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When Charisma Doesn't Fail:  
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Management in the Case of Diamond Mountain

Matthew Immergut\*

Department of Sociology  
Purchase College, State University of New York  
Purchase, New York

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\* [matthew.immergut@gmail.com](mailto:matthew.immergut@gmail.com)

# When Charisma Doesn't Fail: Charismatic Authority and Dissonance Management in the Case of Diamond Mountain

Matthew Immergut

Department of Sociology  
Purchase College, State University of New York  
Purchase, New York

## Abstract

How do the faithful keep their faith when their spiritual leaders say one thing but then do something else? How do they manage the dissonance that such contradictory behavior evokes? In this article, I examine these questions through a case study of Diamond Mountain, a convert Buddhist community under the charismatic leadership of Geshe Michael Roach and Lama Christie McNally. Drawing on previous scholarly work on failed prophecy, I analyze the rationalizations that members use in the face of less dramatic but more frequent occurrences of leader-induced dissonance. Three prominent rationalizations found in the failed prophecy literature aligned with the rationalizations used by students of Roach and McNally in managing ongoing tensions. The last of these, "test of faith," also provides a way to understand how dissonance, confusion, and chaos are not so much deflected by the community but interpreted as a necessary part of the spiritual path. These rationalizations are examined not in isolation but in the context of a broad set of beliefs and group social dynamics.

Dressed in a flowing white robe, with long blond hair, in her mid-thirties, Lama Christie McNally made her way through a crowd of adoring students. They were giving her flowers and candy, prostrating themselves at her feet, smiling and jubilant. In his mid-fifties, Geshe Michael Roach, an ordained Tibetan Buddhist monk in the Gelugpa tradition with a Geshe degree,<sup>1</sup> was alongside McNally, also receiving gifts, smiles, beaming gazes, and prostrations from admirers. To their devotees, Roach and McNally were links to a sacred tradition and the embodiment of spiritual perfection. In the words of one student, “they are living enlightened beings that have come to save us.”

When Roach, a monk who had taken vows of celibacy, emerged from his first three-year meditation retreat<sup>2</sup> in 2003 with McNally, publicly announcing that his once devoted student was now his “spiritual partner,” an incarnation of the female deity *Vajrayogini*, and should be considered a lama, it caused a commotion within the Tibetan Buddhist community all the way up to the office of the current Dalai Lama. As one letter from the office of the Dalai Lama stated, “We have seen a photograph of you wearing long hair, with a female companion at your side, apparently giving ordination. . . . This unconventional behavior does not accord with His Holiness's teachings and practice.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, for years, Roach and McNally maintained a highly regulated spiritual partnership that included “tantric” practices such as always being within fifteen feet of each other, eating off the same plate, and being intimate but celibate (see Kaufman 2008). Along with hundreds of students, they built Diamond Mountain, a free “Buddhist University” in rural southeastern Arizona in the Chiricahua Mountains. Although they had thousands of students globally, the core community at Diamond Mountain was approximately 150–200 people, most of whom fit the Western Buddhist demographic in the United States more generally: Euro-American, racially homogenous, middle-class, and well educated (Coleman 2001; Prebish and Baumann 2002; Seager 1999).

According to Roach and McNally, taking a spiritual partner is a lifelong vow:

Spiritual partners make a lifetime commitment to stay together and to help each other in their study, meditation, retreats, and every aspect of their daily personal

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<sup>1</sup> A geshe degree is one of the highest recognized degrees in the Tibetan system and has similarities to a doctorate in theology.

<sup>2</sup> The three-year, three-month, and three-day meditation retreat is a Tibetan Buddhist practice that most often commences at the completion of one's monastic training. As Buddhism has come West, however, more laypeople, such as those at Diamond Mountain, are taking part in such extended meditation retreats.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://info-buddhism.com/Dalai-Lama-Letters.pdf>; accessed June 6, 2014.

life, in order to develop wisdom and compassion, and reach enlightenment together.<sup>4</sup>

Yet with no explanation, Roach and McNally ended their partnership (and their secret marriage) months before they had planned to go into their second three-year silent retreat with forty-one of their students. Instead, Roach returned to the business world to launch a new Buddhist-based company,<sup>5</sup> and McNally took one of her primary male students, Ian Thorson, as her new spiritual partner and husband. Even though Roach and McNally continued to teach together for a time, McNally became the official retreat master for the three-year retreat that started in December 2010. To differing degrees, members were upset, puzzled, and confused by the breakup. But many also saw it as “one more teaching” from enlightened beings that have behaved in confusing, challenging, and puzzling ways for years.

I treat Diamond Mountain as a case study to examine the topic of dissonance management. Drawing from previous scholarly work on failed prophecy, I analyze the rationalizations that members use in the face of less dramatic but possibly more frequent occurrences of dissonance that come from erratic, contradictory behavior and decrees of their leaders. More specifically, I focus on the breakup of Roach and McNally and the way in which their devotees mobilize the rationalizations of “human error,” “spiritualization,” and “test of faith” in the face of this dissonance-producing event. I also discuss a variation of the test of faith, which I call “spiritualizing dissonance.” These interpretative moves are not examined in isolation, however, but are set within the context of group life. These social factors and the complex worldview of the group contribute to making these rationalizations reasonable.

I chose this community not only to explain the cultural practices of an understudied new religious movement but also to illuminate underlying patterns that may be common to other groups as well. Certainly, the situation at Diamond Mountain may be unique. But when considered in light of the previous theoretical work on failed prophecy, the similarities by which members adapt to disruptions reveals notable commonalities amid such differences. Thus the significance of this article comes from drawing out this more complex range of situations in which the theory of cognitive dissonance applies. It is an extension and critical

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<sup>4</sup> This quote came from Roach and McNally on the Diamond Mountain website. It was removed sometime in 2012 from [diamondmountain.org/roots/gettoknowus.html](http://diamondmountain.org/roots/gettoknowus.html). However, it is still available via the Internet archive WayBack Machine ([archive.org/web](http://archive.org/web)).

<sup>5</sup> According to his very popular book *The Diamond Cutter* (2003), Roach entered the diamond business in New York City before his first three-year retreat and helped to build Andin International Diamond from a small start-up to a multi-million-dollar company, which was bought by Warren Buffett’s Richline Group in 2009. Roach’s most recent venture is the Diamond Cutter Institute, which applies Buddhist principles to business practices.

application of previous research to a new case study in order to further the theoretical conversation about how groups manage dissonance and not only survive disruptive events but even thrive thereafter. Also, by examining how members rationalize less dramatic but ongoing tensions, we might better grasp how they continue to believe during big failed events such as an unfulfilled prophecy. In Melton's (1985) terms, by studying more commonplace and mundane dissonant management strategies as part of the "total gestalt" of a group's beliefs, we may understand why unfulfilled prophecies or other dramatic failures by leaders might not be such a world-shattering event.

I want not only to show how dissonance management helps keep members from abandoning a charismatically led movement, but also to suggest how it may actually contribute to making collective failures happen. In the case of Diamond Mountain, the collective failure was the death of McNally's partner, Ian Thorson. What I suggest in the conclusion is that group members tacitly agreed to ignore dangerous signs such as physical violence using the shared practice of "spiritualizing dissonance" and invoking danger signs as a "test of faith." Thus, somewhat similar to Vaughan's (1996) analysis of the Challenger explosion, we get a glimpse of how local cultural practices, especially implicit agreements to interpret certain danger signs as benign, can lead to larger collective failures even though individuals may be simply and earnestly pursuing their goals and tasks.

#### *DISSONANCE AND CHARISMA*

In their now classic work *When Prophecy Fails*, Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) examined The Seekers, a small prophetic group that believed that the apocalypse was imminent. When the end did not come, rather than walking away, core followers not only kept the faith but began proselytizing. From this small study, Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter worked up the theory of cognitive dissonance. Simply put, when people confront information that conflicts with their strongly held beliefs, they find ways to resolve dissonance and achieve consonance without sacrificing their faith.

Since that study, a steady stream of sociologists of religion have engaged the question of why people often continue to believe after failed prophecy (e.g., Cowan 2003; Dawson 2011a; Dein 2010; Dein and Dawson 2008; Hardyck and Braden 1962; Melton 1985; Stone and Farer 2000; Tumminia 1998, 2005; Tumminia and Swatos 2011). Although there is very strong experimental evidence for Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter's theory within psychology, the sociologically oriented field studies have been less conclusive (see Hood 2011). Rather than outright rejection, scholars such as Dawson (1999, 2011b) and Stone (2009, 2011) propose opening a more comprehensive set of questions around issues of failed prophecy, dissonance management, and group survival. They argue

for “Festinger-inspired research” (Stone 2009: 88; Dawson 2011b: 93), whereby cognitive processes are situated within their social context and dissonance management is seen as a ubiquitous feature of group life. In contrast to the controlled laboratory setting, this type of research demands immersion in the complicated landscape in which believers reason out their faith (Hood 2011).

Recognizing that many of these prophetic groups have religious leaders, very often ones with charismatic authority, I extend the prophecy question in this article by asking: When a religious leader fails, why do people very often continue to believe? By “fail,” I mean potentially less dramatic failures but likely more common moments in which proof of powers falter, the leader contradicts his or her own decrees, or a supposedly superhuman individual becomes all too human. How do followers make sense of such events? How do they manage this charismatically induced dissonance?

Arguably, charismatic leaders are dissonant producing. For Weber (1968, 1978), instability and unpredictability are inextricably linked to charismatic appeal in that, upon demand of the followers, the leader is set apart—literally extraordinary, and outside of the everyday. Nevertheless, potentially erratic behaviors challenge followers. This is implied by Weber’s point that individuals with charismatic authority, unlike the more stable forms of bureaucratic and traditional authority, must continually display proof of their powers, making such authority inherently unstable. “The charismatic leader” writes Weber (1968: 22–23),

gains and maintains authority solely by proving his strength in life. If he wants to be a prophet, he must perform miracles. If he wants to be a warlord, he must perform heroic deeds. Above all, however, his divine mission must “prove” itself in that those who faithfully surrender to him must fare well. If they do not fare well, he is obviously not the master sent by the gods.

Just like end-of-times proclamations, charisma is precarious because it is open to observed disconfirmation. To see a human god falter must create some cognitive tremors for followers. In fact, as Jacobs (1987) points out, unpredictable behavior by the leader often leads to weakening or total disaffiliation from the group, especially when the leader violates the spiritual norms that he or she had laid down.

So even while the ideal typical charismatic leader may be beyond assessments of “good” and “evil,” when that leader acts in seemingly incongruous ways in the everyday life of the group, such behaviors often do challenge followers, create dissonance, and demand some type of reconciliation. In cases of charismatically induced dissonance, followers may simply drop out at the first signs of deviance or contradiction. In this article, however, I focus on those who do not drop out but stick around even when they are shocked, disturbed, or agitated in some way by the leader’s behavior.

This study is therefore somewhat different from cases that have been presented in the failed prophecy literature. But the failed prophecy literature does have valuable insights to offer to this examination of Diamond Mountain. First, we can place this case as part of a continuum of “failures,” from actual failed prophecy to blended cases of failed prophecy with failure of the charismatic leaders to conform to expectations (Dein and Dawson 2008) to the current study, in which leaders fail to behave as they themselves have stipulated. Second, the work on rationalization in the failed prophecy literature provides a set of typologies for assessing how followers organize charismatic failures.

As a number of scholars have argued, rationalizations are more frequent and effective than proselytization in the face of failed prophecy (Dawson 1999; Melton 1985; Stone 2009; Zygmunt 1972). Dawson (1999) provides the most comprehensive presentation, drawing from a wide swath of empirical literature to create a typology of four rationalizations that are used consistently in the face of failure: spiritualization, test of faith, human error, and blaming others. The first three, as I will detail below, are evident in efforts to make sense of leadership challenges at Diamond Mountain, whereas the fourth is not. However, a variation of the test of faith, what could be called “spiritualizing dissonance,” is used at Diamond Mountain. This is not so much a deflecting of confusion as a transformation of dissonance into a spiritually important marker for the individual and, as I outline below, a crucial part of the entire Diamond Mountain culture.

### *METHOD*

The material in this article is part of a larger visual ethnography that began in 2008 and continues through the present. Fieldwork occurred at Diamond Mountain, but I also met with Roach, McNally, and students as they traveled around the country for teachings. I collected three forms of data: interviews, field notes from participant observation, and audiovisual recordings. I conducted approximately forty in-depth interviews with members as well as a series of follow-up interviews with members over the years. I also spent weeks and, at times, months in the community, during which I took part in all community rituals, meditations, teachings, debate, building projects, and all other activities. I took copious field notes, recording interactions as well as informal conversations. Last, I have approximately ninety hours of audiovisual footage for the larger documentary project. This footage captures the overall life in this community, such as group activities and rituals, lama devotion, teachings, and the building of three-year retreat cabins. Because most of the individuals at Diamond Mountain had demographic backgrounds similar to mine—white, middle-class, educated—I established rapport quite quickly.

My approach to the data was initially inductive, in part drawing from a grounded theory perspective (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1997). After sifting, sorting, and coding much of the data, I became increasingly interested in the social interactions and patterns of reasoning used in the face of what appeared to be contradictory teachings and puzzling behaviors by the leaders. After deciding to focus on the breakup (explained below), I then selected all interviews, field notes, and footage that addressed this topic. These were coded, followed by moving back and forth between the emergent patterns in the data and the sociological literature on cognitive dissonance theory. I also conducted follow-up interviews to examine this specific issue more directly.

Although I highlight a variety of challenging situations for analysis in this article, I focus on the breakup of McNally and Roach for a few reasons. Foremost, I was at Diamond Mountain during the split, which gave me an opening to ask members how they understood this event. In formal interviews as well as casual conversations, members were quite forthcoming about the challenge of the breakup. That this event should produce dissonance is quite understandable, considering that so many members built their lives around Roach and McNally as partners. Roach and McNally also counseled couples to stay together even during difficult times; they arranged spiritual partners for some of their closest disciples; and, simply put, breaking up seemed to be a blatant contradiction of their teaching that spiritual partners stay together for life. In addition, the students going into the three-year retreat expected to go in with both Roach and McNally. After the split, McNally was the designated retreat leader with her new spiritual partner Ian, previously her closest disciple. For all these reasons, the split is an important example of a dissonance-producing puzzle that needed resolution.

### *THE CONTEXT OF DIAMOND MOUNTAIN*

If we consider only rationalizations that religious groups use in the face of contradictory evidence, we can easily come to the conclusion that members are unreasonable or deluded. But by having a sense of the socialization mechanisms, group interactions, and ideological foundations of any subculture, we can gain insight into the interpretive logic that is at work. We get a more comprehensive picture and come to see followers not as crazy but as “sane people trying to reason their way through the facts and doctrine in pursuit of understanding,” as Dein aptly put it (in Hood 2011: 31). Below, I briefly examine socialization processes and the leadership structure of Diamond Mountain (DM). I then outline three common rationalization found in the literature—human error, spiritualization, and test of faith—in the context of the DM worldview.



*Socialization and Investment*

For most dedicated students at DM, their initial inspiration came from a public encounter with Roach and McNally at a teaching event. A host of educational opportunities, such as the Asian Classic Institute (ACI) website, give inspired individuals a collection of educational, ritual, and meditation resources that will enable them to go deeper into the worldview.<sup>6</sup> Of particular importance are the eighteen formal ACI courses that Roach taught in person in the early 1990s to a core group of students over the course of seven years. These original teachings were recorded and placed online and became the foundation for a formal training program. The courses “are designed as teacher-training program, and cover the same basic core of information that a Geshe (Doctor of Theology) learns at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery.”<sup>7</sup> Although they are a condensation of the twenty-year training that takes place in a monastery, the courses are nevertheless rigorous and include daily practices, homework, quizzes, and a final exam, all of which are graded virtually or by a teacher who has already completed the program. Like all the other material offered, the training is free of charge.

Around 2004, Roach, McNally, and a group of dedicated students began building Diamond Mountain University in rural southeastern Arizona. There, they offered three five-week semesters each year with free classes on a variety of topics, including Buddhist philosophy, Chinese medicine, and dance. They also offered regular ritual gatherings, special initiations, yoga, meditation, and an outside arena where students could practice traditional Tibetan-style debate. At the heart of Diamond Mountain, however, were the tantric teachings given by Roach and McNally to a select group of about 125 students, all of whom had completed the eighteen ACI courses and were initiated into this “secret” lineage. These teachings were held on weekends, usually late at night, and ran for many hours. They included a significant amount of reading, homework, and testing. Most of these students took time out from their work and home lives to fly or drive great distances to attend these intensive teachings.

Students who completed the six-year course of tantric study could take part in a three-year, three-month, and three-day retreat guided by Roach and McNally, starting in December 2010. The forty-one students who decided to participate first needed to build their own retreat cabins in the extremely rugged valley adjacent to the DM campus. They also had to shut down their lives completely. For many, this meant leaving partners, children, very successful careers, and a variety of middle- and upper-middle-class trappings. With great effort and at significant financial cost (cabins cost anywhere between \$80,000 and \$275,000 and, once

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.acidharma.org/aci/index.html>; accessed June 2014.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.acidharma.org/aci/online/onlinefr.html>; accessed June 2014.

completed, belonged to Diamond Mountain), a dedicated group entered the retreat on December 2010.

This brief sketch provides a sense of the way in which socialization and investment worked together. As their education into the DM worldview advanced, so did their investment of time, mental energy, and money. The numbers of students decrease as the investments intensify. But such costs come with the benefit of deeper knowledge as well as increased status, something that I discuss below.

### *Charismatic Leaders and Group Structure*

Their students saw Roach and McNally as the embodiment of spiritual perfection. It was very common to hear students talk about the two as “totally holy beings,” “perfect spiritual guides,” “fully realized,” and other expressions that indicated an intense level of reverence and adoration. In addition, both were seen to have certain spiritual powers (*siddhis*), such as reading minds, seeing far into the future, and knowing precisely what the student needs for continued spiritual growth. As leaders, they provided their students with a comprehensive path and were models for the end result of that path. As one student succinctly stated, “They are who I want to become.” Because they were such ultimate spiritual guides, displays of public reverence such as prostrating before them were very common. Furthermore, many of their students had radically adjusted their lives for the sake of being close to their lamas.

Reverence toward, even worship of, one’s lama is an important part of Tibetan Buddhism, in particular on the tantric path (Capper 2002). Students undertake intense vows of devotion and obedience to their lamas. As a spiritual practice, lama devotion entails projecting a perfectly realized spiritual being or Buddha; this practice will ideally give the student a direct experience of an enlightened mind (Coleman 2001).

The way in which individuals practice lama devotion at DM varies. For some students, the lamas are simply deeply respected teachers; for others, they are living deities to be worshiped. Regardless of these individual private sentiments and variability, what is sociologically important are the overt, public expressions of devotion to the lamas (see Heider and Warner 2010). Whenever Roach and McNally showed up for teachings, they were greeted as celebrities. A buzzing room came to a complete halt, and all attention turned toward them. Students crowded around them, lining up to give them gifts, prostrate to them, and touch their hands or feet. As Roach and McNally finally made it to their teaching podium—a few-second walk that could take half an hour as they greeted every student—students collectively prostrated themselves three times and settled in to receive the teaching. The primary result of this regular ritual sequence was the creation of an emotionally palpable and viscerally felt shared reality in which

Roach and McNally appeared as centers of collective life. In a sense, the lamas became sacred emblems, the foundations for in-group solidarity, and the living symbols of the moral life of the group (see Collins 2004, 2010; Durkheim 1968 [1915]). Individuals partaking in this or any other ritual around Roach and McNally got charged with emotional energy (Collins 2004). When members are out of direct contact with their lamas, feelings fade. But these types of lama-centered devotional expressions were a regular occurrence at DM and resulted in both the constitution of the lamas' charismatic power and a recharge of the group bond.

While solidarity was palpable during events, what was also evident was that not everyone belonged equally. There existed a ritually enacted stratification system based on consistent nearness to Roach or McNally. The individuals who were closest to the lamas—main attendants and those who sat closest during teachings—were demarcated as insiders from the larger group, enjoying a privileged sense of inclusiveness. There existed what Weber (1978) called a charismatic aristocracy. Students made it into this select inner circle through greater deference and willingness to surrender themselves to their lamas. Such renunciation, as it is called at DM, provided this dedicated inner circle with a variety of material and spiritual benefits, such as food, shelter, reverence from other students, and social status. The chosen students also acted as behavioral ideals for the less committed. Although scholars have often assumed that charismatic communities were bonded by “fraternal equality” (Zablocki 1980: 184), DM provides evidence for a charismatically inspired stratification system.

#### *WORLDVIEW AND RATIONALIZATIONS*

Much of the post-Festinger literature on failed prophecy recognizes that the more sophisticated a group's worldview, the greater is the likelihood that the group will endure in the face of adversity and failures (Dawson 1999; Dein and Dawson 2008; Melton 1985). “In the face of dissonance,” Melton (1985: 20) states, “believers are able to rely upon the broader context of faith, on the unfalsifiable beliefs out of which religious thoughtworlds are constructed. Within that context, believers can engage in a reaffirmation of basic faith and make a reappraisal of their predicament.” This is the case for new religious movements with sophisticated ideologies (Snow and Machalek 1982) as well as for established religions with highly developed worldviews that have endured, in part because they have been able to provide solutions (or “theodicies”) to pressing tensions and apparent contradictions. Such answers or rationalizations not only emerge from the foundation of the worldview, as Melton points out, but also reflexively reinforce those very foundational beliefs.

Below, I outline the basics of the DM worldview and three rationalizations that are used to repair the dissonance caused by the breakup between Roach and McNally: human error, spiritualization, and test of faith. I also include a few other dissonance-inducing events to highlight certain elements of each rationalization. Although they are separated analytically, in the lived religious reality of the group they are intrinsically connected to the entire worldview, and there is therefore a great deal of overlap.

### *Emptiness, Karma, and Human Error*

Although Roach and McNally covered a spectrum of topics, emptiness and karma resided at the center of all their teachings. Both concepts are extremely complicated, have been the subject of centuries of debate and interpretation, and are therefore difficult to summarize (Hopkins 1999; Hopkins and Napper 1996; Nagao and Kawamura 1991; Thurman 1995). Nevertheless, my aim is not scholarly accuracy or to argue with many of Roach and McNally's detractors about the correctness of their teachings; instead, it is to present emptiness as I have heard it consistently during my research. The most common way in which Roach and McNally explained this concept was by holding up a pen and asking, "What is this?" For a modern human, they would continue, a pen is a writing implement. For a dog, the pen is a chew toy. Which is it really? Both. Since it can be either, it is therefore really neither. If the pen had any essential nature, every person across cultures and history and every nonhuman being could see only a pen. Like the pen, all phenomena are "empty" of any inherent nature and dependent on the mind doing the perceiving.

How and what any mind perceives—pens or chew toys—is a result of karma. Karma is understood as any type of intentional action of body, speech, or mind. These actions produce "seeds," as Roach and McNally taught, that eventually "fruit" into experiential results. Plant negative karmic seeds, and unpleasant fruits will ripen. Plant positive karmic seeds, and pleasant experiences will ripen. Neutral karmic seeds will result in perceptual experiences with little emotional quality. Karma and emptiness are connected because past karmic seeds ripen with each and every perceptual moment—according to Roach and McNally, new ones are planted on an average of ninety per second—thereby shaping an empty reality into a particular cognitive-emotional shape.

But all of this is to say that we misperceive reality, according to Roach and McNally, believing and acting as if there is an objective world "out there." As Roach stated during an interview, "We believe consciousness is beginningless, and we believe it has an inherent error in it—almost like original sin. There's an inherent tendency to misunderstand things." This idea of a fundamental ignorance at the center of human perception is a common feature of Buddhist traditions

across the board. But students at DM use this idea in a way that has strong parallels to the rationalization of human error in situations of failed prophecy (Dawson 1999). Human error in cases of failed prophecy means that the leader blames followers or followers blame themselves for some type of “misunderstanding, miscalculation, or moral inadequacy” (Dawson 1999: 67). At DM, the assumption of human error or ignorance is used as a way to explain seemingly contradictory behaviors of their leaders, such as the split between Roach and McNally.

Many students were initially dismayed by the breakup, especially considering that Roach and McNally never gave any explanation for their breach of spiritual partnership. For example, one student said, “I’m confused sometimes. I don’t understand the split up. They’re our spiritual mom and dad. We’ve been sold the idea of *Chakrasamvara*, husband and wife, in union. And they’re never apart and now they’re apart. So people ask, what’s going on?” Even with such confusion, however, the dissonance was quickly organized by referencing the teachings on human misperception and the “correct” way to understand such events. As this student continued later in the interview:

Well what have we learned about emptiness? What have we learned about karma? Is there anything out there from its own side truly existent? Can there be a lama out there from their own side? The answer is no. . . . There’s no lama out there. The lama is just the ripening of your own best karma. . . . So if what we’re seeing with the lama doesn’t somehow jive with our perceptions of what a lama should be, then I guess the responsibility is on the one who is projecting that. . . . So I don’t like what I’m seeing, then I have to fill the gap I see. The gap I’m creating with my own mind.

Like other members, he did not accuse or blame the lamas for their inconsistency. Instead, these members used the disturbing moment as a reminder of their own error-prone perceptions. As this interview segment also reveals, just as the problem comes from within, so does the solution.

In a sense, the entire path presented by Roach and McNally is about “purifying” perception of this fundamental error of thinking that the world is “out there.” It is about realizing that the world is coming not “at us” but “from us.” This purification of perception entails a rigorous regime of study, meditation, lama devotion, and yogic practices, all of which plant good karmic seeds to remove the error that produces all types of discord and unpleasant events. If contradictions continue to appear in an individual’s world, it simply means that the error remains and one has not practiced well enough.

Because it is such a fundamental element of the worldview at DM, the rationalization of human error is mobilized implicitly or explicitly in the face of just about any type of tension or contradiction. For example, according to Roach and McNally, aging and death are the result of an individual’s karmic perceptions—

more accurately, the result of an individual's past "bad karma." As an outsider, I was always puzzled by this because when I compared recent pictures of Roach and McNally with pictures from ten years earlier, the two certainly appeared to be aging. I brought this point up during an interview with Patricia, a tenured Ph.D. in experimental psychology at a prestigious university who gave everything up to follow her lamas into the three-year retreat. In the spirit of experimentation, with which she would be familiar, I suggested to her that if we gave the pictures to a hundred people, I hypothesized that a significant percentage would say that they had aged. She responded:

Geshe Michael and Lama Christie have said this path can stop aging and death. People are skeptical, especially those with scientific minds. I'm an experimental psychologist. I can tell you that the limit of science as I practiced it was that my perspective was the truth. That's not the truth. If I look at the lamas and see them aging, I have to question myself. Even if I asked 100 people, it's still my perspective. . . . As my practice has gotten stiller, I have seen John [her husband] get younger, myself get younger, my lamas glow beyond their skin so that I know they aren't aging the way they appear to me. I'm creating my lamas. If they are aging, it's my responsibility to keep them young.

As this statement makes clear, this is not a world based on empirical evidence or intersubjective consensus about some "objective" reality. Instead, these expressions indicate a reality in which individuals are the unconscious and ignorant creators of everything in their worlds. The possibility that Roach and McNally offered Patricia and other members was a practice to become conscious creators, removing human error and thereby giving them the ability to shape an empty world into one without aging, suffering, and death. Contradictions like these for outsiders such as myself raise deep suspicion about the veracity of the teachings. Although they did create challenges, for members like Patricia these types of contradictions led to questioning the self rather than questioning the teaching or teachers. Any incongruities also provided a spur to practice harder because, as Patricia said, "it's my responsibility to keep them young." Like cases of failed prophecy, challenges and disconfirmations such as breakups, aging, and death do not necessarily weaken beliefs but provide opportunities to strengthen convictions (Stone 2009: 79).

### *Ultimate Reality, Subjectivity and Spiritualization*

Spiritualization was also a rationalizing strategy used by students at DM but with some specific variations. In its original formulation by Melton (1985), spiritualization is a reinterpretation in which what was supposed to be a witnessable event (e.g., the end of the world) is transformed into a nonvisible, spiritual event (e.g., it

happened in the heavens). “The believer begins to see not that the prophecy was incorrect,” Melton (1985: 21) writes, “but that the group merely misunderstood it in a material, earthly manner. Its truth came at a spiritual level, invisible except to the eye of faith. Thus from the original prophesied event, the believers create an ‘invisible,’ ‘spiritual’ and, more importantly, unfalsifiable event.”

Although more implied rather than overt, the idea of an ultimate reality was used at times as a form of spiritualization at DM. In the face of contradictory evidence such as the breakup, ultimate reality was used to point to a reality that is available only to the most enlightened minds. “Spiritual partners never do split up,” Sam stated during an interview, “but this goes back to the lineage. It’s never clear why things are happening . . . they could be separate but still the same person. I’m not sure they are separated.” Sam was referring to the possibility that Roach and McNally still had a nonphysical yet abiding union at some absolute level of reality. Whatever the truth was about their breakup, it was at this spiritual level accessible to the nonenlightened only through “the eye of faith.”

That eye was focused on Roach and McNally, both of whom, according to their own claims and the claims of their students, had had direct experiences of emptiness and thus a clear window onto the ultimate. Their teachings and behavior supposedly stemmed from this ultimate yet inaccessible level; therefore any contradictions, inconsistencies, or paradoxes became proof that Roach and McNally were operating from a more profound reality. Any inability on the part of the student to understand their teachings or behaviors just revealed the gap between the lama’s ultimate wisdom and the student’s ignorance. Thus with practice, faith, and devotion to the lama, the inaccessible knowledge of ultimate reality will eventually be available to the student as well.

A more common form of spiritualization was to place events within the realm of human subjectivity. Of course, this is not the same spiritualization as described by Melton, in which explanations refer to a nonmaterial or spiritual reality. Instead, this type of spiritualization moved a collectively witnessable event into the inaccessible and thus unfalsifiable realm of a private mind. For example, Jennifer, a primary attendant of Roach and McNally, referenced the inner recesses of Roach’s and McNally’s minds, stating quite adamantly, “Who says they broke up? You don’t know what’s going on in their minds. You just don’t know.” This type of spiritualization could also be called “psychologicalization.”

Rather than referencing the inner workings of their leaders’ psyches, however, students more often emphasized their own personal interpretations of events. Take the following three interview segments as examples:

*A:* Some people might see it as a split. To me it’s more of an evolution.

*B:* From my side, faith is a choice. From my side, Geshela [Geshe Michael] has perfect morality. He couldn’t do anything against the scriptures.

C: My understanding of what happened is their practices reached the desired results.

The content of these interpretations is not the salient point. The more important elements are the expressions “to me,” “from my side,” and “my understanding.” This type of speech act is a ubiquitous part of everyday talk at DM, referring to the isolated realm of subjectivity and personal interpretation. Stated differently, by using these types of phrases, the students are interpreting witnessable events as a matter of personal perspective and thus shutting down the possibility of outside assessment or collective discernment. This turning to the self is also clearly evident in the statement above from Patricia, who said that “for her,” Roach and McNally are not aging, and if they are, it’s her fault.

This solipsistic rationalization arises directly from the worldview of students at DM and is intrinsically tied to human error. Whatever they see or experience is a result of their own karmic actions and resulting subjective perceptions; to think otherwise is to suffer from human ignorance. The content of the explanation or interpretation of why McNally and Roach broke up therefore is not as important as situating the event within the realm of the students’ own minds and thus making it inaccessible to verification.

Interestingly, locating everything within the individual has the general effect of maintaining social order and cohesion. Personal disputes between members must always, eventually, return to looking at their individual contribution to the discord rather than blaming another. This also means that it becomes nearly impossible to criticize the leadership and remain within the community. Criticism only points to an individual’s “lack of understanding,” which, if consistent, can eventually push a member out of the group.

#### *Lama Devotion, Testing Faith, and Spiritualizing Dissonance*

According to Dawson (1999), another prominent means to deflect the dissonance caused by failed prophecy is by interpreting it as a test of faith. Rather than seeing the nonoccurrence of the end of the world as a contradiction, it is rationalized as an opportunity for proving and thus possibly strengthening one’s faith.

Although they did not use the phrase “test of faith,” students of Roach and McNally considered just about every action, decree, and command that their leaders made as a “teaching.” The breakup was, more often than not, also organized as one more teaching for the benefit of the student’s spiritual progress. Here are a few segments from conversations and interviews from members that directly mention the breakup as a teaching:



A: It's obvious to me it [the breakup] is a teaching.

B: A lot of people will have different stories about what happened, but my story is that the lamas, in their infinite kindness, are pushing us and doing exactly what we need.

C: They've been perfect teachers . . . now they're showing us what it's like to get kicked out of the nest.

D: I can see it as a teaching. People will say that's just a way of rationalizing. But I've seen spiritual teachers do stuff. . . . I believe in this possibility more than most people would because I've seen it over and over.

Seeing everything as a teaching is considered a part of the practice of lama devotion, especially for those closest to the lamas. As one of Roach's main attendants said during an interview, "Even if he farts or burps, you need to think he did that to help me get enlightened." I asked the attendant whether he thought this was actually the case. I received a "spiritualized" response: "The reason why I can say he farted for my benefit is because ultimately I don't know. He may or may not have."

The teachings from the lamas were often very tough as well. Most students considered that the lama's job is to challenge the student, often in difficult, mystifying, and even harsh ways. "That's what the lamas do," a student told me. "The lamas pull the rug out from under you just when you're comfortable." During an interview about the breakup, another longtime student said, "There's more twists on the path to enlightenment than a novel. When you first start the path, it's in a jungle. It's the lama's job to constantly put you into difficult situations to help you let go." Letting go means dropping expectations and conventional ways of thinking and perceiving. As another longtime student made clear, this is not an easy undertaking:

The lamas are continually shoving us out our box. [Roach is] like a pied piper. He'll get us going all in one direction and then he'll zig [zag]. . . . So there's often this cognitive dissonance going on, "Well, he said this this week and the next week he went that way, now he's contradicting himself again, he said the opposite in class last night" . . . especially as we've been learning *tantra*, he says you've got to get comfortable with ambiguity, you've just got to get comfortable with ambiguity. And the whole time I've been here it's been ambiguous, and it's hard.

Rather than simply rationalizing and smoothing out contradictions, ambiguity, not knowing, confusion, and cognitive dissonance are all considered inevitable on the path. These agitated mental states all indicate a cleansing of an individual's wrong views and thus offer more potential for spiritual progress. As the above quote indicates, creating discomfort and confusion to break the ego is especially important

on the tantric path—a path that, according to Roach and McNally, can lead to enlightenment in a single lifetime.<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, the idea of learning spiritual lessons from instability became a normalized part of the daily life at Diamond Mountain. In classic charismatic form, Roach and McNally's rules, decisions, and decrees were rarely formalized but followed a mysterious inspired logic. This type of decision making made life in the community fairly unpredictable. There were schedules, but they changed often. Teachings rarely started on time and concluded far past their scheduled end time. Events were often publicly announced but never materialized. When asked about this lack of consistency, most members smiled knowingly, indicating that this was simply the way life worked there. The lamas also gave their students directives, projects, and a variety of tasks, all of which could change suddenly, be added to, or end abruptly. Other times, members simply waited around for directives, often for hours. When orders were received or meetings started, students dropped everything to heed the call. "Lamas have a job to throw on people as much as they can handle," Andrew told me, adding,

That's what they do. They really push you. So we try to serve our lamas as fully as possible. We might be up until four in the morning doing what they ask, then that person is late because they're exhausted, or late to build the retreat houses, and it just gets disorganized.

In general, this lack of rational planning contributed to a fair degree of stress. Another member noted that it was always changing and that if you were someone who liked stability and predictability, this was not a good place for you. You never knew what the rules were. Confusion and dissonance had become a meaningful part of the overarching DM culture.

Even though they sometimes got upset or stressed, confused or distraught, members saw all of this unpredictability not as a flaw of their teachers but as spiritual training—a test of faith. No matter how seemingly contradictory their teachers' behaviors may have been, no matter how difficult their directives may have appeared, no matter how disorderly or nonsensical daily life became, students fulfilled their tasks and served their teachers as fully as possible because it was considered an enormous opportunity to undo their wrong perceptions and free themselves from their ignorant sense of self and reality. "Your lamas, in their wisdom, know you have to work on ever subtler levels before you can transform," a student told me as she was discussing her preparations for entering the upcoming

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<sup>8</sup> In its traditional cultural context, enlightenment was understood primarily as a slow, multi-lifetime process pursued by monastics and not laypeople.

three-year retreat and the split. "So they break you. They break your heart open. That's what's been happening the last year before I enter retreat."

Enduring dissonance was particularly important for the lamas' closest disciples. Those who were allowed into this inner circle knew how to relax into dissonance, thus demarcating them from more marginal outside members. As an attendant to Roach said about the breakup,

I think the reaction from the outside community was stronger than then inside community. We, the insiders, we get comfortable with lack of stability. Things are always shifting. There's a kind of calmness amidst chaos. It doesn't seem like there's been a real strong emotional reaction.

The devoted student must learn to make sense of and manage lama-induced dissonance in an ongoing way, becoming comfortable in uncertainty, surrendering to confusion, and having faith that such surrender will ultimately lead to liberation. In poetic terms, the lama sets up a fiery crucible that creates pain and discomfort as all of one's cherished self-delusions are cooked away for the sake of freedom.

At a personal and community level, instability had become a very important part of their daily practice. Managing dissonance, in other words, had become a spiritually important exercise in the everyday life of the community, a way to continually test their faith. Eventually, for long-term committed students, puzzling behaviors no longer produced much dissonance but became a normal part of everyday life. Big events such as the breakup caused some turmoil. But because the students had learned to manage and make sense of lama-induced dissonance, ultimately seeing it as part of cultivating spiritual maturity, the breakup was little more than one more predictable unpredictable event. "It was a surprise but almost not," as Sandy, a senior student stated about the breakup. "They're always doing something totally out of left field."

### *CONCLUSION*

In this article, I have examined the dissonance management strategies used by followers in the face of contradictory behaviors by leaders. Drawing from the literature on failed prophecy, I have examined the way in which members of DM rationalize the often erratic and seemingly contradictory behavior of their lamas, focusing specifically on the breakup. Three of the rationalizations that are found in the failed prophecy literature aligned with the rationalizations used by students of Roach and McNally in managing lama-induced dissonance. The last of these, test of faith, also provided a way to understand how dissonance, confusion, and chaos are not so much deflected by the community as interpreted as a necessary part of the spiritual path.

Rationalizations do not stand in isolation but arise within the dynamics of the group context. Socialization and investment mechanisms, the power of the charismatic leader, and the dynamics of group interactions are just a few of the internal elements that support such rationalizations. Although I did not discuss it directly, considering these social elements may also help to explain why people keep the faith in the face of contradictory evidence whether they rationalize or not. In other words, students may forgive their teachers' failures because there are other benefits to belonging, such as educational and economic opportunities, rituals that create a sense of cohesion and emotional energy, meditative practices, social status, and a supporting and caring community. The benefits of these social supports may override the need for cognitive consistency. But for the most part, it is the combination of a broad set of beliefs and group social dynamics that ensure survival in the face of leaders' contradictions or failures.

The rationalizations used at Diamond Mountain arose from the community's worldview or "basic faith" (Melton 1985) and reinforced it as well. In a sense, their beliefs formed a tight net in which each strand relied on the others to create an inseparable and functional whole. Contradictions that arose, such as those between belief and behavior or between beliefs and experience, might strain or rip certain sections. When tensions or tears appeared, the threads of rationalization were one means for reinforcing or mending the net. In addition, the more frequently members practiced mending small areas of tension, the more honed their skills would be in the face of larger rips. Of course, there was the possibility that the tear might get too big to mend.

Such a major tear occurred at Diamond Mountain. About a year into the three-year retreat, McNally stabbed her spiritual partner and husband Ian. Although he healed, the two were removed from the retreat by Roach and the Diamond Mountain board. Rather than leaving, they snuck into a nearby cave, where Ian eventually died of dehydration and malnutrition and McNally was found dehydrated and delirious. The story appeared in the *New York Times* (Santos 2012), on *Anderson Cooper 360* (Cooper 2012), on *ABC Nightline* (Harris 2012), and in a host of other major media outlets, most of whom portrayed the group at DM as a cult. How did members manage such a dramatically disruptive event? Were they prepared to see this as one more teaching? Or was this too big a tear to sew back together? The preliminary answer is both: Some students managed and have remained committed, whereas others, including some of the most dedicated members of the inner circle, dropped out. Although some people in the three-year retreat also left, the majority continued through 2014.

I returned to DM in April 2014 to interview the students who were exiting the retreat. Although these interviews still need more analysis, an interesting pattern emerged relative to dissonance management. What I learned was that violence between McNally and Thorson was well known and predated their entry into

retreat. However, these violent events came after years of erratic behavior by the lamas; therefore the violence came after years of students' learning to manage lama-induced dissonance on a regular basis. This group of highly committed retreatants thus had learned quite well how to see apparent challenges as opportunities to spiritually grow. Every challenge that they overcame, as one interviewee told me, deepened their commitment to the teacher and teachings and increased their investment. Specifically for this group, the investment of time and money in the building of retreat cabins was very significant. Therefore when McNally and Thorson got together and the violence began to emerge, many of these students not only had years of practice in making sense of challenges, but also had a serious investment to protect. A common refrain from these retreatants as they reflected on their leaders' behaviors was "I should have said something." But there were social and cognitive forces operating within the group that worked against speaking out. One interviewee compared the entire situation to placing a frog in a cool pot of water on the stove and slowly turning up the heat. By the time the frog realizes that it is boiling to death, it's too late. Arguably, then, not only do regular dissonance management strategies help groups to make sense of big failures such as unfulfilled prophecies, but such routine rationalizations may also help to explain how big failures actually happen.

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