

NOTHING TO TEACH: PATRUL'S PECULIAR PREACHING
ON WATER, BOATS, AND BODIES¹

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Dza Patrul Rinpoche (Rdza dpal sprul O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po, 1808-1887), the famed author of *Words of My Perfect Teacher* (*Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*), was renowned during his life in Eastern Tibet for his brilliant oratory and matchless skill at imparting Buddhist ethical teachings. He delivered these teachings to a wide variety of audiences: personal disciples, monks of all four Tibetan traditions, aristocrats and government officials, nomads and villagers.² Amongst a series of such teachings that appear in his collected works, one finds a particularly peculiar and mysterious composition.³

The work, entitled *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* (*Chu gru lus kyi rnam bshad*), is a short narrative, running all of nine pages long. It takes the form of a conversation between a group of old

¹ At the outset I would like to thank the many people who have aided me in this project. Janet Gyatso, Tulku Thondup, Lobsang Shastri, Jann Ronis, and Kalsang Gurung all helped me to read passages from the text that I will be discussing. I also benefited immensely from conversations with Gene Smith, Zagsa Paldor, and Alex Gardner at the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center and Rubin Foundation, as well as Marc-Henri Deroche, Pierre-Julien Harter, Daniel Berounsky, and many others at the Second International Seminar of Young Tibetologists in September, 2009. Additional thanks to Janet Gyatso, Heather Stoddard, and Marc-Henri Deroche for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay. While many of these scholars' insights have found their way into the paper, I take full responsibility for the certain interpretive errors and hermeneutic missteps that I have made in working with the challenging material at hand.

² For English renditions of Patrul's life, see the following: Thondup 1996; Thubten Nyima 1996; Nyoshul Khenpo 2005; and Schapiro 2010. For Tibetan biographies, see: Rdo grub chen 2003; Kun bzang dpal ldan 2003; and Thub bstan nyi ma 2003. For Patrul as a brilliant orator, see Mi pham 2003. For examples of Patrul teaching nomads and commoners, see Kun bzang dpal ldan 2003: 197-98, 202. For an example of Patrul teaching an aristocrat, see his *Padma tshal kyi zlos gar*, written for Bkra shis dge legs, in Rdza dpal sprul 2003 (vol. 1). On teaching the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* to monks from all four of Tibet's major traditions, see Kun bzang dpal ldan 2003: 208.

³ The composition appears in the first volume of Patrul's collected works, together with other miscellaneous works (*gtam tshogs*), some of which are works of ethical advice. Patrul's collected works were assembled by his disciple and attendant Gemang Ōn Rinpoche (Dge mang dbon rin po che O rgyan bstan 'dzin nor bu, b. 1851) and published under the auspices of Kenpo Shenga (Gzhan phan chos kyi snang ba, 1871-1927) at Dzogchen monastery. For this paper, I have consulted two editions of the collected works, listed in the bibliography. Subsequent references will be to the edition published in Chengdu, in eight volumes, in 2003.

people and a group of younger ones. Their dialogue concerns the meaning of a colloquial phrase used by the youth that the elders do not understand. After the youth provide the elders with a multifaceted explanation of the term's meaning, the old people respond with a scathing criticism of the youth's exposition. The text concludes with the youth defending their explanation.

The table of contents to the Gangtok publication of Patrul's collected works labels the composition as a "laughter-discourse" (*bzhad gad kyi gtam*).⁴ True to its billing, the work contains funny moments, witty turns of phrase, and playful manipulations of its audience's expectations. Patrul's interests go beyond entertaining his audience, however. His text is didactic, skillfully transmitting esoteric philosophical and ethical content through the use of multivalent allegory; it is stylistically diverse, making use of multiple rhetorical styles such as narrative, polemic and counter-polemic, and hymnal praise; and it is creative, surprisingly placing its author, Patrul himself, into the narrative as if he were a character in the story.

Above all, the text presents us with a series of puzzles. Who do the characters of the youth and the old men represent? What does the youth's seemingly allegorical explanation of "water, boats, and bodies" actually teach us? Why does Patrul appear as a character in his own composition? What is Patrul ultimately trying to achieve in this playful composition?

⁴ The full title of the work as it appears in the table of contents to the Gangtok edition is "Ngo mtshar bskyed pa bzhed gad kyi gnas chu gru lus kyi rnam bshad" ("A Humorous Chapter that Generates Amazement: The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies"). The *bzhed gad* in the title should read *bzhad gad*. See the table of contents to *Rdza dpal sprul 1970* (vol. 1). At this point in my research, I would hesitate to call *bzhad gad kyi gtam* a genre, though Patrul does mention this form of discourse in an informal taxonomy that he lays out in the introduction to a short historical work of his that I will discuss later in the paper (see: "Chos 'byung 'bel gtam nyung ngu" in *Rdza dpal sprul 2003*: vol. 1, 290-291). Given the nature of the composition in question, I would recommend thinking of the text as a "playful" discourse. I have yet to find comparable *bzhad gad kyi gtam* attributed to Buddhist teachers, though they certainly exist. Already in the twelfth-century, for example, Lama Zhang makes reference to using humor (*bzhad gad*) in service of Buddhist teaching. See Yamamoto 2009: 164. The most likely place to find these kinds of texts would be *gtam tshogs* and *bslab bya* collections—collections of instructions that address wide varieties of audiences. Many thanks to the late Gene Smith for his suggestions on this front. There are a number of contemporary *bzhad gad*, *dgod gtam*, or *mtshar gtam* collections of humor, though these all seem to be "secular," in that they are composed and edited by non-lamas. They include humorous skits and dialogues, as well as speeches for public occasions (*bras dkar*). See, for example, Bsod nams tshe ring 1994. My preliminary research suggests that these materials are significantly different in tone and content from Patrul's composition. One obvious place to look for the intersection of Tibetan ethical advice and playful narratives are the ubiquitous A khu ston pa stories. A few of these are reproduced in contemporary *dgod gtam* collections such as the one listed above.

Water, Boats, and Bodies: The Story Begins

One day, a group of old men (*rgan pa dag*) are resting on the side of the road, when some young people (*gzhon pa dag*) walk past. Some time later, the young folks return, having attended to some business.⁵ The old folks, presumably recognizing the youngsters from earlier on, stop them to have a chat.

Young men, what have you heard, what have you understood, what is there for you to explain?⁶ . . . Elders, we haven't heard anything, understood anything, there is nothing to be explained, not even "water-boats-bodies."⁷

According to several native speakers, the phrase "water-boats-bodies" (*chu gru lus*) is a colloquial idiom used in the Derge (Sde dge) region of Eastern Tibet, meaning something like "nothing at all."⁸ In the text, Patrul has decided to transcribe this purely oral idiom (pronounced *chu-dru-lu*) using the three words "water" (*chu*), "boat" (*gru*), "body" (*lus*). When the youth declare that "there is nothing to be explained, not even 'water-boats-bodies,'" they are therefore simply saying "there is nothing to be explained—nothing at all."

The older men respond to the youth, explaining that while they understand that the youth have not heard anything or understood anything, they do not know what the youth mean by the phrase "water-boats-bodies" (*chu gru lus*). Here I want to pause to call attention to Patrul's portrayal of the older men. Patrul has them communicate with the youth in a manner suggestive of a word-commentary (*tshig 'grel*) to a canonical text. Rather than simply asking what "water-boats-bodies" means, the older men launch into a lengthy commentary on the youth's claim not to have heard anything, understood anything, or have had anything to explain. So, for example, the old men give a long-winded explanation of what they had meant when they asked whether the youth had "heard" anything: namely they had been asking whether the youth had

⁵ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 342: *gzhon pa dag . . . song nas rang gi don dang bya ba 'ga' zhis gi don gang yin pa de bsgrubs nas slar ong ba*. My English rendering of the narrative is a close paraphrase of the text, though I often will provide the Tibetan in footnotes such as these for reference purposes. All direct translations are either placed in quotation marks or (more often) are indented to signal a block quotation.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 342: *a bu dag/ lo brgya dag/ ci zhis ni thos/ ci zhis ni go/ bshad par bya ba ni ci zhis yod/* I have chosen not to translate the respectful addresses the old men use for the youth. Loosely, "*a bu dag/ lo brgya dag*" translates as "youngsters, ones who should live many years."

⁷ *Ibid.*: 342: *sku tshes lags/ dgung lo lags/ thos pa dang/ go ba dang/ bshad par bya ba ni chu gru lus kyang med do/* Again, I chose not to translate literally the honorific forms of address used here for the elders (*sku tshes lags/ dgung lo lags*).

⁸ Sincere thanks to Tulku Thondup, Thupten Phuntsok, and Zagtsa Paldor for identifying and confirming the meaning of this phrase.

“heard in their ear passages any conversations resounding in the various places” to which the youth had traveled.⁹

By having them speak in this formal way, Patrul identifies the old men as well-educated. In fact, this is only the first of a number of moments in the narrative wherein Patrul emphasizes the elders’ formal, literal, and intellectually conservative approach to communication. Patrul will later suggest that these old men are monastic elites who are obsessed with the scholastic activities of commentary, composition and debate, traditional responsibilities of Tibetan monastic-scholars.¹⁰ He will also have them raise quite literalistic complaints about the sermon that youth deliver later in the story.¹¹ Patrul deliberately positions the youth, and ultimately himself, in opposition to these old men and their intellectual habits.

By structuring *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* as a conversation between old men and young men, Patrul is also playing with our expectations. We are conditioned to expect from Buddhist morality tales that the older men will be the wise teachers, tasked with showing the youth how to live in accordance with Buddhist teachings. In fact, Patrul composed just such a text, called the *Responses to the Questions of the Boy Loden* (*Gzhon nu blo ldan kyi dris lan*), wherein an old wise man educates a young, troubled boy about worldly and religious ethics.¹²

But in *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies*, things are not as we might expect. It is the youth, and not the elders, who are the wise distributors of knowledge, as becomes clear in the youth’s response to the elders’ question about “water-boats-bodies.” It is playful twists like this one that qualify this treatise as a humorous, playful discourse (*bzhad gad kyi gtam*). Such twists signal to Patrul’s audience that he is engaging in a verbal performance, meant to both educate and entertain.¹³

⁹ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 342: *thos pa zhes bya ba ni/ phyogs dang phyogs su grags pa’i skad cha khyed kyi rna lam la thos pa cung zad yod dam zhes dris pa la de med do zhes zer ba lte de ni go’o/*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 349. The most famous Tibetan discussion of these three scholarly responsibilities is Sakya Paṇḍita’s (Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan, 1182-1251) *Mkhas pa ’jug pa’i sgo* (*The Entrance Gate for the Wise*). For studies of the work see Jackson 1987, Gold 2007.

¹¹ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 348. I will review these complaints later in the essay.

¹² See Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 1, 31-55. For English translations, see Tulku Thondup 1997 and Acharya Nyima Tsering’s translation in Dza Patrul Rinpoche 2006.

¹³ For anthropological theorizations of how performers across cultures signal to their audiences that they are engaging in “verbal art” (modes of communication where speakers assume the responsibility of communicative competence subject to evaluation by an audience), see Bauman 1984 and Babcock 1984.

Water, Boats, and Bodies: Take One

After the old men finish asking the youth what they had meant by “water-boats-bodies,” the youth respond with a five-page long etymology of the phrase. This etymological performance is the explanation of “water-boats-bodies” suggested by the title of the work.

The youth proceed to explain the phrase “water-boats-bodies” (*chu gru lus*) by offering interpretations of each of its three syllables. The youth's performance stands in sharp contrast to the literal unpacking of the words “heard” and “understood” that the older men just presented. The creativity and elegance of the youth's interpretation of “water-boats-bodies” call attention to the literal-mindedness and conservativeness of the old men's contribution.

The youth's interpretation of water (*chu*) goes as follows:

Water, which comes from the Great Ocean for the purpose of eliminating the stains and the thirst of the world, goes from place to place. Ultimately, it flows and falls back into the Great Ocean, which is the resting place for all water. Still, that water has nothing at all added or taken away from it, nor is it sullied or stained. Just as it is when it leaves the Great Ocean, so too it is when it later returns again to the Great Ocean. And yet, on its way, different people drink it, bathe with it, transform it, and so on. So it appears. In the same way, we [the youth] leave our homes for various purposes, go to different places, meet different people in these places, talk about things, enjoy ourselves, and so on. Nevertheless, there is nothing that we newly understand that we have not heard, understood, or known before. It is just like the example of rivers.¹⁴

The youth draw a connection between the term water (*chu*) and their own activities. Water, which the youth interpret as “rivers” (*chu klung dag*),¹⁵ comes from a single source—the great ocean (*rgya mtsho chen po*). (This is a traditional Tibetan conception of the path of rivers: from the Ocean, to the Ocean).¹⁶ The water from these rivers

¹⁴ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 343–44: *chu ni 'jig rten gyi dri ma dang skom pa sel ba'i phyir rgya mtsho chen po nas 'ong ste phyogs nas phyogs su 'gro zhing/ mthar chu thams cad kyi gnas rgya mtsho chen po der gzhol zhing 'bab pa yin mod kyil chu de la ni phyogs dang phyogs nas bsnon pa dang bri ba dang rnyogs pa dang dri mar gyur pa cung zad med de/ sngar rgya mtsho nas ji ltar song ba ltar phyis kyang rgya mtsho chen por slar 'ong mod kyil chu bo chen po dag 'gro ba'i lam de dang de dag tu ni gzhan 'ga' zhig gi btung ba dang/ bkru ba dang/ bsgyur ba la sogs pa byed pa ltar ni snang ngol de bzhin du kho bo dag rang gi khyim nas don dang bya ba 'ga' zhig gi phyir phyogs dang phyogs su 'gro zhing/ de dang de dag tu'ang/ 'ga' zhig dang 'phrad pa dang/ gtam bya ba dang/ dga' bar bya ba la sogs pa ni yod mod kyil/ sngar ma thos pa dang/ ma go ba dang/ ma shes pa dag gsar du go ba dang thos pa ni ci yang med de dper na chu klung dag bzhin nol.*

¹⁵ The Tibetan word *chu* means “water,” but it can also refer to a “river.” Towards the end of their etymology of *chu*, the youth explicitly identify their example as referring to “rivers” (*chu klung dag*).

¹⁶ Per a personal communication with Lobsang Shastri, August 2011.

accomplishes the aims of others: water quenches thirst, for example. And yet, according to the youth, river-water always returns to its source without ever changing. In just the same way, the youth go from and return to their homes, without changing—without gaining any new knowledge—yet are still able to accomplish things along the way, such as talking to people that they meet.

The youth then continue on to the next syllable: boats (*gru*). Like river-water, a boat is something that accomplishes its aims without changing at all, the youth explain.

For the purpose of transporting others, boats go from one side of a river to the other, and come back again, going and returning continually. Sometimes these boats transport merchants, sometimes other guests, sometimes women, monks, gurus, *brahmans*, thieves, butchers, and so on. But when they come back again, however they were before, they are still that way: they are not filled [with anything new] nor are they depleted . . . In the same way, we leave our homes and go to others' homes and later come back to our own homes . . . sometimes meeting and seeing men, sometimes women, and sometimes children. Still, we never understand or hear anything new from them that we had not understood or heard previously.¹⁷

Boats go places and accomplish things without changing in any meaningful way, just as the youth go places and meet people without learning anything new.

The same pattern holds for the third syllable, “bodies” (*lus*): bodies accomplish things without changing in any meaningful way. As the youth explain, bodies enter into the boats that cross rivers and ride them to the far shore. But, along the way, the passengers (with their bodies) never gain anything or change in any way—they never leave any remains behind in the boat, for example. Yet the passengers and their bodies do accomplish something: they make it to the other side of the river.

In this third example, the youth pun on the word “body” (*lus*). *Lus*, in its nominal form, means a body. But, in verbal form (*lus pa*) it means to leave something behind as a remainder. *Lus* refers to the body that enters into the boat, and it refers to the fact that nothing is left as remains in the boat after each successive trip across the river.

¹⁷ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 344-45: *gru ni gzhan dag sgrol bar bya ba'i phyir tshu rol nas pha rol du 'gro ba de las kyang slar 'ong ste de ltar 'gro ba dang ldog pa rgyun yang mi chad la/ gru des ni res 'ga' tshong pa/ res 'ga' 'gron po gzhan/ res 'ga' bud med dang/ dge slong/ bla ma/ bram ze/ rkun po/ shan pa la sogs pa bsgral te 'gro yang/ gru de slar 'ong ba'i tshu na ni sngar ci 'dra ba de 'dra ba las/ bri ba yang med/ gang ba yang med do/ . . . de bzhin du kho bo yang rang gi khyim nas kyang khyim gzhan du 'gro de nas kyang slar rang gi khyim du 'ong ste . . . res 'ga' skyes pa dang/ res 'ga' bud med dang/ res 'ga' byis pa dang 'phrad pa dang/ mthong ba dag yod mod kyi de dag las bdag gis cung zad sngar ma go ba'am/ ma thos pa/ gsar du go ba dang thos pa ni cung zad kyang med do/ .*

In the same way that bodies enter into and depart from boats without gaining anything or leaving anything, so too do the youth enter into and depart from other people's homes without gaining anything or leaving anything. Still, like the boat-passengers who accomplish their goal of crossing the river, so too do the youth accomplish their aims.¹⁸

We thus find the youth presenting a narrative etymology of "water-boats-bodies" that justifies their use of the idiom in the context of their activities. "Water-boats-bodies" means "nothing at all" because each element of the word refers to things that, according to their interpretation, do not change at all (despite their efficacy). The colloquial expression and its meaning ("nothing at all") match the youth's usage perfectly, as they insist that they have traveled around accomplishing things without being changed in the sense of hearing or learning anything new.

The youth's etymology is not only successful, but it is also elegant, as the youth themselves point out.

Furthermore, because water [or rivers] are the base, boats enter into rivers, and bodies enter into boats ... the three are presented ... in order of support and thing supported thereby.¹⁹

The proud performers inform us that there is a tidy systematicity to the "water-boats-bodies" etymology that they have just offered. Water is explained first because it is the material support for boats. That is to say, boats float on water. Boats come next because they are the material support for the bodies that enter into them. Water supports boats, which support bodies. This short statement shows the youth (and thereby Patrul) calling attention to their own eloquence, making sure that the audience of *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* is well attuned to the elegance of the etymology that they have just heard.

Water, Boats, and Bodies – Take Two

Despite the proficiency and elegance of their etymology, the youth do not stop at just one explanation.

For the purpose of temple ceremonies, or for the purpose of virtuous kindness towards people from different places who have become sick or who have died, we continually attend gatherings of the monastic community, where we recite mantras, chant, meditate and so on. Sometimes, we also set out for some small purpose of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 345.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 345-6: *de yang chu ni gzhi yin la/ gru ni chu la 'jug/ lus ni grur 'jug pa'i phyir . . . de dag gi snga phyi rten dang brten pa'i go rim gi dbang gis . . . dpe gsum po rim bzhin tu bzhag pa yin no/.*

our own. We will therefore set forth three examples, in order, in relation to these pursuits.²⁰

Thus begins a second interpretation of “water-boats-bodies,” this time related to the details of the purposeful activity of the youth. As it turns out, in yet another twist, the youth are no mere children, but are full members of society who dedicate themselves to the needs of others by participating in religious rituals to heal the sick and aid the deceased. Patrul again plays with our expectations. When we originally meet the youth at the outset of the narrative, the text leads us to believe that they were simply attending to their personal business, giving us no hints that there was anything special about them. “For the purpose of some business and affairs (*don dang bya ba*) a group of youth went to various places,” it informs us.²¹ But, as the youth now reveal, their business entails participating in religious gatherings and serving others.

The youth connect their purposeful activities to water (or here rivers) in the following manner:

Just as rivers accomplish various benefits like eliminating stains [1] and thirst [2], maintaining the life-force [3] and then finally entering into the Great Ocean [4], in the same way. . .²²

The youth draw parallels between the beneficial activities of water and their own beneficial participation in temple ceremonies, which:

. . . accomplish various benefits like eliminating the stains of illness [1] and activating the power of medicine and so on to get rid of the harm of demons which is comparable to the thorn-like pain of thirst [2], and in addition cause [the sick] to stay for a long time [3], and, at the end of all of that, by means of making a final dedication, cause the [merit of this activity] to fall into the Ocean of Omniscience [4].²³

How does this comparison work? The following paraphrase summarizes the argument.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 346: *phyogs gzhan dang gzhan gyi mi zhig na ba dang shi bar gyur pa de dang de dag gi sku rim mam dge rtsa'i phyir yang nas yang du dge 'dun gyi tshogs su 'gro ste der ni kho bos bzlas pa dang/ klog pa dang/ sgom pa la sogs pa gzhan la phan pa 'ga' zhig gi phyir zhugs pa yin la/ res 'ga' ni rang gi don phran bu dag gi phyir yang 'gro zhing 'ong ba de dag gi phyir yang dpe gsum du rim pa bzhin bzhag pa ste/.*

²¹ *Ibid.*: 342: *don dang bya ba 'ga' zhig gi phyir gzhan pa dag phyogs phyogs su song ngo.*

²² The numbers in brackets are my own additions for the purpose of pointing out how this round of interpretation is structured. *Ibid.*: 346: *chu klung gis 'gro ba dag gi dri ma dang skom pa sel zhing phan pa du ma byed de srog gnas par byed cing mthar rgya mtsho chen por 'jug pa bzhin du . . .*

²³ *Ibid.*: 346: *nad kyi dri ma sel zhing/ gdon gyi gnod pa skom pa'i zug rngu lta bu med par byed la sman gyi mthu bskyed pa la sogs phan pa du ma byed cing thog yun ring du gnas par byed de bya ba de dag mjug bsngo bas rgyas 'debs pa'i phyir rnam pa thams cad mkhyen pa'i rgya mtshor 'bab pa.*

1. Water washing away stains is analogous to youth participating in ceremonies that eliminate illness.
2. Water eliminating thirst is analogous to the youth participating in ceremonies that eliminate the pain caused by demons.²⁴
3. Water maintaining one's life force is analogous to religious ceremonies keeping people alive for a long time.
4. Water finally returning to the great ocean, its source, is analogous to monks sending the merit of their activities back into the "ocean" of omniscience by means of the traditional prayers for dedicating merit that close Buddhist ceremonies and meditation sessions.²⁵

The youth display their interpretive prowess by analogizing the virtuous activity of healing the sick, described in four points, to four characteristics of water. The youth simultaneously demonstrate to the old men (and to the audience) their altruistic intention to benefit others.

How do boats (*gru*) relate to the youth's selfless activities? Boats are used to cross over a river, when one is trying to get from one side to the other, because one cannot cross on one's own. In a parallel way, the youth, together with monks, rely on the Buddha's teachings to transfer the consciousness of the dead, who are just like people stuck in the middle of a river, over to the dry land of liberation.²⁶ In this interpretation the youth employ the common Buddhist trope of the Buddha's teachings acting as the raft that takes suffering beings across to the far shores of liberation. Here, the youth actually analogize the river-to-be-crossed to the realm in between death and rebirth called the *bar do*. The idea is that by reciting special instructional texts after someone has died, one is able help lead that person out of the *bar do* realm and on to a preferable rebirth. The teachings that one recites in order to help the recently deceased are comparable to boats that take people across rivers.

And what of bodies?

One does not enter into a boat for the good of the river. Nor does one enter the boat for the good of the boat. Nor for anyone else.

²⁴ In Tibetan culture, negative spirits are sometimes credited with causing physical maladies.

²⁵ Tibetan Buddhism recognizes that religious practitioners generate positive karmic merit by participating in religious rituals, offering prayers, visiting holy sites, and so on. It is common for a ritual or a meditation session to conclude with a dedication prayer that expresses the wish that all of the positive merit accrued during the practice ultimately benefit all beings. The "ocean of omniscience" is a standard metaphor referring to the all-knowing, all-pervasive wisdom of enlightenment.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 347.

Rather, one puts one's body into the boat only for the sake of oneself and for the sake of the hat and clothing that one is wearing. In this way, when I go out for the purpose of some small provisional business, I exclusively go out for purpose of the small tasks of mine and of those friends of mine, like you, who depend on me.²⁷

Here, in a particularly humorous moment of the work, the youth explain that one enters into a boat in order to get oneself to the other side—not in order to help out anyone else (and certainly not for the good of the river nor for the good of the boat). So too, the youth explain, do they periodically leave their homes in order to accomplish their own tasks or to attend to their own business. While the humor of this passage may not translate well, I can attest to the fact that this line caused one Tibetan with whom I read the text to laugh out loud. The humor lies in the absurd suggestion that one would ever cross a river in a boat for the benefit of either the river or the boat.

Having delivered two intricate, creative, and extensive etymologies of “water-boats-bodies,” the youth conclude their oration with a moment of heightened bravado. The youth declare in verse:

If you were to write down the meaning of “water-boats-bodies”
 You could use up all of the paper that there is in a store
 And all of the ink in the possession of a scholar
 Yet you would never use up our intelligence
 Nor would you use up the meaning of “water-boats-bodies.”²⁸

The youth's capacity to interpret the meaning of “water-boats-bodies” is inexhaustible, they playfully boast. All of the paper or ink that one could possibly find would still be insufficient to document the interpretations that they are capable of spinning about “water-boats-bodies.” The youth's subject material—the etymology of “water-boats-bodies”—is so rich that its (hidden) meaning (*don*) can never be exhausted. The youth themselves are so smart that their intelligence (*blo gros*)—namely their capacity to offer skillful interpretation—will never run out.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 347: *lus ni chu'i don du'ang grur 'jug pa min/ gru'i don du'ang ma yin/ gzhan su'i don du'ang ma yin te lus ni rang nyid dang rang la brten pa'i zhwa gos tsam chu las sgrol ba 'ba' zhig gi phyir 'jug pa de dang 'dra bar kho bo yang gnas skabs kyi don phran bu dag gi phyir 'gro ba'i tshe rang dang rang la brten pa'i grogs khyed cag gi bya ba cung zad de'i phyir 'gro bar zad /*

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 348: *chu gru lus kyi don 'di bri na yang/ tshong khang ji snyed shog bu zad 'gyur zhing/ mkhan po ji snyed snag tsha zad 'gyur gyil kho bo'i blo gros zad par mi 'gyur tel chu gru lus kyi don kyang mi zad do /*

Critique & Response

So how do the old men respond to the youth's eloquent outburst? Well, they are not impressed. The old men begin by chanting a "maṇi" (the six-syllable mantra *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*) and offer a prayer to the bodhisattva of compassion Avalokiteśvara, which signals the beginning of a formal response on their part. The old men then offer a critique, in verse, of the exposition that they have just heard. I mentioned earlier that Patrul depicts these old men as highly educated, formal and rigid, having had them articulate unnecessary, pedantic definitions of "heard" and "understood" earlier in the story. Patrul now continues with his portrayal of the old men as formally rigid and obsessed with scholastic modes of teaching. The overarching concern in their critique is that the youth's creative etymologies of "water-boats-bodies" do not live up to the standards of a traditional word-commentary, such as a commentary one might find to a Tantric root text.²⁹

Over the course of their short, terse, versified response, the old men criticize the youth for the following faults:³⁰

1. Unlike tantric commentaries (*rgyud 'grel*), the youth's "water-boats-bodies" commentary does not add grammatical notes, like adding a final Tibetan "sa" particle, in order to make the grammar of a root text more clear. Nor does the "water-boats-bodies" commentary add ornamental words to fill out the meaning of the root text. [The fundamental argument is that the "water-boats-bodies" etymology cannot be a legitimate teaching because it does not look the way that a proper word-commentary should look.]³¹
2. The "water-boats-bodies" commentary does not use authoritative quotations or evidence from the Buddhist canon.
3. The "water-boats-bodies" commentary, while having been written in a way that is easy to follow, does not properly connect the commentary to the root text (where the root text is simply the phrase "water-boats-bodies"). Consequentially, it contains many contradictions. [The old men offer this critique without citing any examples].
4. The "water-boats-bodies" interpretation suffers from the fault of not having been subjected to debate.

²⁹ A Tantric root text is a text whose composition is attributed to an enlightened Buddha and which authorizes a wide variety of practices centering on one specific, enlightened deity. The "cycles" that surround these root texts include commentaries (such as glosses of the words of the Tantra), practice instructions, and ritual manuals related to the deity in question.

³⁰ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 348-349.

³¹ Adding grammatical particles and clarificatory glosses are practices typical of Tibetan inter-linear commentaries.

Patrul has the old men set forth various possible formal criteria for evaluating a sermon, all of which they find lacking in the youth's discourse. They mention the use of grammatical analysis and ornamentation, the use of evidence from the Tibetan Buddhist Canon (the *bka' 'gyur* and *bstan 'gyur*), the consistency of the teaching with its source material, and the subjection of teachings to debate. These principles of evaluation recall Sakya Paṇḍita's (Sa skya paṇ ḍi ta, Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182-1251) normative criteria for the scholarly activities of composition, exposition (teaching), and debate. Sapaṇ's *Mkhas 'jug* argues for the importance of mastering grammar and the ornamental figures of Sanskrit poetics in training scholars to compose and comment on Buddhist treatises (skills represented by critique number 1, above). He also advocates for appealing to scripture (*lung*) (item 2 above) and reasoning (*rigs*) to identify the flaws of false tenets (item 3). Finally, he identifies debate (item 4) as a means whereby properly trained scholars can preserve and defend the Buddhist tradition.³² Whether or not Patrul intentionally presents the elder monks as voices for Sapaṇ, these characters nonetheless embody the scholastic model of discursive production that Sapaṇ came to represent in Tibet.

The youth's subsequent response is everything we might expect it to be: confident and creative. Perhaps as a signal to the scholastically minded old men that they won't be out-done, the youth likewise deliver their response in verse. They begin:

In general, since engaging in explanation, debate, and composition is indispensable for leaders of monasteries, you too have composed this polemical critique.³³

Here, the youth explicitly identify the old men as leaders of a monastery, ones who have received training in the three scholarly disciplines of exegesis, debate, and composition. Mention of these three disciplines explicitly links them to Sapaṇ's model of scholarly activity, as articulated in the *Mkhas 'jug*.

The contrast that Patrul is constructing between the old men and the youth is becoming increasingly clear. Patrul presents the old men as caricatures of monastically educated scholars who have strict, formal expectations about what an authentic teaching should look like. In this case, they expect the youth's exposition to look like a word-commentary to a root-text, complete with canonical citations, and expect the interpretation to be subjected to formal debate. The youth, with their eloquent performance, embody a more open-minded model of discursive production, one better tuned to the needs of a broader, non-monastic audience, as they will soon suggest.

³² Jackson 1987: 97-103. See, also, Gold 2007; Jackson 1984.

³³ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 349: *spyir na 'chad rtsod rtsom pa gsum/ dgon sde'i mgo 'dzin byed pa la/ med thabs med pa de lags pas/ khyed kyang rtsod pa'i 'byams yig 'di/*.

This contrast situates *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* within a longstanding debate in Tibet over the form of authentic (and therefore trustworthy) teachings. Jonathan Gold has argued that Sakya Paṇḍita established strict criteria for scholastic training, composition, and evaluation of Buddhist teaching in order to establish the scholastically trained monk as a protector (a “gatekeeper”) of Buddhism—someone who could prevent the erosion of the teachings at the hands of those Tibetans who faultily transmit Buddhist knowledge by adding their own inauthentic innovations.³⁴ For Sapaṅ, it was not enough to cite one’s personal lama’s teachings when explaining the provenance of one’s practices.³⁵ Sapaṅ’s criticisms, we might note, targeted teachers (Gampopa) and practices (the “singly efficacious white remedy,” treasure revelations, Nyingma tantric practices) with which Patrul had great affinity.³⁶

Sure enough, the youth respond to the elder’s criticisms by doing just what Sapaṅ criticized—appealing to the authority of their teacher. But their appeal brings with it yet another surprise:

This explanation of “water-boats-bodies” is well known to scholars of superior monasteries. The composer, Gewai Pal (*Dge ba’i dpal*)...³⁷

Gewai Pal is none other than Patrul himself.³⁸ The youth continue to describe him as follows:

. . . Gewai Pal is one whose intelligence gained from meditation is entirely clear . . . It is not possible that he would be without the confidence of knowing that he can never be trampled in debate, nor is it possible that he would ever speak nonsense. The composer of the commentary, Palgi Gewa, has the understanding gained from opening hundreds of texts and has the confident eloquence

³⁴ Gold 2007.

³⁵ Jackson 1994: 100.

³⁶ For Sapaṅ’s critiques of Gampopa (Sgam po pa Bsod nams rin chen, 1079-1153), Lama Zhang (Zhang tshal pa Brtson ’grus grags pa, 1122-1193), and the “singly efficacious white [remedy]” (*dkar po gcig thub*) method of introducing students to the empty nature of their own minds, see Jackson 1994 and Yamamoto 2009 (Chapter Two). For more on Sapaṅ’s criticism of Rnying ma tantras, see Tomoko Makidono’s article in the present volume. Patrul, of course, taught and practiced Nyingma treasures (*gter ma*) and tantras (in particular *Guhya garbha*). But Patrul’s writings also speak to his close connection with Gampopa’s teachings. He cites Gampopa multiple times in *Words of My Perfect Teacher* and makes reference to the idea of *dkar po gcig thub* in his *zhal gdams* compositions. See Dza Patrul 1998: 12, 208; Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 8, 284.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 349: *chu gru lus kyi rnam bshad ’di/ dgon stod mkhas pa mang la grags/ gzhung bshad dge ba’i dpal ba khong/ . . .*

³⁸ Patrul (*Dpal sprul*) is an abbreviation of the title Palge Tulku (*Dpal dge’i sprul sku*), meaning “the Palge incarnation.” Patrul was recognized at a young age as the incarnation of the Palge Lama Samten Puntsho (*Dpal dge’i bla ma Bsam gan phun tshogs*). Gewai Pal (*Dge ba’i dpal*) is simply an inversion of Palge (*Dpal dge*).

(*spobs pa*) of speaking hundreds of words. If he were to be the defendant in a debate, he would propose a firm thesis and would display the intelligence to prove his assertion. If he were the opponent, he would engage in sharp debate, using knowledge to destroy the assertions of the other . . . He is the master of one-thousand disciples. He is like the condensation of many scholars.³⁹

This is a spectacular moment in the text, to be sure. Up until this point, the text reads as a narrative, describing an interaction between a group of youth and a group of older men. Now we learn that the etymological exposition that seemed to come spontaneously from the youth is in fact a teaching of Patrul's—who we, as the readers, (unlike the old men in the story) know to be the actual composer of the work. Patrul has placed himself into the narrative world of the composition and effectively made his own eloquence and authority as a teacher the subject matter of the composition! Such unabashed self-praise is seemingly quite rare in Tibetan religious writing.⁴⁰

This rhetorical move is particularly sophisticated, and I should add a bit confusing, because I believe Patrul to be speaking playfully and even somewhat ironically. He claims, for example, that the “water-boats-bodies” teaching is well known to many scholars.⁴¹ And while the work itself did eventually become well known to trained Nyingma (*rnying ma*) scholars, I do not believe Patrul to be saying with a straight face that the creative etymology the youth have just performed was actually famous in its day.⁴²

Still, despite his playfulness, Patrul is making a very serious claim: the authority of a given teaching *can* be based on the authority of the teacher giving that teaching. In effect, Patrul is defending the legitimacy of creative teaching performances, as long as such performances are delivered by capable teachers. Patrul implies that he himself is just such a teacher because of his confidence, erudition, the sharpness of his intellect, and the breadth of his influence. Patrul, in the guise of the youth, thus rejects the

³⁹ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 349: *dge ba'i dpal ba khong/ bsgom pa'i blo gros gting na gsal/ . . . nam phug rgol bas mi brdzi ba'i/ gdengs shig sems la ma thob par/ ma brtags ca cor gsung mi srid/ 'grel byed dpal gyi dge ba de/ gzhung brgya 'byed pa'i rnam dpyod yod/ tshig brgya smra ba'i spobs pa yod/ sna rgol byas na dam bca' brtan/ rang 'dod bsgrub pa'i blo gros yod/ phyi rgol byas na rtsod rigs rno/ gzhan 'dod bshigs pa'i rnam rig yod/ . . . blo gsal stong gi slob dpon yin/ mkhas mang 'du pa'i 'du sa yin/.*

⁴⁰ For an exception, see Sakya Paṇḍita's *Nga brgyad ma*, his praise of himself for possessing eight superior qualities. See Kun dga' rgyal mtshan 1992: 681-710.

⁴¹ Lobsang Shastri suggested to me that this may be Patrul's way of saying that the “water-boats-bodies” etymology is nothing new, special, or particularly difficult. The statement that “this explanation of ‘water-boats-bodies’ is well known to scholars” would thereby mean that scholars perform this kind of explanation all of the time. It is as if to say that the formal old men are taking the “water-boats-bodies” entirely too seriously.

⁴² While I am hardly prepared to offer a reception history of the *Explanation of Water Boats and Bodies*, I can report that scholars such as Thupten Phuntsok and Zagtsa Paldor were quite familiar with it.

criteria that the monastically trained old men propose, instead arguing that it would be impossible (*mi srid pa*) for someone as intelligent and well-read as Patrul to have composed a meaningless, or improper teaching. Patrul also cites his own eloquence as justification for the legitimacy of the teaching, noting the confident eloquence he has gained from extensive practice in preaching.⁴³

Thus far, Patrul has the youth defend the “water-boats-bodies” explication by appealing to the brilliance of its author. But the argument is not finished. The youth continue with their retort, now taking each element of the old men’s critique one by one, beginning with a discussion of the *maṇi* mantra (*Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*) that the old men had chanted in the opening of their polemical critique.

The six-syllabled *maṇi* is said to be the essence of the dharma. As for its spreading, it has spread throughout Tibet. As for being known, even old women know it. As for being recited, even beggars recite it. As for being written, even children know how to write it. For scholars who compose treatises [however] there is no entry way to the *maṇi*.⁴⁴

Patrul, via the youth, reminds his audience that there are profound Buddhist teachings beyond scholastic commentaries, teachings such as the *maṇi* mantra, that are accessible to the masses and yet just as potent as the scholastic treatises to which the old men are so attached. This is an understated argument suggesting that scholarly monks, who do not properly value chanting the *maṇi*, are not the only purveyors of meaningful Buddhist teachings. In fact, the youth suggest that the *maṇi* (as the essence of the dharma), is superior to the treatises that the old men produce.

The composition concludes with the youth offering a flurry of rebuttals that dismiss each of the old men’s critiques, in turn. So, for example, in reference to the fault of lacking quotations from the canon, the youth declare that “knowledge” (*rig pa*)—probably meaning here some combination of learning and intelligence—is that which edits or corrects scripture (literally purifies scriptures, *lung gi dag byed*).⁴⁵ Because Patrul’s intelligence and knowledge is

⁴³ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 349: ‘grel byed dpal gyi dge ba ‘del/ gzhung brgya ‘byed pa’i rnam dpyod yod/ tshig brgya smra ba’i spobs pa yod/.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 349-50: ‘bru drug ma ṇi padme ‘di/ chos kyi snying po yin pa skad/ dar ba bod yul yongs la dar/ shes pa rgad mo rnam kyang shes/ ‘don pa sprang po rnam kyang ‘don/ bri ba byis pa rnam kyang bri/ mkhas pas bstan bcos rtsom pa la/ ma ṇi’i ‘gros sgo yod rab med/.

⁴⁵ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 250: *bka’ bstan yongs la rlung rtar grags/ lung gi dag byed rig pa ni*. “The *kanjur* and *tanjur* are renown everywhere, like the wind. Knowledge is that which edits scripture.” The term scripture (*lung*) in the second sentence refers to the *kanjur* and *tanjur* (the two collections of the Tibetan Buddhist canon) from the first sentence, thus implying that knowledge is what is necessary for understanding the canon. This couplet includes yet another case of Patrul’s clever punning. Patrul states that knowledge is that which corrects scripture. Knowledge is, literally, the “purifier” of scripture. The term for

well attested to, no quotations from canonical scriptures are necessary. But were they necessary, the youth add, Patrul would be able to provide quotations, regardless. And with these pithy arguments, the *Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* ends.

A Discourse about Discourse

What are we to make of this curious composition? Why would Patrul compose an explanatory interpretation of something as mundane as a colloquial idiom? Why would he place himself as a character into his own narrative? What concerns of Patrul's might be hidden within this playful work?

Patrul hints at his intentions in the very first words of the composition—the opening homage to the “Gentle Protector,” the bodhisattva *Mañjunātha*. The verse introduces what I interpret to be the primary theme of the entire composition: confident eloquence. Confident eloquence—*spobs pa* in Tibetan (Skt.: *pratibhāna*)—refers to some combination of preparedness, fearlessness, confidence, and eloquence in speech. Confident eloquence is one amongst a set of four “thorough, perfect knowledges” (Skt.: *pratisaṃvid*; Tib.: *so so yang dang par rig pa*) that appear in Sanskrit and Tibetan Buddhist literature as a way of categorizing the pedagogical skills of advanced bodhisattvas, those Buddhist practitioners dedicated to progressing towards enlightenment in order to rid all beings of suffering.⁴⁶ The set of four, often translated as “the four discriminations,” appears in numerous places in Sanskrit Buddhist literature, including the *Prajñāparamitā* in one-hundred thousand verses, the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, the *Dharmasaṅgīti* and the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, with some sources placing this grouping of skills at the ninth of ten stages of bodhisattva training, as articulated in the *Daśabhūmikasūtra*.⁴⁷

“purifier” (*dag byed*) is also a figurative term for the wind, where the more common term for the wind (*rlung*) is used in the first half of the couplet. *Lung* (scripture) and *rlung* (wind) are also homonyms. It is difficult to translate *rig pa* in this context. When combined with *lung*, *rig* (more correctly *rigs*) specifically refers to logical reasoning. As a translation of Sanskrit *vidyā*, *rig pa* can mean intelligence, learning, or knowledge more broadly. As I will discuss in a moment, *rig pa* also figures in a traditional set of four “knowledges” attributed to *bodhisattvas*, where “knowledge” means pedagogical skill. Within Patrul's Rnying ma tradition, *rig pa* refers to the foundational awareness that is the condition for all experience. Patrul's use of *rig pa*, here, probably carries with it all of these connotations at once.

⁴⁶ For more on *pratibhāna* see Dayal 1970: 260-267, 282; MacQueen 1981; MacQueen 1982; Braarvig 1985; Nance 2004 (Chapter 3); Nance 2008: 142-143.

⁴⁷ Dayal 1970: 261, 282. While the four *pratisaṃvid* in question are intimately connected to bodhisattva training, slightly different renditions of four *pratisaṃvid* do appear in non-Mahāyāna Abhidharma sources, such as Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. See, for example, Makransky 1997: 26.

The four thorough, perfect knowledges receive different interpretations in the Sanskrit sources and their commentaries. Briefly, however, they are as follows: the knowledge of phenomena (Skt.: *dharmapratisaṃvid*; Tib.: *chos so so yang dag par rig pa*), which can mean knowing all things' names and identifying qualities or knowing all Buddhist texts; the knowledge of their meaning (Skt.: *arthapratisaṃvid*; Tib.: *don so so yang dag par rig pa*), entailing understanding how to categorize these phenomena or how to teach given the specific requirements of the pedagogical situation at hand; the knowledge of the etymology of words (Skt.: *nirukti-pratisaṃvid*; Tib.: *nges pa'i tshig so so yang dag par rig pa*), which refers to knowing how to speak about all phenomena using human or non-human languages; and finally the confident preparedness and skill to actually preach—what I am calling confident eloquence—which Nance describes as teaching in a fluid and inexhaustible way (Skt.: *pratibhānapratisaṃvid*; Tib.: *spobs pa so so yang dag par rig pa*).⁴⁸

These four categories are well known to Patrul, who was steeped in theorizations of the bodhisattva path, having written commentaries on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* and the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, and even an independent work on the stages of accomplishment of bodhisattvas.⁴⁹ In fact, the opening, dedicatory verse actually incorporates all four knowledges into its homage. The underlined text below identifies these four knowledges as they appear in the opening verse:

Reverence to you, Gentle Protector, sun of the heart; who possesses the thorough and perfect knowledges of phenomena and their meaning, confident eloquence and the etymology of words.⁵⁰

It is no coincidence that Patrul chooses to include these “knowledges” in his opening verse. Patrul means to use the narrative that follows to model what a confidently eloquent performance by a bodhisattva looks like, and then to debate what criteria are capable of authenticating the quality of such a performance.

As is common in Tibetan compositions, the opening verse serves a dual function. First, it fulfills Patrul's responsibility as a composer to pay respect to his teacher, to one of his spiritual ancestors, or to an enlightened hero (here, he has chosen the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī). Second, it implicitly establishes the general topic of the discourse, which I have identified as the pedagogical skills of bodhisattvas, in general, and confident eloquence, in particular. Patrul also carefully chooses the language within the verse to foreshadow the more

⁴⁸ Compare Dayal (1970: 160-167), Lopez (1988: 202), and Nance (2004: 178-179). The *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa* parses confident eloquence (*pratibhāna*) as “coherent and free speech” (*yuktamuktābhilāpita*). See Dayal 1970: 18.

⁴⁹ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vols. 2, 3, 4, 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: vol. 1, 342: *chos dang don spobs nges pa'i tshig/ so so yang dag mkhyen ldan pa/ 'jam mgon snying gi nyi ma la/ btud de.*

specific content of his treatise. The phrase “thorough and perfect knowledge of the etymology of words”⁵¹ refers to the skill of being able to communicate proficiently using any language, one of the four “thorough, perfect knowledges” just discussed. But Patrul plays with the meaning of this phrase, which literally translates as knowledge of “the etymology of a word” (*nges pa'i tshig*). The Tibetan term for etymology that appears here, *nges pa'i tshig*, as translation of the Sanskrit word *nirukti*, is best understood as a creative etymology, one that neither tries to capture the historical derivation of a word nor explain the word's literal meaning. Rather, a creative etymology comments on the word's meaning by looking at its constituent parts.⁵² Sure enough, the sermon about “water-boats-bodies” enacted by the youth is just such an etymology—a commentary that dissects the term in question into its constituent syllables and thereby unearths its hidden resonances.

There is an additional allusion to Sanskrit theories about skillful speech hidden within *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies*. When the elders ask the youth whether they have heard anything, understood anything, or have anything to explain, I believe them to be alluding to a three-fold set of requirements for preaching that appear in Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti*.⁵³ According to Vasubandhu, those who wish to teach Buddhist sūtras should have heard a lot (*thos pa mang po*), understood what they have heard (literally “be endowed with the basis of hearing,” *thos pa'i gzhi can*) and have retained what they have heard (literally “accumulate what has been heard,” *thos pa bsag pa*). While the Tibetan rendering of Vasubandhu's three requirements does not map on exactly with the questions that the older folks ask of the youth, their meaning is very close. If we interpret Vasubandhu's third criteria to mean that one has sufficiently retained what one has learned such that one is capable of explaining it, then we can understand Vasubandhu to be requiring Buddhist preachers to have heard something, to have understood it, and to be capable of explaining it—the very three things that the elders ask of the youth.

The subtext of the dialogue between the monastic elites and the youth now begins to fall into place. The elites are challenging the youth to deliver a sermon by citing preparatory requirements that would be familiar to scholastically trained monks. The youth, however, reject these traditional requirements (there is “nothing to

⁵¹ *Ibid.*: 342: *nges pa'i tshig so so yang dag par mkhyen*.

⁵² Jeffrey Hopkins, for example, translates *nges tshig* as a “creative etymology,” in contrast to the more straightforward *sgra bshad* (explanation of a word). The *Tshig mdzod chen mo* defines *nges pa'i tshig* as an explanation of a term which is itself constructed by joining multiple words. See the entry for *nges tshig* in the Hopkins Tibetan Sanskrit English Dictionary available via the Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library Translation Tool, <http://www.thlib.org/reference/translation-tool> (accessed 2 April, 2010) and the entry for *nges pa'i tshig* in *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* 1993: 657.

⁵³ Skilling 2000: 319; Nance 2008: 141-2.

be explained" they boast) and implicitly reject the elite monks' authority to determine who is capable of delivering legitimate teachings.

Patrul uses a performative strategy to address the questions of what constitutes creative eloquence and who is capable of delivering a successful Buddhist sermon. Rather than deconstructing the idea of "confident eloquence" in the abstract, or commenting upon passages from Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti*, Patrul instead chooses to make characters in his narrative—namely the young people—perform a confident and eloquent etymology—a discourse which constitutes more than half of the work. In lieu of composing an analytical treatise about skillful preaching, Patrul chooses to show us what a masterful discourse looks like.

What makes the youth's discourse so skillful? First, their interpretation is successful on the most literal level: it offers an explanation of the colloquialism "water-boats-bodies" and why it means "nothing" in the semantic context within which they have used it. They articulate succinctly how the etymology of the phrase coincides with their usage of the term. On this level, the commentary is an enactment of skillful speech that is able to articulate the connection between a linguistic phrase and its meaning.

One might wonder, however, why Patrul would choose to have his characters model bodhisattva skills, such as confident eloquence, by interpreting an obscure colloquialism. Surely, bodhisattva's preaching skills are best used to spread teachings that help sentient beings overcome suffering. How could an etymology of a local Tibetan colloquialism act as such a teaching?

From one perspective, Patrul's choice of subject matter is what makes *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* a playful, humorous discourse. The very idea that an etymology of a colloquialism could stand in for a bodhisattva's teaching is unexpected and even a bit funny.

From another perspective, however, the youth's capacity to hint at profound meanings where we least expect them to, to allegorize profound Buddhist ideas through the use of mundane examples, is itself strong evidence for their masterful teaching skills. That is to say, the fact that the youth can transmit powerful teachings even when talking about seemingly mundane matters is a testament to their brilliance as orators, and, by extension, Patrul's brilliance as a composer.

This latter argument is predicated on the assumption that the etymology of "water-boats-bodies" is, in fact, profound. But is it? How so?

A Dzogchen Allegory

I would argue that Patrul does indeed intend for the youth's performance to hint at profound philosophical meanings, even while these meanings remain oblique. Many others with whom I have discussed this work, native-Tibetan speakers and scholars of Buddhism alike, have shared the intuition that the youth's etymology functions as a philosophical allegory. I will preliminarily suggest one way to interpret the youth's story about how water, boats, and bodies go places in the world without ever being changed; how, despite the fact that water is drunk, and boats and bodies cross rivers, nothing is ever added to or taken away from any of the three. Still, as I will subsequently argue, the youth's performance is fundamentally about the *possibility* of creating a philosophically and ethically rich teaching, more than it is about delivering a teaching with a single, fixed meaning.

I tentatively suggest that we think about "water," "boats," and "bodies" as metaphors for the functioning of our mind (*sems*), and the empty nature of that same mind (*sems nyid*).⁵⁴ We might then read Patrul's allegory as follows. Our mind engages with the world of our experiences, what Patrul will sometimes call appearances (*snang ba thams cad*): visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, or mental (thoughts and emotions, however subtle).⁵⁵ One might say that our mind goes out to meet these appearances, just as rivers depart from the "great ocean" in the youth's description of the journey of water; or as boats depart one shore on their way to the other, as human bodies travel on rivers on these same boats, or even as the youth depart their homes to attend to their business.⁵⁶

Even while diverse, changing appearances arise for the mind, however, the nature of the mind (*sems kyi rang bzhin*) itself never changes. That is to say, the mind (*sems*) continually experiences new, impermanent, and ultimately delusive appearances, but the underlying empty nature of the mind is always the same: empty yet capable of awareness. The distinction between the changing mind

⁵⁴ Patrul uses a variety of terms for "the nature of mind:" *sems kyi rang bzhin*, *sems kyi chos nyid* and *sems nyid*, which could all be translated as "the nature of mind." Related terms that appear in Patrul's writings include *sems kyi gnas lugs* ("the manner in which mind abides") and *sems kyi rang zhal*, "mind's own-face." He equates this empty nature of mind with *dharmakāya* (*chos sku*), as well. See Patrul's *Thog mtha' bar gsum du dge ba'i gtam lta sgom spyod gsum nyams len dam pa'i snying nor*, Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 8, 133, for one example of this equation.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of appearances and their empty status, see Patrul's *Theg chen lta khrid bden gnyis rab tu gsal ba*, Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 3, 293. For a statement on how all of our experiences are merely appearances, see the *Thog mtha' bar gsum du dge ba'i gtam*, Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 8, 131.

⁵⁶ Of course, according to Tibetan Buddhist philosophies of mind, the mind, with its habitual tendencies, is at least partially responsible for these appearances in the first place. That is to say, the appearances do not come about on their own, separate from the mind.

and the unchanging nature of the mind parallels the familiar distinction between the ever-changing conventional reality of appearances and the never-changing ultimate reality of the emptiness of those appearances.⁵⁷ Patrul's compositions, we might note, consistently emphasize the importance of looking at one's own mind (*rang gi sems la blta*) in order to identify its empty and aware nature.⁵⁸

The "departures" of water from the Great Ocean in the form of rivers, for example, is an image for the way in which specific instances of water function in the world—some specific batch of water is drawn from rivers for some particular human use, like drinking. Yet, in this metaphorical rendering of where water comes from, water ultimately returns to the Great Ocean. In this state of return, the particular river-water that was used by humans is now undifferentiated from all other water in the Ocean. When the specific river-water has returned to the Great Ocean, it is just water as such, water in its nature as water, not some specific water serving a specific function. Our minds are like this water. They manifest as appearances, as individual moments of awareness wherein one has specific experiences, whether these experiences are perceptions, thoughts, or otherwise. But these instances of mind always return to their state of simply being empty, non-locatable, undifferentiable mind.

But to recognize the nature of one's mind as empty is also to recognize that the nature of mind is non-arisen and therefore unchanging—nothing can ever be added to it or taken away from it. Mind is "non-arisen" in the sense of not being something that has come about as an independent entity. As Patrul sometimes mentions, mind is entirely devoid of location, smell, or color – it is empty of existence as an independent, identifiable entity.⁵⁹ And because it has never arisen as an independent entity, because it has never come about as a substantial, identifiable thing in the first place, it can never change or become something new.

Mind, as awareness, is like the water, boats, and bodies that are described in the youth's sermon in their tendency to interact with the world, again and again. But, mind, in its empty nature, is just like water, boats and bodies in that ultimately nothing is ever added to it or taken away from it that would change its nature.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Patrul explicitly identifies these appearances, which our mind manifests, as conventional truth in the *Theg chen lta khrid bden gnyis rab tu gsal ba*, in Dpal sprul 2003: vol. 3, 298.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 1, 276-277; Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 8, 289, 369. Patrul's *Mkhas pa shri rgyal po'i khyad chos* is his most famous instruction on encountering the true nature of one's mind. See Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 5, 206-225.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Patrul's *Theg chen lta khrid bden gnyis rab tu gsal ba*. Dpal sprul 2003: vol. 3, 298.

⁶⁰ In a related vein, Patrul also speaks about the "unchanging clarity of the ground," where the ground (*gzhi*) is mind in its undifferentiated, empty state.

One helpful source for interpreting the “water-boats-bodies” allegory is Patrul’s meditation instruction “The Final Great Perfection’s Profound Method for Becoming Enlightened: Enlightened-Mind That Liberates Itself” (*Mthar thug rdzogs pa chen po’i sangs rgyas pa’i thabs zab mo dgongs pa rang grol*).⁶¹ In this work, Patrul gives meditators practical instructions (from the Rdzog chen tradition) on how to rest in the nature of mind, without trying to alter or control the way that mind manifests itself. The following passage touches upon the dual quality of mind from the perspective of a meditator—mind’s tendency to unpredictably manifest itself in appearances and yet to always return to its fundamentally unchanged, restful, empty nature.

Although you try to fix [the mind], it goes unimpeded without any set focus
 But if you focus on not fixing it, it returns to its own place [on its own].
 Although it has no limbs it runs everywhere,
 But if you send it, it will not go, returning to its own place [on its own].
 Although it has no eyes, it is aware of everything,
 [and these] appearances of innate awareness go to being empty [they are empty].
 This so-called essence of mind does not exist;
 While it does not exist, various [instances of] mindful awareness manifest.
 [In so far as] it is not existing, it goes to being empty.
 [In so far as] it is not not-existing, mindful awareness appears.⁶²

This passage captures some of the (*Rdzog chen*) vocabulary that Patrul uses to describe the nature of mind. Mind goes out (*’gro*) unimpeded (*zang thal*) and “runs everywhere” (*kun tu rgyug*) in so far as it manifests (*’char*) awareness and is capable of being aware of everything (*thams cad rig*). Yet mind also returns on its own accord (*rang sar ’khor*) to its fundamentally empty nature; it “goes” to emptiness (*stong par ’gro*). In being empty, it does not exist (*med; yod par ma yin*). This passage is thus a good example of how Patrul

This relates to the recognition that all mental experience, no matter what it is, has as its nature the simultaneous purity and manifest clarity of innate awareness. See, for example, Patrul’s instructions on recognizing one’s innate awareness (*rig pa*) in the *Mkhas pa shri rgyal po’i khyad chos*. Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 5.

⁶¹ Rdza dpal sprul (unknown publication date): 633-653. For an English translation of the work, see “Self-Liberating Understanding, Being the Profound Method for Gaining Enlightenment via the Great Perfection,” in Low 1998.

⁶² Rdza dpal sprul [unknown date]: 643: *bzhag kyang gtad med zang thal ’gro/ ma bzhag btang yang rang sar ’khor/ rkang lag med kyang kun tu rgyug/ btang yang mi ’gro rang sar ’khor/ mig ni med khyang thams cad rig/ rig pa’i snang pa stong par ’gro/ sems kyi ngo bo ’di zhes med/ med kyang dran rig sna tshogs ’char/ yod par ma yin stong par ’gro/ med pa ma yin dran rig snang/.*

appeals to metaphors of movement—coming and going—when talking about the nature of mind.

For Patrul, the nature of mind never changes, of course. It is always both empty and aware. As he states in the line just preceding this passage, mind's empty and aware qualities are undifferentiated (*dbyer med*). Mind thus never changes in its nature—nothing is ever added to it or taken away from it. Nonetheless, Patrul chooses to *describe* the experience of awareness as a departure, as a going (*'gro ba*) and returning (*rang sar 'khor*).

Generating Meaning Out of “Nothing”

Regardless of how one interprets the opaque meaning of the youth's “water-boats-bodies” interpretation, I would argue that *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* is first and foremost about “confident eloquence”—what it looks like and the criteria for evaluating it. In this way, the youth's etymology is about the *possibility* of creating a philosophically pregnant allegory, more than it is about one specific interpretation of that allegory.

After offering the philosophically suggestive etymology of “water-boats-bodies,” Patrul never returns to this allegory in order to clarify its meaning. Quite to the contrary, he has his youth launch into a second set of etymological explanations of “water-boats-bodies,” this time addressing the youth's altruistic activities, thereby deemphasizing the importance of the first interpretation. When the old men respond to the youth's sermon, they never take issue with the specifics of the interpretation of “water-boats-bodies,” nor do they ask for clarification about the philosophical or religious consequences of the etymology. Rather, they offer criticisms about *the form* of the etymology, challenging its status as a legitimate teaching in the first place. What is at stake for the elders is the status of interpretations that do not fall within the formal, rigid framework that they expect from a treatise.

It is therefore sufficient for Patrul to *suggest* that it is possible for him to devise an elaborate allegory, without having to be explicit about how the code of the allegory should be cracked. Patrul succeeds as long as his audience believes there to be profound philosophical or ethical guidance contained in his eloquent exposition, regardless of exactly how his audience chooses to interpret the sermon. The brilliance of the etymology is its capacity to infer profundity without ever spelling out its meaning.

The conclusion of the youth's creative etymology of “water-boats-bodies” supports my reading of *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* as a reflexive inquiry into the skillful production of teachings—a discourse primarily about discourse. The youth conclude their sermon by boasting that their capacity to interpret

“water-boats-bodies” can never be used up.⁶³ I read their boast to be a statement about the skills of someone who embodies confidence eloquence. Their implicit argument seems to go as follows: even something as seemingly inconsequential as a phrase in Derge slang is an opportunity for a skillful teacher to tease out meaning and deliver an eloquent teaching. Because of their (meaning Patrul’s) unlimited intelligence, their capacity to provide meaningful teachings on even the most unlikely subjects is inexhaustible.

Patrul’s choice of the phrase “water-boats-bodies” for his etymology is loaded with irony, of course, making it a perfect selection for a playful, humorous discourse. “Water-boats-bodies” is a colloquial phrase and thereby mundane, making it an unlikely source for profound teachings. The fact that Patrul can generate meaning out of such a seemingly insignificant idiom testifies to his interpretive talents. Not only is the colloquialism “water-boats-bodies” surprisingly mundane subject matter, but the phrase itself means “nothing.” By commenting so extensively on “water-boats-bodies,” Patrul is subtly telling us that he is capable of generating meaning, inexhaustible meaning even, out of literally “nothing.”

The Challenge of Skillful Teaching

When Patrul eventually identifies himself as someone who has “the confident eloquence (*spobs pa*) of speaking hundreds of words,” he explicitly acknowledges his ambition to embody the bodhisattva skill of confident eloquence. Another composition from Patrul’s collected works confirms his fascination with the question of how to compose and deliver skillful teachings. In an introduction to a short history of the dharma in Tibet that he wrote, entitled *A Short Discourse on the Origin of the Dharma* (*Chos ’byung ’bel gtam nyung ngu*),⁶⁴ Patrul devotes some time to discussing the principles behind different modes of public speech—whether these discourses be ones that teach worldly ethics or practices aiming at liberation; whether they be ones intended to generate feelings of wonder and devotion, or certainty about the nature of reality; whether these compositions be humorous (like *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies*), historical in focus, or otherwise.⁶⁵ The details of this discussion confirm what *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* already suggests, that Patrul is exceedingly concerned with the proper ways to deliver teachings.

In this introduction, Patrul lists various requisite elements of successful discourse. With regard to discourse concerning worldly aims and ethics, one should speak powerfully, one should

⁶³ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 348.

⁶⁴ *Chos ’byung ’bel gtam nyung ngu* in Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 1, 290-325.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: 290-293.

incorporate a sense of humor, and one should generate certainty in one's audience about the truth.⁶⁶ These observations, but the first of many in this passage, display Patrul's interest in a range of performative desiderata: the quality of one's delivery (speaking powerfully), one's choice of rhetorical strategy (sense of humor), and one's goals for teaching in the first place (generating confidence or certainty in one's audience). Patrul also recognizes a connection between these performative components and the specific mode of discourse to which they apply—here noting how these strategies are particularly relevant for discourse about worldly ethics, called “people's dharma” (*mi chos*).

Patrul is also sensitive to the mistakes that public speakers make in their rhetoric and their performance. Egotistic, pseudo-scholars, for example, deliver discourses that, despite being filled with lots of material, have no relevance or connection to the goals of its audience, include examples that contradict the points that it is trying to make, and are burdened by many superfluous examples.⁶⁷ Other discursive mistakes follow in Patrul's discussion: discourses filled with endless deception, discourses with no structure, and long talks with no practical relevance. These are all qualities that characterize what Patrul playfully calls the speech of stubborn old folks.⁶⁸ And if one isn't properly learned about one's subject matter, Patrul later remarks, one will not be able to cover enough ground in one's talk and will be unable to answer questions about what one has spoken about.⁶⁹ Patrul thus displays a keen sensitivity to the preparatory, performative, rhetorical, structural, and substantive components of discourse. Patrul, it should be emphasized, is someone who spends a lot of time reflecting on how to be an effective orator and teacher.

A survey of Patrul's collected works also teaches us something about his concern with how to deliver effective teachings: his fascination with different modes of discourse and different techniques for composing confidently eloquent dharma. As we know from his biographies, Patrul taught the same material over and over throughout his life to audiences of vastly different educational backgrounds. He famously taught Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* to everyone whom he met. He also regularly taught Karma Chagme's (Gnas mdo Karma chags med, 1613-1678) *Dechen Monlam*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*: 290: *ngag gi sgrub pa spangs pa la 'byung ba shes chel brjid la non dang ldan pa/ mtshar la bzhad gad 'byin pa/ bden la nges shes bskyed pa de/ mi chos kyi phu thag chod pa la 'byung/*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*: 290: *mang la 'brel ba med pa/ dpe dang don du 'gal ba/ dpe mang khur du lus pa de/ mi mkhas nga rgyal che ba la 'byung/*.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*: 290: *zob la zad dus med pa/ lus med yan lag mang ba/ 'brel med gtam gzhung ring ba de/ rgan po u tshug can la 'byung/* I do not think that the old people spoken of here are comparable to the old people in *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies*. The scholars whom Patrul picks on in the latter show no signs of making these mistakes (speaking impractically, or with no structure).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*: 291: *thos pa'i mtha' rgya ma bcad na/ chos bshad khol bus sa mi chod de slar la dris na yang lan mi 'byung/*.

(*Bde chen smon lam*) prayer for rebirth in the Sukhāvati heaven, the *Mani Kambum* (*Maṇi bka' 'bum*), and the chanting of Avalokiteśvara's six-syllable mantra.

The great proliferation of compositions in Patrul's collected works about the graduated path to liberation (*lam rim*) also speak to his unflinching dedication to coming up with different ways to communicate the same subject material. Patrul's compositions dealing with the structure of the path to enlightenment are plentiful and diverse: formal commentaries to classic works, pedagogically-driven outlines to these works, free standing explorations of path-related themes, his own rendition of the path in the *lam rim* ("graduated path") genre, and dozens of life-advice compositions.⁷⁰

These "life-advice" works (*zhal gdams*)⁷¹ accentuate Patrul's perpetual experimentation with structure and rhetoric in his path-related discourses. In many of his forty some odd life-advice compositions, most of which are in verse and fewer than four pages in length, he repeatedly teaches the same material. He offers an introductory guide to the path to enlightenment, with a focus on devotion to one's teacher, taking refuge and generating the altruistic attitude of a bodhisattva, chanting Avalokiteśvara's six-syllable mantra, and repeatedly examining the nature of one's mind no matter the context. Yet Patrul generates a wide variety of compositions from this common subject matter by changing his tone and meter, and by employing witty schemes to capture the attention of his audience.

To be sure, *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* is hardly the only text of Patrul's wherein he challenges himself to creatively

⁷⁰ Patrul's formal commentaries on classic Sanskrit Mahāyāna treatises include works on the *Abhisamayalāṅkāra* and the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*. See his *Mdo sde rgyan gyi don bsdus 'phags pa'i dgongs rgyan*, *Sher phyings mngon rtogs rgyan gyi 'bru 'grel*, and *Sher phyings mngon rtogs rgyan gyi spyi don*, in Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vols. 3, 5, and 6, respectively. For various analytical outlines (*sa bcad*) to path-related works such as the *Abhidharmakośa*, *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, Mnga' ris paṅ chen's (1487-1542) *Sdom gsum rnam nges*, and 'Jigs med gling pa's (1729/30-1798) *Yon tan mdzod*, see Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 2. For free standing explorations of path-related themes such as the three vows and the stages of the path, see, for example, the *Sdom pa gsum gyi gnad bsdus pa* and the *Rgyal sras byang chub sems dpa'i sa lam gyi rnam grangs mdor bsdus*, in Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 4. Patrul's own *lam rim* work is his famed *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, in Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 7.

⁷¹ Patrul's collected works contain over forty *zhal gdams*, a great many of which offer condensed versions of the path, often emphasizing simple yet all-encompassing "essential points" of the practice. See the many *zhal gdams* that follow the *Thog mtha' bar gsum du dge ba'i gtam* in Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 8, 140-173, as well as those gathered together under the title *Mtshungs don man ngag rdo rje'i thol glu spros bral sgra dbyangs* in Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 8, 260-371. For other *zhal gdams*-like instructions, see Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 1, where, for example, is found Patrul's famous *Padma tshal gyi zlos gar*, a drama consisting of dharma instructions to a bee who is overcome with sorrow at the death of his lover.

structure his instructions.⁷² *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* is a particularly strong example of Patrul challenging himself, however, because of the range of discursive modalities that appear within its nine pages. Patrul opens with a multivalent, pun-filled homage, sets forth a narrative introduction, composes a creative etymology, counters that performance with a formal, polemical criticism, and finally closes with a self-congratulatory rebuke of the criticism. In addition to including a confidently eloquent exposition of the hidden meaning of “water-boats-bodies,” the entire text of *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* reads like an oratorical performance, showcasing Patrul's capacity to compose in a wide variety of genres.

The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies is a reflexive work in that it is a skillful discourse about skillful discourse—one that addresses the topic of creative eloquence by having its characters model a creatively eloquent discourse and then debate its merits. The work thereby displays Patrul's self-consciousness about his own work as a composer of Buddhist sermons and showcases his proclivity to challenge himself to compose rhetorically diverse and sophisticated teachings.

A Composition about its Composer

The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies is also reflexive in another sense. By casting himself as the hero of his own story, Patrul places his own status as a skilled teacher at the center of the composition. Once the youth introduce Patrul as the originator of their creative etymology, it becomes clear that the composition is not just a discourse about discourse, but is also a composition about its composer.

Patrul's creative treatment of his own status as author, his imaginative use of the “author-function,” is actually a hallmark of a number of his compositions.⁷³ In each case, Patrul calls attention to his own status as author by creating a unique persona for himself as the person delivering the instructions. For example, in his *Discourse on Dharmic and Worldly Knowledge, The Ladder of Liberation* (*Chos dang 'jig rten shes pa'i gtam thar pa'i them skas*), Patrul portrays himself as a solitary ascetic who is periodically visited by students who request teachings from him. Patrul then presents the content of the discourse in the form of sophisticated answers to the basic questions

⁷² See, for example, the just mentioned *Padma tshal gyi zlos gar*. The *Thog mtha' bar gsum du dge ba'i gtam* finds Patrul creating a lyrical instruction, in verse, on the entirety of the path through the prism of the six-syllable mantra. See Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 8, 127-140.

⁷³ For a classic discussion of the variety of ways in which the status of the author functions in a text, see Foucault 1998.

about the Buddha's teachings that these visitors pose to him.⁷⁴ In his *Responses to the Questions of the Boy Loden*, Patrul presents himself as an old man delivering ethical instructions to a troubled young man. The instructions only begin, however, after the old man has proven his wisdom to the young man by trading witty insults with him.⁷⁵ Finally, in one untitled life-advice composition, Patrul delivers practice advice to himself, calling himself names and pointing out his own faults.⁷⁶

Patrul's technique of calling attention to his own position as author functions slightly differently in each of the examples just listed. But what does he accomplish by calling attention to himself as author of *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies*? I would argue that Patrul appears in the composition in order to represent, for his audience, the ideal social position of an eloquent teacher.

Patrul paints a flattering portrait of himself as a confident, eloquent, and authoritative teacher who is both capable of engaging with educated elites on their own terms, yet also adept at teaching a wide audience in a way that the elites cannot match. Patrul articulates his dissatisfaction with the discursive ideals of the conservative-minded old monks by juxtaposing their staid explanations of the words "heard" and "understood" with the youth's creative etymology of "water-boats-bodies." He likewise contrasts the elites' ineffectual critique of the "water-boats-bodies" etymology with the youth's colorful defense of Patrul's brilliance. In each case, Patrul positions himself as vastly superior in wit and skill to the old men.

One issue at stake in Patrul's criticism of these monastic elites, obsessed as they are with scholastic pursuits of formal composition and debate, is their incapacity to reach a wide audience with their teachings. Patrul's interest in reaching the widest possible audience is evident in his treatment of the popular six-syllable mantra of Avalakiteśvara, "*Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*," in the composition.

Patrul has the youth introduce the *maṇi* in order to draw a parallel between the six-syllable *maṇi* (*oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*) and the three-syllable "water-boats-bodies" (*chu gru lus*). In a brilliant sleight of hand, having just discussed the "six-syllabled *maṇi*" and its fame in Tibet, the youth jump right into a discussion of the "three-syllabled" "water-boats-bodies" teaching. The youth refers to the *maṇi* as: "*'bru drug ma ṇi padme 'di*" (this six-syllabled "mani peme"), then, only a few lines later, refers to the phrase "water-boats-bodies" as: "*rtsa ba tshig 'bru gsum po de*" (that root word or root phrase in three syllables).

And what of this "three-syllabled" root teaching, "water-boats-bodies"? Well, the youth claim it to have been transmitted from ear to ear in the past, just like the *maṇi*. So, while the old men might not

⁷⁴ See Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 1, 272-289.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*: 31-55.

⁷⁶ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 8, 140-143.

have heard of the “water-boats-bodies” teaching prior to meeting the youth, this teaching has nonetheless traveled far and wide, much like the *mani*. Far from being just a phrase of youthful slang, the youth talk about the phrase “water-boats-bodies” as if it were itself a mantra, or a secret teaching of some sort.

In a pattern that should now be familiar, Patrul's parallel treatment of the *mani* and “water-boats-bodies” is both playful and serious. There is clearly some irony in Patrul's assertion that his “water-boats-bodies” teaching has spread from ear to ear like the *mani* has. A colloquial expression meaning “nothing” is hardly the religious equivalent of the renowned mantra of the Bodhisattva of compassion. In this regard, Patrul's comparison of the two, the three-syllabled “water-boats-bodies” and the six-syllabled mantra, is a witty joke, appropriate for a humorous discourse (*bzhad gad kyi gtam*).

But Patrul is also asserting something quite important about the value of a good teaching. While scholars may be too busy writing arcane commentaries to be bothered by popular practices such as chanting the mantra of compassion, the majority of Tibetans are engaged in just these kinds of practices. Furthermore, these popular practices are no less profound than scholastic commentaries. In fact, as the youth assert, the *mani* is the very essence of all of the Buddha's teachings. This section establishes that Patrul, unlike the scholastic elites represented by the old men, is capable of creating teachings like the *mani* that are accessible to the majority of Tibetans. Teachings that resemble the etymology of “water-boats-bodies,” he seems to suggest, are the kinds of teachings that are capable of mass appeal—they are accessible, easy to remember, yet filled with hidden profundity.

Patrul's concern for teaching all types of people is a common, if oblique, theme throughout *The Exposition of Water, Boats, and Bodies*. During their explication of the meaning of “boats” (*gru*), the youth state that boats ferry all kinds of people: merchants, women, monks, gurus, brahmans, thieves, butchers, and so on. And when drawing out the parallel between boats' function and their own activities, the youth mention that they meet all sorts of different people on their travels, sometimes men, sometimes women, and sometimes children.⁷⁷ Boats, on a figurative level, and the youth, on a literal level, engage with all segments of the population. I interpret this motif as evidence for Patrul's concern that confident and eloquent teachings be accessible to a wide variety of audiences. In this way Patrul is modeling himself after some of his heroes, such as Karma Chagme and Shabkar (Zhabs dkar Tshogs drug rang grol, 1781-1851), both of whom were known for their popular teachings to audiences of all educational levels.⁷⁸ The conservative scholars, on

⁷⁷ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 344-5.

⁷⁸ Patrul composed a prayer for the quick rebirth of Shabkar that appears in his collected works. See “Zhabs dkar sprul sku myur 'byon” in Rdza dpal sprul

the other hand, are depicted as people who are too concerned with scholastic practices (like formal word-commentaries to canonical scriptures) to value accessible instructions.

Yet Patrul is very careful in his critique of the elders in *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies*. Patrul maintains the importance of various capacities of educated monks, specifically their skill in debate and their knowledge of scriptures, both skills that one develops through monastic study. One might say the same of Patrul's attitude towards Sakya Paṇḍita, whose conservative legacy appears to be an object of some ridicule in this text (though Sapaṇ is never named). Patrul clearly does respect Sapaṇ's high standards for monastic learning, however. Patrul is quoted in his biography praising Sakya Paṇḍita for his skill in the five traditional fields of learning, for example.⁷⁹

Patrul also portrays the common activities of educated monks in a positive light. His protagonists, the youth, perform some of the social duties of monks, such as participating in rituals to benefit benefactors and praying for the recently deceased. For Patrul, it seems, the ideal teacher must be at once scholastically trained,

2003: vol. 8. Patrul's biography also tells of how Patrul set out to meet Shabkar, intent to learn from this highly reputed master, before learning on the road that Shabkar had died. Kun bzang dpal ldan 2003: 197.

⁷⁹ See Kun bzang dpal ldan 2003: 193. This section of the biography also alludes to Patrul's non-sectarian approach, here noting the respect he held for Longchenpa (Rnying ma), Sapaṇ (Sakya), and Tsong Khapa (Geluk). A note about Patrul and non-sectarianism is in order. Contemporary English descriptions of Patrul are quick to (problematically) identify Patrul as a member of the nineteenth-century non-sectarian movement (*Ris med*) in Eastern Tibet. See, for example, Dza Patrul Rinpoche 1998: xxxviii; and Reynolds 1996: 297. Patrul was, in fact, a close colleague of two of the three figures most frequently associated with this "movement." Khyentse Wango ('Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po, 1820-1892) composed a hymn in honor of Patrul and consecrated a major religious construction project that Patrul oversaw, and Chogyur Lingpa (Mchog gyur gling pa, 1829-1870) gave Patrul the responsibility of overseeing the distribution of one of his treasure revelations. There is, to my knowledge, no evidence in the biographical archive that Patrul had a relationship with Kongtrul ('Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, 1813-1899). Kongtrul does not appear in Patrul's biographies, nor does Patrul appear in Kongtrul's autobiography. Given the biographical record, I thus personally see no compelling reason to place Patrul within a *ris med* "movement," if one wants to call Kongtrul, Khyentse Wangpo, and Chogyur Lingpa's activities, as significant as they were, a movement. With that said, Kun bzang dpal ldan uses the phrase "*ris med*" a number of times to describe Patrul's activity, which was, by all accounts, non-sectarian in so far as he taught students from all different lineages and used source materials from all different lineages. One might justifiably understand *Ris med* to be, *de facto*, an informal lineage formed by spiritual descendants of Kongtrul's and Khyentse's, those who trace their lineage through Kongtrul and Khyentse's students and incarnations. In so far as members of such an informal lineage emphasize a non-sectarian attitude in the construction of their self-identity as a lineage, it makes perfect sense for them to include Patrul in their accounts of the "origin" of the *ris med* lineage. For an investigation of *Ris med* along somewhat different lines, see Alexander Gardner 2006: Chapter 3.

socially engaged, and capable of communicating confidently and skillfully to a wide audience.

Patrul's approach is to thus present himself, the supposed originator of the "water-boats-bodies" creative-etymology, as enjoying the best of both worlds. He represents himself as someone who is not limited by the constraints of scholastic discourse yet is still capable of operating within the world of monastically trained scholars. So, for example, he claims to be beyond the requirements of quoting from scripture or engaging in debate. Because of the genius of his confidently eloquent preaching and the thoroughness of his education, these requirements do not apply to him. Still, were he to choose to support his teachings with scriptural quotations or participate in debate, he could do so with ease.⁸⁰

Patrul also presents himself as occupying a privileged position with respect to the social world—living neither an ordinary, mundane life nor abandoning all connections to his fellow people. The protagonists of his story, the youth, perhaps represent his students. They do, after all, spread his teaching about "water-boats-bodies." And how do these ideal students behave in the world? They are at once full participants in the social world and yet entirely unaffected by it. The youth are engaged with their neighbors, traveling amongst commoners, conversing with them, and healing them. Yet, as the "water-boats-bodies" allegory so elegantly expresses, the youth are capable of interacting with the world without being changed by it. Like water, they accomplish their aims without being stained or diminished.

Patrul's concern for respecting the elite education of monks while nonetheless criticizing their conservative approach to public discourse reflects the complex nature of Patrul's own real-life status as a religious figure in nineteenth-century Eastern Tibet. Patrul's career was multi-faceted, even conflicted. He was recognized as an incarnate lama at an early age and thereby inherited a monastic estate, privileged social status, and the guarantee of an elite religious education. Yet, as a young man, he rejected his monastic inheritance, leaving his monastery to lead the life of a wandering ascetic (at least for a short time).⁸¹

But Patrul also spent much time traveling to the major monasteries of Eastern Tibet as both student and later teacher, and thereby retained strong institutional connections to a number of important monasteries in Eastern Tibet. He received a traditional monastic education at Dzogchen monastery, for example, and

⁸⁰ Rdza dpal sprul 2003: 349-50.

⁸¹ Patrul was recognized at an early age as the incarnate lama of Palge Samten Ling monastery (*Dpal dge bsam gtan gling*) in the Dzachuka (*Rdza chu kha*) region of Khams, though he abandoned the monastery around the age of twenty. For an account of his rejection of his inherited role of head lama of Palge Samten Ling, see: Kun bzang dpal ldan 2003: 195-6. General references for accounts of his life appear in note 2.

studied with many of the great scholars of his day. Later he even became a scholastic instructor and the abbot of a monastic college at Dzogchen, where he assembled analytical outlines of canonical treatises meant for use in scholastic study.⁸² Yet he nonetheless frequently wrote of his skepticism of a life devoted to scholastic study and composition.⁸³

Patrul was a friend and consoler to the elite in Derge, having composed advice for some of them, yet was also a populist teacher to nomads and villagers throughout Khams. He was, at times, both a forest-dwelling hermit and an administrator at a major monastery, a self-effacing renunciant and an iconoclastic performer. Patrul's career was, to say the least, a never-ending negotiation within a network of conflicting social positions.

Perhaps, then, we should read *The Explanation of Water, Boats, and Bodies* as a statement of Patrul's personal aspirations as a teacher—his desire to embody the pedagogical skills of a bodhisattva, to employ his considerable education, training, wit and creativity in the service of creating accessible yet profound teachings for beings of all capacity, while all the while remaining inoculated from the dangerous and harmful emotions, the hopes and the fears that characterize worldly life.

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⁸² Patrul was educated at Dzogchen monastery (*Rdzogs chen dgon*) outside of Derge, spent many years in retreat caves surrounding the monastery, and later taught at Dzogchen's monastic college and affiliate monasteries. Patrul's accomplished teachers included Rdzog chen rgyal sras Gzhan phan mtha' yas (1800-1855), Rdzogs chen Mi 'gyur nam mkha'i rdo rje (1793-1870), and Zhe chen dbon sprul Mthu stobs rnam rgyal (b. 1787). For Patrul's analytical outlines, see Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 2.

⁸³ Patrul's "life-advice" compositions are replete with rhetoric declaring the uselessness of scholarly pursuits and criticism of all-talk but no-substance monks, though these statements often appear in sections that strive to motivate the audience to renounce all worldly pursuits and escape to a cave for solitary retreat practice. These passages would therefore demand careful interpretation with attention to the context of Patrul's loaded rhetoric. See for example, however, Rdza dpal sprul 2003: vol. 8, 128, 275, 278.

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