

FROM THE MIND-BODY  
THERAPY TRACK

# The Power of Pilgrimage: Sacred Rite & Paradigm Therapy

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The old man's face is weathered, his wrinkles tell a story of centuries of hardship that he and his kin have endured as nomads exposed to the extreme elements of the high Himalayas.

And yet he smiles. His hands clasp together in prayer above his crown, and effortlessly as breath he utters the sacred mantra: *Om Mani Padme Hum*. His hands touch throat and heart, as he lowers himself to the ground in full prostration onto the ancient rocks beneath him. His eyes are unblinking in the cloud of dust, his internal gaze is likewise unflinching, transfixed on Chenrezig, the deity of compassion with a thousand arms.

The man rises, carefully takes three steps forward, and repeats the prostration. He will continue like this—step by step, bow by bow, mantra by mantra—for hours, days, perhaps weeks. He is bound for Mount Kailash to circumambulate the sacred mountain, as his forebears have done for generations before him. For Buddhist pilgrims, Kailash is more than a mere Himalayan peak in the Tibetan autonomous region of China. It is the celestial axis uniting heaven and earth at the center of the cosmos. It is the abode of Chakrasamvara, the manifestation of great bliss that realizes reality beyond the distorted veils of perception. But more



than a journey to arrive at an external destination, pilgrimage is an internal process of transformation.

In recent years I've been leading pilgrimages to sacred sites throughout Buddhist Asia. I'd like to take this opportunity to explore the motivation for going on a pilgrimage, its historical precedents, its purpose, and its potential therapeutic value in the hopes that we might eventually gain a deeper appreciation for its power and relevance in the West.

### MOTIVATION

Pilgrimage condenses the journey for spiritual liberation that can take an entire human lifetime or more into a few short weeks on the road. There are many possible motivations that compel one to venture to a

sacred destination, but perhaps none more essential and profound than devotion. In general, devotion is a universal quality of intense yearning and commitment – we can be obsessed with our favorite sports team, wedded to our job, or madly in love with our partner, but for the pilgrim, devotion is to the transcendent ideal, by whatever name; God, enlightenment, or the ground of all being. A pilgrim is motivated to abandon what ordinary people covet, face what most run from, and endure what many cannot bear in order to serve, surrender, receive or achieve what is considered the treasured aim of their spiritual practice.

While most of us conditioned by the modern materialistic way of life can't reasonably expect to understand, let alone embody the kind of deeply nurtured devotion exhibited by our old man on his way to mount Kailash, we can nevertheless spark and fan the nascent flame of devotion within us. It may start when we answer the faint call of interest in a photograph, song, or story that points in the direction of an adventure to a far off land. Devotion may be further refined through an initiation, such as when a Buddhist



pilgrim takes formal refuge in the Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha* thus consecrating their commitment to a new orientation for evolution. Or it may go well beyond, where one's entire way of being - outlook, attitude, and lifestyle - are so thoroughly subsumed that an utter rebirth of the individual can occur. To understand this profound motivation deeper, we can look to the origins of pilgrimage as a kind of embodied devotion.

### HISTORICAL PRECEDENT

Buddhist pilgrimage dates back to the Buddha himself. To ease the anxiety of his disciples who feared the impending loss of inspiration as the time of his death grew close, the Buddha recommended they visit physical sites linked historically with the major milestones of his life. Through the power of association, these sites would not only become reliquaries of his remains for commemoration, but virtual representations of the Buddha where his living presence could be accessed. More so, sites of veneration eventually came to signify the potential to awaken for anyone who visits them with the heart of devotion. As a result, the ethos of pilgrimage was born, and for centuries Buddhists from all around Asia venture to auspicious places connected with the Buddha and all the subsequent spiritual masters to perform karmic acts of generous offering, purification, textual recitation, and meditation in order to activate their latent potential for enlightenment.

The significance of pilgrimage may be lost on those of us living in the modern West today. As my interest in offering pilgrimages has peaked of late, I've had to develop a rationale for its importance that my students and clients can appreciate. One in-road into discovering this relevance comes from the Old English word *hale*, which is reveal-





ingly the root for *holy, whole, and heal*. These words are a reminder that the endeavor to reach a holy site is a catalyst for reclaiming wholeness, which is itself the deepest form of healing mind, body, and spirit. Given this framework let's explore the purpose of pilgrimage and relevance today.

#### PURPOSE

I think the most obvious value of pilgrimage comes from its transformational aspect as a mythological rite of passage. Pilgrimage is neither a vacation nor a sightseeing tour, but for cultures that still engage in this practice it serves as a rite of passage bearing three critical phases of departure, initiation, and return. Leaving home, pilgrims metaphorically die to their attachments to family, career, comfort, and most importantly to their limiting beliefs and worldviews. Something essential to one's identity needs to be sacrificed or surrendered in order to create space for something new. Then one passes through a liminal phase in which sacred wisdom keepsers bestow knowledge and usher pilgrims through a series of trials that help mature their latent qualities. Initiation intelligently uses hardship to empower the neophyte in a process of creative self-redesign, just as fire is used to alchemically to transform base metals to gold. Finally, initiates must return home with what mythologist Joseph Campbell called, "the elixir." Not content to hide away in some mountaintop hermitage savoring realization for themselves, the pilgrim is motivated to re-enter the society in order to share a life-affirming

message with their fellow kinsmen mired in struggle.

Of course, it's entirely possible to enter a mythological journey without physically leaving home, just as it is possible to learn French from a book while living in Chicago. But who will argue against the profound depth of learning afforded by living amongst the Parisians in a cultural immersion, expeditiously transforming, body, speech, and mind by walking for weeks in their shoes? This suggests that there is an actual value to the physical sites and destinations themselves that cannot be replicated at home. The sacred qualities are not just projections of mind alone, as these holy places are unique portals imbued with the energetic charge of devotion from an endless stream of pilgrims dating back to the Buddha himself. The energy and association invested at the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya by pious pilgrims differs greatly than that of the Eiffel Tower by admiring tourists. Thus there is an interdependence between the devoted mind and the accumulated energy invested that makes sacred sites so unique. The fact that one must travel to these sacred, often remote, destinations inevitably raises its own challenges. These difficulties have always been an important variable in the rite of passage since the inception of pilgrimage as each trial serves as the friction needed to shake loose the old and rouse regeneration.

For example, the cost of pilgrimage might well marginalize people. However, consider that devout Muslims save for years to make their *haj* to Mecca, pious Christians the Camino de Santiago, some Tibetans sleep by the roadside on their way to Mount Kailash, and the greatest gathering of human beings on the planet, the Kumbha

Mela on the banks of the sacred Ganges, attracts rich and poor Hindus alike to fulfill their aspiration. It's important to consider in our modern, secular culture, that while pilgrimage seems financially unfeasible for many, too great a distance from home, too long a time commitment away from work, that may in part be because we don't yet prioritize spiritual activities in the same way we prioritize forms of enjoyment, entertain-

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ment, secular education, and retirement. I have found those who sacrificed the most for pilgrimage often had the most meaningful and transformative experiences. This fact leads me to my final thought on the potential therapeutic value of pilgrimage.

#### PARADIGM THERAPY

In my twenty years observing our modern culture through the personal trials of my psychotherapy clients, meditation students, as well as in my own life, a picture of the current problems we face has begun to emerge. Depression, anxiety, chronic pain, stress-induced physical syndromes, pervasive meaninglessness, and the apathy that have grown to epidemic proportions, do not just have a biomedical origin. They also arise from psychological and cultural causes. Despite our technological advancement, modern materialistic culture is misguided in other vital domains of life, and we now exhibit the widespread symptoms of what I call a ‘sickness of paradigm.’

I view western, secular societies as the result of a three-centuries-old transgenerational trauma, characterized by a pervasive disconnection from spirit. Spirit encompasses the invisible but vitalizing source of all life. As a result of throwing the baby of spirituality out with the bathwater of organized religion during Europe’s Age of Reason, we also became unmoored from spirit and certain profound orienting principles such as interconnectivity and virtue. We are now cast adrift. Once God was proclaimed dead, we no longer maintained a coherent worldview and we lost a connection to and respect for our bodies, rituals, consciousness, mythologies, nature, ancestors, cycles of time, the cosmos or the divine. Orphaned through this pervasive separation, our modern culture has predominately forgotten who we are and why we are here.

This spiritually-deprived, materialistic, worldview our culture has recently adopted now confuses consciousness with brain activity, and our sense of human purpose with material gain. Despite the technical precision of our modern drugs, surgeries, and therapies (in large part emerging from the Cartesian split of mind from body and both from spirit), materialist and scientific worldviews have not yet presented a sufficient remedy for the deeper, more causal roots of our fragmentation.

For years now I’ve been synthesizing sacred wisdom from classical traditions like Tibetan Buddhism with modern neuroscience to offer a coherent map of reality along with comprehensive guidelines

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for how to live. I endeavored to integrate these streams in my book *Gradual Awakening*, as well as my two-year online Contemplative Studies Program. I’ve also recently joined the faculty of Embodied Philosophy’s new MindBody therapy certificate programing. Within all these offerings, I contend that a profound cultural reprograming based on a synthesis of cross cultural disciplines is not only necessary for us to recover optimal wellness as individuals, but essential for our survival as a species on the verge of self-imposed mass extinction. In my Program I further introduce students to an authentic spiritual worldview, prayers, meditations, rituals, an ethical lifestyle, and a group service project as well as pilgrimage to sacred sites, each explained and justified through the lens of current trauma research and neuropsychology. What is needed most is a holistic paradigm therapy, one that addresses our impoverished worldview and a hedonic lifestyle, which offers a reconnection to *hale* – our healthy, holy, and whole self beyond just the physical dimension.

I first discovered the healing power of sacred sites when I was twenty years old while on my first pilgrimage in India. I was suffering the symptoms of root-trauma induced depression and disillusionment

with modern consumerist society. My exposure to Buddhist culture amplified at the holy places over the course of those five months changed the entire trajectory of my life. As a result, I would eventually go on pilgrimage another five times, before I started designing and leading journeys myself. In 2016, 20 years after I first was in India I led a group to the sites of Buddha's awakening. I invited a young Buddhist master, Geshe Tenzin Zopa—famous for his devotion in the documentary *The Unmistaken Child*—to lead our group in traditional teachings and rituals at sacred sites including refuge and the Bodhisattva vows under the Bodhi Tree, ground zero of the world's awakening revolution. These ceremonies, like powerful mind altering substances, reorient human vision including our sense of meaning and purpose. What can be discovered through this inner vision is that human beings are more than mere bodies driven by a genetic imperative to survive a single lifetime as our current scientific dogma would have us believe. Evolving in parallel with genes on a material realm, we are also infinite consciousness driven by a moral imperative across countless lifetimes, here to learn profound lessons, and

ultimately to awaken to our interdependence with all of life. Every major culture since the dawn of humankind has concurred in some form with this spiritual outlook; the only exception being the new kid on the block - our current industrialized culture.

A poignant memory that best captures the therapeutic power of pilgrimage occurred in 2018, when Geshe Tenzin Zopa and I co-led another group to the power places of the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. Towards the final day, all of us dressed in traditional white, gathered at the ancient Boudhanath Stupa, with its iconic eyes gazing in all directions to ease the sufferings



of the world. Here, we received the Bodhisattva Vow, which is the altruistic resolve to orient one's entire evolution towards awakening for the benefit of others. At the culmination of the ceremony, having each made the pledge, Zopa's refrain to all of us was "*Now your life is made meaningful...now your life is finally meaningful.*" In that moment we connected with the timeless, the transcendent, the ineffable. Experiences like these will leave indelible imprints in our collective memory for eternity—and while each of us will undoubtedly continue to struggle with the vicissitudes of life, none of us are confused any longer about who we are and why are here. That is what I mean by a paradigm therapy, a reconnection to the lost and secret human dimensions of life beyond the physical that only a sacred wisdom culture and practice can provide. For me, this is the medicine missing from our current allopathic and biomedical treatments, the dogmas of scientism, and our over-dependence on the rational mind. Through pilgrimage it dawned on me how deeply healing an immersion into sacred wisdom culture can be not only on an individual level, but on social and cultural levels as well.

Having taken the Bodhisattva vow with Zopa under the all-compassionate gaze of the Bodhanath stupa, I pledged to lead one pilgrimage each year, 'sharing the elixir' in small doses with my students and doing my part to help our struggling modern culture find its way back home again. Inspired by the spark of devotion, pilgrims from the West and I will embark for Sri Lanka, Ladakh, and Myanmar after that, each destination a mystical doorway through which the ancient rite-of-passage of separation, initiation, and return can be re-enacted in the psychodrama of life. In so doing, each pilgrim will encounter the trial and treasure of venturing to a distant holy site and eventually come to realize the source of their own healing and wholeness within.