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On Being and Becoming: Experiential Ethics

Technologies of the self employed by young adults in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

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Cover image: "Elck" or "Everyman". Print by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Flanders, 1558. Elck in old Dutch means 'each' or 'everyone' and the scenes in this drawing illustrate proverbs or sayings. The central proverb concerns Elck who vainly seeks himself in the objects of this world as he stands over a broken globe. With a lantern he searches through a pile of barrels and bales, a game board, cards and objects which signify the distractions of life. To the right, two more Elck figures play tug of war with a rope, illustrating the saying, "each tugs for the longest end". In the background on a wall hangs a picture which continues the moral theme. It shows a fool sitting among a pile of broken household objects gazing at himself in a mirror. He is Nemo or Nobody, as the inscription below him informs us: "Nobody knows himself".[1]

1 Description from www.britishmuseum.org (accessed 1 August 2014). The poem on the bottom of the image is in latin, middle french, and middle dutch: "The Elck soekt hem seluen in alderley saken / Ouer al de werelt, al wort by gbevloect, / Hoe can dan iemant verdoelt gheraken / Als elck hem selven nu altijt soect. / Elck trekt oock om dlancste soomen hier siet / Deen van bouen, dander van ondere. / Niemant en kent schier hem selven niet / Diet wel aenmerkt die siet groot wondere."

Abstract

In this document I discuss the techniques employed by young adults in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, in order to make themselves into morally acceptable persons for the rest of society, and attain a certain state of happiness and perfection. Through the stories of my Mongolian peers, and an analysis of Foucauldian ethics, I argue that experiencing this ethical transformation consists in resolving the paradox lurking between becoming and being, and liberating mental space in which change can happen.. Focusing mainly on the Buddhist and shamanist personal ethical experiences of my informants, I argue that the Foucauldian conception of ethics builds upon a fundamentally distinct dualist philosophical tradition. And conversely, the main technology of the self I found in Mongolia is characterized by the letting go of these technologies, abandoning the never-ending neurotic struggle for change, and abiding to what 'is' in a spiritual sense.

Prologue

Everything seems small and insignificant under the Mongolian eternal blue sky. Nothing compares to the vast open spaces, the steppe, the Gobi desert. The scarce roads cutting straight lines through the endless plains seem to lead nowhere, the unyielding wind clears the land and the minds of the Mongolian people of their clouds and impurities. A sort of natural serenity pervades the countryside and even the streets of the capital, Ulaanbaatar, and yet paradoxically its inhabitants are constantly reminded of their history, of their fierce and violent past as conquerors. The name, portraits, and monuments of Chinggis Khaan are omnipresent; schools, books, and museums proudly remind the population of his feats. With a giant monument of this founder of the largest contiguous empire in history at one side of the city, and a towering statue of the Buddha at the other side, Ulaanbaatar is a city of coherent contradictions, of warlords and lama's, shamans and cosmopolitans. With 95% of the three million Mongolians being ethnic Mongolian, the population is relatively homogenous. Local variations notwithstanding, many common elements result in a strong national identity, including the famous birthmark (the Mongolian 'blue spot'). The clashing of global flows against well-preserved traditions is almost audible strolling past the few skyscrapers towards the *ger* districts. Big investments come in, huge mines are built, and nations fight over having a say in the country's future. In many cases, the scientific literature can't keep up with the pervasive social-cultural transformations triggered by the new developments and policies. One of the most studied events is for instance the paradigm shift that came with the switch from communism to democracy in the early '90, producing two generations with distinct mindsets. In a spiritual sense, generally speaking, the older generation grew up under a regime that forbade all kinds of religious expression, while the younger generation had the opportunity to explore all paths, from the traditional Buddhist one, to the new Christian churches eager to gain a place in Mongolian society,

to the globalized worldviews.

This research is about how young adults in Ulaanbaatar shape the moral self in this social-cultural context, how they experience their ethical lives. Because these topics are borderline philosophical, the stories lie in the gray zone between rationality and spirituality. A certain lack of definition is inevitable, for any description of an experience that is precise would refer too heavily to a personal history that is not accessible to the reader, and would distract us from the leitmotif: personal ethical experience. We can get an insight into what this experience is like, but hardly define and structure it in theoretical terms. One could in fact question whether this would even be relevant in this case. Imposing concept on concept would make the research data more accessible but may also distort its message. Linearity in ethics might help us understand the process, but obscures where it leads to.

My anthropological fieldwork in the capital of Mongolia lasted three months, from February to May 2014. Most of the twenty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with young adults (22-29) and some teachers, shamans, Buddhist monks and Christian clergy. To avoid manipulating the data and in order to create the insights *with* my informants in a relationship of correspondence, I did not inquire directly about ethics. By doing so, I tried to contain the issue of 'translating' the western academic notion of ethics and moral identity to the Mongolian experience of morality. Moreover, it lessened the danger of me looking for and finding preconceived answers to my initial questions. How does one perform *participant* observation when it comes to a subject such as ethics? In a way, I am part of my own research population not only in the role of the researcher, but also as an individual going through a process much alike those described by my informants during my fieldwork. Besides participating in shamanic rituals, visiting monasteries, and following courses in Buddhist meditation centers in Mongolia, for three months I extensively practiced the various meditation techniques suggested to me by my informants. I also completed the ten day *Vipassana* meditation

course. Because of my intimate personal involvement with the subject-matter, or because the very nature of it, some parts of the following text might come across as biased, subjective. But such is often the nature of experience, and the following chapters are not about ethics in an absolute sense, but about the directions an ethical life can take, its complex and dynamic nature. All along keeping in mind that although all paths eventually lead to simply “being”, and it is the destination that matters, it is only the journey that can be described.

In chapter I, I sketch the theoretical framework of my research, focusing mainly on Ingold and Foucault. In chapter II, I outline the reflections and experiences of informants involving a Buddhist worldview, in the third chapter a shamanic, and in the fourth a less defined spiritual non-dualistic worldview. In the fifth chapter I make some concluding remarks about my anthropological study of experiential ethics. I also discuss my findings: the paradox of a dualist ethics of becoming, identification with reality as the resolution of the paradox, the distinction between observing and working at the self, and experience as being the most radical form of knowledge.

I. Anthropology of experience

"The day you teach the child the name of the bird,
the child will never see that bird again" – Jiddu Krishnamurti

Anthropology nowadays, as Inda and Rosaldo (2008: 9) state, "is preoccupied not just with mapping the shape taken by particular flows of capital, people, goods, images, and ideologies that crisscross the globe […] but also with the experiences of people living in specific localities". Said experiences are examples of unique states of being particular to the specific circumstances and lives of persons, that rarely can be seen as separate form global flows but certainly cannot be dissolved in them. In other words, they are not generalizable.[2] My anthropological fieldwork is first and foremost about providing insight into the formation of moral identity by re-tracing the ethical paths young adults in Ulaanbaatar have taken. That is, how do they work at themselves in order to become the moral persons they think they ought to be, and live the life in the way they think they ought to live. Due to the highly theoretical nature of the topics, before discussing the actual research data I will outline a basic conceptual framework to clarify some of the main notions used, such as experience and ethics.

The questions I asked in the field led to many and divergent stories. My aim however is not to enlist the innumerable techniques people employ in order to shape their moral selves, but to gain a deeper understanding in the particular experience and moment in which ethical transformation occurs through the analysis of these techniques. I suggest and argue that this moment does not consist in a predefined process, or a kind of

2 As I will argue, global dis-embedding and re-embedding processes do however play an important role in both the experience and the local context in which the experience takes place.

analytical knowledge, but in the resolution of the paradox lurking between one's perspective on what one sets out to *become* and what *is*. Analyzing the techniques (technologies of the self) employed by the research population to shape their moral selves leads us to the space between becoming and being, between *knowing* what the moral self should look like and *experiencing* the moral self. As Ingold (2011: 14) puts it: "Whether our concern is to inhabit the world or to study it – and at root these are the same, since all inhabitants are students and all students inhabitants – our task is not to take stock of its contents but to *follow what is going on,* tracing the multiple trails of becoming, wherever they lead. To trace these paths is to bring anthropology back to life." In other words: To read the fieldwork data as a list of subjective experiences would mean missing the point, the focus must be on the experiential factor that makes these ways of being come to life.

Indian philosopher Krishnamurti (1994) once said: "The description is not the described; I can describe the mountain, but the description is not the mountain, and if you are caught up in the description, as most people are, then you will never see the mountain". In a scientific context it is all too easy (and tempting) to conceptualize the experiences of the research population, put them in a theoretical framework that makes sense, and leave it at that. There is more. I set out to lay down a series of explications, reflections, and insights extrapolated from my informant's (and my own) stories which are all road-signs pointing to 'the more': experience itself.[3] Knowledge can only bring us so far when it comes to ethics. One cannot *know* what the informant describes until one has gone through the same thing, and even then, all his explanations will only point to where the experience can be 'found'. It is extremely easy while discussing these topics

3 One might say this counts for any topic. When researching for instance the experience of nationalism for the Mongolian youth, the conceptualization of Mongolian nationalism is not the experience itself. Ethics however is a special case because it is all about change. As I will argue, there is nothing to hold on to in the moment where ethical change happens: what triggers the change is the lack of structure and orientation. Moreover, because the particular components of the experience can diverge radically between individuals (and this great variance is in fact evident in the stories of my informants) there is no pattern one can refer to and use as the content of the description.

to get caught in the movement of our own thinking, and mistake reality with a description of it. A way of avoiding this danger is concentrating on the difference between experience and knowledge, and recognizing that an intellectual conceptualization of experience destroys its purity. The mind packages experience, it rationalizes the experience and converts it into thought. But it is evident that the concepts and explanations are there to point at the experience, they are not it. It is merely an intellectual disguise: the description is not the described. It is therefore crucial to realize the reality and understanding of ethical experience is not going to take place from the neck up.

Experience lies beyond knowledge, it does not lend itself for rationalizations. The role of anthropology then is not to unveil some pattern connecting people's experiences, or solely provide descriptions of cultural dynamics and global flows. Postmodernism has cast a shadow on the great theoretical systems developed in the twentieth century, and has brought back academic attention to its origins, the subjective individual experience. What anthropology has to offer that other disciplines lack is a concrete attentiveness to human agency, and to the practices of everyday life (Inda and Rosaldo 2008) that compose this experience. Agency, however, while it may play and important role (in moral anthropology as well), won't do in anthropological studies of ethics.[4] When analyzing people's choices we “mark them down as agency” only when these choices seem to be the right ones from our perspective and view of agency (Laidlaw 2002). The notion of agency presupposes the availability to choose between, combine, and adapt different models to which individuals have access depending upon their particular

4 What this concept alludes to, as it is popularized in anthropology, “Is a matter of the effectiveness of action – specifically its effectiveness in producing, reproducing, or changing the structures within which people act. […] a means of pinpointing whose acts are, to various degrees, structurally or transformatively important, or powerful” (Laidlaw 2002: 315). Laidlaw also states that “In so far as talk of agency raises the question of whether person's choices are genuinely their choices – in so far, that is, as it points to questions of freedom – it does so in a way that is necessarily and systematically conflated with the question of the capacity or power which their choices have in casual terms. This means that, as an index of freedom, the concept of agency is pre-emptively selective.” (Laidlaw 2002: 315)

position within society (Rasanayagam and Heintz 2005).[5] In this conventional understanding of agency, there is no room for a passive attitude towards certain societal power dynamics, and the very use of the concept in this context assumes its opposite. As I will show, ethics is not about patterns but change, which requires a certain freedom.[6]

Tim Ingold, one of the most influential contemporary anthropologists, has contributed a great deal with his work to the anthropology of life. In his work I find support for my idea that describing the moral self is akin to trying to take a well-focused picture of a running athlete with a slow speed camera. One is learning, in Ingold's terms, about “other ways of being”, and it is inappropriate to frame anyone's way of being into patterns, because it implies a static understanding of being itself, leading to prejudice and stereotyping. The moral person is not a thing, the very permanence of its form is merely the outlive of a movement. Just like when drawing a circle, one would no longer see in the completed figure the trace of the twirling movement that went into its formation (Ingold 2011: 13). Therefore, in order to understand the moral person, it is essential to trace back this movement, to follow the movement oneself. To this purpose, the subject of ethical experience must be seen as a living being in perpetual motion while connected with the world. Ingold (2011) argues that we must not make the mistake of translating/converting the “being in the world” and “being involved with the world of beings and things” into an internal construction, of which manifestations and

5 The way these models are perceived are particular to what Asad (2003) called the individual 'ethical sensibilities'.

6 Although it might be tempting for anyone with a (western) scientific attitude to look for patterns and come up with generalizations of statements informants make and stages they might find themselves in, it is not an efficient approach to illustrate the phenomenon at hand. It is not only crucial to reconsider the role of ethnographic studies in statements about moral workings in societies at large, but also the ethical workings on a more personal level. Many great anthropologist, in their approaches to moralities, have built on the Durkheimian conception of the social, which uncritically identified the good with the collective, and thereby excluding the possibility and necessity of an independent understanding of ethics (Laidlaw 2002). In this environment the branch of “moral anthropology” arose, whose main promoters (Fassin 2014; Howell 1997 among others), focus and explain the collectively agreed upon moral rules, beliefs, and opinions, relating them to the broader cultural dynamics, thereby collapsing the whole idea of morality into notions of culture and ideology. While the development of this new field is considered an advancement for our discipline in general, and has indeed led to at least some dialogue with moral philosophy, it does not take into account the ethical complexities at play on the personal level and the fundamental individual conceptions on life and reality itself. As long as questions on morality and ethics are collapsed into discourses on culture and social regularity (the Durkheimian legacy), the everyday personal experience that matters and that anthropologist strive to bring to light is obscured.

related behaviors are but external expressions. By doing this, we suppose that the field of relationships in which persons move, which is also the origin of their sense of identity and belonging, is *generated* by a personal inner cognitive schema:

> "People's *engagement* with the world, far from constituting them as the particular persons they are, is treated as the consequence of a particular mode of *construction* of it, such that particularity and difference are attributed not to the specific positions occupied within a relational field, but to the inner contents of the mind." (Ingold 1993: 218-219)

Ingold (1993) calls "logic of inversion" this replacement of conception of the person as being inextricably *intertwined* with the life-world and part of a field of relationships with the person set off against his environment, *architect* of a set of cognitive rules for constituting these relationships. Where life has been "installed inside things", he aims to "restore these things to life", by returning to "the currents of their formation" (Ingold 2011: 68). For the purposes of this research, understanding this inversion is crucial in order to avoid a particularly hazardous trap for anthropologists. Because of this logic in fact, the person is expected to move and behave according to the indications given by the cultural models and cognitions rooted inside his/her mind. Beings which were and are open to the world are closed and close in upon themselves, "sealed by an outer boundary or shell that protects their inner constitution from the traffic of interactions with their surroundings" (Ingold 2011: 68). As will argue in the next chapters, in shamanism and other spiritual traditions this is an important theme.

In the anthropology of ethics the role of experience has been often eschewed as inaccessible, while still reporting on the conduct and stories of individuals in particular situations, the values, models, ideals they employ. This is the kind of ethnographic study of ethics practiced by the likes of Howell, Fassin, Zigon, Laidlaw (2002). As the last author states: "Whatever and in so far people's conduct is shaped by attempts to make of themselves a certain kind of person, because it is such a person that, on reflection, they

think they ought to live, to that extent their conduct is ethical and free" (Laidlaw 2002: 327). According to Laidlaw, ethical conduct is subject matter for an anthropology of ethics only to the extend that is shaping is done with reference to ideals and models that are amenable to ethnographic study (Laidlaw 2002). The very way Laidlaw formulates what ethics is about neglects the central role of experience, and what it means for the anthropologist himself to research and participate in the *experience* of ethics. In a similar fashion activism is indulged in ethnographic activities, leading to valuable insights and theoretical innovation (Marcus 1998), personal involvement in the anthropological study of ethics and moralities can lead to whole different level of analysis and finding. As anthropologists, we learn with people, make an effort to see things the way the teachers and friends we meet in the field do. When the subject is ethics, this means for the anthropologist working at himself in the ways his research population does, and report not merely on the techniques employed, but on their experienced effects and purpose. The anthropologist researching experience becomes his own informant. Fieldwork in this branch is crucial because ethics itself has no defined form one can describe prior to actually hearing the stories of those consciously practicing it, and it makes no sense prior to the actual personal experience of its transformative power. While Laidlaw lays the accent on the values and models used in the attempts of persons to make themselves into the kind of persons they want to be, I present a critical analysis of these "attempts to make of themselves a certain kind of person."

The French historian Michel Foucault, besides his explorations regarding the role of power in shaping knowledge, has written as well on the topics at hand. In the context of this research, I engage with his viewpoint on ethics because it takes into account the personal transformative connotation mentioned earlier. In the last decades, many of the Anthropologists (Howell 1997; Humphrey 1997; Robbins 2004; Zigon 2008; Fassin 2012) concerned with morality and ethics have eulogized Foucault for making an anthropological study of morality and ethics possible by providing insight into its

workings.[7] In this research I suggest that prior to this study of the models, ideals, and values it is worth taking a closer look to at very idea of "working at oneself" and what actually happens when an ethical transformation occurs. This analysis will eventually lead to a somewhat different understanding of ethics and consequently to a re-interpretation of the meaning and purpose of an anthropology of ethics based on that understanding.

In *The Use of Pleasure,* Foucault (1990) describes ethics as being one of the three main areas of morality (together with moral code and moral conduct).[8] Ethics involves the conduct required of an individual so as to render one's actions consistent with a moral code of one's society. The Mongol term would be *surtakhuun* (суртахуун), which literally means "those things that have been taught" (Humphrey 1997: 25).[9] In Foucault, ethics differs from moral conduct in that it concerns those techniques intentionally employed by individuals for the purpose of engaging in moral conduct. When, for example, an individual decides to respect the moral prescription of being sexually faithful to his partner, ethics concerns the ways by which he brings himself to behave in accordance to such prescription.[10] Ethical conduct in this case might thus involve a strategy such as avoiding being alone in a room with a sexually attractive other; the actually being faithful on the other hand is the (satisfactory, good) moral conduct. Such distinctions make it easier to understand what exactly is happening when one sets out to

7 More recently there have also been some critical anthropological revisions of Foucauldian ethics, for instance by James Faubion (2011).

8 The moral code are the norms, values, and rules prescribed to individuals by the institutions and groups of which they are members (family, church, state, etc). In Mongolian, the term that comes closest to this concept is yos (ёс), the commonly accepted rules of order and custom (Humphrey 1997). Humphrey argues that there is no Mongol term that truly corresponds with the western concept of 'morality', and even *yos surtakhuun* is of recent origin. The terms and notions do however denote a certain area of moral activity that plays a big role in Mongolian culture. Moral conduct refers to all those actions that have positive or negative moral relevance, insofar as they obey or resist the values, norms, and rules the moral code prescribes.

9 In this term we can already see the importance of the relations between individuals and exemplars when it comes to morality and ethics in Mongolian culture.

10 The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines more specifically Foucauldian ethics as "the intentional work of an individual on itself in order to subject itself to a set of moral recommendations for conduct and, as a result of this self-forming activity or "subjectivation," constitute its own moral being." (www.iep.utm.edu/fouc-eth/ accessed July 10, 2014)

"work at oneself" in order to become a morally acceptable person. Foucault (2000: 263) defines ethics as "the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself". In other words, it is a personal endeavor to shape one's moral self, a conscious effort to become what in one's own social context is seen as a morally appropriate person (Zigon 2008: 43). Regardless to what exactly is considered morally appropriate in a particular culture, ethics is understood as the conscious effort that makes one into that moral person, and is thus both a personal and social process (Zigon 2008: 43).[11]

The kind of ethics I inquire into is a successful relation of the subject to itself, one that consists in some kind of transformative experience. An experience that brings about pervasive behavioral change in a person is somewhat different than the ethical triangle Foucault envisioned. In his works, in fact, Foucault apparently views morality as a repetitive, cyclical process of continuous adaptation: the moral code leads to ethics, which leads to change in moral conduct. The process keeps on repeating itself due to constant variations in the historical, social, and personal variables, and the individual must keep struggling in order to keep up. On of the four aspects Foucault (1990) identifies to the shaping of the moral self concerns the ways and means by which one transforms and works at oneself.[12] Once a person is free from whichever constraints impede the practice of ethics, the self is formed in a creative fashion by working at oneself (Foucault 2000: 262). This is done by making use of what Foucault famously called the "technologies of the self" which

> "[…] Permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls,

11 Ethics understood in this sense differs from the more traditional notion of morality, defined as the rules that society (or social institutions) impose on its members, moral codes that determine which behaviors are forbidden, their positive or negative value (Zigon 2008).

12 This is the aspect that is most relevant to my research. The first aspect has to do with the acting of the individual as the focus of moral conduct. The second has to do with what exactly makes a person recognize his/her moral obligation. The third concerns the ways and means by which one transforms and works at oneself. The fourth what kind of person one wants to be or thinks one ought to be (Foucault 1990).

> thoughts, conduct, a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 2000: 225).

Focusing on the technologies of the self instead of on freedom is necessary because according to Foucault, freedom is exercised in different ways depending on the historical and societal circumstances. Studying ethics and freedom thus involves describing the particular ethical practices *through* which people exercise freedom (Laidlaw 2002).

In the following chapters, I will discuss some of these ways young adults in Ulaanbaatar exercise their freedom, how they experience their ethical lives. The point of my research is showing how the personal stories of experience do not match up wit the theoretical Foucauldian understanding of ethics. Experiencing ethics consists in resolving the paradox of 'being while becoming', and creating the space in which transformation can happen. We can allow the presupposition that people all over the world employ diverse techniques in order to make themselves into morally acceptable persons for the rest of society, and attain a certain state of happiness and perfection. The question is, does the real ethical transformation come about by “working at oneself”, employing these “technologies of the self”, as Foucault (2000) understood it, or by breaking free of this vicious cycle of change, by letting go of the idea there is something to work at, and getting to know the 'worker' her/himself?

II. Taming the wild horse

“Men follow customary rules as dogs follow bones”
- Mongolian saying[13]

On a windy and sunny day, I meet Kanaa, a Buddhist monk in his early forties, in front of the Zanabazar Buddhist University of Ulaanbaatar. He wears a yellow *deel* (дээл, traditional Mongolian clothing) with blue sleeves and a pair of colorful traditional Mongolian boots. After leading me through some corridors, from where I can look into the various rooms where numerous students sit on the ground reading, we settle in his office. He pours some *suutei tsai* (суутэи цаи, tea with milk and a little salt), he excuses himself for his rusty English, he complains a little about the taxes the government imposes on the monasteries, and about individuals impersonating monks and doing fortune-telling in exchange for money. Every now and then the door opens and I see a group of young monks peeking inside and chattering with each other. I later learn that my informant is well-respected and high-ranked, fulfilling quite an important role in the monastery. After some small talk, Kanaa observes how the Mongolian moral code has changed. Young people, he states, are victims of globalization. Some of them try to learn about traditional Buddhism, but it is in the context of a search for identity. Others do not just accept traditional Mongolian/Tibetan Buddhism, but try to figure out what real Buddhism is, they search for the truth. The 'new' religions and ideologies however bring confusion and hinder this search. Even in a political sense, says Kanaa, “democracy is not necessarily a good thing, it creates choice and confusion”. Because of the wide pallet of traditions and ideas at their disposal, the young generation mixes

13 In Gaadamba and Tserendsodnom (1967: 9). The Mongolian term for customary rules is *yos,* which contains the ideas of reasons. *Yos* have to be learned together with their reasons of being.

everything: Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, shamanism. In Kanaa's view, global flows and culture are clearly something to be wary of. It is not so much the cultural identity of Mongolia he is worried about. Even more so, he clearly states he does not care too much about the great Buddhist revival that took place in Mongolia in the nineties, with the introduction of freedom of religion. In his eyes, the search for truth has to be sincere, and being Buddhist just because it is part of the pre-Soviet Mongolian cultural identity is not enough. In theoretical terms, Kanaa's stance can be understood as a response to the dis-embedding tendencies of globalization, a will to define and restore the rooted tradition, religious and cultural commitment.

Globalization has produced and is producing a world ever more tightly integrated, more than any earlier age in history (Eriksen 2007). This tightening comes with a compression of time and space, communication and transportation being faster than ever, and it may almost appear like the human world is becoming a single place. Eriksen (2007: 141) has duly noted that "globalization is always *glocal* in the sense that human lives take place in particular locations". And Shalins (1994) has shown how modern, globalized practices do not replace, but are integrated into pre-existent systems of meaning; these systems adapt to the new elements, but do not homogenize. In the Anthropology of globalization, *re-embedding* is the response to the dis-embedding, tightening, compressing tendencies of globalization. The loosening of a fleeting social landscape is as it were counteracted with a local commitment to networks, morals, local powers and identity politics (Eriksen 2007). As Bauman (1998) observed, even neo-tribal and fundamentalist tendencies are legitimate and relevant products of globalization, for they express the experience of people on "the receiving end of globalization". On the one hand we have the hybridization of culture on top levels, international organizations, policies, multinational corporations; on the other hand, we have the commitment to local networks, the strengthening of national and even sub-national identity politics. From a theoretical viewpoint, Kanaa's stance is quite understandable, as well as that of the shamans in chapter three.[14] But the point I want to

14 This is as well a reaction against a certain forced flexibility and insecurity that comes with the dawn of what Bauman (2000; 2006) called a "liquid modernity".

emphasize, in the context of religion, is the way this Buddhist monk expresses his experience and relates it to global forces. These forces do not merely affect Kanaa's lifestyle, but hinder the search of the younger generation for true Buddhism, making him concerned more than angry his beloved *dhamma* path will be obscured.

The youth is distracted by all the new influences. “Their mind is like a whore,” says the monk, smiling and sounding severe at the same time. “They follow their senses instead of thought. They stop (their spiritual quest) when something just feels good”.[15] From Kanaa's perspective, searching for the truth is not so much a choice as it is a duty. The change one desires to experience must not be directed towards some secondary goal such as “feeling better”, but towards the truth, whatever it may be. Not everyone may want this, some might fear it, others may prefer the separation and the distractions to the real thing, and it's all good. Kanaa on the other hand attributes a kind of moral status to the search for truth, and disapproves the pursuit of anything else but that. Mongolia, according to Kanaa, is becoming like America and the West: everyone shortsightedly chases what feels good.

The search for truth his first priority, not even the high-ranked monk can hide his distaste for the changes the new democratic era has brought. The loss of traditional customs and values are intertwined with the spiritual confusion affecting the youth. He recollects how when he was young the whole family lived in one *ger* (гэр) districts,[16] and everyone ate from the same pot. Now “every child wants his own house and table”.

15 His statement reminds me of a talk by Adyashanti, a spiritual teacher whose teachings I came to know whilst in Mongolia, coming from a Zen Buddhist tradition similar in many ways to Kanaa's Tibetan/Mongolian background: “In order to be truly free, you must desire to know the truth more than you want to feel good. […] If this desire to feel good is stronger than the yearning to see, know, and experience 'truth', then this desire will always be distorting the perception of what is real […]. In my experience, everyone will say they want to discover the Truth, right up until they realize that the truth will rob them of their deepest held ideas, beliefs, hopes, and dreams. The freedom of enlightenment means much more than the experience of love and peace. It means discovering a truth that will turn your view of self and life upside-down.” (Adyashanti)

16 Placed at the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar, these districts are a kind of shantytowns of gers (or yurts, the traditional Mongolian round felt tents). More than half of the capital's residents live here without access to the city's basic public services like sewage systems, water, and heating.

In other words, tradition and interpersonal relationships are sacrificed in the name of technology and comfort. Even phones, according to Kanaa, “separate people instead of connecting them: when I go visit my family, everyone is playing with their phone instead of talking to each other. Nowadays people have no time to think about the truth, all they do is working and entertaining themselves, concern themselves with trivial things instead of learning about the 'right way'.” To access the internet, to open the gates to the sea of ideologies, values, choices, only distracts the youth from what's really important. Global flows have the power to drown us.[17]

After letting off the steam, the monk starts to nuance his story, explaining that “changing the movement of thought in the right direction” is different than following what “feels good”. There is a middle way to everything, which is why judging is difficult from a Buddhist perspective. A person that is your friend on one day can be your enemy the next, but whether friend or foe, he is a living human being in both cases. “Everything has its own nature”, the monk explains, “realizing the structure of things is essential for controlling the mind and understand ourselves. When you study your own feeling of anger for instance, you will come to see it is as a flame, fueled by yourself.” In order to work at ourselves, in Kanaa's view, one must have a clear direction, avoid confusion and distractions. Buddhism is often promoted as a science of the mind, and indeed initiates undergo a lengthy period of study of various disciplines, that could all be relevant and conductive to the development of one's enlightenment. At first glance, this seems to be a message of *becoming,* in line with the Foucauldian conception of ethics as “working at oneself”: one must do an effort to change the movement of thought and action.

Meditation is the main tool employed by monks such as Kanaa and the young people

17 Kanaa's message of staying with one's traditions is consistent with the one spread by the 14th Dalai Lama, who stated in one of his speeches that “it is better to stick with the wisdom and traditions of one’s own land than to run from them pursuing in exotica what was under your nose all the time”.

dedicated to the Buddhist way to trigger this change. The way people interpret and practice meditation differs wildly. It is one of those techniques that evolved in different cultures, crossed continents, has been re-invented and re-introduced innumerable times. Some forms of meditation are examples of what can be considered a "technology of the self", since they are techniques by means of which people transform themselves into the persons they think they ought to be. Through practitioners and monks I came to know some of the Buddhist meditation techniques. The *ānāpāna* meditation (exhalation and inhalation) works through concentrating on the breathing movement, and is meant to control the mind, by increasing concentration, peacefulness, and awareness. To illustrate this, Kanaa shows me an old *thangka* (painting on a cotton scroll depicting Buddhist deities or scenes) and points to the image of a horse in the center of a complex composition of figures and Tibetan script. He explains "The untrained mind is as a wild horse: it must be tamed in order to achieve the necessary clarity to gain a deeper understanding of reality." At a Mahayana Buddhist meditation center where I followed a nine week introductory course, Thubten (a Buddhist nun) explained the idea to me and about other twenty Mongolian students with a glass of water. "The mind is in perpetual motion, and usually there is not the necessary calmness and space to acquire deeper insights. When one performs the stabilizing (*ānāpāna)* meditation, what happens is that the water settles down, we are not frantically thinking anymore, and we are able to focus on what really matters".[18]

The concentration and awareness trained with meditation techniques is applied to the

18 Another example of meditation technique, which I learned at the Mahayana meditation center in Ulaanbaatar, is commonly called 'creative' or 'visualization' meditation. This technique is meant to increase those qualities we desire or perceive as being positive, and let go of the negative ones. The exercise starts with visualizing, at the level of one's forehead, the Shakyamuni Buddha, with a body made of golden light, seated on a golden throne, supported by a pair of snow lions at each corner, and adorned with precious jewels. The Shakyamuni Buddha is the embodiment of all enlightened beings: he has attained all realizations and has purified all defilements. This visualization exercise is repeated by the teacher at the beginning of each meditation session. Then, negative qualities such as jealousy are visualized as a black smoke, expelled through the mouth with each expiration. Then, one imagines the bright white light of the Shakyamuni Buddha, visualizes the positive qualities one thinks one needs as white some coming from the light, and takes them in with each inhalation. Interestingly, what qualifies as positive and negative traits is not defined. Tey might thus be different for each person.

experiences considered to be problematic in everyday life. Being aware of what is happening changes our perception of it. As Thubten explains: “Problems are the raw materials we use to change the mind. We ought to transform problems into the stuff of learning.” Dulgoon, a woman in her early thirties with three children, also a student at the Mahayana meditation center, says she wants to control the rage attacks she experiences when her sons misbehave. Being a devout Buddhist, she decided to refine her meditation methods in order to become a more tolerant, patient, and calm mother. Thubten tells her this is entirely possible: “There are secondary conditions, but the seed of the experience, the root of the problem and cause of both suffering and happiness is located in the mind.” The mother replies that it was her personality, and she had always been that way. How could she ever change? “Because the mind has no beginning or end, and is ever-changing, we can transform it by changing the pathways,” states the nun. “The pathways are connected with habits. We need to start leaving the negative pathways doing nothing but harm by finding potholes in them, and make a habit of using the positive pathways.” This is an example of how layman Buddhists in Mongolia interact and learn from monks and lama's. Notice that in Dulgoon's ethical experience, just like in Foucault, it all starts with a desire for change and the identification of some qualities considered negative. During these kind of workshops, Buddhist monks and nuns use these desires to initiate the people to deeper spiritual insights.

Moral rules are related to the calm and concentrated mind-state. The young Buddhist practitioners I interviewed named a series of these rules, divided in acts of speech (lying, cursing), body (killing, sexual misconduct), and mind (revenge thoughts, ignorance). As I was told by Teem, student of Buddhism, the infringement of these rules “produces unrest in the mind, it makes the horse even wilder and difficult to tame.” Following the moral code is a condition to attain and maintain the calmness and concentration necessary to successfully meditate and access deeper truths. In Buddhist courses such as the one taught by Thubten as well, one reflects and applies series of moral rules meant to lead one to the “right view”, such as “when in the company of others, I shall always consider myself the lowest of all, and from the depths of my heart

hold others dear and supreme."[19] Statements about what exactly is necessary diverge among practitioners, and what one ought to do may also depend on one's position in the world and in the Buddhist hierarchy. Batchuluun, a young Buddhist informant committed to the moral code, confided me that he is not supposed to eat meat, but after all, he needed the proteins to withstand the harsh Mongolian winter. When I asked if he eats meat in the summer, he answered he prepares dried meat in the winter, which he eats in the summer, so that he does not need to kill animals when it's not necessary. This contradiction might seem ironic form one viewpoint, but is understandable if we consider moral rules in Buddhism are conductive to something else, and the real purpose is to still the mind. It is clear however that not everyone interprets and relates to these rules in the same way.

Kanaa and Thubten help the youth to access truths which are very different from those found amidst the distractions and confusion of daily life. They are not known beforehand. They cannot be attained with a conflicted, distraught mind. [20] One could say that in Buddhism (as I learned in Mongolia), ethical transformation is the result of the realization of those deeper truths about reality that can only be seen by taming the wild horse. Ethical transformation is not something we can identify, chase, and achieve: it is something that finds us and leads us to places unknown. The purpose of meditation is not to know and possess some truth, but to let is possess us. The "noble eightfold path" is considered in Buddhism the way out of suffering through the achievement of self-awakening or enlightenment. The eight points are divided into wisdom, ethical conduct, and concentration. Although these three divisions and its eight factors are meant to be developed simultaneously, according to some interpretations the first step is the "right view", and everything else (right speech, right action, right livelihood...) follows from

19 From the "8 Verses of thought transformation (mind training)", by Langri Tangpa Dorje Senghe.

20 Just like the glass of water and the wild horse, if we can find a stable and concentrated mind-state, we have the means to actually pay attention and start the ethical experience. The change this experience brings about is never the change one expects, especially prior to attaining the necessary concentration. This is why Kanaa argues there can be no goal other than the burning desire to see what is true, whatever it means. A goal such as "feeling better" does not bring us all the way.

there. In Buddhist circles I often heard teachers say everyone proceeds “according to one's own capacities” which in other words means that if the first step is too difficult, one will start at developing the right speech and such, follow as it were the Buddhist moral code, and hope this effort will eventually lead to the right view as well. If one attains the right view, a certain shift in consciousness, a realization precedes the change in one's moral conduct, which could be seen more as a consequence of such shift. It appears however that without the right view, one cannot get the other ones right. In a sense, when informants that self-identify as Buddhists talk to me about vows they took to follow the eightfold path, and observe the prescriptions of right speech, action, and livelihood, it is thus implied that the right view did not lead them to 'automatically' walk this path. Again, ethics is thus perceived as working at oneself, making use of certain strategies in order to engineer one's own ethical experience and transformation.

The moral codes and techniques as they are passed on within a systematized religion such as Buddhism do indicate a certain understanding of spiritual knowledge that is separate from experience. For some of those outside the monasteries, practicing the Buddhist methods and taking vows to follow its moral code (like Batchuluun did), it is of uttermost importance to *know* what those rules and techniques are and to follow them, in order to achieve the desired spiritual growth. Buddhism, says Batchuluun emphatically, is a “science of the mind”. It is about “studying and understanding the nature of things, knowing what is right and wrong”. “Nowadays,” states the young man, “the contemporary global world has a different worldview than the Buddhists who follow the moral code, they don’t even try to fight their bad habits.”[21]

By relating diverging worldviews to differences in moral conduct, Batchuluun reveals an understanding of knowledge that is not linked to experience but passed on. This

21 This, by the way, says nothing about the individuals; as I mentioned earlier, one should be wary of Ingold's “logic of inversion”. That is, treating people's *engagement* with the world as “the consequence of a particular mode of *construction* of it, such that particularity and difference are attributed not to the specific positions occupied within a relational field, but to the inner contents of the mind.” (Ingold 1993: 218).

reminds of what Ingold calls the “genealogical model”, the view based on the assumption that “individuals are specified in their essential genetic and cultural constitution […] independently and in advance of their life in the world, through the bestowal of attributes from ancestors” (Ingold 2011: 157). In other words, according to this model cultural knowledge is passed down from one's ancestors and does not have as its source the experience (related to inhabiting particular places in the world) of the individual. The essential nature of a living being is “received as an endowment”, passed on to each individual independently and regardless of the being's interaction / correspondence with its environment (Ingold 2000: 108). Even though the cultural-type of individuals is established through instruction, the “knowledge already acquired is *imported* into the contexts of practical engagement with the environment” (Ingold 2011: 157). It is therefore not experienced, but fixed from the start. The kind of cultural knowledge that *can* be passed down and pre-date the interaction of the being with its environment must be *categorical* (Ingold 2011). It must permit, Ingold argues, “the isolation of discrete phenomena as objects of attention from the contexts in which they occur, and the identification of these objects as of a certain kind on the basis of intrinsic attributes that are invariant across contexts” (Ingold 2011: 158). The genealogical model (and the 'vertical' integration of knowledge, in Ingold's terms) argues that one has to know what one is dealing with in order to function in the world. We do this by associating every object encountered with ideas of classes of objects. Ingold states that the genealogical model and the classificatory project reinforce and even more so entail each other. The first holds that “the knowledge we receive from our ancestors, and that enables us to function, comprises a system of concepts for classifying the objects we encounter in the world. The other, in seeking to classify living things […] in terms of transmitted attributes, converts the resulting taxonomy into a genealogy” (Ingold 2011: 158). The genealogical model is at odds with experiential ethics because it puts knowledge before experience. Batchuluun and those informants who told me about the moral rules they have vowed to observe expect ethical transformation to come about through discipline and obedience. This is of course more than legitimate, but what I am

trying to convey is the different experiences of Buddhist ethics.[22]

Narantsetseg, a Mongolian woman of 24 years old, is more of a do-it-yourself spiritual seeker, and does not self-identify as being religious. She is representative for a group of informants that eschew the genealogical model and accept little or no knowledge that does not come about from their direct personal experience. Right at the very beginning of our first conversation, in one of Ulaanbaatar's coffeehouses, where we found shelter from the fierce Mongolian cold, she stated:

> "You're here in the world on your own you know? I mean you have people around you but it's really your experience, your soul... you have to really help yourself and... It's like an adventure of your soul". (Narantsetseg)

Narantsetseg recollects how she had many questions in her mind, and since her family did not give her any answers, she went looking for them herself in churches, monasteries, and books. She puts all she learns through a kind of 'experience test': if she does not recognize nor is able to experience what she reads, the insight will not (or not yet) become integral part of her worldview. Compared to Batchuluun, she has a somewhat different perspective on Buddhism. She tells me the well-known story of Siddhartha Gautama, of his quest for the end of suffering, and how eventually he re-discovered the ancient *Vipassana* meditation technique. Through this method, the young woman says enthusiastically,

> "He won his mind and emotions, he knew what was going on and why... things like impermanence, and how to flow with it. So that is what he taught and he said, this teaching will disappear. He knew it, because people with

22 Having almost no knowledge and experience with Buddhism prior to my fieldwork in Mongolia, it is important to keep in mind that what I am trying to portray here is not authentic Buddhism as it is, but religion and spirituality as it is experienced by my informants. There is a discrepancy between how some informants and the contemporary youth experience Buddhism or any form of spirituality for that matter.

> more impure minds, they would try to act like... OK this does not feel good, let's add this or that... and that was not the way he (the Buddha) found it. And then 500 years later, after he died, there was Buddhism. After he died people created this Buddhism thing, and they symbolize Buddha, and try to pray to him.... But what he taught people is if you take medicine from a doctor, and then bring it to your home and put it in your altar, and pray to it, it wouldn't help you. You have to take the medicine right?" (Narantsetseg)

Somewhere between exited and frustrated, Narantsetseg observes that was one of the stories the Buddha told, and still it happened: "The people that came after him did not follow his teachings and the method he thought would help them. Instead they put up a monastery." Narantsetseg's story is a prime example of that of many young adults, listening and interpreting the scriptures and lessons of great religions in a very personal way. To them, all religions hold a core of truth. They originate from enlightened beings that have experienced truth themselves, that have undergone a radical spiritual transformation. She does study the great religions and scriptures, but her approach is different: the truth is to be experienced in one's own life, not to be 'possessed' and defined by knowledge. As soon as people think they *know* the truth, according to Narantsetseg, "It really spreads hate when people are divided into different religions. It's like 'we are different' and so... people get separated by their beliefs". People get separated instead of united, which to her should be the function of religion.

Most of the opinions of do-it-yourself spiritual seekers such as Narantsetseg are based on personal experience. This is the reason why the young woman is so passionate about it. It does not mean that experiences are identical, but it points to a different approach to the whole ethical life. Meditation for Narantsetseg was nothing but an experiment when she first started, and now she describes it as one of those essential tools that, besides teaching you how the mind really works, provides the necessary balance to lead a proper, healthy and happy life. This balance, she states, is not something she experienced prior to her spiritual experiences, and it is not something she expected to

learn before starting meditating.

> "I think it's about finding out yourself. […] when I was little, I was really a materialist. Then some experiences happened, and I went into the spiritual side and I detached myself from materialism. But being really far from the material is also not healthy, so you should find a balance, because it's a spiritual and a material world. It's a combination of both. […] going to one extreme always creates problems." (Narantsetseg)

Narantsetseg's approach, the 'alternative' account of acquiring knowledge, is similar to that which Ingold sets against the classificatory project and genealogical model, and implies a *storied* view of knowledge. In this view, knowledge is not ready-made, instructed, put into the mind of the individual prior to his engagement with the world, but is *experienced,* "perpetually 'under construction' within the field of relations established through the immersion of the actor-perceiver in a certain environmental context" (Ingold 2011: 159). People do thus not "apply their knowledge in practice" but they "know *by way* of their practice" (Ingold and Kurttila 2000: 191). Knowledge is not instructed as a complex structure of ideas but is the product of a complex process: "Knowing does not lie in the establishment of a correspondence between the world and its representation, but is rather immanent in the life and consciousness of the knower as it unfolds within the field of practice set up through his or her presence as a being-in-the-world" (Ingold 2001: 143). This complex process has neither beginning nor end: "It is continually going on. It is equivalent to the very movement – the *processing* – of the whole person, indivisibly body and mind, through the life-world" (Ingold 2011: 159). In the genealogical model, movement is ancillary to the integration of knowledge. It serves as a change of perspective, to transport the individual from one observation point to the other. The data collected in each locus is then sorted in the higher classification system, which is indifferent to the various contexts from which the data is extracted. In the process-like view Ingold proposes, *movement equates knowing.* In other words, knowledge is integrated *along* the way. In contrast to the vertically integrated

knowledge system, which has classification as its main tool, 'alongly integrated knowledge' has as its epitome the *story* (Ingold 2011: 160).

What classifications, codes, and techniques split apart, is drawn together by stories. In classifications things are categorized on the basis of characteristics given independently from the various contexts it encountered, they are separated from what surrounds them, and at the same time they are not defined by their relations to the things that surround them at a particular time. In a story, on the other hand, it is exactly those relations and the context which determine how each element is identified and where it is positioned (Ingold 2011; 2007: 90).

> "The storied world […] is a world of movement and becoming, in which any thing – caught in a particular place and moment – enfolds within its constitution the history of relations that have brought it there. […] In the storied world, […] things do not exist, they occur. Where things meet, occurrences intertwine, as each becomes bound up in the other's story. Every such binding is a place or topic. It is in this binding that knowledge is generated." (Ingold 2011: 160).

If we see our ethical lives and that of others from the perspective of storied knowledge, we are able to take into account the fluid and moving nature of ethical knowledge and transformation. For the anthropologist it makes it possible to get an insight into experiential ethics as well.[23] As Ingold puts it: "To tell a story is to *relate,* in narrative, the occurrences of the past, bringing them to life in the vivid present of listeners as if they were going on here and now. […] To know someone or something is to know their story, and to be able to join that story to one' s own." (Ingold 2011: 160-161). It is clear

23 The task of the anthropologist involves meeting the object/subject of study in a certain place or topic and create the bindings that generate knowledge. Listening to one's story in the place where it originally took place could help to learn *with* the other by reliving as it where the particular experience, and joining it to the anthropologist's own life-story.

this ‘joining of stories’ is relevant not solely for the researcher trying to learn about the ethical lives of others, but as well for those gathering knowledge they deem important for furthering the desired ethical transformation. In fact, it helps those looking for change letting go of the ready-made, instructed knowledge *about* ethical change, and encourages one to *experience* the change, just like Narantsetseg did. The kind of experience leading to ethical change does not thus lie in the well-ordered and classified knowledge accumulated over centuries, but in movement and the dynamic interaction and binding of personal stories, including those of spiritual masters such as the Buddha or Jesus.

This is more clear to some than others. In the last month of my fieldwork I meet Tuvshintur, a young freelance journalist with a lot of experience in everything spiritual. During a long and intense conversation about his experiences with Buddhism and shamanism, he tells me he owns most of the books written by Rajneesh (also known as Osho), an Indian mystic, and more than hundred other books on spirituality. When I ask if this is his method of choice for developing himself in a spiritual sense, he replies:

> “Reading is a really big one, but it is not enough. Reading is about 20% of the spiritual development. Practice is 80%, meditation and such. There are plenty of things happening during the meditation one cannot express. Language lacks, so it's more about experience. Let's consider you've never seen a lemon, and someone is explaining to you what a lemon is. It tastes like this and so on... that's nothing. You have to eat it. Books, scriptures and sutras are just explanations of the lemon. You cannot read all the explanations all day long, your whole life... you have to eat it! That's it. In order to do that, you need a good method, such as meditating.” (Tuvshintur)

Tuvshintur is the epitome of the well-read and experienced spiritual seeker, a few years older than Narantsetseg. He is less convinced of the necessity to find a balance between his spiritual and materialistic life. From his viewpoint, growing spiritually, or

undergoing an ethical transformation, working at oneself is not about accumulating knowledge, it's about going where knowledge points to. Systems and institutionalized religions (derived from the genealogical model) according to him have their function in society: “Every society needs religion, because like I said there are plenty of things law can't control, law can't rule. Religion has to rule the spiritual side of society. But for real liberation... for me I don't need any religion, I just need the essence of religions” (Tuvshintur). It is by living that one encounters the ideas that bring about spiritual transformation.[24] The great deal of time Tuvshintur spends reading spiritual books and learning about the great religions shows the line between Ingold's genealogical and storied models is often blurred. But it is worth noticing how both Narantsetseg and Tuvshintur go about their spiritual journey. As Tuvshintur states, he “needs the essence of religions”, while the social-cultural elements of them are irrelevant to his quest. Both are in a way looking to spiritual teachings for *hints* that can lead them to transformative experiences.

We must not forget that the researcher is not merely looking for meaning in the stories of his subjects, nor is the reader merely learning about the meaning found in the stories of certain subjects by the researcher. The joining of stories and the exposure to unfamiliar universes of symbolic action has not as its primary purpose some technical advance in the theory of culture, but the finding of meaning in our own life stories. This meaning is found by understanding that when we meet and try to understand any being moving and learning *alongly* in the world, we too are living our own stories, and are affected by everything we encounter. In fact, “it may not be until long after a story has been told that its meaning is revealed, when you find yourself retracing the very same path that the story relates.” This process is “like that of following trails through a landscape: each story will take you so far, until you come across another that will take

24 Tuvshintur tells me a story he heard about Jesus traveling to the Himalayas in his twenties and studying with the Himalayan Yogi, as an example of how even Jesus through certain experiences and interactions with other people came to be 'liberated'. He adds that it does not matter whether this is true, but it does say something about how spiritual and ethical development works.

you further" (Ingold 2011: 162). The trail-following is what Ingold calls *wayfaring,* and it is how knowledge is carried on.[25] What we can understand is that 'knowing' equates relating to the world around us (Ingold 2011: 162), and that relating to the world around us implies *experiencing* it. Human beings do not "apply their knowledge in practice" but they "know *by way* of their practice" (Ingold and Kurttila 2000: 191).[26] And what is important is this continuous movement of the person though the life-world.[27]

In this view, one may say that *becoming* equates *being,* experience equates knowledge. There is no end to the process, no end to movement. And it is exactly this incessant movement that constitutes our suffering. Kanaa calls this '*dukkha'*, which is the Buddhist term for anxiety, unsatisfactoriness, suffering. *Dukkha* is caused by our frantic trying to hold on to things that are inevitably changing, to control the movement of life.[28] Kanaa sees an ulterior threat to the realization of our enlightened state in globalization, with all its new distractions and ideologies, and the weakening of tradition. Kanaa and many monks like him are concerned for younger generations: the dhamma path must be clear and devoid of distractions. In a way, what Mongolian spiritual teachers, monks, and shamans are up against is not merely a series of novelties

25 In this sense, if we wish, any wayfarer is able to tell a story, and any story we decide to join with our own brings knowledge. The question is thus not so much "to whom must the anthropologist or the seeker go?" but to whom does one choose to go. Whatever one encounters that evokes visions of the destination one is trying to reach, whatever trail seems close enough to our own and which we feel will take us further (whatever that means), is the story we choose to join. It does not mean this particular story is the truth. It does not mean it is the end of the line. It does not mean it brings us where we want to go. It simply means it is something we encountered and we listened to. It might as well be that a story we hear in our youth only unravels in our consciousness much later in our adult lives. Perhaps it needs some other story or insight to make sense.

26 In 'wayfaring' movement itself is of importance, not the destinations it connects: "indeed wayfaring always overshoots its destinations, since wherever you may be at any particular moment, you are already on your way somewhere else" (Ingold 2011: 162; 2007: 78). Moreover, this movement, this process of knowing is "continually going on. It is equivalent to the very movement – the *processing* – of the whole person, indivisibly body and mind, through the lifeworld" (Ingold 2011: 159).

27 This is articulated beautifully in an inspiring passage of "Creative Evolution", by philosopher Henri Bergson, a big influence for Ingold: "life in general is mobility itself; particular manifestations of life accept this mobility reluctantly, and constantly lag behind. […] Evolution in general would fail to go in a straight line; each special evolution is a kind of circle. Like eddies of dust raised by the wind as it passes, the living turn upon themselves, borne up by the great blast of life." (Bergson 1911: 134)

28 In the Buddhist worldview, most humans are prisoners of *Samsara,* the endless movement and cycle of birth and death, stuck into a repetitive destructive pattern of thought and behavior. And yet all we do functions to maintain us in this state.

that can mislead youngsters, but a whole philosophy of control intrinsic to western culture. *Dukkha* is not intrinsic to the endless movement of life, it originates in struggle, in the attempt to control and change the flow. What distinguishes Narantsetseg and Tuvshintur from Batchuluun is their willingness to be transformed by experience, instead of manipulating their transformation. Batchuluun, on the other hand, by taking a vow to follow a set of moral rules, experiences his ethical life as a matter of motivation, knowledge, and work.

Thinkers such as Foucault and Ingold endorse a particular ontological view on the truth in their works, but informants in the field (and all of us in our daily lives) *experience* this. And it is how humans experience and relate to this ontology in their lives that defines their ethical experience. It must as well be said, to nuance the way I portrayed his view on ethics in the previous chapter, that Foucault (1979) does differentiate between what he calls “spiritual exercises” and the “intellectual method”. The historian notes how pre- and post-Cartesian systems approach the whole epistemological problem of how one acquires knowledge and the idea of self-transformation differently. Spirituality or spiritual exercises are in Foucauldian terminology methods one uses to transform oneself in order to “gain access to the truth”. And the truth, in Foucauldian philosophy, is something that 'happens' rather than something that already exists, something that is produced rather than something that needs to be unveiled or discovered (O'Ferrell 2005). When Foucault characterizes truth as something that is produced, he implies that rationality and relations of power are the producer. In other words, truth is something that happens, takes place in a particular historical context (Foucault 1997). Ingold's (2011) notion of “being alive” is based on a notion of progress as making: the continuous re-inventing of ourselves with the same old words and materials. In different ways, both seem to support the idea that truth is as it were

something to be produced, as it were, by living.[29]

Reassuming, the idea of transforming a situation perceived as problematic into an exercise of control, the learning and putting into practice of moral rules, are examples of how one can attempt to manipulate the movement of life. Ethics is then, consistently with Foucault's view, experienced as struggle, work, an effort to become the moral person that one on reflection wants to be. The main “technology of the self” employed in this case is the appliance of genealogical knowledge. Even informants who self-identify as Buddhist (like Batchuluun) can experience ethics this way, even though the point of Buddhism is to go beyond the struggle. On the other hand is the wayfaring attitude of going along with the movement of life. Ethics becomes a matter of experience, and ethical transformation is a result of this experience. The technology of the self employed is the relating of storied knowledge to one's own life history, the personal relation of the stories of others with one's own experience. This is not a matter of control of struggle, but of concentration, observation, and awareness. To do this, one needs to liberate the mental energy employed in the frantic grasping to what is impermanent. When one lets go of all impermanent belief structures, there is nothing left, and one falls into a kind of void where nothing is true. Just like the glass of water and the wild horse, if we can find stability and rest and our minds become calm we have the means of accessing deep insights about reality and ourselves. In the 'being' view of ethics, because it comes about through observation of the self and experience instead of the working on the self, ethical transformation is not something we can chase and achieve, it is something that finds us and leads us to places unknown.

29 Foucault goes a step further than Ingold, and inserts an ethical view: working at oneself by means of technologies of the self. However, he does not appear to relate this view directly to his understanding of truth, which leads him to describe an ethics of *becoming* instead of one of *being*.

III. The eternal blue sky

“If you follow sayings you [only] become clever
If you follow an exemplar you become wise” - Mongolian saying[30]

On the 4th of April I have the great opportunity to go and participate to the annual shaman celebration in *Selenge Aimag* (Сэлэнгэ аймаг), a province north of the capital and close to the Russian border. In the barren countryside of Selenge stands a huge pine tree, known as “the mother tree”, in which according to legend a powerful queen burnt herself alive after her two sons died, swearing she would assist all Mongolians through the forces of nature after her death. All year round people visit this sacred location, but once a year shamans from all over greater Mongolia gather here to bring offerings and perform various rituals. The night before the celebration Hotlong and her shaman friend Teb-Tengeri pick me up downtown, and bring me to the shaman's house in one of the capital's ger-districts for some *suutei tsai*, and meeting some other shamans. My friend Hotlong is the only one speaking English, and therefore communication is somewhat limited. We set out for the north around midnight, with five cars alternately blasting slow traditional Mongolian ballads with throat-singing and disco music.

Due to the rough road and the old tires we come to a stop multiple times in the freezing steppe. At dawn, after a seven hour drive, we finally arrive at the location, and each one of us throws milk offerings at the rising sun.[31] The four shamans put on their special clothing, a heavy *deel* (traditional Mongolian one-piece clothing reaching below the

30 In Mongolian: Üg dagaval uhaantai bolno. Üliger dagaval tsetsen bolno (Erdene-Ochir 1991: 47). The 'Üliger' is the ideal combination of the teacher's words and deeds at their best. 'Uhaan' (clever) stands for rational intelligence, and 'tsetsen' (wise) for sageness or prudence (Humphrey 1997).

wearer's knees) adorned with all kinds of objects and symbols.[32] After some minor rituals, the most experienced shaman begins the possession ritual. He starts by dancing slowly while beating the drum close to his face. All the people around move their hands, palms up, chanting to invite the spirit. The rhythm becomes faster and faster, the dance more frantic, and all of a sudden the shaman starts shaking and spinning around wildly, banging his drum faster in a climactic crescendo, then he almost falls down on the ground: the spirit has taken possession of his body, and he 'transforms' in an old man. His assistant hastens to catch him, and leads him to his seat. The shaman, now possessed by one of his ancestor spirits, walks curved, his face completely obscured by his head-wear, from under which he emits guttural sounds. Once seated in cross-legged position, he starts mumbling with a completely different, croaky, elderly voice, and starts smoking or drinking whatever his assistant gives him (mostly cigarettes in a long pipe and Mongolian vodka). Incense and other herbs are burning on the small altar next to him. What is most striking is the change of attitude the attendees have towards the shaman himself. Before the possession, he was just another member of the family, not even the oldest or most charismatic. Now he is a king, a powerful ancestor, a different person. After a small introduction talk, in which the ancestor spirit presents himself and underlines the sacredness of the location, one by one, the attendees approach him to pay respects and ask for advice.

It is because of small things such as the trembling hands of the shaman's assistant, the bent heads, and the lack of eye contact, that I am convinced how high young and old

31 The milk blessing is another example of traditional Mongolian ritual. Hotlong explains to me that before throwing it in the air, I have to whisper a prayer into the milk, a prayer of gratitude or a request for anything I desire, such as a better job, or money. The head needs to be covered with a hat, which has to do with the soft spot on the head, the place where the spirit goes in and out. A spoon with milk is taken at the height of the mouth, and one whispers the prayer or request into the milk. The other hand needs to be open with palms up. Once finished whispering, the milk is thrown in the air, taking care to not lower the hand with the spoon beyond the mouth. The process is repeated four times, once in each direction.

32 Each shaman customizes his own special clothing, according to the instructions of his ancestors. Common elements in the clothing are bells, swastika's (probably borrowed from Buddhism, but instead of symbolizing well-being in Mongolian shamanism it serves as protection), animal pelts, metal plates and jewelry, big hats with feathers and hanging threads that cover the shaman's face. They always wear lots of rings, usually of silver (symbolizing protection).

hold the spirits in their regard, and how serious this custom is in their experience. The whole event proceeds in a natural way, like paying a visit to an esteemed grandparent, although most seem somewhat fearful. Some elderly women encourage me to approach the shamans, and I have short talks with three of them, on bended knees, mimicking the respectful attitude of the others. The ancestor spirits sniff my hair and touch my ears, then say I am a good person. In these and all the talks I had with possessed shamans, the message is always the same: be aware of what you are doing, treat everything around you as you treat a person, because everything is alive. There are no commandments, merely the suggestion of letting everything flow freely and naturally. At first I had the tendency of unconsciously associate ancestor spirits with the whimsical Greek Gods, but in the shamanic view spirits are not there to interfere with our lives, they merely encourage us to become aware of a deeper dimension of life. From the point of view of a spirit, life flows naturally and unstoppably, and there is no need for intervention. During an interview, Hotlong beautifully articulates this attitude, referring to her own experience and relationship with the ancestor spirit:

> “Grandpa's spirits are just there to point the way. Not to bring you down or lift you up... […] if there is a straight line to death, grandpa just wants you to go straight ahead. He doesn't want you to fall off the bridge, to fall and come back on again and again. He is just there to send you the right way.” (Hotlong)

Some hours later, we visit the mother tree, where hundreds of people are gathered, all seemingly ethnic Mongolian and no tourists. We put our offerings (milk and rice) on the big piles of food in the vicinity of the tree, and then our *khadags* (хадаг, traditional colorful ceremonial scarfs) on the mother tree itself. The giant mother tree is covered mostly in blue and yellow drapes, to symbolize respectively honor and respect.[33] Almost

33 The tree was healthy and green until a few years ago, when it got struck by lightning. Now its condition worsens by the year.

fifty shamans from different Mongolian ethnic groups and parts of the county are at work here, giving offerings and performing a variety of rituals. The noise of entranced shaman chanting, the strong scent of the traditional juniper-based incense burning everywhere, the mysterious mother tree with all its drapes visible through the smoke, all adds up to create a surreal atmosphere. The dedication of the shamans and the reverence of the all-Mongolian public put the whole event out of time and space, as if it remained unchanged for millennia. I wander around the area enthralled by everything that happens around me, and the experience feels timeless and natural as the spirits themselves.

Hotlong explains to me that the purpose of the shaman is to host an ancestor spirit (referred to as 'Grandpa'), so that people can approach and talk to him in a physical way, and get advice about relationship or work, anything they are troubled with.[34] When possessed, the shaman will talk in an ancient Mongolian dialect, which only the assistant can interpret with some difficulty. Most of Grandpa's wisdom is therefore lost in translation. The possession can take hours or days, and ends when the spirit wants to leave; the shaman then beats his drum again, and returns to his normal state.[35] According to some informants, if a person with a calling to become a shaman refuses to become one, the spirits will destroy his life and make him miserable until he accepts. Teb-Tengeri knows this well: “Both my father and one of my brothers had to die before I finally gave in and decided to become a shaman. It is not something you can resist.” One can become a shaman at any age, but there can be only one shaman in the bloodline.[36]

34 Experienced shamans have more than 6 spirits, younger ones two or three. Depending on the ancestry line, the ancestor spirit can be a king, a general, a singer, a slave, a hunter, a thief, and so on.

35 In spite of the large quantities of vodka ingested, he is ostensibly completely sober, and does not remember anything from the event except if the spirit wants him to remember something in particular. Many informants mention this as a sign of power.

36 Once one becomes a shaman there is no difference in rank. However, some shamans are older and more experienced, and have disciples to whom they teach how to control the spirit and do the rituals. At the mother tree as well, I observe how a young girl in her twenties hosts an ancestor spirit for the first time, assisted by a more experienced shaman. Crouched on the ground, repetitively moving her head and completely disoriented, she struggles to maintain the connection and let the spirit completely take over.

Through their answers and attitude, it is evident that the ancestor spirits have a human element. This is not a secret: they talk about their wives in the spirit realm, and display the common human range of emotions. Getting advice from Grandpa is literally like getting advice from an older, wiser family member. He will display the same kind of emotions a concerned father or mother has, express disappointment, pride, worry, sometimes anger. For instance, in one session I witnessed the possessed shaman beat his assistant with a log because he had the impression his words were not interpreted correctly. Grandpa is not dispassionate, but his emotions are not above him: they all come out a sense of caring for his family and life. Hotlong explains her relationship with grandpa as literally a familiar one:

> "It is just like getting advice from your family. Sometimes Grandpa will be angry and pissed at you, like – I'm not gonna talk to you -...you know? Sometimes he'll be like what's going down? What's happening? Why are you doing this? But whatever you're thinking he knows, and at the end he is always like – it's gonna sort itself out, be as you are, you don't need to worry about it... - that kind of things. He gives you the support, the advice you need..." (Hotlong)

As mentioned earlier, Grandpa never gives direct commandments (complaints notwithstanding). The relationship the ancestor spirit has with his progeny and those that communicate with him is way more subtle. The only constant moral imperative he voices out is that of respect (for tradition, for one's family, and for nature). According to Caroline Humphrey (1997), accepted rules or conventions (*yos zanshil;* ёс заншил) are related to respecting nature. For example in "you must not wash in rivers", there is a message of danger as well as wrongness. If you do, the flowing water gets polluted, and river spirits will take revenge. Although I did not encounter this particular rule, it does appear that most religious customs and rules of conduct are related to the existence of natural spirits (*ezen,* эзэд), and on the consequences of disturbing the relationship with

them. When someone comes for advice, Grandpa will sometimes hint at some reasons why a certain misfortune happened, but rarely will he give any solid guideline. The relationship between a person and his ancestor spirits does not exclusively go through the family shaman. Whenever one has any kind of trouble, one can give a milk offering and say Grandpa's name a few times:

> “Whoever told Grandpa his name, whoever is in Grandpa's mind... Grandpa always looks after them. He is always looking at them. […] you are in their mind, and protection automatically is there. […] But it's nothing to be like... surprised or scared about. It wouldn't affect you in any way, unless you want it to. But if something wrong happens, if you have a situation, problems... then. If you just gonna offer milk, […] and call on Grandpa's name […] he will look at you and try to help you. Not sort out your problem, or make it disappear, or give you a hint or anything... just keeps an eye on you”. (Hotlong)

Having the spirit “keeping an eye on you” raises in a way one's awareness of life's workings, sharpening one's senses to the small signs and decisions that shape the future. Some state that asking the spirits to look after oneself is not unlike praying to God, but the relationship is different, because the ancestor spirits are related to the person, and are thus personally invested in their progeny's fate. Moreover, they have human characteristics, and have therefore much more in common with them. The main perk of getting advice form an ancestor is that one gets a point of view from a finer reality, from someone who has deeper insight into the complexity of life. Most importantly, Grandpa's advice and attitude is very different depending on the person and the situation. Most of the informants are grateful for the assistance their ancestor spirits provide them, and do realize very well how this works. Informants such as Hotlong describe very fondly their relationship with Grandpa, and it is apparent they value the idea that their choices as well are respected:

> “Grandpa just gives you small suggestions. Just because you […] respect what they are saying, you think about it. If Grandpa tells you in the next few days for example […] be careful, watch out for yourself... it just gives you that kind of awareness you know? Just opens up your eyes a little bit. […] it makes you sharper, and that may have helped me, in many cases. […] because I was aware of it, and it went in another direction. Grandpa would never say this is gonna happen, you have to do this, if somebody says, don't do this... he just informs you, and you have to work it out” (Hotlong)

A certain kind of openness and trust is required in order to feel the presence of the ancestor spirit in one's life. As one informant puts it “trust opens up your options, it opens you up to Grandpa. But if you don't believe it you're just locked. Even if he tries to help you, if he tries to tell you some things about you, there is no point. It's like, if you don't trust you have this invisible wall around you, nobody can enter...”

Putting one's trust in the ancestor spirits and believing in their presence is essential to receive their help, but it is not an act of blind faith. Most informants report impressive experiences of the power of shamans as being at the basis of their reverence. Statements such as “I have literally seen the spirit taking possession of the shaman” or “I have seen the shaman transform himself” and other very visual experiences such as “a wolf approached and licked the shaman when we were in the forest” are very common when conversing about the topic. Some informants refer to intense feelings of fear or awe when in the presence of a possessed shaman, others to predictions come true. Most seem to have had a period in which they were skeptical of shamanistic activities or viewed them as bad, followed by experiences that made believers out of them. Iderbayar, a man in his early thirties, is an example of someone who changed his mind only after his brother (Teb-Tengeri) finally accepted his calling to become the family's shaman, and he personally was able to witness the hidden knowledge of the ancestor spirit about his bloodline:

> “Before, I actually refused shamanism, I had nothing to do with it. And the public perception of shamanism was that it is just there to, like... do all kinds of spells and curses, in a wrong way. That was my perception as well. But it is not like a religion, which is there and you just believe... It's actually real, I saw someone coming down on him (the shaman) and even then I didn't believe it. And the main reason I started […] respecting it, is because grandpa... he would know everything that people from his bloodline have done. Things that nobody else could know, he knows. Things that nobody else has seen, he has seen. Because he's just looking down. Not on everyone, […] just on his bloodline.” (Iderbayar)

The trust or respect that arises from these experiences puts the person in contact with some kind of invisible reality that changes way of thinking about the world. The technology of the self linked to Mongolian shamanism does not consist in the advice the spirit gives to the person, but in the awareness that is created through this special relationship. The main difference with Buddhist meditation is that the awareness and sensitivity are directed externally, towards one's environment and life events. Because of the trust and respect towards an entity living on a different plane of existence, one pays more attention, and experiences life as it were on a finer scale. And it is by leaving a vagueness, an element unknown, that the possessed shaman encourages one to live this way. The follower himself does not often even understand the poetic utterances of the shaman, and because of the limitations with the translation, the follower is left with a really vague “just pay attention to this” message.

The person whose awareness is sharpened by the shaman's council is conscious of the idea that his identity and life develops in relation and interaction with his environment. In this sense, the ethical transformation is an ongoing process. For the shaman and his followers, *being* is about *becoming,* and becoming is about being aware of the finer

invisible forces that shape and transform us.[37] The ethical experience and transformation does again not come about by accumulating genealogical knowledge about how and what one ought to be, but about navigating trough what is. The shamanic ethical direction fits Ingold's (2000; 2011) notion of 'being alive' even better than the Buddhist one because it implies, with Ingold, that an organism is formed and develops in relation to the environment and other organisms.[38] The animistic/shamanic idea is that everything in nature is inhabited by spirits makes human beings as well part of a giant, world-wide organism. The person is not a separate being anymore, and the ethical experience consists in his awareness of being part of an all-encompassing unified entity constantly moving, growing, living.[39]

It is only fitting that the traditional great deity of Mongolians was the “eternal blue sky”, which was worshiped together with the various spirits inhabiting the sun, moon, and all natural things. The sky is seen as a unifying element, something that represents the interconnectedness of things. One night, during a six hour long conversation with Teb-Tengeri while he was possessed by one of his ancestor spirits, I asked: “From the perspective of an ancestor spirit, what is real?”. His answer was long and poetic, but in its essence sounded like “What is real for me are the gods and spirits that inhabit the sun, the moon, the eternal blue sky, the mountains and rivers, and make everything move.” In shamanism a distinction is made between the spirit level of existence ('all above', ruled by the almighty spirits, the *tenggeri/*тэнгэри) and the worldly one ('all

37 In a way, when the shaman is possessed by the ancestor spirit there is no talk of *becoming. A*t this point he embodies the ideal traditional being. He *is* tradition itself.

38 The person and everything he encounters are thus the result of innumerable lifelines that come together in the ethical experience, just like the shaman moves through life aware of the life in everything. And this insight comes from a deeper spiritual dimension: without the advice and concerns brought to the person by the ancestors through the shaman, there would be no reason for him to see his surroundings as alive.

39 In *“The secret history of the Mongols”*, the oldest Mongolian literary document, which depicts Chinggis Khaan's life and legacy (it was written after his death in 1227 AD), this worldview takes a concrete form. Mongolian scholar Urgunge Onon, commenting on the classic, states that one of the reasons why the other great Indian and Chinese civilizations failed to create an empire vast as the Mongolian one, “lies in the Indian and Chinese view of the world, which was more trammeled and restricted than that of the Mongols.” He substantiates this by observing that “the Mongols of the time lacked even a word for ‘country’. (Ulus, which in those days meant ‘nation’, has since acquired the additional meaning of ‘country’ in modern Mongolian.) As a result, the Mongols came to consider the universe as their *ger* or tent.” (Onon 2001: 5)

below', ruled by the *chinggis*/Чингис). But there is contact between these two planes of existence. Life itself is the point of contact. Shamanists need no church, for worship and communication between the individual and nature happens in an immediate fashion and everywhere but a closed building.[40] To shamanists, Onon (2001: 4) states, “the soul is linked directly to Heaven and the individual is therefore the center of his own universe. Heaven is nothing more nor less than the consciousness of each one of us. Heaven is our guide; under it we are born free and equal.” This view (confirmed by Teb-Tengeri) reminds us of Ingold's understanding of life and of the person as being indistinguishable from his environment and interactions. It also shows us how this worldview, which stems in many ways from similar premises of the Buddhist one, can lead to a somewhat different ethical experience.

Through the shaman, the ancestor spirits provide information to contemporary Mongolians of how life was in ancient times, which values were uphold, such as hospitality and respect for nature. Most of those 'trusting' in the spirits agree on the idea that the traditional way is indeed the best way, and that the values embodied by the ancestor spirits should play a bigger role in modern society. If we were to look for a technology of the self in the practice of shamanism, it would be thus one that involves learning about one's origins and culture, enact it, having a lifestyle that is harmonious with tradition. Explaining shamanism, Hotlong states that “the whole reason why spirits come down is just to check up on you, to check on their bloodline. […] That's why they say every family has one shaman, just to communicate with their ancestors.” This connection between the present family and the ancestors is also between a morally superior, traditional Mongolian ancient past and a decadent modern one. Since most of Mongolian culture is orally transmitted, the shaman functions as a bridge between present Mongolians and their past. Just like Kanaa frowned upon the confusion caused by trans-cultural influences, ancestor spirits will often complain about the decadence of

40 For this reason as well shamanistic rituals are often performed outside or in the traditional gers, which have an opening on the roof to facilitate communication with the sky.

modern Mongolian society, the sedentary lifestyle (as opposed to the traditional nomadic one), and the related lack of respect for the environment. Similar to what I have observed in chapter two, there is a noticeable focus on cultural identity, a commitment to local moral networks, a strengthening of the rooted traditions, and all sorts of responses to the disembedding movements of globalization (Eriksen 2007).[41]

One may argue that the Mongolian shamanist may have come in contact, just like Sylvain's (2005) San, with a western, globalized idea of 'culture', which proves useful for securing ethnic recognition, and in some cases generating income. And while there are indeed some shamans who in the last few years have begun taking advantage of the slowly growing tourist industry by performing rituals in exchange of money, this is not the case for shamans like Teb-Tengeri. Some say that one cannot throw a stone in Ulaanbaatar without hitting a shaman. Aside from the fact that most families have their own shaman (only a family member can communicate with the ancestor spirit of the bloodline), there are as well, according to my informants, many impostor shamans active in Mongolia, without any powers, without the ability to call upon spirits. We must therefore distinguish between various groups of shamanists. What is certain is that no shaman that is not honest and genuinely one with his culture could put up a show like the one at the mother tree, and no Mongolian that does not sincerely experience the shaman's powers as being real can spend his life following his Grandpa's advice.

In the day-to-day life, the ancestor spirit's will takes the form of complaints about the modern-day Mongolian's weaknesses and heroic stories about the past. Iderbayar, a brother of Teb-Tengeri, recollects full of pride a story he heard from his 'Grandpa', which is meant to exemplify the courage in his bloodline.

41 Contrary to what Shalins (1994) called the “indigenization of modernity”, the shamans take good care of not incorporating modern artefacts and ideas into their rituals and stories, possibly out of fear to weaken their traditional image. Every object, every word they use is Mongolian. Although this may strike one as yet another part of the re-embedding phenomenon, it must be said that the way and frequency family shamans perform their rituals has been the same for centuries. Even during soviet times (ca. 1920-1990) shamanism, being mostly a private religious phenomenon, was widely practiced.

> "Grandpa is actually quite disappointed with Mongolian people, because he says they are really small, not strong enough... as they were in the 12th century. For instance like, in a case, Grandpa said that he once was wandering in the forest, close to the border with Russia, when seven wolves attacked him. He fought bravely, and won. He had a lot of injuries, but he came alive from that. But now he just says, people from this generation can't even see a wolf, they are so scared, there is no pride." (Iderbayar)

Some days later, when I visit his shaman's house, I can see the seven wolf pelts in the special room dedicated to the rituals. The shaman tells me he bought these pelts to honor his spirit's memory. The fact Teb-Tengeri actually acquired these wolf pelts and put them in his shaman *ger* tells us something about the role and importance of these stories. They are meant to set one ancestor spirit apart from the others, to provide a moral lesson, to set a standard for the progeny.

To conclude, it is worth noticing that paladins of tradition such as Kanaa and Teb-Tengeri do not reject all changes modernity and global flows bring to Mongolia, but merely those changes that distract the population even more from what in their eyes is real and valuable. In other words, they have a clear idea of what the ideal conditions are for a good and enlightened life. Both Kanaa and Teb-Tengeri emphasize the importance of concentration and awareness to what happens respectively inside and outside oneself: Kanaa tells us to tame the wild horse (mind), and Teb-Tengeri to be sensitive to our environment. These are both ways one can transform oneself for the better. And both these directives are preceded by a number of moral rules or advices that are conductive to a state of awareness. Shamanists live with a kind of creative emptiness, that makes it possible to adequately and sensitively react and relate to a living world. The maintaining of the traditional cultural identity and a certain resistance to global flows are both in line with this perspective.

Why has the shaman/spirit the authority to give such advice? Those who know well recount ancient tales of the world we all inhabit. Through storytelling they reproduce past experiences into present ones. Moreover, they are tuned to one's surroundings in such a way that they are aware of reality on a finer scale: “Knowing *is* relating to the world around you, and the better you know, the greater the clarity and depth of your perception. To tell […] is not to represent the world but to trace a path through it that others can follow.” (Ingold 2011: 162). Stories are not like encoded messages the anthropologist needs to decipher in order to reveal the systems and all-encompassing concepts that lie within them. The interpretation is not intrinsic to the story, but is *attributed by the listener.* Recognizing, like Geertz (1973: 5), that the anthropological analysis of culture is “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning,” we discover this meaning by *joining* the stories heard with one's own live history. Geertz’s semiotic approach is relevant inasmuch it enables us to access the conceptual world in which others live.

IV. Much ado about nothing

“If a man wishes to be sure of the road he treads on, he must close his eyes and walk in the dark” - St. John of the Cross

In Ulaanbaatar, it took me several weeks to get used to the fact that whether one has a destination or is just strolling, in the minds of Mongolians the pedestrian light is always green. It is remarkable how most of the capital's citizens cross the streets amidst the heavy traffic without fear or hesitation, and it makes one wonder if the same attitude applies for the proverbial spiritual road. The journey is rarely devoid of trouble, for it always involves change, and always leads one through unknown territory. If it didn't, it wouldn't be a journey, but a state of being. But the legendary Mongolian courage is more visible and actual than one might think: very few of the many men and women I interviewed chose to settle for a particular religion or belief system. Although both the shamanic and Buddhist traditions are highly valued, for most, to see (i.e. experience) is to believe. This is a generation and age group that claims to not settle for a particular religion or system of belief. It looks beyond the surfaces for answers that are real to *them*. As Ulzii, an energetic and enthusiastic Mongolian man in his mid-twenties puts it:

> “some of our parents, when they rich, welcome monks to their home, pay them, and they will forecast your future and recite mantra's... Usually these people don't know what is beyond that, what they are saying. When you study these Buddhist teachings, these mantra's, it is just about morals usually... like: “Please do not believe all beautiful things” […] So if you read it and try to put it in your current situation, it always works. We got to see also this kind of perspective, not only the Buddhist one […] we have to dig deeper, you know? (Ulzii)

The older generation did not really have a chance to explore the various spiritual and ethical paths because of the soviet regime. According to Ulzii, most of their ethical and moral teachings came from communist propaganda movies. Ulzii himself, being a cinephile, prefers those movies to the contemporary blockbusters:

> "Before the '90, we only had the Russian television and some ideological movies. Of course it always was some kind of propaganda related films... but it also covered like hard working, the social equality of the households... […] there is some insight in human nature, and human nature is quite related to morality and ethics. So that you are touching someone's vein and someone's perspective." (Ulzii)

There is a generational difference in what is considered relevant for one's ontological predilections. In other words, what is taken into account during the formation and adaptation of the moral self. In Ulzii's view, and that of others, religion does not have a monopoly on morality, and spirituality is part of everyday life too. Working at oneself then becomes a matter of taking and evaluating different perspectives, and sticking with the ones that are experienced as truthful. It is perhaps those belonging to this generation that most of all felt what Zygmunt Bauman (2006; 2011) called the transition from 'solid' to 'liquid' modernity. This transition, according to the Polish sociologist, has pushed individuals to become flexible and adaptable, abandoning rigid commitments to groups and ideologies in order to be able and pursue opportunities according to availability. It must be said that indeed the rapid development Mongolia underwent and undergoes, combined with its exposure to global flows has made it so that in the last two decades policies, institutions, and general social forms do not have the time to keep up and solidify. The disembedding forces of globalization have hit Mongolia fast and hard: investment capital, work, and ideas all have seen a sudden spike after the fall of the Soviet Union, which had put a brake on them for decades. Along with disembedding, re-embedding, interconnectedness, standardization, and movement,

globalization brought mixing (Eriksen 2007). The increasing, unprecedented diversity in Ulaanbaatar and the growing number of cultural crossroads where people meet cause frictions on different levels. This, combined with the social expertise of a generation completely brought up in the information makes the mixing phenomenon both powerful and all-pervasive. It comes as no surprise then that my Mongolian peers tend to blend insights from all the worldviews they encounter. Sustainability concerns are linked with traditional shamanic values, Buddhist notions of enlightenment with contemporary new age principles. And again, the common denominator is experience: all is related to one's personal life history.

Bolormaa, a young woman in her twenties working at an agency that regulates exchange projects for students, gets enthused right from the start about my research topic. After speaking with her a few times in different locations, the subject of religion comes up, and she tells me about her past as a somewhat zealous (Protestant) Christian. She stopped going to church two years ago, and I am stricken by her stories about how her life changed after making that decision. In my opinion, Bolormaa exemplifies the person who has taken her spiritual life in her own hands and chose for the rough road of self-discovery. She recollects how she was fed up with her family members telling her what to think and believe, even more so because she saw hypocrisy all around her. But the decision to stop frequenting the Christian community (and thereby sacrificing for a big part her relations with her family as well) led to some unexpected developments. Now Bolormaa insists that personal experience is central to her spiritual growth:

> “I want to have my own experiences, not be told. I know it is good to listen to the elders and do as they say, but without experience I wouldn't have the complete understanding of the things I would do you know? So I rather go through difficulties than to stay afraid... or something like that. […] I want to experience it for myself, just by reading the bible. And of course I listen, but Jesus knows what is meant to know. First I experience something, and then I try to understand it and find out about it. I am not a good reader.”

(Bolormaa)

This is a very common position, which might be correlated to the age group.[42] As mentioned earlier, in Mongolia it has as well cultural and historical origins. Moreover, if we are to believe Bauman (1998), this might well be a trend related to contemporary social developments and globalizing forces. One could say that to Bolormaa and those sharing her view, what is true is not what is said to be true, but what is experienced to be true. It does not matter what Jesus, the Buddha, the shaman, or even Chinggis Khaan said, if one does not know that it is true *through* one's own experience. This attitude requires some kind of flexibility and autonomy: as soon as one commits to a certain tradition, organized religion, and ideology, the possibility to experience for oneself the spiritual truths is limited.[43] To set out for the unknown, without any predigested truths to hold on to also requires courage and confidence, although of course few will make the radical choice of breaking with one's past. Bolormaa still clings to some basic notions she was taught too, such as the idea of God as an external entity ("not of this world" as she phrases it) and the divinity of Jesus. But what has changed is the way she looks at these notions. When asked if she feels like being in a period of transition, she replies "Exactly, yes... I am trying to quit the knowledge I have had from the church. I mean not all of it, but have some comparison with what they have said and what I am seeing, and then find out on my own..." With this detachment from the 'old knowledge' she grew up with came the realization that there are innumerable other perspectives on life that speak to her own experience. Moreover, by looking at her old community as an outsider, she thinks like Narantsetseg in chapter one that certain beliefs only separate people even more from each other:

42 Some studies (Saucier 2006; Grossman 2010) suggest that more than 70% of Millennials (Generation Y) declare to be "more spiritual than religious", distancing themselves from traditional knowledge and systems of belief, rejecting them as the most valuable means of furthering spiritual growth (Fueller 2001).

43 This also applies to what Benedict Anderson (1991) called "imagined communities", socially constructed communities such as nations, which are imagined by the individuals who perceive themselves as belonging to that group.

> "At my church they think they are the people of God, so if God is not from here they are not from here too. In a spiritual way, even if their body is here. So they pray to be connected to where they come from. […] I am realizing that right now, that I have the same ideas (laughs). […] I don't know about other religions, all I know is the information that has been given to me, that people pray to statues, which is not God, to cows, stuff like that... All I have is this kind of information, and I want to change it! […] I think that gives the people at the church the idea that everyone who is not Christian is... lost. […] they pity them, and look down to them you know? So it's not good I think. But if you get to know the person it's much different, and what they have done or what their god has done to them, is their experience too." (Bolormaa)

It is clear from her stories that Bolormaa resents the way her old community equates their perspective on the truth as *the* truth, and therefore have some kind of patronizing attitude towards those outside their group. This attitude stems out of a presumed monopoly on knowledge about spiritual matters. By questioning this knowledge, Bolormaa is able to transform her attitude. Religious groups like the one Bolormaa grew up in have a tendency to prioritize ethical knowledge on experience, and this explains why they might consider to have a kind of advantage on unbelievers. This points to a *becoming* ethical experience. One could actually say most perspectives generally considered to be 'good' or 'morally appropriate' are such because they involve more of those qualities and feelings humans consider to be positive. Love, compassion, generosity, peace of mind, joy, serenity, are all synonyms of the "good (perspective on) life". In other words, the morally virtuous life. Ethics thus becomes a process of inclusion of positive and exclusion of negative qualities. Working at oneself is thus a matter of taking a viewpoint on life that *makes living a positive experience*. This naturally leads to a behavior and mentality conceived to be morally acceptable. Put like this, the 'working' understanding of ethics may seem more than reasonable. Unfortunately, what makes living "a positive experience" is by definition as subjective

as one can get it, for it concerns personal *experience*, not any kind of empirical or theoretical knowledge.[44]

Bolormaa resents her old community's attitude because she has come to see, through her personal development, ethical experience as the very source of ethical knowledge. And because of this, she does not consider her own experience and related knowledge to be more valid or superior of that of others: it only applies to herself. The shift of focus from given knowledge to her own experience manifests in very concrete ways in Bolormaa's life. In two years' time she re-interpreted and recycled the notions and techniques she learned, as well as giving more serious attention to some intuitions that had previously only played a marginal role. An example are a kind of déjà vus, an extra-sensory experience she considers to be good omens in critical moments of her life:

> "You know déjà vu? I get many of those. Once I actually remembered – oh things are going to happen this way – and then it actually happened! Then I was so freaked out... Now every time I get a déjà vus I write it down "I got a déjà vu of this and that" and I take it as a good sign, because it was meant to happen and something like that. […] it happens if you had a past life or whatever... maybe it's past memories, but I just take it as a very positive thing, whatever it is. I think everybody has this feeling, like "I have already been in this place". But mine is like that but with more details, like someone is like this and that, and the color is like that. So I'm not sure but... let me show you" (Bolormaa)

She takes out a kind of diary filled with small notes about all the déjà vus she had, and tells me about the decisions she took because of those experiences. In the diary I can

44 Moreover, the innumerable cultural and social variables create all kind of moral disagreements about what is positive and what one is supposed to find negative within and between societies. Moral disagreements come by definition from a conflicted state, a belief in separation, an attitude of resistance with what *is*.

read many prayers, very personal expressions of her feelings, directed to God or herself, related to her anxieties, ambitions, and relations. There is also an apparent sense of pride in the case of Bolormaa about the way she created her own spiritual path by combining things she heard here and there with what she learned during her Christian upbringing. The void left by the Christian community she was part of has been filled with various strategies and ideas that work for her, fitting to her personality and needs. She states nowadays she looks very differently at people with different beliefs, and has many more friends with diverse worldviews.

Interestingly, it appears Bolormaa did not directly choose for the changes she now experiences. The only thing she consciously chose for was change itself, to let go of what she had and believed. On the basis of her story, it could be hypothesized that one cannot transform oneself, only *create the space within oneself* in which the transformation takes place. A kind of mental space or energy is freed up after Bolormaa's rejection of a big part of her old beliefs, or more precisely the change in her attitude towards what she considers as relevant for her ontological predilections. This change triggered an ethical transformation leading to a change in behavior and worldview. As Bolormaa's story exemplifies, the fact that one does not plan one's ethical transformation but merely creates the conditions for it to happen, entails that there is no linear progress in the spiritual/ethical search. Although the process one goes through is often described as a journey (as Narantsetseg puts it, “a journey of the soul”), the longest stretch is traveled with the wrong destination in mind. Tuvshintur, the well-read 'spiritual seeker' mentioned earlier, when asked where he thinks he is right now on his spiritual journey, replies:

> “I'm not on that level or that level... I can't tell. There is a law: you can travel right now to the highest level, the Buddha level of spirit. But the thing is, can you stay there? It's a different vibration, a different atmosphere, a different pressure. It's like an ocean. You can dive, but how long can you stay underwater? *(J: So your experience is more about diving in and coming*

> *back...)* Yes, it's not like climbing a building. In order to stay on that level, you need to be pure. If you contaminate your mind here, you can't bear the light there. That pure atmosphere, that pure vibration... You want to stay into darkness, because that's comfy for your mind. That's my understanding..." (Tuvshintur)

As the Mongolian proverb goes, "the distance between heaven and earth is no greater than one thought," and everything that one thinks stands in the way are merely additional thoughts that make heaven seem distant. It is when one realizes the destination is not reached through traveling but though standing still and looking inward that real progress is made. The ethical transformation and experience lies in the realization that it was all "much ado about nothing", that we already have what we were looking for.

It is the way one relates to the natural flow of life and unfolding of events that determines one's ethical experience and progress. In chapter two, in the context of Buddhism, I mentioned the technique that most of all transformed Narantsetseg's worldview and ethical understanding: Vipassana meditation. No account of an experience that led to a profound ethical transformation can be clearer than Narantsetseg's story about this technique. Right after completing the course, she experienced a change in perspective and behavior, that led her to believe this is *the* way to access the truth about oneself. It did not take long for her to correct her attitude:

> "When I first did Vipassana I thought 'this is it', I'm gonna follow this my whole life. And it made me so peaceful and calm... It felt like it solved all my problems. […] Then I tried to force it on people, I wanted all my family to go to Vipassana, I wanted them to feel better and understand things... and then I was upset that people did not want to do it. I was doing it wrong. Like every religious person, I did it the exact same way..." (Narantsetseg)

This teaching has had such a big impact on Narantsetseg's life because it directly influences how one relates to what *is,* by helping one observe (witness) the unfolding of events, sensations, feelings, and thoughts, instead of reacting to them. Narantsetseg states that from the moment we are born, we learn to react to things, to express judgment. It is as if humans do not realize everything continuously changes. In the Buddhist Vipassana tradition, *anicca* (Pali term meaning impermanence) is one of the "three marks of existence", together with *dukkha* (Pali term for suffering) and *anatta* (illusion of the self). If one is not aware of the impermanence (*anicca*) of things, one has the tendency to react and struggle against sensations, feelings, thoughts, trying to change what happens. In Vipassana one learns to observe the sensations of the body in a balanced, equanimous way, in light of the understanding of impermanence. Suffering, problems, and all those things we think we ought to change are all part of what is:

> "And you just got to let it be... You can't resent it, because it's going to happen. But you have to see it... you know, it's gonna go away. So if you see that with a clear mind, and if you don't make more suffering for yourself... you can live happily. You still will for example feel the pain, but you won't resist it. You know? So it's natural, it's natural and impermanent. It's not gonna be here forever, and if you see that you're not suffering. It's just pain." (Narantsetseg)

Vipassana meditation is meant to lead the practitioner to enlightenment by eradicating suffering. Narantsetseg however has taken the notion of equanimity and balance so to heart that she applied it to the technique and overall spirituality as well. And actually many young Mongolian adults like Narantsetseg, Bolormaa, Tuvshintur, Hotlong, and others emphasize the importance of finding *balance* between the social and the spiritual. This is a recurring theme in interviews, and although it has likely much to do with the phase and the age of the respondents, it does strike me as an attitude that fits well into Mongolian culture. Most people are well aware of the power and importance of spirituality and religion at large, but choose the insights they provide to complement and

correct instead of shaping their lives. Some of my Mongolian informants are very explicit about this point, and have experienced for themselves the consequences of being unbalanced both towards the materialistic (or 'social' as some put it) and the spiritual side:

> "Once you really far from the material it's also not healthy, so you should find a balance, because it's a spiritual and a material world, it's a combination of both. […] But I was going too far with it. […] And I couldn't get any friends. Because I was marginalized by my own attitude, like, too spiritual!" (Narantsetseg)

Since Narantsetseg repeatedly emphasized the importance of experiencing Vipassana instead of understanding and describing it intellectually, I participated to and completed the same course she did. The course (free of costs) consists of a ten day retreat during which one meditates ten hours a day. As mentioned earlier, Vipassana is the original Buddhist meditation technique. The word itself means "seeing things as they really are". According to the organization (led by S.N. Goenka) that promotes the technique worldwide, it is a process of self-purification by self-observation:

> "One begins by observing the natural breath to concentrate the mind. With a sharpened awareness one proceeds to observe the changing nature of body and mind and experiences the universal truths of impermanence, suffering and egolessness. This truth-realization by direct experience is the process of purification."[45]

45 A more detailed description can be found on the website www.dhamma.org (accessed July 20, 2014). The first four days one practices anapanasati (Pali term meaning 'mindfulness of breathing') meditation and the rest of the days Vipassana. From the first to the ninth day one is not allowed to talk, read, or use any kind of electronic accessories. The wake-up bell is at four o'clock in the morning, and bed time at ten in the evening, and there are no meals after noon. This is a quite extenuating experience, and requires most people to radically change their lifestyle from one day to the next. Finding oneself in an environment in which there are no distractions form one's feelings and thoughts can be unsettling. And this is one of the goals of the course: to shake up one's unconscious and let suppressed and forgotten sensations, feelings, and thoughts come to the surface, so that they can be confronted and observed with a calm and balanced mind.

Aside from new experiences such as the unprecedented levels of concentration and the complete absence of any 'worldly' distractions, one does indeed become aware of some maladaptive habits of the mind and recurring patterns of thought. In my case, I was confronted with my tendency to unnecessarily over-analyze an *experience* such as the meditation technique itself, in other words, to do exactly what I am warning about in this very thesis: focus on the description instead of the described. For trained anthropologists, it is quite challenging to not to interpret the things we experience in the field or even in life. But fortunately it is not as if analyzing one's experiences is not allowed, the point is to be aware of the fact it is happening, and what the purpose of the analysis is. It's all about not getting lost in it, and miss the experience itself. In a similar fashion, although at first glance the Vipassana meditation may look as the Foucauldian technology of the self par excellence*,* this technique does not require one to work or *change* oneself, but to *observe* oneself. In Narantsetseg's words, Vipassana is about “watching sensations, feelings, and thoughts arise without reacting or identifying with them.” The very point is therefore, contrary to the Buddhist moral norms Batchuluun described (chapter two), to *not* try and change them, with the understanding that they are already changing. It requires one to flow along with life without holding on to those experiences that are impermanent.[46]

When we observe ourselves, what do we see? In order to gain a deeper understanding of how ethics can be experiential, we must further explore this idea of *observing oneself* as opposed to *working at oneself.* The very idea that one ought to “work at oneself” in order to become a certain kind of person implies a dualistic understanding of reality. Reality, truth, what *is*, however one wants to call it, is in this view something outside of

46 As mentioned earlier, the Buddhist moral code is however conductive to a good meditation, because it helps keeping the mind calm (taming the wild horse). But the (current) difference between Narantsetseg and Batchuluun does not lie in the methods or technologies they employ, but in the approach. Batchuluun takes his vows and follows the rules, because he believes that will make a moral and virtuous person out of him. Narantsetseg has no idea about what it means to be a moral person, and does not take any vows, but tests the Buddhist technologies of the self on her own skin. One seeks transformation through knowledge and work, the other though experience.

ourselves, to which we react and which we have the power to change.

The search for a "better I" could also be seen as a cultural construct or even a commodified social phenomenon. British philosopher Alan Watts often refers to this curious western tendency to look at human existence as a most precarious thing, of defining the self in a rather narrow way, which leads us to somehow see ourselves as separate from reality. In one of his lectures, he states: "It is quite alien to western thought to conceive that the external world, which is defined as something that happens to you, and your body itself, as something that you got caught up with... it is quite alien to our thought to consider all that as you yourself."[47] Watts (1957) argues that most of us regard the things we experience as things that just "happen to us", events originating from some activity external to ourselves. In the same way we feel we are not responsible for a thunderstorm, we do not plan a belly rumble. And yet, certain experiences are selected as it were as being part of the 'me'. It is as if one focused one's attention on certain restricted areas of the greater spectrum of things that one experiences. According to Watts, most humans therefore have a quite myopic view on what exactly the *self* is.

The discussion on the self is a crucial component of experiential ethics because what distinguishes the ethical experience as *being* from the one as *becoming*, and the measure in which "working at oneself" is plausible, all depends on what the *self* is conceived to be. It is evident that as long as we consider the self to be imperfect, it requires a lot of work, but if it is perfect (complete), one just ought to be. This consideration depends on one's point of view, and the extent to which one is able to take into account a more

47 In the same lecture, Alan Watts states "If you're reared with an early 20th century common sense, which is based on the philosophy of science of the 19th century, with its rejection of Christianity and Judaism, you regard yourself as a biological accident in a stupid universe. […] A vast pointless gyration of radioactive rocks and gas in which you happen to occur. Of course if you don't have that point of view and you are more traditional, you look upon yourself as a child of God, and therefore under authority. […] Either point of view you take, […] you are not really a part of all this." Alan Watts' lecture: "The Myopic View of the World" (alanwatts.com, accessed on 20 July 2014).

holistic perspective. What most spiritual traditions (including the Buddhist and the shamanic) strive for is breaking through states of consciousness in which one is able to see “the apparent disintegration and disorganization of everyday life as the functioning of a totality which at its level is completely harmonious.” (Ibid.) It is this 'spiritual' ambition that makes ethical experience a matter of being instead of becoming.

Whether Buddhists, shamanists, or simply spiritually inclined, most of the Mongolians I met during my fieldwork who are actively engaged in a kind of spiritual journey, are headed for an experience of truth and harmony with what *is*. It seems to me, considering their stories and their goals, that as long as the dualistic belief of separation persists (including its ethics of becoming), one is always at the mercy of the caprices of the mind and body, stranded in a kind of whimsical state of being (i.e., *Samara*). Quite literally, the opposed descriptive understanding of reality and its related ethics of *being* is what is known as *non-dualism* (in Sanskrit '*advaita'*, not-two). This non-dualistic view refers to a state of pure consciousness (*Atman*, Sanskrit term meaning 'the true self'), which is the only thing that is real. In the moment that one stops resisting what is, and does not see the self as separate from the rest of reality, what happens is a shift in identification: from a separate, conflicted being to reality and life itself. Bluntly put, according to this principle, we are not what we think we are, no separate worthless or majestic being, but *existence* itself. The realization of this principle does not actually change anything, but transforms our lives from being unconscious, struggling, suffering, to being natural, peaceful, moral. Quite similarly to what Ingold (2011) tries to convey in his work, 'being alive' therefore means being life itself, moving through the world in continuous harmonious interaction with everything that surrounds us.

In the context of this worldview, in a way, I think the Greek imperative “know thyself” is misleading because we cannot *know* what we are, we can only *be* what we are. The reality of non-duality does not take place from the neck up, but in living itself. Knowledge is irrelevant in this case: It is all about experience. The question “Who are we?” has no answer: it is undefined. Only when one lets go of all the explanations and

thoughts about what one *is* one can become it, and the questioner himself as it were disappears. When we consider this identification problem, we see that the judgment of oneself that occurs prior to the “working at oneself” is actually rather incoherent. Judging oneself in fact implies a paradoxical duality, a split-mind situation in which the self looks at the self and expresses a judgment. In other words: who is doing the judging? What is it that one is judging?[48]

Some informants use the term 'soul', others the 'true self'. What they refer to is a human state stripped of all its conditioning, corrupting influences, prejudices, assumptions. Referring to this, state, Ulzii introduces me to the Mongolian concept of *kuhn chanar* (хүн чанар), which roughly translates as “human nature”:

> “Usually Mongolians believe that […] human beings are born really good, clean. The natural is to be good, compassionate, helpful, to follow good things (sic). But because of things in the environment this might change. “Human nature” is kind of a different word, it's “kuhn chanar”. This is like a quality of a human being, you have some kind of soul. […] It is an innate thing. […] For me it is also more like a teaching of how to become a good human being... remember my human nature” (Ulzii)

Perhaps this is the endpoint of any spiritual search, a natural state in which one is no longer burdened by one's presumed knowledge, in which all attention is directed towards the present moment and future and past are irrelevant. In Ulzii's Mongolia the *kuhn chanar* is pure and good, and ethics is about recovering this original state, shedding off the mud accumulated along the way.[49]

48 Again, by making these statements and observations I do not intend to promote or support a non-dualistic understanding of reality, but to get a feel and insight into what this experience may be like. Since arguments fall short of adequately convey an experience, it is as well the task of the reader to imagine how reality would look like seen in these terms.

V. Concluding remarks

“It is quite true what philosophy says; that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards.” - Søren Kierkegaard (2006: 63)

I begun my fieldwork inquiring into ethics, defined in the Foucauldian sense of the relation of the self to itself, the act of working at oneself by means of certain techniques. Most of the answers were related to spirituality, to experiences of personal transformation.[50] These stories appeared to point to two main ways ethics is experienced: *being* and *becoming*. Of course, most people presumably go through both, and in some instances and worldviews the two might even overlap. It is thus in any case not a 'hard' dichotomy.

Firstly, in the *becoming*, 'working' experience, ethics becomes all about judging ourselves and others and making adjustments, be it on the basis of arguments, values, or prejudices. Even when it has no religious connotations, ethical behavior is a matter of knowledge. Truth remains something external to us. The Foucauldian perspective and that of those employing various techniques with the intent of changing themselves are related to this experience.

Secondly, in the *being,* 'observing' experience, ethics is about knowing oneself.[51] The

49 Interestingly, in Christianity the notion of 'original sin' requires some kind of purification right from the beginning: man is born sinner, and gets a new chance in life. Similarly, in Buddhist theology, *Maya* casts a veil of illusion that makes humans think there is some kind of separation between them and the rest of the world, in a kind of cosmic mistake. In Christianity, this illusion is no mistake, but something evil, personified by the devil.

50 This by the way is not necessarily in accordance with religious ideals: spirituality and organized religion are not always experienced as related (Saucer 2006)

spiritual or ethical quest in this case aims to create the conditions (such as awareness and mental space) necessary for ethical transformation. This is the kind of view Buddhism, shamanism (in some measure), and do-it-yourself spiritual seekers promote. Ingold's (2011) understanding of 'being alive' is related to this experience, because it describes the movement of personal life as being embedded and connected, instead of separated from the larger flow. In this view, moral knowledge is questioned; truth is something internal, to be experienced instead of known.[52]

What are Buddhists like Kanaa, Batchuluun, shamanists like Teb-Tengeri, Hotlong, Iderbyar, and spiritual seekers like Narantsetseg, Ulzii, Bolormaa, and Tuvshintur trying to accomplish? Why are they still working on themselves? One could speculate that, building on the work of Alan Watts (1957), what causes the *becoming* ethical experience could be a misguided belief in separation. If, at the beginning of our spiritual journey, we unconsciously consider ourselves as being somehow separate from reality, we would indeed keep trying to control and change it, and because of this very struggle with reality itself we would stand in the way of our experiencing reality. The solution to this issue then, as many religious traditions suggest, would be to see separation as an illusion and to realize our unity/identity with reality, god, awareness. The very consideration that one should work at oneself in an ethical sense originates from the belief that one can and should manipulate the present reality. Foucault seems to think this as well, by viewing the technologies of the self as the means by which individuals make of themselves the persons they want to be. This very intention is left unquestioned. Do we really know what or who we are? Can come to know this by looking into things and truths that are external to us, like the 'Elcks' in the cover image? When one knows oneself, does it make sense wishing to change oneself?

51 Knowing oneself is here to be understood not in the sense of having some insight into the dynamics of one's psychology, but identifying with reality itself, what *is*.

52 As mentioned in chapter two, Foucault is not completely unfamiliar with the notion of *being,* as he writes as well about the experience of the truth that is happening and produced, but does not appear to relate it to the ethical experience.

As the Chinese monist philosopher Lao Tzu famously said in the *Tao Te Ching,* “The Tao that can be described is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name”.[53] What *is* and what most spiritual seekers such as my informants try to achieve, is existence itself. And as discussed earlier, one cannot have a defined perspective on what existence or experience is: the description is not the described. In this view, we already are what we are looking for, but as long as it is seen as something we think we need to become, we will not experience it. Becoming, working, achieving, are in this sense all synonymous of control. And the key idea is that the *experience of being,* does not come through control or trying to change that which is external to our being. Attempting to *be* trough *becoming* is a paradoxical attitude originating from the belief that the truth of the self and the flow of life can be manipulated. By contrast, Lao Tzu's philosophy is based on the idea truth by its very nature, like freedom, cannot be known, only experienced.

Experiential ethics, as appears through the stories of my Mongolian peers, comes about through a shift of focus from knowledge to experience, from control to observation. As Bolormaa and others show us, relating understanding to experience instead of knowledge is a backwards process. From early childhood, one learns to define, label, 'know' things. There is a catch, Krishnamurti says: “The day you teach the child the name of the bird, the child will never see that bird again.” As soon as we think we know what a bird is, we tend to lose the conscious *experience* of each single bird. Understanding through experience thus in theory requires dropping all the conditioning accumulated over the years that impedes an 'uncorrupted' approach to reality. It also requires one to be aware and embrace the way one's life moves, however it may move, and, as Ingold puts it, *alongly* integrating knowledge. This means to face what *is,* what happens each moment in a sustained way, without resisting it, without constantly

53 For the complete translation of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching by James Legge https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Tao_Te_Ching_(James_Legge) (accessed June 21, 2014)

wanting to change what is happening. Ethics in its more trans-formative conception is about seeing every moment as the moment we need to experience and that needs to be happening. Nothing has to change, and everything changes.[54] As Marcus Aurelius wrote in his *Meditations*: “Love that only which happens to thee and is spun with the thread of thy destiny. For what is more suitable?”.[55]

In this spirit, I have presented the possibility of seeing the meaning of the moral self and the role of the techniques that are employed in its shaping in a different light than what Foucault proposes. Of course, Foucault builds on a quite different philosophical tradition than the Mongolian ones. What matters is considering that if we impeach one of the most basic assumptions of western thought, namely the one pertaining to *becoming* and *working* at oneself with regard to ethics, this turns one's conception of reality inside out like a sock. Once a dualistic thinker considers non-duality, and a non-dualist thinker considers dualism, the implications are far-reaching. Buddhism encourages those that engage with this tradition to “see things as they really are,” and from this perspective western philosophical and psychological traditions could be said to encourage people to “understand things as they appear to be.” But the tables turn depending on where one stands. This is why the leitmotif to be followed by an anthropologist is the personal ethical experience of the informant. For everyday ethical experience does not usually lend itself to dichotomies like the non-dualistic and dualistic one. In fact, even if my Mongolian peers (and myself) would have a general idea about the various perspectives one can take with regard to ethics and life, only one can *truly* be experienced at a time.

54 This stream of thought naturally leads us back to Lao Tzu and his interpretation of failure. The Taoist notion of *wuwei,* 'non-action' (or effortless action) is open to many interpretations, but it could be taken to mean a certain naturalness in one's practice. Many in Mongolia however do not see the Taoist attitude as naturally following from the aforementioned worldview. Moreover, Chinggis Khaan's legacy is such that it does not even buy into 'passive' philosophies, and indeed the traditional shamanic culture nuances and compensates for what other Mongolian spiritual paths seem to lack: action. It is perhaps because the great Khaan himself was not convinced by the conclusive moral standing of Buddhism that he set out to establish the largest land empire in human history, and this attitude lives on till today (Onon 2001).

55 Full text available at http://www.studenthandouts.com/marcus.pdf (acessed August 4, 2014).

In the following paragraphs I will outline or reiterate a couple of insights I derived from my informant's stories, the *being/becoming* dichotomy, and the notion of experiential ethics.

1. Creating the conditions for ethical transformation

When it comes to ethics, be it *working at* or *knowing* the self, the mind is 'useful' only to the point where it reintroduces us to what *is*, and from then it releases its natural aptitude for control. In the Buddhist tradition I have discussed in the first chapters, as well as in the vaguely new age spiritual principles of other informants, the mind is nothing but a tool; when the tool supersedes one's *being,* it hijacks the self, it becomes maladaptive. As has come forth in the stories of my Mongolian peers and the techniques they employ, the mind does play an important role in creating the conditions for ethical transformation. Tuvshintur has his spiritual books, Ulzii his movies, Bolormaa her déjà vus, Narantsetseg her meditation techniques, and so on. They all find these methods to be conductive for the transformation they are looking for, and it is their intellect that enables them to apply them.

As informants like Bolormaa show us, those who actually succeeded in somehow transforming themselves in an ethical sense did not do so directly through employing certain techniques, but by letting go of them. In Bolormaa's case, an unexpected change in lifestyle and worldview came about in the void left over by her rejection of old ones. In the Buddhist and shamanic traditions, Kanaa and Teb-Tengeri also point to the need of rejecting some habits, both mental (beliefs) and practical.

It is evident is that no tradition or individual ethical experience is completely about *being* but also in part about *becoming* and working at the self. In some cases *becoming* is the name of the endgame, in others just a phase in the process. Buddhism and the various techniques related to it for instance have the very clear goal of enhancing

concentration and awareness in order to work on the self in more subtle ways. Ultimately to get a deeper insight into what from the Buddhist viewpoint is illusion and what is real. In shamanism as well, one could even say that being and becoming in the shamanic tradition ought to somehow coincide. This is why the shaman has a central role in maintaining and spreading the traditional way, and 'corrects' those being seduced by the pressure of global culture and flows.[56]

2. The function of the technologies of the self

Ethics, understood by Foucault (2000) as a personal endeavor to shape one's moral self in order to become the moral person that one (on reflection) thinks one ought to be, merely points to the process people engage in, and says nothing about the actual transformative experience that brings about change. The technologies of the self that people employ are merely road signs that point to a particular moment: the personal experience that shifts one's perspective from what one sets out to *become* to what one *is*.

Laidlaw praises Foucault for creating the possibility of an anthropology of ethics, by arguing how the freedom of the ethical subject “consists in the possibility of choosing the kind of self one wished to be” (Laidlaw 2002: 324). By describing the different techniques of the self people use, according to Laidlaw (ibid.), one can “tell the story of different ways in which people have purposefully made themselves into certain kinds of persons, and therefore of the historically specific and definite (and of course always limited) forms which that ethical freedom has taken”. Although I do not directly oppose the Foucauldian idea that actively *seeking* to answer the fundamental ethical question of “how one ought to live” is in fact to exercise one's self-constituting freedom, I argue that *answering* the question has nothing to do with technologies of the self, because the

56 The dichotomy East/West is as well illusory. In fact, even though Foucauldian ethics seems to be the product of a tradition that is heavily biased towards the 'becoming' and 'working' worldview, the Buddhist and shamanic ones seem to capture both being and becoming.

answer cannot be known, only experienced. Conversing with my Mongolian peers on the subject, I found that although most do indeed employ certain techniques in order to "make themselves into the persons that on reflection they think they ought to be," it is by letting go of these techniques and the struggle for control that the ethical transformation takes place (most strikingly in the cases of Narantsetseg and Bolormaa). Laidlaw observes in his concluding remarks of his essay about the anthropology of ethics and freedom: "In formalized religious techniques of the self […] the ambition of shaping the self is explicit, and is informed by sophisticated theoretical reflection, as it is not, perhaps, when people join a voluntary association of some kind" (Laidlaw 2002: 326-327).[57]

What I have argued and shown is that the stories of my informants do not match up with Foucault's theoretical view on ethics. The techniques of the self, powerful or not, are merely the struggle that precedes the actual ethical transformation. One could view the shift from a dualistic to a non-dualistic view as the most powerful technology of the self, one that involves identification with everything that lives, and therefore collapses the need for any distinction between good and bad, desire and aversion, thereby canceling the need for any change. But to focus on this process as being the relevant phenomenon at hand would be to fall again in the description/described fallacy, and miss the mark. What is relevant to ethics is the transformation itself, and everything that precedes it are road signs pointing to its experience.

3. The paradox of a dualist ethics of becoming

A rational analysis of the non-dualistic view leaves us with nothing but tautologies, "relations of ideas" as David Hume (2003) would call them: being what you are,

57 Laidlaw (2002: 327) adds that the formalized religious techniques of the self "are doubtless much more powerful techniques of the self than these more do-it-yourself activities. But these, too, may be instances of the exercise of ethical freedom."

accepting what is, and so forth. Even to consider the idea that thought holds no reality is to unmask the idea itself for what it is, another thought with no reality. And this is the reason why one looks into experience for meaning. As discussed in chapter one, Foucauldian ethics starts with the ability and decision of individuals to shape one's moral self, in a conscious effort to become what in one's own social context is seen as a morally appropriate person (Zigon 2008: 43). For those choosing to “work on themselves”, this effort involves “a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 2000: 225). The problem Foucault had with non-dualism, in my view, is that in his philosophy the *subject* is a separate being which is always self-aware and has the freedom of choosing how to act or not act. In other words, it is unacceptable to the French historian that the identities of people could be fixed. Foucault does not consider the possibility that one can identify with consciousness itself. If he did, it would entail nothing one does or thinks is really worth really worrying about, because there is no separation between the subject and reality, and therefore the subject has no agency in a Foucauldian sense. In a way, there is no *personal* free-will, there is only the unfolding of life itself. Moreover, from the non-dualistic view, judging oneself to not yet be “the moral person that on reflection one thinks one ought to be” is paradoxical. The very idea in fact implies separation, a controller that controls the mind, a worker that works at the self. But the controller is the controlled, and the worker is the one worked at. Working at oneself in the way Foucault envisioned is in this sense is much alike saying “I am good, but I need to become good”. Who is controlling the controlled? Foucauldian ethics, from this point of view, begins to look like a schizophrenic nightmare.

Notice that one's sense of self is in other words derived from the thinking process itself. It is most probable that every human being has this experience of competing, conflicting forces in the mind, and this is natural when acquiring new knowledge, making compromises, adapting. But when it comes to the self, one could say that this is kind of strange, because thought itself has no intrinsic reality to it: at its best thought is

symbolic (the description), at its worst thought is "thinking about thinking", in an endless unfruitful loop. The paradox of a dualist ethics of becoming lies in its impossibility to actually deliver when it comes to real transformation of the self, because it builds on an identification with a thought, a presumed knowledge, instead of on an experience. It is like thinking about the act of eating a sandwich in order to still one's hunger, when it would just be sufficient to lift one's hand and take a bite, without even *thinking* about it.

4. Observing the self and working at the self

Foucault presupposes that the person starting to "work at himself" and thereby employing certain technologies is the same as the one finishing the job. In other words, he assumes that ethical transformation merely implies some negative qualities to be replaced with positive ones. Although the use of technologies of the self might be a phase one goes through on the way to the realization that actually causes the transformation, it is ultimately triggered by the inquiry into what it is exactly that needs to change, why, how, and who is "working" on the self. And indeed in the worldviews outlined in the previous chapters I have shown that it is not by working at oneself, but by observing oneself that transformation takes place. *Observing* the self equates to *transforming* the self through insight. Working at the self only relates to the creation of the conditions that make insight possible. The ethical process is more akin to a process of self-discovery, especially for the Mongolian Millennials, heavily influenced by the now public and legitimate Buddhist tradition (since 1990, after the fall of the communist government).[58]

In the Foucauldian view, when we think of transformation, we think of something that needs to change. We achieve the transformation through our will, by means of control,

58 Of course Foucault never claimed that self-discovery and knowledge of the self are irrelevant, but it is worth pointing out that it is somehow bypassed in his writings about ethics.

in a certain movement of time. It is tempting to say this is kind of a western approach to life and ethics, one in which control, agency, and power, are central notions. It comes with a linear understanding of personal and societal development, a somewhat ethnocentric notion of progress. The alternative is a view in which control is an illusion, and change is a law of nature. In this view, there is no progress in the repetitive movement of becoming: when it comes to ethics and moral qualities, repetition is the way to stagnation. In other words, one is fighting against oneself, in order to change oneself, without knowing oneself: the controller is the one being controlled.

This is the great paradox between *being* and *becoming*: one struggles to become in order to be, and it is this very struggle that creates the present distance from one's destination. There is a lack of awareness about what is happening right now, a fixation with the future and a blindness for the present. On paper it is evident that, in many ways, we *are* what we are trying to become, that one continuously becomes and is. And yet it is hard to find individuals experiencing life like this, and most go through life chasing self-fulfillment, to change and shape the moral self. One could say that the ethical moment in which transformation occurs is the moment in which we become aware of it. What comes next is a long period of chimera-chasing that keeps us running in circles, instead of experiencing the transformation. Being prey of *Samsara*, passing through the same life and situation again and again, means moving and at the same time being paralyzed in a state of non-living.

5. Resolving the paradox: Identification with reality

I have argued that a dualist ethics of becoming is based on a paradoxical identification with the thinking process itself, the very mind where the idea of a need for change originates. The alternative, of course, is as a Buddhist like Kanaa would say “seeing things as they really are.” In other words: discovering one's true nature, taking a closer look to the “I” that wants to change. Identification with something that is more all-encompassing than our narrow social-cultural identity (the body, the mind/thoughts, the

life history) is a recurring theme in the three ethical directions I described, and almost appears to be the destination of any spiritual search. In the end, when the Buddhist realizes his Buddha-nature, when the spiritual searcher realizes the non-duality of reality, and the shamanist is one with his tradition and completely aware of his being part of a living world, what actually happens is a shift in identification from the defined, limited self to the all-encompassing reality. One realizes oneself as it were to be a consciousness devoid of defined properties. According to these worldviews, it is when this re-identification occurs, and the person lets go of his reductive notions about him/herself and stops associating with the inner contents of the mind, that one is transformed and finally begins living in the deeper sense of the word.

Interestingly, although there are many similarities, what is let go of or lost in the case of the Buddhist realizing his Buddha-nature is very different than in the case of the shaman hosting an ancestor spirit. In the first case, and as well in the case of a spiritual-seeker realizing the non-duality of things, one will expect not to see one's national and cultural identity as defining. Moreover, the shift in identification is lasting. In the case of the shamanist however, everything but the cultural identity is lost, although of course one recuperates an ancient traditional cultural identity which may somewhat differ from the contemporary one. The shift (at least for the shaman himself) is not lasting, but can be triggered on demand. For the shamanist follower, although it is conceivable that one's identity will be different once one sees the world with the added spiritual dimension, cultural identity and identification with nature do in a sense coincide. The ancestor spirit stands as role model and perfect example of a Mongolian person at his best: strong, proud, respectful of nature, nomad, and so forth.

One of the main differences between the 'becoming' and 'being' states of mind consists for the prior to *have a perspective on* reality and for the latter of *being* that reality. The difference is basically the same of that between knowledge and experience: the former always assumes a certain distance with the object. It is evident that in the case of reality this becomes problematic. Not only because one cannot step 'out of reality' and know it

in the proper sense of the term, but also because the continuous experience of it precludes its definition and understanding. In other words, when something 'becomes' real, it is not known. Experiencing ethics therefore means abandoning one's understanding of it, and abandoning means to stop trying to 'become' and work at oneself, and to let it all be as it is.

6. Truth in experiential ethics

In the anthropology of experiential ethics, the informants are the protagonists, and what they experience to be true is of relevance, and how this experience relates to the truths and ideologies they know and support. One could say that in this context, what is true is not what is said to be true, but what is experienced to be true. It does not matter what Jesus, the Buddha, the shaman, or even Chinggis Khaan proclaimed, if one does not know that it is true *through* one's own experience. In a sense, with regard to ethics, experience thus always precedes understanding, and understanding is merely the recognition of some truth in relation to the prior experience. When it appears that, through inquiry and remembrance, everything that all the aforementioned teachers said are true, there is no real commitment to a single one of them: the truth is all around us if we experienced it.[59] This is why it is often said we already have all the spiritual knowledge religions and teachers try to convey. When we recognize the truth in the words of great spiritual leaders it is therefore not about acquiring new information, but about remembering.

This tells us something about truth. It is not something that exists and needs to be discovered, or something that can be defined, but something that can and is experienced. In a religious sense, it almost seems like one goes back to the Christian tradition, in which the truth is equated with God (*Via et Veritas et Vita*) and is not really conceived as

59 The kind of inquiry that relates truth to experience does not necessarily involve analysis and reflection. The question has to be related to experience, the answer experienced beyond thought.

something that is truly *knowable*. In most religious and spiritual traditions, the truth is something to be experienced. In the case of Buddhism, the very purpose of many meditation techniques, is sharpening one's concentration in order to become aware of truth's presence, its all-encompassing nature. Escaping *Samsara* is in this view not a matter of running faster, but of finally standing still. Since the experience of truth is not dependent on the accumulation of knowledge but on its experience, this also implies there is no information that can give us this experience, no tradition or belief system outside of ourselves is in a sense relevant. In other words, in oneself lies the truth, and the key to it is in our own hands. This is the reason why do-it-yourself spiritual seekers such as Narantsetseg and Tuvshintur look into their own experience for answers.

7. Culture and identity: The causalities of experiential ethics

On the basis of my analysis of the Buddhist, shamanic, and spiritual ethical worldviews, one can notice that some things are (supposed to be) lost in the process. In fact, if we take experience as our criterion of truth, everything that we do not continuously and consistently experience falls apart. This may include systems of belief, feelings, customs, cultural conditioning, values, prejudices, and so on. In other words, most of what is actually part of what we conceive to be our social-cultural identity. According to the Buddhist and spiritual traditions, if we are to relate the truth of the question “who am I” to experience, the only thing that remains standing is consciousness, it is the only constant. But again, consciousness is not really an answer if it is not *experienced* as being true: for a Christian it might be God, for a shamanist one's ancestor spirit. In this sense, one's cultural identity is paradoxically both lost and determines what is true for the individual.

The time in which most anthropologists saw culture as a kind of homogenous 'package' of collective behavioral-moral traits and customs is long gone. In the last decade, many questioned this kind of conceptualization (Vertovec 2001; 2007; Sylvain 2005). On an academic level, there has been a shift in thinking of cultures as discontinuous in space

and continuous in time, to continuous in space (interconnected) and discontinuous in time (Robbins 2004). But the same global flows that play a role in the re-thinking of this notion of culture have brought many of those involved with eastern philosophy to question the western approach to ethics and truth itself. They have brought me myself to question the Foucauldian dualistic understanding of ethics through the stories of my informants. The basic assumption that ethics requires work is not per se flawed, but it ought to be nuanced by taking into consideration that from a different perspective ethics may require us to take a break. Now it would be easy and misleading to oppose the eastern (and Mongolian) non-dualistic view of reality to the western dualistic one, and understand the different conceptions of ethics (becoming vs. being) as the products of this fundamentally divergent philosophical developments. But as mentioned earlier, as soon as we attempt to grasp the ethical workings in this way, we miss the point. What is apparent from looking at the different ethical directions people take, and the conceptions of reality some maintain, is that there is no such thing as an 'eastern' or 'Mongolian' ethical experience. By conceptualizing this phenomenon as such, one merely deepens the gap between academic theory and everyday practice, for it delimits ethical freedom. *Experience* can never be described and generalized this way, in the same way the description is not the described. Experience and experiential ethics ought not to be seen as part of some broader cultural context, because it is a personal phenomenon. On the other hand, the role of global flows and acculturation play in the transformation of our worldviews and ethical experience must be acknowledged and taken into account in anthropological studies.

Culture can be seen as local, if we consider it to be the product of a certain mainstream conception of reality. This kind of knowledge originates from the Ingoldian genealogical model, such as institutionalized religious systems, traditions, customs, and

so on.[60] But there is a more all-encompassing, *global culture*, which consists of the various ways people experience reality. Phenomena that pertain to this kind of culture are not linked to *external* environmental and social factors, the ideas, customs that come along with our being in a certain location in the world. They are linked to the *internal* experience of the person himself, his life-movement, and the transformations he undergoes being at the center of his own universe. This is consistent with Ingold's “logic of inversion” outlined in the first chapter: the tendency to understand a person's engagement with the world and life as the result of a particular way of constructing it (Ingold 1993: 218). If we see the different way informants (and we ourselves) act and live as the result of their particular worldview that, in turn, is the result of a particular cultural context, we fail to understand the viewpoint of the various Buddhist, shamanic, and spiritual traditions I outlined. The danger of relating culture to ethics is that, although we might discover some moral links, we miss the ethical experience which is independent from the individual's knowledge and inner contents of the mind. The point is, what actually is shared, and is part of local instead of global culture, has no relevance at all to experiential ethics, to who we are, or to who we ought to be.[61]

As I mentioned in chapter two, Mongolian spiritual teachers, especially Buddhist monks and shamans, are rightly concerned about global forces, and try to strengthen people's commitment to ethnic identities, to restore the rooted tradition, and generally support a conservative identity politics. Modern artifacts and practices brought in by the winds of globalization do distract young Mongolians from the traditional, clear, time-tested path

60 In Mongolia the idea of a homogenous, definable Mongolian culture and tradition is rooted in the minds of even the most cosmopolitan young adults I met. Although creating grand dichotomies might be scientifically inappropriate, it is surely tempting when looking back at the field. It is a fact that Mongolia, having a population that is 95% ethnic Mongolian, is one of those societies that has much to hold on to when it comes to culture.

61 Local culture and identity may give a certain flavor and color to ethical experience and play a role in the effects of the transformation that comes about, but the general process and ethical moment is not related to the local cultural variables. Even more so, one could say that the real ethical transformation occurs exactly by distancing oneself from one's cultural conditioning. Ethical directions such as the shamanic, Buddhist, or generally spiritual one do not 'belong' to a particular ethnic group of society. Although European culture can be said to be based on a Judaic-Christian tradition, the philosophies and views on ethics such as the Foucauldian one are produced by an all-pervasive dualistic conception of reality, not the 'cultural noise' (including Christianity) that surrounds it. And this conception originates from the identification with thought itself.

to truth and self-realization. But most importantly it is the attitude and mentality of control that threatens Mongolian spirituality. The very idea one can and should work on and work on changing oneself, the idea of control, which we have seen in Foucauldian ethics, is based on a more fundamental western understanding of truth, which only worsens the struggle Mongolian spiritual teachers try to prevent. While I cannot explore these notions further here, let's just say it appears we are confronted with two different views on truth: one that sees truth as something to be discovered and unveiled, and one that sees it as something all-encompassing and ever-present, to be experienced. It is evident that if in a culture that is formed around the second view on truth we introduce ideologies and philosophies coming from a culture formed around the first view, we have a problem. As I have mentioned earlier, this whole search for a “better I” could also be seen as a cultural construct or a contemporary commodified social phenomenon. The investigation of these conceptions is fertile soil for future research in the anthropology of experiential ethics.

8. Experience is the most radical form of knowledge

On a final note, one of the most important lessons I learned in Mongolia and which I tried to convey in these pages is that experience is the most radical form of knowledge. Although I have separated them in order to get an insight into their interaction, it is clear that all systems, Buddhism, shamanism, and individual spiritual searches make use of both struggle and letting go to create the right environment and conditions in which ethical transformation happens. Like a Zen master they tell us to let go and hold on at the same time, to carry water in buckets without bottom, in order to make us realize the water is where it should be, and the bucket is utterly useless. What remains is an experience which is more valuable than conceptual knowledge because it integrates with our psychological and physical memory, thereby transforming us in a deeper way.

Experience is like a magnet: when we try to understand a phenomenon, we will never be satisfied until we actually experience it. When this happens, we are immediately

repelled, for if we stay with the experience, we become in way the phenomenon itself. This has some disconcerting implications. For one, we necessarily lose what we were during our search, our struggle to understand, and the very personal will that motivated us to inquire is gone. In many spiritual traditions, this is in a way the goal: becoming one with life, with God, awareness, or something all-encompassing and all-knowing. But this principle works on many levels. For instance, empathy with a friend is usually praised, but if we put all our time and energy into really putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, this is inappropriate; some kind of separation is necessary in order to live one's own life.

All the Mongolian friends with whom I conversed and shared moments have accumulated over the years an amount of cultural, spiritual, and self-knowledge, which I have had the privilege of putting in writing. But as Ingold (1993: 219) reminds us, we should be wary of replacing "the person as a node within a nexus of relationships with the person as a bearer of a set of cognitive rules for constructing them." In other words, we should not lose sight of the idea that the way people construct the world is just that, a construction. What really matters and is real is people's engagement with the world, in other words, their experience. And as I have shown, in ethics experience is everything: it is the missing link between being and becoming. This is not some theoretical abstraction completely unrelated to the empirical data. It is what informants in the field like Narantsetseg, Bolormaa, Tuvshintur and others actually say when asked about their ethical lives: I will tell you my story, but don't forget, you have your own.

Epilogue

Although the stories I chose to document are mostly about shamanism and Buddhism, the basic ethical workings are generalizable to the more universal human pursuit of perfection and fulfillment. By listening closely to the people one meets in the field/world talking about their own ethical (and spiritual) search, one learns about how different the paths can be but also about where these paths meet. In the Inuit worldview, states Ingold, as soon as a person 'moves' (lives), he becomes a line. The interaction between lines and the creation of knots and places creates an ever-changing ‘meshwork’, which could be conceived as a living pattern. We can retrace the lines of people's lives, try to understand where they come from, where they are going, and how we personally relate to them. Such lines are not static, they vibrate, they are alive. The relation of a person with his future and past is in fact a dynamic one, characterized by continuous re-interpretation and re-assessment. This means that in order to understand the ethical lives of others and ourselves we need to let go of the idea we can get a firm grip on its development. During my research I came to believe that the process of working at oneself in an ethical sense is closely intertwined with discovering oneself to be something different than we thought. This is not the kind of understanding we acquire though a gradual assemblage of arguments, towards the unfolding of some mystery: It is the kind of understanding we acquire though experience, though living. Therefore, an anthropology of ethics should provide insight not through mere description, but though sparking, by means of examples from the field, an interest and awareness in the reader himself about his own ethical life. Words can only refer to the space between the experience of becoming and of being, the reader's own life-experience is meant to fill it.

As mentioned in the first chapter, during this process one must be wary of being caught

up in description, or the experience will be lost: "The description is not the described" says Krishnamurti (1994: 117). In a way, what the Indian philosopher is saying is that only the described is real.[62] In his view, the human mind gets 'caught' as it were in the movement of its own thinking, mistaking fact and reality with the distorted description of that reality (Krishnamurti 1991). How then, do we see what *is* instead of its description? Ironically, if we accept that activities of the mind such as judgment and analysis generate the kind of conflict that clouds our view of what is by distracting us with its description, the question itself of how we can get rid of this habit breeds conflict. The right attitude, according to Krishnamurti (1991), is not to ask ourselves how to get rid of the conflict but realize the truth of what is, and that see that in reality, conflict is absent. In other words, we see what *is* by *being it:* experiencing. The same counts for every idea in this text.

Any intellectual description of experience converts the actual thing into thought, forcing it into a certain formulation and conceptualization. As I have argued however, the reality of ethical experience does not take place from the neck up. As Kierkegaard (2006: 63) would put it, "life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards." It is exactly this tension between experience and knowledge, being and becoming, that is most apparent in everyday ethical workings. Experiential ethics does not lend itself to dialectics, just like the described never fully comes to its expression in the description. A true understanding of experiential ethics lies by definition in the awareness of one's own ethical life. This very thesis is merely a confusing whirlwind of concepts, statements, event analysis, reflections, and speculations for the reader that does not complement it with his own experience. It would be, as Tuvshintur said, like describing the flavor of a lemon to someone who never took a bite.

62 Description, thinking, and analysis, are all mental activities that more often than not generate judgment, justification, and categorization In other words: conflict. Conflict in any form distorts and hinders us from understanding reality, it misleads us into formulating "what should be" instead of directing our attention to what is. Even the interval between idea and action breeds conflict (Krishnamurti 1994: 117).

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