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Abstract

This piece of ethnography seeks to redefine theories on the inherent value of labour through emerging ideas of labour as a form of exchange in Buddhist religious and material economy. From drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork in Kagyu Samye Ling Monastery and Tibetan Centre, I explore how lay residents redefine socioeconomic structures by using different Buddhist doctrines to create their own value of labour.

Keywords : Buddhism, labour, work, exchange, the gift

Kagyu Samye Ling Monastery and Tibetan Centre is an unusual Buddhist monastery in rural Scotland that aims to reconcile the relationship between the need to gain capital and achieve worldly renunciation. This ethnography outlines several paradoxes within Samye Ling that can be concentrated into this fundamental issue. I argue that it is only by elucidating how lay members of Samye Ling interact with both 'a material economy of things and a moral economy of persons' through their labour, can this issue begin to be answered (Coleman, 2004: 424).

What I refer to as lay people are the non-monastic residents of the community: those that are practising Buddhists and have no intention to become a monk or nun, or those that do not identify as Buddhist, but respectfully follow Buddhist teachings as a form of spirituality. I also refer to these people at times as resident volunteers. Equally, what I refer to as 'work' denotes the profession or the area that the individual is situated, whereas 'labour' should be seen as the product created by this work that is exchanged.

I found lay residents of Samye Ling more valuable than the Sangha in redefining different forms of exchange within a religious community because their religious intentions are not purely focused on reaching enlightenment, but on more complex ideas of sociality and receiving merit. Because lay people are not expected to focus so rigidly on Dharma (Buddhist teachings), they occupy a space of 'fuzzy fidelity' that allows them to reconcile ideas on exchange and labour through an economic perspective grounded by doctrinal aspects of ethical conduct (Storm, 2009). Therefore, by utilising Coleman's analysis of the 'charismatic gift', I argue that lay residents of Samye Ling give their labour

as expressions of a 'wider aesthetic of charismatic motion and embodied orientation... establishing connections between the human subject and forms of sacralised objectification' (Coleman, 2004: 242), thus creating an economic model situated between a material economy – generating capital for the centre – and a moral economy of persons based on Buddhist dogma (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff, 1990).

The laypeople of Samye Ling are highly essential instigators of social, economic and spiritual exchange in the monastery because they conduct exchange primarily through their labour. Because they are volunteers and cannot expect to gain any form of wage, they align their experiences of labour to different ideas pertaining to Buddhism and utilise their labour in ways to generate positive social relations between other residents.

The majority of the lay residents at Samye Ling are British and should be described as Kay suggests in his study of Buddhism in Britain, as 'active seekers as opposed to passive converts' (Kay 2004: 5). Following the same line of research, McKenzie also denotes British laypeople's approach to Buddhism as a form of 'Seekership,' understood as 'the active search for religious answers to one's problems' (McKenzie, 2012: 104). Many of my informants confirmed to me that their reasons for living in the centre circulated around the need to find purpose in the world, that they could only gain through spirituality.

Concerning volunteer work, residents work for an average of 35-45 hours a week, six days a week, in one of the various sectors of the monastery chosen for them by the Abbot, Lama Yeshe, and the volunteer manager Jack. These sectors include the kitchen, garden, tearoom, or workshop to name but a few. Residents often feel perplexed by where Lama Yeshe and Jack tell them to work, as it does not always circle around practical reasoning:

"Well, when I arrived I wanted to work in the garden; I like seeing things grow and being outside, so being stuck in the tearoom is really hard."

"I studied civil engineering back home for two years, so I design things and help out in the workshop."

"I have no idea why they put me in the kitchen; I'm not even that big a fan of cooking."

From my own perspective, I had a considerable amount of work experience in retail and had recently left my job as a supervisor in a cafe, so I expected to be told to work in the tearoom or the gift shop. However, after conferring with Lama Yeshe, Jack decided the most suitable place for me to work

would be in the kitchen, because he felt I “needed [sic.] to be aware of the responsibility each volunteer has in the centre and working in the kitchen was [sic.] a good way to learn resilience.” Initially I was confused about this evaluation, until I was told by tearoom worker, Adam, that Lama Yeshe decides where is the best place for you to work based on your mental and spiritual development. Furthermore, unless someone was particularly skilled in one of the volunteer sectors, spiritual means took precedence. Buddhist texts are often understood as ‘instruments which offer forms of moral cultivation,’ so in choosing a volunteering space for the individual, it is only ethical to place them somewhere they can grow spiritually (Voyce 2015: 299).

The reason for Lama Yeshe being in charge of deciding where volunteers work is centred on his obligation as a spiritual leader to assign volunteers to a workplace that will help them to benefit spiritually and gain positive karma. Miller’s ethnographic research of Buddhist monastic economy confirms this attitude, as he states that ‘since the layman is unable to pursue enlightenment directly, the Sangha, as patron, is obliged to find a means by which he can pursue it indirectly. The means must be flexible enough to serve the immediate needs of laymen in different stages of spiritual growth’ (Miller, 1960: 140). Because the lay members of Samye Ling are not overtly interested in becoming a monk and joining the sangha, their intentions for coming to the centre are often grounded upon gaining merit to generate positive karma. Therefore, the first mode of exchange can be seen between the residents offering their labour, and Lama Yeshe, as their patron, returning the favour by assigning them the most productive place to work for cultivating positive karma.

To give a simple definition of karma, in the Buddhist faith there is no such thing as the self or the soul, but there is an afterlife in the form of Samsara – the wheel of rebirth. Where and what form one is reborn into is entirely dependent on karma. In other Indic religions, such as Hinduism and Jainism, the soul is contaminated by negative karma, and “removing karma accumulated over many lives requires the heat of austerity to burn it from the soul” (Laidlaw, 1995: 618). Buddhism differs in this sense because karma is regarded as a tangible object in itself - the sole surviving piece of one’s existences. Karma is an accumulative form of cause and effect that is carried through one’s lifetimes; for every good deed with kind intentions, one gains positive karma and vice versa. Furthermore, instead of facing absolute austerity, Buddhists must attempt to live a life based on satisfaction of necessary needs – food, clothing, shelter, etc. – and limit their consumption of unnecessary worldly pleasures. It is by living a life free from external desires and doing good deeds that one cultivates good karma. Regarding work, because Buddhists believe in karma, the motivation for hard work ‘would not be to change one’s material situation, for that hardly has to do with “improving” one’s life.’ (DeVoe, 1983: 84). Buddhists commit to hard work for the spiritual benefit of their karma. The

primary aim for lay Buddhists – both within Samye Ling and in a broader context – is to continually cultivate positive karma to get closer to the ultimate bliss of Nirvana with each lifetime, and to eventually be able to release themselves from Samsara. In Samye Ling, although a majority of the lay and monastic community were striving towards the goal of Nirvana, they did not expect to reach this goal for several lifetimes.

This phenomenon was explained to me one evening by one of my closest informants, Jens. Jens is in his early twenties, Swedish, and had been living in Samye Ling for around two years when I first met him. His appearance is that of a struggling artist: bedraggled chin-length hair tamed by a worn paper-boy cap. He could often be found in the workshop, his clothes torn and covered in flecks of paint and wood varnish. More importantly, he would often be referred to by other residents as an encyclopaedia of knowledge, especially when it came to Buddhism:

“A lot of people here [monks and residents], come to this place to do good deeds and help the monastery to gain good karma. They hope that with this right effort, they will reach enlightenment. But if anyone who is not a seasoned monk tells you that they will attain enlightenment in this life, they are obviously, completely insane. Now some monks have reached enlightenment here, in this lifetime, but it is because they have strived for countless lives to gain enough merit to get them into this form of existence that allows them to take that final step. The whole point of here, I think, is just to try to clean up some of the bad things you’ve done in the past and try again next time.”

Acquisition of merit can be split into two groups, “Nibbanic” and “Kammatic”: those that gather merit to reach Nirvana, and those that gather merit to give them good fortune and a better rebirth (Spiro, 1978: 7). Spiro’s extensive anthropological work with the Buddhist economies of Burma helps to solidify the information given to me by Jens. Spiro confirms that the soteriological act of Buddhism is found through the cultivation of merit, and ‘knowledgeable Buddhists not only held the acquisition of merit to be their most important Buddhist activity but viewed it as the indispensable means to the attainment of Nirvana’ (Spiro 1982: 8). As the “Nibbanic” motivation for cultivating merit can be found solely within the sangha, I will continue by focusing my analysis of lay people’s motivation of gaining merit for “Kammatic” reasons.

However, tensions can arise if a volunteer cannot find the spiritual reasons behind being placed in a given sector of Samye Ling. On one occasion Lama Yeshe had visited the tearoom on the morning Anka was saying her goodbyes to fellow tearoom staff before going on a one-month yoga teacher training class in Berlin. On telling Lama Yeshe that she was leaving he said to her, “you have a weak

mind and going to a yoga course won't help you fix that." Although this may appear as critique too harsh to be spoken by such a highly revered monk, his reasoning comes from Anka only having stayed in the monastery for a few weeks beforehand. In stating that she had a 'weak mind' he was stating that she appeared very unable to detach herself from external stimulation, which would only cause her unnecessary suffering in the long-run. Lama Yeshe's statement did not deter Anka from undertaking her yoga course, it actually acted as a great benefit to her. In having her ego bruised, she said that she felt she had found purpose in returning to the monastery, specifically in how to use her work as a way to practice patience, and to use her own mind to seek happiness.

Although work is chosen for the resident volunteers to benefit them mentally and spiritually, they are often left feeling physically exhausted: their hours are long, with little time to relax, and are expected to deal with varying intensities of labour, all without wage. Volunteers sometimes even feel that they are being exploited with the amount of labour they are expected to perform. One informant, who eventually decided to leave, did so because she felt that there was a "thin line between acceptance from her [sic.] side and manipulation from the whole management's side."

To pacify these negative feelings, some residents integrate the Buddhist doctrine of merit-making into their work; theorising their long hours volunteering as a form of spiritual practice and invoking the notion of karma as payment. In this way, residents re-categorise their labour as an exalted form of gift-giving. After my shift in the kitchen, I would often sit in the tearoom, have a coffee, and talk at the bar with some of the other residents. On one occasion, I walked in as groundskeeper, Forrest, and tearoom worker, Adam, were talking about how they viewed their work. Adam told Forrest about his dissatisfaction in working in the tearoom, having expected from the beginning to be put in the garden. However, Forrest reminded him that this was the plan of Lama Yeshe and doing as the Abbot asked would mean better merit. After that occurrence, there would be numerous occasions, where Adam would finish his work, slam the tearoom door shut and claim victoriously "another merit point in the bag." Conflating the idea of merit as a return for his labour was one of the few reasons that kept Adam - and several other residents - from leaving Samye Ling altogether.

This exchange of labour for merit should be categorised as a form of gift exchange rather than commodity exchange. Gift exchange is classified by Mauss as the 'exchange of inalienable objects between people who are in a state of reciprocal dependence that establishes a qualitative relationship between the transactors' (Mauss, 1982: 100). As a continuation of this influential theory, Sahlins categorised the reciprocity of the gift into three ways; generalised, balanced, and negative (Sahlins 1972). For the residents of Samye Ling, the exchange of labour for merit is categorised as a form of 'balanced reciprocity': a form of direct exchange that is not seen as overtly social, but more

concerned with individual autonomy and the actual exchange (ibid: 194). One deviation from Sahlin's category of balanced exchange in this ethnography, is that although the exchange of labour for merit is direct, there is ambiguity in the timescale of receiving merit. Although karma is stated as accumulative, a residue of sorts that clings to every good and bad action, it is not required by the individual until their death. Therefore, it can be argued either way that merit is exchanged directly or indirectly by this labour.

An anthropological piece of theory that I found helpful for conceptualising this process of viewing labour as a form of exchange, is provided by Lambek. Although it was Marx that stated that value could be seen as produced by human, social activity, Lambek indicates it is 'when we turn activities into objects or put a price on things we expand the realm of commensurable value' (Marx, 1990, Lambek, 2013: 143). It is only viable to place gift-giving alongside other 'idioms of transfer of moral qualities' to represent different communities lived experience of the gift (Laidlaw, 1995: 300). Furthermore, it is stated by Laidlaw in his ethnographic exploration of the Jain people, that people give all forms of gift, with a range of 'different motivations and intentions which might in some cases be no more than the desire to earn good karma' (ibid: 358). Therefore, I don't believe it is controversial at all to state labour as a form of gift that is a reciprocal object.

However, labour in Samye Ling can also be argued as a gift that is a form of 'generalized exchange', one that is more rooted in social integration (Sahlins, 1972). Labour in Samye Ling is not only spiritually exchanged for merit, but it is also a practical form of exchange in the sense that for their labour, residents receive access to food, shelter, and a like-minded community. Having access to a religious community is spiritually beneficial to individual's motivation to seek merit. Because Buddhism is a faith that views all worldly objects as corrupting, residents believe that the only gift worthy enough to be exchanged for something as beneficial as merit must be labour. Gregory states that while 'commodity exchange establishes objective quantitative relationships...gift exchange establishes personal qualitative relationships between the subjects transacting' (Gregory, 1982: 41). Indeed, in Buddhist theology, there is strict importance based upon both intentionalities of practice and morality. If one wishes to gain merit from their labour, then they have to conduct their labour with good intentions and make the right amount of effort: the quality of your merit depends on the overall quality of your labour. I attest that residents use the ideology of 'right effort' to build upon qualitative relationships of exchange.

In addition to labour being used as a form of generalized exchange merit, labour also has a substantial impact on reciprocity between residents. The best example of this was illustrated throughout my time working in the kitchen. Each volunteer in the kitchen had equal responsibility in creating the different

components of the meal, and if someone did not put enough effort into lunch, then it would negatively affect both the meal and by extension, the morale of all the residents wanting a substantial meal before returning to work. One of the longterm volunteers, Pasha, who worked in the workshop, stated that a good lunch is essential because “it sets you up for the day, if you go back to work starving because you didn’t like the food, then you either end up in a bad mood for the rest of the day, or you stop working altogether”. Therefore, if one resident does not give intentional effort into their work, not only will they get no merit from their labour, but they will have an adverse kammatic effect on other residents’ work. As stated by Carrier, ‘in societies dominated by gift exchange the structure of kinship typically provides the basis for people’s identities, relations, and obligations’ (Carrier, 1991: 129).

This ideology of labour as the best gift between residents comes into conflict with the arrival of visitors. Visitors use monetary contributions as a form of gift exchange, because it is the only form of the gift they can give due to the short amount of time they have at the centre. The fundamental disconnect between residential volunteers and visitors is created from the inability to synthesise money as having equal value to labour. The main argument by residents is that labour has more value because it has long-term benefits and is more productive socially and spiritually. When asking about the importance of physical work to residents, one of my informants who had worked in the garden for over a decade, said “work really levels the playing field. Where you come from, or what money you may have doesn’t count for anything. It’s your effort to get out your bed every day and put some real effort into making something beautiful that counts. You have to give everything you have to get what you want in return.”

Money, on the other hand, has often been defined as a commodity. Money is described by Marx as ‘a crystal formed of necessity in the course of the exchanges’, whereby different products of labour are practically equated to one another, which then is commodified to become a ‘socially recognized universal equivalent’ (Marx, 1990: 61). As further argued by Gregory (1980), because money is a commodity, it becomes impersonal; because it is impersonal, it cannot be categorised as social, and therefore stands for the opposite of the gift. Because money is often viewed as an alienable commodity, resident volunteers of Samye Ling cannot understand money as deserving of merit, because they can’t discern the personal intention of the giver behind money. However, the view that labour has more exchange-value than money is held only by the volunteer residents of the centre. The managers of Samye Ling are endlessly thankful for visitors’ donations, because all contributions are regarded equally valuable and worthy of merit. Lama Yeshe would regularly turn up to places where visitors would frequent, like the tearoom and gift shop, to stress to the volunteers about how

important visitors patronage was to the centre. He would state that any act of kindness, no matter how small, would benefit the monastery and that showing compassion to everyone that visits the centre would only reap positive benefits.

Philanthropy plays a significant role within South Asian traditions, especially in the forms of the spiritual gift. Money can be seen as destructive because it causes the beholder to engage in gluttonous or harmful pleasures. It provides the beholder with power that can be used for corrupt or hateful purposes, and can create a false sense of self, leading the beholder to believe they are above all others. However, Buddhists decree that the corruptive nature of money can be reconciled as moral if used for the benefit of others, rather than the self. Within the Buddhist tradition, those that are reborn wealthy are said to have been given a fortunate rebirth; but their affluent existence will cease to exist unless they use it for charitable reasons. However, the intentionality behind providing this monetary donation is the primary importance. As stated by Kawamura on her study of the Buddhist philanthropy, 'there is a real moral difference between the gift which is given out of vanity and the desire for self-aggrandizement ... and the gift which is given out of a genuine sense of community with the object of the donation' (Kawamura, 1998: 99). I argue that residents in Samye Ling see labour as having a higher value than money because the intentionality of giving labour is apparent, while the moral intentions of giving money are far more ambiguous, even if being used for good.

However, there are also paradoxes present in resident's value of labour, to which some residents use their social relationship to make money at the expense of others labour. On a few occasions, head gardener Harry and his partner Jenny would bake vegan cakes to sell in the tearoom, the purpose they stated was to provide the tearoom with vegan alternatives and make some spare money. This was however deemed a controversial action because everyone in the center was there on a voluntary basis, and the majority of ingredients for the cakes were given to them by the kitchen, without them being made to pay for them. This action created a negative form of exchange, otherwise described as 'something [given] for nothing with impunity' (Sahlins, 1972: 195). Negative forms of exchange create tensions within social relationships between parties because, as Mauss states that 'one loses face forever if one does not reciprocate, or if one does not carry out the destruction of equivalent value' (Mauss, 1990: 54). It does not only mean that future exchanges between these two parties will be adversely impacted, but the side that has not reciprocated the gift is seen as inferior (ibid: 84) and will struggle within their community to make future exchange relationships, because of these past discretions. The issue is that whereas all other volunteers are working purely for merit – where they are involved in 'gift exchange' which is more generalized and moral – Harry and Jenny are working

more in a commodity fashion, for money, which means their labour is not part of the overarching gift-exchange economy in the centre.

Mauss' theory is sound in this ethnographic instance, as Jorge, the head-chef, became angry because his budget was spent on supplies that he got no return. He stated that if Harry and Jenny had left one of the five cakes they had baked for the kitchen staff, it would have been an acceptable form of exchange. Jorge was not concerned with money, yet expected to be reciprocated for his generosity, and having lived alongside Harry and Jenny for several years, he felt entitled to a more generalised form of gift-exchange (Sahlins, 1972: 194).

Ames' idea of the 'Buddhist moral community' is an integrated network of relations that connects all of its members through 'a network of prestations' (Ames, 1966: 32). Indeed, there are many parallels between this theory and my research at Samye Ling. For residents, giving one's labour reaps different kinds of rewards: a spiritual and metaphysical one in the form of merit, a social one, in the form of friendship, trust, and solidarity and a set of more immediately transactive, material returns (food, shelter, institutional structure, etc.).

The notion of labour as a form of gift exchange that is reciprocated by merit helps residents to find both context and purpose for their work and leads them not to feel discriminated or exploited by the management of Samye Ling. Issues arise from this categorisation of labour as a gift; namely when visitors use money as a form of exchange. Money cannot be conceived as a form of the gift because it is an alienable universal equivalent of exchange - value, synonymous with commodities. Because of its alienability, residents cannot see the intentions behind visitors' donations, and visitors' possible commitments to Buddhism. However, it is vastly important for residents to view their labour as the best gift, as they would cease to work in Samye Ling if they felt otherwise.

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