

6.5. Minutes With... Transcript
David DiValerio
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Nicole Welk-Joerger: You're listening to 6.5 Minutes with C21 – an audio introduction to the topics, experts, and leaders who take part in the conversations hosted by the Center for 21st Century Studies. I'm Nicole Welk-Joerger, Deputy Director of the Center and the interviewer in this episode.

Earlier this month, David DiValerio added to our ongoing explorations of loneliness and isolation with his research on the cultural and intellectual histories of Tibet. DiValerio is an associate professor of religious studies and history here at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

You're working on this longer intellectual history of the long term meditative retreat in Tibetan Buddhism. Can you talk about how isolation is a part of this history, and how we might understand it differently with your specific case studies?

David DiValerio: So as you mentioned the project that I'm currently in the process of finishing a first draft of is a study of the history of long-term meditative retreat in Tibetan Buddhism, specifically individual meditative retreat, I think communal meditative retreat is kind of a different phenomenon, that I'm not really addressing here.

So this is the tradition of men and women who have made the decision, they are usually monks, but not necessarily, to then go off into the mountains to live in a cave or in a hut in a forest somewhere, some place of isolation and stay there for an extended period of time for the purposes of meditation. It could be a year, 3 years, 10 years, we have cases of individuals throughout the history of the tradition who will arrive somewhere and make a vow to stay there for the rest of their lives. So, they are going into isolation in a, in a really extreme way from our normal perspective as worldly people, all for the purposes of isolation so they can meditate more effectively. And what motivates this is the goal of achieving enlightenment, which is understood as an act of compassion. If you can achieve enlightenment, then you can help sentient beings more effectively. Relieve them of their suffering. Teach, do all the things to help all the different sentient beings in the universe, who all have at one point, or another been our own mother. If you think back to all of our uncountable past lives. So, it's motivated by compassion. And isolation, to be removed from other people is understood to be a necessary condition to have those kinds of meditative experiences. So, it is inherent to the tradition of long-term meditative retreat. It is a means to the end.

Nicole: Related to this, your previous work has focused on translation especially with these biographies of monks. And I wondered, did you encounter descriptions or discussions of loneliness or isolation in these pieces? Did they struggle with these states of isolation or loneliness or is this just a completely different way of thinking about and talking about being alone, particularly for a meditative purpose?

David:

So, my earlier research which led to my first two books was sort of working in the world of Tibetan Buddhist hagiography: life stories of individuals who taken on this kind of extreme ascetic lifestyle. And I can't recall any passages from any of those texts that talk about one of these figures actually being lonely. That that doesn't really fit in the spirit of hagiographic literature, you know where it describes all the miracles the person performed and all this sort of wonderful things that came but we don't really hear much about the struggle along the way. A really good case in point is from my second book which is a translation of the life story of a man named Kunga Zangpo who was born in 1458, who became known as the madman of Ü for doing this sort of strange behaviors after his many years of asceticism. But there is a point where he lived in a single room, and never went outside for a period of 10 years. This, he was at his monastery he was sealed inside of a room, and he never left. And the entirety of his communication with the world outside would have been through a small hole where food and water would have been passed through, and his disciples would arrive from far away and they would sit on the ground outside this hole, and he would speak to them, you know, at a whisper through this this portal.

Throughout the history of the retreat tradition, we have examples of men and women who are literally bricking themselves up inside of their cave or their chambers or whatever. But I can't think of a single example where it actually talks about, you know, the challenges of loneliness. Now, I have found a couple passages that I think would be useful to highlight from the literature I'm working with now, that talk about the necessity of loneliness, or the virtues of loneliness. So for example, one of the texts I'm working with for this current project was written by a man named Sonam Chodzin born in 1688 and he's from Sikkim the sort of kingdom on the periphery of the southern part of the Tibetan world. And he wrote a text called the དབེན་པ་རི་ཁྲོད་འགྲིམ་པའི་གསལ་འདེབས། ཞལ་གདམ་ཐར་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་གྲུ་ཕྱིར *this is the reminder for those who wander in mountain retreats and empty places, the instruction of the great ship for liberation*. And in it he's describing the kind of attitude towards the world and the lifestyle that one should assume, and he's talking about the ideal retreat for those who wander in mountain retreats the "grim pa'i." And he says that such a one would be happy to get sick, would be happy if they died and in the fact of being alone or feeling lonely that's actually the fulfillment of your vows, because to take on this kind of lifestyle you make a vow to cut off interpersonal relationships, and if you get to the point of feeling lonely and desperate and unhappy that's actually a sign of success, that means that you're doing it right.

Nicole:

What is something we may need to consider or reconsider about loneliness and isolation, if we study it in the context of religious history?

David:

Sort of stepping back and thinking about this question of loneliness, and how it connects to my research and then the study of religion in general. I think that the tradition I'm studying is well it's unique for how robust it is the fact that it's been an unbroken tradition for 1000 years and actually a very normal part of the Tibetan religious life. I think if we were to look at eremitic traditions of all different religions, we'd actually find lots of similarities with the kinds of things that we've been talking about today. And I think in each case that the most central thing that we'll find is that this is kind of a subculture where it's based on a total inversion of

our normal hierarchy of concern. Where you know the sorts of pursuits that define our lives and that you know that animate us day in and day out, year in and year out and actually give direction to our societies, these are traditions that are purposely turning those on their heads and saying, we reject you know your normal values and so on. And in the process, isolation or loneliness can be completely redefined and taken from something that's normally seen as a problem in our society and then turned into a virtue.

Nicole: To further engage with this interview, other conversations, and the participatory research and reading activities for Lonely No More, please visit our website at uwm.edu/c21. If not there, we hope to catch you when you have another 6.5 Minutes to spare.