Western Travellers in the Land of the Buddha Legitimising Travel through the Religionification of Tourism

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, there has been a significant growth of tourism, pilgrimage and travel in Indian places associated with the Buddha. Such dynamism is the outcome of greater international touristic activity (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2015), of recent policies by the Ministry of Tourism of India, international investments in Buddhist sites (Geary, 2009; Goldberg, 2011), and an increased popularity of Buddhism in the West (Thibeault, 2013). The existence or absence, the intensification or the decline of Buddhist pilgrimage in India reflect larger historical and religious developments in Buddhism both in and out of India. The modernisation of Buddhism in the last two centuries, and the rebirth of Buddhist pilgrimage in India in the early twentieth century have developed into a globalised Buddhism which is giving shape, and is shaped by, contemporary tourism.

In the Mahāparinibbānasutta (Dīgha Nikāya 2:140-141), it is said that devotees should visit the places that are associated with four events of the Buddha’s life (birth, enlightenment, first teaching, and final enlightenment). It was only in the two centuries following the Buddha’s final nirvāṇa that pilgrimage practices actually gained currency, and slowly made their way into the canonical literature. Buddhist sites in India evolved until the twelfth century when Muslim emperors took over power in North and then South India; Nālandā University in Bihar was destroyed in 1198, Buddhism disappeared from Kashmir in the fifteenth century, and from South India in the seventeenth century. What was left were pillars with edicts and stupas built by Aśoka in the third century B.C.E. In the early twentieth century modern archaeologists studied the edicts, and identified the epithetic places mentioned in the Mahāparinibbānasutta as the modern cities of Lumbinī, Bodhgayā, Sārnāth, and Kushinagar. Thus, the establishment of a coherent pilgrimage circuit to these places was a modern invention (Bareau, 1980; Foucher, 1987). Modernist Asian Buddhists who reclaimed these sites, such as Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933), were convinced by the ideals of rationalism, empiricism, and universalism through which they reinterpreted Buddhism (Huber, 2008).

Bodhgayā became the centre of the Buddhascape: a transformed landscape by foreign, migratory Buddhist actors and their specific practices, images, ideas, and objects. ... Bodhgayā is the centre of the Buddhascape as it has the ability to both manifest sectarian particularities and transcend all traditional particularities because of its historical significance and material potency to draw together Buddhists of all kinds (Goldberg, 2011: 11–12).

Institutional development in Bodhgayā began in 1877 with the construction of the Birmese temple, followed by that of the Mahābodhi Society in 1891. Once Buddhists could again have partial control over the...
Mahābodhi temple, many more temples were built (Doyle, 1997; Trevithick, 2001). In the 1990s, new Bihari policies benefited the building of temples from almost any Buddhist tradition or lineage. International tourism to Bodhgayā increased when direct flights to Bodhgayā from Bangkok and Rangoon were established in 2002. The idea of a Buddhist India gained popularity as governmental agencies in India began to promote religious tourism to Buddhist destinations.

### Pilgrimage and Tourism

Anthropology (Coleman and Eade, 2004; Eade and Sallnow, 2000; Turner and Turner, 1978), studies of religions (Reader, 2005), ethnomusicology (Diehl, 2002), and Tibetan studies (Buffetrille, 2000; Huber, 2008; Karmay, 1998; McKay, 1998) have contributed to the interpretation and conceptualisation of Buddhist pilgrimages. Few studies have been published on the topic of Buddhist pilgrimages in India and Nepal from the 1970s onwards (Doyle, 1997, 2003; Geary, 2009; Goldberg, 2011; Moran, 2004; Trevithick, 2001). Rather than considering pilgrimage as a sui generis condition of homo religiosus mobilis (Turner and Turner, 1978), or an intrinsic field of contestation (Eade and Sallnow, 2000), I adopt a middle-way approach which focuses on the sociological conceptualisation of religion and tourism. This approach - which is not dissimilar to Stausberg (2011) - highlights the coherence and (apparent) contradiction within both fields, as well as the influence each has on the other.

Tourism has developed to such a point that it now shapes other social realities in global society. Some authors have argued that the modernisation of society has brought about the disappearance of religion and pilgrimage, for the benefit of ‘secular’ forms such as tourism. For instance, Dean MacCannell wrote:

> I believe that the consensus about the structure of the modern world achieved through tourism and mass leisure is the strongest and broadest known to history (1999: 139).

Tourism could thus, metaphorically subsume modern society. This sort of opposition between premodern religion and pilgrimage, on the one hand, and modern mass tourism, on the other, has also been put forward by anthropologists. Some authors suggest that the tourist is a modern lay pilgrim which results from an evolution from medieval pilgrimage to modern tourism (e.g. see Michel, 2004:93-94; Urbain, 2002:163-164). However, such an understanding of tourism only takes into account a partial reading of religious history, and fails to include religion as a sociological object of its own. In a way, this view assumes a secularist view - implying that the foundational function of religion progressively disappears in modernity - that should lead us to think that in places where it is the strongest, e.g., in North America and in Europe, tourism should replace religion altogether, which is not the case. It rather seems that religion and tourism still flourish simultaneously in common social spaces. Therefore, it should not be assumed that the modernisation of religion and of pilgrimage leads to the secularisation, and the dissolving away, of the religious features of these two phenomena (Stausberg, 2011: 22-25).

Pilgrimage phenomena are thriving in the twenty-first century, as they become both more globalised and more particularised (Reader, 2007; Stausberg, 2011:56-64). Reinvented forms of pilgrimage manifest ‘autonomadism,’ praising autonomy and nomadism (Michel, 2009), and ‘do-it-yourself religion.’ (Bibby, 1988; Ménard, 1999) Mobility is characteristic to both pilgrimage and tourism, but the legitimation of tourism builds on an entirely different set of assumptions than the religious ones on which pilgrimage rests. In this paper, I am focusing on modern tourism in the form of mass leisure tourism;[2] which has become a mass phenomenon among privileged classes in Western, post-industrial societies. Entertainment, cultural, and nature tourism (Michel, 2004: 49) have been integrated in mass leisure tourism in the second half of the twentieth century, owing to the appearance of paid holidays in the 1950s-1960s, in post-industrial societies (Urbain, 2006). The efficiency and power of tourism even trigger anti-tourism discourses on the part of those who resist integration into mass tourism, and who prefer calling themselves ‘travellers’ to convey a sense of authenticity that they deny to tourists (Stausberg, 2011:7; Urbain, 2002: chap. 3). Through its encounters with tourism, economy and advertising, pilgrimage has adapted and has toned down its explicit religious communication to emphasise other aspects.

1. Stausberg (2011:234 note 4) has noted this bias in many studies of tourism.
2. Taking roots in the Western culture of the 1950s, autonomadism took its inspiration in the Beat generation, then the hippie culture in the 1960s, and later in the routard culture in the 1960s–1970s. It finally led to the marginal, and then the commonplace backpacker culture which is illustriously portrayed by Lonely Planet’s travel guides.
3. Leisure tourism may also occur within the context of other forms of displacement, including travelling as a business person, attending an academic conference as a scholar or a sports competitor / athlete.
such as holidaying, hiking, or heritage (Reader, 2014: 192-193). In the following, I attempt to show that opposing pilgrimage and tourism conceptually can only be useful if we aim at distinguishing the interferences that occur between them. While I intend on ‘plac[ing] the focus of attention directly upon the experiences … of the tourists themselves’ (Norman, 2011:18), and thus acknowledge their individuality, I refrain from calling participants ‘spiritual tourists.’ Rather, I insist on an understanding of the reciprocal influence between religion and tourism in which neither sphere subjects itself totally to the other.

Western Travellers in the Land of the Buddha

This paper focuses on the understandings and discourses of legitimation that Westerners travelling to India put forward when they are asked about their role(s) as travellers, tourists, or pilgrims. In describing the sort of destinations to which these travellers go, and the kinds of activities they perform, I argue that their experience and understanding of travel in the land of the Buddha can be seen as reflections of the interferences between Buddhism and tourism. The rejection of the tourist identity is, in such circumstances, only illustrative of the power of tourism, and serves a contrario to legitimise the participants’ views on the practice of religion and on touring. While Buddhism seems to have acquired a systemic, self-evident legitimacy in the participants’ understandings (Thibeault, 2013), tourism only gains legitimacy when it is embedded in religion in general, and in Buddhism in particular, i.e. when tourism models (parts of) itself on Buddhism to make better sense of destinations, and the experience thereof. This is precisely what I will call the ‘Buddhification of tourism.’ The reverse process, that of the ‘touristification of Buddhism,’ i.e. when Buddhism models (some of) its properties on touristic ones in order to shape its communication (e.g. discourses, practices) in a more powerful, efficient, and convincing manner, is only marginal in the particular situations I investigated.

Figure 1 : At the foot of the Mahabodhi Temple, two Western women practice Tibetan Buddhism while pilgrims circumambulate the stupa

Source : Author
First, I look at the ways by which study participants relate to India as a special destination, their motivation for such a journey, and how participants relate to the traveller, tourist, and pilgrim identities. I detail the two main places in India where Western travellers visit out of their interest in Buddhism: Bodhgayā and Dharamsala. By examining the sort of activities that the participants perform there, and the understandings they communicate I underscore the importance of Buddhism in their interpretations of travelling and touring. Second, I discuss the pilgrim / tourist difference that is often assumed in the conceptualisation of pilgrimage and tourism. I argue that religious communication (of which pilgrimage is part) and touristic communication have distinct properties that give shape to two systematically different, but interrelated social spheres: global religion and mass leisure tourism. Through a conceptualisation of religion and tourism, I arrive at the operational conceptualisations of touristification and religionification (and its correlate Buddhification), which I use to explain the process of the mutual modelling between religion and tourism.

To investigate the contemporary formation of Buddhism, I conducted a qualitative study among Westerners who travel to India with an interest in Buddhism. Forty-five participants, aged between 26 and 69 years old, were interviewed in India from March to June 2010. Most of the research was conducted in Dharamsala (Himachal Pradesh), and Bodhgayā (Bihar). The choice of Dharamsala and Bodhgayā as locations to conduct fieldwork observation was based on the international, cosmopolitan features of these two Indian destinations. While the first is more closely associated with Tibetan Buddhism, the second is interdenominational. Both show aspects of the modernisation of Buddhism and of pilgrimages in India. Their historical backgrounds illustrate such a point, and their inclusion in planned Buddhist tours in India make them privileged places to observe contemporary touristic practices at the crossroads with Buddhism.

The great majority of participants were involved in the practice and / or study of Vipassana meditation - a Theravada Buddhist form of meditation, or of various lineages of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Forty-five interviews were conducted in Dharamsala (22 women and 23 men, aged between 26 and 66). The great majority of the participants were single, with only a few people involved in a relationship and another few who were married. The countries of origins and the nationalities of the participants included Canada, the United States, Mexico, Honduras, Guadeloupe, Brazil, United Kingdom, France, Spain, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Poland, Holland, Israel, South Africa and Australia. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded in QSR NVivo 7, and analysed by means of categories constructed from recurring themes in the participants’ speeches. The three main category headings were: travel in India, Buddhist practices and notions, and views on contemporary Buddhism. It is the first of these that provided the data used for this paper.

**Buddhism and Travel in Contemporary India**

A good number of participants first came to India with a very vague knowledge or experience of Buddhism. Their encounter with Buddhism was serendipitous, and they say it was coherent with whatever they had been looking for through travel. Quite often, the plan to travel to India wasn’t specifically related to a clear,
well-defined religious or spiritual purpose. Their interest in Buddhism arose with the people they met and the places they visited. As their understanding and practice of Buddhism evolved, they began reinterpreting their Indian travels on the grounds of their newly adopted Buddhist belief systems (see Box 1). Then, their encounters led them to cultivate a deeper interest in Buddhism. In other cases, having discovered and begun to practise meditation in the West, influenced their choice of Indian destinations.

Most of the participants consider themselves as travellers when asked about their perceptions of travel, pilgrimage, and tourism (see Box 2). According to them, tourists adopt a consumerist attitude and behaviour, and a superficial view of the world, and they engage to a minimum with local people and destinations.

Participants assume that a pilgrim or a Buddhist would travel to places connected with religion or Buddhism with a spirit of devotion, faith, and willingness or duty to practise the religion. Few participants consider themselves as pilgrims in this way (see Box 3). Some participants say that they have done a pilgrimage to one or a few sites, but there are few who say that they have gone on a journey to India with the aim of performing a pilgrimage to Buddhist places. They sometimes mention having been a tourist or a pilgrim informally. For most of the participants, it is the figure of the traveller that appeals to them—as someone who journeys abroad and establishes deep connections with the people and their places. They imagine their Indian journey through that figure and its connection to Buddhism.

The participants’ self-declared identities as travellers seems to appropriately serve their purpose to discover, study or practise the Buddha’s Dharma. The rejection of the tourist identity puts emphasis on their religious or spiritual role as travellers. However, the identification as a ‘Buddhist traveller’ or ‘travelling Buddhist’ does not appeal to participants. As Raphaël explained (see Box 2), he came to India and Nepal in order to find and meet his root (main) guru, the person that would become his main Buddhist teacher in this lifetime. For him, that makes him different from other kinds of travellers.

Quite a few participants came to India to volunteer in a NGO, and had interactions with Buddhism or Buddhists which influenced their travel plans at some point (see Box 4). Other participants have been involved with the Red Cross, *Médecins Sans Frontières*, or other, local Tibetan NGOs in Dharamsala. Only those participants that are engaged in NGOs that serve Tibetans underscored the importance of learning about Buddhism as they
The participants have also been attracted to places that are not specifically connected to Buddhism: Mātā Amṛtānandamayī Devī’s ashram in Tamil Nadu; Sri Aurobindo’s ashram in Pondicherry; the Golden Temple in Amritsar; the towns of Rishikesh or Varanasi where the spirits of the Himalaya and Gaṅgā rest, respectively. Journeys to India encompass a wide range of traditions and places, but some itineraries appear as more influential than others. For example, some participants say that they have consciously decided to visit only highly spiritual places, to the exclusion of other more ‘touristic’ places that they pejoratively associate with mass tourism. This sort of legitimisation is common, but participants also say that they had a good time seeing the Taj Mahal or lying on one of Goa’s sunny beaches. As one of the participants told: 

I have been to Goa, and spent four days under the sun. It was really good. Will I go there for three weeks? So what? There should be a spiritual attraction to a place if I’m going to go there. I’m not against tourists, I can tell when I’m being a tourist. You see, I did four days of tourism in Goa, and I was very happy (Pierre, 60, Canada).

The participants’ tendency to consider spiritual, religious or Buddhist places in India with a higher esteem is not merely the effect of the participants’ view and rejection of mass tourism: it is actually a feature of how religion and tourism interact. As I will argue below, these travellers relentingly acknowledge their role within the touristic system of communication, and strive to give meaning to tourism by calling on other forms of communication, like Buddhist or religious ones.

### Box 4. Buddhism through NGOs

‘Kolkata, I really wanted to see it. … Even the Kali temple, that interested me a lot. … I then went to Mother Theresa’s. After, it was Rajasthan and all of that, it was just touristic. Rajasthan is a beautiful area, but it remains touristic. What was important for me was Buddhism, through volunteering with Tibetan refugees. … At this moment, my main interest is to continue to volunteer, and to learn about Buddhism.’ (Louise, 59, Canada)

‘I first came here in October 2007 for the first time. I didn’t have any kind of interest in India, or in the spiritual practice or whatever. … I was just finishing the baccalaureate in anthropology in Alicante, in my place in Spain. I wanted to leave the place. I met some friend who has a friend who was working in a small, rural Indian NGO in Bodhgaya. They were looking for people to go there. So I said: ‘fine, I want to go.’ It was India. It could be Angola, Brazil or whatever.’ (Marco, 34, Spain)

[Later, Marco was introduced to the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahāyāna Tradition (FPMT), and to its famous one-month November course which he attended in Nepal. At the end of it all, he began a Buddhist program of study and practice, and it was at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA) in Dharamsala that he pursued it - during which time he was interviewed]
Box 5. India as a spiritual power place

**Power, energy and spirituality in India**

‘On my first trip to India, my curiosity was more cultural than spiritual. But, of course, spirituality is very powerful and present in India. I was also open to that. I happened to be surrounded with spirituality. … India, its beauty, ugliness, contrasts. There is something in the land, for thousands of years, spirituality has guided this country.’ (Catherine, 32, Canada)

‘It was love at first sight, with India, once the cultural shock had lessened. We had found our way in the spirituality that was everywhere in the daily hubbub.’ (Alexandre, 33, Canada)

‘I really like Benares, places that are powerful energetically.’ (Marc-André, 41, France)

‘Sometimes in India, I really feel like [saying] thank you. When I say thank you with my heart, something is coming back to me: ‘You’re welcome, this is for you.’ … In Varanasi, I had this sensation, in the evening, close to the ghats, with the candles, chanting around, and the smell of incense. Magic moments. Not the place, but when you feel the moment is holy and you are inside the moment, this is what I’m looking for. You can feel it everywhere.’ (Tina, 26, Italy)

‘India is an extremely spiritual country, it integrates its spirituality in daily life. It’s not separate. All these temples on the side of the road. Constantly, India brings me back to the fact that spirituality and practice are not separate from the here and now.’ (Julie, 42, France)

‘When you are in Europe, you never feel far removed from the familiar. We wanted to be farther removed from the familiar.’ (Brian, 62, USA)

**Rishikesh as a spiritual place**

“We really liked Rishikesh. We found that it was really touristy and westernised, in a lot of places. We found a place down the end of town, the last ashram. All the ashrams are lined up along, down the river. … We were on the left bank, if you are facing down the river. We stayed in a place where you could walk down to the river in about five minutes to a ghat. It just happened there was a place the same people came every day, same locals. They would sit by the river and do their ritual things, and kind of meditate and watch the sun go down. It was lovely. You felt like you were making contact with the Hindu spirituality as a real thing there.’ (Brian, 62, USA)

**India as a spiritual place, a contrario**

‘I’ve found that Indians are moving away from their spirituality, it’s a shame. They want to westernise themselves too much. Their evolution is going in the wrong direction. Even their religious and spiritual aspects are becoming more materialistic.’ (Marc-André, 41, France)

**India as a non-spiritual place**

‘[India] is a very fascinating place. It doesn’t have a spiritual meaning to me.’ (Daniel, 36, Israel)

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**Touring Bodhgayā**

Bodhgayā, the Mahābodhi Temple and the Bodhi tree (Latin *ficus religiosa*) are considered by Buddhists worldwide as the universal centre of Buddhism. At the foot of the Bodhi tree, the diamond throne (Sk. *vajrāsana*,[4] Tib. *dojeden*[5]) is viewed as the place where Buddhas of the past and future have awakened themselves, as it has been the case with Gotama (Pali; Sk. Gautama), the Buddha of the current Buddhist era who lived 2,500 years ago. In the period from October to mid February, Bodhgayā is enlivened by enthusiastic crowds of thousands of visitors who stay a few hours or sojourn many weeks. These visitors are Indian, Sri Lankan, Thai, Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, European, from the Americas, and elsewhere. Hindus stop in the Buddhist Bodhgayā on their way to the Hindu Gayā, paying homage in both places to the Hindu god Viṣṇu (who they believe incarnated himself as the Buddha). Western foreigners, from various traditions - such as Vipassana Meditation as taught by S. N. Goenka, *vipassanā* meditation in a more generic sense, Tibetan Vajrayāna, Zen, and others - stay for long or short periods at Bodhgayā, and spend their time practising Dharma, listening to teachings, visiting other Buddhist sites in the area, as well as shopping and socialising with fellow travellers.

Foreigners mingle with Buddhists from all traditions to liven up a colourful crowd. Around the Mahābodhi Temple, practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism walk the circumnavigation path while holding their *mālā* (rosaries) with their fingertips, reciting mantras or absorbing themselves in a silent meditation. Several Tibetans perform prostration each three steps while they walk this path. This circumnavigation practice is not adopted so much by foreigners practising Tibetan Buddhism. Numerous Tibetan Buddhism practitioners - foreigners and Tibetans alike - prostrate themselves at a regular rhythm, for hours on end. Many among them have committed to a daily practice of prostration, and go about their practice very early each morning. As Nina (40, Australia) said:

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4. Sk.: Sanskrit.
mostly to listen to the Dalai Lama’s teachings. A few hundred Westerners attended too. Other activities included a one-day pilgrimage to Vulture Peak in Rājgir, organised by the Root Institute (which belongs to the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahāyāna Tradition - FPMT). The Buddha and some of his disciples meditated there, and, according to the Mahāyāna tradition, the Buddha taught the Prajñāpāramitā there. Accompanying Lama Zopa Rinpočé, spiritual head of FPMT, pilgrims (mostly Western) climbed Vulture Peak and attended an afternoon-long teaching given by their ‘root guru’ (see Figure 2). Root Institute also offered all sorts of Buddhist courses, retreats, and teachings during this very busy period of the year. Many Tibetan Buddhism practitioners whom I’ve met in Bodhgayā were travelling from Kopan monastery in Nepal to Tushita Center in Dharamsala, and on their way had made a stop at Root Institute (all three centres belong to the

That’s the practice [in Bodhgayā]. Everyone is talking about prostration. Everyone is doing it. The energy is all about that. It’s set up for it.’

The Mahābodhi Temple is surrounded by a path which runs along the temple walls and passes under the Bodhi tree. This path, the Bodhi tree, and the statue of the Buddha inside the temple constitute the main attractions. Whether walking, sitting, or prostrating, practitioners from all Buddhist faiths and traditions seem to engage in deep, contemplative and introspective practices.

In the winter time, many great Tibetan prayer festivals (Tib. mönlam chenmo) are held within the setting of the Mahābodhi temple. Each of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism holds its own separate event. In the winter of 2009–2010, the Gelukpas held their great prayer festival simultaneously with the teachings of the Dalai Lama. Thousands of Tibetans, from India, Nepal and Tibet, came to attend the various festivals, but 6. Sk., ‘Perfection of Wisdom.’
The Dalai Lama’s influence in Dharamsala is no longer limited to his bodily presence: his symbolic representation has acquired an influence of its own. The symbolic presence of the Dalai Lama has given this place a ‘special’ feel, and turned it into one of the ‘power places’ of Tibetan Buddhism (see Figure 3). Dharamsala can be observed as a liminary and central place: on the one hand, Tibetan refugees settle there only in the hope of leaving it one day to go back to Tibet and, on the other hand, Dharamsala has been sanctified by the Dalai Lama’s presence and has become a thriving pilgrimage site for Buddhists, Tibetans and non-Tibetans alike (Diehl, 2002).

McLeod Ganj is a hill town which has thus been greatly shaped by the Tibetan culture over the last fifty years. Travellers from all around the world land in this area during the high season (mid March to mid June, and October-November), driven by their interests in the Tibetan ‘cause’, the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism, meditation, the freshness and beauty of the mountain scenery, yoga, a diversity of religious events (Reiki, healing therapies, esotericism, etc.), social

Touring Dharamsala

Pilgrimage sites in India which are specifically associated with Tibetan Buddhism are a new development. Dharamsala became famous because the Dalai Lama established his residence there in 1960, in McLeod Ganj (Upper Dharamsala), and the Central Tibetan Administration in 1963, in Gangkyi (midway between Lower and Upper Dharamsala). Tenzin Gyatso (born 1935), the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, fled out of Tibet following the Tibetan population’s uprising, on March 10, 1959. The Dalai Lama is acknowledged as the representative of all Tibetan sects of Buddhism, and his authority has an influence on most of Tibetan Buddhist organisations, centres, and monasteries worldwide (Obadia, 1999).
Box 7. Dharamsala

"From Rishikesh, I wanted to go to Badrinath and the mountains, then I felt like I was always travelling and looking for something, and something was always missing. So I said to myself: ‘Just to go to Dharamkot [Upper Dharamsala area], and take your yoga seriously. There’s the vipassanā so you can do meditation.’" (Tina, 26, Italy)

‘We’d chosen to go to Dharamsala, because we wanted to know the Tibetan cause better, and there were Buddhist teachings. We stayed three weeks, we were following teachings at the Library [of Tibetan Works and Archives], on Buddhist philosophy. We did three days of Vipassana Meditation, because we were meditators already.’ (Alexandre, 33, Canada)

‘This place [Dharamsala], from the first moment, it blew my mind. It’s like a parallel reality.’ (Daniel, 36, Israel)

The main Buddhist attraction in Dharamsala is the main temple (Tib. Tsuklakkang) which is located at the bottom of the hillside town McLeod Ganj. The Dalai Lama’s residence is just a few steps away, and the temple grounds hosts most of his public appearances during which he delivers Buddhist teachings, leads a religious transmission or initiation, or speaks about the current situation of Tibet and Tibetans. The outer pilgrimage path (Tib. lingkor) circles the temple hill and the residence. Pilgrims - Westerners and Asians - walk this path holding counting beads on their mālā, spinning prayer wheels (Tib. mani khorlo), and walking around chörtens (stupas). Khora (Tib., ‘circumnavigation’) is considered an important part of Tibetan Buddhist rituals. As Jimmy (42, Britain) said:

We do circumambulation a lot in the Tibetan tradition, walking around holy objects. ... I often go to the temple [Tsuklakkhang] and I recite mantras using my mālā while walking around the stupa or the temple.

The other, inner pilgrimage path circles the Tsuklakkang and the temple dedicated to the Tantric deity Kālacakra (Sk., ‘Wheel of Time’).

Between Lower Dharamsala and McLeod Ganj, the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA) hosts teachings which are attended by experienced Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, and by curious travellers who drop in to these daily classes once in a while. In 2009–2010, the most popular teachings were those given by Geshè Sönam Rinchen. LTWA courses (e.g. Tibetan language, Buddhist philosophy) begin in mid March and last a few months (until May or June), or many months (until December). The Buddhist philosophy classes all follow a traditional, orthodox framework: teachings are delivered in the form of a recitation and a commentary on a Buddhist scripture from Tibetan or Sanskrit origins, and composed by Indian or Tibetan masters. Students follow a set of formal ritual practices before and after the teachings, paying homage to the teacher and to the teachings.

The FPMT-affiliated Tushita Center, in Dharamkot (Upper Dharamsala), offers a wide range of teachings and retreats in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, such as introductory (e.g., lamrim condensed teachings) or advanced teachings (e.g., Tantric purification), and retreats. I met many participants who attended the 30-day, flagship FPMT course in Kopan monastery (Nepal), travelled to Bodhgayā to attend the January 2010 teachings by the Dalai Lama and to practise prostration intensively, participated in Lama Zopa Rinpočhe’s pilgrimage to Vulture Peak, and who got involved in the activities at Root Institute. They arrived on time in Dharamsala for a one-month advanced retreat, led by their root guru Lama Zopa Rinpočhe. On this South Asian FPMT Trail, there is an informal community of practitioners who relate to each other through their choices of destinations, activities, and through the figure of their main teacher.

With regard to Theravāda Buddhism, the Dhamma Sikhara Vipassana meditation centre, adjacent to Tushita Center in Dharamkot, offers ten-day meditation courses which attract hundreds of participants from March to November each year. This cosmopolitan Vipassana centre commands a good reputation among Westerners travelling to Dharamsala (Goldberg and Décary, 2013:291–300). Both new and ancient participants joined in these ten-day courses, or in the daily meditation sessions (morning and evening). Once the daily, morning meditation session is ended at around 9 a.m., meditators meet at the nearby Himalaya Tea Shop, where they enjoy sweet Indian tea and socialise with fellow meditators. Half an hour or so later, the crowd disperses, everyone going their own way. Lori’s experience and comparison of both Tushita and Dhamma Sikhara is enlightening (see Box 8).

To sum up, there is not merely a single pilgrimage or touristic worldview that frames the travellers’ experiences in the Bodhgayā and Dharamsala areas, but several worldviews that involve distinct forms of
pilgrimage, religious or touristic practices. Mainly, there are two sets of representations - one is FPMT-based and the other is Vipassana-based - which inform the participants’ views on Buddhism, and on Bodhgaya and Dharamsala as places worth experiencing. In the same geographical space, many imaginary spaces thrive, each being supported by practices and beliefs which differ from one type of traveller to the other.

Neither Touristic Religion nor Religious Tourism: Bridging the Divide Between Tourism and Religion

In some rare cases (see Mathis, Box 3 above), pilgrimage is considered as an integral part of Buddhist practice: it is described as a core religious, Buddhist practice, and is put into relation with other, specific discourses, notions, norms, and values (within Buddhism) that are relevant to such practice. However, participants are generally not concerned with the concept of pilgrimage or with being a pilgrim (at least not explicitly), but designate what they do and think in terms of spirituality (thus implicitly or explicitly assuming that pilgrimage is different and should be part of religion). The understanding of Buddhism as spirituality, or even as non-religious, is an important part of the participants’ discourses. But, this construction does not lead to the deinstitutionalisation of Buddhism as religion and as one of the religions (Liogier, 2004; Obadia, 1999; Thibeault, 2013).

As Beyer (2006) has argued, the systematicity of modern religious communication lies in its internal properties: the core soteriological distinction (blessed / damned, or ignorant / awakened in terms of Buddhist communication) indicates whether an experience or action is religiously positive or negative, i.e. leading to salvation or astray; the thematisation of transcendence in central religious communication; the expectation of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and authority within any given religion, and their consequential legitimisation through myth; central religious actions in the forms of rituals; and faith as power and medium of exchange. Participants (as insiders) use the category spirituality to designate what they wish not to fall under the category of religion (Beyer, 2006: 274). Beyer (2006: 281) writes:

This sort of distinguishing concept [i.e. spirituality] . . . is actually better seen as a symptom of contestation over the range of

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<th>Box 8. The Vipassana Meditation centre</th>
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<td>‘The Vipassana centre, that’s Goenka’s place, non-denominational, you don’t have to have a religion. You can just go in there and meditate. Then, same with Tushita, you don’t have to be a Buddhist, but it’s going to give you Buddhist meditation. So it’s going to give you ideas on Buddhism, it’s going to tell you how to become or how to accept, how to understand death, dying, the wheel, samsāra, all of these things that are involved with understanding a specific… In the Vipassana centre, there is a calm, cool, everything is muted, everything is the way it is, like in nature. In the Tushita centre, it’s very beautiful again, but everything is geared towards the Buddha. So everything is colourful and light, there are tangka paintings everywhere, the gompa [temple] is stunning. There are big pictures of the Dalai Lama. … When you come out of meditation, you are surrounded by the religion. When you go to Vipassana, you are surrounded by nothing. Just whatever you want. You can have whatever belief system you want to believe. … There is nothing swaying you in any direction.’ (Lori, 50, Britain)</td>
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Expecting meditation

‘I go every day [to Dhamma Sikhara]. I have been since I’ve been in Dharamsala. I’ve been for about a month. It’s fantastic, it makes you high and cry, it does all of the things that it’s supposed to do. The thing about group meditation is you can feel everyone in the room. We all got our own picture of what it is where you are going, what you are doing. But everyone in the room has a sense of the expectation of meditation. It’s beautiful. It bl'nesses you out. For me, to go [to group sittings] and meditate is just to be in the vibrational room with other people and feel that.’ (Lori, 50, Britain)
In few cases, participants make a distinction between pilgrimage and tourism, but most of them distinguish travel and spirituality, on the one hand, and tourism, on the other. Norman (2011) has analysed the experiences of such participants as forms of spirituality, rather than of religion, and included these under the concept of ‘spiritual tourism.’ I agree that participants’ discourses emphasise very ‘self-governed and often self-oriented,’ (Norman, 2011:18) i.e. individualised, understandings of beliefs and of practices. However, in order to address the complexities of the mutual modelling between religion and tourism, I refrain from speaking of ‘spiritual tourism’ as a separate category.

Religion (in the guise of spirituality) seeks to maintain its social difference in the face of tourism. The travellers’ practices of, and their discourses of or about, Buddhism serve to foster a difference between the kind of religion (i.e. Buddhism) they envision, and how they want to keep it protected from the invasion of tourism. For example, the participants legitimise their travels by emphasising how important it is for them to study Buddhist philosophy, volunteer in a NGO, or meditate while they tour Buddhist destinations. It is thus the participants’ imagination of religion (or Buddhism) through travel that serves the purpose of distinguishing religion (or Buddhism) from the meanings they attribute to tourism, which permeates the participants’ imagination of travel. Then, would participants’ travel experience be better described in terms of ‘religious / Buddhist tourism’?
conceptualisation of tourism will help to develop a more complex analysis of the interfaces between religion and tourism.

Mass Leisure Tourism

Modern tourism has developed its own systematicity, and much of its operations rest on the problem of giving meaning and legitimacy to leisure practises that involve mobility and moving about (Farias, 2008:19). Mobility could be legitimised in diverse ways, and its touristic legitimisation in the form of touring (i.e. visiting, guiding or being guided on a tour) also makes it distinct from other forms of mobility (e.g. migration):

Its societal function could be understood as thematizing, communicating and making sense or experiences of mobility, which remain otherwise invisible to society (Farias, 2008: 244).

Tourism makes mobility acceptable within the context of leisure, this space in which a person is at liberty to live his or her life according to his or her choices, without the constraints of immediate survival necessities (Liogier, 2012b:255). Sociologically, tourism develops when its components, which I will designate as touristic communications, organise themselves in a coherent fashion while distinguishing themselves from other, external communications (i.e. religious).

One way to address the systematicity of modern touristic communication is to single out what constitutes its core distinction (as opposed to other forms of communications, e.g. religious), how this central distinction is operationalised through programs, and how power is generated in this system through a particular media. A core touristic distinction should take into account a particular manner of performing mobility. I shall call this manner touring, following Farias’s suggestion that touring involves ‘visiting,’ ‘seeing’ and ‘sightseeing,’ and the idea of ‘guiding someone on a tour’ (Farias, 2008: 24). The concept of touring is sufficiently general to address all sorts of practices, and specific enough to describe both the action of going to a place and that of visiting that place. However, touristic communication is not bounded by and is not determined by any place, object, nor people. Therefore, a core touristic distinction would be between what is toured and what is not toured (has been / has not been toured, or will be / will not be toured). The toured / not toured binary code of touristic communication should help us to circumscribe forms of communication that ought to be thought of as touristic. Both aspects of this code are means to make sense of any element (either within or without tourism) in terms of touristic meanings, imagination, practices, or discourses. Therefore, there is something touristic in addressing something as not having been toured: it underlines the potential of this element to become part of further touristic communication. Moreover, it makes part of the self-referential property of touristic communication: touristic communication reproduces itself through more touristic communication, and it tries to bring under its fold communication what has not yet been thematised as touristic. For example, participants planned their touristic journeys by incorporating and anticipating Buddhist representations of practices, teachings, and places (cf. Boxes 1 and 7 above).

The programs that operationalise the binary codes, and organises communication in recognisable touristic themes are made of practices, rules, and narratives of touring (Farias, 2008:25). Conceptually, touristic programs set up parameters and conditions which delimit the range of what may or may not be conceived of, or anticipated as, actions or themes of touristic communication. The search for authenticity amidst alterity (e.g. ecotourism), the challenge of doing something that has never been done before (e.g. adventure, modelled on competition sport), or the mass participation in touristic activities centred on entertainment (e.g. theme parks, modelled on mass entertainment) are all particular cases of touristic programs. These programs give an orientation, a direction to otherwise improbable, contingent communication. John Urry’s (2002) tourist gaze may be useful here to qualify the different touristic programs in terms, for instance, of romantic, collective or postmodern gaze. However, Farias (2008: 25) proposes to make use of touring rather than gaze when describing touristic programs, because the guide and tourist’s experiences involve bodily and sensual dimensions that are not part of the semantics of (sight) seeing. Also, by considering locals as potential guides, and not merely as passive subjects who are being gazed at, this systemic framework allows no restriction to the inclusiveness of touristic communication. Liogier (2012b, 2012a) argues that the contemporary modes of tourism are more and more based on the ‘individuoglobalist’ ideology - which articulates concerns for one’s most profound, intimate well-being with concerns for the global well-being of humanity and the universe - whether we are dealing with forms of sports, culture, ethics, or religion within tourism. Thus, we may consider the many ‘labels’ or ‘trends’ of
contemporary mass leisure tourism as particular programs of touristic communication. However, following Stausberg’s (2011:13–14) argument that ‘using prior motives and motivations as a starting point seems too static and limited a perspective,’ I do not use ‘religious tourism’ to designate the interfaces between religion and tourism. When touristic communication models itself on religion (i.e. the ‘religionification of tourism’), this modelling creates the expectation that touristic experiences and actions will be inspired (or even structured) by the soteriological power of religious communication. In this way, both forms of communication are mutually enhanced, i.e., there is a reciprocal touristification of religion and Buddhism that occurs at this crossroads (see below).

The power of the touristic system is symbolised as touristic destinations and attractions. Touristic communication thus happens when something that relates to destination and attraction is being shaped into form:

*It is rather the basic form of social coordination and complementary orientation of both, guide and tourist, towards showing and experiencing a destination, getting and giving information, providing and attending to interpretations, fabricating situations and believing, that makes ‘touring destinations’ possible.* (Farias, 2008: 239)

The making of a destination is thus, the result of many converging factors, of which communication about experience of travel, place, event, and object is foremost. Thus, both touring and destination are central to the process by which touristic communication circumscribes itself. Destinations are, in this context, more than mere physical or local spaces, they are assemblages that become observable because of the frequent emphasis of which they are the focus, and which set them apart from the rest. When touristic communication refers to non-touristic elements (e.g., a place that is not a destination yet), it seeks out potentially relevant information that could be turned into touristic communication, so that this element could be addressed in terms of the properties of tourism (i.e., as a destination). In the process, touristic communication ‘touristifies’ the world.

Mutual modelling can also occur when touristic communication selects elements from another, already organised set of communication, and makes use of them. Then, touristic communication models itself on the properties of other forms of communication, and through these other properties enhances its own efficacy. When touristic communication models itself on the properties of religious communication, this religionification of tourism (aka religious tourism) creates new sets of meaning in which religion serves to order, deepen, and complexify touristic communication. New religious-touristic destinations can thus be constructed in this way. In the process of the religionification of tourism, religion may, and will most probably, be influenced and modelled by tourism, thus leading to the reciprocal process of the touristification of religion. For example, participants’ interest in Bodhgaya and Dharamsala mostly lies in the religious or Buddhist value of these places, whether this value is attributed to geography, people, practices, or something else. The power of these destinations lies in their capacity to attract, to become the focus of touristic communication: they are attractions, destinations which possess a significant power of attraction. Not all destinations are attractions: attraction or the power of attraction is constructed through generalisations which symbolise a unity between a destination and the tourist expectation as manifested in communication (Farias, 2008: 233–235). Any guide or tourist may resist or reject the power of attraction of a destination, i.e., not ‘adhere’ to its symbolic unity. But by choosing other alternatives, he or she will not escape the possible particularisation of these other destinations into attractions. He or she then contributes to the development of the attraction of non-attractions, i.e., to the formation of new attractions.
Pilgrimage Versus Tourism: A False Distinction

Pilgrimage, as a religious ritual (or a set of these), mainly serves to reproduce religious communication internally, by means of journeying to destinations consecrated by myth and the performance of several secondary practices on the way to and at the destination. This is what participants seem to assume in their representations of pilgrimage, which they describe as a form of religion. But most participants’ communication about pilgrimage does not lead to further self-referential religious communication or communication about religion. Instead, participants view pilgrimage as a rather exclusive religious phenomenon, and are more talkative about ‘spirituality’ and tourism. On the one hand, the participants’ preference for spirituality reflects their contestation of religion. On the other hand, whether they envision tourism positively or negatively, participants oppose tourism to what they consider as the ‘true’ experience of destinations. Interestingly, this ‘true’ experience of destinations is framed in terms of religious (including ‘spiritual’) or Buddhist communication.

Consequently, there are two points that are worth noting regarding the participants’ communication. First, it is not pilgrimage per se that is opposed to tourism, but religion in the form of religious communication about destination. Thus, it would be more meaningful to consider a religion / tourism divide, rather than a pilgrimage / tourism one, to address the singularities and commonalities of various forms of communication about destinations. Second, touristic communication alone is not sufficient for the participants to give meaning to their experiences and actions related to destinations. They could have made use of references to politics, economy, arts, or education, but most of them relied on religious (Buddhist) communication to make sense of destinations. In this way, the mutual modelling...
between tourism and religion (including spirituality and Buddhism) serves a better purpose than religious or touristic communication alone. This kind of communication is representative of the process of religionification of tourism that I have described. It creates new touristic programs to judge whether one’s experiences of, and actions at, a destination are worth the efforts spent in travelling to it. The reciprocal process of touristification of religion does not seem to be thematised much in the participants’ communication. The touristification of religion is the modelling of religion on properties of touristic communication, so that religious communication can enhance its own efficacy (e.g., generate more faith, lead to a greater blessing or awakening) through the added value of touristic communication.[7] Buddhism appears as self-sufficient and self-referential in the participants’ communication, and the participants do not explicitly resort much to tourism to legitimise it (Thibeault, 2013). However, the Dharma trails on which travellers walk are progressively integrated in well-organised circuits that derive their popularity and prominence from religious and Buddhist entrepreneurs who skilfully design and brand their events using the logic of tourism (see Reader, 2014; Stausberg, 2011:64 –71).

**Conclusion**

The great majority of participants consider themselves as travellers, belonging informally to the sub-group of backpackers. They contest the tourist identification (even though they will confess to having done ‘touristic things’), and very few see themselves as pilgrims. They all value ‘autonomadism,’ (Michel, 2009) i.e. autonomy and nomadism. Buddhist travellers tour India from one Buddhist destination to the next, on one of many Buddhist trails, as part of an ‘intensified or concentrated learning / practice’ (cf. Norman, 2011:34–39). They also include visits to Goa or Tiruvannamalai to quench their thirst for spirituality, adventure (e.g., rock climbing), or holidaying. All of these forms of travel have leisure as a condition of possibility. Making use of their Buddhist imagination of India as the place where the Buddha walked, they relate their trip through the use of symbolic words such as ‘path’ to convey the meaning of Buddhism as a journey of self-discovery. It could be asked whether these travellers are motivated by a kind of ‘Buddhamania’ (Michel, 2009:476), i.e., a search for Buddhism that is rooted in a quest for well-being, and not in religion itself. In spite of the contestation of religion that characterises most of the participants’ understanding of Buddhism, the institutional forms of Buddhism that shape the activities and the discourses through which the participants give meaning to what they do (as travellers or Dharma practitioners) are too important to be ignored. Moreover, mass leisure tourism is not a substitute for premodern ‘religious pilgrimage’ (an oxymoron). Religion does not disappear (through secularisation, for instance) in modernity, and the forms of practices and discourses put forward by the participants do not escape the fields of both religion and tourism. The participants are in fact modern leisure tourists, and are consequently actors within a mass system of mobility.

The participants’ travel stories assign a high importance to Buddhism when it comes to qualifying the degree of attraction of any given Indian destination.
The possibility of getting engaged in Buddhist discourses, or the probability of having a Buddhist experience, when touring a destination usually serve as reference points as regards the relevance of this or that Indian place. Buddhist communication and touristic communication interpenetrate in order to shape the expectations pertaining to the kinds of touristic experience and Buddhist experience that a destination can provide. The attraction of these destinations is usually connected to the possibility of having a ‘special’ Buddhist experience, and engaging in Buddhist practices and discourses (i.e., Buddhist communications). Touristic communication also serves to reproduce the power of Buddhist attractions (e.g., as participants say, it is by going to, and touring these places that one will experience their power), and thus to structure discourses that encourage touring these destinations. It is Buddhist themes, associated with soteriological notions (enlightenment and ignorance are foremost), or ritual practices, that often help to condense the power of attractions; therefore Buddhist communication lends a hand to touristic communication. Dharamsala and Bodhgayā are in this way attractions that result from the dual communication that occurs at the Buddhism-tourism interface. Within this interface, participants may not identify themselves as Buddhists or tourists. However, observing the forms of communication that happen at this interface, we can see that touristic communication is in greater need of justification (i.e. legitimising travel) than religion seems to be. By means of the religionification of tourism, touristic communication shapes itself with the help of religious (Buddhist) communication. In consequence, Buddhified touristic communication becomes more self-evident to participants who deny being tourists.

Finally, this leads us to insist on two theoretical arguments. First, by focusing on touristic and religious forms of communication, I have avoided...
interpretations based on motivations and psychological intentions. MacCannell (2011) has attempted to bridge the gap between the psyche and the social. His concept of *sightseeing* may have some relations with the understanding of *touring* I have described above. But, as *sightseeing* has moved from a more semiostructural sense (MacCannell, 1999) to a more symbolic-psychoanalytic sense (MacCannell, 2011), it tries to bridge the incommensurable gap between the psyche and society, and unearth essential, ethical foundations of tourism. The conceptualisation that I have proposed, drawing on Farias, does not actually lead to any essentialist or substantive claims about tourism or religion: it highlights forms and contents that reoccur in religion and tourism, and at the interface of these. At the most, it approaches social reality in a functionalist and constructivist way. Motivations only construct social reality when they become part of communication. To say that these can influence or structure social reality is to engage in communication, after all. As long as psychic entities are not part of any process of selection, expression, and recognition through communication, they remain hidden from the sociological radar.

Second, neither religion nor tourism disappear in the process of mutual modelling. The *touristification* of religion might be seen as yet another instance of the secularisation of religion, but it does not have to be so. The modelling of religion on tourism (i.e., the *touristification* of religion) does not mean that religion becomes less religious - and reciprocally, that tourism becomes less touristic. We have not used the sacred / profane opposition in the above analysis because this opposition is not operative as regards the inner, self-referential processes which help religious communication to reproduce itself (this is exactly where the religious binary code intervenes). The sacred / profane dichotomy only hints at the distinction between religion and non-religion, but cannot serve to indicate the possible states of any given *religious* communication. In his recent study, Reader (2014) argues that the academic and popular conception of pilgrimage as an essentially religious practice rooted in the sacred realm, strictly removed from anything mundane, ought to be reviewed. By showing that pilgrimage depends on economical (merchandisation, commodification), and media (advertising, entertainment) processes, he argues that it is intrinsic to pilgrimage itself that it should blend with supposedly profane, social dynamics. According to Reader, the dynamics of each sphere (economy, advertisement and entertainment) intermingle in the phenomenon of pilgrimage, and these dynamics form ‘intrinsic parts of the pilgrimage dynamic not just in the present day but also across history.’ (Reader, 2014: 195)

Pilgrimage principally involves personal and social expectations that relate to religious meaning, however we conceive of religion, and in spite of all the influences that other non-religious forces exert on it. Of course, pilgrimage must be contextualised in the broader range of other, non-religious domains. However, economy, tourism, and the media also have their own specific properties, and mass leisure tourism should not be conflated with economy or media. The point on which I insist and on which others have also insisted (Beyer, 2006; Stausberg, 2011) is that the touristification, commodification, and mediatisation of religion do not dilute the power of religion. Religion can thrive socially amidst more and more complex communications, and it can help to shape how other, non-religious systems operate on their own. The study of the religionification of these non-religious systems (e.g., religionification of media and the economy) is an altogether new and distinct approach that could be undertaken.

References


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