CHAPTER 2

Persons: Then and Now, Here and There

> The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.
>
> Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View"

A Western woman carries both dominant Western assumptions about selfhood and individuality and her own reservations about those assumptions. It is thus important to remind ourselves of these male-oriented understandings of selfhood, especially the uniquely Western ways in which choice, narratives, and individual responsibility shape modern individuals. Although these themes are familiar to students of Western culture, they have rarely been placed in conversation with Buddhist thought and culture or considered in the context of Western women's relationship to Buddhist traditions. After reviewing Western notions of the individual, we turn to feminist revisions of these characterizations of individuality, using the issue of mortality as a touchstone for male and female differences. In the latter half of the chapter, we move to a parallel consideration of Tibetan culture and the place of women in it so as to highlight significant cultural elements implicit in the Buddhist-feminist conversation. This makes it possible to consider issues of personhood and gender from several mutually illuminating perspectives.

Throughout, I use the term "individual" to indicate persons, es-

pecially in the West, for whom idiosyncratic traits, personal choices, and unique accomplishments are crucial to their identity. I use it also to suggest that a major project of such persons is to separate themselves, by virtue of their unique traits, from the larger society. As I suggested in chapter 1, Tibetans, like many Asians who have grown up outside strong Western influence, do not cultivate individuality in this sense. I am not saying, of course, that creative, idiosyncratic, or altogether unique persons have been absent in Tibet or any other traditional Asian culture.[1] My point is that "uniqueness" has not been a widely held cultural value and expectation. Moreover, Tibetans are often extremely independent in their personal and work relationships, much less prey than contemporary Westerners to the kind of psychological enmeshment that often troubles relationships between contemporary "individuals." This is a key difference to keep in mind as we discuss various ways in which the boundaries associated with Western-style personhood are not operative in Tibet.

THE WESTERN SELF

The Western construction of persons as unique and special gained particular prominence in the sixteenth century. Persons were no longer equated with their social roles, so that these roles were no longer considered part of a person's essence. Thus, a person came to be understood as "an individual unity with a separate existence independent of place in society."[2] This developing sense of individual uniqueness and personal choice is reflected in changes in the meaning of the English words "individual" and "self" over the past five centuries. In the fifteenth century, "individual" meant "indivisible." It could be used to describe the Trinity ("indyvyduall Trynyte") or a married couple, who were "individuall, not to be parted as man and wife."[3] Since at least the seventeenth century, however, the term "individual" has emphasized the separateness of persons rather than their connection. As Peter Abbs puts it, this inversion of meaning,

"moving from the indivisible and collective to the divisible and distinctive, carries quietly within itself the historical devlopment of self-consciousness . . . that change in the structure of feeling which during the Renaissance shifted from a sense of unconscious fusion with the world towards a state of conscious individuation."[4]

In the late Middle Ages in Europe, "self" was a noun representing something to be denied in favor of God and all he represented. Only in 1674, writes Peter Abbs, following the *Oxford English Dictionary*, did "self" take on its modern meaning of a "permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness."[5] With this, the center of meaning was no longer situated in the wider external sphere—in God, society, or nature—but came to rest more completely within the narrow boundaries of the individual himself. The Protestant reformation and the rise of capitalism combined to place persons in an individuated rather than mediated relation to text and God, just at a time when the development of a new class structure and the proliferation of land ownership encouraged the assertion of exclusionary boundaries, particularly between men. "Consciousness," literally meaning to "know with," took on its modern meaning of self-awareness in the seventeenth century. Numerous related terms also entered the language during this period: self-sufficient (1598), self-knowledge (1613), self-made (1615), self-seeker (1632), selfish (1640), self-interest (1649), self-knowing (1667), self-determination (1683), self-conscious (1687).[6]

By the eighteenth century, an emphasis on a person's unique qualities was further amplified by the idea that each individual has a unique "potential." During the Romantic period, creativity became particularly valued as a manifestation of that potential, which was understood to emerge from a deep interiority filled with emotion and unique feelings that yearned for expression.[7] This unique individual was nevertheless still connected to the wider world, in that nature was seen as a reflection of the individual's mental and emotional state.