

Identity, Spiritual Transformation and the Construction of Group Imagination in the Nyingma Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism

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This paper elaborates on the relationships of spiritual transformation, identity formation, and group imagination within Tibetan Buddhism's Nyingma tradition. Through Dharma assemblies as communal rituals, this research lays out its intention of understanding how a change in personal and collective identities is linked to ritual communication. Shared practices of assemblies form the groundwork for a collective consciousness that enhances group identity and a sense of belonging. Using a qualitative approach, this study has used semi-structured interviews to explore how Dzogchen and meditation practices contribute toward personal spiritual transformation whilst, at the same time, consolidating collective identity. The findings of this study bring value to the knowledge regarding the ritual practices that will keep both individual and collective belonging in place; therefore, maintaining cohesion and continuity within the Nyingma tradition.

Keywords: Dharma Assembly, Tibetan Buddhism, Identity, Ritual Communication

Introduction

The Nyingma, or "Ancient School," is the oldest tradition of Tibetan Buddhism (Griffiths, 1994), based on practices which promote, both personal identity and collective identities via spiritual transformation. Central to the Nyingma tradition are communal rituals, such as Dharma Assemblies that are intended to foster spiritual growth and a shared group imagination (Mills, 2000). Such rituals are integral to religious life but significantly impact the formation and redefinition of personal as well as collective identities. The Nyingma tradition, with its rich spiritual and

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ritualistic heritage, is one of the most traditional Tibetan Buddhist traditions that have for long been used in the preservation of ancient teachings and practices. The main core of this tradition is the concept of Dzogchen, or the "Great Perfection," which aims at realizing the innate nature of the mind as a path to enlightenment (Pettit, 1999). These teachings and collective rituals such as Dharma Assemblies form a platform from which practitioners can manage their spiritual lives while at the same time experiencing a strong sense of community and common goal. The intersection of spiritual transformation, ritual communication, and identity formation within the Nyingma tradition will help explain how ancient religious traditions can adapt and persist in modern contexts. This interplay is particularly relevant in a globalized world, where traditional practices are exposed to influences from other cultures and societies. Still, it thrives as the Nyingma tradition reinforces the bond between its members and presents a clear-cut structure to guide an individual towards his spiritual development.

More importantly, ritual communication also extends beyond the mere performance of ceremonies as a form of transmission of teachings, keeping the doctrine intact, and concretizing collective memory. Through this analysis of how these aspects come together in the Nyingma tradition, the research contributes to a broader discussion on the viability of religious practices, cultural identity, and the redemptive force of common spiritual experiences. This expanded scope situates the current study within an expanded religious and sociocultural context, marking its relevancy not just to Nyingma, but for more general conversations concerning the flows of identity, community, and spirituality in current religious discourses. This study narrows its focus on the role communal rituals specifically Dharma Assemblies play in the Nyingma tradition regarding the construction of personal and collective identities. Ritual communication is evoked during the gatherings and it produces a common spiritual consciousness that binds and cements the people's group identity (Caple, 2021). The research study aims at explaining the ways in which spiritual practices and communal rituals shape personal identity while strengthening, at the same time, the group's collective imagination through these aspects. This study seeks to understand how spiritual transformation and the communal rituals practiced among the group, such as Dharma Assemblies, contribute to identity formation in the Nyingma tradition. This research bridges the gap by addressing how communal rituals intersect with spiritual practice among Tibetan Buddhists to form both individual and collective identities.

Research Questions

1. How are personal and communal identities shaped through spiritual

- transformation within the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism?
2. What role do Dharma Assemblies play in constructing a shared group imagination within the Nyingma tradition?
 3. How do spiritual practices and communal rituals contribute to the formation of collective identity in the Nyingma tradition?

Research Objectives

1. To explore how spiritual transformation shapes personal and communal identity within the Nyingma tradition.
1. To analyse the role of Dharma Assemblies in constructing a shared group imagination through ritual communication.
2. To investigate how spiritual practices and communal rituals contribute to the formation of collective identity within the Nyingma tradition.

The study adopts a qualitative research design with in-depth information obtained through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants who are involved in the Nyingma tradition. This research approach will enable an in-depth understanding into how participants experience spiritual transformation and how communal rituals shape personal and collective identities. By examining the role of spiritual transformation as well as ritual communication, the present study aims to bridge the gap in research in order to provide a better understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and the role of rituals in sustaining communal cohesion in religious traditions.

Literature Review

Identity in Tibetan Buddhism

Identity in the Buddhist context is assigned to impermanence and non-self (anatta), which, in effect, are the central concepts developed in Buddhism that counter the common western understanding of an essential, abiding self (Cantwell, 2017). Practically, though, the process of identity formation within Buddhist societies takes on quite a complicated process based on individual spiritual growth and communal rituals. The Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism illustrates that not only does the formation of identity intersect with personal spiritual development but also reflects integration within the broader religious community (Dachille, 2017). Different types of spiritual practice—the performance of meditation, reciting ritual texts, and philosophical study—help Nyingma practitioners work through and find their identity as individuals and members of the Buddhist sangha (Simonds, 2023). Lineage is something very important in identity-making that is used in Tibetan Buddhism. Nyingma is the oldest of the four schools in Tibetan Buddhism known for holding onto an

uninterrupted transmission of teachings that bind practitioners to historical figures and the contemporary (Sur, 2017). The identity, in this context, can be held greatly within the alignment with lineage and combined heritage of the tradition (Cantwell, 2020). It is within these traditions that the practices convey an identity to the individual and find a place in Nyingma's spiritual and ritualistic heritage. The construction of identity within Tibetan Buddhism is intricately linked to both individual spiritual practices and the collective ethos of the religious community. While identity is traditionally seen as fluid and impermanent in Buddhist philosophy, it simultaneously takes on a functional role within specific religious traditions, such as the Nyingma school, to maintain coherence and continuity (Pannengpetch & Doojai, 2024). For instance, lineage and transmission of teachings have been recognized as vital to preserving both personal identity and communal belonging, particularly within the Nyingma tradition (Cantwell, 2017). Moreover, ritual participation reinforces the integration of individual and collective identities, reflecting shared values and heritage (Porciani, 2019).

Spiritual Transformation in Tibetan Buddhism.

Spiritual transformation is a repetitive theme throughout different religious traditions. In Tibetan Buddhism, this theme goes beyond a personal transformation and becomes the path toward enlightenment. In Nyingma, transformation is encouraged through Dzogchen, or the Great Perfection practice, that calls on the practitioner to realize the nature of the mind and attain spiritual liberation (Khenpo, 2020). However, in the words of Griffiths (1986), spiritual change in Tibetan Buddhism constitutes a multi-levelled process involving highly changed physical, mental, and emotional circumstances that are transformed into a radically changed worldview and identity. Unlike Christian mysticism, spiritual transformation in the Nyingma tradition is not a lonely practice. Events like Dharma Assemblies are group activities, which enforce and accelerate spiritual development by creating a common atmosphere of piety and introspection. Practitioners congregate to participate together in rituals to cleanse karma, to generate compassion, and to deepen their acquisition of the Dharma (Hiltebeitel, 2010). These practices affirm individual and group identity as collective in character, as individuals come to see their personal transformation reflected within the broader spiritual aspirations of the group (Gyatso, 2020). Transformation in Tibetan Buddhism also takes the form of compassion, wisdom, and non-attachment-moral virtues that also mark the identity of the practitioner. While the journey through the spiritual path is progressive, and the sense of self is constantly changing, becoming ever more Buddhist, it enters into a distance from worldly attachments, into closeness with a collective spiritual identity

defined by the religious community. Hence, in the Nyingma tradition, spiritual transformation interdepends with identity formation. Spiritual transformation within the Nyingma tradition, particularly through the practice of Dzogchen, is regarded as a process that transcends mere personal growth. It entails a restructuring of the practitioner's worldview, leading to a realignment with the principles of non-attachment, compassion, and wisdom (Sys et al., 2024). Beyond individual progress, such transformation fosters a deepened connection to communal values and the sangha, ensuring that personal identity aligns with broader spiritual aspirations. Group rituals, such as Dharma Assemblies, not only facilitate this transformation but also provide a space for the embodiment of Buddhist ideals, such as karmic cleansing and the generation of compassion (Hiltebeitel, 2010). This interplay between personal spiritual progress and communal engagement ensures the resilience of Buddhist traditions amidst external challenges.

Group Imagination Through Ritual Communication.

Group imagination in the Nyingma tradition is formed and strengthened through ritual communication, where symbolic rituals and collective practices create shared cognitive and emotional frameworks for the community (Germano, 1992). In Tibetan Buddhism, especially within the Nyingma tradition, Dharma Assemblies are central to this process. These large ritual congregations, in which participants engage in prayers, recitations, and symbolic offerings, serve as the primary mechanism for developing and sustaining group imagination (Samuel, 2012) (See fig.).



Figure 1: The Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism held a traditional dharma assembly in Lhasa, capital of southwest China's Tibet Autonomous Region during August 13-14, drawing hundreds of thousands of believers from Tibet and elsewhere in China

The Dharma Assemblies are not only a way to unify practitioners but also essential to reinforcing a shared spiritual worldview. Through ritual

communication involving objects, chants, and symbolic acts, participants internalize deeper meanings concerning Buddhist cosmology, ethics, and the role of practitioners in the spiritual hierarchy (Hureau, 2009). Repeated participation in these rituals allows practitioners to absorb the cosmological framework and values of the Nyingma tradition, further solidifying the collective imagination. According to (Gyatso, 2020), Tibetan Buddhist rituals particularly within the Nyingma tradition are used to create sacred spaces where participants connect with spiritual entities, deities, and enlightened beings. Through ritual communication, a collective imagination is fostered, binding the community together through shared spiritual aspirations and metaphors (Campany, 2012). Ritual communication in Dharma Assemblies also serves to uphold tradition by passing down teachings across generations. These rituals are not merely performances but also pedagogical in nature, as they encode essential Nyingma doctrines and Guru yoga for transmitting secret knowledge (Duckworth, 2016). For participants, these rituals act as both expressions of devotion and reinforcement of identity, as they embody the teachings in their practice (Zangpo, 2024). Collective memory, re-enacted through these rituals, ensures that the shared imagination within the group transcends individual identity.

Literature presents strong evidence to the effect that identity in the Nyingma tradition is built both through personal spiritual practices and communal rituals. Spiritual transformation is necessary in reshaping both personal and collective identity, and in this process, Dharma Assemblies and other ritual practices have played a critical role in shaping a shared group imagination. This interrelationship between personal growth and collective rituals underscores the importance that ritual communication should play in sustaining cohesion and continuity within the Nyingma tradition. Ritual communication that happens in Dharma Assemblies works as a pedagogical and performative conduit to transmit vital teachings that nourish the collective imagination. These are not purely symbolic acts but critical apparatuses for teaching and reinforcing generations with spiritual tenets (Duckworth, 2016). This sharing through chants, symbolic offerings, and prayer recitations develops a shared cognitive and affective framework among practitioners in Nyingma tradition (Germano, 1994). By these repetitive and communal rituals, there is the embedding of sacral narratives and values that cement groups' identity and cohesion within memories (Samuel, 2012). Scholars have emphasized the dynamic reciprocity between personal spiritual transformation and collective identity formation. For instance, (Huang et al., 2014) argue that Buddhist traditions emphasize a balance between individual and collective growth, where the sangha serves as both a source of support and a vehicle for individual progress. The collective spiritual

imagination fosters personal introspection, while individual contributions enrich the shared aspirations of the community (Gyatso, 2020). In the Nyingma tradition, rituals such as Dharma Assemblies exemplify this interplay, demonstrating how collective participation enhances personal spiritual progress while affirming group belonging (Ya, 2020).

Research Gap

Although plenty of informative literature exists on the constitution of identity, spiritual change, and ritual communication in the context of Tibetan Buddhism, the nexus of these areas as it specifically pertains to the Nyingma tradition can be known as a lacuna in knowledge. Most of the focus regarding identity within Tibetan Buddhism has been on questions surrounding personal development regarding spiritually or the general role of rituals in a more generalized context (Hobhouse, 2024). Few studies, however, have been able to investigate how communal rituals such as Dharma Assemblies may be contributing directly to the construction of a shared imagination of the group while simultaneously reinforcing personal and collective identities. Research on spiritual transformation states that it should be maximized within Tibetan Buddhism, yet the precise way in which ritual practices shape and mirror identity formation, both individually and collectively, remains under-analysed (Specker Sullivan, 2022). In particular, the connection between ritual communication and the organization of individual experiences of spiritual growth with collective Nyingma consciousness needs further exploration. This study addresses these gaps through the research focus on the interplay between personal spiritual transformation and group imagination in the particular context of Nyingma's communal rituals. In this regard, it adds deeper understanding to how identity, spirituality, and ritual communication are interconnected to maintain the collective identity in tradition.

Methodology

Research Design

This research used a qualitative approach to investigate identity, spiritual transformation, and the formation of group imagination in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. There was appropriateness in the use of the qualitative approach for this paper because it provides a deeper understanding of what participants feel or perceive about spiritual change and communal rituals (Hennink et al., 2020). It aimed to understand subtle and subjective understanding among the people practicing their spirituality with the Nyingma tradition, which was illustrated by descriptive data garnered through interviews.

Participants

Participants were purposively selected on the basis of specific involvement within Nyingma communities and active roles in Dharma Assemblies. The criteria for the selection are formal affiliation with Nyingma monasteries, centres, or recognized groups that regularly participate in Dharma Assemblies. Additionally, relevant experience requirements include being an ordained member or lay practitioner who leads roles in the organization and facilitation of rituals and assemblies. Verification of their roles was through community leaders or official records of participation, to confirm that participants were not simply reporting their involvement personally. This way, participants chosen would have a documented history of participation in both individualistic spiritual practices, as in Dzogchen meditation, and community rituals. Purposive sampling has been used here, one of the methods suggested by (Campbell et al., 2020), whereby subjects are formally involved with the Nyingma tradition and whose involvement can be independently verified. This means that subjects are actively engaged in the spiritual and ritual life of the community.

Data Collection

Data was gathered with the use of semi-structured interviews. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the flexibility without losing the thrust of key topics. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate in this study since they allow participants to discuss their experiences in their words yet allow the interviewer to probe deeper into particular aspects of identity formation and group imagination (Magaldi & Berler, 2020) (see Appendix). The interviews were estimated to last between 20 and 35 minutes, and the subjects were told that consent would be obtained before conducting the interviews. All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data. This method helped in teasing out key patterns, themes, and narratives across qualitative data, thereby making it an effective approach to understand personal and collective identity formation, spiritual transformation, and ritual communication in the Nyingma tradition (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process was divided clearly into:

H1. Familiarization with the data.

All interviews were verbatim transcribed, and the researcher read the transcripts line by line in order to really immerse oneself within the data. The preliminary phase would entail reading through and then rereading the transcripts in an attempt to gain a deep understanding of what the

participants were saying: key ideas, for instance, Dharma Assemblies and their impact upon spiritual transformation. For instance, nearly all the participants noted the phenomenon wherein the communal rituals in the Dharma Assemblies provided a deep sense of unity and shared purpose, testifying to their role in identity formation.

H2. Identifying key themes.

From familiarization and broadening towards more thematic categories that could answer the research questions, key themes have been identified. In this phase, the major topics which were derived from participants' descriptions of their experiences were focused upon by the researcher. Recurring topics were grouped together as possible themes such as "Personal Identity Formation" and "Collective Imagination in Dharma Assemblies."

H3. Reviewing and refining themes.

The themes that were established in the initial step were reviewed to ensure that they actually represented the data. This was achieved by going back to the transcripts for a certain theme to have it positively reflective of what participants share. For instance, the theme "Collective Imagination" was reformulated in such a manner to capture, not only the cognitive but also the emotive nature in shared spiritual experiences. If the theme seemed rather broad, it was sometimes stated differently or broken down for even better representation of the data it served. For example, the very first theme of "Spiritual Transformation" was defined further to concentrate specifically on "Personal Identity Formation through Dzogchen and Meditation."

H4. Defining and naming themes.

The themes were defined and named to express their essence after they had become refined. In this respect, it ensured that these themes were closely tied to the research questions and participants. Themes such as "Personal Identity Formation through Dzogchen and Meditation" and "Collective Spiritual Consciousness in Dharma Assemblies" were chosen because they accurately reflected the data set and provided a view of spiritual practices and communal rituals through which identity could be formed.

H5. Interpretation and theme refinement.

The themes obtained after the analysis were interpreted in the context of Nyingma tradition as well as Tibetan Buddhism. Up to this stage, the themes were connected to broader religious and cultural concepts. For instance, the theme "Collective Spiritual Consciousness" can be related to the support function that communal rituals play for the continuation of the Nyingma tradition. The findings are also that "Personal Identity Formation" was connected to how individual spiritual transformation through meditation and Dzogchen influences the practitioner's role within

the community. These interpretations better accessed how personal and collective identities take shape in the Nyingma tradition.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are fundamental to this research because the interviews were personal and spiritual. All participants had their consent obtained before data collection as evidence of the knowledge on what was aimed at and the rights of participants. They were assured that their identities would not be revealed. Sensitive issues were approached with respect and caution so that the interviews do not subject participants to discomfort or pain. The engagement with the respondents was with regard to cultural sensitivity, especially in terms of religion.

Findings

This section expands the thematic analysis carried out on interviews from six Tibetan Buddhism Nyingma followers. Three core themes emanated from the thematic analysis: (1) Identity Formation through Spiritual Practices, (2) Role of Dharma Assemblies in Collective Imagination, and (3) Interplay Between Personal and Collective Identity. This is a representative expression of the participants' opinions regarding spiritual change, group rituals, and building of personal and collective identity.

Theme 1: Identity Formation Through Spiritual Practices

The first theme refers to how Dzogchen and meditation have impacted participants' personal identities. Interviews across the board generally told a story of how these practices helped shape the perception of self to continue living in a way not concerned with material things but deeper approaches to Buddhist doctrines.

1. Participant 1 emphasized how their focus changed from "worldly concerns to a deeper spiritual alignment" with the change of identity in self. This transformation proves to be one of the shifts towards the more spiritual-oriented identity.
2. Participant 6 continued: "The teachings of Dzogchen completely changed my sense of self, creating a more spiritually focused identity. That is all that really needed to be said-that not only does Dzogchen instruction transform a person's life but also create an identity, potentially having a profound internal effect on the participant."
3. "Participant 2 shared that Dzogchen helped her look beyond the ego, in addition to giving her the feeling of getting closer to the Dharma and changing their identity towards deeper values of Buddhism."
4. Participant 3 and Participant 4 both reported that spiritual practices had deepened insight into the basic Buddhist philosophy, such as

compassion and detachment. Participant 4 reported that compassion became part of the central self-sense of Participant 4.

5. The participant 5 explained that frequent meditation helps them resonate with the Buddhist values such as no attachment and wisdom.

Thus, practices such as Dzogchen and meditation form a core in the construction of identity because they incite detachment from mundane matters and deepen an individual's affinity towards basic tenets of Buddhism.

Theme 2: Role of Dharma Assemblies in Collective Imagination

The second theme has to do with how Dharma Assemblies function as the site of key identity construction and strengthening of collective imagination and group identity. All respondents linked their attendance in Dharma Assemblies with a strengthening of their feelings of belonging in the Nyingma community, though their experiences varied concerning how that collective identity is somehow reinforced.

1. Participant 2 pointed out how "chanting and collective prayers during Dharma Assemblies" made him part of a spiritual whole, thereby pointing out how shared practices unite the spiritual family.
2. Participant 3 talked of how the assemblies create a "collective identity," so that every participant feels as part of something larger than themselves. This goes on to show how important these rituals are in creating common spiritual visions.
3. Dharma Assemblies instil a "profound sense of belonging" because of shared rituals that entrench common spiritual goals, thus highlighting the collective dimension of identity, pointed out participant 1.
4. As recorded by Participant 6, Dharma Assemblies are being used to buttress the "collective imagination and shared spiritual identity" among participants, revealing how rituals were helping to support a joint spiritual worldview.
5. Participant 4 indicated that common practices at Dharma Assemblies create and enhance their bonding with others; it develops the entity as a group. This is how communal actions within the assemblies contribute to social cohesion among a group.
6. For participant 5, participation in Dharma Assemblies was found to be essential in achieving a deep sense of belongingness and shared purpose among other practitioners.

Dharma Assemblies thus serve as a key platform for reinforcing collective identity and imagination, unifying participants under shared spiritual values and rituals.

Theme 3: Interplay Between Personal and Collective Identity

The third theme discusses the personal spiritual transformation in

relation to collective identity within the Nyingma tradition. It had a question of whether participants' transformations were critical to the development or cohesion of a collective identity of the group, and results suggested reciprocity.

1. Participant 4 stated, "Personal and collective spiritual progress feed off each other," meaning individual spiritual growth enhances the collective identity, whereas the group's identity strengthens their personal journey.
2. Participant 1 echoed this sentiment saying that personal growth "enhances the group's spiritual energy," and that their collective identity will really enhance their journey. Such a dynamic interaction in between the individual and collective changes one experiences, indeed.
3. Participant 5 amplifies the above emphasis when they declare, "Community shapes my spiritual path," with her growth constituting part of the reinforcement of the collective goals of the group. This indicates how individual identity is shaped through the collective imagination of the groups.
4. Participant 6 explained, their spiritual growth is "nurtured by the collective identity," and this feeds back on to make their progress benefit the vision of the community, which demonstrates that this relationship is a two-way process.
5. Participant 3 added that the group collective imagination supports their change and similarly, in the same way, their growth benefits the community.
6. Participant 2 has explained the ways in which rituals facilitate collective personal change and feels their level of progress is required to the common identity of the group.

In general, the participants demonstrated a very mutual interplay between personal spiritual development and collective identity within the Nyingma, showing how they are interdependent and reciprocally enhancing dimensions.

Summary of Findings

Thematic analysis shows that the process of personal identity formation is deeply conditioned by spiritual activities like Dzogchen and meditation in the Nyingma tradition. Collective rituals, such as Dharma Assemblies, are highly instrumental in group identity and shared spiritual imagination. Individual and collective identities interplay dynamically and reciprocally; individual spiritual growth enhances the group identity and vice versa. Despite the involution and hardships that come along with the process of spiritual transformation, participants accepted the point that these difficulties, in fact, solidified their commitment not only to individual

development but also to the collective identity of the Nyingma tradition. The results clearly answer the research questions since they show how the personal and communal identities are constructed within the site of spiritual practices and the Dharma Assemblies and how the interdependence between individual and collective identity occurs in the Nyingma tradition.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the imperative aspects of identity formation, spiritual transformation, and group imagination in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, the final section will discuss how such findings coincide with current research, implications for Tibetan Buddhism, and limitation and further direction of the study.

Interpretation of Themes

The current research supports and expands on previous findings to describe identity development within Tibetan Buddhism, particularly in the Nyingma tradition. (Mills, 2013) wrote that personal identity within Buddhism is essentially fluid and reliant upon meditation and recitation rituals. The study re-confirms these findings, considering spiritual practices, such as Dzogchen and meditation, and how this practice leads to the change of participants' sense of self from material concerns to spiritual alignment. For example, Participant 1 noted that meditation led them to think less of "worldly concerns to deeper spiritual alignment," which is in accordance with (Mullen, 2017) argument that personal transformation in Tibetan Buddhism depends on ego or material detachment. Similarly, Participant 6 reports an extremely profound self-concept change in line with the teachings of Dzogchen in support of (Gyatso, 2020) argument that Tibetan Buddhist spiritual transformation mostly involves an internal process. This research adds to the literature in the sense that Dzogchen is not only a tool for personal growth but, for the purposes of consolidating one's identity in a larger spiritual community, it has a dual effect: at the individual and collective levels. The theme of Dharma Assemblies and Collective Imagination strongly resonates with (Samuel, 2012) work on ritual communication. Participant 2 notes the collective chanting and prayers during Dharma Assemblies created a cohesive spiritual community while, simultaneously vindicating Samuel's claims that such rituals communicate common spiritual values and form a cohesive cosmological framework (Samuel, 2012). Participant 3 explained further on the symbolic importance of these ceremonies, illustrating how the cumulative effect is an active engagement of a collective spiritual imagination. Resonating with (Griffiths, 1994) notion that Tibetan Buddhist rituals perform pedagogic and performative purposes. However,

this paper extends the scope of the search by illustrating different experiences based on participants' experiences with some emphasizing the performative aspects of the rituals, while others focus on its significance in forging a collective identity. The balance between personal and collective identity identified in this research is comparable to the findings of (Huang et al., 2014), which claimed that both individual and collective identity cannot exist separately from one another in Buddhism. Participant 4 had a focus on how spiritual development is two-way, in which personal development is enhanced by collective identity and vice versa. This research is not something new under the sun, but variation in the perceptual response of participants regarding this interaction identifies a difference. Participant 5 highlighted that the spiritual path in community constrains their impression that the degree to which people believe they are shaped or shaped others' collective identity differs between adherents. Adding to the literature is the dynamic process of forming identity within Nyingma since personal and collective identities constantly change within the spiritual practice and the communal rituals.

Implications for Tibetan Buddhism

This study highlights extensively on how specific spiritual practices and rituals forming parts of the communal fabric in the Nyingma tradition contribute to forming identity, both at personal and collective level with a focus on Dzogchen meditation and Dharma Assemblies. The study underlines the central role of Dzogchen practice in affecting individual spiritual transformation. Dzogchen, respondents report, leads to totally substantial shifts in personal identity and serves as a framework for focusing realization of true mind nature towards disengagement from worldly attachments and spiritual values of compassion and non-attachment. This finding is supportive of the claim by (Ruangsarn et al., 2021) that spiritual practices in Tibetan Buddhism are not only supporting personal development but also unity within religious communities. Thus, the study sheds light on how deeply Dzogchen impacts personal self-perception or the way a person perceives himself and his role within the bigger spiritual community, further suggesting that such practices are necessary for the sustainability of personal as well as communal spiritual development. Dharma assemblies are a main method of ensuring the common spiritual identity of the Nyingma tradition. Representing collective chanting, prayers, and symbolic offerings, the assemblies allow participants to strengthen shared spiritual values and group cohesion. For instance, Participant 2 and Participant 3 revealed that attending the Dharma Assemblies helps strengthen their bonding. In this regard, (Ya, 2020) argument with respect to collective rituals is well-supported in the process of maintaining group identity in Tibetan

Buddhism. This implies that collective events formed by these rituals are not only symbolic but a very important forum through which the Nyingma tradition survives as it fosters an environment to strengthen collective imagination and identity. This study takes Dzogchen meditation and Dharma Assemblies as a unit of specific practice and contributes to understanding the formation of personal and collective identity within the Nyingma tradition. It proves that identity formation is not linear or an isolated process but decisively communal and formed through active participation in commonly shared spiritual practices. The study also indicates that individual transformation and communal rituals are interdependent and necessary in maintaining the continuity and cohesion of Nyingma traditions, thus contributing to further sustaining Tibetan Buddhist practices.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the significance, several limitations apply to this study. First is the sample size-small although well-suited to in-depth qualitative analysis-of six participants, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research might extend participant numbers so that a more representative range of practitioners, including those from different geographical regions or having differing levels of involvement with the tradition, can be included. This would give a much more wholesome view of the differing ways of identity formation and group imagination in the larger Nyingma community. The paper centred its attention on the Dharma Assemblies as the core communal ritual primarily. Although the assemblies are of crucial importance to the process of creating collective identity, other communal practices and rituals of the Nyingma tradition may also produce identity. Further research should consider how various kinds of rituals or collective practices interact with personal and collective identities. Lastly, the study did not pay attention to the exogenous social, cultural, or political influences on participants' spiritual experiences. If its exogenous influences are found to interact with personal and collective identities, it would perhaps be a goldmine in pointing out the flexibility and endurance of Tibetan Buddhism in its contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored how Dzogchen meditation and Dharma Assemblies shape personal and collective identities within the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Findings show that spiritual practices such as Dzogchen foster a shift from material attachment to spiritual alignment, reshaping personal identities in alignment with core Buddhist principles like compassion and non-attachment. Dharma Assemblies, through ritual

communication involving chanting, prayers, and symbolic offerings, play a key role in forming and reinforcing collective identity. These rituals create a shared spiritual consciousness that unites participants, deepening both personal and communal identities. The study highlights the reciprocal relationship between personal spiritual growth and the collective identity of the Nyingma community, with each reinforcing the other. This expands the existing literature by demonstrating that identity formation in the Nyingma tradition is a communal, rather than a linear or isolated, process. While the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, this research contributes valuable insights into the role of spiritual practices and communal rituals in sustaining Tibetan Buddhism. Future studies could explore how other communal practices influence identity and examine broader social and cultural factors in shaping spiritual transformation within Tibetan Buddhism.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

Impact of Spiritual Practices on Identity

1. How have your spiritual practices within the Nyingma tradition, such as meditation or Dzogchen, influenced your personal identity?

Role of Dharma Assemblies in Shaping Collective Identity

1. In what ways do Dharma Assemblies contribute to a shared sense of identity and community among practitioners?

Challenges in Spiritual Transformation

1. What challenges have you faced during your spiritual transformation within the Nyingma tradition, and how have they impacted your personal and collective identity?

Interplay Between Personal and Collective Identity

1. How do you see your personal spiritual growth contributing to or being influenced by the collective identity of the Nyingma community?

Significant Milestones in Spiritual Journey

1. Can you share a specific milestone in your spiritual journey that has significantly shaped your identity?