Global Virus, International Lamas: Tibetan Religious Leaders in the Face of the Covid-19 Crisis

Miguel Álvarez Ortega

Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing how the Covid-19 (2020) crisis has been treated by leading Tibetan teachers in the global media. First, an introduction to Buddhist notions related to sickness both at the individual and collective levels is provided, followed by a detailed account of the public pronouncements up to early August 2020 of the leading teachers of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The paper tries to show how Tibetan Buddhists' response is characterized by an appeal to an external compliance with the authorities, and an internal plural interpretation that reflects a common tension between a symbolic and a transcendental construal of religious categories. It also attempts to provide interpretative keys for the lack of a successful fundamentalist or millennialist reaction while pointing to the particular suitability of Buddhism to accommodate to the crisis.

Keywords: Covid-19 crisis, pandemic, Tibetan Buddhism, millennialism, esotericism

1. Introduction

In December 2019, several cases of severe pneumonia of unknown etiology were reported in Wuhan, China. A month later, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the subsequent outbreak constituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, and on March 11, 2020, it declared the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) a global pandemic.[1]

The extent, virulence, and quick propagation of the virus have caused a global crisis obliging states around the world to take drastic measures typically involving

1 Domenico Cucinotta and Maurizio Vanelli (2020). WHO Declares COVID-19 a Pandemic. *Acta Bio Medica 91*, Nº 1, 157f.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

the closing of borders, obligatory use of masks and social distancing, limitations in free circulation, curfews, and quarantines or lockdowns, among others.

A phenomenon of this magnitude has an undeniable impact on the lives of citizens at all levels and questions their belief systems. It is, therefore, interesting to analyze how different religious traditions and groups have reacted towards the crisis and its management, in terms of interpretation and advised reaction according to their own soteriological project, *Weltanschauung*, and set of practices. In particular, this paper attempts to analyze how the Covid-19 crisis has been treated by leading Tibetan teachers in the global media.

With such a purpose, an introduction to Buddhist notions related to sickness both at the individual and collective levels is provided (section 2), followed by a detailed account of the public pronouncements up to early August, 2020 of the leading teachers of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism (section 3). In this regard, I have opted for a prolixity of literal references at the risk of rendering the text dense and at times repetitive, so that the reader may form his or her own opinion before the data with as little interference as possible. In the concluding section (4) I shall try and argue that Tibetan Buddhists' response is characterized by an appeal to an external compliance with the authorities, and an internal plural interpretation that reflects a common tension between a symbolic and a transcendental construal of religious categories. I shall also attempt to provide interpretative keys for the lack of a successful fundamentalist or millennialist reaction, while pointing to the particular suitability of Buddhism to accommodate to the crisis.

2. Buddhism and Pandemics: The Internal Conceptual Frame

Leaving aside pop-culture references, for most Western readers Buddhism is not part of their cultural or religious upbringing, unlike Christianity. This means that, for those who are neither practitioners nor specialized scholars, the core notions and soteriological project that characterize Buddhism as a religion and thereby activate before a crisis may need some clarification. Attempting to keep the track of the discourse on the problem of the virus, I herein include a brief summary of the role that sickness as a type of suffering represents, and the particular social connotations presented by a pandemic within Buddhist sources.

2.1 Individual Concepts: Suffering, Disease, and Healing

Arguably one of the most popular instances of the centrality of sickness within Buddhist traditions is the narration of what is known as the Buddha's "four sights," a post-canonical recreation of Prince Siddharta's encountering with worldly afflic-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

tions.[2] Secluded in his palace by his father to protect him from exposure to suffering and prevent him from pursing an ascetic life, the tale recounts how one day the prince decided to explore the city in disguise to discover the "real world." He is thus first acquainted with an old man (first sight); and then, as in the phrasing of the *Buddhacarita*, the second sight took place:

> "41. 'Yonder man with a swollen belly, his whole frame shaking as he pants, his arms and shoulders hanging loose, his body all pale and thin, uttering plaintively the word "mother," when he embraces a stranger, — who, pray, is this?'
> 42. Then his charioteer answered, 'Gentle Sir, it is a very great affliction called sickness, that has grown up, caused by the inflammation of the (three) humours, which has made even this strong man no longer master of himself.'
> 43. Then the prince again addressed him, looking upon the man compassionately, 'Is this evil peculiar to him or are all beings alike threatened by sickness?'
> 44. Then the charioteer answered, 'O prince, this evil is common to all; thus pressed round by diseases men run to pleasure, though racked with pain.[3]`"

A later excursion exposes him to a dead body (third sight); and finally, he finds inspiration in an encounter with an ascetic (fourth sight).

The tetrad constituted by birth, ageing, sickness, and death, not only appears in such literary accounts, but plays a decisive role in the characterization and understanding of the central Buddhist concept par excellence, suffering.[4] In the context of the explanation of the core of the Buddhist doctrine, the so-called Four Noble Truths (the Truths of suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path), sickness is repeatedly stated as a clear example of the Truth of Suffering. In the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, traditionally regarded as the first sermon of the Buddha, it is asserted that:

> "Suffering, as a noble truth, is this: Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, **sickness** is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the loathed is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering — in short, suffering is the five

2 According to Heinz Bechert, although the story "definitely does not belong to the earliest traditions of the life of the historical Buddha" (…) "it became a constituent of all biographies of the Buddha at an early date", originating in a "legendary biography of a former buddha that is narrated in the *Mahāvadāna-sūtra*". Heinz Bechert (2004). Buddha, Life of the. In Robert E. Buswell (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. Volume I. New York, p. 85.

3 Edward B. Cowell (Ed.) (2003). Book III: The Prince's Perturbation. *The Buddha-carita of Aśvaghoṣa*. Delhi, p. 40.

4 These are referred in Sanskrit as jāti-jarā-vyādhi-maraṇa and, in Tibetan, as skye rga na 'chi (W.) (Ph. kye ga na chi). Tibetan terms will appear transcribed according to the Wylie system indicated by "W." and followed by a phonetic approximation indicated by "Ph".

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

categories of clinging objects."[5]
(Bold emphasis added).

It is the cultivation of the Buddhist eight-fold path that may put an end to such suffering when final liberation (nirvana) is attained.[6] In this context, the end of the suffering of sickness usually refers to the perception of the experience of illness in terms of affliction, not to the biological condition itself.[7] There are, though, other instances where that seems to be the case. Scholar Bhikkhu Anālayo refers to several texts where the cultivation or even the mere recitation of the awakening factors (mental qualities to be cultivated by practitioners) result in the healing of patients.[8]

Other narratives take a less soteriological approach, and focus on sickness, its etiology, and cure in a worldlier fashion. For example, the *Sivaka Sutta* explains the 8 causes of disease as being the 3 humors, their combination, the seasons, lack of care, assault, and the ripening of karma.[9] Even the Buddha himself is depicted as falling sick and asking for a purgative in a version of the Code of Monastic Discipline (Vinaya).[10]

In most cases, though, rather than as a patient, the Buddha is represented as a "Healer", and not only in a metaphorical sense[11], but as someone who in one of his many lives possessed medical knowledge and treated patients with both con-

5 Thera (Tr.) Ñanamoli (2010). Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting Rolling the Wheel of Truth (SN 56.11). *Access to Insight* (BCBS Edition). June 13. See: https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.nymo.html

6 These are: right view, right intention; right speech, right action, right livelihood; right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

7 Nevertheless, the biological condition would not be, logically, re-experienced since nirvana puts an end to the cycle of rebirths. The idea that holy people may still suffer sickness but no associated mental pain, is well attested. Cf. Paul Demiéville (1985). *Buddhism and Healing. Demiéville's Article "Byō" from Hōbōgirin*. Boston, pp. 21-23.

8 Cf. Bhikkhu Anālayo (2017). The Healing Potential of Awakening Factors in Early Buddhist Discourse. C. Pierce Salguero (Ed.). *Buddhism and Medicine. An Anthology of Premodern Sources*. New York, pp. 12-18.

9 See Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2013). *Sivaka Sutta: To Sivaka (SN 36.21). Access to Insight (BCBS Edition)*. November 30. See: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn36/sn36.021.than.html.

10 Cf. Thomas Dhivan Jones (2017). Illness, Cure and Care: Selections from the Pāli Canon. In C. Pierce Salguero (Ed.). *Buddhism and Medicine. An Anthology of Premodern Sources.* New York, pp. 3-10.; Hin-tak Sik 2016. Ancient Indian medicine in early Buddhist literature: a study based on the Bhesajjakkhandhaka and the parallels in other Vinaya Canons. (Thesis). University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong SAR. See: http://dx.doi.org/10.5353/th_b5760924.

11 Demiéville, 1985, pp. 14-15.; Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2013). *Beyond Coping: The Buddha's Teachings on Aging, Illness, Death, and Separation. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition)*. November 30. See: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/beyondcoping/index.html .

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

ventional and supernatural means.[12] Stories about Jīvaka, who worked as a doctor to the Buddha and his monks, are also popular and numerous.[13]

Despite this centrality, and the praise of doctors and those who look after the sick, it has been pointed out that early Buddhist literature was initially reluctant or ambivalent towards having monks (and nuns in particular) habitually engaged in the medical profession, for varied reasons.[14] The situation changed over time, and the development of Mahāyāna brought new medically-oriented literature, an emphasis on healthcare as an act of compassion, and a more important role of deities, rituals, and esotericism in healing practices.[15] Such elements were further potentiated in Vajrayāna Buddhism, finding its arguably greatest expression in the Tibetan system of Medicine (Ph. sowa rigpa, W. *gso ba rig pa*).[16] Exposed to varied influences, especially in its first centuries, Tibetan Medicine evolved alongside its wider religious and political context to become a Buddhist scholastic discipline.[17] Promi-

---

12 Phyllis Granoff (1998). Cures and Karma II. Some Miraculous Healings in the Indian Buddhist Story Tradition. *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 85, 288-289. A list of "Stories of Treatments Based on Cases of Diseases", may be found at: Kenneth G. Zysk (2010). *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery*. Delhi, pp.84-86.

13 Cf. Thomas S. N. Chen and Peter S. Y. Chen (2002). Jivaka, physician to the Buddha. *Journal of Medical Biography* 10, 88-91; Kenneth G. Zysk (1982). Studies in Traditional Indian Medicine in the Pāli Canon: Jīvaka and Āyurveda. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 5, 7–86.

14 See: David Fiordalis (2017). Medical Practice as Wrong Livelihood: Selections from the Pāli Discourses, Vinaya, and Commentaries. In C. Pierce Salguero (Ed.). *Buddhism and Medicine. An Anthology of Premodern Sources*. New York, p. 105f.; Cf. David Fiordalis (2014). On Buddhism, Divination and the Worldly Arts: Textual Evidence from the Theravāda Tradition. *Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 15, pp. 89-91.

15 C. Pierce Salguero (2018). Buddhist Medicine and its circulation. In David Ludden (Ed.). *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Asian History*. New York, pp. 2-4.

16 In Indo-Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism, Medicine is considered one of the 5 major sciences (W. *rig gnas chen po lnga*; Ph. rigñe chenpo na), along with craftsmanship, logic, grammar, and Inner science (religion). Cf. Bhagwan Dash (1976). Indian Contribution to Tibetan Medicine. In Dawa Norbu (Ed.). *An Introduction to Tibetan Medicine*. Delhi, p 12.

17 The background of Tibetan Medicine seems to have been widely cosmopolitan, especially in its first centuries, drawing from indigenous, Ayurvedic, Persian, and Chinese sources, among others, though later native representations insisted on the Indian and Buddhist elements as the essential defining features. Cf. Frances M. Garrett (2015). *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*. London, pp. 37-44. Its main classical text, known as the *Four Tantras* (W. *gryus bzhi*, Ph. gyu thi), dates form the end of the XIIth century and its historical origins were subject of controversy for centuries. An important tradition (and the text itself) attributes its authorship to the Buddha in the form of the Medicine Buddha (Bhaiṣajyaguru, Tib. W. sangs rgyas sman bla, Ph. sangye nanla). Cf. Frances M. Garrett (2006). Buddhism and the Historicizing of Medicine in Thirteenth Century Tibet. *Asian Medicine. Journal of the International Association for the Study of Traditional Asian Medicine* 2, no. 2, 202-224.; Cf. Janet Gyatso (2017). *Being human in a Buddhist world: An intellectual history of medicine in early modern Tibet.* New York, pp. 143-192.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

nent monastic scholars were "expected" to write on *materia medica*, while most doctors were educated in and pertained to monastic institutions.[18] To provide some background, the etiology of Tibetan Medicine is centered on the aforementioned imbalance of the 3 humors, and it places especial stress on channels and winds of energy (W. *rlung*, Ph. lung) that circulate within the body in a complex interconnection of mind, physical body, senses, and the universe.[19] At the same time, it categorizes congenital conditions as karmic afflictions, and includes the influence of malefic spirits within the causes of disease[20]. Most importantly, the distant cause of illness is considered to be primordial ignorance manifested in attachment, anger, and delusion[21]. Within its wide array of treatments, we typically find dietary and lifestyle guidelines, mantra recitation and visualizations, meditation, medicinal herbs (W. *bod sman*, Ph. pö men), rituals, and exorcisms.[22]

Traditional Tibetan Medicine has been the object of Western medical and scholarly interest from multiple angles, ranging from its use of medicinal plants to its holistic approach to the patient and his condition.[23] Its attention to the psychosomatic interface and the benefits of meditation, particularly in stress relief and pain management, have arguably raised the most interest.[24]

2.2 Collective Notions: Plagues, Millenarianism, and Social Welfare

Disease is not only an individual affliction. It also possesses an undeniable social dimension, particularly when its impact and spread reach such a considerable magnitude that it becomes a plague or, in more modern language, an epidemic (W. *nad yams*, Ph. ne yam). It is not uncommon, in this regard, for religious traditions

---

The text has been translated into English: Clark, Barry: The Quintessence Tantras of Tibetan Medicine. Boston 1995.

18 Garrett, 2015, pp. 52-55.

19 Barbara Gerke (2013). On the 'Subtle Body' and 'Circulation' in Tibetan Medicine. In Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston (Eds.). *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West*. New York, pp. 83-99; Gyatso 2017, pp. 193-250.

20 Tamdin S. Bradley (2013). *Principles of Tibetan Medicine*. London, pp. 40-44, 71.

21 Bradley, 2013, pp. 31-33.

22 Ib., pp. 40-41., 123-160.

23 As sheer examples within an abundant literature, see: Christa Kletter and Monika Kriechbaum (Eds.) (2001). *Tibetan Medicinal Plants*. Stuttgart.; Cf. Craig R. Janes (2002). Buddhism, science, and market: The globalisation of Tibetan medicine. *Anthropology & Medicine*, 9:3, pp. 267-289; Laurent Pordié (Ed.) (2008). *Tibetan Medicine in the Contemporary World: Global Politics of Medical Knowledge and Practice*. London.

24 Again, the existing bibliography is overwhelming. Arguably, the most re-known platform dedicated to the scientific study of Tibetan Buddhist meditation and its benefits, which include performing MRI on practicing lamas, is the Mind & Life Institute, founded by the 14th Dalai Lama and biologist Francisco Varela. See their website: https://www.mindandlife.org/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

to assign it a particular meaning within their own world vision and soteriological project that goes further than a mere health issue. The Christian-based Western world is seemingly so familiar with such an ingrained perception that "biblical plague" or "plague of biblical proportions" have become common expressions in everyday language.

In the case of Buddhism, the absence of a potentially punishing God-creator and the assumed lack of an apocalyptic/ millennialist tradition, have deemed it popularly (and sometimes scholarly) unlikely to develop such interpretations.[25] Still, Buddhist literature contains its own depiction of time cycles in which the notion of degenerate times or decline of the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) plays a crucial role.[26] Such scenarios not only allude to a future crisis of faith, doctrine, and practice, but are also typically tainted by wars, famines, and plagues. In the Tibetan version of the *Candragarbha Sutra*, we find a representative take on the matter:

> "Then at the time of the [next] five hundred year [period], as for [the first] three hundred years, the protectors of sentient beings who dwell in the True Dharma —gods, nagas, and so on —will not remain, {but will go [elsewhere] to spread the True Dharma.} {Sentient beings will no longer believe in the Dharma. Even those sentient beings who practice the Dharma will not practice it in accordance with the basic Dharma texts. Because [their] efforts are small, their attainments will be few. The four [principal] colors and those derived from the four will decline, and {smell,}* taste, and so forth will diminish. And **human diseases, animal diseases**, and famine will arise."[27]
> (Bold emphasis added).

Following such a phase of decline, a new prosperous era is often envisioned, though not necessarily.[28] Alternation of periods of flourishing and decay are not exclusive

25 Charles F. Keyes has pointed out that some scholars of millennialism have wrongly assumed that in Buddhism the pursuit of nirvana is the only and pervasive soteriological goal, and that karma implies strict determinism, thus mistakenly concluding the unsuitability or irrelevance of apocalyptic and millennialist elements. Cf. Charles F. Keyes (1977). Millennialism, Theravada Buddhism and Thai Society. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 36, N° 2, pp. 285-287.

26 In his classical work, Étienne Lamotte referred to the age as "the Disappearance of the Good Law" and provided a detailed list of the numerous Buddhist texts from different schools and traditions referring to it. Cf. Étienne Lamotte (1988). *History of Indian Buddhism from the Origins to the Śaka Era*. Louvain-la-Neuve, pp. 191-202. For an overview from a Japanese perspective, see Chappell, D. Wellington (1980). Early Forebodings of the Death of Buddhism. *Numen* 27, N° 1,122-154.

27 Quotation from the Tibetan version as translated by Jan Nattier (1991). *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline*. Berkeley, p. 241

28 As Jan Nattier points out, it is a peculiarity of Buddhist apocalyptic literature that it contains references to decline with no subsequent redemption. Cf. Jan Nattier (1988). The Meanings of

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

to sutra literature and may also be found in philosophical treatises like the *Abhidharmakośa*[29]. One popular version of these cycles relates the advent of Maitreya (Pali, Metteya; Tib. W. *byams pa*, Ph. janmpa), a future Buddha representing the coming of a Golden Age, prior to which human degeneration would have reduced life-span to 10 years in a context of constant quarrelling, famine, and plagues.[30] The figure of Maitreya—and the notion of his coming—have historically inspired varied millennialist revolts and political movements in China, Korea, and South East Asia[31], while in the case of Tibet, he is mainly an aspirational figure for mystics and scholars.[32] Even so, the notion of the degenerate times is common in Tibetan texts, particularly in Dharma chronicles (W. *chos 'byung*, Ph. chö jung) and in traditions of revealed treasures (W. *gter ma*, Ph. terma), in which concealed teachings are to be discovered to help restore the Dharma in degenerate times.[33] The idea has been popularly employed when reflecting on the circumstances leading to the Chinese invasion of Tibet, often deemed a calamity prophesized by VIIIth century Guru Padmasambhava, and is very much relevant and alive among contemporary

---

the Maitreya Myth. In Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre (Eds.). *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*. Cambridge, p. 39.

29 Composed in verse between the 4th and 5th centuries by Vasubandhu, this highly influential text describes a temporal cosmology of cycles of kalpas comprising the beginning of the world, the rise and fall of humankind, the destruction of the world, and then emptiness. See verses 89 to 102 in chapter 3. An English version of the "classical" French translation by La Vallé Poussin was published by Lokananda C. Bhikkhu (2018). *Abhidharmakośa of Ācārya Vasubandhu. English trad. of La Vallé Poussin by Leo M. Pruden*. Delhi.

30 Cf. Nattier, 1988, p. 27.

31 Cf., among others, Susan Naquin (1976). *Millenarian rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams uprising of 1813*. New Haven.; Cf. Daniel Overmyer (1976). *Folk Buddhist religion: Dissenting sects in late traditional China*. Cambridge, esp. p. 81 ff.; Cf. Erik Zürcher (1982). "Prince Moonlight". Messianism and Eschatology in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism. *T'oung Pao* 68, 1/3, pp. 1-75.; Cf. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (1988). Perfect World and Perfect Time: Maitreya in Vietnam. Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre (Eds.). *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*. Cambridge, pp. 154-170.; Cf. Keyes, 1977, pp. 283-302.; Cf. Manuel Sarkisyanz (1965). *Buddhist backgrounds of the Burmese revolution*. The Hague.; Cf. Robert Flaherty and Robert Pearson (2011). Korean Millennial Movements. In Chaterine Wessinger (Ed.). The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism. Oxford, pp. 326-347.

32 In the Tibetan tradition, Maitreya is considered to have transmitted his teachings to Asaṅga (Vasubandhu's elder brother, circa IVth century), whose philosophical works are thus referred as *The Five Treatises of Maitreya* (W. *byams chos sde lnga*, Ph. jam chö de na). See: Philippe Turenne (2015). The History and Significance of the Tibetan Concept of the Five Treatises of Maitreya. *The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 16, pp. 215-233. On the cult of Maitreya in Tibet, see Jonathan Silk et al. (2019). Maitreya. In Jonathan Silk et al. (Eds.). *Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism. Volume II: Lives*. Leiden, pp. 308-309.

33 Janet Gyasto (1993). The Logic of Legitimation in the Tibetan Treasure Tradition. *History of Religions* 33, N° 2, 132.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Tibetan teachers.[34] For example, in 2012, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse, an important reincarnated lama, referred to our present time as "kaliyuga" (the Hindu Age of Quarrel) and "dark age"[35].

The particular approach to plagues in contrast to regular sickness seems also to be shown in the particular type of response employable. According to the study of P. Granoff on *avadāna* (biographical stories) literature, plagues would be the only clear instances of healing by unabashedly miraculous means, directly or indirectly undertaken by Buddha, either because of—it is hypothesized—their sometimes demonic origin or due to their extraordinary social impact alike droughts and famine.[36]

The communal character represented by plagues or spread diseases also raises the question of healing beyond the singular patient-healer paradigm into the social sphere of what we may contemporarily refer to as social healthcare. In this regard, Buddhist literature typically consigns the provision of medical assistance as a duty of a lawful (Dharma-abiding) king, along with other assistance duties towards those in need, namely, victims of disasters, famine, and poverty. Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland* is an often-quoted example.[37] Also, Emperor Aśoka, arguably the

34 In his autobiographical account, exiled Tibetologist Dawa Norbu writes about the strong beliefs regarding a future Chinese invasion commonly held before it actually took place: "In one *lungten*, written in the middle of the ninth century, King Ralpachen asked the guru Rinpoche what would be the future of Buddhism in Tibet. The guru predicted the advent of Communism, almost in so many words: 'The subjects will rule the kingdom, the king will be made a commoner. A sacrilegious act will be considered a deed of heroism". Cf. Dawa Norbu (1998). *Tibet: The Road Ahead*. London, p. 32. I was exposed to such interpretation during my field work with Tibetan exiles in Kathmandu. Cf. Miguel Álvarez Ortega (2018). Traditional Tibetan Buddhist Scholars on Dharma, Law, Politics, and Social Ethics: Philosophical Discussions in Boudhanath (Nepal). *Buddhism, Law, and Society* 4, 31.

35 We will refer to the figure of Dzongsar Khyentse below. The quotation is taken from a publication on his Facebook page posted on January 12, 2012. https://www.facebook.com/djkhyentse/posts/some-say-the-dark-age-age-of-vice-kaliyuga-is-here-now-or-at-least-coming-soon-s/369588269733327/

36 Granoff bases his thesis mainly on the *Avadānakalpalatā* and the *Avadāna-Śataka*, both translated into Tibetan. Cf. Phyllis Granoff, (1998). Cures and Karma II. Some Miraculous Healings in the Indian Buddhist Story Tradition. *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 85, esp. pp. 290, 298, 300.

37 Always care compassionately / For the sick, the unprotected, those stricken / With suffering, the lowly, and the poor/ And take special care to nourish them/ Provide extensive care/ For the persecuted, the victims of crop failure/ The stricken, those **suffering contagion** / And for beings in conquered areas / Cause the blind, **the sick**, the lowly, /The protectorless, the destitute, / And the crippled equally to obtain/ Food and drink without interruption. (…) In order to alleviate the suffering/ Of sentient beings, the old, young, and infirm/ You should establish through the estates [that you control]/ **Doctors** and barbers through the country. (Bold emphasis added). Verses 243, 251, 320, 240, as translated and arranged by Jeffrey Hopkins (1998). *Nāgārjuna's Precious Garland. Buddhist Advice for Liberation explanation.* New York, p. 77.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

political figure more decisive for the consolidation and spread of Buddhism, and traditionally regarded as a model king, included provisions in his famous Edicts concerning medical treatment for both human and animals.[38] Regardless of such textual and historical references, it has not been uncommon in the West to label Buddhism as socio-politically uninvolved at least since Max Weber.[39] However accurate or fair the categorization, a need to deepen the social commitment of Buddhist practitioners seems to have inspired Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh's "Engaged Buddhism" and subsequent advocates and movements aiming at addressing social and political issues from a Buddhist perspective.[40] Along such activism, Buddhist scholarship in both East and West has since developed a wealth of literature on social welfare, healthcare, bioethics, economics, ecology, and other contemporary socio-political issues drawing from Buddhist sources, concepts, and way of reasoning, often aiming at a laicized reading acceptable by the general public. Traditional teachers and monastics have shown a range of attitudes towards such proposals, while some Western scholars have on occasion pointed out the tension existing between said approaches and canonical sources, traditional readings, and conventional praxis.[41]

3. International Lamas and their Public Discourse

The current situation of Tibetan Buddhism is undeniable marked by the Tibetan diaspora following the Chinese invasion in the 1950s. A positive side effect of the takeover, it is often stated, has been the opening and access to a massive body of texts, teachings, practices, and masters, previously secluded in the Himalayas. Upon the fleeing of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959 and his establishment in Dharamsala, teachers from the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism also went into exile, typically to Nepal and India, where monasteries and centers were thus reconstructed. This relocation not only facilitated the access of scholars and practitioners to Tibetan Buddhist teachers, but eventually resulted in the creation

38 Upinder Singh (2012). Governing the State and the Self: Political Philosophy and Practice in the Edicts of Aśoka. *South Asian Studies* 28, N º 2, 134.

39 Max Weber famously referred to Buddhism as "unpolitical and antipolitical". Max Weber (1958). *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*. Glencoe, p. 206.

40 See the collective volume: Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Eds.) (1996). *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. New York.

41 Donald S. Lopez's accusation of idealizations, decontextualization, and unfounded scientificism are notorious examples of such criticism. See, e.g. Donald S. Lopez (1999). *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago.; Cf. Donald S. Lopez (2010). *Buddhism & science: a guide for the perplexed*. Chicago.; Donald S. Lopez (2012). *Scientific Buddha - His Short and Happy Life*. New Haven.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

of truly international webs along with the development of globalization and new technologies.

Contrasting with the romanticized image of spiritual masters in secluded caves or hard to access monasteries in the middle of the mountains, prominent Tibetan teachers, particularly High Lamas, outside Tibet are often the heads of complex, modern, and resourceful organizations that include traditional monasteries and schools, along with retreat and Dharma centers in both South Asia and Western countries. They provide teachings, empowerments and so forth following the tradition of their school and lineage, and at the same time they often offer courses and teachings to an international audience (both face-to-face and online), and provide social or community services directly or by means of affiliated NGOs. Many of them travel frequently around the world, are active in the social media, have their own Facebook page in English, and have their videos uploaded to YouTube.[42]

The Covid-19 crisis has thus taken place in a context where Tibetan teachers, formerly offering rituals for Tibetan lay followers and education to Tibetan monastics in loco, face an international audience, being able to convey their message, advice, and instructions to students and followers with a varied degree of knowledge and engagement, as well as to the general public, with a global range. To provide just an example, the site of Lotsawa House, a virtual library dedicated to translations from classical Tibetan, offered a list of mantras and prayers recommended by Tibetan masters from different traditions with their corresponding links, so that practitioners could easily locate resources for "protection and healing during the current Coronavirus crisis"[43].

In what follows, the public pronouncements, reactions, and advice from the foremost Tibetan teachers are presented according to their affiliation to the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism: Gelug, Nyingma, Karma Kagyu and Ka-Nying, Sakya, and, finally, Bon and Rime (ecumenical).[44]

---

42 See Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger (Eds.) 2014. *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media. The Pixel in the Lotus*. New York Routlege.; Geoffrey Samuel (2017). Tibetan Religion as a World Religion: Global Networking and its Consequences. *Tantric Revisionings: New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion*. New York, pp. 288-316.

43 It included the following warning: "Please note that several of these practices require an empowerment and reading transmission (lung). If in doubt, please consult a lama." Cf. Lotsawa House (2020). *Love in the Time of Covid-19*. March 16. See: https://lotsawahouse.blog/2020/03/16/love-in-the-time-of-covid-19/

44 For an overview of each school, see John Powers (2007). *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*. Ithaca.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

3.1 Gelug

The Gelug is the most recent among the 4 major Tibetan Buddhist schools, becoming preeminent and politically dominant by the end of the 16th century. Although its formal head is known as the Ganden Tripa, its most important leader is indisputably the Dalai Lama. The 14th Dalai Lama, Nobel Peace Laurate Tenzin Gyatso, is not only a symbol of religiosity, culture, and unity for Tibetans in exile, but also stands as a true international figure, and, as the most globally recognizable Tibetan master, who possesses the widest reach, particularly among non-practitioners. To provide a trivial example of his media impact, his Facebook page alone has 14 million followers.

In mid-February, the Dalai Lama's Office, upon the advice of his doctor and due to the coronavirus, announced the cancellation of all his public commitments "until further notice" in a statement communicated to CNN[45]. Since then, His Holiness has had the chance to express himself in different occasions on the Covid-crisis.

His first reactions, taking place in late March, bore an institutional character. He expressed his support while donating funds to help with the relief of those sick and in need to both the Federal Government of Himachal Pradesh, the State where his residence is located, and the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi.[46] On March 30, upon "repeated requests from many people around the world," the Dalai Lama conveyed a special message:

> "Today, we are passing through an exceptionally difficult time due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to this, further problems confront humanity such as extreme climate change.
> Ancient Indian tradition describes the creation, abiding and destruction of worlds over time. Among the causes of such destruction are wars and disease, which seems to accord with what we are experiencing today. However, despite the enormous challenges we face, living beings, including humans, have shown a remarkable ability to survive.
> No matter how difficult the situation may be, we should employ science and human ingenuity with determination and courage to overcome the problems that confront us. (…)

45 Cf. Tenzin Dharpo and CNN's Sugam Pokharel (2020). 'Dalai Lama cancels all public engagements due to the coronavirus'. February 12. See: https://edition.cnn.com/asia/live-news/coronavirus-outbreak-02-12-20-intl-hnk/h_44c26bc4035ba6d1e0286237b5a19558

46 Cf. The Tribune. Voice of the People. (India). (2020). 'Dalai Lama donates to CM Relief Fund'. March 26. See: https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/himachal/dalai-lama-donates-to-cm-relief-fund-61678; Cf. 2020 NDTV (2020). 'COVID-19: Dalai Lama Donates To PM-CARES Fund, Extends Support'. March 31. See: https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/covid-19-dalai-lama-donates-to-pm-cares-fund-extends-support-2203873

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

> For those with no stable income life is a daily struggle for survival. I earnestly appeal to all concerned to do everything possible to care for the vulnerable members of our communities.
> I offer special gratitude to the medical staff—doctors, nurses and other support personnel—who are working on the frontline to save lives at great personal risk. Their service is indeed compassion in action.
> With heartfelt feelings of concern for my brothers and sisters around the world who are passing through these difficult times, I pray for an early end to this pandemic so that your peace and happiness may soon be restored.[47]"

Besides such official declarations, the Dalai Lama has been asked for his view and advice by several mainstream English-speaking media. In an article in *Time Magazine*, expressively entitled "Prayer is not Enough," he declared possessing no "magical powers" that could alleviate the crisis, having to face, like all human beings, "the suffering and the truths of sickness, old age, and death." He pointed to the pandemic as an example of the Buddhist understanding of the world in terms of interdependence and appealed to a "universal responsibility" which, beyond prayer, required truly global efforts alongside doctors and science.[48] Answering the petition of *The Call to Unite,* an American-based 24-hour global livestream initiative in response to the coronavirus, the Dalai Lama had the chance to stress this idea of a global response based upon "Our human capacity to reason and to see things realistically [which] gives us the ability to transform hardship into opportunity" in a message read by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.[49] On May 28th, the Dalai Lama gave an online interview to ABC's Dan Harris, in which he declared that his daily life of reading and meditation had not been particularly affected by the crisis. Asked about Trump's management of the pandemic in America, he declared Trump's attitude to be too narrow-minded for the leader of the free world, but that it was ultimately "your (American people's) business". Upon his allusion to the practice of compassion to combat anxiety, the reporter referred to the Dalai Lama as a "major scientific figure" due to his fostering of psychologist Richard Davidson's research on the impact of mediation on the brain, and finished his section with a discus-

47 Cf. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet (2020/1). 'A Special Message from His Holiness the Dalai Lama'. March 30. See: https://www.dalailama.com/news/2020/a-special-message-from-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama

48 Cf. Time Magazine (2020).'Prayer is not Enough'. April 14. See: https://time.com/5820613/dalai-lama-coronavirus-compassion/

49 The whole broadcast streamed from 8:00 p.m. EDT on May 1 until 8:00 p.m. EDT on May 2. The Dalai Lama's video may be watched at: https://unite.us/videos/?596. For an overview of "The call to Unite", see the CNBC coverage: https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/01/the-call-to-unite-organizer-explains-idea-behind-24-hour-livestream.html

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

sion of the benefits of mediation with the conductor of the program.[50] Finally, BBC Justin Rowland was given an interview on June 13 wherein His Holiness insisted on the "deeper human values of compassion" that are revealed when we face tragic situations, and that currently call for a global scope: "In the past there was too much emphasis on my continent, my nation, my religion. Now that thinking is out of date. Now we really need a sense of oneness of seven billion human beings.[51]"

Other references to the virus crisis were uttered in the context of varied religious events, Dharma teachings, and intellectual discussions, and so have a more tangential character.[52] Also, when expressing his gratitude for the birthday wishes received upon his 85th birthday, he reminded that: "Climate change and the current pandemic, which threaten us all, are challengers that teach us we must work together." Not all statements pronounced during such a period, however, included an explicit allusion to the virus. Arguably the most important ceremony conducted by the Dalai Lama during the pandemic was the 2-days Avalokiteśvara Empowerment (May 29th and 30th 2020), broadcasted with translation in 13 languages along with the participation of tens of thousands of people around the world. At the introduction, His Holiness presented an overview of the context of the empowerment where he referred to current social struggles like racial violence in the USA, or religious discrimination but made no mention to the virus.[53]

---

50 Richard Davidson appeared in the interview himself stating that: "compassion practice is anti-inflammatory, it actually decreases molecules in the body that we know are important in producing inflammation". Cf. ABC News Prime (2020). 'Dalai Lama speaks out on COVID-19'. May 28. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEWqRcy-6Wg&t=1s

51 Cf. BBC News (2020). 'Dalai Lama: Seven billion people 'need a sense of oneness'. June 13. See: https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-53028343?fbclid=IwAR3PN2xFONDnm7jK_SR2G4z0kQ3gQw KUPPW7KTgcSGbDjDD6ot0Y6kcAkus

52 For example, during the dialogue with Young People from South-East Asia, the moderator brought out the topic at stake to which the Dalai Lama responded praising the possibilities that technology now offers to share one's experiences with others. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet (2020/2). 'Dialogue with Young People from South-east Asia'. June 7. See: https://www.dalailama.com/news/2020/dialogue-with-young-people-from-south-east-asia. He also referred to both the medical remedy to the illness, to be found in research, and to the management of anxiety associated to it, which required the cultivation of self-confidence. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet (2020/3). 'Mind & Life Conversation: Resilience, Compassion, & Science for Healing Today'. June 20. See: https://www.dalailama.com/news/2020/mind-life-conversation-resilience-compassion-science-for-healing-today

53 The Dalai Lama was alluding to the death of African-American George Floyd at the hands of the police on May 25, 2020, leading to massive protests and riots throughout the USA. The empowerment videos are accessible on YouTube: "Preliminaries to the Avalokiteshvara Empowerment" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUWH3PIjZQ8), and "Actual Avalokiteshvara Empowerment" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ti-L1BdhLw4). A summary is offered on the Dalai Lama's website under the titles "Preliminaries for an Avalokiteshvara Empowerment" (https://www.dalailama.com/news/2020/preliminaries-for-an-avalokiteshvara-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

The fact that the empowerments were to be given online raised its own controversy. Tibetan teacher Tulku Orgyen Tobgyal, former member of the Tibetan parliament in Exile, criticized the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan teachers a few days before the Avalokiteśvara Empowerment maintaining that empowerments and blessings required the physical co-presence of student and master, so that online conferral was a sign of degeneration and implied a violation "destroying the faith." Strong reactions came not only from religious figures, but significantly, from political leaders. The Kashag (Cabinet) led by Dr. Lobsang Sangay, the President of the Central Tibetan Administration, deemed the declarations "regrettable" and "wrong," stressing the Dalai Lama's work spreading Buddhism worldwide and the contextual needs during the Covid-19 pandemic.[54] Comprehensive and sympathetic comments were made on the matter by cabinet minister for Religion and Culture Yuthok Karma Gelek, also a monastic, which sparked a call for his resignation.[55] Eventually, both Tulku Orgyen Tobgyal and Yuthok Karma Gelek ended up apologizing and retracted their comments.[56] Interestingly, during the preliminaries to the initiation the Dalai Lama remarked that the same empowerment had been given online in 2019 as an expeditious way to reach Tibetans in Tibet, thus arguably distancing himself for the consideration of telematic technology as extraordinary means for an exceptional context defined by the pandemic.

Drawing from his dual background as a former Tibetan monastic and a Western scholar, as well as from his experience as translator of the Dalai Lama for a long time, Geshe Thupten Jinpa Langri had the chance to express his views in a live YouTube interview with Asia Society Vice President Tom Nagorski, while aiming to serve as a "medium to channel the Dalai Lama's wisdom and thoughts." The encounter, entitled "Coping in the Time of Coronavirus," focused on the implementation of contemplative practices to psychologically deal with the lockdown and on the need to reflect globally on the circumstances and challenges brought by the

---

empowerment) and "Webcast of an Avalokiteshvara Empowerment" (https://www.dalailama.com/news/2020/webcast-of-an-avalokiteshvara-empowerment)

54 Cf. Phayul (2020/1). 'Tulku Orgyen Tobgyal's remarks "regrettable and wrong": Kashag'. May 27. See: http://www.phayul.com/2020/05/27/43492/

55 Ib.

56 Cf. Tulku Orgyen Tobgyal wrote a letter declaring: "At the advice of my root guru, and scoldings I got from Sakya Trichen Rinpoche and Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, they being my masters, I am withdrawing my recent words, and tendering my apology to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and appeal to him to live a long life." (….) "Following the suggestions of my masters, I will never again in future criticize online teachings and empowerments." Cf. Tibet Sun (2020). 'Tulku Orgyen Tobgyal apologises to Dalai Lama for criticizing online teachings'. May 31. See: https://www.tibetsun.com/news/2020/05/31/tulku-orgyen-tobgyal-apologises-to-dalai-lama-for-criticising-online-teachings.; Cf. Tibetan Journal (2020). 'Kalon Karma Gelek Apologizes and Willing to Resign if Needed'. May 28. See: https://www.tibetanjournal.com/kalon-karma-gelek-apologizes-and-willing-to-resign-if-needed/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

pandemic. Jinpa recommended a brief daily mediation practice consisting of not denying or suppressing the negative feelings triggered by the harsh situation, such as anger or frustration, but to observe them, breathe, and thus generate calm and awareness. He insisted on the individual responsibility over our own mental health, both before ourselves and interacting with others, and stressed the need to express gratitude to those in the frontline, like nurses and doctors.[57]

In his general reflection on the pandemic, he underlined how clear the notions of "interconnectedness" and "uncertainty" have become undeniably perceivable by everyone, though they have always been part of the human reality. To the unprecedented global threat that the virus poses, he opposed the equally unprecedented interconnection granted by the Internet and New Technologies; a context in which, he jokingly claimed, "Netflix is our savior!" He concluded drawing attention to the deep social inequalities revealed in the impact of the virus on vulnerable social groups, and the need for socio-political structures which, beyond sheer liberal capitalism, require the protection of basic social services, such as healthcare.[58]

Less known by non-practitioners and yet quite internationally influential, Tibetan teacher Lama Zopa Rinpoche is a pioneer in teaching Tibetan Buddhism to Westerners from his Kopan Monastery in Nepal. In 1975 he created, along with Lama Thubten Yeshe, the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), an impressive worldwide network currently comprising more than 160 Dharma centers in the five continents, and providing diverse services such as education, the sale of religious objects, charitable services, and online learning.

Within the online site of the FPMT, a special page was created solely to provide "Resources for the Coronavirus Pandemic."[59] The page starts with a series of links to the teachings and statements of His Holiness the Dalai Lama as mentioned above, followed by Lama Zopa's own advice. The latter contain a list of prayers and mantras, the oral transmissions for which can also be received online, and a series of video teachings on "Thought Transformation" given from Kopan Monastery specifically for the pandemic. Practices are divided between those aimed at protecting yourself from the virus, and those aiming at protecting others; e.g. "this prayer from Thangtong Gyalpo is to heal the disease in China and for it not to spread out to other countries. So, it is to protect the country. And anyone in the world can recite this prayer.[60]"

57 Cf. Asia Society YouTube channel (2020). 'Coping in the Time of Coronavirus'. April 8. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_sc1SDwopg

58 He specifically referred to the disproportionate death rate of black citizens and the lack of universal healthcare in the USA. Ib.

59 Cf. Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (2020/1). 'Resources for Coronavirus Pandemic'. March. See: https://fpmt.org/fpmt/announcements/resources-for-coronavirus-pandemic/

60 Cf. Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (2020/2). 'Advice from Lama Zopa Rinpoche for coronavirus'. March See: https://fpmt.org/fpmt/announcements/resources-for-coronavirus-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

The Thought Transformation video series consists of a vast collection of 50 sessions (as by mid-July 2020) in English, with translations in Chinese, French, Italian, Russian, and Spanish. The videos are available with summaries and full transcriptions. Drawing from the general idea that the pandemic is a good opportunity for practice, the teachings address both generic Buddhist topics like impermanence, attachment, bodhicitta, and so forth, and the very specific circumstances of the pandemic and how to respond to them. The first teaching, entitled "Advice for Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19)" and given on March 17, begins by referring to how the SARS pandemic (2003) could successfully be tamed by the practice of pujas (offering rituals) performed by an FPMT center in Singapore. A few days later, on March 28, a special puja was conducted in Kathmandu by Lama Zopa and other teachers to mitigate the effects of Covid-19.[61] Most of this teaching focuses on the importance of the awareness of death, usually neglected and now triggered by the coronavirus, and finishes with the advice of daily recitation of the Vajra Armor mantra to "not get the disease" or "recover from it" if already infected.[62] Some teachings in the series present sickness as an opportunity to achieve enlightenment for others, an altruism that is highlighted in the case of nurses and doctors exposed to the virus, who will never be reborn in the lower realms. "We all must die, [he concludes] so to die with compassion for others, this is a very good death"[63]. Other teachings reflect on the ultimate causes of the pandemic,

> (…) "not only the virus, but the whole thing came from the mind. It came from the mind. The world coming into existence, and then existing, and then degeneration, the whole thing came from the mind.
> *Abhidharmakosha* (v. 4.1) says: "The various worlds came from karma". (…). "All came from your mind, but also, from there, all the sufferings came from the negative

pandemic/advice-from-lama-zopa-rinpoche-for-coronavirus/ The site also contains advice on practices from Rangjung Neljorma Khadro Namsel Drönme focusing on Nölsang "Incense Ritual by the Great Master Padmasambhava Called "The Divine Blue Water Clearing Away Contamination".

61 Cf. Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (2020/2).

62 Cf. Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (2020/2).

63 Cf. Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (2020/3). 'Use Pleasure and Suffering to Achieve Enlightenment and Experience the Virus for Numberless Sentient Beings'. April 18. See: https://fpmt.org/lama-zopa-rinpoche-news-and-advice/advice-from-lama-zopa-rinpoche/use-pleasure-and-suffering-to-achieve-enlightenment-and-experience-the-virus-for-numberless-sentient-beings/; Cf. Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (2020/4). 'Coronavirus Leaves Us No Choice But to Develop Compassion and 80,000 Eons of Benefits from Making Charity'. April 23. See: https://fpmt.org/lama-zopa-rinpoche-news-and-advice/advice-from-lama-zopa-rinpoche/coronavirus-leaves-us-no-choice-but-to-develop-compassion/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

> mind, your negative mind. There is individual suffering but there is world suffering, world problems. That is called collective karma.[64]»
>
> "[S]o therefore, we have to be very careful, we have to be very careful. In the past, in the past, if you are very careful of the karma, there is no reason why the virus has to happen, why we have to experience it, why so many people have to die in the world. If you are careful, if from the beginning you are careful, you practice Dharma, you are careful of karma, careful, then you don't need to experience the virus." (…) "For example, there are people, there are many people in the world who don't experience the virus, who don't die due to the virus (…).[65]»

This series of teachings probably constitutes the main initiative of the FPMT before the pandemic, but it is not the only one. The organization also offers several FPMT Online Learning Center programs to "any student or center who would like to use them" free of charge[66]. In May 2020, the International Merit Box Project Fund, created in 2001 as a means to collect offerings for varied Dharma-related purposes, was dedicated entirely to help FPMT centers to deal the crisis caused by the virus.[67]

Other Gelugpa teachers with relatively less reach and influence have also tried to offer specific responses to the Covidd-19 crisis for his international followers. For example, the Abbot of Sera Mey Monastery (Bylakuppe, India) Geshe Tashi Tsering created a series of posts in his personal website called "Practicing Buddhism in a Pandemic," in which he provides updates on the management of the crisis at the monastery and gives commentaries on teachings and prayers (namely the Lam Rim Chenmo and Maitreya's prayer). There is little reference to the virus besides the generic need to not abandon one's practice despite the circumstances.[68]

---

64 Cf. Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (2020/5). 'All the Problems in the World, Including the Coronavirus, are Telling Us to Practice Dharma'. April 21. See: https://fpmt.org/lama-zopa-rinpoche-news-and-advice/advice-from-lama-zopa-rinpoche/all-the-problems-in-the-world-including-the-coronavirus-are-telling-us-to-practice-dharma/

65 Cf. Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (2020/6). 'If We Had Been Careful of Karma, There Would Be No Reason for the Virus to Happen'. April 25. See: https://fpmt.org/lama-zopa-rinpoche-news-and-advice/advice-from-lama-zopa-rinpoche/if-we-had-been-careful-of-karma-there-would-be-no-reason-for-the-virus-to-happen/

66 The Free programs offered via the FPMT Online Learning Center are: "Discovering Buddhism: Module 11.Transforming Problems"; Basic Program: Mahayana Mind Training, Wheel of Sharp Weapons", "Living in the Path", "Living in the Path (Spanish)", "Discovering Buddhism (French)". Resources for the Coronavirus Pandemic. FPMT, see: https://fpmt.org/fpmt/announcements/resources-for-coronavirus-pandemic/

67 US$31,368 were distributed in the spring of 2020. Cf. Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (2020/7). 'The Merit Box Project'. May 15. See: https://fpmt.org/projects/fpmt/merit-box/

68 GesheTashi.org (2020). 'Geshe Tashi's Coronavirus Updates. Practising Buddhism in a Pandemic'. Consulted in July. See: https://geshetashi.org/category/geshe-tashis-coronavirus-updates/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Director of The Tibet Center Austria Geshe Tendhar gave a couple of specific teachings aimed at the coronavirus situation, where he asked his followers to abide by the guidelines and recommendations provided by the Austrian Government. He also provided varied advice for non-Buddhists and Buddhist practitioners with different backgrounds and formative experience, while asking everyone to try to understand the situation as clearly as possible to act accordingly.[69]

Finally, Demo Rinpoche, Resident Spiritual Advisor at Jewel Heart (Ann Arbor, Michigan) on April 16 announced that:

> "In this moment of crisis, we have an opportunity to shift our minds from stress-inducing consumption of upsetting news to the spiritual path. We will be studying and applying the lessons of Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* to turn this time of pandemic into a beneficial period."[70]

The eleven teachings, delivered in English and with sparse yet explicit references to the pandemic, can all be accessed online.

3.2 Nyingma

Considered the oldest among the four major Tibetan schools, the Nyingma tradition has never occupied a dominant political position in Tibet, and it has traditionally kept a de-centralized internal structure lacking a single head of the school.[71] The major lineage holders are associated with the main six monasteries (Shechen,

69 Geshe Tendhar suggested that non-Buddhists who have meditation training should bring mindfulness to everyday life to protect oneself and others (e.g. being careful with what you touch, being aware of physical distance, not touching your face, etc.). For those who have received teachings on emptiness, he also suggested meditating on emptiness. For those who have studied Traditional Tibetan Medicine, he suggested focusing on strengthening their immune system and avoid negative emotions. To those who have studied Buddhist psychology, he advised to "develop a strong and peaceful mind." Cf. Tibet Center Austria - Institute of H.H. Dalai Lama (2020). 'Lama Geshe TenDhar on the Coronavirus situation- March 2020'. March 18. See: https://www.tibetcenter.at/en/coronavirus-en/ Aspiration prayers dedicated to those fighting the virus and the study of the Lam Rim Chenmo were in general recommended to his followers. Cf. Institute of H.H. Dalai Lama (2020). 'Our practice in difficult times – April 2020'. April. See: https://www.tibetcenter.at/en/our-practice-in-difficult-times/

70 Cf. Jewel Heart (2020). 'SPECIAL TEACHING FOR THE CORONAVIRUS: Finding Relief through the Bodhisattva's Way of Life'. April. See: https://www.jewelheart.org/events/coronavirus-finding-relief-through-the-bodhisattvas-way-of-life/

71 At the request of the Central Tibetan Administration in exile, a representative of the school was appointed by a rotation system of senior lamas from the six-major Nyingma monasteries from the 1960s until February 2020. The last appointee rejected the position and deemed it harmful for the school. Cf. Phayul (2020/2). 'Shechen Rabjam Rinpoche declines the position to head Nyingma tradition'. February 2nd. See: http://www.phayul.com/2020/02/04/42548/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Dzogchen, Mindrolling, Palyul, Kathok, and Dorje Drak), all rebuilt in exile, although this internal relevance does not necessarily imply a major international projection.

Shechen Monastery lineage holder Khyentse Yangsi Rinpoche, a young teacher born in 1993 and reincarnation of the famous lama Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, recorded an audio message for his followers that was posted on his Facebook page. He started depicting the context of the virus in terms of the prophesies of Guru Rinpoche on the advent of a degenerate era comprised of a kalpa of war, a kalpa of natural disaster, a kalpa of famine, and a kalpa of major diseases. Even if pandemics are not a new thing – he elaborated – the particular harshness of the current one would be but a result of our own destructive behavior towards ourselves and others, so that "we are seeing now the results of the negative seeds, now ripening upon all of us." Alike other teachers, he advised not to panic and continue with one's daily practice along with the recitation of Medicine Guru Rinpoche mantra. His final reflection dealt with the frustration of not being able to do something for others besides confinement and self-cultivation; he apologized: "I'm sorry I cannot do much. I wish I could sacrifice my life with the right motivation, and physically go and help; but since I'm not able to do that, I'm sorry"[72].

Dzogchen Monastery Dzogchen Rinpoche, Jigme Losel Wangpo, was even more incisive in his degenerate times rhetoric, claiming he had even prophesied the virus. In Mid-March he posted on his Facebook wall:

> "I want to offer you my humble and direct advice. I want to support you through this **kali yuga virus**. Things look serious, but we don't need to panic. This event has been **prophesized in ancient texts** and is the result of the **disrespect of mother nature**, being greedy, and the lack of compassion and kindness to one another.
> Mother nature is showing supernatural power beyond human, scientific, and political control. This crisis is showing us how to be respectful of mother nature and how to be kind to one another in our one world.
> I have been consulted by Tibetan Buddhist Leaders to give my thoughts.
> This **virus will end soon**. We must confess to mother nature and request reverse of conditions by practicing Ekazati. **I had mentioned this three or four years ago in my teachings**, and I have made a joke about how you would all survive without toilet paper, and this is now happening.
> Make sure you all take care of yourselves and your health. I feel responsible for taking care of you.
> Please take this opportunity as a home retreat or as I'm jokingly calling it a Coronavirus Quarantine retreat. During these days, we will be accumulating as much

72 Dilgo Khyentse Yangsi Rinpoche (2020). 'About the current situation with Coronavirus'. *Facebook.* March 21. https://www.facebook.com/shechen.cro/videos/2809514709139867/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

of the Ekazati practice as is possible, Barsam Drolsum and Dukshe Sengsum. Together with both monastic and international sangha, we will do the necessary prayers and practices for world healing and health.
I encourage you to commit to not disrespect mother nature by just taking and not giving back."[73]
(Bold emphasis added)

Mindrolling Monastery Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche is an influential female teacher having both a monastic and Western education. In early March, she informed that "The Verses that Saved Sakya from Sickness: A Prayer for Pacifying the Fear of Disease" had been recited at the monastery to help tame the virus and recommended it to her followers.[74] In April, at the request of her students, Khandro Rinpoche recorded a video announcing the compliance with the lockdown at her monastery, praising the government and health workers, and hoping everyone was careful and safe. She stressed that Buddhist practitioners should not make a great deal of being isolated, but cherish the opportunity to keep one's practice in a yet deeper fashion: "this is a wonderful blessing and an opportunity". Finally, she encouraged the looking out for those in need of support and help[75]; and so, her monastery donated 1.6 million rupees to several Indian state governments and provided food and supplies to the local community.[76] The notion that no special practice was needed was stressed on her personal website, where instead of particular instructions, a post entitled "Practicing in Times of Adversity" from 2018, was reposted[77]. Nevertheless, she deemed it appropriate to make teachings on "Turning Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment" available online, and her summer program was substituted by a 2-week online course on Longchenpa's *The Great Chariot.*[78]

---

73 Cf. Message from His Eminence the 7th Dzogchen Rinpoche (2020). Facebook. March 21. See: https://www.facebook.com/DzogchenBuddhism/ Rinpoche also has international followers and centers in Europe, America and Australia, but there is practically no online information besides this message. His international groups may be checked at "Gyalwa Dzogchen Sangha", See: http://www.dzogchen.org.in/sangha.

74 The prayer was allegedly composed by Thangtong Gyalpo at the time of a seemingly untamable infectious disease. Ringpa (2020). 'Dedicating our Dharma Practice to the Coronavirus'. March 10. See: https://www.rigpa.org/rigpa-news/2020/3/10/6civjuaj6w2pt4qtz00pl6rlne71ko

75 Cf. Mindrolling Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche (2020). ‚Advice for the COVID-19 situation'. *YouTube.* April 10. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWJWunQgtyc

76 Cf. Khandro Rinpoche (2020/3). 'Mindrolling Aids in Pandemic Relief Effort'. *Facebook.* April 14. See: https://www.khandrorinpoche.org/mindrolling-monastery-aids-in-pandemic-relief-effort/

77 Cf. Khandro Rinpoche (2020/2). 'Practicing in Times of Adversity'. (Originally posted on November 21, 2018). *Facebook.* March 24. See: https://www.khandrorinpoche.org/practicing-in-times-of-adversity/

78 Cf. Ringpa (2020/2). 'Online Teachings with Jetsun Khando Rinpoche'. *Facebook.* April 12. See: https://www.rigpa.org/upcoming-events/2020/4/12/online-teachings-with-jetsun-khand

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

The Nyingma lineage holders from the other three "mother monasteries" were significantly less vocal regarding the pandemic, at least their international followers and public[79]; whereas other teachers with a dual Nyignma and Kagyu affiliation and arguably a more global projection were more active and communicative towards their audience, as we shall see in the next section.

A last figure is worth including here: the aforementioned protagonist of the controversy on the Dalai Lama's online empowerments, Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche, who is a Nyingma rituals expert, former member of the Tibetan Parliament in exile, and amateur actor. In his YouTube Channel, he uploaded a video in Tibetan with his "Advice in the time of COVID-19," where he described the pandemic as a result of the 5 poisons disturbing people's minds and thus creating an imbalance in the 5 primary elements. Though he recommended to follow the scientists and doctors' advice, he also argued that:

> "Since the main point is 'mind', if your mind remains relaxed, the outer and inner disturbance of the primary elements and the epidemics caused by the mind will be pacified (…) If your thoughts are pacified naturally, all sickness will also be pacified."[80]

He recommended praying to the Triple Gem, i.e. Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and to Guru Rinpoche, as well as reciting "Pacifying the Turmoil of the Mamos," since the kind of disturbance that causes epidemics is caused by an agitation in the minds of Dakinis and Mamos (female spirit-deities). Above all, he concluded, the most important thing is to relax.[81]

---

ro-rinpoche; Cf. Khandro Rinpoche (2020/4). 'Mindrol Lekshey Online: Curriculum Review and Teachings'. *Facebook*. July 13. See: https://www.khandrorinpoche.org/mindrol-lekshey-online-2020/

79 Palyul Monastery Penar Rinpoche's seat in exile, Namdroling Monastery donated Rs. 10 lakh to PM CARES Fund (Cf. Star of Mysore (2020). 'Penor Rinpoche Charity Foundation Donates Rs.10 Lakh Towards PM CARES Fund'. April 17. See: https://starofmysore.com/penor-rinpoche-charity-foundation-donates-rs-10-lakh-towards-pm-cares-fund/); while his international network published a special advice for the 2003 SARS and none for the covid-19. (Cf. Palyul Ling International (2020). 'Advice: Dealing with the 2003 SARS Outbreak'. February 3. See: https://palyul.org/wp/1456-2/). Khatok Monastery Lhoga Rinpoche succinctly recommended the practice of Gotrab during the virus crisis (Cf. Nyignma Kathok Buddhist Centre (2020). 'Practice for the Wuhan Corona Virus'. March. See: https://kathok.org.sg/practice-for-the-wuhan-corona-virus/). Finally, Dorje Drak Monastery (the throne holder of which is still to be recognized in his latest reincarnation), also announced a donation of ₹ 1, 30,000 to HPSDMA COVID-19 state disaster response fund. The official letter may be consulted on the monastery's Facebook page (See April 20, 2020: https://www.facebook.com/dorjedrag/?rc=p).

80 Cf. Orgyan Tobgyal YouTube channel (2020). 'OT Rinpoche's advice in the time of COVID-19'. March 19. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4TX8U7BGTw&t=194s

81 Ib.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

3.3 Karma Kagyu and Ka-Nying

The Kagyu, literally meaning the "oral lineage" because of its emphasis on direct oral transmission, has the Karma Kagyu as its largest school, arguably thanks to their unbroken line of reincarnate lineage holders known as the Karmapas, relevant and influential figures within the whole Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The recognition of the last Karmapa, following the death of the 16th in 1981, gave rise to a dispute between two aspiring candidates, Trinley Thaye Dorje and Ogyen Trinley Dorje, both of whom have been publicly performing the role within their own organizations and counting on diverse support.

Trinley Thaye Dorje, enthroned in Delhi as the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa in 1994, was probably the first high lama to publicly react before the virus crisis in an official letter published by the end of January. Therein he recommended his followers to stay at home and get together for streaming practice sessions, and argued that:

> "the many and various kinds of obstacles that we face, such as natural disasters, wars, infectious diseases, and famines that keep occurring are the infallible **consequence of our collective and individual karmas**.
> Nevertheless, because of our lack of deep conviction about this, we tend to deny the causality of our actions and their results when we encounter difficult challenges. (…). Or, **we may consider all of the problems we face as the result of bad policies in our societal systems, or erroneous scientific views** or other negative developments. (…) **This is wrong.**
> In general, this all happens as a result of not being able to come to terms with the fact that, no matter how frequently we experience joy and happiness in this world, the suffering of birth, ageing, illness, and death come side by side, just as the body and its shadow walk together. **Whatever suffering occurs, it is important to identify its root**. In the Buddha's teachings, there is the system of tracing **the origin of our suffering in our karma and afflicting emotions** (…).
> Engage in the six sessions practice of day and night, be heedful to sustain yourselves on white food, and spend your time doing practices such as Nyungne, or similar practices."[82]
> (Bold emphasis added).

A shorter official letter was published in March where he stressed the need to take all due precautions and particularly to avoid panicking, since "the core sickness is, in my opinion, both a mind filled with anxiety about the disease, and a tendency

82 Cf. Karmapa (2020/1). 'Coronavirus: Karmapa's message for dharma centres and practitioners'. January 29. See: https://www.karmapa.org/coronavirus-karmapas-message-for-dharma-centres-and-practitioners/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

to wrongly think that we should never become sick or die"[83]. Other incidental or more direct allusions to the pandemic may be found in a section in his personal website where the Karmapa shares his reflections and provides answers and advice requested by his students. A key idea here is the perception of the virus as a "blessing in disguise" bringing people together; a notion qualified by the lives lost and the harshness faced by countless individuals.[84]

On the economic front, in Mid-April, he announced donations to the Indian and Bhutanese Governments to help address the pandemic and encouraged "everyone to practice whatever form of generosity you can – no matter how limited your financial means may be."[85]

Ogyen Trinley Dorje, enthroned as the 17th Karmapa in 1992 at Tsurphu Monastery (Gurum, Tibet), is endorsed by the Dalai Lama and has more international visibility and political weight. His first public reactions to the virus appeared in a video on his Facebook page aimed at reflecting on the proper response to protect sentient beings from wars, famine, and plagues. He insisted that barely acknowledging the news was not enough, so that one should ask "what can I do to help?" and work "according to our own abilities and capacities," even if they come down to just making aspirations.[86]

His main stance, though, was articulated in Mid-April and built upon the notions of impermanence and prayer. The Karmapa insisted that we are prone to smoothly embrace impermanence when we envisage changes aligned with what we want, but get paralyzed when they take a different turn. Instead, we should contemplate ourselves and "use this crisis to improve ourselves and learn something new." As Buddhists, he proposed a series of prayer sessions to show support and appreciation to those on the frontline, and "for world peace and for the pandemic

83 Cf. Karmapa (2020/2). 'Coronavirus: Karmapa's new message'. March 19. See: https://www.karmapa.org/coronavirus-karmapas-new-message/

84 Cf. Thaye Dorje, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, reflects on the pandemic, and introduces his responses to questions from student". In Karmapa (2020/3). 'Meditations for our Times'. July 15. See: https://www.karmapa.org/meditations-for-our-times/

85 Cf. Karmapa (2020/4). 'Karmapa donates 14.6 million rupees to Covid-19 relief funds'. April 26, See: https://www.karmapa.org/karmapa-donates-14-6-million-rupees-to-covid-19-relief-funds/; Cf. Karmapa (2020/5). 'A further donation was announced in May: "Karmapa donates 500,000 rupees to West Bengal for Covid-19 relief". May 11. See: https://www.karmapa.org/karmapa-donates-500000-rupees-to-west-bengal-for-covid-19-relief/.

86 He also recommended the recitation of Thangtong Gyalpo's prayer, The Verses that Saved Sakya from Sickness: A Prayer for Pacifying the Fear of Disease, the same recommended by Khandro Rinpoche (2020/1). 'The Gyalwang Karmapa's Advice Regarding Covid-19'. *Facebook*. March 19. See: https://www.facebook.com/karmapa/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

to be quelled."[87] Thus, from April 18th, he started leading a series of weekly-cycled online prayers with a different practice each day. The choice of prayers and the corresponding explanation is of interest since esoteric or supernatural elements are given a symbolic contextual value. For example, "A Prayer for Rebirth in the Pure Realm of Sukhāvatī" is not explained as a supplication to be reborn in a joyful and heavenly Pure Land as opposed to our common world, but as a call to reflect on the causes and conditions that create our world and thus develop an environmental conscience and attitude that would help preserve it. Similarly, the malicious spirits targeted by "Appeasing the Discord of the Mamos" "could be understood as the natural environment arising in the form of inner goddesses," so the mantra would represent an aspiration "to remedy our imbalances and disharmony with the natural environment." Interestingly, at the explanation to the same mantra, he claimed that "some experienced Tibetan doctors" can cure the virus, though insisting that prevention was crucial: "A protection cord around your neck or a blessing pill will not be of any help if you then rush off to a large gathering of people[88]."

Besides the Karmapas, as mentioned above, several teachers belonging to both the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages, and thus sometimes referred to as Ka-Nying, have managed to attain a notable international relevance. We shall here focus on Kathmandu-based Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche and Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche.

Mingyur Rinpoche has a wide net of centers around the world (more than 50 Meditation and Community Groups on five continents), managed under the label of *Tergar*.[89] Due to the lockdown, the organization made available online their group practices conducted by instructors, 4-days retreats, and the inclusion of sick relatives in the daily practices of senior lamas.[90] Mingyur Rinpoche's initial reflection

87 Cf. Kagyu Office (2020). 'A Message from the Gyalwang Karmapa About the Coronavirus Pandemic'. April 14. See: https://kagyuoffice.org/a-message-from-the-gyalwang-karmapa-about-the-coronavirus-pandemic/

88 Karmapa (Ed.) (2020). Prayers for a Time of Pandemic. Compiled and Introduced by the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje. Dharma Ebooks, pp. 178-179, 237-238. The whole list of prayers follows this order: 1) The Heart Sutra with the Repulsion of Maras; 2) The Noble Aspiration for Excellent Conduct & The Sutra in Three Sections; 3) Sutras of the Dharani of Akshobhya; 4) Praises on the Twenty-One Taras with Benefits; 5) Supplications of Guru Rinpoche; 6) A Prayer for Rebirth in the Pure Realm of Sukhāvatī; 7) Selected Dharani Mantras, The Prayer that Saved Sakya from Illness, and Appeasing the Discord of the Mamos. Both the English version and the Tibetan original of the compilation may be downloaded from https://dharmaebooks.org/prayers-for-a-time-of-pandemic/?fbclid=IwAR20F_WucRp-NRV7Eh7unQc88ATA4HruLNY2RsgB15E7ExKDJ4k45qw-EMd8; https://dharmaebooks.org/prayers-pandemic-tibet/?fbclid=IwAR2XMMUvSS4vv80JuG10b1N7pcRd0G3bVtqnA2v5uEOHpgGZ0c5PSXrZA80%EF%BC%89

89 It comprises: Tergar Meditation Communities and Practice Groups, Tergar International and Tergar Asia.

90 Cf. Tergar (2020). 'Covid-19 message'. See: https://tergar.org/covid-19-message-2/. The retreats are as follows: Nectar of the Path: Teachings on the Path of Awakening Online Retreat

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

centered on the idea that no matter the circumstances "the most important thing is our mindset" and to let go without giving up before the ups and downs of life.[91] From the end of March, he started broadcasting a series of teachings addressing spiritual and mental strategies not only to cope with the pandemic and the lockdown, but to turn the situation into a profitable learning experience.[92] The videos turned out to be a success, Rinpoche's YouTube channel reaching almost a quarter of a million subscribers. In a somehow summary session entitled "10 Life Lessons We Can Learn from Coronavirus" (25 May), Rinpoche drew a parallelism between our tendency to focus on our faults while overlooking our qualities, and our need to overcome such propensity and look into positive aspects of the pandemic. According to him, there would be 10 aspects that could actually be better cultivated and improved thanks to the virus lockdown: interpersonal relationships, spirituality, self-discovery, health and cleanliness, the environment, new discoveries, medical treatments, resilience, meditation, and education[93].

From a ritualistic perspective, and despite having declared in June 5th that Buddhism is not a religion but a science of the mind, on July 22nd Mingyur Rinpoche participated with other important lamas in a "42 fire pujas to subdue the Covid virus and the unrest and turmoil in the world, as well as liberate and bless goats from the butchers."[94]

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche also leads a net of international centers for Buddhist Studies and Meditation known as Gomde Centers and Dharma Houses[95]. His greatest international asset, though, is probably the Kathmandu-based Rangjung

---

(July 25-28); Exploring the Nature of Mind: Deepening Recognition – Online Retreat (August 1-4); Dzogchen: The Path of Natural Liberation – Online Retreat (August 8-11). "Mingyur Rinpoche's Schedule", https://tergar.org/mingyur-rinpoches-schedule/.

91 Cf. Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche (2020/1). 'Message on COVID-19 outbreak'. *YouTube*. March 15. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgZETpd9h5s&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3A-LmqPj6EhU4q3kOZBTvTzdlflgOJ41IFFvd8jh66_S4pY26GuM_IFA8

92 The Live Teaching sessions offered on YouTube include: Living with distress (March 29); Transforming Anxiety into Awareness (April 5); How to Turn Tough Times into Growth and Development (26 April); Living in a Pandemic: How to Transform Depressive Thinking (17 May); 10 Life Lessons We Can Learn from Coronavirus (25 May); Equanimity in Uncertain Times (1 June). Cf. Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche YouTube Channel, see: https://www.youtube.com/user/MingyurRinpoche, and Tergar Meditation Community YouTube Channel, see: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQPdChAO9IoHRio2WMGJJzA

93 Cf. Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche (2020/2). '10 Life Lessons We Can Learn from Coronavirus'. May 25. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9M50dGK4PQ&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR11eRUs2X4dZCVb7eR9wZbNdu2K2OV-yAhX_DE3NT1T9prNurA43cJjFGI

94 Both quotations extracted from his official Facebook page, see: https://www.facebook.com/mingyur.rinpoche/

95 Cf. its webpage: Shedrub. The Online Home of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, see: https://shedrub.org/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Yeshe Institute. Modelled upon Rinpoche's ideal of the "scholar practitioner," it offers academic degrees on Buddhist Studies and Himalayan languages combing modern Western methodology and traditional Tibetan teachings.[96] Rinpoche's first reactions in March focused on encouraging compliance with social distancing and lockdown measures, to take the opportunity to practice and study, and to take "mendrub" (blessing pills) every morning with water on an empty stomach.[97] Public announcements in April turned the attention towards the material relief of local daily workers and their families in dire straits channeled through Rangjung Yeshe Shenpen, Rinpoche's social work organization[98]. In the same month, a collection of teachings was made available online, discounts were offered on the Tara's Triple Excellence Online Meditation Program, and the whole teaching activities of the Institute were also moved online.[99]

Chokyi Nyima's longest and most detailed statement on the pandemic was an online teaching given at the end of June entitled "Kindness is the Best Medicine during Mental and Physical Distress." Rinpoche pondered upon the notion that no matter the level at stake (individual, familiar, social, and so on), problems always arise as a consequence of not following "Natural Law", that is, the 5 Buddhist precepts (no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, no consumption of intoxicants). In all circumstances, the cultivation of sīla (moral conduct), samādhi (meditaion), prajñā (wisdom), and particularly karuṇā (compassion), are the solution for a life free of suffering. Besides these basic Buddhist tenets, Rinpoche

96 Cf. its webpage: Rangjung Yeshe Institute, see: https://www.ryi.org/

97 He particularly recommended reading Buddhist hagiographies and accumulating the mantra of Bhagavatī Parṇaśavari, "who is associated with healing and the curing of contagious disease". Facebook post by Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, published on March 15, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/Chokyi.Nyima.Rinpoche/; also "Dharma Teaching and Some Short Advice", video posted on March 22, 2020, Ib.

98 E.g., Rinpoche's Facebook page announced the delivery of relief hampers with essential items (April 1st), and expressed gratitude towards those who had contributed to the social project with their donations and volunteering work (April 13th). Ib. Managed by Rangjung Yeshe Shenpen's director Mélanie Létourneau, the campaign can be accessed at "Food relief for poor families in CoVid-19 Lockdown-Nepal", see: http://www.shenpennepal.org/program/covid-relief/

99 Facebook posts dating from April 11 and April 15, 2020. See: https://www.facebook.com/Chokyi.Nyima.Rinpoche/. The compilation of dharma talks may be found at "Shedrub Mandala Online Dharma Resources", April 14th 2020, see: https://shedrub.org/news/onlineresources/?fbclid=IwAR0l4y1TYkdClrJ3pfvPwnOOeFvjuDt5lXhwobmhLypx6AGleS54-XNXunA. Tara's Triple Excellence Online Meditation Program may be accessed at https://dharmasun.org/tte/. Rangjung Yeshe Institute also offered a series of recommendations to deall with "the challenges of online learning", "emotional challenges of the Covid-19 crisis and "a sense of loss during the Covid-19 outbreak", available at "Support during the Covid-19 Crisis", Rangjung Yeshe Institute, see: https://www.ryi.org/support-during-the-covid-19-crisis.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

insisted on the importance of respecting other religions while claiming, similarly to Mingyur Rinpoche, that Buddhism would be the religion that matches Science best.[100]

3.4 Sakya

The fourth major Tibetan Buddhist school is called Sakya, meaning "pale earth," a reference to the landscape of its founding monastery near Shigatse. The throne holder of the school, known as Sakya Trizin, is a position hereditarily passed down through male members of the Khön family, which had a leading political role during medieval Mongol rule over Tibet.

The current Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, is the 42nd in the succession lineage and assumed the position in 2017 from his retiring father, Ngawang Kunga Tegchen, under a new appointment system. The 41st Sakya Trizin established relevant monastic and learning centers in Nepal and India, like the Dzongsar Institute, the Sakya College, and the Sakya Institute, and still remains active as a religious public figure. The international net of Sakya centers around the world is particularly strong in English-speaking countries, namely, the USA, where the Sakya Trizins possess a Seat near New York.[101]

On March 12, the Sakya Trizin emeritus gave an oral online transmission of "The Prayer Which Saved Sakya from the Epidemic," recommended by teachers from other schools cited above.[102] The first major pronouncement of the Sakya Trizin took place in an interview for Tibet TV on April 7, in which he stressed the "global effort" required by the crisis, the need to follow medical guidelines, tame our afflictive emotions, and pray for the recovery of all patients.[103] The following day, a donation to the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand was announced.[104]

---

100 Cf. Shedrub (2020). 'Kindness is the best Medicine during mental and physical distress'. June 30 See: https://shedrub.org/news/onlineresources/?fbclid=IwAR0I4y1TYkdClrJ3pfvPwnOOeFvjuDt5lXhw0bmhLypx6AGleS 54-XNXunA

101 For a whole list of Sakya centers, see: "Sakya Worldwide" at: http://www.sakyaling.de/sakya-asia/.

102 Cf. Sakya Dolma Phodrang's Facebook post, dating form March 15, 2020. See: https://www.facebook.com/pg/sakya.dolmaphodrang/posts/

103 The interview may be accessed at the YouTube page of TibetTV under the title "His Eminence 42nd Sakya Trizin Ratna Vajra Rinpoche on COVID-19". April 7, 2020. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuLWyPFWKlQ. A summary may be found at the website of the Central Tibetan Administration under the heading "Sakya Trizin Rinpoche espouses oneness of humanity on the time of Coronavirus pandemic". April 9, 2020. See: https://tibet.net/sakya-trizin-rinpoche-espouses-oneness-of-humanity-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-pandemic/

104 See the Sakya Dolma Phodrang's official Facebook publication from April 8, 2020: https://www.facebook.com/pg/sakya.dolmaphodrang/posts/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

In May a special issue of the Sakya periodical publication called *Melody of Dharma* was dedicated to the pandemic-driven lockdown, containing advice from the main teachers of the school and a collection of mantras and practices. The editorial dwelled on the notion of the pandemic context as a "precious opportunity" to both cultivate ourselves and discover new ways to communicate with each other and practice solidarity[105]. In his article, the Sakya Trizin emeritus encouraged people not to panic, to find refuge in the Triple Gem, and to follow medical instructions since, he elaborated:

> "Will prayers, visualizations and mantra recitations be sufficient to carry us through? These, of course, are of huge benefit, but it is also of major importance that we strictly observe the recommended rules of personal hygiene and social distancing. (…) We should pray to these deities, chant their mantras and recite their prayers. I believe that by doing so, we will successfully be saved from this pandemic, and find happiness.[106]"

The current Sakya Trizin, who referred to the Buddhadharma as a medicine for negative thoughts, argued that

> "All these problems are caused by our own karma, and we should respond to them by taking good care of our own health, by cultivating positive thoughts, and by pacifying this virus by reciting prayers and mantras. (…) As the great bodhisattva Shantideva said in his Bodhicharyavatara, we should practice equality, which means that we are all the same and we should care for each other (…); we should extend our focus and pray "May all beings be free from suffering.[107]"

His brother Khöndung Gyana Vajra Sakya Rinpoche was blunter in categorically refuting the idea that

> "just chanting the mantras, we will be cured, or that we can do whatever we want. Thinking that we can just chant the mantra and everything will be fine, is a wrong view. And there are unfortunately some people who hold this view, that if we pray

105 "From the Editors", in Melody of Dharma. A Publication of the Office of Sakya Dolma Phodrang Dedicated to the Dharma Activities of His Holiness Sakya Gongma Trichen Rinpoche And His Noble Family. N. 19. Special Lockdown Issue, May 2020; downloadable from: http://hhsakya-trizin.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Mod-19.pdf

106 Gongma Trichen Rinpoche (2020). Bringing Obstacles Into the Path. In *Melody of Dharma*. A Publication of the Office of Sakya Dolma Phodrang Dedicated to the Dharma Activities of His Holiness Sakya Gongma Trichen Rinpoche And His Noble Family. N. 19. Special Lockdown Issue, p. 6.

107 Cf. Sakya Trizin (2020). Courage in the Face of Illness. In *Melody of Dharma*. A Publication of the Office of Sakya Dolma Phodrang Dedicated to the Dharma Activities of His Holiness Sakya Gongma Trichen Rinpoche And His Noble Family. N. 19. Special Lockdown Issue, p. 7-8.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

> and recite mantras, we will be safe from the virus. (…) We have to start by taking care of ourselves, taking all the precautions necessary to keep safe. Only then will prayers be effective, helping us emotionally and keeping us strong with their blessing[108]».

This value of prayers as an emotional aid or confidence boost did not entail a mistrust in the illness-dispelling efficacy of rituals, since invocations of the Goodness Parnashavari were performed by Sakya teachers from February through April and an online Parnashavari empowerment was bestowed online by Gongma Trichen Rinpoche on April 17th, relying on its "extremely powerful" capacity of "vanquishing of contagious illnesses"[109].

3.5 Bon and Rime

Besides the 4 major schools covered so far, the Buddhist Tibetan world broadly speaking also comprises the followers of the indigenous religion of Tibet, known as Bon, that developed in a reciprocal influence with Buddhism and was recognized as the 5th school by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government in exile in 1988; as well as teachers embracing a non-sectarian or ecumenical approach, known as Rime (W. *ris med*).

The Head of the Bon school, Lungtok Dawa Dargyal, the 34th Menri Trizin Rinpoche, released a succinct message on his website asking his followers no to panic, take precautions and follow the guidelines of the World Health Organization. He also informed that his sangha was praying to the protectors for a swift eradication of the disease[110]. His Monastery in Dolanji made donations to the PM Cares Fund and Himachal Pradesh COVID-19 Response Fund.[111]

The most interesting initiative from the Bon side, however, was the organization of a Cybersangha event hosted by Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche reuniting

108 Cf. Khöndung Gyana Vajra Sakya Rinpoche (2020). Keeping A Positive Mind In the Midst Of Suffering. In: Melody of Dharma. A Publication of the Office of Sakya Dolma Phodrang Dedicated to the Dharma Activities of His Holiness Sakya Gongma Trichen Rinpoche And His Noble Family. N. 19. Special Lockdown Issue, p. 11.

109 Cf. Office of Sakya Dolma Phodrang (2020). 'Dharma Practices to Counter the Ongoing Pandemic. The Practice of Parnashavari'. In *Melody of Dharma*. A Publication of the Office of Sakya Dolma Phodrang Dedicated to the Dharma Activities of His Holiness Sakya Gongma Trichen Rinpoche And His Noble Family. N. 19. Special Lockdown Issue. May, pp. 19-20.

110 Cf. Lungtokling (2020). 'Covid-19: Message from His Holiness Lungtok Dawa Dargyal, Menri Trizin 34 Rinpoche'. Blog. March. See: https://www.lungtokling.org/index.php/en/blog/159-covid-19-message-from-his-holiness-lungtok-dawa-dargyal-menri-trizin-34th-rinpoche

111 See the post of April 6, 2020, on the Facebook page of the Yungdrung Bon Monastic Centre Society: https://www.facebook.com/ybmc.society/posts/on-this-day-of-6th-april-2020-his-holiness-the-34th-menri-trizin-rinpoche-and-me/3411898062171675/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

teachers from six different spiritual traditions of Tibet. This ecumenical encounter took place on June 7 2020 via Zoom and was later uploaded to several digital platforms. In his presentation, the host alluded to the will to follow the Dalai Lama's advice to adopt a non-sectarian (Rime) attitude and open a dialogue with other traditions, particularly in a context of growing racism and discrimination.[112] Pönlop Trinley Nyima Rinpoche (Bon) referred to the Tibetan exile as both an opportunity and obligation as religious leaders to spread the Dharma around the world: "if we pray together"—he claimed—"it will transform into something tangible and influence the community". All teachers started by praising the ecumenical initiative and reciting a prayer from their own traditions, after which they gave a teaching concerning the pandemic. Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche (Kagyu), the first to intervene, delivered a teaching on the Bardo (transitional state) of dying and death and the possibility to choose to be reborn in the Pure Land. Sogan Rinpoche (Nyingma) also addressed the topic of the Bardo and thanked technological progress and globalization for allowing the preservation of Buddhist teachings. Khenpo Gyurmey Dorjee (Sakya) labelled the pandemic as a completely new phenomenon caused by human misconduct, not by nature's dynamics, and referred to internal transformation as the only way out since politicians' approaches never succeed. Gyaltsab Rinpoche Choekyi Nangpa (Jonang) recommended approaching the crisis from the perspective of the 4 noble truths, in order to understand our suffering and be able to do something about it. Finally, Yangten Rinpoche (Gelug) sustained that the pandemic was created by an imbalance of the 4 elements and recommended as a solution the practice of the Medicine Buddha sadhana, which are not only words but have a transforming power.[113]

Possessing a wide non-sectarian education, SOAS alumnus, film-maker, prolific author, and sponsor of the most ambitious translation project of Tibetan canonical texts, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche is one of the most interesting and controversial lamas today. Openly expressing political views and frequently resorting to humor and irony, his Facebook page is anything but dull. For example, in late February he posted a video showing how he was celebrating Losar (the Tibetan New Year) by drinking cow urine he had ordered from Amazon to tease PM Modi and Hindu leaders' claims that it served as a cure for the coronavirus. The same tenor was used a couple of months later in a letter to the famous environmental activist Greta Thunberg where, after stating that the virus was "doing the job

112 The broadcast in Tibetan (144 minutes long) may be accessed at the CyberSangha website under the title "Teachings & Prayers for the Pandemic from Six Spiritual Traditions of Tibet". See: https://cybersangha.net/prayer-for-pandemic/?fbclid=IwAR1Uer-PGffNFyVMj1XUyDyhsGbEkcjR2VR7p9h1 C4G HEYAE1f1sp6ujsMg. An English audio translation is available at: https://mixlr.com/ligmincha-in-english/showreel/teachings-prayers-for-the-pandemic

113 Ib.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

for (her)", since it would sooner or later be over, it would be a great idea to ask everyone to stop drinking Coca Cola every Friday.[114]

Politically, he openly condemned Western countries for their sanctions on Iran in the very fragile context of the pandemic and referred to the US as "lower than a beast"; moreover, he was probably the only Tibetan teacher to publicly criticize governmental measures: upon the announcement of the lockdown in India by Mid-March, he reacted with an "apology accepted" post, asking the government to feed the poor and provide a better internet connection.[115]

Not all of Rinpoche's reactions had this playful character. He also asked his sangha to pray "to pacify physical and mental pain" caused by the virus and thanked those who participated in the project to illuminate the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya "in this bleak time"[116]. Support to his followers was also shown in the creation of a Spotify playlist to deal with isolation[117]. At the same time, in an interview with Bhutanese Kuensel, Dzongsar Khyentse confessed that, though as a Buddhist practitioner and teacher he had fairly studied and written on impermanence, "when the Covid-19 hit, I saw those teachings hadn't really entered my heart, and that I'd been teaching them without totally believing them".[118] He also admitted living with the "anxiety of the unknown," to deal with which he resorted to his Buddhist practice. From a socio-political angle, he observed how countries quickly resorted to blaming each other, instead of cooperating, and that the statistics show how the lowering of contamination levels in India due to the lockdown "will save far more lives than those lost to Covid-19"[119].

Finally, from a more philosophical perspective, he offered an interesting interpretation of the abovementioned "mamos" in relation to the pandemic. He argued that it is due to our lack of understanding of emptiness and non-duality that all problems arise. This lack of understanding leads to extremist views and to a disrespect of the 5 elements (which are no other than the 5 Dakinis), for example, by

114 Posts on the official Facebook wall of Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse (February 24, April 29). See: https://www.facebook.com/djkhyentse/

115 Posts on the official Facebook wall of Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse (March 14, March 15, March 21, April 2). See: https://www.facebook.com/djkhyentse/

116 See the announcement on the website of the Dzongsar Khyentse Chokyi Lodro Institute, February 5. 2020. See: http://dzongsarinstitute.org.in/en/2020/02/05/announcement/. Cf. "Illuminating the World", post at Siddhartha's Intent website, April 11, 2020. See: https://www.siddharthasintent.org/about-us-2/news/2020/illuminating-the-world/

117 The list, which includes artists like Sam Cooke and Nina Simone, is entitled "Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche playlist for lockdown during Covid-19 pandemic", and is available at: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4vLPkOuyfSBUfgQWuFVwu1?si=vr9hIaN3-QmuXiWS4_1ifow

118 Cf. Kuensel (2020). 'Things aren't looking good. But there's a lot we can do'. April 29. See: https://kuenselonline.com/things-arent-looking-good-but-theres-a-lot-we-can-do/

119 Cf. Kuensel (2020).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

means of excessive greed, and that is what is meant by the "wrath of the mamo": "in Buddhism, we don't generally believe in some sort of evil spirit there that's harming the world". He thus advised Buddhist practitioners to be friends with the 5 elements, rely upon the 3 Jewels, and, if having the proper transmission, practice "Appeasing the Mamos," without failing to comply with all scientifically-grounded guidelines.[120]

4. Conclusions: External Compliance and Internal Non-Excluding Narratives

The data collected in this study show, first of all, a general compliance with the discourse and policies of political institutions before the pandemic, namely preventive measures of social distancing and isolation as established by healthcare bodies and recommended by the scientific community. In contrast, for example, with certain North American evangelical groups, there has been no questioning of the nature and dangers of the virus or of the enforced measures.[121] Tibetan religious leaders' first typical reaction, having their main monasteries in India, has been of endorsement of the state and federal authorities, to which they offered donations (direct material involvement in social action has been less common), support and praise of healthcare workers, and a general request of obedience of official guidelines. In this regard, it is important to consider that Tibetan lamas often made their first public statements at the request of the Tibetan Government in Exile, as explained by the 42nd Sakya Trizin.[122] At the same time, they have emphasized a need of unity, dwelling on the idea of all humankind facing a global threat, and made a call for interreligious and interracial harmony. Consequently, there has not been, at least in the public discourse of the leaders of each and every school, any sectarian or radical attitudes putting the blame of the pandemic on certain religious groups or ethnicities. This contrasts, for example, with the anti-Muslim rhetoric

120 Cf. Siddhartha's Intent YouTube Channel (2020). 'Understanding non-duality: advice from Rinpoche for today and beyond'. March 17. See: https://www.you-tube.com/watch?v=RbUp7iGrKqQ&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1g46NszzZHBL_p4G-UQjVdGWv9015IPUAb6FFKTX0w0lEebRq09cs Cx0q8

121 Cf., e.g., Peter McLaren (2020). Religious Nationalism and the Coronavirus Pandemic: Soul-Sucking Evangelicals and Branch Covidians Make America Sick Again. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 1-22.

122 Cf. Sakya Trizin (2020). Courage in the Face of Illness. In *Melody of Dharma*. A Publication of the Office of Sakya Dolma Phodrang Dedicated to the Dharma Activities of His Holiness Sakya Gongma Trichen Rinpoche And His Noble Family. N. 19. Special Lockdown Issue, p. 6. The Government in Exile also encourage their functionaries and Tibetans around the world to contribute to Coronavirus relief funds, see: https://tibet.net/kashag-appeals-cta-functionaries-and-tibetan-worldwide-to-contribute-to-coronavirus-relief-funds/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

found in Indian officials or the globally spread anti-Asian racism and xenophobia denounced by the United Nations.[123]

Internally, the discourse developed by Tibetan teachers may be addressed by the alternatives presented and "allowed" by their scriptures, interpretations, and philosophies. And so, regarding the *context* of the pandemic, it may be interpreted as yet another regular manifestation of our impermanent and suffering-marked reality, or as an exceptional scenario, a never-seen-before threat that stands as a clear sign of humanity living in degenerate times. The question of the *causes*, even if ultimately a non-fortuitous problem of human agency, may be tackled from a merely material biological perspective, or acquire clear moral connotations (not following the 10 virtuous actions or the 5 precepts), a philosophical-spiritual dimension (ignorance of the ultimate nature of reality), or an esoteric approach (the wrath of spirit-deities). As a result, *solutions or responses* also vary, including healthcare precautions, ethical behavior, calm-abiding meditation, or prayers and rituals.

This plurality is not internally considered as creating tensions or demanding exclusivism. This may be understandable, at least, because of the compatibility of the elements (mishandling of animals is both a biological and a moral issue) or because they simply operate at different levels. Also, depending on the perspective, seemingly excluding characteristics are deemed compatible: the context of the pandemic is both regular and exceptional depending on the point of view. This does not, of course, entail that an external questioning of the employed elements and their correlations may not be undertaken (one may deny the capacity of pujas to tame the pandemic or argue that animal cruelty cannot per se explain a disease), but that is not our concern here. In this study, we have observed how different teachers choose to privilege certain elements in their rhetoric, but they take good care not to explicitly exclude or condemn others. This is especially revealing in the complex matter of esotericism and the value of rituals and prayers, which touches upon deep philosophical and ontological problems within Buddhism. On the one hand, there is this idea that practice helps us be calm and focused, and also gives us courage, but that prayer is no counterfeit to the virus and the "mamos" are but a metaphor for our relationship with nature; on the other hand, there is this call for rituals, for specific prayers that can tame the virus and appease real evil forces unleashed by humans. The fact that both takes can be found in the very same discourse one after the other is telling of the complex situation of a tradition catering

123 Cf. New York Times (2020). Indian officials are blaming an Islamic group for spreading the virus, and Muslims have been targeted in a wave of violence. India, Coronavirus Fans Religious Hatred. April 12. See: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/world/asia/india-coronavirus-muslims-bigotry.html; Cf. Human Rights Watch (2020). 'Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide'. May 12. See: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

for both a native and an international audience in a context where Science arguably tends to hold, so far, the epistemological monopoly.

This intricacy may also be observed in the controversy surrounding the online conferral of empowerments, significantly raised by drawing from accusations of "degeneration". There seems to be room for such an intellectual questioning or discussion within an esoteric tradition based upon master-disciple connections, while canonical sources could potentially allow a millennialist reading of the situation. The explanation of the lack of a backed-up fundamentalist reaction obviously involves multiple and complex reasons, but I would argue that at least two elements bear decisive importance. Firstly, as Keyes pointed out for the case of Buddhist Thailand, "millennial movements are caused primarily by a crisis centering around political power,"[124] which is absent: the Tibetan Government in exile and the Tibetan religious elite promptly reacted in defense of a socio-politically charismatic figure which symbolizes unity. Secondly, as explained above, technology and mass media have been a key feature in the preservation and spread of Buddhism around the world. As the Dalai Lama cared to point out, "going online" was not an exceptional measure for an exceptional time, but an already implemented and widely used resource. What is more, the virus is depicted as a "blessing in disguise" allowing more people than ever to access teachings and practice Dharma thanks to the combination of general Internet usage and confinement.

In conclusion, it may be argued that a religion that fosters introspection and meditative practices in solitude, that encourages a serene acceptance of adversity, and that has been globally consolidated thanks to the Internet and new technologies, may be particularly suited to deal with a pandemic scenario basically calling for people to stay at home, be calm, and wait until everything is over.

Bibliography

Álvarez Ortega, Miguel (2018). Traditional Tibetan Buddhist Scholars on Dharma, Law, Politics, and Social Ethics: Philosophical Discussions in Boudhanath (Nepal). *Buddhism, Law, and Society* 4, pp. 1-52.

Anālayo, Bhikkhu (2017). The Healing Potential of Awakening Factors in Early Buddhist Discourse. In C. Pierce Salguero (Ed.). *Buddhism and Medicine. An Anthology of Premodern Sources.* New York, pp. 12-18.

Bechert, Heinz (2004). Buddha, Life of the. In Robert E. Buswell (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Buddhism. Vol. I.* New York, pp. 82-88.

Bradley, Tamdin S. (2013). *Principles of Tibetan Medicine*. London.

Chen, Thomas S. N., and Chen, Peter S. Y. (2002). Jivaka, physician to the Buddha. *Journal of Medical Biography* 10, pp. 88-91.

124 Cf. Keyes, 1977, p. 284.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Clark, Barry (1995). *The Quintessence Tantras of Tibetan Medicine*. Boston.

Cowell, Edward B. (Ed.). (2003). *The Buddha-carita of Aśvaghoṣa*. Delhi.

Cucinotta, Domenico, and Vanelli, Maurizio (2020). WHO Declares COVID-19 a Pandemic. *Acta Bio Medica* 91, N° 1, pp. 157-60.

Dash, Bhagwan (1976). Indian Contribution to Tibetan Medicine. In Dawa Norbu (Ed.). *An Introduction to Tibetan Medicine*. Delhi, pp. 12-24.

Demiéville, Paul (1985). *Buddhism and Healing. Demiéville's Article "Byō" from Hōbōgirin*. Boston.

Fiordalis, David (2017). Medical Practice as Wrong Livelihood: Selections from the Pāli Discourses, Vinaya, and Commentaries. In C. Pierce Salguero (Ed.). *Buddhism and Medicine. An Anthology of Premodern Sources.* New York, pp. 105-112.

Fiordalis, David (2014). On Buddhism, Divination and the Worldly Arts: Textual Evidence from the Theravāda Tradition. *Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 15, pp. 79-108.

Flaherty, Robert Pearson (2011). Korean Millennial Movements. In Chaterine Wessinger (Ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*. Oxford, pp. 326-347.

Garrett, Frances M. (2006). Buddhism and the Historicizing of Medicine in Thirteenth Century Tibet. *Asian Medicine. Journal of the International Association for the Study of Traditional Asian Medicine* 2, no. 2, pp. 202-224.

Garrett, Frances M. (2015). *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*. London.

Gerke, Barbara (2013). On the 'Subtle Body' and 'Circulation' in Tibetan Medicine. In Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston (Eds.). *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West.* New York, pp. 83-99.

Gongma Trichen Rinpoche (2020). Bringing Obstacles Into the Path. In *Melody of Dharma*. A Publication of the Office of Sakya Dolma Phodrang Dedicated to the Dharma Activities of His Holiness Sakya Gongma Trichen Rinpoche And His Noble Family. N. 19. Special Lockdown Issue. pp. 5-6.

Granoff, Phyllis (1998). Cures and Karma II. Some Miraculous Healings in the Indian Buddhist Story Tradition. *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 85, 288-289.

Gyasto, Janet (1993). The Logic of Legitimation in the Tibetan Treasure Tradition. *History of Religions* 33, N°2, pp. 97-134.

Gyatso, Janet (2017). *Being human in a Buddhist world: An intellectual history of medicine in early modern Tibet.* New York.

Ho Tai, Hue-Tam (1988). Perfect World and Perfect Time: Maitreya in Vietnam. In Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre (Eds.). *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*. Cambridge, pp. 154-170.

Hopkins, Jeffery (1998). *Nāgārjuna's Precious Garland. Buddhist Advice for Liberation explanation.* New York.

Janes, Craig R. (2002). Buddhism, science, and market: The globalisation of Tibetan medicine. *Anthropology & Medicine,* 9:3, pp. 267-289.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Jones, Thomas Dhivan (2017). Illness, Cure and Care: Selections from the Pāli Canon. In C. Pierce Salguero (Ed.). *Buddhism and Medicine. An Anthology of Premodern Sources.* New York, pp. 3-10.

Karmapa (Ed.) (2020). *Prayers for a Time of Pandemic. Compiled and Introduced by the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje*. Dharma Ebooks.

Keyes, Charles F. (1977). Millenialism, Theravada Buddhism and Thai Society. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 36, N° 2, pp. 283-302.

Khöndung Gyana Vajra Sakya Rinpoche (2020). Keeping A Positive Mind In the Midst Of Suffering. In *Melody of Dharma*. A Publication of the Office of Sakya Dolma Phodrang Dedicated to the Dharma Activities of His Holiness Sakya Gongma Trichen Rinpoche And His Noble Family. N. 19. Special Lockdown Issue, pp. 10-11.

Kletter, Christa / Kriechbaum, Monika (Ed.) (2001). *Tibetan Medicinal Plants*. Stuttgart.

Lamotte, Étienne (1988). *History of Indian Buddhism from the Origins to the Śaka Era*. Louvain-la-Neuve.

Lokananda C. Bhikkhu (2018). *Abhidharmakośa of Ācārya Vasubandhu*. English trad. of La Vallé Poussin by Leo M. Pruden. Delhi.

Lopez, Donald S. (2010). *Buddhism & science: a guide for the perplexed*. Chicago.

Lopez, Donald S. (1999). *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West.* Chicago.

Lopez, Donald S. (2012). *Scientific Buddha – His Short and Happy Life*. New Haven.

McLaren, Peter (2020). Religious Nationalism and the Coronavirus Pandemic: Soul-Sucking Evangelicals and Branch Covidians Make America Sick Again. *Postdigital Science and Education*, pp. 1-22.

Ñanamoli Thera (Tr.) (2010). *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting Rolling the Wheel of Truth (SN 56.11)*. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition). June 13. URL: https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.nymo.html

Naquin, Susan (1976). *Millenarian rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams uprising of 1813*. New Haven.

Nattier, Jan (1991). *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline.* Berkeley.

Nattier, Jan (1988). The Meanings of the Maitreya Myth. In Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre (Eds.). *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*. Cambridge, pp. 23-47.

Norbu, Dawa (1988). *Tibet: The Road Ahead*. London.

Overmyer, Daniel (1976). *Folk Buddhist religion: Dissenting sects in late traditional China*. Cambridge.

Pierce Salguero, C. (2018). Buddhist Medicine and its circulation. In David Ludden (Ed.). *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Asian History*. New York, pp. 1-28.

Pordié, Laurent (Ed.) (2008). *Tibetan Medicine in the Contemporary World: Global Politics of Medical Knowledge and Practice.* London.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Powers, John (2007). *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*. Ithaca.

Price Grieve, Gregory, and Veidlinger, Daniel (Eds.) (2017). *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media. The Pixel in the Lotus*. New York Routlege.

Queen, Christopher S., and King Sallie B. (Eds.) (1996). *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia.* New York.

Sakya Trizin (2020). Courage in the Face of Illness. In *Melody of Dharma.* A Publication of the Office of Sakya Dolma Phodrang Dedicated to the Dharma Activities of His Holiness Sakya Gongma Trichen Rinpoche And His Noble Family. N. 19. Special Lockdown Issue, pp. 7-9.

Samuel, Geoffrey (2017). Tibetan Religion as a World Religion: Global Networking and its Consequences. In *Tantric Revisionings: New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion*. New York, pp. 288-316.

Sarkisyanz, Manuel (1965). *Buddhist backgrounds of the Burmese revolution*. The Hague.

Sik, Hin-tak (2016). *Ancient Indian medicine in early Buddhist literature: a study based on the Bhesajjakkhandhaka and the parallels in other Vinaya Canons*. (Thesis). University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong SAR. URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.5353/th_b5760924.

Silk, Jonathan et al. (2019). Maitreya. In Jonathan Silk et al. (Eds.). *Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism. Vol. II: Lives*. Leiden, pp. 302-324.

Singh, Upinder (2012). Governing the State and the Self: Political Philosophy and Practice in the Edicts of Aśoka. *South Asian Studies*, 28, N ° 2, pp. 131-145.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2013). *Beyond Coping: The Buddha's Teachings on Aging, Illness, Death, and Separation. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition)*. November 30. URL: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/beyondcoping/index.html

Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Sivaka Sutta (2013). *To Sivaka (SN 36.21). Access to Insight (BCBS Edition).* November 30. URL: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn36/sn36.021.than.html

Turenne, Philippe (2015). The History and Significance of the Tibetan Concept of the Five Treatises of Maitreya. *The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 16, pp. 215-233.

Weber, Max (1985). *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*. Glencoe.

Wellington Chappell, D. (1980). Early Forebodings of the Death of Buddhism. *Numen* 27, N° 1, pp. 122-154.

Zürcher, Erik (1982). "Prince Moonlight". Messianism and Eschatology in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism. *T'oung Pao* 68, 1/3, pp. 1-75.

Zysk, Kenneth G. (1982). Studies in Traditional Indian Medicine in the Pāli Canon: Jīvaka and Āyurveda. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 5, pp. 7–86.

Zysk, Kenneth G. (2010). *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery.* Delhi.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Online Open Sources

Facebook Pages

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche: https://www.facebook.com/Chokyi.Nyima.Rinpoche/
Dorje Drak Monastery: https://www.facebook.com/dorjedrag/
Dzogchen Buddhism: https://www.facebook.com/DzogchenBuddhism/
Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse: https://www.facebook.com/djkhyentse/
Karmapa: https://www.facebook.com/karmapa/
Mingyur Rinpoche: https://www.facebook.com/mingyur.rinpoche/
Sakya Dolma Phodrang: https://www.facebook.com/pg/sakya.dolmaphodrang/posts/
Shechen Croatia, Buddhist Society: https://www.facebook.com/watch/shechen.cro/
Yungdrung Bon Monastic Centre Society: https://www.facebook.com/ybmc.society/

Official Websites

Cyber Sangha: https://cybersangha.net
Dzongsar Institute: http://dzongsarinstitute.org.
Federation for the Preservation of Mahayana Buddhism: https://fpmt.org/fpmt/
Geshe Tashi: https://geshetashi.org/
Gyalwa Dzogchenpa. Sangha: http://www.dzogchen.org.in/sangha
His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet: https://www.dalailama.com
Jewel Heart: https://www.jewelheart.org/
Khandro Rinpoche: https://www.khandrorinpoche.org/
Lotsawa House: https://lotsawahouse.blog/
Lungtokling's Blog: https://www.lungtokling.org
Mind & Life Institute: https://www.mindandlife.org/
Nyignma Kathok Buddhist Centre: https://kathok.org.sg/
Palyul Ling International: https://palyul.org
Rangjung Yeshe Institute: https://www.ryi.org/
Rigpa: https://www.rigpa.org
Sakya Ling: http://www.sakyaling.de/sakya-asia/
Shedrub. The Online Home of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche: https://shedrub.org/
Shenpen Nepal: http://www.shenpennepal.org/
Siddhartha's Intent: https://www.siddharthasintent.org
Tergar Meditation Community: https://tergar.org/
Thabye Dorje. His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa: https://www.karmapa.org
The Karmapa: https://kagyuoffice.org
Tibet Center Austria: https://www.tibetcenter.at/en/coronavirus-en/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Online News

ABC News Prime (2020). 'Dalai Lama speaks out on COVID-19'. May 28. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEWqRcy-6Wg&t=1s

BBC News (2020). 'Dalai Lama: Seven billion people 'need a sense of oneness'. June 13. URL: https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-53028343?fbclid-=IwAR3PN2xFOND nm7jK_ SR2G4z0kQ3gQwKUPPW7KTgcSGbDjDD6-0t0Y6kcAkus

CNBC (2020). 'The call to unite organizer explains idea behind 24-hour livestream'. May 1. URL: https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/01/the-call-to-unite-organizer-explains-idea-behind-24-hour-livestream.html

Dharpo, Tenzin, and CNN's Sugam Pokharel (2020). 'Dalai Lama cancels all public engagements due to the coronavirus'. February 12. URL: https://edition.cnn.com/asia/live-news/coronavirus-outbreak-02-12-20-intl-hnk/h_44c26bc4035ba6d1e0286237b5a19558

Human Rights Watch (2020). 'Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide'. May 12. URL: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide

Kuensel (2020). 'Things aren't looking good. But there's a lot we can do'. April 29. URL: https://kuenselonline.com/things-arent-looking-good-but-theres-a-lot-we-can-do/

NDTV (2020). 'COVID-19: Dalai Lama Donates To PM-CARES Fund, Extends Support'. March 31. URL: https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/covid-19-dalai-lama-donates-to-pm-cares-fund-extends-support-2203873

New York Times (2020). 'India, Coronavirus Fans Religious Hatred'. April 12. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/world/asia/india-coronavirus-muslims-bigotry.html

Phayul (2020). 'Tulku Orgyen Tobgyal's remarks regrettable and wrong: Kashag'. May 27. URL: http://www.phayul.com/2020/05/27/43492/

Star of Mysore (2020). 'Penor Rinpoche Charity Foundation Donates Rs.10 Lakh Towards PM CARES Fund'. April 17. URL: https://starofmysore.com/penor-rinpoche-charity-foundation-donates-rs-10-lakh-towards-pm-cares-fund/

Tibet Net (2020). 'Kashag appeals CTA functionaries and Tibetans worldwide to contribute to Coronavirus relief funds'. April 9. URL: https://tibet.net/kashag-appeals-cta-functionaries-and-tibetan-worldwide-to-contribute-to-coronavirus-relief-funds/

Tibet Net (2020). 'Sakya Trizin Rinpoche espouses oneness of humanity on the time of Coronavirus pandemic'. April 9. URL: https://tibet.net/sakya-trizin-rinpoche-espouses-oneness-of-humanity-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-pandemic/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Tibetan Journal (2020). 'Kalon Karma Gelek Apologizes and Willing to Resign if Needed'. May 28. URL: https://www.tibetanjournal.com/kalon-karma-gelek-apologizes-and-willing-to-resign-if-needed/

Tibet Sun (2020). 'Tulku Orgyen Tobgyal apologises to Dalai Lama for criticising online teachings'. May 31. URL: https://www.tibetsun.com/news/2020/05/31/tulku-orgyen-tobgyal-apologises-to-dalai-lama-for-criticising-online-teachings.

Time Magazine (2020). 'Prayer is not Enough'. April 14. URL: https://time.com/5820613/dalai-lama-coronavirus-compassion/

The Tribune Voice of the People. (India) (2020). 'Dalai Lama donates to CM Relief Fund'. March 26. URL: https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/himachal/dalai-lama-donates-to-cm-relief-fund-61678

YouTube Videos

Asia Society YouTube channel (2020). 'Coping in the Time of Coronavirus'. April 8. URL: https://ww-w.youtube.com/watch?v=n_sc1SDwopg

Orgyan Tobgyal YouTube channel (2020). 'OT Rinpoche's advice in the time of COVID-19'. March 19. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4TX8-U7BGTw&t=194s

Ringpa (2020/1). 'Dedicating our Dharma Practice to the Coronavirus'. March 10. URL: https://www.rigpa.org/rigpa-news/2020/3/10/6civjuaj6w2pt4qtz00pl6rlne71ko

Ringpa (2020/2). 'Online Teachings with Jetsun Khando Rinpoche'. April 12. URL: https://www.rigpa.org/upcoming-events/2020/4/12/online-teachings-with-jetsun-khandro-rinpoche

Khandro Rinpoche (2020/1). 'The Gyalwang Karmapa's Advice Regarding Covid-19'. March 19. URL: https://www.facebook.com/karmapa/

Rinpoche, Khandro (2020/2). 'Practicing in Times of Adversity'. (Originally posted on November 21, 2018). March 24. URL: https://www.khandrorinpoche.org/practicing-in-times-of-adversity/

Rinpoche, Khandro (2020/3). 'Mindrolling Aids in Pandemic Relief Effort'. April 14. URL: https://www.khandrorinpoche.org/mindrolling-monastery-aids-in-pandemic-relief-effort/

Khandro Rinpoche (2020/4). 'Mindrol Lekshey Online: Curriculum Review and Teachings'. July 13. URL: https://www.khandrorinpoche.org/mindrol-lekshey-online-2020/

Rinpoche, Mindrolling Jetsün Khandro (2020). 'Advice for the COVID-19 situation'. *YouTube.* April 10. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWJWunQgtyc

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Rinpoche, Yongey Mingyur (2020/1). 'Message on COVID-19 outbreak'. *YouTube* March 15. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgZETpd9h5s&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3ALmqPj6EhU4q3kOZBTvTzdlflgOJ41IFFvd8jh66_S4pY26GuM_IFA8

Rinpoche, Yongey Mingyur (2020/2). '10 Life Lessons We Can Learn from Coronavirus'. *YouTube.* May 25. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9M50dGK4PQ&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR11eRUs2X4dZCVb7eR9wZbNdu2K2OV-yAhX_DE3NT1T9prNurA43cJjFGI

Tibet TV (2020). 'His Eminence 42nd Sakya Trizin Ratna Vajra Rinpoche on COVID-19'. April 7. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuLWyPFWKlQ

Siddhartha's Intent YouTube Channel (2020). 'Understanding non-duality: advice from Rinpoche for today and beyond, 17 March 2020'. July 25. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbUp7iGrKqQ&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1g46NszzZHBL_p4GUQjVdGWv9015IPUAb6FFKTX0w0lEebRq09csCx0q8

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454855-007 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND