

SELF-AWARENESS OF PARTICIPANTS IN A LONG-TERM TIBETAN BUDDHIST RETREAT

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Buddhism represents a system of thought and practice which has been classified among the major religions and philosophies of the world (Humphreys, 1951). It consists of two main schools: Mahayana Buddhism, or The Greater Vehicle, and Hinayana Buddhism, or The Smaller Vehicle. Tibetan Buddhism, the focus of this article, belongs to the Mahayana school, whose adherents seek Enlightenment, a liberation from the suffering associated with the cycle of existence, not only for their own sake but on behalf of all sentient beings. Enlightenment represents an awakening of the Buddha-nature within the individual, and this awakening is achieved through the increased awareness that results from following a specific system of thought and spiritual practice, one in which "a profound experience of selflessness can also lead, ultimately, to full enlightenment" (Tenzin Gyatso, Fourteenth Dalai Lama, 1995).

There is no quick and easy road to Enlightenment, and the meditative practices of Tibetan Buddhism require discipline and determination. Retreating from the world, therefore, becomes an important form of spiritual discipline, since it provides a more efficient path for concentrating on the various meditative practices that lead to Enlightenment. The practice of participating in retreats in order to enhance one's awareness is a common spiritual discipline in both Eastern and Western religious traditions. The use of retreats is important for Tibetan Buddhists since they believe that retreats can assist individuals on their road to Enlightenment {Kagyu Samye-Ling Tibetan Center, 1991}. As one prominent Tibetan Buddhist scholar has noted, "a period of retreat" is often required, "because only that can truly open our eyes to what we are doing with our lives" (Sogyal Rinpoche, 1992, p. 32). Therefore, Tibetan

Buddhism provides opportunities that assist people on the road to Enlightenment by sponsoring retreat centers like the Kagyu Samye-Ling Tibetan Center located in Dumfrieshire, Scotland, the oldest Tibetan Buddhist Retreat Center in the Western world (Kagyu Samye-Ling Tibetan Center, 1991).

The achievement of greater self-awareness is a shared value of Eastern and Western societies (Chang & Page, 1991; Page & Chang, 1989), and Tibetan Buddhism's emphasis on participating in retreats in order to increase one's self-awareness can be likened to the process of psychotherapy (see Cernovsky, 1988; de Silva, 1990; Goleman, 1981; Komito, 1984; Page & Berkow, 1991; Russell, 1986). The retreat process and the process of psychotherapy both support the enhancement of awareness by providing distraction-free environments for their participants. Both processes employ techniques that are meant to change cognitive structures (Cernovsky, 1988). Both processes require significant commitments on the part of participants who must immerse themselves in periods of explicit self-examination. Finally, both processes employ trained experts, in the form of either retreat masters or therapists, who attempt to facilitate participant self-exploration.

Despite their similarities, these two processes also differ from one another. One of the most noticeable differences involves the degree of emphasis that each process places on the need for verbal discourse and human interaction as a means to enhancing self-awareness. For the most part, Western psychotherapy is rooted in the notion that verbal exchanges between therapists and clients form an indispensable part of the self-exploration process. By way of contrast, the most rigorous phases of self-exploration in the Tibetan Buddhist retreat process are marked by silence and interpersonal isolation, lasting as long as six months at a time. Thus, while the structure of the Western psychotherapy process implies that self-awareness is best achieved through interactions with others, the Tibetan Buddhist retreat process implies that self-awareness is most powerfully enhanced through prolonged periods of solitude and meditation.

One other major difference between Western psychotherapy and Tibetan Buddhist retreats involves the differing emphases of scientific and spiritual approaches to the human person. Scientific studies attesting to the effectiveness of Western psychotherapeutic approaches have been well-documented (see, for example, Prochaska & Norcross, 1994). By way of contrast, the effectiveness of Tibetan Buddhist retreats is typically viewed as a matter of spiritual concern rather than as an issue of scientific inquiry. Thus, the psychological impact of such retreats remains a relatively unstudied phenomenon.

The present study attempts to address this gap in the research literature by examining statements related to the self-awareness of individuals who were participants in a Tibetan Buddhist retreat. In this qualitative study, we examined the experiences of individual men and women who participated in a four-year retreat held at the Kagyu Samye-Ling Tibetan Center in Dumfrieshire, Scotland. Specifically, we inspected the written responses obtained from retreatants following their completion of a strict six-month period of isolation, silence, and meditation that was part of the structure of this traditional retreat process. By studying the themes that emerged from these

statements, we attempted to determine the impact that this six-month period had on the participants.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were from an original group of 46 individuals who were taking part in a four-year retreat at the Kagyu Samye-Ling Tibetan Center in Dumfrieshire, Scotland. Of these 46 participants, 20 were female and 26 were male. The retreatants differed from one another in terms of age (ranging from 23 to 66 years of age) and previous retreat experience (ranging from 0 to 92 months). Although all of the retreatants were self-declared Tibetan Buddhists, they came from countries all over the world. While it is known that over half of the retreatants came from Western Europe, the specific nationality of each participant was not recorded in order to protect the identity of the retreatants.

The subjects who participated in the four-year meditation retreat at Samye-Ling took part in "a carefully-controlled situation" (Kagyu Samye-Ling Tibetan Center, 1991, p. 10). Each day of the retreat began at 4:00 AM and ended at 11:00 PM, and was structured around fixed periods of meditative sessions, study time, personal time, and meals. Apart from this fixed schedule, the isolating, ascetic nature of the retreat gradually increased with the passing of each year. During the first year, each retreatant's communication with the outside world was limited to one letter per week. By the second year, one letter per month was allowed, and in the third year, only one letter every six months was allowed. No letters were allowed during the fourth and final year of this long-term retreat. The focus of this study was to assess the impact of the structured six-month period of strict isolation and spiritual practice that occurred during the third year of the retreat. For those six months, retreatants were not allowed to talk to other people. They were not allowed to change their clothes, nor were they allowed to shave or wash, except for their teeth and face. They were also required to stay in their rooms. At this point there were 23 retreatants remaining in the retreat, comprised of 12 women and 11 men.

Survey Instrument

After completing the six-month period of silence, isolation, and meditation, the retreatants were invited to write down three types of responses on a two-page survey instrument. The instrument included boxes for the subject's code number and sex at the top of each page. For example, the code "5M" refers to the fifth male subject. The first response opportunity, entitled "Diary of Today," provided the following instructions: "We would like you to keep as complete as possible a diary of this day's activities." The instructions for the second response asked: "Please use this space to write your reflections of the past six months," while the instructions for the third response were: "Please use this space to write your aims or expectations of the next six months." The responses to these questionnaires amounted to over 60 pages of written

material generated by 23 participants, which were analyzed using the following qualitative research methods.

Qualitative Analysis

We adapted a qualitative method of analysis proposed by van Kaam (1983; see also O'Leary, Page & Jenkins, 1991) in order to examine the written responses of the retreatants. By way of introduction, our adaptation of this method involved a total of three raters who analyzed the retreatants' written statements in four basic stages. During each of these four stages of analysis, the individual raters initially conducted their ratings separately from one another before meeting together to share their ratings and reach consensus. In the first stage of analysis, all subjects' written responses were broken down into their smallest, discrete units of independently meaningful content. In the second stage, these discrete units were then separated based on their content into "Internal" and "External" categories, which will be defined below. During the third stage of analysis, the raters further examined the content of the Internal response units to determine which items could be grouped together according to similar themes. Finally, in the fourth stage, consensus was achieved regarding the exact number of discrete content groupings, the themes that accurately expressed their shared content, and the specific response units associated with each theme.

Having provided the general outline of the four stages of our analysis, we can now describe our analysis in greater detail. The first stage of analysis involved the use of two individual raters to break down all of the retreatants' written responses into their smallest, independently meaningful units of content or thought. Initially, these two raters individually examined separate photocopies of all of the retreatants' written materials. On these copies, the raters designated where they believed each discrete unit of independently meaningful content began and ended. The two raters then met together to share their ratings and arrive at a consensus list of discrete units. The consensus list resulted in a total of 186 discrete items, each of which were then coded according to the corresponding subject number and sex of the respondent. These coded units were then transcribed into a computer database program in order to facilitate subsequent sorting and reorganization of the responses.

Since each of these discrete units referred to the retreatants' perceptions of themselves or of the retreat environment following their six-month period of solitude and meditation, the second stage of analysis was used to determine whether the content of each item was "Internal" or "External." At the beginning of this second stage, we were still relying on only two raters and had not yet involved the third rater in the analysis. These two raters initially agreed that the designation of "Internal" would be reserved for items focused on the self, i.e., *intrapersonal* references to experiences or happenings unfolding within the boundaries of each retreatant's mind or body. The raters also initially agreed that the designation of "External" would be reserved for items that were focused on retreatants' references to their physical surroundings or environment. External responses, therefore, consisted of *interpersonal* and *extrapersonal* references to events or experiences outside the mental or physical boundaries of individual persons, including references to daily routines, tasks, meals, other persons, or the retreat environment.

However, despite arriving at these initial Internal/External distinctions, we were mindful of the potentially biased Western and non-Tibetan Buddhist perspectives of the two raters. Thus, in an attempt to be more sensitive to including a non-Western, Tibetan Buddhist perspective in our analysis, we sought out and incorporated the input of a third rater, a Tibetan Buddhist Fulbright scholar visiting from India. Subsequently, during this second stage of analysis, the initial notions of what constituted Internal and External responses were modified based on this third rater's personal understanding of Tibetan Buddhism. The third rater clarified that *any* physical references, not only about one's physical environment but also about the internal workings of one's own physical body, are considered External issues from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective. Therefore, statements involving physical ailments, such as ulcers or back aches, which the two Western raters would have designated as "Internal" responses, were now more accurately designated as "External" responses. This clarification was consistent with the connotation of the Tibetan word for body, "which means 'something you leave behind,' like baggage" (Sogyal Rinpoche, 1992, p. 20). The third rater also clarified that "Internal" responses, from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective, should be limited to that which occurs "within the boundaries of the mind and the heart," including the spiritual practices of the retreat (J. Ugyan, personal communication, January 24, 1997). Thus, we reserved the Internal designation for statements related to self-awareness, including references to insights, emotions, and meditative practices. From this second stage onward, the *third*rater participated in the analysis of the retreatants' written responses.

The second stage of analysis proceeded based upon our refined distinctions of what constituted an Internal or an External response from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective. Each of the raters separately and individually rated the 186 items. The raters then met to reach a consensus regarding their Internal and External designations. The resulting consensus lists consisted of 86 Internal items and 100 External items. At this point of the analysis, the Internal and External designations were added to the computer database so that all response units could be sorted according to these two categories.

For this article, only the Internal responses were analyzed during the third stage of analysis. In this stage, identical lists of these 86 discrete response units were generated from the computer database and given to all three raters. The raters, working independently of one another, cut up their lists into 86 separate strips of paper, having one item on each strip. Each rater then separated these strips of paper into piles based on common content or themes emerging from a further examination of each response unit. Once all the items were placed into piles, these piles were named by the rater according to their common, organizing themes. The raters then met together to arrive at a consensus concerning the number of piles and the names or themes associated with each pile. One rater created seven common-theme piles, while the other two raters created six piles each. There was considerable overlap in regard to the list of themes that each rater presented along with these piles. The initial consensus was that there were six discrete themes emerging from the 86 Internal response units. For instance, all the raters agreed that one consensus theme emerging from the responses of several retreat participants could be labeled as "Happiness/Satisfaction." An example of one of the individual statements constituting this theme was: *«It has been one of the happiest times of my life.»* The six themes that emerged from this initial consensus were also added to the computer database.

In the fourth and final stage of analysis, the raters re-examined these themes in order to determine whether they could create a more exact listing of themes that were discrete and did not overlap in terms of meaning or content. Beginning with the list of six themes agreed upon in the third stage of analysis, each rater independently examined the response units associated with each theme to see if any themes could be modified or combined. The raters then met together to share their refined lists and arrive at a final consensus of discrete themes and the exact response units associated with each theme. Individually, all three raters were able to combine some themes and reduce the initial consensus list. Together, they agreed that any overlapping that occurred in the initial consensus list of six themes was no longer present in their final consensus list of five discrete themes. The resulting themes were then used to update the computer database and generate a final printout of each response unit, sorted according to theme. To ensure the accuracy of the response units associated with each theme, identical copies of this printout were given to the raters. After independently examining their lists, all three then met together and came to joint agreement regarding the exact response units that constituted each theme. These five Internal themes, and the response units associated with them, are described in the Results section.

RESULTS

The remainder of this report examines the retreatants' individual statements grouped according to the Internal themes identified in this research. The following five themes were identified: 1) happiness/satisfaction; 2) struggle leading to insight; 3) practice/meditation; 4) sense of time; and 5) goals/expectations.

Happiness/Satisfaction

Fifteen individual statements were categorized under the theme of Happiness/Satisfaction. This theme included responses related to the personal happiness or satisfaction expressed by many of the retreatants following the intense six-month period of spiritual practice. The emergence of this theme seemed counter-intuitive considering the extreme rigor of this phase of the retreat, which included solitude, no bathing or showering, and no contact with the outside world. A sense of happiness is amply captured in the following responses of several retreatants:

The last 6 months have been very beneficial for me, I feel very happy about them, it has been fruitful.

I feel SOlucky being here. I am very happy.

I had the happiest time of my life. Being alone, not talking, I learned to find happiness in myself.

. . . it has been one of the happiest times of my life.

The last 6 months have easily been the best of my life.

Interestingly, all of the above statements were written by female retreatants. **In** fact, while nine different women expressed positive sentiments about the six-month period of intense silence, only two male retreatants offered responses that were included under this theme. The sole male reference to happiness was:

I have found a basic peace and happiness which I didn't have before and which doesn't change.

This same male retreatant seemed to focus on the psychologically satisfying impact of this phase of the retreat:

My emotional and mental state is peaceful and stable.

The other male's expression of satisfaction seemed to be more closely associated with a sense of relief:

Having finished a very intense period in the retreat I have been feeling more relaxed than usual

Struggle Leading to Insight

In the previous section, several retreatants claimed to have had positive experiences in spite of the rigor associated with the strictest six-month phase of the retreat. Such counter-intuitive responses regarding this intense period of isolation are borne out even more strongly under a theme that we entitled, "Struggle Leading to Insight," which incorporated more than one-third of all the Internal statements. A total of 30 individual statements were categorized under this theme.

This theme encompassed the retreatants' expressions of personal growth or gain despite the great difficulties they endured during the strictest phase of the retreat. The responses of one particular male retreatant exemplify the type of rewarding insights that many retreatants experienced as a direct result of their personal struggles:

... the past six months has been difficult but because of that I have learnt [sic] a great deal more about myself and others-not [sic] ordinary person would [be] willing [to] give up speech-writing-showers-cleaning for half a year-it's a little like being a mad person although I am not.

This man went on to describe the psychological trials associated with this difficult period:

It's interesting seeing one's ego squirm as its comforts and props are taken away, but somehow leaves one with less bothers and worries and space, but only if one can accept the change and losses then one can truly be happy and content. ... The two middle months were dark and lonely. I found myself getting paranoid, but I didn't get too depressed.

In the end, this retreatant claimed that his struggle was worthwhile and personally rewarding:

As a result I am now much more honest to myself: honest toward others--more open and happy in myself. It has been difficult but very rewarding.

The gender differences alluded to under the previous theme were even more pronounced in regard to the responses associated with the current theme, with responses from 9 men and 4 women. While the Happiness/Satisfaction theme was primarily comprised of female responses, the theme of Struggle Leading to Insight was dominated by male responses, with 25 of this theme's 30 statements coming from male retreatants. It appears that many male retreatants included more detailed depictions of their struggles when evaluating the strict, six-month period of the retreat. The most notable pattern emerging from the male responses in this area focused on the psychologically purgative and therapeutic overtones of the retreat, some of which were not particularly pleasant or easy to endure. For example, as one male retreatant wrote:

It was quite difficult as neuroses came bubbling to the surface that had to be acknowledged and faced and dealt with, negative habitual patterns, disturbed emotions.

Similarly, another male respondent noted:

I felt I was stewing in the juice of the negative actions that seemed to fill up my past life. There was no escape, no way to hide from myself, as I pondered and analysed [sic] everything that has seemed to go awry in my life. "How could this have happened?," I often asked myself. And often the memories were so intense that I felt ashamed and distraught, wanting only to turn it all off like a TV set, but it wouldn't turn off. So I was forced to analyze every situation in detail, in order to find out what I did wrong, and I felt I learned a lot about my particular neuroses. I saw how my anger and pride, greed and opportunism, self-centeredness and dishonesty led me to make such a mess of so many situations in my life. And it bolstered my resolve to never let it happen again.

Likewise, another male wrote:

My mind seems to get stuck onto things (like fear and regret) very easily.... Slowly very deep psychologic [sic] problems are revealing themselves (or rather: are being recognized by me), and dealing with them will need patience. What it is, is difficult to describe. The best way is maybe, that it is a tension that can manifest as fear, paranoia, nervousness or even elatedness, yet retaining its basic quality.... I suspect it comes from a feeling of always under-achieving. This whole process is becoming more exposed as time passes.

Yet perhaps the most striking psychological analogy related to the struggle was offered by a male who likened this very rigorous period of the retreat to the process of psychoanalysis:

The 6-month period of silence was very powerful and seems to have been like a period of intensive psycho-analysis: continual streams of memory impressions from all phases of my life, and a steady succession of mind patterns manifesting more and more clearly, showing quite starkly the different layers of thought/feeling activity and how the habitual tendencies of the mind are rooted deep in unconscious currents. Sometimes frightening, but very revealing and rewarding because now many negative tendencies have been revealed and weakened.

By way of contrast, the female responses included under this theme were more dismissive of the struggle aspect of the retreat. Downplaying the struggle is alluded to in such female responses as:

It was not without difficulties, but wonderful.

Although sometimes a little difficult, on the whole a very good time.

I feel that it is not such an impossible task to understand and see clearly what my mind is all about.

These females seemed to attain insight or personal gain while only tangentially referring to the notion of struggle.

Apart from the male-dominated focus on the struggles associated with the attainment of insights, one final pattern emerged under this theme that applied to both males and females. This pattern included retreatants' expressions of an increased sense of personal awareness as a result of the strict meditative practices. One female retreatant experienced a heightened sense of awareness which she attributed to the silence she embraced:

I felt that it was the first real opportunity to become "totally" aware of what's happening inside, although you can of course do that when talking-for me it is very much harder.

Likewise, a male respondent wrote:

To be able to become aware of one's smallest actions has made me have a completely different view on life and how to conduct myself in the future.

Overall, despite the stark contrast that emerged between male and female retreatants in regard to the struggle, males and females alike were able to attain personal insights and a heightened sense of self-awareness from their participation in this strict phase of the retreat.

Practice/Meditation

Twelve individual statements were categorized under the Practice/Meditation theme. The Tibetan Buddhist rater emphasized that references to the "spiritual practice" in the retreatants' responses should be classified as Internal responses. The spiritual practice is made up of specific elements, including prayers, chants, yogic postures, readings, and other meditative exercises. While these practices might at first glance appear to be "external" to the person, for Tibetan Buddhists they represent an avenue to "internal" experiences that are introspective in nature and aimed at enhancing retreatants' mindfulness and awareness on the road to Enlightenment.

Many of the retreatants' written statements included under this theme seem to reveal that these practices were effective in achieving their aim. Consider, for example, the following list of internal experiences offered by both male and female retreatants:

The past six months were fertile time for intensive introspection and meditation practice.

Because of the practice my mind has been less agitated than before.

My capacity of meditation and concentration improved greatly as well as my mindfulness.

Meditation is becoming part of my whole being, and this is extremely significant.

I feel the past 6 months were a fruitful time for me in the retreat. Because it was an intense period of introspection.

While these responses offer glowing reports attesting to the effectiveness of the spiritual practice, one older male retreatant suffering from an ulcer offered a more neutral assessment of its value. While his ulcer represents an External issue, he did offer the following three Internal comments related to his experience of this practice:

Due to my practice, some deep problems have been brought to the surface, and I am living through what seems to be the gradual process of working through them by not blocking all the negative states that arise in my mind and body [I] awake to practice with renewed effort, trying to let go, no aversions, no clinging The people who have done them all feel that they are certainly worth the discomfort, as they bring quick results. So my attitude is mainly neutral.

Sense of Time

Because of the strictly observed time limits involved in various portions of the retreat, particularly in regard to the rigorous six-month period of spiritual practice, we were not surprised that the theme of "time" surfaced in some of the retreatants' responses. However, we anticipated that this theme would be more pronounced than it actually was. In fact, the "Sense of Time" theme contained the fewest responses of any of the Internal themes that we identified, with only seven statements categorized under this theme.

Paradoxically, the minimal responses in this area seem to reveal that "time" was not a central worry or concern for most of the retreatants, not even for those males who found the retreat to be a struggle. In fact, there were no obvious differences between the male and the female responses in this area.

Examples of the individual responses under this theme included:

The immediate past is but a dim memory.

One day is like one year, and at the same time, one year is like one same day.

Time passed quickly.

Yet perhaps the most poignant example of the timelessness of the retreat experience is captured in a poem offered by a female retreatant:

With the Sun under my feet
And the Moon in my hair
I embrace the vibrant body
of Infinite Space
Timeless Dance
Instant Joy-May we all be free from suffering!

Thus, unlike the involuntary, long-suffering images often associated with prisoners sentenced to their cells, or with patients confined to their beds, or with elderly shut-ins forgotten in their homes, these retreatants made no references to being obsessed with counting their days of silence or with marking the passage of time. None of the retreatants referred to their rigorous six-month period of solitude as an unwelcome or involuntary sentence.

Goals/Expectations

A total of 22 statements were categorized under the Goals/Expectations theme. Unlike the other themes that emerged naturally from the retreatants' responses, this final Internal theme emerged from the direct prompting of the third survey question which asked for their aims and expectations. There were no obvious differences in the male and female responses grouped under this theme.

An example of a specific goal focused on one retreatants' need for striking a balance between meditation and relaxation:

I hope to become better at relaxing in my meditation because it has become more and more clear that I have tended to do too much mental focusing and too little relaxation. One has to find a middle between too "tight" and too "loose." And that is what I am to do.

However, most of the other statements about personal goals were rather generic:

Do my best-

I would quite like to be alive in 6 month's time.

I would like to be able to "give-in" a bit more to the teachings, and practice meditation more wholeheartedly.

[My] aim is to develop compassion towards all beings.

I feel optimistic about the future, hoping that in the remaining time of the retreat I'll be able to make definite changes in my mind.

I haven't learnt {sic} yet to tame my wild mind and this I hope to do, for now to occupy it is best.

Beyond these responses, neither male nor female retreatants appeared to be very driven in regard to personal goals or expectations. There was no sense of urgency in

their responses. Instead, their responses had a simple and sated quality to them, reflecting a desire for continuity and a centered peacefulness in the here-and-now:

I hope, quite simply, to be able to continue as I have been doing for the next 6 months.

To simply continue trying to improve my mind, and recognise [sic] and face any difficulties as they arise.

My only aim is to keep practicing exactly as I'm doing now.

Fewer plans for the future, try and be in the present more.

I just hope to keep some kind of continuum going and to keep trying my best, I can't do more than that.

My aim is to continue working with whatever comes up in my mind and to deal with whatever comes as honestly and as openly as I am capable,

These centered and sated expressions of a desire for continuity could be interpreted as a sign of the retreatants' trust in the effectiveness of the retreat process. Their lack of urgency also suggests that these respondents were pleased with their present level of progress in the retreat.

Finally, some respondents were detached from expectations altogether. Again, there was a lack of urgency in their responses:

I do not have specific aims or expectations, but I have a general positive feeling about my future.

I don't have any expectation. I only hope to keep alive and in good health.

I have no aims or expectation—just rest my mind in its true nature ...

I don't expect radical change but I am optimistic that things can improve slowly.

Quite happy to say I don't have too many [expectations]. They can be an obstacle to meditation.

Many of these responses are consonant with Tibetan Buddhist notions of detachment. Yet when considered together with the other responses grouped under this theme, these statements suggest that several participants were presently experiencing their situation in a positive manner even after having just completed the most rigorous six-month phase of the retreat.

CONCLUSION

The five themes that emerged during this qualitative analysis described the self-perceptions of retreatants following the strict six-month period of silence, isolation, and meditative practice structured into the third year of a four-year Tibetan Buddhist

retreat. According to the written responses of the participants, this rigorous phase of the retreat did not appear to have harmful or detrimental effects on retreatants' self-perceptions. Instead, these responses revealed that this period of isolated meditative practice appeared to enhance personal awareness for many of the retreatants. Ironically, some of the participants' responses had a calm and sated quality that described a sense of peacefulness or reward that resulted from participating in this rigorous phase of the retreat. Others mentioned that they became more comfortable with themselves during this time of solitude and isolation from others and from the outside world. Still others expressed that their own memories, thoughts, feelings, or habitual patterns were gradually revealed to them in a new way. These observations are consonant with the goal of the Tibetan Buddhist retreat process, which is one of *assisting* individuals on the road to Enlightenment by providing opportunities for increased consciousness and awareness.

In many ways, the Tibetan Buddhist view of the retreat process as a means of increasing one's awareness can be likened to the process of Western psychotherapy. Both processes attempt to facilitate participants' increased conscious awareness of their thoughts, feelings, and behavioral patterns by providing opportunities for self-examination in distraction-free environments. Both processes also take time to unfold, with each method recognizing the gradual, ongoing nature of the consciousness-raising process.

However, these two processes do differ. Perhaps the most noticeable difference involves differential emphases on the need for verbal discourse as a means to increasing self-awareness. On the one hand, Western psychotherapeutic approaches have traditionally viewed the verbal dialogue between patient(s) and therapist(s) as an indispensable part of the consciousness-raising process. On the other hand, Tibetan Buddhist retreats employ silence, solitude, and meditation as key agents of self-awareness. In fact, several retreatants alluded to increased self-knowledge and awareness in the absence of verbal dialogue. Thus, it is worth noting here that therapists who place singular emphasis on the importance of talk-therapy as a means to facilitating client self-awareness may in fact be overlooking the usefulness of non-verbal means for their clients.

Overall, the written responses examined in this study did indicate some interesting contrasts between many of the male and female retreatants' expressions of self-awareness. These contrasts were most pronounced in regard to expressions of happiness and satisfaction *versus* descriptions that focused on the struggles that led to insight. That is, while many more females than males highlighted the satisfying or fulfilling nature of this six-month portion of retreat process without alluding to its rigor, males tended to emphasize the internal, psychological struggles and challenges that led to rewarding personal insights. However, since the cultural backgrounds and other identifying variables of these subjects were de-identified, it is not clear whether these contrasts were solely related to subjects' sex or to other unknown factors such as nationality, age, previous retreat experience, or some other personal variable.

Future research could explore the possibility of gender differences among retreatants, not only in Tibetan Buddhist retreats, but in other types of retreats from other cultures

as well. Likewise, since so many of the participants in this study attested to the value of their retreat experiences in the context of meditation, future research might address how specific Western verbal consciousness-raising approaches compare to alternative, non-Western, or nonverbal modes of enhancing self-awareness.

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