

Interactional Identity Formation: Evidence From Contemporary Comparative Religious Contexts

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Abstract

In this paper, insights from ritual and anthropology are applied to considerations of the ritual and social framework of Buddhist/Daoist practices of self-emptying and tradition-specific modes of realization of the divine, including visual actualization, rupture, and embodied intensification. Comparative ethnographic analysis of a Nepali Gelug (*Tib. dge lugs*) Buddhist retreat and a Formosan Daoist–Kagyü (*Tib. bka' brgyud*) retreat reveals how interaction rituals are assembled, enacted, regulated, and stabilized through the coordinated deployment of bodies, discourse, authority, and cosmology. Examined practices focus on interaction rituals (IRs), emotional energy (EE) and ritual engagement through disciple education and embodied responses. In both retreats, disciple-disciple interactions arise as significant points of EE. Knowledge transfer is found to extend from the core teacher/guru, and is actively reinforced, reinterpreted and affirmed in inter-disciple IRs. While most intense EE arises solely from a disciple's direct encounter with the divine in embodied/meditation practice, all such encounters observed did entail some level of legitimization and/or judgement by more senior gurus/teachers. This control of affect and encounter can be experienced by the disciple in deeply positive or negative manners, pulling some more deeply into the ritual community while pushing other individuals toward rupture with the community. These findings contribute to broader debates on interaction ritual theory, illustrating how emotional energy is both generated and actively regulated within certain intensive ritual environments; how ritual legitimacy and communal cohesion are sustained under conditions of affective excess and internal plurality; and, how these conditions manifest in two very different religious retreat environments.

Keywords: social interaction ritual, emotional energy, identity, Buddhism, Gelug, Kagyu

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Introduction¹

A group of disciples enter a wide, southeast-facing gomba. Incense wafts from multiple burners staged before multiple deities. One disciple walks to a side cabinet, procures a mat and scripture, and finds herself a place facing the dharma throne. The other disciples notice and follow suit. This is the start of a silent retreat, but the participants have not officially “begun”: many are talking softly. One middle-aged man (disciple 1) is having difficulty getting down on the mat; an older disciple (disciple 2) shows him how. Several disciples are now seated on mats. One thirty-something woman (disciple 7) turns to another (disciple 13) and suggests adding an extra mat for comfort: disciple 13 thanks her, rises and retrieves the extra mat. Encouraged, disciple 7 suggests the same to another disciple (disciple 9). Disciple 9 thanks disciple 7 with the words *dze-su-yid-rang* (lit. “I rejoice in your virtue”; here, meaning *thank you*); but disciple 9 remains seated. When the instructor-monk enters, all participant-disciples have arranged themselves on mats and are ready to begin.

This series of social interaction rituals (SIRs), repeated over and over in Buddhist retreats across Asia, helps to establish a community among the individuals in the silent retreat. Similar from one temple to another and one tradition to another, these simple exchanges are ritualistic: an individual initiates an exchange with one or more interlocutors; a response is expected. These SIRs demand established responses: “amitoufou” (Chinese), a simple “thank you,” “dze-su-yid-rang” (Tibetan). All carry the same communicative weight: acceptance, with grace, of a ritualized instruction related to the retreat context. Interlocutors respond with encouragement, thanks and appreciative gestures even when the advice offered is unnecessary. These interactions are not religious rituals; these SIRs help to establish social identities and relationships within and between individuals in a newly formed “community”: the retreat group. In the space of only minutes, identity, roles, and potential bonds already begin to form.

From the earliest moments of the retreat, *identity* is established. Consider the older disciple 2 who instructs middle-aged disciple 1 on how to reach the mat more easily. This SIR is comprised of a series of interactions: an offer “here's how...”, an encouraging smile from disciple 1, an instruction, disciple 1's answering movements, disciple 2's words of encouragement, and, once both are down, affirmation of ease by both. These interactions establish identities – the shared difficulty of aging bodies and the distinct identity of disciple 2 as a compassionate, wiser and more practiced disciple whose body is disciplined by frequent, long-term meditation practice. The actions of disciple 7 likewise carry identity markers: wise carer and instructor. Both of her initiated interactions are answered with a *thanks* that acknowledges helpful and compassionate intent. She is established as wiser in her first interaction with disciple 13; in the second interaction, this “wise carer” identity is delimited as disciple 9 appears to be more physically entrained both in meditation posture and in Tibetan language: his Tibetan *thanks* suggests a deeper level of Buddhist training. Disciple 9 thus establishes his own identity as potentially more senior. All this, the group learns through three very simple, twenty-to-sixty-second SIRs.

Identity Building²

As the retreat progresses, identities develop and evolve, both within the group and within the greater community of the Nepali Buddhist compound. Let us consider the most basic level of

¹DIR: R1 context GR1.

²DIR: R1 context GR2-16, 86.

identity formation: the identity of participant as retreat participant. Engagement in the retreat establishes each individual as a member both within the *ad hoc* retreat community and within the greater *international* Gelug community. Each *ad hoc* retreat community also builds a collective identity vis-à-vis the sangha present in the retreat compound. For this Nepali Buddhist compound, participants in silent retreats are clearly identified and respected as “silent”. They are provided a “silent” area in which to take meals; they are not approached with questions. And, if approached, retreat participants are expected to signal their silent status either by completely ignoring the approach or by a gesture signalling rejection – one raised palm. Because silent retreat status is normal and expected, this is normally sufficient to attain respect for silent status by the individuals within the greater Buddhist compound. The present retreat was an extreme exception that eventually brought a rare case of censure from the instructor-monk.³

Rule-breaking and SIRs of censure/remonstrance. The attendees completing this retreat were loosely vetted through an application process to ensure all had previously completed at least one shorter (3-5 day) meditation retreat; and, had understood the basic tenets of Tibetan Buddhism. The purpose of the prerequisite was clearly stated in the application: to ensure those attending had the embodied awareness and discipline to endure both the emotional and physical strain associated with long-term silence and *sitting* (being seated in meditation). In this particular retreat, these benefits did not manifest.

Issues arose from day 2 of the retreat. On day 1, individuals had volunteered to lead yoga training for the health of all participants. Yoga practice began day 2 immediately following the one-hour Q&A session; this was the only hour of the day when retreat participants were allowed to speak. Silence should resume at the end of Q&A. It did, for a few dozen steps. On entering the yoga studio, oral instructions began and conversation continued for the entire yoga session. After twenty or so minutes, first one, then a second disciple gestured for silence. Ignored, they withdrew to practice in silence. Others joined them. On day 3, yoga practice conversations became more animated. The silent disciples again practiced separately in silence, with a fifth person joining. During Q&A on day 4, one disciple made a pointed inquiry about silence; the response: silence should be maintained outside of the Q&A period. From day 4, the “quiet” disciples formed a silent taiqi session. The issue was effectively resolved. The retreat group split in two: each sub-group developed distinct identities, particularly vis-à-vis the greater Buddhist compound.

Identity and Censure⁴

The continued silence rule-breaking eventually led to censure on the morning of day 8. The disciples, as usual, gathered for their morning meditation and visualization session. The instructor-monk entered with two senior monks and had a short, soft exchange. One senior monk remained for several minutes and silently supervised as the instructor-monk approached the assembly, guided the disciples through a Vajrasattva purification, and delivered a teaching on purification. This was followed by a story from the life of Manjushri, a deeply flawed individual who repented and eventually became one of the Gelugpa tradition's most revered Bodhisattvas. The instructor-monk then directly addressed the participants' failure to maintain silence; carefully instructed one of the disciples (a talker) to read the regulations from the retreat's introductory pamphlet. The instructor-monk then asked two pointed questions. The

³ This is the only case of direct censure this researcher has witnessed at this compound over more than 20 years.

⁴ DIR: R1 context GR86.

first question, to a member of the yoga group (disciple 13 from day 1) – *How do you settle the mind prior to beginning yoga practice?* – failed to elicit a response. The second question was directed to disciple 9 (from day 1), a taiqi participant. Disciple 9 demonstrated with action, not words, a taiqi pose for settling the mind prior to beginning motions. No additional words of remonstrance were uttered; instead, the instructor-monk took action to absolve the group’s “unpure” actions by leading a tri-fold Vajrasattva purification session, a physically exhausting practice. This was followed, unexpectedly, by a Medicine Buddha practice.⁵

Censure, Identity, Cohesion⁶

These practices extended the day 8 morning session well into the breakfast break, leaving the participants thoroughly, but not universally, humbled. Two less-experienced disciples (including disciple 13 from day 1) attempted to engage others on the way to breakfast; their attempts at conversation were met with silence.

The disciples followed one another to breakfast, partook of whatever remained of the meal, and left to complete their assigned chores in the kitchen. There, they learned they’d been replaced by participants of another group, who’d registered for another type of training. These disciples later talked about the looks they received from some members of the community and the friendly pats received by kindly nuns. This intensified their feelings of embarrassment and their awareness of the breadth of that exposure. These disciples continued to communicate their embarrassment in exchanges immediately following the retreat and even two years after.⁷ The instructor-monk never referred to these events again; nor did any of the senior monks or nuns.

Identity, Affirmation, Widening Inclusion⁸

Ramifications of these events may have influenced interactions observed day ten, the final “half-day” of the retreat. During lunch that day, the instructor-monk approached one of the taiqi practitioners (disciple 10). She was invited to join the renunciants’ table, where several monks and two nuns were seated. When the others had left the table, the instructor-monk asked disciple 10 about her Buddhist training and invited her for a counselling session during which he helped to guide her in her future goals. Later communications revealed that disciples 2, 4, 6, 9 and 10 (all Taiqi group disciples) were all approached in this manner. Two received personal divination services; all but one of the taiqi practitioners were invited to more advanced trainings. Later that same day, there was a sponsored birthday celebration for one of the lamas, and a tea ceremony; disciples 2, 6, 9 and 10 were present. Later communications revealed that these individuals received invitations to this ritual event from a variety of community members, including the instructor-monk, a junior monk, two nuns, and an individual engaged in the teaching session discussed above. While not all members of the yoga group (disciples 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 11-16) continued to communicate with this researcher, none that *did* communicate reported inclusion in the main gumpa ceremony. These limited invitations suggest active observation, evaluation and control of disciples in Gelug retreat environments. Those disciples who had engaged with the taiqi group appear to have been identified as having demonstrated capacity to engage with higher-level instruction and training.

⁵ The explicit purpose of the Medicine Buddha practice was not explained; given the healing mission of the Medicine Buddha, this observer understood the practice as likewise cathartic. DIR: R1 GR.PI.4, 16, 23, 89.

⁶ DIR: R1 context GR97-112.

⁷ DIR: R1.GR.PI.4, 16, 23, 89.

⁸ DIR: R1.

Emotional Efficacy, IR Chains and the Regulation of Experience⁹

Official contemporary Gelug and Kagyu communities welcome those who *request* teaching. During the Gelug retreat, requests for additional training or vow-taking were generally accommodated. The bond of vow-taking creates IR chains between the monk and his vow-takers that can extend for years. Divination, counselling and other forms of guidance also form continued disciple-initiated engagements. However, *invitations* are also extended for those demonstrating engagement. Such was noted above: on the final day of Gelug training, certain disciples were invited to seek out the monk for individual, personalized counseling and divination. These duties illustrate the monk's role as caretaker of the attendees' spiritual progress as well as their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. The instructor-monk's attendance to disciples' physical wellbeing (ensuring yoga or Taiqi training for physical health) was also noted.¹⁰

Interactions with the divine are also maintained, interpreted according to the dharma, and regulated. An example arose on the fifth day of the Gelug retreat. The instructor-monk guided the disciples through a powerful walking visualization practice that allowed disciples direct access to the divine. The experience generated euphoria in several of the participants. Perceiving this, the monk-instructor called the disciples back to their seats by ringing a singing bowl. He then addressed these issues of euphoric experience in a Q&A session. The monk-instructor discussed emotions that the disciples might be feeling and the need to rein them in. During the Q&A, disciple 12 repeatedly rejected the monk's framing of euphoric experience.¹¹ He responded patiently with a direct response, analogies, and finally a quote from scripture. Disciples 2 and 3 assisted. Disciple 12 began shaking and crying in visible distress. She exited the gompa with disciple 7. The Q&A continued. Disciple 10 reported that she had experienced auras and questioned the validity of this in her visualization; the group discussed this until disciple 7 gestured from a side door. The monk ended the session and went to assist disciple 12, who was still in distress. At the monk's behest, three disciples helped disciple 12 to the Buddhist clinic. When she returned to practice the following day, she received nods and words of encouragement. As for the topic of auras and visualization, this discussion continued amongst the disciples following the retreat.

This extended episode begins with the regulation of spiritual experience in a context of intense emotional energy (EE) and follows the responses of two disciples: the first response was one in which the attempt at regulation of ecstatic experience was accompanied by rejection and extreme emotional distress; the second was one in which the attempt at regulation is explored and embraced. These two responses complicate Collins' (2004) account of EE, in which successful SIRs generate EE and EE motivates sustained chains of SIRs. In this case, we see two very different interaction sequences. In the first, disciple 12 has just experienced an intense emotional connection with the divine; her repeated challenge indicates that the expected affirmation of this experience has failed to arise. Instead, the monk's discussion runs counter to her own appreciation of the experience. Disciple 12 breaks off communication. This occurs twice. The first instance occurs on day 5, when she is taken to the clinic; with encouragement from her peers, she returns to the retreat and completes the ten days. The second rupture begins at the end of the retreat. The disciple departs at the completion of the retreat and, in the long term, ruptures with the dharma group.

⁹ DIR: R1.

¹⁰ DIR: R1.GR.NRE.1.

¹¹ Disciple 12 is recorded as responding "No" sixteen times while contesting the instructor-monk's interpretation.

The second disciple (Disciple 10) also experiences euphoria. Her reaction to the imposed interpretation follows a different trajectory. Disciple 10 asks for definition of her own experience. Unlike disciple 12, disciple 10 embraces the teaching and works to self-regulate her emotions. She has been properly “disciplined.” Later, disciple 6 and several other peers affirm the status of disciple 10 as a legitimate aura seer.

A Kagyu retreat provides comparative scope to these dynamics. This retreat, a two-day experience at a Buddhist center in Taiwan, was distinct from the Gelug retreat in several manners. First, the main guru held lineage positions in multiple religious lineages, Kagyu, Daoist and Chan. Second, the instructors were senior lay disciples, not renunciant monks. Third, the number of senior disciples guiding the retreat exceeded the number of participants (18). Fourth, the levels of Buddhist training among the participants varied widely, from several months to several decades of study. Fifth, apart from a single, one-hour sermon given by the guru, participants were split up into small, rotating groups: the smallest groups included a single participant and two senior disciples. A final and very helpful difference was the inclusion of “reflection” diaries. Participants later shared their diaries in great detail, providing this researcher with ample data and detailed descriptions of the participants' own internal experiences.

During the final, detailed sharing of diaries, participants' comments revolved around two contrasting themes: expressions of enthusiasm and enjoyment on the one hand; expressions of confusion or uncertainty on the other. When participants were asked to identify elements of Buddhism that they had learned, most responded that they did not know or that they had learned contradictory information. When participant 1 was asked to describe the four noble truths, he answered, “I don't know”; when asked about his favorite part of the retreat, he chose Taiqi walking and showed a picture of a bright yellow sun, his expression of how he felt when participating in the activity.¹² Participant 2 drew a butterfly to express her feeling about Taiqi walking, also her favorite activity; when asked about the four noble truths, she was able to name the first two but was confused about the third and fourth. Although both participants indicated positive emotional engagement in the activity, their responses indicated confusion over the content or meaning of most teachings.¹³ These responses were reflected in thirty-eight percent of responses; of the remaining participants responding to these questions, all had prior knowledge. Of the eighteen participants in the retreat, twelve ruptured with the Buddhist group, despite expressions of positive engagement in the retreat. This subsequent rupture fits uneasily in Collins' framework for EE.^{14,15}

EE emerged in a highly dynamic educational ecology of both kinetic and doctrinal teachings. Apart from the initial doctrinal teachings given by the guru, all activities were conducted in rotating groups: a discussion-and-reading circle (basic dharma readings), a philosophy discussion circle (on the circle of consumption), various specialized teachings offered only to

¹² Participants were instructed to create an image of how they felt: this was not a spontaneous creative expression.

¹³ The exception was kinetic practices: most participants expressed little or no confusion over the kinetic teachings such as yoga, sitting positions or taiqi movements.

¹⁴ In Collins (2004), emotional energy (EE) forms a motivating force for continued engagement in Ritual Chains. Successful social interaction rituals create an emotional response. EE draws individuals into repeated engagement in these social interactions, forming chains of rituals that connect individuals and social groups. The opposite is also true: social interaction ritual failure denies EE and individuals fall away from the interactions and their ritual chains.

¹⁵ Implications of these findings for the study of education and ritual, while potentially significant, are not addressed in the scope of this paper. Compare, for example, with studies of Phelan, Olitsky and Sauren.

the most advanced participants,¹⁶ and numerous kinetic teachings: yoga, Taiqi walking, walking meditation and qigong. When naming their favorite activities, an advanced (non-senior) participant (P3) named two “favorites”: walking meditation and a purification practice engaged in by only advanced (non-senior) participants. Two more advanced participants (P4, P5) favored a philosophical world-building teaching that had grown out of the philosophy discussion circle. Excluding four non-committed responses, the remaining participants favored kinetic training. The dynamic environment of the Kagyu retreat and the varied nature of the participants' backgrounds help to explain these responses.

Let us consider our two philosophers (P4, P5). These individuals are specialists in religious history; their academic entrainment allowed easy grasp of scholarly material disseminated during the training. While the senior disciples attempted to reset the sessions to a more basic level each 30 minutes when new groups rotated in, these intellectuals continued to push the discussion to higher levels leaving other participants with little ability to engage. For scholars, this type of interaction closely resembles similar scholarly SIRs in which collaborative interpretation, critique and debate generate engagement; such engagement conforms to a scholar's definition of successful IRs: intense EE would naturally emerge. The same activity is experienced in a different way for those participants left unable to engage: for them, EE would *not* naturally emerge.

Most of the remaining respondents prioritized the kinetic training. These kinetic trainings employ a combination of kinetic and vocal IRs, with the senior disciples correcting with simple instructions followed immediately with affirmation and praise: “Lift your chin... good. Yes, just like that”; “Pull in your chin. Good, good.”; “Lift your spine. Yes. Good.” Where more detailed instruction was needed, metaphors were used to help: “Imagine a thread extending up through the top of your head and anchoring you to the sky.” These instructions persisted throughout the Taiqi walking and yoga trainings. These SIRs between the senior disciples and the participants all followed a familiar pattern: instruction > participant movement > praise and senior disciple observation > nod > praise, a simple but complete series of repeated SIR successes. These repeated successful SIRs should encourage continued engagement both in the activity and in the group at large.

The Taiqi training and walking meditation evolved in somewhat similar instructional ecologies. Walking meditation is exactly what it sounds like: it is meditation, which requires focus and entrainment of heart/mind; it is walking, which requires movement. In these sessions, many expressed uncertainty about how to focus their attention, what meditation actually meant, and how to maintain balance given the unfamiliar toe-heel step and repeated insistence that participants focus the eyes on the tip of the nose. Several participants repeatedly lost balance; some chose to simply sit out that session. Eventually, the community's most senior disciple stepped away from her duties in the office¹⁷ to assist in one of these sessions: her instructions were simplified, specific, and less demanding. “Focus your attention on the breath going in and out of your belly.” When the participant couldn't walk toe to heel, she dismissed the need for

¹⁶ In the context of the Kagyu retreat discussion, the phrase “advanced participants” refers to individuals who have several years of Buddhist philosophy and/or training but who have not formally taken vows with the Center's guru and become his disciples. The term “senior disciples” designates lay disciples who have both taken vows with the Center's guru and are designated “senior” by peers and the guru himself. Senior disciples did not name themselves “senior”. In four years of observation of this religious community, this naming consistently extended from the guru himself; only then did other disciples designate their peers “senior”.

¹⁷ This “senior” senior disciple was not part of the team of senior disciples organizing the retreat; she had other duties.

that as well as the instruction to focus her eyes on her nose. Observation suggested other participants in that session opted to follow whichever instruction they preferred; they completed the thirty minutes without struggle. However, when returning for a second session, participants received conflicting instructions and an argument ensued, impelling two senior disciples to step away from another training to mediate the conflict. The qigong training followed a similar trajectory.

The mixed participant pool helps explain the different distributions of EE observed during the retreat. Most participants migrated toward those kinetic trainings that relied on simple cycles of instruction, embodied response, observation, affirmation and repeated success. Participants could assess their own performance and receive almost immediate affirmation from senior disciples. In both scholarly and kinetic trainings, repeated successful IRs generated positive affect. Where kinetic instruction slipped or became more abstract (walking meditation, qigong), IR failure resulted; participants' expressions of EE diminished accordingly.

An intriguing empirical tension arises. Following Collins' logical framework, successful IRs generate EE. EE generates repeated engagement in IRs. These repeated engagements form IR chains that bind participants with their communities. In the Kagyu retreat environment, these expectations are met; yet IR chains did not form as expected. Of the eighteen participants in the retreat, twelve ruptured with the Buddhist group immediately following the retreat, despite expressions of positive engagement in the retreat. Two more ruptured with the community within ten months; a final participant, within the next three years, leaving only three with continued engagement with the Kagyu community beyond the initial three years. These subsequent ruptures fit uneasily in Collins' framework. Comparative consideration of the Gelug retreat may help to provide some clarity.

Let us return to that awkward moment of censure in the Gelug context. Rules regulating retreat discipline have been broken by a number of disciples. The instructor-monk reiterates previously disseminated rules, questions the two exercise groups without accusing individuals, then leads the group in addressing the karmic burden generated. No individual criticism is expressed. No further censure is given. Now, let us turn to the Kagyu retreat. Participants are taking turns reading a Buddhist story. The story references Gridhrakuta (Vulture Peak). The reader mispronounces the name. A senior disciple snickers. A second participant corrects the reader; she is also incorrect. This generates a sarcastic comment from a second senior disciple and a laugh from another. A third senior disciple provides the correct pronunciation and explains the name. This and similar interactions are repeated every time a participant appears to misunderstand or mispronounce words from the reading. While the third senior disciple handles things compassionately, the other two respond with sarcasm and snickering. Only in reading sessions attended by the two scholars (participants 4 and 5) do these interactions fail to arise. In both cases (Gelugs, Kagyu) an authority figure attempts to discipline the boundaries of orthodoxy, be it rule breaking or the not-so-simple pronunciation of a word. Let us understand clearly that both the mispronunciation of a sacred word (a sacred place-name) and the breaking of a retreat rule are understood to generate karmic debt; therefore, both incidences are not without spiritual significance. In the Gelug case of euphoria, even the boundaries of one's own experience and interpretation of one's inner world are subject to regulation.

Disciplining the Mind

Disciplining the mind is an acknowledged goal of Buddhist meditation and meditation retreats. But when discipline leads to negative affect, does rupture automatically ensue? Was the public

criticism of the Kagyu retreat participants a deciding factor in the high rates of rupture? All responding participants expressed positive EE; yet, most were subjected to criticism, if not of themselves then of others. During a discussion that followed the retreat, the guru-led sangha mocked various individuals for lack of knowledge or poor mastery of the teachings. But not all individuals (guru, disciples) engaged with the participants in a critical manner. Consider, for example, the third senior disciple during the reading session or the actions of the center's *most senior* senior disciple who assisted during the walking meditation. These dynamics suggest that there is not a single trajectory leading from EE to successful integration with the community; nor one that leads directly from negative affect to rupture. Instead, I suggest that several parallel dynamics coincide, among these the willingness of the participant/disciple to internalize standards of group orthodoxy, including orthodox interpretations of one's own experience (as seen in the Gelug visualization interpretation), standards of normative retreat behavior, and standards of reading and vocalization (as seen in the Kagyu reading sessions).

The opposite may also be observed. Following the retreat, continuing, longitudinal analysis of disciple-disciple interactions suggests that rupture with Gelug authority does not necessitate rupture of the ritual chains established during the retreat. Certain disciple-disciple IR chains continued even after one or more of the disciples permanently separated from the Gelug community. These observations suggest that IR chains continue to evolve. Longitudinal ethnographic observation therefore reveals dynamics of continuity, differentiation and rupture that remain largely invisible in studies confined to static environments (a religious retreat, a classroom) (Cf. Turner 1969).

Conclusions

While multiple vectors of consideration have been raised, I focus discussion on five significant findings.

First, both retreats cultivate and direct EE through disciplined embodied practice. Whether through Gelug visualization and engagement with the divine or Kagyu kinetic training and meditation, individuals learn through repeated cycles of embodied action, correction, observation and affirmation. These practices provide powerful opportunities for emotional engagement and for the internalization of tradition-specific standards of conduct, thought and experience. Longitudinal observation, however, suggests that such internalization proceeds unevenly and follows no single trajectory toward either participation or rupture with the religious community.

Second, these disciplined bodies do not adhere to the concepts of a “front” or “back” stage (Goffman 1967). Retreat participants are expected to maintain ritual discipline *continuously* because *all* space is treated as sacred (Eliade 1961). Likewise, all action is divine and sacred action. This understanding is clearly revealed in the Nepali retreat: when SIRs of rebuke fail to re-establish sacred silence, the group splits. The non-silent peers are treated as not-present: following the retreat close, one disciple remarked that the rule violators were “not [really] present”: this opinion was agreed upon by all, and followed with the words “nyir-shei jik-pa zhi-war shok” (may they be safe, peaceful and free of suffering). This traditional SIR effectively closed that topic of conversation on a positive note without necessity of assigning blame.

Third, these retreats sorted participants. In the Gelug context, sorting was effected through invitations to more advanced trainings and personalized guidance (invitation to a personalized

prognostication). In the Kagyu-Daoist context, intellectually advanced participants effectively self-sorted, providing themselves greater scholarly satisfaction; additional and intentional sorting occurred for two advanced meditation practitioners who were given two-on-one visualization and purification teachings. In both the Kagyu and Gelug contexts, individuals deemed ready received invitations for more advanced training.

Fourth, EE is potentially predictive of community trajectories; it is not deterministic. EE operates alongside other trajectories, among them participants' willingness to internalize orthodox interpretations of personal and emotionally charged engagements with the divine. The findings of Collins, Ball and others are correct to emphasize that successful SIRs encourage continued engagement; however, longitudinal data suggest that these ritual chains need not remain confined to the institutional contexts in which they formed. They may continue to connect individuals and groups of participants through continued peer-level relationships, form new relational networks and persist even after individuals rupture with the original institutional authority.¹⁸

Fifth, this discussion demonstrates that EE is not simply generated during intensive retreats—it is actively regulated. Interactions with gurus, senior adepts, monks and peers all help to shape how practitioners understand, legitimate, and stabilize powerful religious experiences. EE is actualized in the assembly, enactment, regulation, and stabilization of apprehension and the coordinated deployment of bodies. Discourse and authority are tools through which SIRs actualize belief, engagement and apprehension of the divine (cf. Zito 1997; see also Tambiah 1979). While direct encounters with the divine remain the greatest source of emotional intensity, these experiences are consistently re-interpreted through communal authority. EE thus becomes both a mechanism of spiritual development, identity creation, and conformity, and a mechanism through which religious communities sustain themselves, differentiate practitioners, and sometimes produce rupture. More broadly, these findings suggest that interaction ritual theory can explain not only the production of EE but also its ongoing regulation within intensive religious retreat environments.

Author's Note

1. All data in this paper derive from field notes, participant interviews, and observations conducted by the author. Supporting datasets for this article are prepared for deposit in Humanities Commons CORE. Contact the corresponding author for access. Dataset identifier-references (DIRs) are found in footnotes.
2. In this paper, the term “social interaction ritual” (SIR) follows Collins.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

This paper composition, design, data collection and analysis were completed without the aid of AI. AI was used in editing/copyediting of the already-composed paper. Any errors are my own.

¹⁸ These continuing peer-level relationships also resonate with anthropological observations that religious life is sustained through enduring religious and social networks extending beyond individual institutions. (cf. Dean 1998; Jordan 1969.)

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