The Embodied Experience of Prostration (*chaktsal*): Senses, Aesthetics, and Politics in the Eastern Himalayas

Kei Nagaoka

Kei Nagaoka, Visiting scholar, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, USA. JSPS Cross-border Postdoctoral Research Fellow (CPD), Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo, Japan, ORCID: 0009-0003-8498-1589

Abstract: *This study explores the embodied experience of prostration among Tibetan Buddhists through ethnographic research in the Eastern Himalayas. I extend somaesthetics theory by using a sensory ethnographic approach to analyze the intersubjective relations and bodily sensibility that intersect in the daily experience of prostration. By focusing on the interactions among their senses, aesthetics, and politics, I argue that prostration embodies the Monpa art of living as a creative act that enhances one's good life. This study contributes to discussions of embodiment, sensory anthropology, Tibetan Buddhist studies of the body, and the politics of ritual.*

Keywords: *intersubjectivity, sensory ethnography, embodiment, politics of ritual, Northeast India*

This study explores the embodied experience of Buddhist prostration, called *chaktsal (phyag 'tshal)*, in the daily lives of the Monpa people in Arunachal Pradesh, Northeastern India. [1]Prostration is a devotional practice of touching four parts of the body— head, brow, mouth, and chest, with both hands together, followed by fully lowering the body to the ground, face-down. In Tibetan Buddhist doctrine, this act is a physical gesture of taking refuge in the Buddha, purifying negative karma, and accumulating merit called *sonam (bsod nams)*. Asian physical practices such as meditation, zazen, and yoga have spread to Europe and the United States, becoming popular worldwide as forms of exercise and methods for physical and mental well-being. In contrast, *chaktsal* is practiced mostly by people in Tibet, the Himalayas, and Mongolia, where they serve as religious purification rituals within their local contexts. Practitioners purify their karma and accumulate merit through daily practice with the body, speech, and mind in prostration through physical movements, reciting mantras, and imagining the Buddha.

Prostration is often practiced when people visit monasteries or during Buddhist rituals at home or in villages, monasteries, or sacred places. Many people practice prostration as part of their daily routines in the Buddhist altar rooms of their homes. Although prostration is a well-known physical movement among local people, few studies have focused on the techniques

1 Tibetan terms are rendered with phonetic transcription, followed by the transliteration of the standard Wylie system at first use (Wylie, 1959).

and experiences of prostration itself. While many scholars have discussed the tantric ritual performances and healing practices by monks, shamans, oracles, and practitioners of Tibetan medicine (or Sowa Rigpa) called *amchi (am chi)*, little attention has been paid to the daily practice of lay people who repeat prostrations at home. When I lived with the Monpa people and practiced prostrations with them, I gradually learned that the interplay of senses, feelings, and experiences of prostration varied depending on the context.

This study analyses how the physical act of prostration constitutes a diverse experience intertwined with the senses, aesthetics, and politics of the local people, expanding Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics perspective by drawing on a sensory ethnographic approach. Through ethnographic research focusing on the physical acts and bodily sensibilities of prostration, I argue that prostration is not just a representation of submission or asceticism, but rather embodies the creative art of living a good life.

This research was based on intermittent fieldwork conducted in Tawang District, Arunachal Pradesh, from 2010 to 2016. My research interests lie in examining the diverse practices surrounding illness and treatment among the Monpa people. While my research was not initially focused on prostration, I performed an abbreviated half-body prostration practice when visiting monasteries or participating in rituals, adapting to local customs.[2] As I gradually made more Monpa friends and began performing both the half and full versions of prostrations daily with them at homestays and at friends' houses, I started experiencing the sensations brought on by prostration movements. This was distinct from the trance-like states experienced in rituals, where one might dream or travel to another world. It was a sensation and emotion generated by the movements themselves. At the same time, I began to wonder what prostration felt and meant to the friends performing it beside me, and why they chose to continue this practice daily. This article discusses the daily prostration practices at home of two women, Sangmo and Nima, whom I met locally, and the prostration practices of ritual participants in the public space of monasteries through participant observation and open-ended interviews conducted in Tibetan, Hindi, and Monpa.

1. Prostration and Somaesthetics

Previous studies have analyzed prostration in relation to the *nyungne* ritual among Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling, India (Zivkovic, 2013) and the religious life of Tibetan women in Qinghai Province, China (Fitzgerald, 2020), though only ever marginally. These studies critique text-centered analyses, focusing instead on the uncomfortable muscular exertion involved when participants in the *nyungne* ritual or training program prostrate themselves hundreds or thousands of times. They discuss asceticism and the understanding of others' suffering through physical pain as well as the embodiment of the ritual founder's experience in the past (Fitzgerald, 2020; Zivkovic, 2013). However, the people I came to know do not always experience painful prostration. Pain-free prostrations, repeated only a few times, are also frequently practiced. Hence, perspectives focused solely on pain cannot fully capture the experience of prostration. For the Monpa people, prostration is an art through which they engage positively with life via their bodily movements. Understanding this experience requires analyzing not only Buddhist or ritual doctrines but also their relationship to bodily sensations and aesthetic values. With reference to Shusterman's somaesthetics, this study defines the Monpa people's aesthetics as practices, consciousness, emotions, and experiences which center on living a good life that

2 The half-body prostration is refraining from total extension; one kneels taking the head to the floor before rising into a standing posture (Zivkovic, 2013: 53).

encompasses various values rooted in bodily sensations.

Shusterman defines somaesthetics as "the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning" (Shusterman, 1999: 302). Noting the absence of the body in aesthetics and philosophy, Shusterman states that the purpose of somaesthetics is, first, to return to the original meaning of aesthetics as sense perception; and second, to revive interest in philosophy as an art of living, keyed to cultivating wisdom regarding how to live a good life in both theory and practice (Shusterman, 1997, 2007, 2012, 2020). His somaesthetics combines the body (soma) as a sentient subjectivity with aesthetics, with an emphasis on self-improvement through bodily discipline using analytical, practical, and pragmatic approaches. While his somaesthetics was proposed as a comprehensive field linking diverse studies on the body and was not confined to any specific aesthetic or method, it is nevertheless characterized by its particular focus on self-improvement through physical training and cultivating bodily consciousness. Building on John Dewey's (1958) discussion of aesthetics in everyday experience as the interaction between the biological body and the environment, Shusterman also emphasizes the socio-political aspects of the body discussed by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Foucault, 1977, 1978). Shusterman analyses and discusses practices concerning the relationship between the coding of the body by political power and aesthetic values, the creation of alternative aesthetic values that transcend this, and the relationship between aesthetic values and social norms or morality. A central question in his somaesthetics is how the improvement of bodily movements alters people's emotions, sensations, and thoughts; how the body, through such actions, becomes extended into objects or embedded within social and political contexts; and, how this experience transforms bodily consciousness (Shusterman, 2020).

Somaesthetics can prove helpful with respect to analyzing the experience of prostration within the interplay of the body, aesthetics, and politics. However, a tension exists between Shusterman's concept of self-improvement and the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the self. Shusterman's somaesthetics emphasizes the construction of an ideal or better self through discipline and training. By contrast, prostration in Tibetan Buddhism, while an act of improvement in terms of purifying karma and accumulating merit, ultimately aims for liberation from self-attachment. As prostration is a practice oriented toward self-effacement, it is problematic to discuss the aesthetics of self-liberation in prostration practice within a subjectivist framework. To overcome this tension, it is necessary to expand the theory of somaesthetics by referring to discussions of intersubjectivity, the body in Tibetan Buddhism, and sensory ethnography. As will be shown, in Tibetan Buddhism, the self is understood in relational terms rather than as will or as project, and in place of creative self-fashioning, the emphasis is on effacement.

2. Sensory Ethnography of Permeable Body

Michael Jackson argues that the self and the other are a product of intersubjective engagement. Jackson conceptualizes intersubjectivity as a mode of being in the world that encompasses social relations between human beings, ancestors, spirits, collective representations, and material things (Jackson, 1998). For his part, Thomas Csordas criticized the discourse- and symbol-centered approach in anthropology, and offered the notion of embodiment as a paradigm for research in their place. He characterizes the latter as an "indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and the mode of presence and engagement in the world" (Csordas, 1993: 135). It incorporates "somatic modes of attention" that are "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others"

(1993: 138). According to this approach, self can be "diffused with other persons and things in a unitary socio mythic domain" through the intersubjective process (Csordas, 1994: 7).[3]

Anthropological studies on the body in Tibetan Buddhism have discussed subtle and permeable bodies using an intersubjective approach (Samuel & Johnston eds., 2013; Zivkovic, 2014a). For example, Geoffrey Samuel conceptualizes the subtle body in Buddhist Tantras as a fluid body possessing "centers" (*cakra*), "channels" (*nāḍī*), and flows of "energy" (*prāṇa*), which differs from the Western dualistic understanding of body and mind (Samuel, 1989; Samuel, 2013).[4] Discussing tantric lineages grounded in centuries of experience in the use of alternate states of consciousness and body-mind techniques within the subtle body, he suggests that transformations in consciousness and transformation in society should be seen as aspects of a single process, not reducible to one another. For her part, Tanya Zivkovic analyzed the sensory experiences of Buddhist rituals and the use of lamas' relics, highlighting the intersubjective relationship and embodiment between lamas, deities, and ritual participants (Zivkovic, 2010, 2013, 2014b). Zivkovic states that the self is not considered a bounded and fixed entity, and its ritual life includes intersubjective reciprocity, which "pass between people, deities, and objects in, at times, very fluid ways" (Zivkovic, 2014a: 100).

Regarding the body within such intersubjective relationships, Robert Desjarlais employs a sensory ethnographic approach to focus on the relationship between embodied experiences of illness and healing and aesthetics among the Yolmo people of Nepal (Desjarlais, 1992). Desjarlais states regarding illness which is understood locally as involving "soul loss" and shamanic healing rituals to reunite soul and body, it is important not only to analyze how meaning is produced through discourse and symbols, but also to explore how local people experience illness through bodily sensibility and aesthetics. According to him, sensibility (defined as "more the visceral sense of a way of being") and aesthetic values are interrelated, and combine to generate the embodied experiences of health and illness (Desjarlais, 1992: 151). He argues that aesthetic values such as harmony, balance, control, presence, purity, and karma among the Yolmo people become embodied as soul loss—accompanied by feelings of sorrow and pain—when one or more of these qualities are lacking due to the tensions people face in political contexts like diaspora and tourism. Shamanic rituals visualize and verbalize these emotions by restoring aesthetic deficits through ritual procedures. Desjarlais's discussion of the relationship between body, sensation, and aesthetics is crucial for addressing the embodied experiences of prostration using an intersubjective approach. His series of sensory ethnographies, which address the experiences of aging and mourning alongside illness, focus on suffering (Desjarlais, 1991, 2000, 2003). Through ethnographic research on prostration, this study combines Shusterman's somesthetics with Desjarlais's sensory ethnography to explore embodied experiences related to a broad range of human emotions and sensibilities such as joy, hope, guilt, anxiety, and fear, and not only the feeling of pain.

Furthermore, this study focuses on the multisensory aspects of touch and sensorial politics of ritual. Research in sensory anthropology has brought to light the historicity and sociality of the sense of touch and how it is constitutive of communication with social others and spirits in addition to engaging sensibilities about skin, texture, and warmth of both people and/or things (Classen, 2012; Classen ed., 2005; Le Breton, 2017). The sense of touch also overlaps with other senses such as taste, speech and sound, sight, and smell through the multisensory experiences within different contexts (Howes, 2019). In what follows, I describe my own haptic sensations

3 For a discussion of the phenomenological approach in anthropology, see Desjarlais & Throop (2010).

4 The letters in brackets are Sanskrit spellings.

during repeated prostration and how sensibilities of touch intertwined with words and sight among the Monpa. An additional focus in what follows concerns the politics of ritual, including pilgrimage rituals. Anthropological studies on pilgrimage highlight that pilgrimage practices influence social movements, borders, identities, and markets beyond religious phenomena, emphasizing how pilgrimage interacts with politics and economics (Coleman, 2021; Coleman & Eade eds., 2018). When Monpas practice prostration, their bodies are embedded within the context of Himalayan border politics and the Buddhist revival (discussed in the final section of this article). Therefore, I examine how their experience of prostration and their aesthetics become linked to norms and territoriality.

Arunachal Pradesh is a disputed border region between India and China in the eastern Himalayas, and is inhabited by ethnic groups with more than 100 different languages and customs. India effectively controls Arunachal Pradesh and classifies the populations into 26 scheduled tribes according to administrative status categories (Mayilvaganan ed., 2020). Most inhabitants of the state, who originally practiced nature worship (known as *Donyi Polo*), converted to Hinduism or Christianity and now practice a combination of both ritual traditions. Approximately 10% of the inhabitants are Buddhists, including Tibetan Buddhists (Mahayana) in the western part of the state and Myanmar and Thai Buddhists (Theravada) in the eastern part (Census 2011). The Monpa people living in the Tawang district of the state are Tibetan Buddhists and they distinguish themselves from other non-Buddhist ethnic groups called *gitu* in Monpa. In Tawang, Monpa comprise approximately 70% of the total population of 49,977, with the remaining 30% consisting of Indian officials, soldiers, and teachers from other states as well as merchants and day laborers from India, Nepal, and Bhutan, and refugees from Tibet (Census 2011). Tawang was strongly influenced by neighboring Tibet from the 17th century to the mid-20th century (Norbu, 2008). However, India effectively acquired controlled over Tawang in 1951. When the Sino-Indian border dispute broke out in 1962, Tawang became a battleground between Chinese and Indian troops, along with Ladakh in the western Himalayas (Guyot-Réchard, 2017; Mayilvaganan ed., 2020). This border conflict led the Indian government to seek to reconstitute Tawang as a border barrier, and defence-oriented development schemes, such as the construction of military facilities and roads, began in earnest (Gohain, 2019, 2020). After their interaction with Tibet was cut off by the border closure, the lives of the Monpa people were more strongly influenced by Indian politics and economics. As the government's militarization of the Tawang region progressed, the Buddhist revival movement began in the 1990s, expanding into the regions known as the Mon region, including the Tawang and West Kameng districts (Gohain, 2024; Nagaoka, 2021). The Buddhist revival emphasized the preservation and promotion of Monpa's Buddhist culture, along with economic and educational development. Alongside various social activities, this movement stimulated consciousness of Monpa culture, Buddhist rituals, and the practice of prostration.

3. Touching the Floor

I was staying with Sangmo (a woman in her 60s) in Urgeling Village. Sangmo had the habit of burning incense in Buddhist altar rooms and outdoors early in the morning, reciting mantras after breakfast and dinner, and performing full-body prostrations at night. Sangmo lived with her husband, her third daughter, her third daughter's 9-year-old son, and a young female relative in a concrete house that they had built several years earlier. Her third daughter's Monpa husband, an Indian Army soldier, was absent as he lived at the military base. Next to their current residence stood the traditional wooden house they had previously lived in, referred to as the "old house."

Despite having a splendid Buddhist altar room in the current house, Sangmo deliberately went to the old house every night with a flashlight to perform prostrations.

When I started staying at her home, I went with her to the old house to prostrate for the first time. On the way, I asked Sangmo, "Why do you always prostrate in the old house when there is a nice Buddhist altar room in the new house?" She replied. "The concrete floor is very cold and hard. It hurts when I kneel." I thought maybe she could just lay a rug down on the hard floor, but I did not say anything and entered the old house. This space had almost become a storage locker, with only one small Buddhist painting on the wall. When Sangmo pointed to the wooden floor and said, "I've been doing prostrations here all along," I looked and was surprised to see that only that part of the floor was sunken and smoothly curved into the shape of her feet. The years of pressing her feet down on the same spot gradually deformed the wooden floor into a footprint. To me, that wooden indentation seemed to embody Sangmo's intense desire to live a good life. In the Monpa tradition, such footprints in wood evoke images of sacred footprints or handprints left by high lamas at sacred sites, which are formed by their powerful supernatural abilities. Sangmo gazed at the imprint with joy. After sweeping the floor with a broom, she stood directly on the floor.

We performed both the half and full versions of the prostration approximately 30 times each. Until then, I was accustomed to performing half-body prostrations three times as part of the monastery visit ritual, but I had never performed the full-body version. When Sangmo first taught me the full version, I had to consciously think about when and how to move my hands and body, which resulted in awkward movements. However, as I continued prostrating with Sangmo every night, my body gradually adapted to this full-body movement, and the clumsy motions transformed into smoother ones. As I repeated the customary movements at a regular rhythm, my awareness came to focus on my breath and bodily motion. The smoothness of movements resulted in a sense of comfort and joy. My body would begin to sweat slightly. My hands and body repeatedly touched the smooth surface of the wooden floor, transferring heat from my body. I felt that the floor and my body were synchronized and shared the same warmth. Sangmo breathing beside me and my own breathing naturally fell into the same rhythm and moved in unison. Unlike trance experiences involving some kind of vision, the sensation of joy brought about by the repeated full-body prostrations consisted, for me, in the rhythm, warmth, and breathing generated by the smooth movement itself. It was a feeling of becoming one with the house's space, synchronized with my surroundings, less a sense of "I am moving" and more a sense of becoming "part of the movement itself."

Through my own sensory experience, I finally understood why Sangmo spoke of the "cold and hard" texture when explaining why she doesn't perform full-body prostrations on concrete floors. This sensation is less likely to occur on concrete floors or carpeted floors. Concrete floors, which conduct heat less readily than wood, remain "cold" no matter how many times you prostrate yourself, keeping the body and floor separate. When placing your knees on the floor or sliding your whole body forward to touch the floor, concrete feels "hard" and is prone to causing pain compared to the softness of a wooden floor. Conversely, carpeted floors often feel warmer than their own, and their overly soft surfaces make it difficult for the body and floor to move in unison, hindering smooth motion. In fact, the preferred surface for practicing prostrations is usually wooden, not only at Sangmo's old house, but also in homes and monasteries where prostration is practiced. When prostration is performed outdoors at sacred sites, it is performed on smooth earth or a wooden board the size of an adult's entire body, which is placed there. Sangmo never skipped prostration, although she might have adjusted its form or number based on the condition of her knees. For her, the practice of prostration was less an ascetic hardship

and more of an experience of joy. This joy encompasses the gratitude of being born with a human body capable of prostration, the joy of purifying karma and accumulating merit, the delight of touching her own footprints on the wooden floor, and the sheer pleasure derived from the fluid motion of prostration itself.

4. Sensibility and Aesthetics of Generosity

When I was still not accustomed to the full-body prostration motion, I could not keep up with Sangmo's regular movements and fell behind. This created an awkward moment. When Sangmo finished prostrating first, she waited for me to finish and said with a worried expression, "You should get up from the floor as quickly as possible." She told me that keeping my hands on the floor too long would cause me to "be reborn as a *yida (yi dwags)* in the next life." *Yida* refers to hungry ghosts. Startled, I stared at the floor, imagining a scene of an invisible yida wandering about. For the Monpa people, the floor is the world where *yidas* dwell, and touching it with the hands or the whole body creates a sense of physical contact with the *yidas*' bodies. The smooth motion of prostration includes the swift act of rising soon after the body is extended on the floor. For Sangmo, the experience of touching the floor evokes not only joy and comfort but also a sense of unease—the fear that one's body might synchronize with and be influenced by hungry ghosts.

Hungry ghosts exist in one of six realms where people are reborn in the next life: gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings (Zivkovic, 2013: 49). Transmigration across realms depends on a being's actions in their current life and their consequences or karma (Obeyesekere, 2006: 1-2). Hungry ghosts are believed to inhabit the lower spaces beneath human feet. Similar to other Tibetan Buddhists, the Monpa spatial conception holds that heavenly realms are inhabited by higher deities, earthly realms by humans and animals, underground or aquatic realms by serpent deities called *lū (klu)* and underworld deities. Lower spirits, such as hungry ghosts and evil spirits, are thought to wander the lower spaces beneath the earth and rivers. When humans bring impurities and violate the boundaries between different spaces, they incur illnesses and misfortune from gods and spirits. The image of a hungry ghost is one of an emaciated body with a distended belly. It is believed that stingy people who refused to share food or drink with others in their previous lives would be reborn as hungry ghosts. When hungry ghosts attempt to consume food or drink, they burn away at their mouths, leaving them perpetually starved. When humans walk and spit on the ground, many hungry ghosts gather to obtain water from the spit. For Monpa, touching the floor or placing objects on it causes anxiety about crossing the boundary between the human world and the world of hungry ghosts and entering into contact with them. Therefore, placing Buddhist scriptures or other books directly on the floor is considered to place wisdom and knowledge in the world of hungry ghosts–a disrespectful and sinful act (negative karma). Furthermore, being called stingy by others implicitly carries the meaning "you will be reborn as a hungry ghost," making it one of the most dishonorable things a person can do.[5]

The emaciated body of the hungry ghost is thought to have resulted from a lack of generosity. Physically touching that hungry ghost body creates anxiety: "Perhaps I myself lack generosity, and because of that, I might be reborn as a hungry ghost in the next life," Sangmo mused. For Sangmo, prostration was linked to this anxiety, possibly influenced by hungry ghosts, which

5 For the Monpa, the bodies of humans and hungry ghosts permeate each other. When one loses appetite due to stomach pain from conditions like gastritis, a ritual is performed to satisfy the hunger of hungry ghosts by preparing and offering food to them. Abdominal pain is seen as a state where, influenced by hungry ghosts, one becomes unable to eat food, just like a hungry ghost. It is believed that by the hungry ghost consuming the food through the ritual, the sick person themselves can then eat again. In the ritual, the boundary between the sick person's body and the hungry ghost's body becomes blurred and permeates.

served to heighten her attention to performing acts of generosity. For example, Sangmo fed birds before prostration. A bird feeder was set up on the path between the new and old houses, and whenever Sangmo passed on her way to prostrate, she always placed rice in the feeder. Furthermore, Sangmo never ate chicken, saying, "Birds that kill insects to eat are impure." I thought she disliked birds, so when I saw Sangmo placing rice on the feeder, I wondered why she would feed creatures she disliked. When I asked Sangmo why she fed the birds, she replied, "I thought that if I gave the birds rice, their hunger might be satisfied, and perhaps the number of insects killed by birds might decrease a little." Feeding birds is an act of generosity. It not only satisfies the birds' hunger but also saves insect lives, reduces the birds' sins, and accumulates merit. Hence, Sangmo combines the act of prostration with the act of giving food. This is an extreme form of other-awareness and care, one which crosses species boundaries.

When practicing prostration, Sangmo's body is not in a one-on-one relationship with the Buddha to which she prostrates. By touching the floor, she connects not only with the Buddha, but also hungry ghosts, and the space of the house. Furthermore, through the act of giving food, which is related to generosity, she connects with birds and insects. Prostration evokes sensations of joy and comfort, but also brings conscious awareness of physical contact with hungry ghosts, potentially stirring unease about displaying a lack of generosity. By combining prostration with the act of giving food, an act of generosity, Sangmo addresses and mollifies this unease. In this practice, Sangmo's body interpenetrates or permeates with and transforms into multiple beings.

5. Sensibility and Aesthetics of Diligence

Nima (a woman in her 50s), living in the city center, struggled to perform her daily ritual of full-body prostration because of an old wrist injury. I met Nima at a Tibetan medicine clinic where she received acupuncture treatment two or three times a month to alleviate her wrist pain. When I first saw her at the clinic, I noticed a large lump on her wrist. One month later, it had shrunk considerably. Delighted, Nima invited the *amchi* (a Tibetan medicine practitioner) and me to her home, where she treated us to a feast of homemade dishes. Since then, Nima and I have become friends and I often visit her house. The wrist injury occurred about ten years ago when she slipped and fell on wet stairs outside her home, the day after it rained. Nima said that her wrist and limb swelled and hurt, so I asked her, "Did you go to the hospital then?" She replied, "No. I was worried about the swelling, but I was afraid that the doctor might say I needed surgery, so I did not go." According to Nima, the aforementioned lump later formed on her wrist, which began to hurt when carrying heavy objects or on rainy days. She sought treatment from folk healers twice, but that did not cure her. Recently, wrist pain had made it difficult to properly perform daily prostrations. Nima had never visited a Tibetan medicine clinic before, but hearing rumors that acupuncture was now offered there, she mustered the courage to go there.

Nima made it her daily routine to spend long hours in the evening in the prayer room, reciting sutras and performing full-body prostrations. Many Monpa people recite the four-syllable mantra of Avalokiteshvara, "Om Mani Padme Hum," before performing prostrations. However, Nima does not use this simple four-syllable phrase. Instead, she opened a small booklet printed with the Tibetan sutras and chanted them aloud. Hers was not the fluent recitation of a specially trained monk or nun. Though Nima carefully pronounced each word in the scripture, she often stumbled over them. Nima gave me a shy smile and said, "I still can't read it as well as a monk. But before, I could not read Tibetan at all." Here it should be explained that due to government policies following increased militarization of the region, the younger and middle generations of Monpas began to receive Hindi education in schools. Consequently, except for

those with Tibetan relatives, most could not speak, read, or write Tibetan, the official language, before the border closure. Watching Nima diligently read the sutra booklet, I asked, "How did you learn Tibetan?" She replied that a Tibetan language class had started in the neighborhood community house a few years back, and she attended weekly sessions to learn Tibetan reading and writing. The sutra booklet she used during her prostrations was distributed by a monk who taught Tibetan classes. Nima was very determined to improve her daily chanting and prostration practices by learning Tibetan and undergoing Tibetan medical acupuncture.

For Nima, the experience of prostration is deeply connected to feelings of hope and guilt. Nima lived with her husband, second son, and Assamese housekeeper. Nima's second son, in his twenties, had an intellectual disability since birth and struggled to speak properly. A young man of the same age and a relative living nearby occasionally visited Nima's home to help the second son and take him out. Nima told me, "When my son was born, the umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck. Because of that, he could not breathe properly." Nima believed that her son had lost the inborn sense of speech due to this mishap, and that the mishap was itself attributable to her own negative karma.

When he was a child, Nima took her son to various hospitals in Indian cities to see doctors. However, every doctor told her that they could not cure his disability. Nima then started taking her son on pilgrimages to Buddhist holy sites in India and Nepal. She felt guilty that her karma might have robbed her son of the power of speech. The practice of prostration and reciting mantras from sutras fostered a sense of hope that, by purifying her karma, her son might be able to overcome his disability and speak like others.

In Tibetan Buddhism, mantras (as the words of gods and Buddhas) possess the power to purify sins and heal illnesses and are something that can be physically sensed (Czaja, 2020). For the Monpas, rather than fully comprehending the meaning of a mantra, devotees prioritize hearing its sound to connect directly to its power. By vocalizing the mantra, its sacred power is conveyed through the medium of breath or wind, known as *lung (rlung)*. This power is then transferred to ritual implements, pills, or the bodies of participants during the ritual (Gerke, 2012; Gentry, 2016; Nagaoka, 2022; Zivkovic, 2013). When a monk recites a mantra during a ritual, his *lung* (breath) is believed to carry the mantra's power to the ears and bodies of the participants, who can then absorb the power of the sacred words through their skin. In empowerment rituals called *wang (dbang)*, the power of mantras is transferred by high lamas or monks onto specific ritual objects. The high lama places these objects directly on each participant's head, transmitting the power of the mantra to them through touch as well as sound.

For Nima, both prostration and reciting mantras were crucial to enabling her son to regain speech. Her physical actions of touching and speaking are linked to hope, bringing change not only to herself but also to her son's body, as merit and purifying power permeate or flow between their bodies. At such times, failing to recite the sutras precisely in Tibetan or not performing full prostrations with the entire body may provoke feelings of guilt, because such missteps suggest a lack of diligence. This heightens her awareness of diligence, awakens her consciousness of the effort involved in learning Tibetan and receiving Tibetan medical treatment, and leads to her actions for physical improvement aimed at performing more appropriate prostrations and reciting mantras.

6. Sensibility and Aesthetics of Honesty

Against the backdrop of the Buddhist revival, ritual ceremonies were revived in various monasteries that had previously fallen into disrepair, and new rituals were performed. As the

number of ceremonies increased, people gained more opportunities to prostrate themselves in public ritual spaces. It is believed that the benefits (merit and purity) gained from prostration can be shared with others or transferred to monasteries by counting the number of times one's body touches the ground and communicating that number to the recipient. Typically, when entering a monastery room housing a Buddha statue, people perform simplified prostrations three times. They then approach the statue, place offerings such as a white silk scarf called *khata (kha btags)* and banknotes along with incense and then touch their forehead on the pedestal at the statue's feet while offering prayers. In contrast, during some special ceremonies, people perform full-body prostrations dozens, or even hundreds, of times before reporting the count to a monk. The monks record their names and the number of prostrations, and through this process, the benefits of their prostrations are tabulated.

How does simply verbally stating the number of times one prostrates and touches the floor to another person transform those benefits into an offering? This can be understood from the perspective of the intertwined senses of speech and touch. Prostration is the muscular movement that accumulates merit and purifies negative karma. The merit generated by prostration is proportional to the number of times the physical movement is repeated. By verbally stating the number of prostrations performed for the monastery, the *lung* (breath) of speech carries benefits and transfers them to the monastery. Thus, people can dedicate the benefits of a mantra by verbally stating the number of times they have recited it. The dedication of the merits of prostrations or mantras is a virtuous act that enhances the purity of the monastery by offering the merits and purity gained through a practitioner's own efforts. It is believed that people will accumulate more merit through this act.

The dedication of prostration merits at monasteries relates to feelings of closeness and fear as well as the aesthetics of honesty. Rather than counting their own prostrations alone, people prefer to count each other's prostrations together with family members or friends. This act of mutually counting prostrations fosters feelings of closeness and trust among individuals. However, they also fear committing mistakes or improper acts before the deities and Buddhas, and thus often tend to report fewer number of prostrations to the monks than their family or friends count. For example, during the Tibetan New Year of 2016, I attended the Monlam Chenmo ceremony with Pema (a woman in her 30s) and counted her prostrations. Pema told the monk a number several dozen times less than I had counted, and she also told me to report a lower number than she had done to the monk. I asked Pema, "Why do you tell the monk such a much lower number than you actually did, even though you prostrated many times?" She replied, "If we mistakenly tell the monk a number higher than the actual count, the gods and Buddhas might think we are lying and deceiving them."

To avoid such difficulties, it is better to state a lower number. When attending ceremonies with the aforementioned Sangmo, Nima, or other friends, they also declared fewer number of prostrations than they performed, dedicating merit to the monastery. In spaces surrounded by venerable Buddhist statues and paintings of guardian deities, people feel the gazes of the gods and Buddhas ever so keenly. They feared that they might act insincerely. If one mistakenly states a higher number of prostrations than were actually performed, the gods and Buddhas may perceive it as a lie born from the selfish desire to gain more merit than others. Such lies constitute evil deeds that lead to the accumulation of sins. The act of counting prostrations for offering is associated with the fear of committing an act deemed a lie before the deities. Guided by their aesthetic honesty, Monpa people carefully understate the number of prostrations that offer merit. Through this practice of offering, each prostrate's physical act expands into a monastery, enhancing its purity and sacred power.

Prostration in Monpa is an intense relational act. Depending on the location and situation, the act of touching the ground is combined with other actions to diversify the experience of prostration. It engages with various emotions—joy, hope, closeness, anxiety, guilt, and fear—intertwined with the sensations of touch, words, and gaze, alongside the aesthetic values of generosity, diligence, and honesty. These are the embodied experiences of the Monpa people striving to live a good life.

Figure 1. People repeating prostrations and a girl counting the numbers of her mother's prostrations (The picture was taken by the author)

7. Embodiment as Emplacement

The Monpa people became embedded within a political context marked by tensions between militarization and Buddhist revival, increasingly subject to newly established norms and moral values. As the Indian government advanced the militarization of Arunachal Pradesh, development projects in Monpa-inhabited areas prioritized national defense over resident livelihoods. For example, military facilities and roads were built on land formerly used by Monpa for pasture and farming. Moreover, Hindi has become the official language in schools and government offices, and Indian national holidays have become public holidays. Officials, military personnel, teachers, merchants from India, and construction workers from Nepal began flowing into Tawang. The Monpa, who constituted the vast majority of Tawang's population, encountered large numbers of non-Buddhist outsiders for the first time during this militarization. Hindu, Islamic, and Christian religious facilities were built around the central town. Since the 2010s, tourism has also developed apace, bringing in many Indian tourists during Indian holidays. Diverse values from the outside were thus introduced to Tawang, impacting the lives of the Monpa people.

The Buddhist revival movement was initiated by Monpa monks who returned from Tibetan monasteries in South India. It expanded in the 1990s across the two districts where Monpas reside—Tawang and West Kameng—promoting the protection and development of Buddhist culture among the Monpas by designating these areas as "the land of Mon" *(Monyul)*.[6] The

6 Unlike Tawang, where the Monpas have constituted the majority of the local population, West Kameng is historically home to various ethnic

Buddhist revival created specific norms concerning culture, language, and medicine. Activists emphasized the importance of Buddhism and the Tibetan language in *Monyul* culture. The revival peaked in the 2000s, when the Monpa spiritual leader, the reincarnated monk Tsona Gontse Rinpoche, became a politician, and another politician, Dorjee Khandu, was appointed as the first Monpa Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh.

Political movements demanding *Monyul*'s autonomy have also emerged. Tibetan language education began in public schools in Monpa-inhabited areas, and Tibetan literacy classes for adults were held in various locations. Similarly, activists emphasized Tibetan medicine as a part of *Monyul* Buddhist culture. *Amchi* (Tibetan medicine practitioners) were increasingly expected to fulfill social roles beyond treating patients, such as participating in rituals alongside high lamas as embodiments of *Monyul* culture and giving lectures (Nagaoka, 2021). Following the deaths of Tsona Gontse Rinpoche and the Prime Minister in the 2010s, the political movement demanding autonomy declined. However, many NGOs established by activists continue social activities aimed at the Buddhist revival. This Buddhist revival sought not only to preserve *Monyul* culture but also to present norms for people to live well as Monpa, by ascribing moral value to Buddhism, the Tibetan language, and Tibetan medicine. The aforementioned actions of Nima to improve her Tibetan language skills and access to Tibetan medicine, along with the frequent offering of the benefits of prostrations during monastery rituals, are deeply connected to these new norms.

Alongside the creation of new norms through the Buddhist revival, the practice of prostration by the Monpa has become a political expression of living as a Buddhist minority in Arunachal Pradesh. The physical act of prostrating and touching the floor visually expresses cultural and value differences from outsiders who do not perform this action, thus gaining meaning as a normative gesture of the Monpa. The repetition of prostration during rituals, such as offering merit in public spaces, fosters a sense of solidarity among Monpa. By touching the floor with their entire bodies, they transform that space into a *Monyul* space. Individual bodily actions extend into the land, linking with the constructed norms of *Monyul* to enhance the land's purity. At this point, prostration is not merely a cultural representation of *Monyul*; the act itself becomes one of the devices that physically creates the ritual space of *Monyul*. In this context, the embodiment and spatialisation of prostration are two sides of the same coin, which could be called "emplacement." Along with the revival of rituals and the creation of new rituals within the Buddhist revival, the construction of new stupas and massive Buddha statues has became widespread. Amid tensions with militarization, the "*Monyul*-ization" of living spaces based on Buddhist revival norms has progressed. Monpa people gathering in these spaces to perform prostration revitalized the space, in which bodies and land become intertwined, and these ritual spaces evolve into living *Monyul* inhabited by minority Buddhists in Arunachal Pradesh.

8. Conclusion

To resolve the tension between Shusterman's concept of self-improvement and the understanding of the relational self with an emphasis on its effacement in Tibetan Buddhism, I expanded Schusterman's somaesthetics theory by incorporating a sensory ethnographic approach that analyzes the relationship between permeable bodies and aesthetics from an intersubjective perspective. Regarding prostration, while emphasis has been placed on understanding others through asceticism and pain via repetitive single movements, among the Monpa people,

groups alongside the Monpa, such as Sherdukpen, Lispa, Chugpa, Miji (Sajolang), Aka (Hrusso), and Bugun (Khowa). The emphasis on *Monyul* and its culture in the Buddhist revival created ethnic tensions in West Kameng.

prostration is a creative art of living a good life. It is combined with other actions, such as offering food, reciting mantras, or dedicating the merits of prostration to others or monasteries, resulting in diverse versions of practice and experience. Within this context, prostration relates to Monpa sensibilities and aesthetics, experienced alongside rich emotions, such as joy, hope, closeness, anxiety, guilt, and fear. Furthermore, for Monpa, living in an increasingly militarized and uncertain world, the prostration movement possesses both embodied and emplaced aspects keyed to the relational self. Prostration is an act through which people mutually permeate Buddhas, deities, hungry ghosts, homes, monasteries, and lands, thereby erasing their boundaries. Yet, by linking with new norms in Buddhist revival and the image of *Monyul*, prostration also becomes an act that creates boundaries between *Monyul* space and other spaces. Like reciting mantras, prostration is an art of living that resonates in multiple senses within a process in which the body, aesthetics, and politics intertwine.

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