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The 'Ecological Self' in Contemporary Scholarship

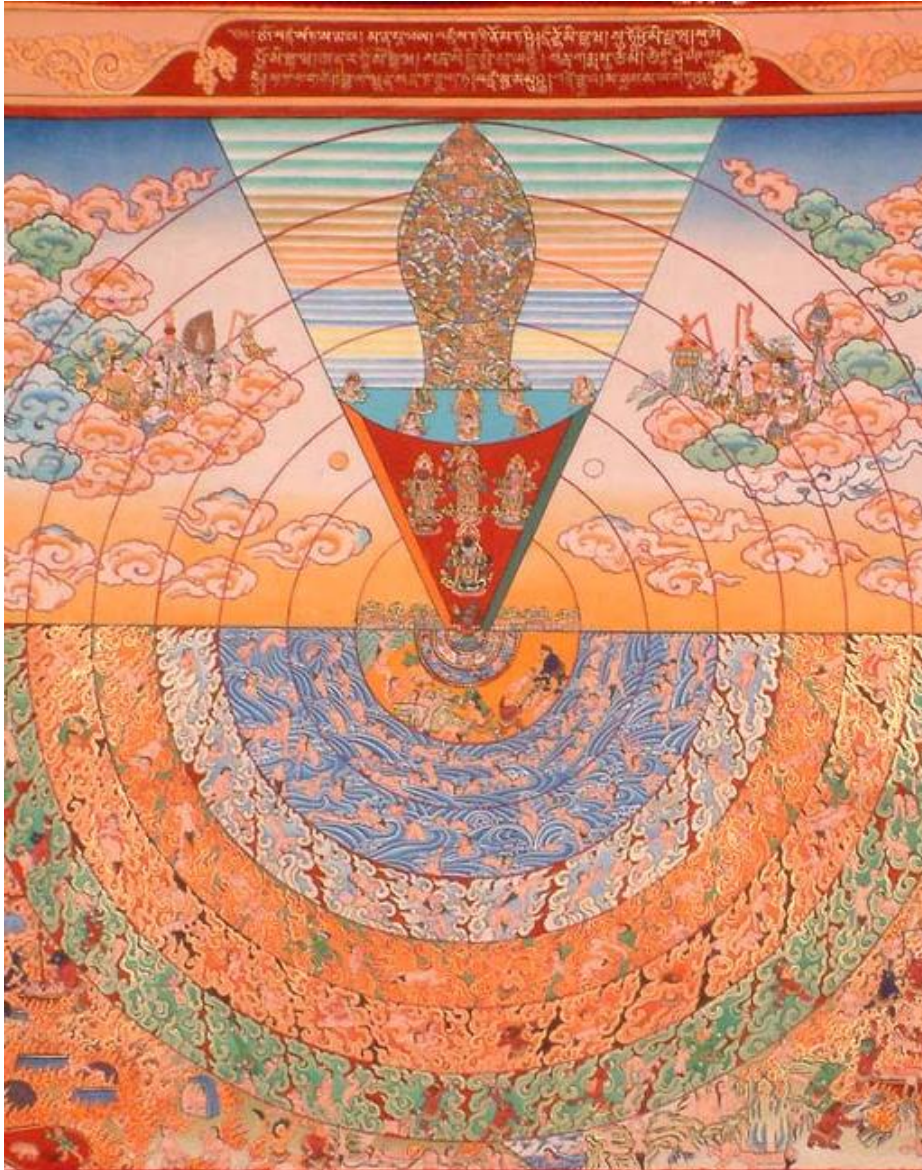
Some notions of an ecological self that may have parallels in Tibetan Buddhist concepts of self and will be explored here, as follows:

The self...

- is part of wider ecological systems.
- is porous and permeable--multiple.
- is a concept that breaks down the distinction between inner and outer worlds.
- is interdependent—relational.
- when conceived of as interdependent leads to compassion.

The 'self' in Buddhist Thought

- Not-self (Skt.: *anātman*; Pāli: *anattā*)
- Taught in the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta ('Discourse on the Definition of Not-Self') of the Pāli Canon, the earliest extant body of Buddhist teachings
- The 'aggregates' of material form (physical form), feeling (sensation), perception (concepts), volitions, and consciousness are not-self because none of these are fully under the control of the individual, as a 'self', nor are any of them controlled by a 'self' extant outside of them
- Through letting go of the notion that any of these elements (and others besides) represent a discrete 'self', one is liberated from protecting that 'self' and clinging on to happiness/suffering in respect of one's 'self'.
- Any notion of an unchanging 'self', a 'real me' is rejected in Buddhist thought. It is this notion, this illusion of 'self' that causes the ignorance which underlies our suffering cycle of rebirth.
- This is not a denial of the existence of persons, merely a denial that they exist in any kind of permanent and unchanging way... Persons are understood of as dependently arising based on causes and conditions, as existent in an interdependent way.
- Transmigration in realms of rebirth is facilitated through a 12-fold link of dependent origination through which persons are reembody—reborn across lives in interdependence
- The 'reborn' being is not the same as the being who died, nor are they different. The elements of persons are linked from life to life by a causal process rather than by some identical or permanent 'soul' that transmigrates.



The 'Ecological Self' is part of wider ecological systems

- This can be related to the Indo-Tibetan cosmology underlying all Tibetan Buddhist thought and practice
- Rebirth, as fundamental to this cosmology, places all life on equal footing in that elements of being transmigrate as persons from life to life and realm to realm—re-embodied within this process in diverse ways according to processes of causation (or *karma*)



The 'Ecological Self' is porous and permeable--multiple.

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- Buddhist philosophy posits a non-self.
 - an idea of the self (or the non-self!) as interdependent with all that exists, circulating in a fluidly interconnected cycle of life is intrinsic to Buddhist thought and teaching
 - The concept of selves, persons having no inherent nature or intrinsic substance lends itself to permeability and the diversity of being across rebirths
 - It is precisely this ever-changing and fluid nature of being and becoming that allows for transformation—for enlightenment



The 'Ecological Self' is a concept that breaks down the distinction between inner and outer worlds.

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- Tibetan Tantric Buddhist thought shows the individual mind-body complex as inseparable from all that lives
 - All things and events exist in interdependence.
 - The way in which this is taken into account in Buddhist Tantric practice is that meditators do not just identify themselves with the deity. They also imaginatively transform their environment into a transfigured universe that represents the world as it is perceived and operated on by that particular divine form.
 - This is the tantric maṇḍala—the enlightened universe or natural world



The 'Ecological Self' is interdependent—relational

- With the later Buddhism of the Mahāyāna, the Buddhism which spread to Tibet, notions of interdependence were further developed by thinkers such as Nagarjuna (2nd Century CE), whose work is credited with a highly influential philosophical argument that the whole of existence is characterised by Śūnyata (emptiness/voidness/lack of intrinsic existence).
- As can be seen from the image, he taught *nāga* (Tibetan: 'le' - ལེ་ *klu*) along with human students and this was not 'para' normal, but normal within context of Indo-Tibetan understandings of identity and existence.
- Śūnyata is the idea that no phenomena exist as independent realities in their own right – i.e. **nothing exists independently, in and of itself, but only in relation to other things**
- Everything is a conceptual construct, void of any intrinsic existence, only relative to its causes and conditions
- The true nature of phenomena is somewhere between existence and non-existence
- The 'self' is also illusory and impermanent

This perception and experience of self can retrospectively be called ecological.



The 'Ecological Self', when conceived of as interdependent leads to compassion...

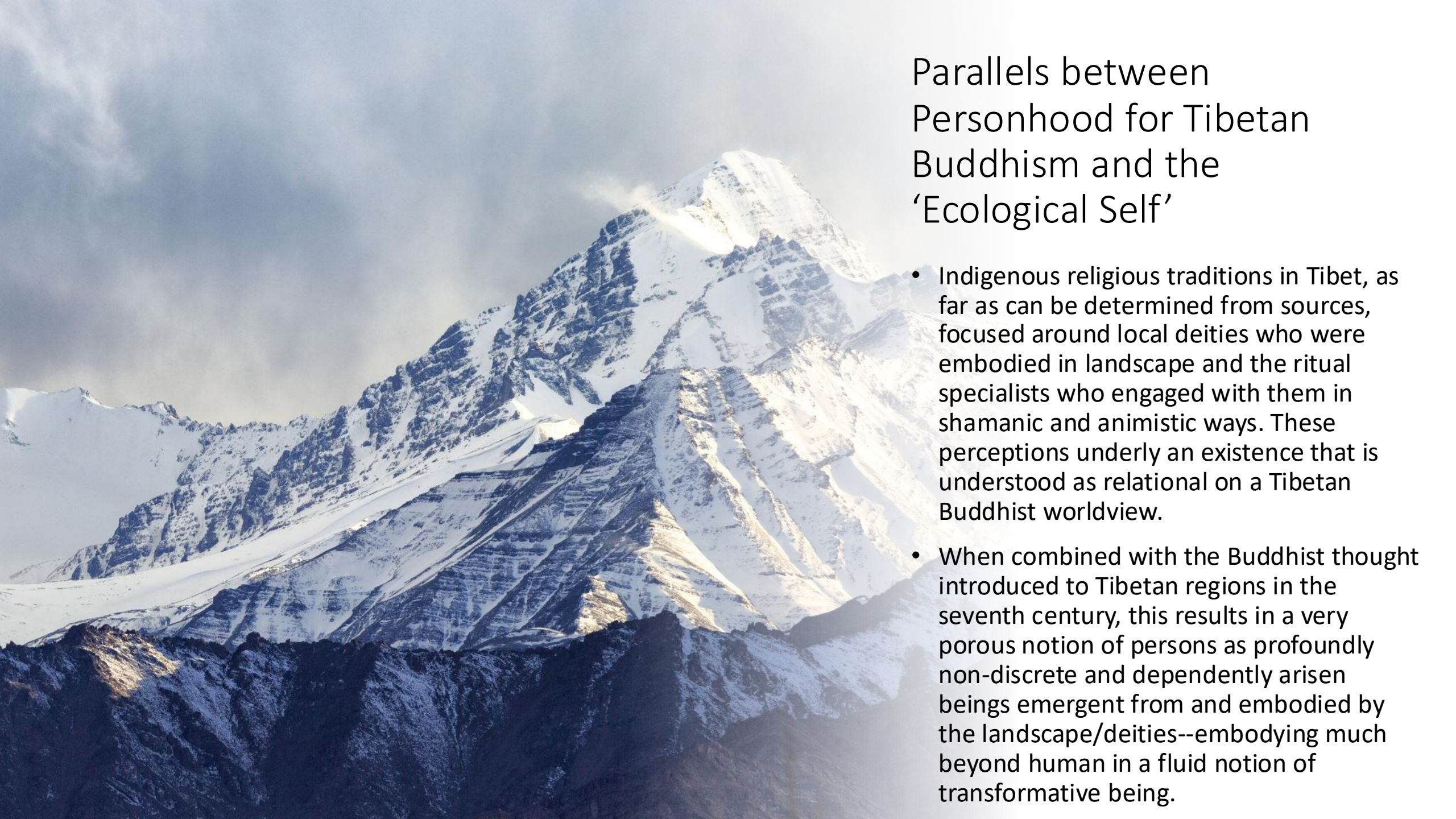
- One of the most well-known Tibetan Buddhist symbols and popular deities is the 1000-armed 'Avalokiteshvara' (Chenrezig), the bodhisattva of compassion and patron deity of Tibet, who represents the pure power of Enlightened Energy. The thousand-armed Chenrezig has 11 faces and 1000 arms. His Eleven faces are each in their own colour: 4 faces are red, 3 white, 3 green, and 1 black.
- Avalokitesvara, 'One Who Looks With Unwavering Eye' is the most revered Bodhisattvas, represents all Buddha's infinite compassion. His first two hands are joined holding the 'wish-fulfilling jewel'. The second right arm holds the crystal beads(rosary), his second left arm holds golden lotus with stem, his third right and left arm each holds mudra of supreme giving and empowerment vase respectively. He holds wheel of knowledge in his fourth right arm while holding a bow and arrow in his fourth left arm. These implements combined include the 8 principal arms of 1000 armed Chenrezig.
- He is considered to be the paternal ancestor of the Tibetans—giving birth to the race when incarnated as a monastic monkey who gave up his vows for a demoness. He later incarnated as the Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo who, along with his companion queens, founded the first Tibetan empire. All the Dalai Lamas are considered incarnations of this protector deity of compassion.



The 'Ecological Self', when conceived of as interdependent leads to compassion... As a statement, this can be exemplified by the foundational Mahayana Buddhist motivation, as expressed by this verse:

'May I always be an object of enjoyment
For all sentient beings according to their wish
And without interference, as are the earth,
Water, fire, wind, herbs and wild forests'

Nagarjuna, *The Precious Garland, Buddhist Advice for Living and Liberation*



Parallels between Personhood for Tibetan Buddhism and the 'Ecological Self'

- Indigenous religious traditions in Tibet, as far as can be determined from sources, focused around local deities who were embodied in landscape and the ritual specialists who engaged with them in shamanic and animistic ways. These perceptions underly an existence that is understood as relational on a Tibetan Buddhist worldview.
- When combined with the Buddhist thought introduced to Tibetan regions in the seventh century, this results in a very porous notion of persons as profoundly non-discrete and dependently arisen beings emergent from and embodied by the landscape/deities--embodying much beyond human in a fluid notion of transformative being.