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Features of Trance Mediumship in Tibetan Buddhism and Modern Spiritualism

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A Thesis in the Field of Religion

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Abstract

The term "trance" comes from the Latin *transitus* (a passage) implying a passage from one state to another and it has been widely researched in fields as diverse as neuroscience, anthropology, psychology, and religion. Given the fact that trance is a well-studied, worldwide phenomenon and several religions, including Spiritualism and Tibetan Buddhism, incorporate it in their practice, what, if any, commonalities exist in its use across different religions. This study attempted to answer this question by examining the use of trance in Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism seeking to find any overlap. To do so, several sub-components of trance (i.e. methodology, philosophy, and purpose) were identified and examined. This paper theorized that the trance methodologies employed in both traditions would show similarities. It was also hypothesized that the philosophical framework of each tradition and varying purposes of trance would not demonstrate notable similarities. The evidence uncovered in this study did support these hypotheses and by revealing unexpected findings, themes, and deficiencies added to the body of literature on trance as well as Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism. These included the sacredness, veneration, and power that Tibetan Buddhism gives its oracles and the possible detrimental effects of advocacy and bias among the researchers studied.

Dedication

To all of you who walk the most peaceful road there is – the road of redemption.

Acknowledgements

No book is written in a vacuum. I acknowledge the counsel of a pair of former Deans, wise women who work out of libraries, and a bespectacled wine lover who famously asks, “So what?” I raise a glass to you all and bow.

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Chapter I

The Background and its Problem

Background of the Problem

The term “trance” comes from the Latin *transitus* (meaning “a passage”) implying a passage from one state to another, however; “a working definition of trance is difficult to formulate.”¹ The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 4th Edition (DSM IV) defines trance as a “transient alteration in identity whereby one’s normal identity is temporarily replaced by a spirit, ghost, deity, or other person” and from a psychological perspective, trance is considered an “alternate” or “altered” state of consciousness (ASC²) with qualitatively distinct perceptions of mental functioning, as compared to ordinary states of consciousness (OSC) (Ludwig, 1969; Tart, 1975; Zinberg, 1977). This definition of trance is almost identical to that of “Spirit Possession” as listed in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* as “any altered or unusual state of consciousness and allied behavior that is indigenously understood in terms of the influence of an alien spirit, demon, or deity.”³ Terminology can therefore be confusing because a full understanding of some of the terms used in this study (i.a. Buddhism) requires broader contextual knowledge while others (i.a. possession and trance as shown here) may cause confusion because they are commonly and falsely used interchangeably. Still others (i.a. oracle) have different meanings within the context of this work than in popular parlance. When applicable, this study defers to the *The Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism* (ODOB), *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (PDB), *The Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion* (EPR), and the *Harper’s Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience* (HEMPE) for a standardized understanding of the terms used. This study makes the important distinction that ‘trance’ is

voluntary and ‘possession’ is not (see List of Terms in Appendix 1), however; one needs to be aware that much of the literature does not recognize the importance of this distinction.

This study will attempt to find any commonalities that may exist in the use of trance in Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism. To do so, several sub-components of trance (i.e. methodology, philosophy, and purpose) will be identified and examined. In addition, because the influence of culture cannot entirely be removed, its influence within each religion will be noted. In seeking any commonalities of trance across these two religious traditions, this paper will not only attempt to broaden the understanding of trance, but also advance the study of these religions. Noteworthy differences will also be examined when they shed light on the influence of culture or provide insight on the sub-components (i.e. methodology, philosophy, and purpose).

Research Problem

Several religions, to include Spiritualism and Tibetan⁴ Buddhism, incorporate trance in their practice, not for liturgy but for seeking interaction with the non-physical realm. Given the fact that trance is a well-studied, worldwide phenomenon not unique to any one religion, what, if any, commonalities exist in its use across religions?

Research Question

Despite their significant cultural differences, how do the methodologies, philosophy, and purpose of trance mediumship overlap Spiritualism and Tibetan Buddhism? This study will not exhaustively examine each of these three components (i.e. methodologies, philosophy, and purpose) but will selectively examine specific queries such as:

- Concerning methodology, how do trance mediums in each religion appear to achieve and maintain an altered state of consciousness associated with this phenomenon? What, if any, physiological changes in the trance mediums of each religion have been observed? What are the mechanics and sequence of events involved in producing and maintaining the trance state?
- Concerning philosophy, what are the beliefs that underpin and frame the use and actions of trance in each religion?
- Concerning purpose, what function does trance serve within each religion?

Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism are ideal candidates to study these questions because they are very dissimilar. For example, they differ in their belief in God, the soul, and the afterlife and these stark differences provide a sharp contrast to examine the methodologies, philosophy, and purpose of trance within each.

Hypothesis

The working theory of this study is that although trance is a universal phenomenon seen throughout history and across cultures (Frazier, 1890; Schmidt and Huskinson, 2012; Gutierrez, 2009; and Oesterreich, 1921), the dominating influence of culture minimizes the similarities in its use across religions. Of the three components (i.e. methodology, philosophy, and purpose) of trance that will be examined, it is theorized that methodologies would have the most (or only) overlap and that the philosophy behind the use of trance and the purpose thereof would have the most dissimilarities.

Trance is a spectrum of phenomena (Walsh, 1990), and it is theorized that the methodologies employed in the various levels of the altered state of consciousness necessary for the replacement of the medium's identity with a separate identity will show similarities in the way the medium in each religion appears and behaves throughout the experience. On the other hand, the "who" or "what" speaking through the medium, (i.e. the philosophical framework) and the "when" and "why" (i.e. the purpose of the trance) they are speaking through the medium, will not demonstrate as many, if any, similarities and noteworthy differences. These specific hypotheses will be tested by examining trance in Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism consistent with the established standards of research in religion.

An Overview of Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism

Tibetan Buddhism

Buddhism, like all religions, is internally diverse,⁵ but Tibetan Buddhism is so unique that some anthropologists call it 'Lamaism'⁶ to differentiate it from the other forms of Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism has a unique mixture of Buddhism, Indian Buddhist tantric traditions, and Bon practices (Schlagintweit, 1999). "Bon" is a term used to describe a broad and diffuse category of pre-Buddhist shamanistic practices indigenous to Tibet (see Appendix 1 List of Terms). Tibet's secluded location, long history of relative isolation, and unique Bon practices also has contributed to the uniqueness of its beliefs and practices. For example, although Buddhism rejects the existence of a soul, the belief of the soul persists among the Tibetan lay culture,⁷ and this belief has its roots in the Bon tradition. In addition, the practice of the oracle-priests is not a part of the traditional Buddhist structure and reflects beliefs and an indigenous tradition prior to Buddhist cultural patrimony.⁸

When Buddhism came to Tibet in the mid-8th century AD/CE,⁹ it brought with it many deities which had evolved from the gods of Hinduism, but it also ‘converted’ a great many of the original Tibetan shamanic spirits to Buddhist and bound them by oath to be defenders of Buddhism and its teachings or *dharma* (see Appendix 1 List of Terms).¹⁰ In the 17th century AD/CE, the 5th Dalai Lama established the Nechung (or *kuten-la*¹¹) as the official State Oracle,¹² and since then the Nechung has played a central role in the political history of Tibet.¹³ It is the converted Bon deities as well as the high-ranking Buddhist deities who allegedly entrance the oracle-priests within Tibetan Buddhism.

In its Buddhization of the indigenous Bon pantheon and ritual practices,¹⁴ Tibetan Buddhism also assimilated the trance mediumship of the indigenous Bon religion into its belief system.¹⁵ Although other sects of Buddhism have deities, only Tibetan Buddhism utilizes trance. Within Tibetan Buddhism, there are two types of trance mediums, “oracle-priests” and “lay oracles.” Residing with the Tibetan Government in exile in Dharamsala, India are four oracle-priests, one of whom is the official State Oracle (or Nechung), who becomes entranced by the highest-ranking deities of the Buddhist pantheon (the *dharmapala*, see Appendix 1 List of Terms). The most well-known of these spirits is the mighty *Pehar* (or *Dorje Drakden*) who is the head of the *dharmapala*, even though he was originally a god in the Bon religion. In highly stylized ceremonies, these oracle-priests become entranced and provide guidance for the Dalai Lama, the Regent, or other governmental officials. After answering all their questions and if the oracle-priest is still entranced, he will occasionally provide divine answers to questions posed by private people who are usually a few aristocratic families or benefactors of the monastery.¹⁶

Lay oracles, on the other hand, live in rural communities throughout Tibet and in refugee camps in Nepal, Bhutan, and India and are embodied by a lower class of fierce protective

Tibetan deities associated with pre-Buddhist Bon shamanism.¹⁷ These local protector spirits are relatively unknown outside of their small geographic area. When lay oracles supposedly become entranced by high ranking gods they are considered by the Buddhist clergy as imposters, since according to Tibetan religious teachings, none of these high-ranking gods would condescend to interfere with mundane affairs.¹⁸ The deities that the lay oracles invoke in their healings are indigenous Bon deities converted to Buddhism.¹⁹ Another characteristic of lay oracles is that they hold séances in their own and other people's homes and help ordinary people find solutions to day-to-day problems²⁰ such as divination and healing.²¹ Even though the embodying deities can take on the characteristics of wrathful animals which are associated with them, the oracle-priests and lay oracles are only entranced by deities and not discarnate spirits or animals.

Spiritualism

Spiritualism is a religion which began as a movement in 1848 and is based on a set of principles²² that include the continual existence of the human soul and communication between the living and "the dead." Its origins lay in the non-trance mediumship of the Fox Sisters. In their presence, raps and knocks would be heard and eventually a code was derived to ascertain that they were made by a murdered peddler. This convinced many that life was eternal and communication was possible between the living and the dead.

However, the phenomena of trance is seen as a direct way to achieve this communication and mediums become entranced by what Spiritualists call a 'control' who is thought to be an independent entity or spirit guide who speaks through the entranced medium.²³ In addition to communication between the living and the dead, mediums also perform healing, produce art, or offer philosophically-based teaching while entranced. Because Spiritualism is decentralized and

without dogma, creeds, or standardized beliefs beyond a set of guiding principles, many different examples of trance mediums have been documented, but only two, Leonora Piper and Gladys Osborne Leonard, have been formally and extensively tested under controlled conditions. Nonetheless, Piper and Leonard share characteristics of all trance mediums in that they possess similar methodologies, philosophy, and purpose and so, based on accessibility of data, evidence from their cases will be primarily used in this study.

Besides it being an expression of its core beliefs, another reason for the plethora of trance mediums in Spiritualism is that since its inception, Spiritualism has encountered resistance from mainstream science and orthodox religion which claimed its phenomena was either not valid or demonic. In such a climate of skepticism and hostility, Spiritualism has had a heritage of mediums who have sought to produce evidence in support of the theory of survival. And so, it is long considered that “Spiritualism is a religion, philosophy, and a science.”²⁴ However, the threshold for evidence and controlled conditions for the many trance mediums within Spiritualism has varied widely, and only Piper and Leonard have had years of testing in laboratory-like settings that sought to attain consistency, eliminate variables, and reduce the likelihood of alternate explanations for the trance phenomena.

Significance of the Study

This study has the potential of offering fresh insights from a neglected point of investigation on the commonalities and differences of how religions utilize trance. If any similarities can be found in the use of trance between two very different religions, parallels might be found in other religiously based trance states (i.a. the whirling dervishes of Sufism, mystical dancing within Shakerism, trance within Shamanism, glossolalia which is commonly referred to

as “speaking in tongues” within Pentecostal Christianity, and spirit possession within Haitian Voodoo). By breaking down and investigating three sub-components of the use of trance (i.e. methodologies, philosophy, and purpose), this study also has the potential of expanding the knowledge of trance outside of religious contexts and be applicable to other fields of study. This paper also relates to studies in consciousness and survival such as research into Near Death Experiences (NDEs) and Out of Body Experiences (OBEs). Finally, this paper is relevant to studies that research altered states of consciousness and their physiological and neurobiological characteristics to include studies that measure brain wave activity through electroencephalography (or EEG).

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, psychical research examines a wide range of phenomena that occurs both inside and outside of religious contexts. One of the most widely studied phenomenon in psychical research, precognition (or divination) is commonly defined as “the practice of seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means.” Using qualitative methods, divination has been widely studied in ancient religions (i.a. Johnston, 2008), tribal societies (i.a. Nais, 1993), and contemporary Islam (Kirby, 1993) as well as tested quantitatively in modern laboratories (Rhine, 1981; Heywood, 1978; and Murphy, 1961). Tibetan Buddhism has such an established heritage of divination that it is termed “Mo” and uses items such as balls of dough, bootstraps, mirrors, thumb nails, dice, or prayer beads and often involves *Palden Lhamo*, a Tibetan deity.²⁵

Another less common but still studied phenomena within psychical research is trance. Within Tibetan Buddhism, the study of trance tends to be qualitative, while the study of trance within Spiritualism tends to be quantitative. Among the non-religiously based studies of trance that use quantitative research methods are Krippner and Friedman (2010) and Walsh (1990) who examined the neurofunctions of those in trance and concluded that brain activity changes during trance and trance-like states. Among the general studies of trance that uses qualitative research methods are Goodman, Henney, and Pressel (1982) who compared three field studies to demonstrate similarities in trance healing in tribal societies. Additional qualitative studies include in situ ethnographic research by Motta (2005) who asserted kinesics can have clear and

subtle meanings during trance and Plancke (2011) who concluded that trance can empower women in tribal societies. Both qualitative and quantitative research on trance outside a religious context support and influence the study of the particular use of trance within Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism.

Review of Trance Studies within Tibetan Buddhism

Within Tibetan Buddhism, the predominant research method for studying trance is the qualitative method, in particular anthropological fieldwork which is effective in the study of religious practice and alternate states of consciousness. This ranges from direct observation which demands investigator objectivity to complete participation which requires more subjectivity. The earliest accounts of Tibetan trance-mediums were documented in Das (1882) and Waddell (1895) who both furnished detailed descriptions of trance based on anecdotal accounts as well as limited first-hand observation. As the first Western academic reporters of this phenomenon, they utilized very basic anthropological and ethnographic fieldwork, briefly observing and reporting on this phenomenon. Bellezza (2005) provided a more in-depth ethnographic and textual study as he examined religious texts and observed oracles over many years arguing in great analytical and descriptive detail that the tradition of oracles was appropriated by Buddhism from the Bon tradition. This thesis was frequently voiced in Tibetan Studies but not previously substantiated due to lack of evidence. Bellezza supplemented his ethnographic fieldwork among lay oracles with philological methods that included studying and interpreting Bon texts and Buddhist doctrine. Peters (2004 and 2016) also used the ethnographic approach becoming a discipline to a lay oracle rather than simply being an empirical observer. Peters' complete participation reduced theoretical design in favor of descriptive analysis as he

asserted the oracles were more shamanistic than Buddhist. This conclusion was echoed by Samuel (1993) and Sidky (2011) who used less exhaustive ethnographic studies. Additional studies such as Bell (2013), Tewari (1987), and Peters (1978b) used anthropological fieldwork trace trance mediums in Tibetan Buddhism back to the older, indigenous Bon religion of Tibet. One study by Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956) came to the same conclusion after examining the pantheon of deities embodied by Tibetan lay oracles. Often termed a “religion,” it has been argued that “Bon” is not a religion but “Shamanism”²⁶ (See “Bon” and “Shaman” in the Definition of Terms in Appendix 1).

Other researchers have pursued auxiliary lines of study. Arnott (1989) compared oracles in Tibetan Buddhism to the Delphic Oracle of Ancient Greece and found them vaguely similar in purpose. Still other researchers (Peter, 1978; Shen-Yu, 2010; and French, 2002) observed the three official state oracles, most notably the principle state oracle, or Nechung (or *kuten-la* which means “the physical basis” or “body support” for the deity²⁷) and argued that their purpose was more for Tibet’s government in exile than for lay people. Lastly, documentary films (Cherniak, 2011 and McGann, 2003) that include actual footage of oracles in trance, assert that this phenomenon is an esoteric part of Tibetan Buddhism that most practitioners are unfamiliar with.

Review of Trance Studies within Spiritualism

Whereas the predominant research method for studying trance in Tibetan Buddhism is the qualitative method, within Modern Spiritualism the predominant research method is the quantitative method. Modern Spiritualism started in 1848 with the non-trance mediumship of the Fox Sisters, but the emergence and empirical investigation of trance mediumship began in earnest with the formation of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) and the American

Society for Psychical Research (ASPR) in 1882 and 1885 respectively. Much of the early published work in the SPR's and ASPR's peer-reviewed²⁸ journals, *Proceedings* and *Journal*, chronicled and analyzed the works of trance mediums Leonora Piper and Gladys Osborne Leonard. *Proceedings* and *Journal* articles to include "A Note on a Series of Sittings with Mrs. Leonard" (1920), "Correspondence" (1920), "Sittings with Mrs. Leonard" (1918), "Three Sittings with Mrs. Leonard" (1921) and those by Allison (1929, 1934, and 1941) and Bell (1902) used quantitative methods to generate numerical data that was transformed into statistics which supported the claim that one's consciousness survives the death of their physical body. During the last part of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century, the ASPR and SPR stressed the study of mediumship. One technique used in this quantitative research of both Leonora Piper and Gladys Osbourne Leonard was testing through "proxy sittings," defined as "sittings at which the person desiring a communication from a deceased loved one is not physically present at the sitting; instead a third person, preferably someone with little or no knowledge about the deceased person, arranges the sitting with the medium and attends it as a proxy for the real sitter (or living person wanting to hear from their deceased loved one),"²⁹ that sought to control the variables of telepathy and overt fraud and so statistically reduce their probability. Despite the fact that no trance mediums after Piper and Leonard have been tested using proxy sitters, Beischel (2015) significantly advanced contemporary psychical research in documenting experiments with proxy sittings, using single-blind and double-blind protocols on non-trance mediums and concluded the validity of these mediums.

Exceptions to using the quantitative research method to study trance within Spiritualism include Leonard's autobiography (Leonard, 1931) and biographies of Piper (Piper, 1929 and Smith, 1964 and 1972) which, in a more qualitative way, offered narrative insights into their

decades as trance mediums and shed light on underlying issues involved. An early work that utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods was Lodge's 1916 *Raymond* that provided detailed argumentation and different lines of evidence to assert that Lodge's son, Raymond, survived his physical death and communicated with Lodge via the trance mediumship of Gladys Osborne Leonard. While Leonard's autobiography, the biographies of Piper, and the *Raymond* work were written by advocates of Spiritualism, they nonetheless must be considered. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, it can be argued that lack of neutrality also exists in works detailing trance within Tibetan Buddhism.

Other early studies of trance within Spiritualism included a large body of work by William James (James and Cattell, 1898; James, 1909; and Alvarado, 2016) on trance medium Leonora Piper. James pursued both scientific activities in abnormal psychology and psychological research that sought to verify that Piper's trance was a real dissociative experience and to confirm the information Piper gave in trance was "supernormal" knowledge. Some of James' physiological testing of Piper included methods now considered highly unethical such as subjecting her to caustic smelling salts or running knitting needles through her hand while she was in trance. These and other quantitative methods were typical of early psychological researchers who as "men of science" had extensive backgrounds in experimental chemistry, physics, physiology, and mechanics. But according to Baker (2013), William James, in contrast to fellow researchers Sir William Crookes, Sir Oliver Lodge, Doctor Charles Richet, and Professor William Crawford, continually wrestled with the notion of whether psychological research was, or could be labelled, a "science." Baker's observation of James may have merit as James only investigated trance, a phenomenon of the mind, whereas Crookes, Richet, and Crawford

investigated phenomenon of physical mediumship such as levitation, direct voice, and materializations and the research and data of these phenomenon were easier to reproduce.

Contemporary researchers have examined William James' and other works of early researchers. For example, Salter (1950; 1961) analyzed the primary SPR and ASPR sources on trance mediums Leonora Piper and Gladys Osbourne Leonard to validate the conclusions of James and other early psychical researchers that Piper and Leonard were legitimate trance mediums. In addition, Robertson (2007) solely concentrated on Leonora Piper, reviewing the ASPR data and concluded her legitimacy and the identities of the spirits who embodied her. Finally, Moore (1977) also focused on Leonora Piper in examining William James' lifelong analysis of her to disprove the commonly held belief that all mediums were fraudulent. In regards to this, James famously said "In order to disprove the assertion that all crows are black, one white crow is sufficient and Mrs. Piper is my white crow."³⁰

Research Gap

Contemporary trance research is very limited, but there is ample survival research that uses current after-death communication data and it has had to break away from traditional methods of scientific query and experimentation. Rhine (1981) reported on her and her husband's 40 years of pioneering laboratory-based psychical research and the quantitative methods (e.g. Zener cards³¹) they employed. She and her husband used traditional methods of scientific testing and argued the validity of phenomena such as precognition and telepathy, but her research did not involve trance or other after-death communication. In their (J. B. Rhine and his wife, Louisa) opinion, mediumship was beyond scientific investigation at that time and therefore it was largely disregarded in their research. In addition, LeShan (2003 and 2009) used

his expertise as a clinical and research psychologist to review survival evidence and concluded psychic phenomena (to include trance) operated according to their own laws and a new theory of consciousness was needed to explain and conduct psychical research. Tymn (2013) reviewed case studies focusing on trance mediums Leonora Piper and Gladys Osbourne Leonard and argued that religious and scientific fundamentalism leads to ignoring the data, denying the possibility of survival, and developing new experimental methods. He also noted that examining Piper and Leonard required researchers to admit to the complexities of a proxy sitter – medium – control (that Tymn calls “a medium on the other-side”) – communicator dynamic. Braude (2003) examined the concepts underpinning the survival theory as well as case studies and critiques thereof to argue that, according to the conventional scientific method, there is no controlled way to study survival evidence. In asserting that since replicability is a primary tenet of the scientific method and trance and other survival phenomena are not predictably reproducible, he proposed that a more naturalistic approach (i.e. case studies with alternate explanations explored at various points in the phenomena) to psychical research is needed. However, Schwartz (2002) devised double and triple blind studies to test mental (non-trance) mediums with proxy sitters. He determined whether the sitter could accept the information given by the medium and then codified and assessed the data on a scale ranging from “strongly specific” to “general.” In this way, he was able to quantify the data and compare it to random statements which were also quantified and use the results to argue in favor of survival. Additionally, Beischel (2015) designed quintuple-blind testing protocols for studies that control for alternative explanations that include: fraud, experimenter cueing, general information, rater bias and cold reading techniques. Based on her findings, she asserted that some mental mediums could demonstrate anomalous information reception (AIR), or the ability to report accurate and detailed information

about a deceased person without any prior knowledge of that person or the sitter, and that this supports the survival theory.

Psychical research thus forms the overall construct for this study of trance. Complicating this broader analysis is that phenomena within psychical research can be found inside and outside the context of religion and so are studied using both qualitative and quantitative research methods across disciplines as diverse as neuroscience, anthropology, physiology, and philosophy.

Chapter III

Evidence

Introduction

In this chapter, evidence from Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism will be presented to test this paper's hypothesis. It is theorised that of the three components (i.e. methodology, philosophy, and purpose) of trance examined in this study, a comparison of the methodologies would provide the greatest points of contact between these traditions, and that both the philosophy behind the use of trance and the purpose thereof would demonstrate points of divergence. This evidence will mainly be comprised of direct accounts from previous researchers using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

In this way, the two traditions will be compared, not to argue for or against their truth claims, but to find similarities and differences. In Religious Studies, neutrality is a constant concern, as even one of the ethnographic researchers who observed Tibetan Buddhism over many years eventually became a disciple to a lay oracle he was studying. His perspective may have tainted his objectivity, but this paper will still use his observations and analyse the possible effects of any bias in Chapter 4. Likewise, within Spiritualism some researchers were affirmed believers in the trance phenomena and their lack of neutrality will also be discussed later in this paper. However, this paper will endeavour to achieve procedural neutrality and objectivity and not advance any claim as real or not real.

Evidence

Methodology of Trance

By examining the trance patterns practices in Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism, this paper focuses on how trance mediums in each religion appear to achieve and maintain an altered state of consciousness associated with this phenomenon; what, if any, physiological changes in the trance mediums of each religion have been reported, and what are the mechanics and sequence of events involved in reputed trance practices.

The methodology of attaining and maintaining the purported trance state shows some similarities between Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism. However, even before the alleged trance state begins, the two religions differ as to whether any pre-trance preparations are required. Within Tibetan Buddhism, pilgrimages by the Nechung (or State Oracle) are believed to be essential before annual and major ceremonies.³² Purification by bathing is also considered to be an important preparation practice for the Nechung.³³ In addition, meditation and fasting³⁴ for up to several days are thought to be a requirement prior to major ceremonies.³⁵ On a related note, it is believed that protective deities will only choose oracles if they lead an absolutely blameless life,³⁶ but within Spiritualism, none of these requirements are seen as essential. Finally, celibacy does not seem to be a required characteristic of mediums in either Tibetan Buddhism or Spiritualism. While the State Oracle and several other high-ranking oracle-priests take a vow of celibacy, the vast majority of Tibetan lay oracles marry.³⁷

According to the evidence gathered from both traditions, there is a rough sequence of events that signal the putative onset and deepening of the trance state as well as the arrival of an entrancing spirit. It is believed that Buddhist oracles must make invocations and offerings to the gods as a way to promote their arrival.³⁸ Accounts emphasize that as the deity makes their presence felt, the oracle undergoes physical changes, often wrathful, which may involve dramatic radical changes in their physiognomy, voice, and comportment.³⁹ These changes have

been described as including the widening of the oracle's eyes and the disappearance of their irises,⁴⁰ reddening of the face, an appearance of a pained anguish, foaming of the mouth,⁴¹ sweating,⁴² gasping, attempts at jumping, and flailing about. Other accounts assert that the oracle may also yawn, snort, hiccup, laugh loudly, and sneeze which are all considered to be signs that the state of entrancement is deepening.⁴³ Convulsions, seizures, and shaking are the most common characteristic of the trance state as described within Tibetan Buddhism,⁴⁴ however none of these or the aforementioned changes are present in accounts provided by Spiritualism. This may be because Spiritualist mediums are usually sitting instead of standing. In place of the hyperactivity observed in the trance states of Buddhist oracles, a passive state of reduced physical activity is practiced among Spiritualist mediums. As evidence of this physiological passivity, it is reported that Spiritualist medium Leonora Piper took 6 minutes to drop into trance. Her breathing slowed from 20 breaths a minute to fewer than 10 and her pulse fell from 84 to 70 beats per minute.⁴⁵

Advocates assert that Buddhist oracles can embody either fierce or compassionate deities⁴⁶ and they demonstrate different behavior (comparatively quiet or will fall into a heavy fit.⁴⁷) depending on whether the deity is placid or wrathful. If embodied by a wrathful deity, the oracle will purportedly speak with a commanding voice, impatiently demanding obedience, and sometimes hurling insults at those present.⁴⁸ Similarly, it is believed that Spiritualist trance mediums are described as exhibiting the voice and mannerisms of their entrancing spirit. A Leonora Piper sitting is described as having a remarkable change in her voice as it allegedly became unmistakably identical in tone to the one that the spirit had while he was alive. In another Leonora Piper sitting, her mannerisms, to include twiddling her fingers as if twirling a mustache, supposedly matched those the entrancing spirit displayed when he was alive. In

addition, the contemporary Spiritualist trance healing medium known as “John of God” routinely exhibits changes in his manner, stance, and speech while appearing entranced.⁴⁹ Another differing methodological characteristic is the evidence that shows in Tibetan Buddhism both zoomorphic⁵⁰ (animal) and anthropomorphic⁵¹ (human) forms can allegedly entrance oracles, so that Buddhist oracles may growl, snap, and growl like animals.⁵² Conversely, Spiritualist mediums claim to be entranced by only human spirits.

Glossolalia⁵³ (or more commonly referred to as “speaking in tongues”) and xenolalia are trance phenomena worthy of consideration in Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism. Glossolalia is the phenomenon in which people appear to speak in unknown languages and Buddhist oracles at times speak in a language unknown to all present, however; this phenomenon is not claimed in Spiritualism. Xenolalia is the ability to speak a language that the speaker did not previously know. This phenomena is allegedly practiced in both Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism when foreign languages are spoken which only a few people present know.⁵⁴ We have an account from September 6, 1888, in which L. Rogers Rich, an artist, had a sitting with Spiritualist medium Leonora Piper and he was at once addressed in French by an entranced Piper, a language she did not know, and afterward had a lengthy conversation in French. In a second sitting, a month later, an entranced Piper is described as telling Rich that his deceased niece was at his side. To test her, Rich asked the niece, who had lived all her life in France, for his name in French, to which Piper accurately relayed “Thamas Rowghearce Reach” entirely in the French alphabet.⁵⁵

Additionally, descriptions of the use of artifacts and feats of strength are methodological characteristics of trance described within Tibetan Buddhism, but not within Spiritualism. While entranced, Tibetan oracles are observed to pound their chest with a large sword or wave threateningly at the audience. At other times, the lay oracle moves among those assembled and

lightly touches them with it. It has also been reported that oracles pierce their bodies with a sword⁵⁶ and then remove it to show no sign of injury.⁵⁷ Lay oracles allegedly can bend the swords into a U-form⁵⁸ or twist⁵⁹ them into what is termed the “knotted thunderbolt” which become a prized possession that is hung above doorways and thought to ward off demonic influence.⁶⁰ In addition, lay oracles have been described as immersing their hands in boiling oil or swallow fire⁶¹ or live coals⁶² without harm. Because of these alleged superhuman powers, lay oracles are held in awe⁶³ and feared.⁶⁴ However, Buddhists believe that the ability to perform these feats without the mind of compassion is the sign of a *tirthika* (or non-Buddhist) or one possessed by some powerful demon.⁶⁵

Buddhist oracles are unique in that they employ a significant number of artifacts during their entrancement. Their attire and paraphernalia make them appear similar to the traditional image of the deity that is believed to entrance them.⁶⁶ Artifacts include a ritual bronze thunderbolt, prayer beads, a metal extraction pipe for sucking out poison, a ritual dagger, and a large circular mirror that is placed on their chest.⁶⁷ Weapons include long swords, knives, bow and arrows, and a 5 foot lance that are carried when oracles becomes entranced by belligerent deities.⁶⁸ In addition, they wear an elaborate boot to helmet ceremonial costume that consists of several layers of clothing topped by a highly ornate robe of golden silk brocade which can weigh up to 60 lbs. and requires two assistants to place on the entranced oracle.⁶⁹ A crowning headdress that contains symbols from Buddhist philosophy including the five families of the Buddha and the five elements of air, water, earth, fire and space is the final most important item of the costume and it is put on last.⁷⁰

According to the practices of Tibetan Buddhism, there are several ways to induce the trance state including dancing and music.⁷¹ It is thought that drumming facilitates trance⁷² and

invokes the deities,⁷³ so drums are the most common musical instrument within Buddhist ceremonies.⁷⁴ It is also believed that drums control all the unruly spirits of the underworld who are a source of disturbance for humans.⁷⁵ The only parallel to this within Spiritualism is the use of singing in Spiritualist séances.

However, both traditions do display limited similarities in other areas related to methodology. Concerning the physical toil the trance state can sometimes take on the medium, it was observed that Spiritualist medium Gladys Osbourne Leonard “could barely stumble out of the room”⁷⁶ after her apparent trance sessions and similar fatigue was witnessed among Buddhist oracles. In fact, most of them are said to be short-lived⁷⁷ especially those oracles who embody wrathful deities.⁷⁸ Despite the great physical strain associated with trance, longevity among Spiritualist mediums does not appear to be affected as Leonora Piper lived for 93 years and Gladys Osborne Leonard 86. Both Buddhist oracles⁷⁹ and Spiritualist mediums also experience some reputed amnesia of their trance state. In addition, it is shown that both Buddhist oracles and Spiritualist mediums claim little or no memory of what transpired during their trance state.

Philosophy of Trance

The philosophy, or the beliefs that underpin and frame the use of trance, demonstrates stark differences between Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism. These represent the “who” or “what” that is purportedly speaking through the medium and no doubt stem from the distinct variances between these traditions related to their concepts of the soul, the afterlife, and the whether mediums are born or made.

Although Buddhist philosophy rejects the reality of the soul and its immortality,⁸⁰ lay oracles do not necessarily agree.⁸¹ In rural areas of Tibet, it is believed that the soul can wander

from the body and get lost so lay oracles must perform soul retrievals.⁸² Lay people within these regions believe in soul loss⁸³ such as demons carrying it away⁸⁴ and the validity of soul retrieval rituals to rescue such souls.⁸⁵ Lay oracles are therefore considered by Buddhist ecclesiastical authorities to be Bon not Buddhist.⁸⁶

Spiritualism and Tibetan Buddhism also differ on the issue of whether mediums are born (i.e. mediumship is an ability possessed to only certain individuals) or made (i.e. anyone can be trained to develop mediumship skills). It is believed that the lineage of the State Oracles in Tibetan Buddhism is “nearly all hereditary”⁸⁷ from both paternal and maternal ancestors with many lineages considered to be “many generations old,”⁸⁸ in one case there has been a lineage through “13 continual generations.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, when asked how accurate the State Oracles were, the Dalai Lama replied that several factors are involved, but mediums have some differences from birth in their body condition.⁹⁰ This is not to say that the training of oracles is not taken seriously as their authority is gained by answering questions and demonstrating strength in various tests. State Oracles undergo training in meditation by ordinary monks for several years before they perform trance,⁹¹ and some lay oracles are taught by the spirits⁹² and even practice in graveyards to strengthen their grasp on the deities.⁹³ The Nechung Oracle meets and tests new State Oracles⁹⁴ while both are in trance, but lay oracles generally have no such authentication process except an acceptance by the local people they serve.

Spiritualist tradition however does not hold that mediumship is hereditary. Prominent trance mediums such as Gladys Osbourne Leonard and Leonora Piper did not have children or grandchildren who displayed any mediumship ability and the legitimacy of a Spiritualist trance medium is not determined by their lineage but by their evidential nature of their trance phenomena. In an effort to quantify and authenticate Gladys Osbourne Leonard’s trance

mediumship (admittedly not a fully objective goal), Nora Sedgwick, the widow of the first President of the Society for Psychical Research, evaluated 532 statements from the trances of Leonard, with the aim of finding out how many hit the mark. While it must be recognized that this data does not meet scholarly standards and it was also collected and interpreted by an advocate, it still merits consideration, as it expresses the emerging agreement of Spiritualism regarding trance. In Sedgwick's estimation, 92 could be classed as correct; 100 approximately correct; 204 complete failures; 40 nearly complete failures; and 96 dubious. Putting the first two groups together, Mrs. Sedgwick concluded that 36% of Leonard's trance statements were approximately successful, a rate that she asserted was far more than chance.⁹⁵ James Hyslop of the American Society for Psychical Research made similar statistical calculations regarding the communications through trance medium Mrs. Piper. He classed 152 as true, 37 as indeterminate and 16 as false. Of the 927 factors comprising these incidents, he classed 717 as true, 167 as indeterminate and 43 as false. By this account, he estimated the accuracy of her entranced statements over her career (an alleged accuracy 77% over 40 years of researched work).⁹⁶ Together, Sedgwick and Hyslop agreed that a percentage-based analysis served as a form of evidence for the trance claims of Spiritualism.

Another detailing and identifying factor, stigmata, was purportedly involved in evidential trance session with Spiritualist trance medium Mrs. Northage. Mr. J. C. Flye reported that a young soldier who passed over in the war took control of an entranced Mrs. Northage and spoke about the cause of his death. One of the peculiarities of his passing was that he was wounded by a bullet in his hand. As Mrs. Northage was regaining consciousness, one account states that witnesses were astonished to find that the bullet wounds had produced clear marks on Mrs. Northage's hand in the exact place where the soldier was struck.⁹⁷ Although stigmata was not

observed amongst the oracles of Tibetan Buddhism, four scholars cryptically reference the phenomena in Buddhism.⁹⁸

For lay people in the Tibetan region, there is a continuum between life and death and the living and the dead that is similar to Spiritualist beliefs. To them, the entire world is alive with spirits that people communicate and interact with,⁹⁹ so when the Buddhist oracle calls upon the deities and spirits, it is believed that he does not beckon them from a heavenly realm separate from earth.¹⁰⁰ This animism is not part of traditional Buddhism structure though and reflects indigenous Bon beliefs and traditions that predate the Buddhist cultural patrimony.¹⁰¹

Consequently, many of the deities and spirits that lay oracles interact with originally belonged in the Bon pantheon.¹⁰² Two major principles within Spiritualism are “The Communion of Spirits” and “The Continuous Existence of the Human Soul” and they outline a similar belief system in which the world of the “living” and the world of the “dead” are in close contact. Spiritualists believe that knowledge and evidence of the soul’s continual existence has a therapeutic effect as the founder of the Society for Psychical Research and author of *Survival of the Personality*, Frederik Myers wrote, “The realization that life is eternal can heal the deepest wounds of the spirit.”

Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism have very different philosophical frameworks pertaining to what happens to individuals after the death of their physical bodies. Tibetan Buddhism is more notable than the other sects of Buddhism for the attention it gives to the after-death experience. Books such as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*¹⁰³ describe the journey of one’s consciousness after death and the period before its next incarnation. Nonetheless, there is no philosophical basis in Tibetan Buddhism to support the belief that someone in between incarnations would communicate with the “living.” According to Buddhists, the “who” or “what”

allegedly speaking through oracles are deities, not the souls of the dead, and it is not philosophically necessary for them to offer evidence that can specifically identify themselves. However, “The Communion of Spirits” is one of the seven principles of Spiritualism. Many Spiritualists consider this to be the key philosophical principle because it distinguishes Spiritualism from other religions and is demonstrated during their worship services. Spiritualists therefore consider spirit communication, either through trance or another method, to be a sacred expression of their religious philosophy and believe it is most genuine when it is detailed and so evidential that it identifies the spirit communicator. Therefore, Spiritualism relies on evidence that is detailed and verifiable (i.e. evidential) to demonstrate communication between the “living” and the (identifiable) “dead.”

Other philosophical differences which frame the purpose of trance include Spiritualism being monotheistic while Tibetan Buddhism is nontheistic. Despite this, there is a hierarchy of gods who ostensibly entrance Buddhist oracles and a hierarchy of oracles based on who entrances them.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the Tibetan language reflects these differences in that there are different terms for the oracles based on who in the hierarchy of gods appears to entrance them.¹⁰⁵ Gods are seen as superior to goddesses and a god will in most cases entrance a man, while women will reputedly be entranced by a goddess.¹⁰⁶ Within Spiritualism, it is believed that entrancing entities are not deities, and in some cases it has been suggested that the entrancing spirits themselves may sometimes be entranced by other “higher” spirits.¹⁰⁷

Still another difference is that within Spiritualism trance mediums are sometimes apparently simultaneously entranced by multiple entities. Observers report that Leonora Piper seemed to have two, and sometimes three, different spirits communicating through her at the same time. Dr. Richard Hodgson of the Society for Psychical Research stated in a report that he

had many times witnessed a spirit communicator speaking through an entranced Mrs. Piper while at the same time her hand was writing a message about a totally different subject to himself.¹⁰⁸

On one occasion, he described both of Piper's hands were writing and a voice was speaking through her – apparently three spirits communicating at the same time on different subjects.¹⁰⁹

One philosophical commonality between Buddhist oracles and Spiritualist trance mediums appears to be the use of “helping spirits.” Within Tibetan Buddhism, it is thought that these spirits prevent demonic entities from interfering in the trance ceremony, protect the oracle,¹¹⁰ and collaborate with the chief entrancing deities and help them to accomplish their mission.¹¹¹ It is believed that harmful spirits are always present¹¹² during healings who can create obstacles, ruin the ritual, produce more pain and suffering to the patient or even enter the oracle's body which is why various deities protectively surround the body.¹¹³ Within Tibetan Buddhism, helping spirits can allegedly take the form of eagles, owls, bears, wolves, tigers and foxes,¹¹⁴ whereas in Spiritualism, they are referred to as “gate keepers” and allegedly take the form of human spirits, perhaps Native Americans or even children.

Purpose of Trance

The purpose, or function (i.e. the “when” or “why”), of trance within Tibetan Buddhism bears at least some commonality to trance within Spiritualism. It is observed that both claim to utilize trance for healing and, to a limited degree, advice, but only Spiritualist mediums deliberately seek to provide comfort to the bereaved and wish to give an opportunity for them to have communion with their deceased loved ones.

When utilized to provide advice, Buddhist oracles seek to offer pragmatic, apotropaic and clairvoyant assistance to individuals, the community, and the state at large.¹¹⁵ The Dalai Lama

has an annual meeting with 3 State Oracles, one-after-another, to seek guidance on state matters for the upcoming year.¹¹⁶ Questions are also posed to the entranced Nechung concerning administrative policies of the Tibetan government, health conditions of high-ranking government officials, and the judgements of lawsuits.¹¹⁷ Although the State Oracle's advice is considered valid, such as on March 17, 1959, when it purportedly gave the Dalai Lama precise instructions on the route he should take to escape the Chinese invasion of Tibet,¹¹⁸ there are instances to the contrary such as when the Nechung Oracle was dismissed from his office in 1904 after falsely predicting Tibetan victory against the British Expeditionary Force. However, this failure was blamed on demonic possession or a pernicious spirit pretending to be the intended deity.¹¹⁹ To Buddhists, lay oracles help ordinary people find solutions to day-to-day problems¹²⁰ including personal crises such as family problems, wealth and love issues, or for communal concerns such as unsolved crimes and legal matters.¹²¹ It is said that lay mediums function as a psychotherapist diagnosing and treating spiritual, psychological and interpersonal problems.¹²² This differs from Spiritualism in that uplifting messages of philosophy such as prayers and the homily within Spiritualist worship services are allegedly given under the supposed influence of discarnate entities in a light trance, but personal advice is rarely given in Spiritualist trance sessions.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the main purpose of lay oracles is to cure disease¹²³ because in rural areas clergy and professional medical professionals are far away.¹²⁴ Unlike Western "allopathic" medicine, which focuses on individual symptoms, lay healing rituals are performed to restore balance and harmony in the individual's total life situation.¹²⁵ It is believed that many spirits disrupt the normal flow of existence and cause illnesses¹²⁶ and lay oracles will often be embodied by different deities as the need for specialized healing requires.¹²⁷ This roughly

mirrors the practice of trance used for healing in Spiritualism which reputedly employs a special spirit who may have been doctors while they were alive.

However a difference is that Buddhist oracles believe that illnesses are both natural and spirit-caused,¹²⁸ while Spiritualists do not believe that disease is caused by spirits. Based on the belief in the interconnectedness of all things (or *pratityasamutpada*),¹²⁹ healing by Buddhist oracles extends far beyond the matter of individual illness. Oracles restore harmony to the patient by divining the reason for the illness, discovering the spirit responsible for the illness, and determining the method of dealing with the disease causing entity.¹³⁰ The sick person is not so much cured as rescued from a spirit.¹³¹ Also according to this belief, any illnesses in livestock might have a cause in their owner's family.

Thus for the Buddhist oracles, their practice involves spiritual extraction and exorcism.¹³² These are often all night dramatic affairs with the patient as well as the healer going into apparent trance.¹³³ First, the entranced oracle speaks to the patient who is also possessed asking, "Who are you?" and "Why are you bothering this person?"¹³⁴ The oracle can then turn violent, seeking to force the spirit out of the patient. Patients scream out in pain¹³⁵ as the oracle (or their possessing deity) painfully strikes,¹³⁶ bites,¹³⁷ or sucks¹³⁸ their bodies in an effort to expel the evil spirit that is causing their illness. While healing can be a purpose of trance in Spiritualism, the patient does not undergo pain even in the case of when a diseased humerus bone was removed in front of hundreds of witnesses.¹³⁹ Both Buddhist oracles and Spiritualist trance mediums claim to diagnose illnesses through clairvoyance¹⁴⁰ and prescribe often herbal-based medicines.¹⁴¹

In this chapter, evidence from Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism was tested against the hypothesis that of the three components (i.e. methodology, philosophy, and purpose) of trance

examined in this study, a comparison of the methodologies would provide the greatest points of contact between these traditions, and that both the philosophy behind the use of trance and the purpose thereof would demonstrate points of divergence. Evidence pertaining to the methodology of trance included data explaining how mediums in each tradition are described as achieving and maintaining an altered state of consciousness associated with the phenomena, any reported physiological changes observed in the mediums, and what mechanics and sequences of events were reportedly involved. Overall, there were commonalities, and some differences, between Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism in regard to methodology. Evidence pertaining to the philosophy, or the beliefs that underpin and frame the use of trance, reveals obvious contrasts between the two traditions. These include descriptions that make claims about the “who” or “what” that is purportedly speaking through the medium. In this case, there were far more differences than commonalities between the two traditions. Finally, evidence pertaining to the purpose, or function (i.e. the “when” or “why”), of trance within Tibetan Buddhism did display some similarities, but also some differences to that found in Spiritualism.

Chapter IV

Analysis and Discussion

Introduction

This study theorized that of the three components (i.e. methodology, philosophy, and purpose) of trance examined, a comparison of the methodologies would provide the greatest points of contact between these traditions, and that both the philosophy behind the use of trance and the purpose thereof would demonstrate points of divergence. Overall, the evidence uncovered in this study did support this hypothesis. The evidence examined in this study also raises as many questions as it answers and at times requires consulting appropriate theories of religion. In addition, an analysis of this study's evidence reveals unexpected findings, themes, and deficiencies.

Trance purports to represent not only a complex psychospiritual¹⁴² (defined as “a blending of the mind with spirituality”) experience, but also a continuum of related experiences. Data on trance can come from disciplines as diverse as neuroscience, neurotheology,¹⁴³ psychology, religion, and anthropology and so trance data, such as that uncovered within this study, can be interpreted through multiple lenses each representing a different field of research. In addition, trance allegedly involves activities which deviate from a normal waking consciousness in which the mind employs logical and critical thinking by moving into an altered state of consciousness in which the subconscious mind, the seat of imagination, is more prominent. This is important because the realm of the subconscious mind is subjective and blurs expected boundaries of reality. The analysis of some of this study's evidence will go into greater depth on these topics.

Unexpected Findings

An unexpected finding was the frequency and duration that some researchers reported of healing sessions done by Buddhist lay oracles and the disparity of experiences between the State Oracles and lay oracles within Tibetan Buddhism. The former were entranced only several times a year, while lay oracle might perform around 30 minor healing rituals daily each taking 5-10 minutes each.¹⁴⁴ The researchers cited had spent many years studying trance within Tibetan Buddhism, yet no speculation was offered into this disparity or the physical toil on the oracles. Besides serving different needs, was the alleged trance of the State Oracles more physically exhausting or did it require more preparation compared to trance sessions done by Buddhist lay oracles? No answered were given and no such disparity was observed in Spiritualism.

Other unexpected findings of this study include the healing theatrics and lack of personal responsibility in Tibetan Buddhism. The descriptions of exorcism portray the aggressive (yet psychotherapeutic¹⁴⁵) treatment of patients by the entranced healer who acts in ways beyond the bounds of traditional healing techniques. However, personal accountability by the healer for their actions seems minimized because it was accepted that it wasn't the healer yelling at and striking the patient, but the entrancing goddess yelling at and striking the entity possessing the patient and causing the illness.¹⁴⁶ In fact, the violence shown by the healer to the patient is actually considered by adherents as a helpful blessing from the goddess.¹⁴⁷

Although similarities were found in each tradition's methodology, the evidence did demonstrate different physical changes that were described within the trance mediums of Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism, and these reflected differences in attaining and maintaining the altered state of consciousness thought to be necessary for trance. Both hyperactive and passive

states were depicted in the data, the former in Tibetan Buddhism and the later in Spiritualism. Although neither tradition uses drugs to facilitate trance, there are stimulants which activate the nervous system and produce a hyperactive state or with depressants which reduce awareness of external stimuli, slow body functions, and decrease overt behavior and produce a passive state. Tibetan Buddhism contrasts with Spiritualism with its use of (or reliance on) loud rhythmic music and dance to facilitate the reported trance states. The opposing states of hyperactivity and passivity as observed in mediums of both traditions in this study seem to support the notion expressed in the literature that altered states of consciousness is not limited to a singular physical state.

The most unexpected finding of this study though is the sacredness, veneration, and power that Tibetan Buddhism gives its oracles. In line with the functionalist theory of religion advanced by Emile Durkheim,¹⁴⁸ it can be argued that entranced oracles within Tibetan Buddhism become a sacred object (or at least a tool for the sacred), assume a collective veneration, and are responsible for the adherence to social order. In other religions, sacred objects (or relics) such as the Shroud of Turin and the black stone of Mecca are believed to have divine properties, sense of reverence and awe, and special power. Bell (1992) argues that rituals are concerned with power and from this it can be reasoned that the trance rituals give the oracles their power. Also, imbuing rituals with sanctity seems critical for their success in promoting long-term solidarity¹⁴⁹ and according to Durkheim (1995), collective veneration of the sacred (in this case the oracle) is at the center of social order.

Themes

Several themes are observed in the evidence relating to methodology. For example, trance phenomena within both Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism sheds light on the social, not the individual, aspect of religion. Whereas religion, according to sociologist Max Weber, creates societies and influences cultures by molding beliefs,¹⁵⁰ the functionalist theory of religion holds that religion isn't an addition to ordinary life, it is the basis for society and is viewed within the context of the entire society and influences the thinking and behavior of its members.

In addition, the methodology observed in Tibetan Buddhism seem to be highly ritualized. In trance events that are witnessed by a great many people, such as those with the Nechung (or State Oracle), appearance takes on great importance as the attire and regalia seem a necessary part of the experience. Their use signaled the stages of trance to audience members and served as a visual reminder of the mythology of their belief. The loud noises of the musical instruments and the wild movements of the oracle seem to suggest an emphasis on style over substance for the average witness to the phenomena. If these public ceremonies of the State Oracle were not so flamboyant, would they be as widely attended? Does the visual and audible nature of these ceremonies relate to the benefit received by the average witness? None of the authors cited speculated on these questions. This emphasis on appearance is not a theme observed in Spiritualist trance events. Instead of a show-like atmosphere, importance is commonly placed on specific evidence allegedly proving the identity of the entrancing spirit or, less often, receiving inspiring philosophical truths.

A related theme seems to be the effect of witnessing or participating in trance rituals. According to Durkheim (1995), participation in public trance rituals binds Tibetan Buddhists to their society and allows them an escape from ordinary life into the higher realms of existence. Rituals (defined as a set of collective behaviors that mirror group membership and group

transcendence) to include trance rituals create an emotional arousal, or “collective effervescence,” and lead to a sense of group solidarity. It is important to note that this effervescence is collective, not individual, as ritual is a powerful affirmation of belonging to or identity with the community of believers. Indeed, Durkheim argued “that ritual is the fundamental mechanism that holds a society together.”¹⁵¹

Among Buddhists, witnessing a ceremony of the Nechung (or State Oracle) even in the far back of a large crowd is considered a great blessing. In these events, few individuals receive an individual message or healing. To believers, merely attending the trance event is an awe-inspiring connection to their religion and a chance to renew faith and hope in their belief system. This explains why so many Tibetan Buddhists attend the annual public appearances of the Nechung. Indeed, Stark and Finke (2000) found that increased belief in religious rituals leads to more participation in them. The practice of ritual produces two primary outcomes: belief and belonging.¹⁵² Moreover, although any lasting effects of witnessing trance phenomena is not mentioned in the literature and cannot be measured, the perceived sacred nature of these events might be seen that those who attended are uplifted, inspired, and reconnected to what is perceived as sacred whether it be in Tibetan Buddhism or Spiritualism. Also, the non-tangible benefit of attending these trance events might be similar to attending worship services in another faith tradition, as it is a public act which deliberately reinforces the tradition's belief system.

Finally, witnessing or participating in these rituals is a multi-sensory experience. Vibrations caused by the loud percussion instruments such as gongs, drums, and trumpets, blast the senses and reverberate through the entire body. They can also be terrifying and painful in the case of some patients of lay oracles. Therefore, witnessing the phenomena of trance shares some of the religious experience as described by William James in his 1902 *Varieties of Religious*

Experiences and Rudolf Otto's personal encounter with the holy in his 1923 *The Idea of the Holy*.

Deficiencies

No interpretation of the evidence would be complete without addressing its arguable lack of neutrality. Possibilities of bias can be seen amongst the cited authors in both faith traditions. As mentioned in Chapter 3, one of the ethnographic researchers extensively cited in this study became a disciple of the Tibetan Buddhist lay oracle he was studying, and several researchers into trance within Spiritualism were outspoken believers in the phenomena. This may have produced a variation of the well-studied "sheep-goat effect"¹⁵³ which refers to the influence of one's belief in the existence of psi (i.a. parapsychological or psychic) phenomena to one's observing alleged occurrences of that phenomena. Lawrence (1993) echoes this in stating that selective perception plays a role in the interpretation of experiences. However, none of these researchers questioned their bias or advocacy. Also, in the case of the allegedly entranced Buddhist lay oracles "sucking illnesses" from patients through a metal straw and then displaying bits of putrid meat as proof of their success, some of the cited authors acknowledged that oracles engaged in a deft sleight of hand. But the ethnographer who eventually became the disciple to the lay oracle he was researching did not explore this further besides stating that healing by Buddhist oracles is dependent on faith in the phenomena,¹⁵⁴ and nowhere in his works was a speculation of how *his* faith might have impacted his work. Since the advent of Modern Spiritualism in 1848, frauds purporting to be Spiritualist trance mediums have been caught red-handed even after deceiving many researchers who believed in the validity of their phenomena. The scope and limitation of this study do not allow a greater exploration of this lack of neutrality

and its possible influence on the data, but it is essential to recognize the bias of advocates who are involved in both describing and interpreting the phenomena which are here under consideration.

Related to the “sheep and goats effect” are the many preliminary steps to be purportedly taken by Buddhist State Oracles. It is believed that pilgrimages, purification through bathing, meditation, fasting, and perhaps celibacy are necessary, but these are not dissimilar to ritual purification in other religions, for example the compulsory washing prior to Islamic prayer. But in the case of trance, this raises the question of whether these are preliminary steps involved in the trance state or whether they are merely psychosomatic. Another question is whether the requirement that State Oracles lead a “blameless life” is a by-product of being an oracle or a requirement to being one. The relationship between belief in trance phenomena and the alleged production of it is closely related.

One noteworthy observation raised by the evidence was that of the works cited within this paper, researchers investigating trance by Buddhist lay oracles did not make a documented attempt to validate claims of healing or medical clairvoyance, so it is unknown whether the “healing” performed by the lay oracles was effective. Also, among the most objective evidence seen in this study were the glossolalia, xenolalia, and feats of strength demonstrated by the entranced mediums. These represent chances to verify the claims and expand the research in an unbiased manner, yet these opportunities were not pursued. Furthermore of the exorcisms allegedly performed by the Buddhist oracles, there was no evidence in the works cited that the author or the oracle tried to identify the possessing entity even though it was acknowledged that spirits of the dead have a direct effect on the living and cause illnesses and even death to individuals they knew when before their death.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, the reports cited showed that

neither the patients nor the observers of the purported exorcism were curious about the identity of the possessing spirit. The communication within a purported exorcism consisted of telling the spirit to take refuge in the Buddha, give up their harmful ways,¹⁵⁶ and find a rebirth¹⁵⁷ even threatening violence if these instructions were not immediately obeyed.¹⁵⁸

Spiritualism is different, however. When it was formally organized into nationwide groups in the United States and the United Kingdom in 1893 and 1901 respectively,¹⁵⁹ practitioners of Spiritualism felt compelled to provide as convincing evidence as possible in support of their claims of after-death communication. They adhered to the Rationalist (or the Rational Choice) Theory of religion which places a greater reliance on reason, logic, and evidence as the basis for religious truth. Against a backdrop of disbelief (even today it is reported that only 15% per cent of the population in the United States believes in trance¹⁶⁰), practitioners and adherents sought a standard of proof that would convince non-believers of the validity of the claims by Gladys Osborne Leonard, Leonora Piper, and other Spiritualist mediums, in order to convince a doubting public of the veracity of the phenomena. Therefore, it is unsurprising that trance phenomena within Buddhism is so non-evidential compared to the emphasis on trance evidence within Spiritualism.

Still another question raised by this study is not related to the evidence but rather the researchers. Neither those investigating Tibetan Buddhism nor those examining Spiritualism displayed a broad understanding of trance in their writings and integrated this knowledge into their observations. Investigations into trance within Spiritualism occurred before trance was researched by academic means, but it was more of a well-researched phenomenon by the time it was studied within Tibetan Buddhism. However, the authors cited failed to demonstrate an understanding of trance's relationship with altered states of consciousness, the conscious and

subconscious, and brain wave activity as outlined in Zinberg (1977), Krippner and Friedman (2010), and Walsh (1990). The authors cited in this study only documented the mechanical sequence of the trance phenomena they witnessed in Tibetan Buddhism without speculating what was going on in the mind and brain of the oracle. In this way, the evidence uncovered in this study does little to support the literature on trance.

An analysis of this study's evidence revealed unexpected findings, trends, and deficiencies. When examining the data against various theories of religion, trance rituals within Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism display patterns of separating the sacred from the profane in line with Mircea Eliade's definition of religion, that is a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things or things that are set apart and forbidden."¹⁶¹ Not only is witnessing and participating in trance rituals empowering, the trance mediums themselves are empowered as central figures who add to social cohesion. Therefore, trance is foremost a sacred, social binding phenomena.

Chapter V

Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Summary

Summary of the Study

This study examined points of comparison and contrast among the practice of trance within the religions of Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism. While the term “trance” can include a spectrum of phenomena (Walsh, 1990) that crosses many different fields of study, there are illuminating points of contact that merit consideration. Since few other studies have examined trance by looking across differing disciplines or religions, this thesis was applying the old adage of Max Muller, “He who knows only one religion, knows none.”¹⁶²

Seeking Mullerian insight, his study identified recurrent elements of trance in two traditions that are not often compared to each other. This study asked, despite their significant cultural differences, how do the methodologies, philosophy, and purpose of trance mediumship overlap Spiritualism and Tibetan Buddhism. Concerning methodology, this study sought to answer how trance mediums in each religion appear to achieve and maintain an altered state of consciousness associated with this phenomenon and what, if any, physiological changes in the trance mediums of each religion have been observed. Additionally, it sought answers to what are the mechanics and sequence of events involved in producing and maintaining the trance state. Concerning philosophy, this paper asked what are the beliefs that underpin and frame the use and actions of trance in each religion. Finally concerning purpose, this paper asked what function does trance serve within each religion.

Of the three components (i.e. methodology, philosophy, and purpose) of trance that were examined, it was theorized that methodologies would have the most (or only) overlap between Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism. On the other hand, this paper hypothesized that the “who” or “what” allegedly speaking through the trance medium, (i.e. the philosophical framework) and the “when” and “why” (i.e. the purpose of the trance) the medium was speaking, would not demonstrate as many, if any, similarities differences.

This study first reviewed the literature of previous studies. In doing so, it found that trance has been studied inside and outside religious contexts and the methods of research have been both qualitative and quantitative. Previous studies of trance within Tibetan Buddhism have been primarily ethnographic and qualitative while previous studies of trance within Spiritualism have included both qualitative and quantitative methods. This demonstrates not only the complexity of trance, but also a wide range of approaches to trance research which serves to both help and hinder ongoing research.

In testing its hypothesis, this study examined accounts of researchers who witnessed trance first-hand. There were limited accounts to draw upon and although these researchers were independent to one another, significant shortcomings of these studies will be discussed in the limitations section of this chapter. Despite this, there was ample data within the studies to compare trance within Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism.

Summary of the Findings

The findings of this study shed light on its research questions. This study confirmed that methodologies had overlap between Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism. It also verified that the philosophical framework (i.e. the “who” or “what” purportedly speaking through the trance

medium) had substantial dissimilarities. Finally, this study did find commonalities in the purpose (i.e. the “why” or “when” trance is utilized) of trance between the two religions.

The findings of this paper have a broader significance when viewed through the lenses of Functional theorists Emile Durkheim, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Max Weber. The Functionalist¹⁶³ theory of religion holds that religion contributes to social cohesion, order, and stability. According to Durkheim, religion, as a cultural system of behavior and practices, provides a comprehensive world view, drives society (not the other way around) and societies are the origin of religions. To him, religion is a collective experience that expresses collective realities and the purpose of rituals is to evoke, maintain, or create a group state.¹⁶⁴ Religion is thus very much a social phenomenon which gives meaning to life and is the source of all understanding. In line with Durkheim’s view of the sacred and the profane, this paper asserts that oracles when entranced become sacred objects that possess divine properties, a sense of reverence and awe, and special powers that contrast to the profane everyday world. Furthermore, their trance rituals possess a sanctity and power that binds the community together and promotes social order. Witnesses and participants to trance rituals in Tibetan Buddhism seem to demonstrate the dichotomy of the profane (i.e. their ordinary lives) and the sacred (i.e. trance rituals) and trance is the, or one of the, heretofore unstated unique and unifying element of Tibetan Buddhism (without which the religion would not exist). Therefore, identifying trance as the producer of what Durkheim calls “collective effervescence” within Tibetan Buddhism is a major significance of this study.

This paper’s findings also have a broader significance when viewed against Malinowski who asserts that religion performs a psychological function in helping people cope with physical and emotional stress. Within Tibetan Buddhism, healing rituals with lay oracles help individuals

cope with the stress of illnesses and uncertainty that would undermine social solidarity. As Malinowski outlines, people turn to religion when practical knowledge reaches its limits and as we see in the findings, people use the lay oracles to seek answers when their crops or animals stop providing milk.

Another broader significance of this paper is its opposition to Weber's notions of theodicy and soteriology. Weber finds theodicy,¹⁶⁵ or the question of why does (a good) God allow evil or suffering to exist in the world, everywhere and sees it as a social problem, based on the human need to explain puzzling aspects of the world.¹⁶⁶ However, theodicy is a notion that demonstrates a Western (or Judeo-Christian-Islamic) bias implying that there is a God and there is evil (two assumptions that are inherent in Western belief systems, but that are rejected by Tibetan Buddhists). To Buddhists, evil is not an inherent characteristic or as an external force and that one is responsible for one's actions because all actions of body, speech, and mind have karmic effects. Therefore, besides the physical cause of disease, bad karma can cause illnesses and the root causes of those illnesses must be identified and addressed. In addition, Buddhist lay oracles purportedly alleviate the suffering that occurs when the patient is afflicted by the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion and fails to recognize that they are interconnected to and interdependent on the world in which they live. The findings of this study demonstrate how directly opposed Tibetan Buddhism is to the dualistic world of the Abrahamic religions and Weber's theodicy and soteriology, or doctrine of salvation.

In addition to these areas of broader significance, this study's findings uncovered several themes, deficiencies, and unexpected findings. A broader significance of this study is that its findings included a theme that the benefit of trance appeared to have a social, rather than an individual, aspect. In both Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism, trance was a phenomena of

public groups not individuals in private. Increased numbers of witnesses and participants to trance events also did not seem to decrease the positive effect of the phenomena. While the purpose of trance was healing of individuals, this paper recognized trance to be a collective ritual with benefits for the community. Again, according to the Functionalist theory, religion is a collective experience in which the sacred is made real and this promotes a sense of collective consciousness and social belonging. Similarly for Proudfoot (1985), religion is primarily a cultural, public, accessible phenomena.¹⁶⁷ Verbit (1970) would content that the collective and public trance rituals within Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism are a key component of religiosity amongst believers. Thus, the social benefits of trance relate to a group, otherwise the trance healings by Tibetan lay oracles would be done in private one-on-one. Likewise, merely attending a crowded public trance ritual by the Tibetan State Oracle serves to strengthen the community and one's belonging to it.

Another finding of this study was the deficiencies in other trance research. Trance is common and complex phenomena that crosses many disciplines, but few researchers (to include the researchers cited in this study) extend their studies of trance outside their area of specialty. This results in many studies with a narrow focus and little referencing of studies outside their immediate research. For example, most of the researchers cited in this study did not explore aspects of trance outside of their immediate center of attention. Given that it is practiced in more than one tradition and that overlaps do exist, it is unfortunate that comparative approaches are not employed with greater frequency.

Another finding of this study was the lack of neutrality within trance research. This represents a "Catch-22" situation in that there are difficult circumstances that arise from mutually conflicting or dependent conditions. For example, being able to study the State and lay

oracles in detail and first-hand requires access, specific background knowledge in Tibetan Buddhism and possibly rare language skills. With such access, skills, and knowledge, researchers are so invested in Tibetan Buddhism that they may have biases and beliefs which could taint their research. This quandary was also witnessed in Spiritualism when most of the small number of researchers studying trance mediums became advocates for the phenomena and religion.

To see the wider importance of the findings of this paper related to bias, one has to go beyond the suspicions of partiality by the researchers cited in this study and consider the broader views on neutrality within social research. Subjectivity leads to partisanship and advocacy, so objectivity, which is research and its interpretation uninfluenced by any emotions, personal prejudices or pre-conceived ideas and judging a situation wholly on the evidence, has become a demanded aspect of social research. However, the notion of objectivity within Religious Studies has grown and it is argued that objectivity is technically not possible in qualitative social research. Even if personal feelings, preferences, and value judgments are not consciously superimposed, there are always subconsciously present and influencing the researcher. Therefore “pure” objectivity is impossible as there are residual interpretive systems from one’s subconscious normative view of the world that can even subtly bias them into thinking their view is *the* view.

Therefore, no researcher is or can be a *tabula rasa* (or “blank slate”¹⁶⁸). However these limitations can be countered by the researcher being reflective about their own biases and using proper methodologies. *Epoche* (a Greek term originally meaning “suspension of judgment,” but now known as “phenomenological reduction”) is a related notion and a term popularized by Edmund Husserl, a founder of phenomenology, that describes the act of suspending as much as one is possible about one’s judgment about the world and rather strictly analyze the experience.

However, this necessitates an awareness of one's biases and reflecting upon how they influence one's observation. In addition, Porpora (2006) argues that "methodological atheism,"¹⁶⁹ now taken for granted in the study of religion, is inappropriate compared to "methodological agnosticism" as a social constructionist form of bracketing.

Furthermore, a simple stating of the social facts or observations is impossible if one accepts that knowledge is context-specific. The aim in objectivity therefore is to be free from a biased interest in the subjects or outcome not from some impossible ability to observe and interpret free from all prior knowledge. Reflexivity about one's interpretations then becomes a feature of social research.

But researcher bias is only one influencing component within qualitative research. Alfred Schultz's¹⁷⁰ work in social research led researchers to add a second layer of interpretation in qualitative research, the first layer being the objects of study who as analyzing beings assign meaning to the world around them. Therefore, it is not fully complete that researchers limit their reflection on themselves, but they should also reflect on the object's bias. None of the sources cited in this study did that.

The researchers cited in this work, especially ethnographers Peters and Bellezza, are not without their possible defenders though. It can be argued that by embedding themselves so closely to their subjects they were able to offer a "thick description" of trance within Tibetan Buddhism. A "thick description"¹⁷¹ occurs when a researcher is embedded in the context that they are studying, is detailed ethnography that can provide a rich variety of relevant contexts including the ethnographer's own presence, and is supported by the belief that culture and behavior cannot be studied separately because they are intertwined.¹⁷² Related to this is Proudfoot (1985) who made the distinction between explanatory and descriptive reductionism in

that descriptive reductionism leads to hasty judgments that religious experience is either authentic or illusory, while explanatory reductionism uses interpretations to reach a “thick description.”¹⁷³ According to Proudfoot (1985: 184), people understand and identify their religious experiences in terms of the concepts and beliefs available to them. Proudfoot’s assertions are supported by Weber’s notion of *verstehen* (or understanding) which means a systematic interpretive process in which one observes and relates to another cultural group on their own terms and from their own point of view, rather than interpreting them in terms of the observer’s own culture.¹⁷⁴ However, even though William James studied religious experience before the notion of “thick description” was formulated, he asserted that one cannot understand the religious experience of others. Therefore, a broader significance of this study included noting that Peters and Bellezza provided a thick description of the trance phenomena in Tibetan Buddhism within the broader discussion of James, Weber, and Proudfoot.

Finally not only Durkheim and Malinowski, but also Otto would see significance within the findings of this study. As outlined in his 1923 work, *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto explained the *mysterios tremendum* which is a sense of terror, awe, and mystery in the presence of the sacred. As previously discussed, certain patients feel terror during their healing experience with the entranced lay oracle especially during exorcisms or painful healings. However, Proudfoot (1985) asserts there are both terrifying and comforting religious experiences.

Conclusion

Limitations of the study

Several limitations could be seen in this study. Most obvious was the fact that this study did not directly observe and report on trance. To do so was deemed outside the scope of this

study in relation to its time and resources, so instead it analyzed the accounts of other researchers who did. Even though this study was embarked on a largely unexplored comparison of trance across these religions, it must be acknowledged that another of its limitations is the sparse number of studies on trance within Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism that this study cited. With only a few sources to cite from, this study was fundamentally constrained. It is hoped that in the future additional studies will broaden the literature in this area.

Implications and relevance of the study

This study had the potential to uncover fresh insights into trance and to some extent it did so. It used a neglected point of investigation (i.e. comparing trance across different religious traditions) and focused on religions that embrace trance. In this respect, it specifically added to the body of knowledge on ritual and sociology in religion. It also found that Tibetan Buddhist trance healing rituals are visually and audibly flamboyant spectacles complete with over-the-top antics such as painfully sucking “diseased tissue” out of patients and slapping them to drive out demons add to the theater of the event. In noting that witnessing or participating in trance can be a multi-sensory and theatrical event, this study has relevance to the growing body of studies on religion and performance. This study’s research question and its findings can therefore be placed in a broader context of research and has practical overlap to other fields of study.

In pointing out that the physiological aspect of the trance medium’s altered state of consciousness had the characteristics of both hyperactive and passive states, this paper expands the knowledge of trance outside of religious contexts and is applicable to other fields of study. In doing so, it noted objective data that in further studies could be empirically measured.

Recommendations for future research

This study and its findings open up new possibilities for research into trance. It is recommended that the scope of future research include several new approaches.

It is recommended that there be additional studies which cross disciplines and/or compare trance in a religion to trance in a non-religious environment. These lines of additional research and researchers not thoroughly placing their study in the broader context of trance seems to be an undeveloped area of focus. Even if researchers do not cross disciplines in their studies, given the fact that trance is so ubiquitous, it is recommended that researchers consider more background investigation into how their study is related to trance elsewhere.

More studies should also continue to seek how trance (or altered states of consciousness) overlaps different religions or even separate varieties of shamanism. As we see in this study despite the influence of culture, commonalities as well as points of divergence can be seen in trance across different religions. Pentecostal religions which embrace the entrancement of the “Holy Spirit” represent prime opportunities for study as well as indigenous religions and Sufism. It is theorized that more areas of overlap can be discovered.

A final recommendation for future research includes more quantitative studies on trance within religious contexts. For example, increased technology has made it possible to easily record brain waves using an array of sensors in a helmet-type apparatus. Although it is unlikely the State Oracles who already wear a heavy ornamental helmet while entranced would wear one, but lay oracles might. Given the fact that several researchers over the course of many years have already developed close relationships to several of these oracles, having them wear such a device (even briefly) seems possible. The brain wave data from lay oracles could then be compared to that of other trance mediums. An additional apparatus, termed the “God helmet,”¹⁷⁵ could also

be used to link religious experience and any activity in the temporal lobes. Finally, more data can be acquired on the patients of lay oracles, before and after healing sessions by the oracle, to determine what if any physical changes, or healing, actually occurred.

Endnotes

¹ Schmidt and Huskinson, 2012: 4.

² Krippner (1972: 1) defines an ASC as a “mental state which can be subjectively recognized by an individual (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a difference in psychological functioning from the individual’s ‘normal’ alert waking state.” Instead of using OSC or ASC, Harner (1990) uses the terms “ordinary reality” (OR) and “non-ordinary reality” (NOR); the latter of which is accessed through a “shamanic state of consciousness.” See “shaman,” “possession,” and “trance” in Appendix I: The Definition of Terms.

³ Crapanzano, 2005: 8687.

⁴ The term “Tibetan” in this thesis will not refer to the political and administrative territory known as “Tibet” but rather pertain to Tibetan civilization and culture that has now spread across many political and national boundaries.

⁵ One of the central premises of academic learning about religion is that religions are internally diverse. See “Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States.” American Academy of Religion (AAR), 2010, The AAR Religion in Schools Task Force, Diane L. Moore, Chair.

⁶ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: vii. A lama (or *guru* in Sanskrit) is a highly respected teacher who has undergone extensive training. In Tibetan Buddhism, deceased lamas can be reborn in a tradition called “incarnate lamas.”

⁷ Peters, 2016: vii.

⁸ Bellezza, 2005: 2.

⁹ Peters, 2016: 44.

¹⁰ Peters, 2016: 3.

¹¹ The Tibetan term “*kuten-la*” (or *sku-tren*) means “the physical basis.” According to Tewari (1987: 141), the body of the medium becomes the “body support,” or the *sku-tren*, of the deity.

¹² Peter, 1978: 288.

¹³ Shen-Yu, 2010: 5.

¹⁴ Bellezza, 2005: 10.

¹⁵ Tewari, 1987: 140; Peter, 1978: 288; and Bellezza, 2005: 2.

¹⁶ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956: 432.

¹⁷ Peters, 2004: 304.

¹⁸ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956: 409

¹⁹ Peters, 2016: viii.

²⁰ Peters, 2004: 304.

²¹ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956: 425

²² The two major governing bodies of Spiritualism, the National Spiritualist Association of Churches in the USA and the Spiritualists’ National Union in the UK, list their principles as follows:

National Spiritualist Association of Churches

- 1) We believe in Infinite Intelligence.
- 2) We believe that the phenomena of Nature, both physical and spiritual, are the expression of Infinite Intelligence.
- 3) We affirm that a correct understanding of such expression and living in accordance therewith, constitute true religion.
- 4) We affirm that the existence and personal identity of the individual continue after the change called death.
- 5) We affirm that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism.
- 6) We believe that the highest morality is contained in the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”
- 7) We affirm the moral responsibility of individuals and that we make our own happiness or unhappiness as we obey or disobey Nature’s physical and spiritual laws.
- 8) We affirm that the doorway to reformation is never closed against any soul here or hereafter.
- 9) We affirm that the precepts of Prophecy and Healing are Divine attributes proven through Mediumship.

Spiritualists’ National Union

- 1) The Fatherhood of God
- 2) The Brotherhood of Man
- 3) The Communion of Spirits and the Ministry of Angels
- 4) The Continuous Existence of the Human Soul
- 5) Personal Responsibility

- 6) Compensation and Retribution Hereafter for all the Good and Evil Deeds done on Earth
 7) Eternal Progress open to every Human Soul

This slight difference in principles has very little impact within Spiritualism and no influence on this study.

²³ Targ, 2012: 180.

²⁴ Findlay, 1935: 339.

²⁵ Roney-Dougal, 2006: 193.

²⁶ Eliade, 1964: 64-65.

²⁷ Tewari, 1987: 141.

²⁸ According to the SPR (<https://www.spr.ac.uk/publications/journal-society-psychical-research> accessed June 28, 2018):

The Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in 1882 ‘to examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognized hypothesis.’ Since, 1884 the SPR has published its work in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (JSPR).

The *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (JSPR) has a long and illustrious history. It was first published in 1884 and is published quarterly every year. The JSPR provides a peer-reviewed forum for communication and critical debate for the community of scholars and interested parties involved and/or interested in the field of psychic, parapsychological or anomalous effects. It includes reports of current laboratory and fieldwork research, along with theoretical, methodological and historical papers that have a bearing on these topic areas.

REVIEW PROCESS

All submissions (i.e., both empirical research and research notes) will initially be assessed by the Editorial team for suitability for the Journal and appropriate formatting (e.g., APA). All submissions deemed suitable and correctly formatted will then typically be sent for anonymous peer review. The Editor will be responsible for collating the Reviewer’s comments and the final decision regarding acceptance or rejection of the submission. The Editor’s decision is final.

²⁹ Kelly, 2010: 256.

³⁰ Hudson, 2007: 152.

³¹ Zener cards were designed by and named after psychologist Karl Zener for experiments in extrasensory perception (ESP) conducted under the direction of J. B. Rhine at Duke University in the 1930s. They are a deck of cards with one of five different symbols (a circle, cross, wavy lines, square and star) on each one.

³² Bellezza, 2005: 69.

³³ Bellezza, 2005: 34.

³⁴ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 443 and Bellezza, 2005: 113.

³⁵ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 440.

³⁶ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 418.

³⁷ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 421.

³⁸ Bellezza, 2005: 7.

³⁹ Bellezza, 2005: 7.

⁴⁰ Bellezza, 2005: 7.

⁴¹ Bellezza, 2005: 7.

⁴² Bellezza, 2005: 7.

⁴³ Peters, 2016: 88.

⁴⁴ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 425 and Peters, 2004: 171 and 379.

⁴⁵ Blum, 2006: 303.

⁴⁶ Peters, 2016: 79.

⁴⁷ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 418.

⁴⁸ Peters, 2016: 6.

⁴⁹ Cumming and Leffler, 2007: xx.

⁵⁰ Bellezza, 2005: 7.

⁵¹ Bellezza, 2005: 24.

⁵² Peters, 2016: 86.

⁵³ For an understanding of glossolalia, see Goodman (1972).

⁵⁴ Bellezza, 2005: 7.

⁵⁵ Meilleur, 2014: 308.

⁵⁶ Bellezza, 2005: 24.

- ⁵⁷ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 440-441 and Rock, 1935: 477.
- ⁵⁸ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 434.
- ⁵⁹ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 425.
- ⁶⁰ Bell, 2003: 123-136 and Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 443.
- ⁶¹ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 443.
- ⁶² Peters 2004: 382 and 230.
- ⁶³ Bellezza, 2005: 6.
- ⁶⁴ Peters, 2004: 316.
- ⁶⁵ Sumegi, 2008: 88.
- ⁶⁶ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 410.
- ⁶⁷ Bellezza 2005: 23.
- ⁶⁸ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 414.
- ⁶⁹ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 411.
- ⁷⁰ Actually, it is the second to last item to be placed on the oracle as sometimes a scarf is tied over the mouth so that the spirit speaking through the oracle is not polluted.
- ⁷¹ Peters, 2004: 59.
- ⁷² Peters, 2004: 150.
- ⁷³ Bellezza, 2005: 81.
- ⁷⁴ Bellezza 2005: 33.
- ⁷⁵ Bellezza, 2005: 429.
- ⁷⁶ Meilleur, 2014: 165.
- ⁷⁷ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 450
- ⁷⁸ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 418.
- ⁷⁹ Peters, 2004: 122; Peters, 2016 85; Peters and Price-Williams, 1980, Bellezza, 2005: 7, and Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 439.
- ⁸⁰ Peters, 2016: 83.
- ⁸¹ Peters, 2016: 7.
- ⁸² Peters, 2016: 57.
- ⁸³ Peters, 2016: 58.
- ⁸⁴ Berglie, 1982: 4.
- ⁸⁵ Peters, 2016: 63.
- ⁸⁶ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 425.
- ⁸⁷ Bellezza, 2005: 19.
- ⁸⁸ Bellezza, 2005: 67.
- ⁸⁹ Bellezza, 2005: 19.
- ⁹⁰ Film, Charniak, 2011.
- ⁹¹ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 419.
- ⁹² Bellezza, 2005: 143.
- ⁹³ Bellezza, 2005: 113 and 70.
- ⁹⁴ Bellezza, 2005: 19-20.
- ⁹⁵ Meilleur, 2014: 77-78.
- ⁹⁶ Meilleur, 2014: 197-198.
- ⁹⁷ From a report sent to Two Worlds, December 9, 1938 as cited by MacDonald (2012: 45).
- ⁹⁸ Keith Taylor, John Whitmore, Ing-Britt Trankell, and Laura Summers have mentioned stigmata in their two works on Buddhism titled *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts* and *Facets of Power and its Limitations*. See Keith Taylor and John Whitmore: *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts. Southeast Asia Program*, Cornell University, 1985: p. 278 and Ing-Britt Trankell and Laura Summers: *Facets of Power and It's Limitations*, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University, 1998, p. 24.
- ⁹⁹ Peters, 2004: 380.
- ¹⁰⁰ Peters 2004 342.
- ¹⁰¹ Bellezza, 2005: 2 and Peters, 2004: 341.
- ¹⁰² Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: vii and 4
- ¹⁰³ According to Peters (2016: 183), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (or *The After-Death Experiences on the Bardo Plane*) is an 8th century text attributed to Padma Sambhava, who brought Buddhism to Tibet and is said to have conquered the deities “of the old shamanic faith” (or Bon) and converted them to be protectors of Buddhism (or *dharmapala* – See Definition of Terms).

¹⁰⁴ Peters, 2016: 41. Peters (2016: 79) further states that the Nechung Oracle and other monastic oracle priests are possessed by the highest ranking deities of the Buddhist pantheon most lay oracles are usually embodied by a lower class of deities associated with Bon shamanism.

¹⁰⁵ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 409.

¹⁰⁶ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 409.

¹⁰⁷ The spirit control known as “Ramadah,” speaking through Spiritualist medium Ursula Roberts, stated that a “higher” spirit (presumable ‘higher’ in consciousness) can entrance a spirit who is entrancing the medium or may directly entrance the medium themselves. This phenomena is also seen in Silver Birch, the spirit control of trance medium Maurice Barbanell.

¹⁰⁸ Meilleur, 2014: 68.

¹⁰⁹ Meilleur, 2014: 68.

¹¹⁰ Bellezza 2005: 15.

¹¹¹ Bellezza 2005: 15.

¹¹² Berglie (1983: 95) once witnessed an oracle hit a patient on the head three times to chase away demons.

¹¹³ Peters, 2016: 23.

¹¹⁴ Bellezza 2005: 7.

¹¹⁵ Bell, 2003: 134.

¹¹⁶ Film, Cherniak, 2011 and Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 424.

¹¹⁷ French, 2002: 48 and 296 and Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1996: 409.

¹¹⁸ See Dalai Lama (1991).

¹¹⁹ Bell, 2013:134.

¹²⁰ Peters 2016: 79.

¹²¹ Diamberger, 2005: 115, 116, and 139.

¹²² Peters 2004: 375.

¹²³ Bellezza, 2005: 73, 107, and 5; Peters (2004); and Ekvall, 1964: 27

¹²⁴ Bellezza, 2005: 5.

¹²⁵ Peters, 2004: 401.

¹²⁶ Peters 2004: 269.

¹²⁷ Peters, 2004: 311.

¹²⁸ Peters, 2004: 50. Also, Bellezza (2005: 488) states that although parasites and unhealthy lifestyles are seen as secondary causes of illness, the primary vectors of disease transmission are the pantheons of spirits that reside in the physical environment.

¹²⁹ *Pratityasamutpada* is translated as “dependent origination” or “dependent arising.” It is said that Enlightenment in Buddhism is realizing the interconnectedness of all life.

¹³⁰ Sumegi, 2008: 31.

¹³¹ Sumegi, 2008: 32.

¹³² Peters, 2004: 316.

¹³³ Peters, 2004: 268.

¹³⁴ Peters, 2004: 348

¹³⁵ Peters, 2016: 92.

¹³⁶ Peters, 2016: 82.

¹³⁷ Peters, 2016: 81 and Peters, 2016: 80.

¹³⁸ Peters, 2016: 94 and Bellezza, 2005: 92.

¹³⁹ See Meilleur, 2014: 343.

¹⁴⁰ Peters 2004: 275.

¹⁴¹ Peters, 2016: 84.

¹⁴² The term “psychospiritual” was coined by Robert Assagioli, an Italian psychiatrist and pioneer in Transpersonal Psychology (aka Spiritual Psychology), in his 1965 work, *Psychosynthesis: A Collection of Basic Writings*.

¹⁴³ The term “neurotheology” was coined in 1962 by Aldous Huxley in his novel *Island* and is also known as “neuroscience of religion” or “spiritual neuroscience.”

¹⁴⁴ Peters, 2004: 343.

¹⁴⁵ Peters, 2004: 328.

¹⁴⁶ Peters, 2016: 79.

¹⁴⁷ Peters, 2016: 79.

¹⁴⁸ In his 1912/1915 work titled *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim asserted that religion arises because of the emotional security brought about by communal living. This work was later translated and edited by Fields in 1995.

¹⁴⁹ Sosis and Al Corta, 2003; 268.

¹⁵⁰ See Weber's 1905 work titled *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

¹⁵¹ Summers-Effler, 2008: 135.

¹⁵² Marshall, 2002: 360.

¹⁵³ The term "sheep-goat effect" was coined by in 1958 by Gertrude Schmeidler, Professor of Psychology at the City University of New York. In its classic meaning, it refers to the effect of belief and attitude in psi testing. Schmeidler divided subjects in an experiment into two categories: those who believe in the possibility of psi (who were named "sheep") and those who did not (who were named "goats"). In her study and in many subsequent ones, it was found that sheep scored higher than goats in ESP tests. See Schmeidler, G. & McConnell, R. 1958. *ESP and Personality Patterns*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press and Lawrence, T. "Gathering in the Sheep and Goats: A Meta-analysis of Forced Choice Sheep-Goat ESP Studies, 1947-1993." *Proceedings of Presented Papers: Parapsychological Association 36th Annual Convention*, 75-86. 1993.

¹⁵⁴ Peters, 2004: vii and 278.

¹⁵⁵ Peters, 2016: 66 and 65.

¹⁵⁶ Bellezza, 2005: 488.

¹⁵⁷ Peters, 2016: 67.

¹⁵⁸ Peters, 2004: 316.

¹⁵⁹ The National Spiritualist Association (later the National Spiritualist Association of Churches or NSAC) was formed in 1893 as the governing body for Spiritualism in America and the Association of Spiritualists' National Union (later the Spiritualists' National Union or SNU) was formed as the governing body for Spiritualism in the United Kingdom in 1901. With these formations came legal acknowledgement that Spiritualism was a recognized religion.

¹⁶⁰ Stephan A. Schwartz in his book review of Arthur Hastings' *With the Tongues of Men and Angels: A Study of Channeling* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston: San Francisco, London, Montreal, et al, 1991) stated that a relatively small amount, 15% of the population in the United States, roughly 41 million people, reported hearing voices and receiving guidance.

¹⁶¹ Fields/Durkheim, 1995: 35.

¹⁶² Stone (2002) states that in 1873, Max Muller, a founder of the social scientific study of religion and a pioneer of Comparative Religion, linked Goethe's paradox of language to religion in stating, "He who knows only one (religion as well as language), knows none."

¹⁶³ Functionalism comes from Sociology and is also known as Structural Functionalism. It is a theory that concentrates on the components of society and how they interact.

¹⁶⁴ Fields/Durkheim, 1995: 9.

¹⁶⁵ The term "theodicy" was coined by Gottfried Leibniz in his 1710 work, *Theodicee*. Theodicy is from the Greek *theos* (God) and *dike* (righteous).

¹⁶⁶ Swedberg and Agevall, 2005: 274.

¹⁶⁷ See Bernard (1992).

¹⁶⁸ Although the notion of a "blank slate" is an established epistemological idea that can be traced back to Aristotle, it has also been continuously countered throughout history. As recently as 2002, Steven Pinker in *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* challenges the notion of *tabula rasa*.

¹⁶⁹ The term "methodological atheism" was coined by Peter Berger in his 1967 work, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*.

¹⁷⁰ Alfred Schultz related Edmund Husserl's work (especially that on the notion of *epoché*) to the social sciences and in his 1967 work, *Phenomenology of the Social World*, he provides a philosophical basis for the sociological theories of Max Weber.

¹⁷¹ "Thick description" is a term that Geertz borrowed from Gilbert Ryle and his 2000 work, *The Concept of Mind*.

¹⁷² Geertz, 1973: 3.

¹⁷³ Proudfoot, 1985: 195-6 and 60.

¹⁷⁴ Macionis and Gerber, 2011: 32-33.

¹⁷⁵ The "God helmet" was originally known as the "Koren helmet" so named after one of its co-founders, neuropsychologist Stanley Koren.

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Appendix 1

Definition of Terms

When applicable, this study defers to the *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (PDB), *The Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion* (EPR), and the *Harper's Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience* (HEMPE) for a standardized understanding of the terms used. At times, terminology is a bit muddled because a full understanding of some terms (i.a. Buddhism) requires broader contextual knowledge while others (i.a. possession and trance) may cause confusion because they are commonly and falsely used interchangeably. Still others (i.a. oracle) have different meanings within the context of this work than in popular parlance.

Buddhism – The PDB offers no definition of this term but only states “See *Buddhadharma*, *Buddhavacana*, *Dharmavinaya*, or *Sasana*” (PDB, p. 157). *Dharmavinaya*, in Sanskrit means “teaching” (*Dharma*) and “discipline” (*Vinaya*). Expounded by the Buddha, it is one of the terms (along with *Buddhadharma*) that is closest to what in the West is called “Buddhism” (PDB, p. 253). *Buddhadharma* in Sanskrit means the “teachings of the Buddha.” It is one of the closest Indian equivalents to what in English is called “Buddhism” along with *Dharmavinaya* (teaching and discipline), *Buddhanusasana* (teaching, dispensation or religion of the Buddha), and *Sasana* (teaching and dispensation) (PDB, p. 151). *Buddhavacana* means “the “word of the Buddha” in Sanskrit and Pali and are those teachings accepted as having been either spoken by the Buddha or spoken with his sanction (PDB, p. 155). *Sasana* is the Buddha’s teachings especially as conceived historically as an institutionalized religion; a common term for the teachings of the Buddha, or what is typically known in the West as “Buddhism” (PDB, p. 782).

Dharmapala – The PDB (p. 638) states that in Sanskrit, *dharmapala* means “protectors of the Dharma” and refers to these divinities who defend Buddhism from its enemies and who guard Buddhist practitioners from various forms of external and internal dangers. The *dharmapala* are the deities that take

control of the Nechung (or State) Oracle. The Peihar is the head of the worldly *dharmapala*, but he was originally a god in the Bon religion.

God – Within Buddhism, the PDB offers no definition of this term but only states, “In Buddhism, see *Devas*.” *Devas* – In Sanskrit and Pali, lit. “radiant one;” a “divinity” or “god,” as in one of the five rebirth destinies of *Samsara* (or the cycle of rebirth). When it is said that Buddhism has “gods” but no “God,” the devas are being referred to (PDB, p. 230). Within Spiritualism, the existence of God is recognized as the 1st of Seven Principles in Spiritualism is “The Fatherhood of God.” However, Spiritualists are left to individually interpret this as a personal or an impersonal being.

Mediumship – Entranced communication with alleged nonphysical entities, sometimes accompanied by paranormal physical phenomena, mediumship is an ancient and universal practice, undertaken to commune with the divine, prophesy, communicate with spirits of the dead, perform paranormal feats, and channel the universal life force for healing (HEMPE, p. 358).

Oracle – Oracle refers to a specific person who practices divination or to the mechanism used to read the portents. As a person, an oracle channels guidance from the spiritual realm or interprets the display pattern of some physical oracle device (EPR, p. 645), but within the context of Tibetan Buddhism, Bell (2013: 123) defines oracle as a human medium who periodically and ritually becomes possessed by a Tibetan Protector deity in order to provide clairvoyant advice on anything from personal matters of health and well-being to state matters of national security – more than one embodiment, one after another. Many of the protector and guardian deities who embody Tibetan oracles originally belonged to the pantheon of the Bon faith (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, vii and 4). Bellezza (2005: 3) states that while mediums perform divination or predict the future the term oracle does not convey their more important curative and restorative functions. Within Tibetan Buddhism, there are state and lay oracles.

Possession – In popular parlance, this term refers to the involuntary, control of one’s body by a spirit or non-physical entity. Buddhist scholar Peters (2016: 179 and 7) states that the term “embodiment” is preferable to “possession” because “embodiment” refers to a controlled and voluntary trance condition whereas “possession” implies that the individual in trance is a victim of the spirits. Within Tibetan Buddhism and Spiritualism, embodiment carries no social stigma, blame, or personal rejection with no personal responsibility, guilt, or shame for what is done or expressed while under the control of a spirit. In this thesis, the term “channeled” is synonymous with “embodied.”

Shaman – The generic term “shaman” describes a wide range of practices among indigenous people wherein “helpers” or “spirits” are called upon to help the patient asking the shaman for help (EPR, p. 843). Firth (1964, 1967) asserts that shamanism is synonymous with “controlled possession” (i.e. “trance mediumship”) and Eliade (1964) and Harner (1990) equate shamans with mediums with shamans. Although oracles in Tibetan Buddhism act like shamans, Bellezza (2005: 2) states that the practice of shamanism is not part of the Buddhist structure and reflects beliefs and an indigenous Bon tradition that existed prior to the Buddhist cultural patrimony.

(Modern) Spiritualism – Broadly defined, Spiritualism is a philosophical orientation that embraces extrasensory epistemologies, an all-knowing infinite God, and the immortality of the soul (EPR, p. 872). Began as a movement in 1848, Spiritualism formed into a religion with the adoption of a set of guiding principles and the creation of governing organizations (i.e. The Spiritualists’ National Union in 1901 and the National Spiritualists’ Association of Churches in 1893).

Tibetan Buddhism – A unique branch of Buddhism said to have been brought to Tibet by Padma Sambhava in 749 AD/CE who allegedly subdued the local Bon deities converting them to Buddhism and binding them by oath to be defenders of the Buddhist faith.

Trance/trance mediumship – That type of mediumship (i.e. “entranced communication with alleged nonphysical entities” HEMPE p. 358) in which the medium’s speech and behavior is controlled by nonphysical entities. Within religious contexts, it is often used synonymously with the term “ecstasy” (Elaine, 1964; LaBarre, 1970; Lewis, 1989; and Peters and Price-Williams, 1980).