

# Monks, Labs, Cyborgs: the Plasticity of Personhood in Tibetan Buddhism

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## Abstract

In this presentation, I refer to a paper (Lopes, 2019) in which I discuss the idea of personhood, or one's sense of self, in relation to advanced meditators in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Focusing on accounts of laboratory experiments on two advanced meditators, I look at the circulation of cultural products derived from these experiments in popular media to explore how they can impact our understandings of what it means to be human and point to the idea of the *plasticity of personhood*.

## Introduction

In a recent paper (Lopes, 2019), I discuss the manners in which one of the most paradigmatic relationships in Tibetan Buddhism, the guru-disciple relationship, is rooted in practices and ontologies that can directly influence and potentially transform one's sense of self, or personhood. Over the centuries, the extraordinary, and sometimes miraculous, feats of Tibetan gurus have been described in traditional forms of literature known as *namthars* or "life stories of liberation." Aimed at inspiring disciples, these stories tend to expand understandings of what it means to be a human being. Recently, different kinds of accounts with a potentially similar impact have emerged involving laboratory experiments on advanced Tibetan meditators, who are in these new contexts called "expert meditators" (with > 10,000 hours of practice). I will explore some of the first instances of these encounters in the laboratories, paying particular attention to the "products" that emerge from them: popular books, academic articles, powerful images, programs, apps, and so forth. It is through the circulation of these products in different contexts that the effects of the guru's example can be felt in our modern societies. This short presentation is intended as a glimpse into how research on advanced meditators can impact our sense of self, or personhood. I focus on the fluidity of this category in contexts that involve the example of advanced Tibetan meditators. I am interested in the role played by emotions in the constitution of such fluidity, or what I call the *plasticity of personhood*.

## Buddhism, Laboratories and Cyborgs

I will draft here my own account of what I consider to be one of the most paradigmatic images of the Buddhism-science encounter: the monk-cyborg. My monk-cyborg has a particular origin, a mythology of sorts. He was born from scientific experiments instigated in one way or another by a particular event, the Mind & Life Dialogue VIII, which happened in Dharamsala in the year 2000. Founded in 1987 by Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, eminent biologist, philosopher, and neuroscientist Francisco Varela,

and businessman Adam Engle, the Mind & Life Institute (M&L) has been promoting since its inception the most important and perennial series of dialogues between scientists and representatives of Buddhist traditions. The particular dialogue undertaken in Dharamsala had destructive emotions as its theme and became a significant landmark in the history of this institute due to its impact on research into emotions.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of my discussion is two well-known participants in the M&L Dialogue VIII who later directly collaborated with the participant scientists by agreeing to serve as "guinea-pigs" in their laboratory: the Nepali lama Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche (b. 1975) and the French-born Tibetan Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard (b. 1946). A few years after the experiments, images of them in their Buddhist monks' robes with electrodes all over their heads began to circulate on the internet in connection with their experience in the lab and the idea of happiness. These images, expressions of the combination of subjectivity and objectivity involved in scientific experiments on Buddhist contemplative practices, point to the hybrid nature that these Buddhist figures have acquired in the popular imagination. Not far removed from Haraway's cyborgs (1991), they indicate, in their "permanent partialities" (*ibid.*), the upsetting of seemingly well-established boundaries and hierarchies between the domains of religion and secularity, tradition and modernity, first-person and third-person observation and so forth.

## Building the Monk-Cyborg's Mind-Body Complex

All four experiments discussed here have been described in different popular publications (Goleman, 2003; Ricard, 2006; Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche and Swanson, 2007; Ekman, 2008). Some results of these experiments have also been published in scientific journals (e.g. Lutz et al., 2004). But whether depicted in hyperbolic manners in popular books or soberly in scientific articles, the results of these experiments are all exceptional and suggest the idea of a superhuman figure that is the fruit of thousands of hours of meditation.

Two of these experiments were conducted by psychologist Paul Ekman, one of the foremost experts on emotions and an important participant in the M&L dialogue in Dharamsala. Ricard and another advanced Western meditator were tested in identifying the emotions on display in a video that showed various facial expressions in very quick succession. They did far better than the five thousand subjects tested previously with the same video. In a second experiment, Ekman used machines that measured the capacity to repress the startle reflex to test Ricard for his bodily movements and

<sup>1</sup> For a recent event that celebrate twenty years of this dialogue see <https://www.scienceandwisdomofemotions.com/summit-home-2021/>

physiological reactions to a powerful detonation like a gunshot going off just beside the ear. Asked to try to neutralize the involuntary strong reaction, he was able to do so almost entirely, something Ekman had never witnessed before (Ricard, 2006; Ekman, 2008; Goleman, 2003).

Ricard was also tested at the laboratory of Richard Davidson at the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin. In 2001, Davidson conducted a series of experiments on Ricard using two technologies—electroencephalogram (EEG) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI)—as part of the preparation to pilot a series of brain tests to be used with advanced meditators the following year. Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche would be part of that cohort of test subjects after Ricard's trial run. Davidson and neuroscientist Antoine Lutz tested Mingyur Rinpoche and seven other meditators' brains using the protocol Ricard helped them to prepare (Lutz et al., 2004). In two different books, best-seller author Daniel Goleman highlights the results obtained from Ricard's and Mingyur Rinpoche's tests during a meditation on altruistic love and compassion. In relation to Ricard, he says that there was "a dramatic increase in key electrical activity known as gamma in the left middle frontal gyrus, a zone of the brain Davidson's previous research had pinpointed as a locus for positive emotions" (Goleman, 2003). In his foreword to Mingyur Rinpoche's book, Goleman says that when Mingyur Rinpoche was tested while meditating on compassion, "his neural activity in a key center in the brain's system for happiness jumped by 700 to 800 percent! For ordinary subjects in the study, volunteers who had just begun to meditate, that same area increased its activity by a mere 10 to 15 percent" (Goleman, 2007). From this literature, popular and scientific, a link between contemplation practices centered on loving-kindness and compassion and feelings of happiness is established; and compassion is described as a skill in which one can train.

### Partial Connections: (*Spiritual*) Technology Transfer

The exceptional results of Ricard granted him the curious title of "the happiest person in the world"<sup>2</sup> – if you google this phrase, there is a chance he will emerge on your screen in his cyborg manifestation. Both Ricard and Mingyur Rinpoche would later assimilate and interpret further their own experience in the laboratory with scientists in popular Buddhism books that emphasize the connection between contemplative practices and happiness. In *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill* by Ricard (2006) and *The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret and Science of Happiness* by Mingyur Rinpoche (2007), the authors talk in accessible language about the experience in the labs, bringing elements of science into their own traditions. Another example of this kind of "translation" activity is Mingyur Rinpoche's recently-released secular online meditation program "The Joy of Living,"<sup>3</sup> whose origins can arguably be traced to the M&L Dialogue VIII and related experiments. It should also be added that scientists sometimes also "translate"

their science in similar ways into language appropriate to general audiences in Buddhist contexts. That has been the case for Richard Davidson, who together with other scientists is a habitual guest speaker at Tergar, a meditation community under the guidance of Mingyur Rinpoche.

We can think about this kind of "exchange" in terms of technology transfer. And since this transfer is happening both ways, we can also talk about *spiritual* technology transfer. Transferred *spiritual* technology has been condensed, for instance, into contemporary meditation programs and apps. We can directly trace at least two programs and their related apps to the M&L Dialogue VIII. First, there is the program Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT), which was developed at Stanford University's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE) by Thupten Jinpa, a professor at McGill University and the main translator for the Dalai Lama (Stenzel, 2020). More recently, in July 2020, Richard Davidson's Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin released the Healthy Minds Program (HMP) and related app. Both of these programs expand upon the previous mindfulness programs in terms of the scope of contemplative practices they engage with. In particular, they both use compassion-based meditation, which understands prosocial qualities such as appreciation, kindness and compassion as trainable.<sup>4</sup>

### Secular Ethics, Cyborg Ethics

From these experiments emerges the figure of a Buddhist superhuman, an expression of human potential for a happy, balanced, stress-free, empathic life through, among other things, the enhancement and control of the emotions. With a little help from science and the circulation of popular cultural products, these happy monk-cyborgs could show us a glimpse into what kind of human being all of us have the potential to become. The programs and apps of meditation, popular Buddhism books, podcasts, lectures and so forth present a possible path to self-transformation, pointing at the same time to the prospect of a broader impact on society. This concurs with what the Dalai Lama has proposed with his idea of a "secular ethics" (1999; 2011), a project that has been directly associated with the research on emotions developed in connection with M&L Dialogue VIII (Goleman, 2003). An important theme in the Dalai Lama's notion of ethics is compassion, which is presented both on a biological level, and on an extended level, "which has to be deliberately cultivated" (Tenzin Gyatso, 2011). This vision of ethics grounded in human nature in all its potentiality not surprisingly finds resonance in Francisco Varela's own vision of an active engaged ethics as being based on the situatedness of the agent (Varela, 1999). A question could be asked here if this sense of the plasticity of the self and trainability in compassionate ethics could also be extended to artificial life. And if so, how could that be done?

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive discussion about scientific studies on compassion see Stenzel (2020). For a critical review of compassion training research see Quaglia and Simmer-Brown (2020). For more on the HMP and their innovative "four pillars of well-being," see <https://hminnovations.org/> and Dahl et al. (2020).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.matthieuricard.org/en/blog/posts/the-happiest-person-in-the-world>

<sup>3</sup> <https://tergar.org/programs/what-is-the-joy-of-living/>

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