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Edited by
Jue Liang, Natasha Mikles,
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Sixth International Seminar of Young Tibetologists Keynote Address: What Tibetan Studies Academics Can Learn from the Tibetan Traditional Education System and Vice-Versa[1]

Ngawang Sonam

(University of Virginia)

As is widely known, the traditional Tibetan educational system, by which I mean the educational system used in Tibetan monasteries, and its central pedagogical approaches are either directly or indirectly structured around three principal practices: listening (*thos pa*), contemplating (*bsam pa*), and meditating (*sgom pa*). While exposition (*'chad pa*), debate (*rtsod pa*), and composition (*rtsom pa*) represent the main approaches to preserving and promoting the Buddha's teachings, the triad of refuting (*dgag pa*) other systems, establishing (*bzhag pa*) one's own system, and dispelling objections (*brtsod pa spong pa*) with respect to one's own system are employed as the primary framework for scholarly composition. Nevertheless, whatever method one may use, the goals of the traditional education system are always ultimately twofold: to tame one's own mind and preserve the teaching of Buddha.

As modern scholars or students in the field of Tibetology, particularly in Tibetan Buddhism, whether we implement qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods in our academic studies or research, our main goal is neither to tame the mind nor preserve Buddha's teaching. Our goal is rather to establish new academic knowledge and to further develop received knowledge for the sake of advancing our academic field. Since traditional and modern educational systems have very different goals, we should expect that their primary methodological paths toward their goals should be different as well. Traditional methodological tools and pedagogical techniques may not work for modern academic studies; likewise, some modern academic methodological apparatuses may not be suitable for the traditional educational system.

However, this does not mean that there is nothing at all that they

[1] This paper is a translation of the keynote address delivered in Tibetan at the Sixth ISYT, held at the University of Virginia from August 1st to August 5th, 2022.

Ngawang Sonam, "Sixth International Seminar of Young Tibetologists Keynote Address: What Tibetan Studies Academics Can Learn from the Tibetan Traditional Education System and Vice-Versa," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 75, March 2025, pp. 5–12.

might contribute to one another. Even though traditional and modern educational systems do not share the same final goals and principal training methods, without doubt there are several conventional pedagogical systems and methodological apparatuses for research that they might profitably share with one another.

Here, I will suggest that for students and scholars in traditional Tibetan educational systems, especially those who are in the monastic educational system, philological approaches and text-critical analysis that have been systematically developed and practiced within Western educational systems for centuries can provide extremely useful tools for working with classical literature and for other forms of traditional textual scholarship. On the other hand, in the past half-decade or so I have spent training in the academic study of Tibetan Buddhism, one major area that I often feel needs to be improved is the basic structure of the curriculum for graduate study in the field. There is a great deal to be learned from the traditional Tibetan educational system on this point, especially in terms of a rigorous comprehensiveness that would make a huge contribution to our graduate curriculum for the advanced study of Tibetan Buddhism. Hence, in this talk I will address the following two compound questions: How and why are modern philological approaches and text-critical studies important for students in traditional Tibetan educational settings, especially for those in monasteries and nunneries? And how and why should we seek to improve the academic curriculum for graduate-level study of Tibetan Buddhism in modern colleges and universities?

1. What can students or scholars in the traditional Tibetan educational system learn from the modern educational system?

As students in traditional Tibetan educational settings, what can we learn from the modern academic system, and how can those elements be implemented within traditional academic practice? While there are certainly a number of different answers that could be given, as mentioned above, my experience in both traditional and Western academic educational systems for many years suggests two particular methodological approaches as key methods that would most benefit students in traditional educational settings: philological practices and text-critical analysis. These methods would definitely serve as crucial tools for improving and updating the traditional educational system and for preserving the value of traditional knowledge in the modern world.

Philology represents the fundamental method of gaining better comprehension of textual traditions and decoding textualized

meaning. As students in traditional educational settings, our primary responsibilities involve traditional texts. Each day, we read, memorize, recite, and debate mainly on the basis of traditional texts. However, intentionally or unintentionally, we often ignore some critical text-related issues that could have a huge impact on our proper understanding of texts and textualized meaning. Careful treatment of internal textual references, drawing a clear line between principal ideas from the original source and those from secondary sources, and linguistic analysis of similarities and dissimilarities between original and secondary sources' language patterns—these are some examples of crucial philological issues and practices we sometimes do not give the attention they deserve. Such oversights can create unnecessary obstacles to our understanding of texts and their meanings.

Moreover, there is a common tendency for traditional scholars to read original or primary texts through the lenses of secondary works, such as later scholars' commentaries, rather than study the original texts on their own. For such reasons, secondary sources are sometimes treated as equally important to the texts they comment upon, even though they were created in different times and places. As we know, vocabularies, phrases, and sentences convey different meanings at different times and in different historical contexts. Thus, I think it is crucial to be able to analyze the texts we read, study, and debate with systematic philological methods.

At the same time, I also would like to acknowledge that Tibetans have had, for a long time, their own rich tradition of philological practice. Philological principles and practices became well-known among Tibetan thinkers beginning in at least the fourteenth century. For example, we can assert that Tsongkhapa's *The Essence of Treatises: Distinguishing the Interpretable Meaning and Definitive Meaning* (*Drang nges legs bshad snying po*) is one of the masterpieces of traditional Tibetan philology. In this work, the interpretations of Buddhist philosophical ideas by Indian masters such as Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, Candrakīrti, Bhāviveka, and Dharmakīrti are analyzed and evaluated, not only along philosophical lines, but also with detailed philological methods. In this text, Tsongkhapa carefully analyzes these works' general language patterns, modes of specialized philosophical terminologies, sources of internal textual references, and so on.

Another example of traditional Tibetan philological work is found in Tsongkhapa's commentary on the *Abhisamyālaṃkāra,* called the *Golden Garland Treatise (Legs bshad gser phreng)*. In the first chapter of *Golden Garland*, Tsongkhapa dedicates over six pages to investigating the authorship of twenty-one commentaries on the *Abhisamyālaṃkāra*. These twenty-one commentaries were commonly accepted as being of Indian origin by the majority of early Tibetan thinkers. However,

Tsongkhapa rejects the Indian origins of four of them. He uses different types of reasoning to analyze each. One is rejected on the basis of internal textual evidence, another on the basis of historical context, and so on. In another example, he rejects the Indian provenance of a commentary on the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in One Hundred Thousand Lines* (Skt. *Śata-sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*; Tib. *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa stong phrag brgya pa),* which is commonly accepted as authored by the Indian master Dharmaśrī, because it employs many terms and phrases that do not appear in other works of Indian Buddhist philosophical literature. If, as Sheldon Pollock proposes, philology is "the discipline of making sense of texts",[2] then Tsongkhapa is a philologist working to make sense of these texts by analyzing their textuality and textualized meaning in their historical contexts. And there are numerous other examples of traditional Tibetan philology.

Although this is the case, philological methods and apparatuses have yet to be systematically defined and developed for use in the traditional Tibetan educational system. This being so, students and scholars in the traditional system, monastics in particular, would definitely benefit from the Western philological approach. I personally have found Western philological methods to be very useful and effective; they help us not only by providing an understanding of textuality, in the broadest sense, but also by providing tools to study the specifics of textualized meaning and historical contexts.

The text-critical approach, especially the critical editorial method, is one widely practiced scholarly method that could constitute a huge contribution to the traditional Tibetan educational system. As we know, the Tibetan textual tradition is very rich in terms of both size and content. The Tibetan Buddhist canon alone, which includes the translated words of the Buddha (Kangyur, *Bka' 'gyur*) and translated treatises (Tengyur, *Bstan 'gyur*), exceeds three hundred volumes. Tibetan scholars have produced countless works of scholarship over the centuries. As students in traditional educational settings, especially monasteries and nunneries, we engage with these texts on a daily basis. The tools of textual criticism, especially critical editorial methods, would provide us the skills and means for analyzing the nature of texts, procedures for collating the assembled materials, establishing relationships among texts, and textual evidence, as well as the process of printing and reprinting the texts. These tools and skills could prove to be crucial for students in traditional settings.

Most of the study manuals used in monasteries and nunneries, along with the Kangyur and Tengyur, have gradually started to be

[2] Pollock 2009: 937.

published in modern book format by traditional institutions. Large numbers of works of Tibetan classical literature, as well as other works, have been reproduced over and over to meet the demands of students and general readers. Given this situation, to what extent can we treat these reprinted versions of modernized classical texts as the authors' original works? What kind of editorial methods were used in the process of reproducing these classical texts? More importantly, is there a standardized editorial apparatus to deal with textual variants and other text-related issues in order to preserve the unamended intention of their original authors? Considering these questions, I think it is important to have standard conventions for the transcription of manuscripts and a systematic way of editing classical works in traditional institutions. I have personally found that Walter Greg's "The Rationale of Copy-Text"[3] and University of Virginia professors David L. Vander Meulen and G. Thomas Tanselle's "A System of Manuscript Transcription"[4] present particularly useful and effective editorial tools that traditional institutions and scholars could employ in their text-related work.

2. What can scholars and students in the modern educational system learn from the traditional Tibetan educational system?

The structures of general curriculums and their contents, as well as pedagogical approaches employed by traditional Tibetan institutions, may slightly differ from tradition to tradition. However, in terms of principal learning subjects, all the major Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug, are primarily focused on five major fields and tantric teaching, as will be shortly discussed. However, in order to engage with today's audience more effectively and productively, I will here rely on my own educational background and the system in which I was educated. As a result, when I discuss the curriculum, pedagogy, and textual references, I am drawing mainly from the Gelug tradition, especially the educational system established at Ganden Monastery.

During the nineteen years I spent training in traditional philosophical studies at Ganden Monastery, I thought little about the overall structure of the traditional educational system and how it affects students' learning. I simply did not realize how well these traditional curriculums were designed. They were something we just took for granted. In 2009, I entered Gelugpa University for Geshe

[3] Greg 1950: 19.
[4] Vander Muelen and Tanselle 1999: 201.

Lharampa study and defended my Geshe Lharampa dissertation in 2015. These six years of Geshe Lharampa training at Gelugpa University gave me a strong sense of how well the standard monastic academic curriculums were designed and how well they prepare students for advanced study.

In general, the overall structure of formal curriculums at Gelugpa University is quite similar to that of modern academic curriculums. There are many subjects and much reading material that students are expected to engage in a relatively short period of time. In many cases, students lack sufficient time to properly digest all the assigned readings. However, the standard monastic academic training students must complete prior to entering Gelugpa University equips them with all the necessary tools to effectively face the challenge associated with this imbalance between academic expectations and the limited time allotted, a challenge we certainly face in advanced Geshe Lharampa study. I think a similar challenge confronts students in most modern educational institutions. Over the last nine years of my training, both in undergraduate and graduate programs in western academic settings, I have come to believe that this imbalance between academic expectations and time allotted is one of the main factors creating obstacles to students' understanding of assigned reading materials.

In the standard monastic curricular system, study materials are divided into several categories based on subject matter, such as Pramāna (*tshad ma*), Prajñāpāramitā (*phar phyin*), Mādhyamaka (*dbu ma*), Abhidharma (*mdzod*), Vinaya (*'dul ba*), and Tantra (*sngags*). Students then train in a single subject over the course of one or two semesters, or even an entire year when necessary. This pedagogical approach prepares students well for advanced study when they enter Gelugpa University. More importantly, this sort of well-designed curricular structure provides a comprehensive foundation for producing well-rounded scholars. At this point, then, I would like to discuss curricular structures in modern educational institutions and consider further the traditional Tibetan monastic curriculum in order to explore what the former might learn from the latter.

In general, undergraduate courses on Tibetan Buddhism seem to be the first place where students develop an interest in the field. For those who continue on to graduate studies, the next three or four years are the essential period for them to gain a general knowledge of the field and to develop a deeper understanding of a particular area of the field in which they will specialize. As we know, the courses on Tibetan Buddhism offered to undergraduate students usually present the topic in very broad terms. A common approach is to cover general concepts associated with the Four Noble Truths and an overview of the historical development of Tibetan Buddhism. Such an approach is

appropriate, as these courses are designed for college students who have little or no prior knowledge of the topic.

The following three or four years of graduate study offer students more opportunities to explore Tibetan Studies and Tibetan Buddhism, with options for specialized courses on a range of related topics. However, the curriculum can vary significantly, as the graduate courses on Tibetan Buddhism that are offered vary from semester to semester and from one year to the next, even at the same institution. Of course, these offerings prepare students for their further advanced study and research. Nevertheless, I strongly feel that a standardized curriculum for graduate study, which covers all major topics (Pramāṇa, Prajñāpāramitā, Mādhyamaka, Abhidharma, Vinaya, and Tantra) of traditional Tibetan Buddhism should be established at any institution where an advanced degree in Tibetan Buddhism, and especially Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, is offered. This will provide students with a solid foundation and better understanding of their academic field, and a more comprehensive sense of Tibetan Buddhism as a whole.

In my view, without such a standardized curriculum that systematically introduces and covers these major topics of Tibetan Buddhism I have mentioned, it will be an impossible task for students to get a full picture of Tibetan Buddhism and its philosophical system. For example, the subjects of Pramāna, Prajñāpāramitā, Mādhyamaka, Abhidharma, Vinaya, and Tantra are deeply connected to each other, both syntactically and semantically, at least in the context of Tibetan Buddhism. Hence, I think it is important to offer at least one semester-long course on each of these major subjects, so that students can develop some sense of the general structure, historical developments, and philosophical ideas of these major fields. With this approach, we really can produce well-rounded students in the academic field of Tibetan Buddhism and its philosophy.

Moreover, providing this type of effective and well-rounded academic plan will not only enrich students' general knowledge of Tibetology, broadly speaking, and their more focused understanding of the field of Tibetan Buddhism, but it will also equip them with the necessary knowledge and tools for a successful teaching career. Such an approach will enable teachers to design courses that provide students a comprehensive picture of Tibetan Buddhism, as it is. Whether we are teaching assistants or professors in the field, throughout our teaching career we commonly face a certain challenge: students regularly come up with a number of questions from their reading or research that fall outside of our specialty or area of focus. In such cases, at least we will be able to provide students with

justifiable answers or sufficient background information regarding their questions.

As we know, due to many factors, it is impossible for students in modern academic institutions to spend decades and decades on these subjects as students in traditional institutions do. Nevertheless, I think it is important to provide graduate students in Tibetan Buddhism in general and especially those who are specializing in Tibetan Buddhist philosophical training a sufficient background knowledge in their field and the critical skills they will need for fruitful academic careers. Hence, I think it would be ideal if institutions could offer at least a minimum of one semester each on Pramāna, Prajñāpāramitā, Mādhyamaka, Abhidharma, Vinaya, and Tantra.

In a world where education is often prioritized as a fundamental key to success, our lives can be characterized by an eagerness to explore new ideas and learn new skills. Whether we are students or scholars in the modern academic field of Tibetan Buddhist studies or engaged in traditional Tibetan Buddhist studies, there are a number of skill sets and forms of knowledge that we can learn from one other. Modern philology and the text-critical approach, for example, offer effective methods and relevant skills for the traditional Tibetan educational system. Thus, it would behoove students and scholars in traditional Tibetan educational settings to learn these methods and skills in order to improve and update their educational system and preserve the value of traditional knowledge in a manner that accords with the present day. As I have expressed above, advanced Tibetan Buddhist studies curricula would benefit significantly from further development and systematization, and I think the traditional Tibetan monastic curriculum would serve as an ideal model.

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One Desires You, One Cries: A Taxonomy of Female Disciples in Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*)

Kali Nyima Cape

(Georgia State University)

This article will explore what an important Tibetan Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) scripture states about female adepts in the 14th century. It begins with a translation of an excerpt from *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinīs (Mkha' 'gro snying thig),* a scripture entitled *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples (Brgyud 'dzin gyi slob bu'i lung bstan)*. Its implications for women and consorts are unpacked through an analysis of a consort taxonomy, and the taxonomy of female disciples described here. The final section examines what is gleaned about women in post-tantra from this text. This includes the exploration of women's liberation, attention to women's bodies, and female disciple's sexual relationships. It concludes by analyzing the striking assertion of redemption as a possibility for all the female disciples, including those with negative characteristics, a direct contradiction to the rule of the consort taxonomy elsewhere in the scripture which designates such women as those to be renounced.

1. Introduction

Amidst the rising influence of all-male monastic learning centers, female adepts practiced in Great Perfections communities that centered religious sexuality. Significant questions loom as to how the literature of these post-tantric communities differed from or overlapped with normative tantric formulations of women's roles. Germano has argued that classical Great Perfection represented novel post-tantric reinterpretations of key elements of Buddhist philosophy and praxis, producing an extensive body of literary masterpieces that constituted an indigenous Tibetan reinvention of Buddhist tantra. Thus, Great Perfection can be considered post-tantric because of its sustained critique of mainstream tantric literature, its redefining of

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tantric discourses and praxis, and its effort to distinguish itself from tantra.[1] However, how these innovations extended to topics of women and sexuality is a question yet to be answered. In particular, the historical development of the paradigms governing women and consorts in classical Great Perfection literature has remained largely unstudied, leaving a gap in understanding of how the most influential post-tantric movement in Tibet factors in the history of Buddhist women. This research addresses a piece of that missing history by analyzing scriptures of pivotal importance to Tibetan Great Perfection, known as *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī* one of the major 14th century texts that shaped the *Seminal Heart (snying thig)* genre, the genre that came to define Great Perfection in Tibet.

The present discussion draws inspiration from the three other works addressing women in Great Perfection, without which this research would be impossible. Each of these works addresses questions of women, gender, and identity in Great Perfection, *Seminal Heart* literature. Those works include Germano and Gyatso's study of Longchenpa's (Klong chen pa, 1308–1363) encounter with a female disciple.[2] Likewise, Gyatso and Klein addressed topics concerning women in later pre-modern Great Perfection texts.[3] The discussion here will focus particularly on female disciples in the classical period, the pivotal era of *Seminal Heart* literature in the fourteenth century, investigating a key text in the corpus known as *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī.*

2. A Historical Context for Post-Tantric Praxis

The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī emerged at the turn of the 14th century in Tibet, a period of the formation of Tibetan canons[4] and the rise of large-scale monasticism.[5] Tibetan monasteries in the premodern period would become a ruling elite that dominated large sections of the population through exerting influence over economics as well as religious, political, and cultural affairs. Eventually monasteries came to house anywhere from ten to twenty-five percent of the Tibetan male population.[6] However, monasteries were not the only focal point of religious life in this era. Hermitages *(ri khrod),* religious encampments

1 Germano 1994: 205, 207.
2 Germano and Gyatso: 2000.
3 Gyatso 1998; Klein 1995.
4 A major compilation of the Tibetan canon in the 14th century was by Tibetan historian, Buton Rinchen Drup (1290–1364). See: Schaeffer 2004: 265-281.
5 Davidson 2005: 84-85.
6 Jansen 2018: 10.

(chos sgar), and nomadic religious groups organized around a charismatic leader existed as some of the alternative religious societies beyond institutions. One form of ideal religious community that was the focus of Great Perfection literature was communities of non-celibate male and female adepts, for whom religious sexuality was a central concern.[7] This was facilitated in part due to tantric and post-tantric movements in Tibet. Tibetans had imported the full gamut of teachings from Buddhist India, but many regarded esoteric lineages, known as tantra, as the highest form of teachings. Therefore, even though the 14th century saw the consolidation of monastic authority within large male-only centers of religious learning, there were still communities that involved women. In this period, these groups were under pressure to legitimize themselves and justify their reasons for their praxis. The central figures of these communities did not have vows of celibacy, but instead sought to embody the alternative ideal of the yogi or tantric adept (*rnal 'byor pa, sngags pa*). Their meditation practices included sacramental sexuality,[8] sexual yogas,[9] and symbolic imagery of male and female buddhas embracing one another. Due to these interests, the writers of the literature analyzed here were earnestly theorizing about women, relationships, and how to relate to women as potential consorts for the purposes of sacramental sexuality, sexual yoga, and companionship.

3. The Source Text

The text presented here is an excerpt from *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī*, a scriptural revelation produced in 1313[10] by Pema Ledreltsal (Padma las 'brel rtsal, 1291–1315/17[11]) shortly before his death.[12] Following typical Tibetan scriptural revelation conventions, this cycle, *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī,* is attributed to a constellation of authors. This includes a male adept, Pema Ledreltsal, as the revealer. It also includes the previously mentioned influential scholar yogi, Longchenpa. Additionally, authors included students of the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (Rang 'byung rdo rje, 1284–1339),[13] and his

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7 The literature studied here presents sexual dimorphism and portrays human life as heteronormative from the human to cosmological domain.

8 Sacramental sexuality refers to rituals involving sexual intercourse, both visualized and embodied.

9 Sexual yoga refers to contemplative exercises involving intercourse that is either visualized or visualized and embodied.

10 Germano 1994: 270.

11 Germano and Gyatso 2000: 244.

12 Ibid.: 245.

13 Ibid.: 248.

disciples. They each added to the cycle either directly or through commentarial literature and redactions. Little is known about the history of the cycle's redactions over time, including between its first iteration by Pema Ledreltsal and the form used by Longchenpa. The corpus was adopted by Longchenpa in his thirties and he came to identify himself as the reincarnation of its revealer. At some point, the scripture came to be primarily transmitted as part of *The Four-Part Seminal Heart* (*Snying thig ya bzhi*) which consists of *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī* and earlier works, *Seminal Heart of Vimalamitra*, along with Longchenpa's own three commentarial extensions.

The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī in the Adzom drukpa chögar (*A 'dzom 'brug pa chos sgar*) woodblock edition is a double-sided, five hundred and nineteen folio corpus, in two volumes with one hundred and twenty-six different texts in verse and prose.[14] This article also relies on the Peltseg edition (*dpal brtsegs*), which is almost identical.[15] The corpus primarily includes philosophical, ritual, and contemplative literature. Today, this scripture remains an important and authoritative text for the Nyingma tradition and its contemplative cycles are drawn upon in some of its largest Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.[16] The presence of female figures pervades the entire corpus. Indeed, *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī* tells the story of a scripture that is in transition to a patriarchal lineal succession even though it had previously centered itself, narratively speaking, on hagiographies of two famed female disciples of the past. These two female figures are Yeshe Tsogyal (Ye shes mtsho rgyal, 8th century), and Princess Pemasel (Lha lcam padma gsal, 8th century), daughter of Tibetan King Trisong Detsen (Khri srong lde btsan, 8th century). They are the first two people the scripture is taught to. Women are also represented in the text through its pervasive tantric couple (*yab yum)* imagery as well as through the presence of Yeshe Tsogyal, as the primary interlocutor, the scribe who records lectures and dialogues with Padmasambhava, and is his primary consort in hagiographies. The scripture also contains references to women within instructions for consort praxis. Consequently, the question that looms over this manuscript is what were the actual lived realities of women who engaged with these scriptures? This is a question that is impossible to answer based on extant sources, a persistent problem in the study of women in this period. Thus, it is necessary to consider what little historical evidence is extant, namely the types of claims that were made about women, to investigate human women's realities as

[14] Dri med 'od zer 1975: 441-446.
[15] Dri med 'od zer 2009: vol. 5–6, 169-172.
[16] Such as Namdroling, in India, which relies on this 'scripture for the "gomdra" (*sgom grwa)* or three year meditation retreat.

portrayed by the scriptures, and what types of literary techniques were used to facilitate and rationalize women's inclusion. In doing so, this investigation focuses upon the discursive landscape within which women would have negotiated their lives.

A scripture within *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī* features particularly revealing descriptions of female disciples and consorts of the treasure revealer, Pema Ledreltsal. This scripture is called *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples.* It offers a glimpse at what the roles of women in the non-celibate, female inclusive Great Perfection *Seminal Heart* communities would entail and the role of taxonomic knowledge in these portrayals. The scripture is composed of a taxonomy that describes the twenty-one disciples of Pema Ledreltsal, the treasure revealer of *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī.* Although it is framed as a prophecy given from Padmasambhava to Ledreltsal in his past life, the actual writer of the scripture is impossible to know. It could have been Ledreltsal himself, as the text asserts, or because of its references to female disciples that would be reborn as disciples in the next lifetime, it is also plausible to consider it may be an addition by Longchenpa and his disciples after the life of Ledreltsal. In that case it may be read as rationalizing the past life histories of the women in Longchenpa's circles. Both these readings lend themselves to classifying this taxonomy as applied taxonomy used to make sense of people the author had encountered, rather than generic types. However, it is also feasible to consider that the scripture could have been added much later, with or without the same functions, despite its claim to be Ledreltsal's revelation.

The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples presents one of the major taxonomies in the *Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī,* the other major one being in *Ḍākki's Path and Fruit,* (*Dā kki lam 'bras kyi skor*) a taxonomy of possible consorts, which I have already analyzed in another article.[17] *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is a brief text, less than three folios. In terms of its size in context, it is a short scripture in a corpus filled with many short scriptures. Among *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī's* texts, only a few scriptures are larger, running around thirty folios in length or more. However, the corpus has many more very short scriptures like the one examined here. Indeed, approximately half of its scriptures are five folios or less. *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is one of these brief scriptures, but it serves as a rich source of information because of its detailed description of female Great Perfection adepts, providing a window into the world of non-celibate religious culture.

[17] Cape 2020.

4. Methodology

Taxonomy is a favored Buddhist information technology. It appears in a range of forms, from Abhidharma literature that classified factors of reality to taxonomies of beautiful and terrifying female consorts appearing throughout tantric literature.[18] In general, taxonomy is a discursive framework used to organize knowledge into simple, accessible structures. It is a tool and method of interpreting, classifying, and filtering information. Because it is different from a list with classifications of types of information, it allows a person to interpret the information, make sense of it and identify types. The classifications allow the user of taxonomy to determine what the relationships are between different types and to make decisions based on this information. There are different types of folk taxonomies, but the type of interest here is *applied taxonomy*, which does not seek to describe all possible classifications in an encompassing way, but instead seeks to address specific examples in terms of the pre-existing framework. Applied taxonomy does not adhere to a strict basis, even though it partakes of preordained categories. However, it varies on a rule-by-rule basis, refining, expanding, and pruning taxonomic sets and classifications based on what is being examined.

This research draws on theories of applied taxonomy to propose that the taxonomy of female disciples represents applied taxonomy, an inductive framework. As such it demonstrates how this taxonomy of disciples negotiates between consort taxonomies from tantric literature and a social world full of human women. I argue that this taxonomy can be regarded as a valuable archive of knowledge practices, revealing data about the social world of the text, discursive practices, and ways of understanding persons. Particularly it reveals how women were theorized in the non-celibate milieu. I also argue that taxonomies are not only ways of organizing influential and important knowledge, taxonomies of women also function almost clandestinely to exclude possibilities. Therefore, they shape what types of female roles are fostered and what types are denied. For example, one illustration of this principle is in the typology of women described in contemporary defenses against allegations of abuse of women in Buddhism. Certain religious leaders have recently responded to abuse allegations by stating they are clearly false because, as is well known, there are women who are trying to discredit a Tibetan leader, those who are mentally unstable, and those who simply don't like the teacher,[19] those who are gold-diggers or who

[18] Cape 2020: 354.
[19] Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche 2020.

have been paid to make false allegations. This is taxonomy at work, being utilized to make sense of current events, by offering accessible lists of culturally legible categories of possible women. What does it imply when, in these possible explanations, that the compendium of possible types of women is full of categories of women who are lying and omits categories of women whose allegations are true? As this example illustrates, taxonomies of persons matter. They are information retrieval systems that reflect and perpetuate biases and as shown in this illustration, they can make some persons seem credible while discrediting others. Therefore, taxonomies are not just summaries of information, nor are they mere descriptions. They are an inductive framework that allows the user to make systematic inferences about what is likely to be.[20] *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* functions in this way, an inductive framework that in this case advocates that advanced Great Perfection adepts may be female and if so, they are also potential consorts who could rapidly attain buddhahood.

This analysis of *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* will demonstrate that taxonomies were mutating discourses and that the curious, sometimes seemingly bizarre taxonomies of divine and demonic consorts in tantric literature were potentially applied as ways of managing knowledge about living persons. They were instruments used to earnestly make sense of people and relationships. This is a general property of taxonomy, taxonomies succeed when they are being applied.[21] Perhaps this explains why taxonomies of consorts have been so persistent across tantric literature. In that sense, this article contributes to missing histories of women in Buddhism, in Great Perfection and Tibet. Yet, it also contributes to histories of Tibetan information science and knowledge production praxis. The project of the current essay is to analyze elements of how a particular taxonomy represents women, as evidence of how discourses about women acquired authority but were also negotiated with and transformed.

5. The Taxonomy of Female Disciples

The following is the taxonomy of female disciples, an excerpt from *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples.* It excludes the section about men and one disciple whose sex is unclear. *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* says:

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[20] Atran 1998: 548.
[21] Flett and Vernau 2011: 226-235.

Hey, you, the one with intelligence and compassion! After you have opened the door to my treasures up until you pass away, there will be twenty-one disciples of various types. There will be fourteen males. There will be seven female Ḍākki types who will be physical connections[22] or dharma connections.

First, one type will come who has a good birth, has great faith, knows a little virtue, is devoted to Mahayana, has great knowledge, sharp intellect, with a large family, is selfish, does not get along with others, and who will be criticized by all. That type is a Karma Ḍākki**,** thus, the condition to receive blessings will be a medium lifespan. She will apply the key points of instruction. She will be liberated in the first bardo….

…One type will come who has a slender body, hot presentation, is attractive, has a red body, has steady faith, and stable mind. This type moreover, is the kind which is a Lotus Ḍākki**.** She will have a long life. In this life she will become a buddha without remainder.

One type has great desire, is short-tempered, has little wisdom, has a blue body, a medium body. That one is the type that is a Karma Ḍākki. Thus, since she is attracted to you, she will engage in sex [with you]. She will bestow the meditative stability of bliss emptiness [through sexual practice]. That one is not a relationship of the profound key points.[23] If she has two rebirths, then after becoming your disciple she will become a buddha. She will have an average lifespan.

One type has a steady mind, is devoted to dharma, has great compassion. Furthermore, because that is a relationship with the profound key points, she will become a buddha. This is a Secondary Lotus type.

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[22] *lus kyi 'brel pa,* bodily connections refer to sexual connections including a long-term relationship such as a spouse or short-term sexual relationship.

[23] This is a repeated attribute in the taxonomy. Based on the *a 'dzom* edition, it could also be read as "Although it is a connection of the profound key points," (*zab mo gnad kyi 'brel mod)*… However, the translation above followed the Peltseg which has it as, "…it is not a relationship of the profound key points," (*zab mo gnad kyi 'brel med),* which is more likely because she requires two more lifetimes before attaining buddhahood.

One type is not devoted to dharma, is very happy, has a big body, is beautiful, her mind strays wildly, and has a pleasant voice. Due to a previous relationship [with you], there is reverence and humility. Since she seizes an ordinary form, she will engage in sex, open the doors of the channels, and grant the common accomplishments. This is the secondary Vajra type, however, there is no dharma connection, just a physical connection. Give teachings to her in the next life. Having performed as the activity seal consort,[24] she will attain buddhahood.

One type has great faith, she has yellow skin and is beautiful. She does not speak much, has a steady mind, works hard, and her body is short and wide. She also is devoted to you and that is a physical connection. Merit will increase. That type moreover, is the Jewel type. Her lifespan will be long.

One is talkative, has black skin, is very busy, has a busy mind, and says, "I did great things!" She stays in harsh places, has an intellect that bends,[25] cries a lot, has short breath, is short-tempered, and weak-minded.

Should it be that you die before completing all these relationships, they will certainly become students in the next life. However, if you remain alive, in this life they will be your disciples.[26]

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[24] Skt. *karmamudrā,* Tib. *las kyi phyag rgya.*

[25] This is rendered as *lteb,* to bend or fold instead of *steb,* whose meaning is unknown.

[26] *e ma shes rab snying rje can/ khyod nyid nga yi gter sgo phye nas tshe'i dus ma byas kyi bar du brgyud 'dzin gyi slob bu rigs mi 'dra ba bdun gsum 'byung ste/ skyes pa'i slob bu bcu bzhi 'byung / bud med DAk+ki'i rigs chos sam lus kyi 'brel pa bdun 'byung ste/ dang po rigs gcig ni/ skye ba bzang ba/ dad pa che ba/ yon tan en re shes pa/ theg pa chen po la mos pa/ shes rab che ba/ blo srab pa/ tsha rus che ba/ rang 'dod che/ gzhan yang blo mi mthun pa/ kun gyis gshe ba zhig 'ong / de karma DAk+ki'i rigs te/ de la byin rlabs 'jug rkyen tshe lo 'bring thub/ gdams pa gnad du tshud/ bar do dang por grol lo/* […..] *bud med kyi slob ma bdun ni/ dang po rigs gcig ni/ lus phra/ rnam gzhag tsha/ yid du 'ong / lus dmar/ dad pa mi 'gyur/ blo brtan pa cig 'ong ste/ rigs kyang pad+ma DAk+ki'i rigs/ tshe ring skye ba 'di la lhag med du 'tshang rgya'o/ gcig ni chags pa che/ spro thung / shes rab chung / lus sngo/ gzugs 'bring / de ni las kyi DAk+ki'i rigs te/ khyed la sems pas chags pa spyod/ bde stong gi ting 'dzin ster bar byed/ zab mo gnad kyi 'brel med de/ skye ba gnyis na khyod kyi gdul byar gyur nas 'tshang rgya'o/ tshe 'bring thub/ gcig ni blo brtan chos la mos/ snying rje che/ de yang zab mo gnad kyis 'brel nas 'tshang rgya'o/ tshe yang ring / pad+ma shugs 'gro'i rigs so/ gcig ni/ chos la mi mos bde ba che/ lus rgyas/ bzhin sdug/ blo sho rgod/ skad snyan/ de ni sngon gyi 'brel pas gus shing 'dud/ gzugs tha mal 'dzin te/ chags pa spyod/ rtsa sgo 'byed/ thun mong gi sid+d+hi ster/ rdo rje shugs 'gro'i rigs te lus kyi 'brel pa las/ chos kyi 'brel pa med/ skye ba phyi ma la sprod/ las rgya byas te 'tshang*

6. The Structure

The taxonomy in *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is made up of one hundred and seventy-six descriptors. Each description offers a range from three to eleven different characteristics, followed by their lifespan and remarks about whether they will realize liberation and if so, when. Some of the disciple types are also described in terms of their relationship with the teacher as will be discussed below. Although they are flexible structures, applied taxonomies include a pre-ordained set of categories, and such common consort classifications do indeed occur in *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples*, such as: karma type, lotus type, and jewel type of disciples.[27] However, six of the eleven male figures in this taxonomy do not have a classification. Likewise, one of the female ones lacks a classification as well. These unnamed types are called, 'one type,' *(gcig ni)* and are structured exactly like the general pattern of the taxonomy.

In *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples*, the taxonomy diverges from the common framework of consort taxonomies in tantric literature as lists of divine and demonic women, those to renounce and adopt. Nor is it presented as a universal taxonomy such as its related text from the same corpus, *The Ḍākki's Path and Fruit*, which focuses on general, universal categories.[28] It also diverges from the descriptions of these classifications of consorts that are described elsewhere in the corpus and in other related tantric literature. Instead, this taxonomy presents nuanced figures who partake of some beneficial and some neutral or negative categories while maintaining their classification as ideal disciples who progress towards liberation. For this reason, this taxonomy is classified as applied taxonomy, since it appears to be deployed to discuss actual persons, rather than theoretical, abstract ideas about general types of consorts among the variety of possible women as it would in the universal taxonomies that appear elsewhere in the corpus. As such, it serves as an example that consort taxonomies are not just literary devices or repetitions of the rhetoric of previous tantric literature, though they surely served in those ways as well, but

rgya'o/ gcig ni dad pa che/ sha mdog ser la yid du 'ong / kha nyung / blo brtan/ bya ba 'ol che/ lus thung la rgyas/ des kyang khyed la dad cing lus 'brel byed do/ bsod nams spel/ /rigs kyang rin chen rigs/ tshe ring ngo / gcig ni/ kha mang / mdog nag/ rtsab rtsub mang / blo rgod/ ngas byas che/ 'gro sa drag/ blo steb/ ngu dad che/ dbugs thung / spro thung / snying chung ngo / gal te 'brel pa rnams ma rdzogs par 'da' mi srid de/ skye ba phyi ma'i gdul byar 'ong nges so/ khyod tshad du bzhugs na tshe 'di nyid kyi gdul bya yin no/ a+thi+i brgyud 'dzin slob bu'i lung bstan ni/ tshe sgrub 'od phreng gi gter kha nas byung ba yin no/ Dri med 'od zer 2009: vol. 6, 169-172.

27 For an overview of typical classifications of tantric consort taxonomies see Cape 2020: 356-357.

28 Cape 2020: 362.

also functioned as living information systems applied in interpersonal settings to interpret human beings. This is evidenced by the application of preset categories such as jewel, lotus, karma but the addition of new categories and inclusion of disciples without categories alongside them. If this taxonomy was indeed applied to human women as it purports to be, then it also suggests consort taxonomies were functioning influentially to shape views about women, interpreting them according to categories, but also revising those categories based on observations. It also suggests that the treasure revealer may have posited those views authoritatively in the charged environment of the teacher-disciple, teacher-consort relationships. Thus, *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is regarded as an example of applied taxonomy, an attempt to manage knowledge, to make sense of sets and differences using taxonomic reference points for pragmatic purposes. This scripture therefore reflects complicated hermeneutic praxis, a religious person making sense of other persons through the lenses made available to him, by earnestly applying the instruments of knowledge available to him.

7. Enlightenment in Female Bodies

The female disciples are comparable to the male disciples in the taxonomy. It is notable that the male and female disciples all share characteristics, are considered by the same categories, and are given comparable descriptors. The names of their classification such as Jewel Hero *(ratna dpa' bo)* are provided, followed by various descriptors. Three male disciples and three female disciples are said to attain liberation within one lifetime, the highest possible attainment in the taxonomy.

The predictions (*lung bstan)* that the women receive in the *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* have a pertinent history and context. Even in early Buddhist literature, in the *Therīgāthā,* there have been narratives of women's liberation. However, early Buddhist literature also evidenced the position that one could not become a buddha until they first received a prediction from a buddha, but such a prediction was something that only male monastics could receive.[29] To overcome this issue, women in narratives changed sex. Or as in the case of the *Soṭaṭṭhakhī,* the literature found creative ways around the issue when the buddha did not give a prediction to a woman, but instead predicted that she would get a prediction later once she was a man. Women in *Mahāyāna* texts also changed sex to demonstrate their

[29] Derris 2008: 29–44.

capacity and the ontological emptiness of sex difference. This happens through magical means in *The Saddharmapuṇḍarīkā Sūtra,* when the dragon princess first turns into a male. Likewise, a goddess in the *Vimalakirti Sūtra* turns into a man, to demonstrate to the Buddha's disciples that women can achieve the same soteriological levels as men, not limited by sexed bodies which are ultimately empty. These are stories of women breaking spiritual barriers, but to prove their equality, become a buddha, and make their point, they must first change into a male form. Therefore, it is meaningful that women in *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* receive a prediction that they will attain enlightenment as women, *while they are in female bodies.*

The attainments of these women are described in various terms. The terms for liberation and to become a buddha are used throughout the scripture. Liberation refers to liberation from samsara, the cycle of suffering and ignorance that Buddhism seeks to end. However, more specifically, the women's attainments in *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* are described in the following terms. The Karma *Ḍākkī* type is predicted to be liberated in the first phase of post-death (*bar do dang por grol lo*), using the term *grol ba,* liberation, to be freed or released. The Lotus *Ḍākkī* is predicted to 'become a buddha without remainder' *(lhag med du 'tshang rgya'o),* referring to a final *nirvāṇa* in which there are no more rebirths, or no body left behind. The term *'tshang rgya ba* is a synonym for *sangs rgya ba,* to attain buddhahood, to become perfected or to become awakened. Four of the seven female disciples, the Action *Ḍākkī*, the Lotus *Ḍākkī,* the Young Lotus and the Young Vajra type are predicted to attain buddhahood using the same term (*'tshang rgya'o).* Both verbs for liberation (*grol ba)* and buddhahood (*'tshang rgya*) are used elsewhere by the larger corpus to discuss the results of the path, such as in *Six Tantras of Liberation by Wearing* (*btags grol gyi rgyud drug*), which promises that one will be liberated (*grol)* by reading the text, or even by merely seeing or hearing it one can become a buddha (*'tshang rgya*).[30] Soteriological inclusiveness is evidenced here in that these same terms for attainments are used for the male disciples as they are female disciples. Therefore, the women receive predictions of soteriological success that are not limited by sexual difference or gender.

The *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is framed as direct advice to the lineage holder on how to regard his disciples including which ones should be abandoned. This is intimate advice, framed as if spoken from Padmasambhava to Ledreltsal directly in his past life as the Princess Pemasel, now recalled through the ventriloquy of treasure

[30] Dri med 'od zer 2009: vol. 5, 13.

revelation.[31] Thus, the scripture asserts that Pema Ledreltsal was told by Padmasambhava directly about who he should accept as disciples.

In a manner comparable to the male disciples, the female disciple's attainments and accomplishments span the full range. Four of the seven female disciples, the *Karma Ḍākkī, Lotus Ḍākkī,* Secondary Lotus, and Secondary Vajra type are liberated within that life. The Action *Ḍākkī* will be liberated after two lifetimes, reincarnating once again as the disciple of Ledreltsal in the future life to accomplish her enlightenment then. Two female disciples and one male disciple do not have a prediction of their enlightenment timing. However, none of the female disciples are specified as having to wait as long as fourteen lifetimes like a male disciple who is described as egotistical. Instead, in the case of the two female disciples, the women's descriptions link the consort praxis to their swift attainment. The secondary Vajra type will become enlightened because she has done sexual yoga with her teacher (*las rgya byas te 'tshang rgya'o).* The Secondary Lotus type likewise becomes enlightened because of the profound elements of connection of their relationship (*de yang zab mo gnad kyis 'brel nas 'tshang rgya'o).*

Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples offers an opportunity to examine an applied taxonomy which is different from a more generalized taxonomy that appears such as *Ḍākki's Path and Fruit,* the other important taxonomy scripture in the overarching corpus of *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī.* Namely, *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples'* taxonomy focuses much more on the mental dispositions and personality traits as the most frequent category of descriptions. In contrast, *Ḍākki's Path and Fruit* focuses its greatest attention on physical features.[32]

However, the three disciples with the most physical and visceral descriptions are three female disciples, the Lotus *Ḍākki* type, who has a small, attractive, red, and hot body, the Young Vajra type who has a big, beautiful body, and pleasant voice, and the Jewel *Ḍākki* type who has a short, broad body, is beautiful, and has a yellow complexion. There are fifteen descriptions of the physical features of the female disciples. In contrast, there are only three physical descriptions of the fourteen male types, perhaps suggesting that the physical features of the female disciples were considered more significant since the male bodies are not attended to as frequently by the author.

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[31] Jacoby (2014) describes treasure revelation as ventriloquy, whereby the treasure revealer speaks through the voice of another.

[32] See the discussion of physical features of ideal consorts in the other major taxonomy of this corpus discussed in Cape 2020: 349-372.

8. Sexual Relationships and Female Consorts

The taxonomy also serves as prophetic encouragement to establish sexual relationships with particular people. Such is the advice for an Action *Ḍākinī* disciple who will be attracted to Ledreltsel and due to that, she is one with whom Ledreltsel should enjoy sex (*khyed la sems pas chags pa spyod).* If this happens, the prophecy promises, then it will produce bliss-emptiness's meditative stability *(bde stong gi ting 'dzin ster bar byed),* a state of contemplative attainment. The female disciple's futures are thus entangled with their role as consorts.

The taxonomy sometimes discusses the qualities of the relationship between Ledreltsal and his disciples in non-sexual ways as well. For the male disciples this includes loyalty to Ledreltsal, regarding him with pure vision and accomplishing whatever instructions the lama gives. In the case of an evil male disciple, he throws away the teacher's advice, has malice towards the teacher and therefore, the taxonomy instructs, Ledreltsal should get rid of this disciple *(spang bar bya'o).* However, when the relationship between Ledreltsal and the female disciples is discussed, sexual relationships and their consequences appear as an additional element of classification, a classification assigned only to the female disciples even though all of the disciples may have participated in ritual sexual praxis that is described in the empowerments.

Indeed, its initial hierarchy of classifications, whether women are sexual partners or not is their defining distinction. Here, by naming these sexual partners as types, the scripture infers that female disciples will fit into some type of sexual partner for their teacher. Sexual partners are furthermore differentiated into physical connections, and dharma connections, the latter being the disciples who understand and embody the esoteric teachings espoused by the text. Furthermore, the taxonomy argues that certain female disciples, based on their prophesied status, are destined sexual partners. This sexual praxis is framed as beneficial and liberating both to themselves and the teacher.

In the taxonomy, the topic of the consort relationship appears eight times amongst the descriptors. This begins with the Action *Ḍākkī* type, who because she is attracted to Ledreltsal, the scripture says he should enjoy sex with her (*khyed la sems pas chags pa spyod*). This is especially since she will give him the meditative stabilization of bliss-emptiness (*bde stong gi ting 'dzin ster bar byed*). The Secondary Lotus Type will attain buddhahood through the relationship she has with him (*de yang zab mo gnad kyis 'brel nas 'tshang rgya'o*). The Young Vajra enjoys sex (*chags pa spyod*), bestows ordinary accomplishments, and she lacks any devotion to dharma. That is because, other than being a physical connection, she is not a spiritual connection (*lus kyi 'brel pa las/ chos kyi*

'brel pa med). This is an interesting case in which one of the "twenty-one disciples," is not otherwise interested in dharma, but is a sexual partner and therefore is listed as a disciple. What is more fascinating is that, despite the lack of devotion to dharma, she gains enlightenment through acting as *karmamudrā* (*las rgya byas te 'tshang rgya'o*). In other words, for her to gain enlightenment, no other relationship to Buddhist teachings or to the teacher is necessary than a sexual one. This is a powerful assertion of the practice of religious sexuality, that it could override fundamental requirements of the ideal disciple and ideal consort, such that just the intercourse itself is considered to hold the ultimate soteriological power.

This is a corpus that is steeped in sexual aesthetics and worldview centered on male-female divine couples, a worldview in which sexuality is viewed as liberating and beneficial. Therefore, these passages could also be read as a description of a faithful Buddhist describing his life in a sexually active community in positive terms. *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is thus partaking of the overarching theme of *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī,* which is to argue for and center non-celibate religious praxis and in this case, using taxonomy to do that. Since taxonomies are also used to describe male disciples and teachers in comparable ways, the issue of the degree of objectification present is difficult to assess. Within the overarching corpus however, despite exhaustive details about how to have sex, there is a conspicuous omission of treatment of the topic of sexual misconduct and sexual violence, narratives which are dissonant with the corpus's images of sexual bliss, equanimity and soteriological super-achievement, an issue that requires further attention. Nevertheless, the scripture takes a clear stance on physical violence in general including explicitly forbidding physical beatings, verbal abuse, disrespect, and disparagement of women.[33]

The taxonomy itself leaves other questions unanswered, why did one female disciple cry a lot? Why did another not have faith in dharma? These descriptions imply judgements, so a possible reading is to consider the *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* as an example of how a treasure revelation is used to exert influence over persons in a community by attributing their qualities to a typology that implied how soon they would access buddhahood. In that case the scripture could be interpreted in terms of complex dynamics where faith, desire, respect, exploitation, and predation all may have overlapped at times, an issue worth noting, but one that is beyond the scope of this article.

[33] Dri med 'od zer 2009: vol. 5, 75-111.

9. Redemption of Female Disciples

There is a talkative type that is a classification perhaps inserted by Ledreltsal, if he is indeed the taxonomist, which is perhaps why this classification is not named. It is not a disciple placed into any pre-existing taxonomic category from the corpus's lists of types. Ledreltsal's unclassified talkative type of female disciple is notable as one who is described in only negative terms. She talks a lot, is nervous, agitated, brags, cries a lot, is short-tempered and has little courage. Yet despite these traits she is a disciple in this life or the next and she is not classified as an unsuitable consort even though she would have been considered unsuitable by the standards set in *Ḍākki's Path and Fruit.* Thus, unlike the *Ḍākki's Path and Fruit,* the taxonomy of Ledreltsal's disciples in the *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is a more forgiving taxonomy. There is redemption for the disciples, where there is not for the demonic consorts of *Ḍākki's Path and Fruit*. For striking examples of the possibility of redemption in *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples*, it is notable that even an evil type of male disciple is predicted to attain knowledge in the future and even the one who enjoys evil will have a little awakening in fourteen births. There is also a Karma *Ḍākki*, a female type, who doesn't get along with others, is criticized by all and is selfish, but she will still get liberated in the post-death state *(bar do)*. The unclassified talkative type is in a class all her own bearing all negative traits, but she will still have a chance to be a disciple in a future life. Thus, *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* goes beyond the good/bad binaries of the consorts to adopt or renounce in consort taxonomies.[34] These discrepancies once again support my argument that these taxonomies are flexible and novel structures, with overarching categories that may share some characteristics but were also changed according to their applications.

There is greater detail and the binary of those to be renounced versus those consorts to be adopted is not cleanly observed, with a mixture of characteristics, good and bad taking place within one single type of person. These more complex portrayals of women in *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* reinforces the theory that this is about specific people written during the time of the treasure revealer or shortly thereafter, rather than an overview of general characteristics of people one might encounter. These women can be reformed and can even have negative characteristics while still making soteriological progress. This also alludes to the sense of redemption and transformation that was believed to be possible through the *Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī's* praxis and Great Perfection in general.

[34] See Cape 2020: 365-356.

Concluding Thoughts and Corroborating Evidence

The community described by the corpus includes women who play a prominent role in the transmission of the scriptures, but it is impossible to know to what extent these hagiographies referred to actual historical figures. Overall, records about female adepts are sparse in the period of this study from the 13th to the 14th century.[35] However, it is clear that women had lower religious status in Tibet than men in this period as evidenced in numerous ways, including the scarcity of written historical evidence about or by women which is connected to a relative lack of religious education and opportunity.[36] The absence of women in the major roles of religious authority in what became the dominant institutions of Tibetan Buddhism that formed during this era is another signal of their lack of equal status. However, there are records depicting women as lineage holders and leaders,[37] a theme that *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākini* is built upon.

For example, the 15th century *Blue Annals* is an important early source for Tibetan history. This source describes a female teacher of The Great Perfection, Jomo Menmo (Jo mo sman mo, 1248–1283), in the 12th century, who was said to have taught the Great Perfection system as taught in Kham, eastern Tibet.[38] She was the teacher of an important male teacher of the Zur clan of the Nyingma tradition. This source also describes a few female lineage holders of the Great Perfection. For example, in its chronology of the Mind Series of Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen sems sde),* it includes at least two female lineage holders, Jomo Zermo (also known as Jo mo sgre mo) and Zurmo Gendun Bum (Zur mo dge 'dun 'bum). [39] In the *Blue Annals*, in the expanse class of Great Perfection section (*klong sde*) another accomplished woman is mentioned as a disciple, Nulmo Gyal le cham *(*Dngul mo rgyal le lcam*)*, who is listed as one who received Great Perfection teachings. This includes an unnamed nun disciple who received Great Perfection pith instructions (*man ngag sde*) with her as well.[40]

One contemporaneous source to the *Seminal Heart* corpus is described in *The Blue Annals* depicting women's activity in tantric circles. That is entitled, *Answers to the Questions of the Twenty-Four*

35 Martin 1996: 35.
36 Martin 2005, 80.
37 Martin 1996: 35.
38 Go gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal 1976: 128.
39 Ibid.: 171. Zurmo Gendun Bum is a figure who warrants further investigation. Later in the modern period, there is also Dudjom Rinpoche's history of the Nyingma Sect, she is also mentioned as a lineage holder of *The Sutra which Gathers All Intentions,* with a short narrative that describes her as a tantric ritual master *(rdo rje slob dpon*). Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 700.
40 Go gos lo-tsa-ba gzhon-nu dpal 1949: 181.

Jomos; Together with their Stories. Parts of this text are attributed to the mid-13th century.[41] These stories describe twenty-four disciples of the Indian yogi, Phadampa. It provides descriptions of a few women's exemplary religious accomplishments in short hagiographies describing the signs of their achievements, such as miraculous signs and relics left behind upon their death, as well as the veneration shown to them by their teacher. Three of these Jomos, Ma che (Ma gces), Barma ('Bar ma) and Rozanma (Ro zan ma) were also consorts or wives.[42] This is important evidence to suggest that in this period female disciples and consorts were thought to have gained realization, a possibility repeatedly asserted by *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākini*. Five of the Jomos are also explicitly described as leaving their households, husbands, brothers or children, to pursue realization independently. One female adept appears to have remained with her husband and children.[43] Additionally a female adept, Jemo (Rje mo) is described as living to the age of a hundred and one and having her own attendant, who was one of the other twenty-four Jomos.[44] Therefore, *Blue Annals* describes women of soteriological accomplishments parallel to male counterparts, including those women who were consorts. They are also depicted as occupying positions in their social networks similar to male adepts who would also leave families and partners, or remain with a spouse, teach, and have students and attendants.

Thus, both *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākini* and the *Blue Annals* portray women as vital members of Great Perfection communities in this era. They unequivocally portray women who practiced in ways parallel to men. This evidence reinforces the plausibility that the female adepts described by the *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* could have existed as actual human women or at the very least were assumed to be credible descriptions that actual women could fulfill.

In conclusion, this article began by illustrating that taxonomy is an inductive framework, not merely a list or a description, but instead an instrument to organize information about persons according to biases and pre-existing categories. Reading *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* in this light presents a scripture that argues for women as capable of attaining buddhahood in this life. It also simultaneously ties their liberation to their role as consorts, which the taxonomy implicitly argues, can lead them to liberation even if they are not otherwise devoted to dharma. The taxonomy portrays a community where religious sexuality is venerated, consistent with an overarching corpus that invests sexual relationships with ultimate ontological meaning,

41 Go gos lo-tsa-ba gzhon-nu dpal 1976: 915-920.
42 Go gos lo-tsa-ba gzhon-nu dpal 1976: 916, 917, 919.
43 Ibid.: 920.
44 Ibid.: 916.

mimetically connected to the buddha couples (*yab yum*) that signify the nature of reality. The female disciples in *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* are described as participating in these ideals, albeit as flawed, complex characters who unevenly fill in the architecture of ideal types supplied by the consort taxonomies they were measured by.

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An Article on Articles: Tibetan Debate and Translation

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Collected Topics (*Bsdus grwa*) has been a foundational genre for Tibetan philosophy since the foundation of Sangpu Neutok (Gsang phu ne'u thog) in 1072 CE, where it was first conceived as a vehicle for the study of authentic cognition (*tshad ma*), up until the present day. This terse and formulaic genre is something like its own Tibetan dialect, replete with its own technical neologisms and idiosyncrasies. It eventually became the engine of both textual and verbal Tibetan philosophical debate, allowing for a targeted, efficient, and fast-paced dialectic.

For anyone interested in Tibetan philosophy, a grasp of Collected Topics is indispensable. However, translation of this genre of texts presents special challenges.[1] Some of these are specific to the genre and how to render its concise formulations into natural English prose. Other challenges arise from broader differences between Tibetan and English, both grammatical and cultural.

The present study focuses on one specific part of a much wider set of complexities in translating Collected Topics. Specifically, we concentrate on the English demand for articles in contrast to the absence of articles in Tibetan. We analyze how this linguistic difference presents specific challenges to rendering this genre into an English prose intelligible to an educated readership.

Because Collected Topics is not just a textual genre but part of a thriving debate practice, we were committed to exploring this question in conjunction with representatives of Tibetan philosophical communities. That is, we wanted to understand how members of these traditions interpret the types of statements found in these texts. Because our research concentrates on translation, we also needed a comparative approach, and so equally wanted to probe English interpretations of translated versions. This led to a mixed methods research approach comparing participant data from both those adept at Collected Topics in Tibetan and those proficient in English

[1] Daniel Perdue's work (1992; 2014) is seminal in this regard.

Forman, Jed & Losang Donyo, "An Article on Articles: Tibetan Debate and Translation," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 75, March 2025, pp. 34–52.

generally.

1. Backstory

The impetus for this project itself arose from debate. The authors were debating at Sera Jey Monastery, experimenting with using English in place of Tibetan. The topic was the definition of "person." In Tibetan, the debate may start, "*mi chos can, smra shes don go ba yin par thal*." We were engaged in a similar debate. Author #2 thus started with "Take person, they know how to speak and understand meaning," an English equivalent. This immediately gave Author #1 pause. "What do you mean?" he replied. "Do you mean *a* person? *The* person? People?"

In Author #1's estimation, his response to this proposition would depend on which of these Author #2 meant. If the topic were just *any* person—*a* person—then whether the predicate holds would be inconclusive, since there are some people who are mute. "The person," on the other hand, suggested something abstract—the person writ large, perhaps like "The State" or "The Economy," that is, an idealized object. So, for example, *the* state, by definition, has authority. But *a* state might lose that authority. Likewise, *a* person in particular might be mute, but, perhaps, *the* person, as an idealized object, is not. Lastly, *people* seem to understand language, but for a different reason, since there are at least *some* that do.

Based on our own introspection, then, we determined that "Take person" appears incomplete. It would seem that we must substitute this with a definite, indefinite, or plural version—"Take *a* person," "Take *the* person," or "Take *people*." We did not come to this conclusion from a grammatical analysis, but from our own linguistic intuitions as native English speakers. On the other hand, even the most colloquial Tibetan speaker would not find anything strange about the article-less "*mi chos can*," despite the fact that Tibetan debate language is highly formalized and counterintuitive to most Tibetan speakers. The question then becomes whether the seeming ambiguity in the English "Take person" only arises from English's demand for articles, or if it is an ambiguity that is latent even in Tibetan debate. In other words, do "a," "the," and the plural have equivalents in Tibetan that are often left unstated? Or do the distinctions they make fail to cut at natural semantic joints in Tibetan?[2]

As a similar (albeit inverse) example, we could think of evidentials

[2] We are not the first researchers to recognize this difficulty in translating Collected Topics. See, for example, Dreyfus 1997: 494 n. 51; Goldberg 1985: 162; Tillemans 1999: 130.

in Tibetan. In colloquial Tibetan, all verbs are suffixed by a verb helper (*bya rogs*). This helper carries information about the verb's tense. But it also carries information about the speaker's proximity to the information communicated by the sentence. So, if someone says, "*bod la g.yag 'dug*," or, "There are yaks in Tibet," the "*'dug*" ending suggests they have been to Tibet and seen yaks there. On the other hand, if they say "*bod la g.yag yod red*"—again, "There are yaks in Tibet"—it means that they know this to be a fact, but it is not necessarily a fact garnered through their own experience.

So, here we have two ways to say in Tibetan something said one way in English, an inverse of the case under investigation, where Tibetan uses one noun that could be rendered in English in at least three ways. Now, should we say that "There are yaks in Tibet" is *ambiguous* about the information provided by Tibetan evidentials? Or is it unambiguous, since the distinction made by evidentials is simply not pertinent to English speakers? This is an open question. And it is the same question to which we turn on the Tibetan side—i.e., whether the distinction expressed by English articles is ambiguous in Tibetan or simply does not obtain.

We wanted to balance a natural language approach to this question while keeping our analysis confined to the genre of Collected Topics. Our suspicion was that differences between English and Tibetan would bear out in how their respective speakers would respond to various propositions. In other words, rather than analyze how speakers describe their understanding of a given proposition—which is often *ad hoc* and puts a high demand on participants to felicitously account for their own linguistic presuppositions—we decided to probe whether different iterations of propositions would provoke different responses, revealing how article use may affect comprehension. In other words, the use of different articles was our independent variable while responses to the propositions were the dependent variable. Our research question, therefore, was broad: how do different, equally felicitous English translations of Tibetan propositions using different articles affect how English speakers interpret those propositions compared to their Tibetan counterparts?

2. The Logic of Collected Topics

One of the central components of the cognitive theory found in Collected Topics textbooks is that thought depends on language, and that language discretizes phenomena from one another. For example, the "color of a red ruby" and "the color red" have distinct referents because their phrasing is distinct. All linguistic distinctions thus map

onto distinct conceptual isolates. The same applies to "The color red" and "red." There is, as the theory goes, a slight difference in what appears (*snang ba*) to the mind with each phrase, entailing a unique subjective experience in each case.[3] The, perhaps, counterintuitive element of Collected Topics, however, is that the referents of these subjective experiences are not rarified concepts. The notion of platonic ideal forms is foreign to this understanding of cognition.[4] So whether we say "Take person," "…a person," "…the person," or "…people," we are referring to something actual (however broad or limited its scope may be), and not a mere idealized person.

With this in mind, we could rephrase our research question in this way: how do language users understand the referent of words, given that the scope of that referent is often ambiguous? This question is also central to Collected Topics. Lopen Karma Puntsho problematizes this problem of referentiality in his Collected Topics Primer.

Exploring the position that there is (a/the) "tree" which pervades all individual trees, he first offers the absurd consequence that there is no tree that pervades across instances, because that general tree does not grow anywhere in particular, and so could not be a tree. He continues with many more lines of reasoning like this. To summarize, he excuses the conundrum of how conceptual entities relate to actual particulars, taking their relationship as a necessary precondition of thinking. Even though there are no real entities that pervade over their particulars, our ordinary language use demands that we discuss the fundamental principles of logic and philosophy from this perspective.[5]

At its core, the problem that Karma Puntsho identifies concerns conceptual scope. Now, even without articles, Tibetan has a rich vocabulary of quantifiers ("some," "all," "every,") that could foreclose some of these scope ambiguities: These are as plentiful in Tibetan as they are in English, with near-total equivalents for each of the English terms used in many forms of Western logic. Still, they are minimally used in Collected Topics. Why this is so would be another research question entirely. Yet, since it is relevant to our research, we would like to hypothesize based on the pedagogical aims of Collected Topics.

Namely, the use of quantifiers would weight the very debates that Collected Topics is meant to provoke. The very question is whether "tree" refers to "all trees" collectively (a universal) or "a tree" individually (a particular) when the word "tree" comes to mind. The

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[3] Shākya'i dge sbyong Blo bzang Rgya mtsho 2007: 138.

[4] Similarly, Georges Dreyfus argues that Gelugpa authors advocate "moderate realism," such that they consider conceptual universals to be real insofar as they are instantiated in particulars but not reified real entities in the way that Plato would argue (1997: 179–182).

[5] Slop dpon Karma Phun tshogs 2007: 29–30.

use of quantifiers would implicitly favor one interpretation over the other. And so, by eliding quantifier use, the authors of Collected Topics can keep these questions open for the ensuing debate.

While there are few explicit directives of how to interpret the logical statements in the unique phrasing of Tibetan Debate, there is something of a roadmap that is signposted in debates found in the textbooks. These textbooks are considered to be normative, as they have been vetted over centuries of use.[6] Students are encouraged to find a way to interpret them without creating internal contradictions, and that process creates a functioning understanding of how different terms are to be interpreted in different contexts.

3. Methods

We take our research question, as well as Collected Topics central concerns in this regard, to be largely psychological. That is, when these conceptual entities "appear to the mind," what is their understood referent? Likewise, we take the Collected Topics tendency to bracket quantifier use to promote a range of possible interpretations in debates to be methodologically sound. Lastly, the question is comparative. Especially in consideration of how to translate these works, we wanted to examine best practices for rendering their debates in English, since English readers typically expect articles and quantifiers where Collected Topics elides them. How can we translate these texts such that "what appears to the mind" of a Tibetan speaker adept in the genre reading Collected Topics also appears to the mind of an English speaker reading them in translation?

For these reasons, we opted to use a mixed-methods, adapted version of the descriptive phenomenological psychological method.[7] This method is descriptive rather than hypothesis-proving. That is, just as Collected Topics is an open-ended method to instigate debate on these issues rather than a compendium of linguistic-ontological conclusions about the nature of concepts, so too did we want to keep our investigation open ended, so that differences in language use could be discovered qualitatively. By examining responses to pointed questions that probe respondents' intuitions about article usage, we hoped that a holistic picture of that usage would emerge.

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[6] At least in the Gelugpa monasteries, the same four sets of textbooks (by Jetsun Chökyi Gyaltsen, Panchen Sonam Drakpa, and Kunkhyen Jamyang Shepa) have been used for roughly five hundred years and continue to form the basis of the Gelug monastic curriculum today, where students are expected to have a working familiarity with their contents (Dreyfus 2003: 124).

[7] Giorgi 2009; Giorgi and Giorgi 2008.

This does not mean, however, that our exploration was theoretically adrift. We depended on Tom Roeper's theory of a "universal grammar," which argues that the linguistic use of articles and quantifiers is basic to the fundamental logic of every language, and that, even when these parts of speech are not present, each language has equivalent ways to make these distinctions.[8] We were curious about the degree to which these distinctions are truly universal and shared between English and the Collected Topics dialect.

Thus, we used Roeper's theorization that articles and quantifiers distinguish "General from Specific" entities, along with our own hypotheses about what distinctions they might entail, to develop a questionnaire probing native speakers' thinking about language use. This questionnaire included ten propositions modeled after the syntax of Collected Topics. This syntax involves a subject and a predicate. In Tibetan, the subject is marked by "*chos can*" and the predicate by "*thal*." We translated this in English with "Take" to mark the subject and "it follows" to mark the predicate. So, as a classic example, "Take a white horse: it follows that it is white" (*lta dkar po chos can/ dkar po yin par thal/*). Participants could either agree or disagree with the proposition, either responding that it is "True" (*'dod*) or "False" (*ci'i phyir*).[9] In addition to Roeper's theory, we (as native English speakers) also introspected about what semantic distinctions are communicated by articles. We hypothesized three broad distinctions: (1) General vs. Specific, (2) Indefinite vs. Definite, and (3) Abstract vs. Concrete.

The first distinction concerns whether the noun designates the set of all things that belong to that noun or specifies only one specific member. That is, does the predicate universally quantify *all* things to which that noun applies, or does it only describe one or some of those things? For example, "Lions are felines" describes all lions, whereas "The lion sleeps tonight" describes a feature of just one, particular lion.

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[8] Roeper 2007: 76–80.

[9] In Tibetan Debate, the "*ci'i phyir*" response—literally "why"—is a request for a reason (*rtags*) to substantiate that the major term (*bsgrub bya'i chos*) is correctly predicated about the subject (*chos can*)—e.g., that the major term "white" can be accurately predicated of a white horse, that "a white horse is white." In standard Tibetan debate, this proposition would elicit a "*ci'i phyir*" response, since, in Collected Topics, "white" (*dkar po*) is not interpreted as a predicate adjective, but as a substantive. Because a horse is not *the color* white, the proposition does not hold. Again, this debate relies on an ambiguity, specifically between predicative adjectives and substantives in Tibetan. More to the point, the request for a reason expresses the respondent's disagreement with the proposition. After the original proposition giver states their reason, the respondent will either claim that the reason does not entail the proposition (*khyab pa ma byung*) or that the reason is false (*rtags ma grub*). It would be odd for the respondent to accept the argument after asking for a reason, unless they are backpedaling. So, a response of "*ci'i phyir*" is the standard way to deny a proposition in Tibetan debate and Collected Topics.

"Indefinite vs. Definite" describes whether we are referencing a unique member of some group, or a particular member without defining which one. So, for example, if someone says, "A person, somewhere, owns a Lamborghini," they are giving a description of a *particular* person without designating who that person is. Notice that we can use plurals in the same way, e.g., "There are people who love origami." This is not necessarily a feature of *all* people in the same way that being a feline is true of *all* lions. So, the distinction here is about whether we are being specific about what the predicate applies to or if we are just noting that it applies to something, somewhere.

The last distinction, "Abstract vs. Concrete," accounts for how articles can sometimes indicate something conceptual rather than an instantiated actual. So, to reiterate an example from above, talk of "The State" most often refers to an abstract political entity within theories of governance rather than any actual state. "The consumer" plays a similar role in economic theory. But, on the other hand, if we talk about "states," we are most likely predicating something about some *actual* group of *states*. Similarly, talk about "consumers" would describe actual observed trends in their behavior. So, for example, we could say, "While economic theory assumes *the* consumer is perfectly rational, more in-depth research reveals *consumers'* habits are much more emotional." The first instance refers to an idealized, theoretical entity while the latter denotes their actual instantiations.

Based on our analysis, we wanted to determine whether changes in articles would force the interpretation of one dipole over the other in the manner outlined in Table 1, using "person" as an example:

	INDEFINITE ARTICLE (*A* PERSON)	DEFINITE ARTICLE (*THE* PERSON)	PLURAL (*PEOPLE*)
GENERAL VS. SPECIFIC	Specific	Specific	General
INDEFINITE VS. DEFINITE	Indefinite	Definite	Indefinite
ABSTRACT VS. CONCRETE	Concrete	Abstract	Concrete

Table 1 — Hypothesized Distinctions Created by English Articles

Through a qualitative process of proposition formation, we developed a list of ten propositions for which we thought varied uses of articles would create different interpretations across these distinctions. Importantly, we constructed these propositions so that this difference in interpretation would create different responses to the proposition among fluent English speakers—that is, whether they would agree it is True or False. An exhaustive list of those propositions is found

below in Table 2:

GENERAL VS. SPECIFIC	Take a/the person/people. It follows that they have ovaries.
	Take a/the car(s). It follows it/they is/are a Honda.
	Take a/the person/people. It follows that they live in China.
INDEFINITE VS. DEFINITE	Take a/the sun(s). It follows that it/they is/are orbited by planet Earth.
	Take a/the ocean. It follows it/they is/are made of water.
	Take a/president(s). It follows they live in the White House.
ABSTRACT VS. CONCRETE	Take a/the child(ren). It follows they have a mother.
	Take a/the university(ies). It follows it/they has/have buildings.
	Take a/the brain(s). It follows it/they process(es) information.
	Take a/the mind(s). It follows it/they is/are aware.

Table 2 — List of Propositions with Associated Distinctions

In our instructions to participants, we specified that "they" would be used both as a plural and a gender-neutral singular pronoun.

While we do not have the space to give an exhaustive justification for why we theorized each of these propositions would produce different responses depending on article choice, an analysis of a few propositions will be helpful. For example, if we say, "Take cars: it follows they are a Honda," we theorized this would elicit a response of "False," since being a Honda is not a feature of *all* cars. However, if we had said, "Take a car: it follows it is a Honda," our expectation

(later shown by the data to not pan out) was that this would more likely elicit a "True" response, since there does exist at least *one* car that is a Honda. In other words, we theorized that fluent English speakers would interpret "A car is a Honda" to have a meaning akin to "Some cars are Hondas."

For the second distinction, we thought that predicating "being orbited by planet Earth" would hold for *the* sun, since this refers to the sun of our particular solar system, while it would not for *a* sun, where the reference to our solar system's sun is not specified. Lastly, we hypothesized "The brain" would provoke a recognition of the brain *as such*—the brain as defined in principle. While *this* brain "processes information," *a* brain might not—e.g., a dead one.

Once we had developed our list of propositions, we randomized their order to mitigate any bias in our analysis. We also solicited the help of Namdru and Dondup Tsomo, students from Sarah College for Higher Tibetan Studies (Dharamsala, India) and native Tibetan speakers, to translate them into article-less Tibetan versions. These equivalences are listed in Table 3:

1.	Take a/the person/people. It follows that they have ovaries.	མི་ཚོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་མངལ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།
2.	Take a/the car(s). It follows that it/they is/are a Honda.	མོ་ཊ་ཚོས་ཅན། ཧོན་ཊ་ /Honda/ ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།
3.	Take a/the sun(s). It follows that it/they is/are orbited by planet Earth.	ཉི་མ་ཚོས་ཅན། འཛམ་གླིང་གིས་ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་ཉིམ་དུ་འགོར་བར་ཐལ།
4.	Take a/the brain(s). It follows that it/they process(es) information.	གླད་པ་ཚོས་ཅན། གནས་ཚུལ་འཛོལ་འདྲུ་བྱེད་པར་ཐལ།
5.	Take a/the child(ren). It follows that they have a mother.	བུ་གུ་ཚོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་ཨ་མ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།
6.	Take a/the ocean. It follows that it/they is/are made of water.	རྒྱ་མཚོ་ཚོས་ཅན། ཆུ་ལས་གྲུབ་པ་ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།
7.	Take a/president(s). It follows that they live in the White House.	ཨ་རིའི་གྲོང་འཇོན་ཚོས་ཅན། ཞོ་བྱང་དཀར་པོའི་ནང་ལ་གནས་པར་ཐལ།
8.	Take a/the mind(s). It follows that it/they is/are aware.	སྤྲོ་ཚོས་ཅན། རེག་པ་ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།
9.	Take a/the person/people. It follows that they live in China.	མི་ཚོས་ཅན། རྒྱ་ནག་ལ་གནས་པར་ཐལ།
10.	Take a/the university(ies). It follows that it/they has/have buildings.	མཐོ་རིམ་སློབ་གྲྭ་ཚོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་ཁང་པ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།

Table 3 — English Propositions and Tibetan Translations

We then used Qualtrics XM online software to construct a dynamic questionnaire based on these propositions. We created two versions, one in English and (with the help of Namdru and Dondup Tsomo) one in Tibetan. On the landing page of the questionnaire, participants were informed about the aims of the study (with no deception), that their participation was completely voluntary, that there was no compensation, and gave contact information for the principal investigators (ourselves). We assured participants that all data was collected anonymously.

Both versions of the questionnaire randomized the order in which participants were shown the propositions. In the Tibetan version, participants would be shown all ten propositions. In the English version, participants would be shown one of three versions of the proposition—either an indefinite article version, a definite article version, or a plural version. So, for proposition (1), participants would see either "Take a person: it follows that they have ovaries," or "Take the person: it follows that they have ovaries," or "Take people: it follows that they have ovaries." One of these three versions would be shown for each proposition randomly. Qualtrics XM also has a feature that guarantees each version is shown equally as often as the others. So, although for each participant one version of the proposition was shown randomly, each version was shown an equal number of times across all participants.

For each proposition, participants could either respond "True" (*'dod*) or "False" (*ci'i phyir*). Afterwards, we presented a follow-up question, first reiterating their response and then asking, "Is it clear to you that this is the case?" (*lan de yang dag yin pa'i rgyu mtshan gsal por yod dam*). Responding yes or no, participants could elaborate as to why they were confident or ambivalent about their response. This was explained in detail on the questionnaire instructions before they began.

For participants, we recruited widely among English speakers, advertising our questionnaire on Facebook and among our soft contacts, including colleagues and students. For Tibetan participants, we recruited among monastics studying at Sera Jey Monastic University in Bylakuppe, Karnataka, India through personal contacts. The comparison between Tibetan-speaking monastics and a much larger demographic of English speakers was intentional. Our goal was to examine how those adept at Collected Topics in Tibetan would read these propositions in comparison to a wider English-speaking audience—experts and non-experts alike—who might be interested in reading about Collected Topics in translation. Thus, the comparison between a restricted set of Tibetan-speaking experts and a larger sample of English speakers is appropriate, since this mimics the

potential diversity in readership of Collected Topics in English. However, this limits some of the conclusions we can make from our study, since those Tibetans who are versed in Collected Topics language also have philosophical training. Thus, we cannot be sure to what degree any differences between samples are an effect of differences of language or philosophical education. This is a limitation we would like to address in future studies.

After culling the data for quality and eliminating duplicate responses (as determined by IP address and other factors), we collected *n*=139 responses on the English version (79 full completions and 60 partial completions) and *n*=116 responses on the Tibetan version (40 full, 76 partial). Ideally, we would have liked to have three times as many English responses as Tibetan, so that we were comparing an equal number of responses for the indefinite, definite, plural, and Tibetan versions of the proposition. At this juncture, the number of responses did not give us sufficient power for any statistical analysis. However, as a pilot study, we were able to perform several qualitative analyses that generated some compelling hypotheses for future study.

4. Results

Table 4 gives a complete list of participant responses for each proposition. The number to the left of the forward slash shows how many participants answered "True" (*'dod*) to a proposition while the one to the right indicates how many said "False" (*ci'i phyir*). The number in parentheses next to each of these indicates the number of those participants that were certain about their answer:

		T(sure)/F(sure)
1	མི་ཚོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་མངལ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།	20(14)/20(15)
	Take a person. It follows that they have ovaries.	4(3)/25(23)
	Take the person. It follows that they have ovaries.	2(1)/27(24)
	Take people. It follows that they have ovaries.	1(1)/29(26)
2	མོ་ཏ་ཚོས་ཅན། རྟེན་ཅ་ཞིག Honda ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།	2(0)/35(29)
	Take a car. It follows it is a Honda.	4(3)/27(23)
	Take the car. It follows it is a Honda.	1(0)/27(22)
	Take cars. It follows they are Hondas.	1(0)/28(26)
3	ཉི་མ་ཚོས་ཅན། འཛམ་གླིང་གིས་ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་ཉིན་དུ་འགོར་བར་ཐལ།	25(20)/12(9)
	Take a sun. It follows that it is orbited by planet earth.	13(10)/18(17)
	Take the sun. It follows that it is orbited by planet earth.	23(20)/5(3)
	Take suns. It follows that they are orbited by planet earth.	2(2)/24(22)
4	སྐད་པ་ཚོས་ཅན། གནས་རྒྱལ་འཕྲོ་འདུ་ཞེད་པར་ཐལ།	18(14)/14(12)
	Take a brain. It follows it processes information.	20(17)/11(10)
	Take the brain. It follows it processes information.	24(17)/7(5)
	Take brains. It follows they processes information.	18(14)/13(9)

5	སྤུ་གུ་ཆོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་ཨ་མ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།	36(33)/2(1)
	Take a child. It follows they have a mother.	18(13)/9(7)
	Take the child. It follows they have a mother.	20(17)/9(5)
	Take children. It follows they have a mother.	17(14)/10(6)
6	རྒྱ་མཚོ་ཆོས་ཅན། རྒྱ་ལས་གྲུབ་པ་ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།	29(24)/6(4)
	Take an ocean. It follows it is made of water.	24(21)/8(5)
	Take the ocean. It follows it is made of water.	27(24)/3(2)
	Take oceans. It follows they are made of water.	24(21)/6(6)
7	ཨ་རིའི་སྡིད་འཛིན་ཆོས་ཅན། ཁོ་བྱང་དཀར་ཏིའི་ནང་ལ་གཏན་པར་ཐལ།	29(24)/8(6)
	Take a US president. It follows they live in the White House.	21(15)/10(6)
	Take the US president. It follows they live in the White House.	21(16)/9(5)
	Take US presidents. It follows they live in the White House.	22(20)/8(6)
8	སྲོག་ཆོས་ཅན། རེག་པ་ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།	32(29)/3(1)
	Take a mind. It follows it is aware.	15(10)/14(11)
	Take the mind. It follows it is aware.	13(9)/17(9)
	Take minds. It follows they are aware.	17(12)/12(7)
9	མི་ཆོས་ཅན། རྒྱ་ནག་ལ་གཏན་པར་ཐལ།	9(8)/26(23)
	Take the person. It follows that they live in China.	4(2)/24(23)
	Take a person. It follows that they live in China.	1(1)/28(24)
	Take people. It follows they live in China.	2(1)/27(24)
10	མཐོ་རིམ་སློབ་གྲྭ་ཆོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་ཁང་པ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།	25(23)/13(7)
	Take a university. It follows it has buildings.	12(11)/18(11)
	Take the university. It follows it has buildings.	9(9)/21(14)
	Take universities. It follows they have buildings.	11(7)/17(14)

Table 4 — Responses to Propositions

So, for example, on proposition 10, “Take a university: it follows it has buildings,” 12 respondents said “True” with 11 being confident, while 18 said “False” with 11 being confident. Below in Figure 1, we graph these responses as ratios. Positive numbers represent the ratio of “True” responses to “False” responses, while negative numbers represent the ratio of “False” responses to “True” responses. Each version of the proposition—indefinite, definite, plural, or Tibetan—is represented by a different colored line.

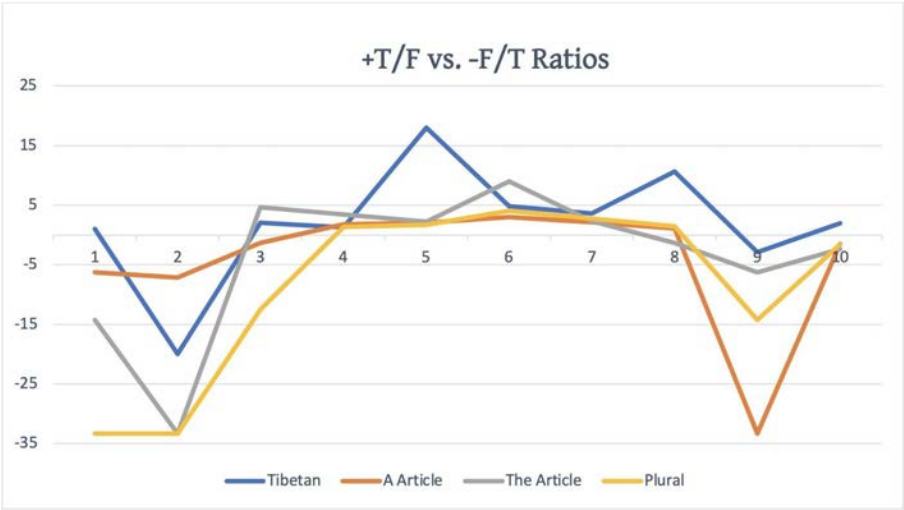

Figure 1— Ratios of True to False and False to True Responses for Each Proposition

We discuss the significance of these findings in the next section.

5. Discussion

Our findings revealed that propositions 1, 2, and 9 from our master list (see Table 3) demonstrated the most variance across the four versions of the propositions. These three were also all and the only propositions originally hypothesized to reveal a distinction between General and Specific. The linguist Tom Roeper argues that this distinction, in particular, is ubiquitous across languages, present even when those languages can be ambiguous about whether a noun is general or specific—what he calls "bare nouns." Roeper cites other article-less languages, such as Chinese and Russian, as an example:

> Finally, what about the reference of ''bare nouns''—nouns that have no determiner at all? Some languages—like Chinese and Russian—have no articles, so they must accomplish definite and indefinite reference differently. English-speaking children begin without articles as well. What does the two-year-old mean when she looks at a plate of cookies and says, ''I want cookie''? Is ''I want cookie'' general (compare ''I want cake''), or is the child asking for a specific cookie (compare ''I want that cake'')? We don't know for sure. Because I think children have ready access to abstractions, I think they start with the abstract and general

> meaning and learn the markers for specificity, which may vary from language to language.[10]

In other words, Roeper argues that even in languages with "bare nouns" that do not distinguish between general or specific that this distinction is still operative but left ambiguous. Regardless of whether this is true of *all* languages, or even Tibetan more generally, it is clearly a feature of Collected Topics. This literature distinguishes generalities (*spyi*) and specifics (*bye brag*), which comes close to Roeper's own differentiation. According to Collected Topics, all members of a generality share some common feature that unites them even though each specific member may have qualities not shared by other members.

So, like in Roeper's example, when a child says, "I want cookie," they could mean *any* cookie will do—any member of that generality—or they could mean *a specific* cookie. In colloquial English, this usage is expected to be corrected developmentally through language acquisition, where the child learns to specify either "that" or "any." In Collected Topics, however, one may say, "Take vases: it follows that they are bulbous with a flat base and able to hold water" (*bum pa chos can/ lto ldir zhabs shum chu skyor gyi don byed nus pa yin par thal/*)—indeed, this is the Collected Topics definition of "vase."[11] This applies both to "a" and "any" vase. While in English, we must differentiate "vases" (general) from "the vase" (specific), both of these can be covered by "*bum pa*" in Tibetan. Without context, "*bum pa*" is thus ambiguous in the way "cookie" would be. This is an ambiguity of which Collected Topics authors are self-aware—hence the discussion of generality versus specific.[12]

We would expect, then, that the Tibetan version of the proposition would show the most ambiguity on this dimension and so would have True-False ratios the closest to 1 or -1. This is, in fact, what we see for propositions 1 and 9. This seems to support our expectation that the English articles are foreclosing general-specific ambiguities in a manner that reduces variances in interpretation compared to Tibetan. However, we did not see this increased ambiguity for the Tibetan version of proposition 2. In that case, the English indefinite version

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[10] Roeper 2007: 76.

[11] Phur lcog Byams pa Rgya mtsho 2015: 62.

[12] For example, Jetsun Chökyi Gyaltsen discusses how to interpret the relationship between the mental continuum(ua) of sentiment being(s) and buddhas: "*sangs rgyas phags pa yin na/ sems can dang rgyud gcig yin pas khyab.*" In this case, the text has to specify that this does *not* mean that several mental continua produce one buddha, since this is ambiguous otherwise. In other words, "*sems can*" must be interpreted as "*a* mental continuum" (Rje btsun Chos kyi Rgyal mtshan 2015: 208).

showed more ambiguity than the Tibetan version.

We have since developed a hypothesis as to why this might be the case. After conducting an online version of this study, we had several participants from Sera Jey monastery take the questionnaire in person so that we could informally interview them about their experience and ask questions about their interpretation. (Their responses have not been included in the current study.) Specifically, we found that Sera Jey participants commonly interpreted "Honda" as a brand of motorcycle only. This is a product of living in different environments: while in the U.S. people commonly own Honda-made cars, those in India more often associate this brand with motorcycles. This would understandably skew responses toward False among Tibetan speakers, not as any product of grammar, but because they did not believe Honda to be a brand of car.

We also hypothesize that the significant differences between Tibetan and English speakers on proposition 8 was a result of environment. In Collected Topics, part of the definition of "mind" (*blo*) is to be aware (*rig pa*). Thus, given that assumption, it would make sense that our Tibetan-speaking participants, who were monastics, would consider this true analytically. We see a similar Tibetan-English split on proposition 5. It seems as if English speakers interpreted "have a mother" to mean "currently," whereas in Tibetan, "*a ma yod*" may have been interpreted to mean "at any point." This difference in temporal understandings of existence is something that warrants more study.

Returning to the distinction between general and specific and those statements concerning it (1, 2, and 9): although there is some evidence that English foreclosed ambiguities that manifested in Tibetan, English articles did not affect responses in the way we expected. Our hypothesis did appear to hold for the indefinite version. We expected that this version would skew more toward True responses, since some participants would interpret "Take a car" specifically. Although, "A car is a Honda," may sound stilted, we expected it to be interpreted to mean there is some car, somewhere that is a Honda. Nevertheless, despite the fact that this version elicited the most True responses out of the English variants, participants overwhelmingly responded False to the indefinite version (87%, 27/31). This is likely because they interpreted "*a*" to mean "*any*," or else "all," in which case it was understood to denote a generality. Still, it is difficult with such a small sample to say anything conclusive, especially since even a few outliers greatly skew the ratios.

On the other hand, responses to the definite and plural versions did not differentiate as we expected. We expected that the plural version would elicit more False responses than the definite version, since the

former suggests a generality while the latter, a specific. However, both the plural and definite versions elicited identical False-True ratios. This was a consistent feature across all of the general versus specific propositions: the indefinite version consistently created much more ambiguity than the definite and plural versions, which in turn more consistently produced False responses. Based on our analysis above, we hypothesize this is because the indefinite article can be interpreted both as a generality or a specific, either as "any" or "some." Determining why the definite and plural versions were more closely aligned than expected, however, requires further research.

Conclusion

As a largely qualitative study, we cannot make any definitive claims at this juncture about linguistic differences between Tibetan and English. We can, however, offer some reasonable hypotheses that would warrant further study. First, our research lends further evidence to the claim that the absence of articles in Tibetan creates ambiguities for English translation. At the very least, then, we can safely advise that translators should be vigilant about their article choices when translating Tibetan texts. It will be prudent for translators to consider the diversity of readers, reflecting broadly on the potential ways that any given translation choice may be interpreted. Although we have no definitive recommendations for how translators should proceed, we find it sufficient to demonstrate how seemingly minimal translation choices can have large ramifications for how readers interpret their meaning, how different subjects "appear to the mind." At this early stage, promoting awareness of the disparities that these choices can create fulfils our aims. We also encourage those who are interested in practicing Collected Topics debates in English to experiment with articles and see how this affects the debate.

One thing that our data does clearly show is that there is not universal agreement on interpretation of these simple subject-predicate statements for either English speakers or Tibetan speakers; not a single proposition, regardless of which article form the subjects took, received a unanimous response as either true or false. The lack of agreement within both language groups raises questions about the idealized definitions of quantifiers in Euro-American forms of logic. Do native speakers use and interpret their own language badly? Or does our analysis reveal that the logic of quantifiers and articles is "fuzzy" and mutable based on context? This is an open question.

Furthermore, following Roeper, we argue that the distinction

between Generality and Specific is an operative distinction in Collected Topics as well. Our research suggests that when "bare nouns" are given in Tibetan without context, that this distinction is sufficiently ambiguous to create a greater variety in interpretation than seen in English, article-latent versions of the same proposition. In other words, this ambiguity is not *only* a product of linguistic comparison but is latent in the original Tibetan. Surely, Tibetan has other ways to foreclose this ambiguity *other* than articles, such as context. There are also several pronouns and particles that can serve this function—"*'di*," "*rnams*," "*gang*," etc.—even though they are not grammatically necessary in the manner English articles often are. Likewise, Tibetan debate form could have incorporated quantifiers just as easily as done in certain forms of Western logic. But they were not included, and no later scholars appear to have identified a need for them. Indeed, they may have considered their inclusion to hamper debate, which relies on a plethora of diverging interpretations.

Despite our preliminary evidence for the effect of articles in interpretation, we also revealed that articles and their absence are not the *sole* or even most important factor in interpretation. Our analysis suggests that in the case of proposition 2, for example, indexical meaning and its variance across different cultures eclipsed the effect of articles. The different understandings of "Honda" between Tibetan- and English-speaking milieus had a much greater effect than grammatical differences between the languages. Although we can attempt to control for these cultural differences in comparative grammatical studies, it is important to note that when translating "on the ground" that other considerations may dominate.

Lastly, we propose that our analysis may give reasons to reevaluate some aspects of the developmental picture proposed by Roeper and others. That is, he assumes that a language is like a perfectly specific "quadratic equation" that a child must figure out how to apply correctly. The key to deciphering this linguistic codex, according to Roeper, is a "universal grammar" latent in every child, in whose mind these distinctions are inchoate and must be aligned to their equivalents in the target language. Furthermore, according to Roeper, this "Universal grammar provides methods, like the *a* □ *the* shift in English, to move from *general* to *particular*."[13] For Roeper, learning language would seem to be a process of coordinating a predefined logical map to a linguistic terrain that reflects that logic.

However, our initial study suggests that even in language proficient adults, these ambiguities remain. Rather than assume that this a product of speakers' failing to fully realize the logical capacity of their

[13] Roeper 2007: 102.

mother tongue, we argue that language is more highly tolerant of logical ambiguity than Roeper may have us believe.[14] Indeed, much of Collected Topics literature is committed to probing the inherent ambiguities of language in order to reveal its logical limits. The translator's task, then, is to find methods that felicitously reveal the subtleties of these ambiguities in Collected Topics and resist English equivalents that erase them—nullifying the debate—while preserving their cogency so that their import is communicated. This is no easy task and will require further study, working closely not only with Tibetan literature, but members of the living tradition that keeps their interpretation alive.

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[14] E.g., see Ewa Dąbrowska's (2015) comprehensive analysis of the notion of universal grammar and its shortcomings.

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Dispatches to the Spirit World: Orality, Literacy, and Power in Tibetan Letters to Gods and Oracles

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Letters have likely been the most widely produced form of textual expression in human societies.[2] Ranging from official to private, from highly formalized epistles to informal messages, letters assume a variety of literary styles and graphic forms depending on the contexts of their composition and the status of their intended recipients. Not merely textual artifacts, letters are also social artifacts: with their culturally specific conventions of etiquette, phrasing, and graphic presentation, they illuminate how humans position themselves within a larger social order. Ishihama Yumiko, for example, has made skillful use of epistolary theory to map the diplomatic hierarchies conveyed in the letters exchanged between the Fifth Dalai Lama and his regent Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, the Qing Emperor Kangxi, and the Mongol Khan Dga' ldan.[3]

Occasionally, letters serve as communicative links not only between human beings, but also between the human realm and the world of non-human agents. In China, written communication with the spirit world has taken place since as early as the Shang Dynasty when the imperial ancestors were entreated, through messages engraved on shells and bones, to accept sacrifices and to grant blessings.[4] During China's Zhou dynasty, when writing surfaces expanded to include stone tablets, bronze vessels, tablets of bamboo and wood, letters were buried as a form of delivery to the spirit world, and after the invention of paper in the 2nd century, paper messages were also commonly buried with the dead.[5] Tsuen-Hsuin Tsien has observed that in the Chinese context, "the extensive use of written messages instead of oral prayer to communicate with spiritual beings

[1] I thank my anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments that have enriched this article, especially when they disagreed productively with one another.

[2] Barton and Hall 2000: 2.

[3] Ishihama 1998.

[4] Tsien 1962: 4.

[5] For example, in the case of treaties. Refer to Tsien 1962: 5.

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(who were supposed to be able to read) was an important factor in contributing greatly to the number of written records we have discovered from ancient times."[6] While not all of these textual examples from China are full-fledged epistles with lines of address, they nonetheless reveal how the power of written communication can extend beyond the human realm to infuse the spirit realm, serving to assimilate non-human agents within a literate bureaucracy.

Like the letters that humans write to other humans, letters to non-human spirits reveal concerns about formality, etiquette, hierarchy, and authority that are expressed in ways particular to the literary cultures in which they appear. Appropriate forms of address are determined on the basis of whether a person is writing to a transcendent being, to a middling divine functionary, or to a familiar local god who sometimes causes trouble. As in the human realm, knowing how to present oneself appropriately to a non-human recipient is critical for securing one's position of power within the dialogue and gaining one's desired outcome from the communication.[7]

In this article, I examine two types of letters to non-human recipients that emerge in Tibetan cultural and linguistic contexts. The first type is letters to territorial deities: the local gods and demons, or more neutrally *numina,* who inhabit humans' shared landscape and whose favor affects the mundane fortunes of the human community. The second type is letters to oracles or dharma protectors: transcendent (*'jig rten las 'das pa*) beings whose power and prophetic instructions support the practice of institutionalized Buddhism. There are so many questions we could bring to these materials: what historical examples do we have of these kinds of texts? Why were they written, and by whom? How were they delivered? Did non-human recipients respond, and if so, how? I will touch briefly on these in the following pages, but the primary questions I will address stem from my background in the study of epistolary literature: how have Tibetan writers positioned themselves and constructed relationships of authority through their letters to non-humans? And second, in dialogue with Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy*[8] and Geoffrey Samuel's *Civilized Shamans,*[9] what role do orality and literacy play in the construction of these relationships?

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6 Tsien 1962.

7 I note Marshall Sahlins' interesting argument that human-deity interactions may actually serve as the original models for (rather than models of) human-human interactions. Refer to Sahlins 2017.

8 Ong 2003.

9 Samuel 1993.

1. A triangulation of sources

My analysis is based on several kinds of sources from the Tibetan literary corpus: epistolary manuals, edited letter collections, and archival documents. Because each offers its own contributions and limitations to this investigation, I introduce them in turn.

Epistolary manuals are instructional handbooks that provide example phrasings for letters composed for various ranks and types of recipients. Some epistolary manuals also elaborate on the history, theory, and practice of letter-writing, explaining in detail the symbolism that inheres in the physical and rhetorical features of a well-written letter. In the Tibetan context, script size and style, margins and spacing, modes of address, and seal placement all serve to position the letter writer in a hierarchical relationship to the intended recipient. Without an understanding of epistolary theory as presented in the manuals, it is not easy for a cultural outsider to perceive the careful social work that a Tibetan letter is doing.[10]

While epistolary manuals are theoretical and pedagogical texts with sample letters crafted to exemplify the manual's instructions, edited letter collections provide practical examples of letters: presumably, traces from real life. Edited letters help us understand to what extent the theoretical instructions arranged so elaborately in epistolary manuals reflect actual practice. (The manuals, as it turns out, correspond very closely to examples of printed letters.) Many edited letter collections are accessible today in block-print or modern typeset editions in Tibetan bookstores, libraries, and digital libraries such as the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (formerly the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center). The sheer quantity and breadth of access to these sources makes them valuable indeed. The short-coming of print editions of manuscript letters, however, is that their physical presentation is much changed from the handwritten documents that the original letters once were. When the text of a manuscript letter is edited for print production, the graphic aspects of script, margins, spacing, and seals that are so richly inscribed with social cues disappear. Aside from the text of the line of address, the rest of the social data that an original letter conveys is erased when edited for print. I address these transformations and their implications elsewhere.[11]

Original archival documents are of key importance for this study, then, because they exhibit the manuscript formatting features that

[10] Kilby 2019.
[11] Kilby 2020.

convey this valuable social data. Archival letters are rarer and more difficult to access than edited letter collections, however. While some original letters to oracles and dharma protectors have been preserved among the Digital Tibetan Archives Material at Bonn University, a rich and carefully catalogued collection,[12] I have not yet located a historical manuscript letter to a local territorial deity. (How these letters would have been ritually dispatched is a question as yet unanswered: would they be buried, burned, or scattered to the winds? If so, what traces would remain of them for our finding? Or would they have merely been read aloud and disposed of?).

With each of these three kinds of sources offering different purchase for our task, we are fortunate to have extant examples from each in order to triangulate their evidence. We can analyze Tibetan written communications with non-humans in terms of both the semantic and the physical aspects of these letters.

2. Aśoka's letter to the naga king

In this article, I treat the dispatch of letters to non-humans as a Tibetan practice, even though there are interesting comparisons to be made with other cultural contexts, such as China. However, I want to begin by pointing out an Indian precedent for the practice of writing letters to local deities that appears in a collection of scriptural narratives, Kṣemendra's *Wish-Fulfilling Vine of Bodhisattva Tales* (*Byang chub sems dpa'i rtogs pa brjod pa dpag bsam gyi 'khri shing*).[13] Several authors of the epistolary instructional materials examined here quote from this collection directly in their discussion of the history of epistolary practice. The story of King Aśoka's letter to the *nagas* features the famous Indian emperor of the Mauryan dynasty who converted to Buddhism. In the seventy-third episode of the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine*, sea merchants traveling to Aśoka's kingdom are troubled by *nagas*—serpent-like deities who govern the waters and subterranean realm—who repeatedly pirate away their treasures. The merchants appeal to King Aśoka, who sends a letter to the *naga* king commanding him to return the merchants' treasures. In the 18th century artistic production of this episode, designed by Si tu pan chen chos kyi 'byung gnas, the letter to the *nagas* is depicted as being dispatched directly into the ocean.[14] This narrative episode appeals to the authority of Buddhist

[12] The field owes a debt of gratitude to Peter Schwieger and his team for their extensive work cataloguing these archives.

[13] Kṣemendra 1800.

[14] This narrative is found as story 73 in Kṣemendra (11th century). For an artistic rendering of the story, see Himalayan Art Resources, image ID 65034, from the

kings to issue letters or edicts commanding the obedience of non-human agents in their environs.

3. Instructions for writing to local gods and demons

In an 18th century epistolary manual, Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor offers instructions for writing letters to the eight classes (*sde brgyad*)[15] of gods and demons along with the various landscape *numina* that inhabit the earth along with humans and other animals. An Indian classification, the "eight classes" of spirit beings are considered to be worldly (*'jig rten pa*) rather than transcendent beings. Blinded by the same unenlightened tendencies that the rest of us are, they generally serve their own interests but can be persuaded toward benevolence when reciprocated with offerings or threatened with punishment. Within their control are the various natural phenomena that affect human flourishing: the weather, the ripening of the harvests, the flow of rivers, and the spread of disease. Their power over the forces of nature, along with their moral capriciousness, means that they bring both harm and benefit to the humans who share their habitat. Because these beings are rooted in particular places and integral to the local geography, the humans living in proximity to them must find ways of appeasing them and co-existing with them.

In Tibetan contexts, human interaction with these local gods and demons occurs primarily through ritual action. For propitiating mountain gods, in many Tibetan regions the male inhabitants of a locale establish a cairn (*la btsas*) on the deity's mountain, where they perform annual rites of offering. Interactions with rock and tree spirits (*gnyan*) and serpent spirits (*klu*) usually take the form of ritual presentations of sacrificial cakes (*gtor ma)* along with prayers. The nature of the ritual interaction depends upon the status of the supplicant: lay people address the local gods with respect and petitioning, as one might try to persuade a volatile landlord to lower the rent, whereas religious specialists address local spirits with a posture of authority and by employing ritual techniques of subjugation particular to their specialized training. Letters too are

Avadāna cycle directed by Si tu pan chen chos kyi 'byung gnas. Also refer to Lin 2011.

[15] It is notable that Sum pa mkhan po prioritizes the Indian Buddhist classification for these spirit beings (*sde brgyad*) rather than appealing to a more indigenous Tibetan scheme that classifies the landscape numina as threefold: gods (*lha*), inhabiting the sky and mountain peaks; rock and tree spirits (*gnyan*), inhabiting the middle space, the surface of the land; and serpent spirits (*klu*), inhabiting the waters and underground realm.

ritual objects, as I have discussed elsewhere;[16] they are performative texts that invoke symbols to create or recreate a reality. Examples of letters to worldly deities have been less studied than have the oral and embodied ritual interactions mentioned above, but such texts are not as rare as their near absence from scholarly literature may indicate.

Sum pa mkhan po is a fitting entry point into the practice of writing epistles to local gods and demons because he is a notable example of a high-ranking clerical monastic who writes about folk practices that are often deemed beyond the appropriate purview of institutional Dge lugs Buddhism. His most well-known example of this is his treatise on dice divination (*mo phywa*)[17]; he also wrote on astrology (*nag rtsis*, in contrast to *dkar rtsis*), which aims at interpreting the astral elements in order to secure the mundane benefits of health, power, and fortune.[18] Sum pa mkhan po's inclusion of local gods and demons in his letter-writing manual may be read as another attempt to bridge the distance between institutional Dge lugs Buddhism and the world of local deities, magic, and folk religion.

Sum pa mkhan po's instructions for writing to non-human landscape *numina* appear toward the latter part of his epistolary manual. Because Tibetan epistolary manuals are organized hierarchically, this placement indicates that local gods and demons are among the lower-ranking audiences to whom one might address a letter. In his manual, the letter writer is presumed to be a lama or a yogi: one with specialized tantric expertise and authority. Sum pa mkhan po's manual reads, in my translation:

> Also, those such as lamas and great yogis have methods for sending letters and requests for protection to the eight classes [of gods and demons] who reside in this world, and all the types [of spirit beings] included therein——the local gods and earth gods and territorial gods, and whatever demons there may be——so that they may not afflict others. [Here is] an illustration of such [a letter]:
>
> 'The word of the yogi so-and-so, who holds the mantras of the tutelary deities endowed with the seven branches of union:
>
> You eight classes of local gods and territorial gods, in the world at large and in particular, here in the place of so-and-so, may you make the teachings of the Sugar Cane One [the Buddha]

[16] Kilby 2019.
[17] Sum pa mkhan po 1975b.
[18] Sum pa mkhan po 1975a.

> increase and, with a mind of love toward beings and creatures, make religion and merit flourish!
>
> Many of the ordinary sentient beings of this particular region, by force of the degenerate age, are acting with vile behavior and some renunciants are not protecting the purity of the [monastic] law. Many householders, too, are performing the ten non-virtuous actions and, especially, are digging where the rock spirits live, and agitating the water spirits, and filling [the water] with impurities, and damaging the tree spirits, and so forth——and by so doing, they have crossed your intentions.
>
> Even so, recollect the commands established by the Thus Gone Ones and the holy lamas, and keep in mind how the monks and the mantra-holders have always made offerings to you with worship and sacrificial cakes and burnt offerings.
>
> Therefore, may you pacify the rough, unpleasant clouds out of season, and hail, and the descent of inauspicious lightning, and destructive lightning [that strikes] with a fierce sound, and the harm of thunderbolts, and the harm of fierce winds, and drought, and so forth——calm these [destructive forces]; and may snow and rain fall in accord with the seasons, and may the thunder sound gently and give way to the flowing of soft, smooth breezes; and may the lakes and ponds, streams and brooks, brim fully without causing harm, and may the harvests of the orchards and crops all increase, and may creatures delight in a feast of well-being; and in all districts, may fortune and virtue and goodness pervade.[19]

This form letter exhorts the local gods to engage in beneficial action and to refrain from destructive action. Sum pa mkhan po acknowledges the role of these localized *numina* in influencing weather, agricultural cycles, and the health of the humans and livestock who rely upon the natural resources within the deities' territory. The interdependence of human and non-human agents manifests here in a relationship that is both hierarchical and reciprocal: hierarchical, because the yogi positions himself as the more powerful and authoritative party in the exchange (as one who holds the mantras of tutelary deities), but reciprocal because even as the writer appeals to the power of oaths that bind these deities to the Buddhist cause, he also makes apologies for human activities that damage the gods'

[19] Sum pa mkhan po 1975c: 59b.3 ff.

habitats and reminds the gods of the offerings they have received, implying that those offerings will continue to be forthcoming.

4. Power, authority, and orality

We can understand the social positioning at play in this letter by means of the epistolary instructions Sum pa mkhan po offers earlier in the manual concerning modes of address, script, and tone and their relationship to one's position in the social hierarchy. Sum pa mkhan po instructs the yogi writing to local gods to employ the *'bru tsa* script (or its relative, the *'bru chung gru bzhi ma*). This is the regal script used by political rulers to express an attitude of "firmness"[20] and to assert authority over the addressee, who receives the letter like "hearing a command."[21] The assertion of the writer's own identity before naming the recipient indicates that the letter writer claims superiority to the recipient. In Tibetan epistolary convention, the name of the higher-ranking of the two parties, whether the writer or the recipient, is always written first; an earlier placement in the text corresponds to a vertically higher placement on the page, which symbolizes hierarchical superiority.[22] At the end of the line of address, it is customary to name the subjects to whom one's order is addressed: in this case, "you eight classes." The use of direct address here is especially subjecting because, as the manual attests, it is a mark of respect to refrain from calling a person's name directly.

The form of address that Sum pa mkhan po prescribes, "by the speech (*gtam*) of the yogi," follows the same form for how political leaders are instructed to address edicts to their subjects: by invoking their word or command (*bka'*), authority (*lung*), or speech (*gtam*), which carry weight because of the ruler's status. With this language, the letter is formulated not as a hierarchically neutral letter to a peer but as an order issued from on high. The writer's self-description as a "yogi who holds the mantras of the tutelary deities" appeals to the specific authority and position of a yogi within a spiritual bureaucracy.

With an understanding of Tibetan epistolary theory, it is clear that this manual's instructions and form letter position the non-human *numina* of the land, rocks, trees, and water as political subordinates to tantric specialists. If we also examine this epistolary form using the lenses of orality and literacy, with an awareness of the different kinds of traces that oral and literate discourses leave on human artifacts, we

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[20] According to the *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo,* the *'bru tsa* script conveys "*tshugs ma zur dod kyi nyams.*" Zhang 2004 [1993]: 2000.

[21] 'Ju mi pham rgya mtsho 2007: 1b.4.

[22] Kilby 2019: 265–267.

see a strong connection in these letters to worldly deities between power and orality. Even in this written letter, the primary mode of authority invoked in the text is the power of the spoken word: *gtam*, *bka'*, and *lung* each refer primarily to speech, not written text.

Ong has highlighted some of the interplay between orality tropes and political authority: because the physical body of a political ruler is consecrated and guarded as the seat of power, his or her speech (which is necessarily embodied) transmits charisma and power directly from the source. Rulers do not fill out forms or write petitions to get their way; they merely speak and it is done. The English word "dictator" captures the same assumption that the highest political power manifests in speech, not text. Across cultures, political authority turns again and again to the power of orality because orality is always grounded in the body. Ong writes, "Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power. A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste, and touch a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert, even dead, but if he hears a buffalo, he had better watch out: something is going on. In this sense, all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms, is 'dynamic.'"[23] The power of a king or Dalai Lama or yogin is *embodied* power. This is why protecting and ritually consecrating the body of the authority figure is so important: their power is sited in the body. Sound is embodied and internal whereas literacy can be disembodied and external. The authority of the yogi over local landscape *numina* is expressed through distinctly oral tropes in Sum pa mkhan po's manual.

5. From theory to practice: letters to worldly deities

Sum pa mkhan po's full-length model letter reveals much about how one Tibetan Buddhist monastic related to local *numina* by using textual communication to bridge the ideological chasm between institutional Buddhist authority and the power of local spirits. The question remains, however, of the relationship between theory and practice in this case. Were such letters actually written in Sum pa mkhan po's day? Or, is this form letter primarily a literary exercise that creatively appropriates the form of a political edict to assert the power and authority of Buddhist ritual specialists over local gods and demons? These questions are worth interrogating because archival evidence does not always match the idealized schemes constructed by those seeking to establish literary and social norms.

[23] Ong 2003: 32.

I find three reasons to argue that Sum pa mkhan po's form letter reflects common practice, rather than mere idealized theory. First, Sum pa mkhan po takes care to instruct his readers about how this form letter can be adapted to various practical contexts, just as he does with the other examples in his manual. He lists the names of the various tutelary deities whose power one might invoke; he lists the alternative titles that one might substitute for "yogi," depending on one's religious qualifications; he offers a choice among *bka'* and *lung* and *gtam* for the line of address; and he lists different examples of local spirits to whom one might address the letter. For example, he suggests that his letter can be addressed to deities who live in mountains (*ri*), lakes (*mtsho*), rivers (*chu klung*), cliffs (*brag*), cities (*grong khyer*), villages (*grong*), monasteries (*dgon sde*), residences (*gnas khang*), or households (*khyim*).[24] This list is interesting because it includes a wide spectrum of deities, from landscape *numina* to the guardians of monasteries, within the world of ritual literacy. The level of detail and care which with Sum pa mkhan po outlines the possible applications of his letter suggests that he expected this epistolary form to be put into practice.

Second, Sum pa mkhan po seems to assume that monastic engagement with the cult of the local gods is a controversial practice, so he spends much ink justifying the act on philosophical grounds. He appeals to the illusory nature of all phenomena, arguing that although gods and demons are not self-existent (*rang tshugs)*, in terms of ultimate truth, even samsara and nirvana do not exist. In other words, gods and demons are no more or less illusory than anything else in the phenomenal universe. He also appeals to the interdependence of human and non-human beings, reminding his readers that these deities have been their own parents in previous births. His quotations from Milarepa to make this point are a deployment of both his philosophical erudition and his folk knowledge to validate a practice that he believes might be seen as unfitting for a Dge lugs monastic.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we have examples of such letters in the edited collections of other prominent lamas and writers across various geographic, historical, and sectarian contexts in Tibet. In the biography of 'Brug pa kun legs (1455–1529), one narrative episode depicts a group of monks approaching the master to complain that hail has damaged their common fields; they ask that 'Brug pa kun legs compose an edict (*bka' shog*) to the eight classes of gods and demons so that the hail will cease.[25] To this reader's delight, we hear the rare voices of the gods and demons in reply as they defend the virtues of

[24] Sum pa mkhan po 1975c: 935 line 1 ff.
[25] 'Brug pa kun legs 2005: 136 ff.

hail showers, which force the monks to practice dharma instead of miring themselves in worldly agricultural work.

In the collected works of several other religious figures, we find examples of letters written to the eight classes of spirits to reprimand them for obstructing the establishment of religious monuments or institutions. Chos kyi grags pa (17th century) composed a "Letter Sent to the Eight Classes" (*Sde brgyad la springs pa'i yi ge*) on the occasion of the construction of a reliquary stupa.[26] Local *numina* inhabiting the ground or subterranean realms often thwart the construction of buildings in Tibetan tradition, and so must be either persuaded to facilitate the building efforts or ritually subjugated, as in the story of the building of Tibet's first Buddhist monastery at Bsam yas, where Padmasambhava subdued the local spirits who were causing obstructions. Another example comes from the collected works of the seventh Dalai Lama Skal bzang rgya mtsho (1708–1757). It is grouped with a collection of monastic charters (*bca' yig*) and letters of award and appointment: the letter's placement here relates it explicitly to the project of religious institution building, similar to the context of Chos kyi grags pa's "Letter Sent to the Eight Classes." Among the collected writings of the visionary 'Jigs med gling pa (1730–1798) is a letter entitled "Report Sent to the Eight Classes: The *Yaksha's* Earring." This letter's title also invokes orality by reference to the ear, of which the letter's content is the adorning ornament. This letter asserts the power of word (*bka'),* command (*lung*), and speech (*gtam*) and addresses itself "To those manifesting, among others, as evil spirits: listen (*gnyon*)!"[27]

Today, the practice of lamas issuing edicts to tame the behavior of gods and demons (*lha 'dre bka' shog*) continues. At the 2022 International Seminar for Young Tibetologists meeting, whose participants are featured in this special issue, I was fortunate to meet a monk based in India, who described how local lamas often issue these documents to protect people's homes from ghosts or other troubles and post them publicly on the sides of buildings, much like other government permits.

6. Letters to oracles and dharma protectors

Let us contrast these examples of letters to *nagas* and the *sde brgyad* with a different kind of letter: letters to oracles. Fewer of the early

[26] 'Bri gung chung tshang chos kyi grags pa 1999.

[27] *gzhi ma 'khrul ba'i sangs rgyas rdzogs pa chen po'i bka'/ lam ma nor ba'i dam chos dbu ma chen po'i lung/ 'bras bu ma bcos pa'i rig grol phyag rgya chen po'i gtam/ yongs grub rig pa bde gshegs snying/ ma rig las gyur kun brtags kyis/ gzhan dbar gdon du shar rnams nyon/* 'Jigs med gling pa 1970–1975: 577.

modern epistolary manuals address how to submit letters to oracles and dharma protectors, but such instructions can be found, for example in Nor rgyas nang pa's manual from the late 19th century.[28] As for archival examples of such letters, the Digital Tibetan Archives at Bonn University (DTAB) yields twenty-eight documents tagged with the keyword *lung-zhu* (request for prophecy or divination addressed to the oracles and protector deities; the response is called *lung-lan*). These archival documents are calligraphed on large format paper and marked with the official seals of the oracles. Often the oracular reply to the divination request is recorded in a different and more hurried hand in the large empty space, which I have called the "hierarchy space" and which Hanna Schneider has called the "distance of respect," between the line of address and the beginning of the petition.

Here I will examine DTAB document 563.[29] The letter is addressed in formal, respectful language to "the throne of the white *utpala* toenails of the leader, victor, protector of the teachings Rdo rje drag mo and her two royal chiefs," followed by a large hierarchy space of 15 centimeters, indicating the great respect and humility of the sender. The document summary that was available on the previous DTAB database housed on the Bonn University website assessed the content of the document as follows:[30]

> This is a letter written by the tutor, monastic officials and monks from the *Blo-gsal gling* monastery to the guardian *rDo-rje drag-mo rgyal* and her retinue. The letter contains three enquiries: 1. What kind of prayers are necessary to be performed in order to pacify the obstacles and fulfill the wishes of the (present) abbot and ex-abbots, lamas, reincarnations and monastic officials? 2. What types of prayers are required to eliminate all the physical hindrances that young and old monks may have? After eliminating the hindrances, (what could be done so that) all monks remain in harmony respecting the Vinaya rule completely, and how could the dialectic study and the number of monks be brought to flourish? How could all the desired wealth (expand) without decline, similarly to the "summer river?." 3. Which prayers are efficient to pacify the negative influences affecting either humans or non-human

[28] Nor rgyas nang pa dbang 'dus tshe ring 1990.

[29] This document is ID 3184 and can also be located with the "Signatory in archives" ID 0563_AA_1_1_20. It is part of the Collection of André Alexander (AA), https://dtab.crossasia.org/3184. Accessed on March 15, 2023.

[30] Previously, the digital collection was hosted at http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/index1.htm. When the collection migrated to CrossAsia, it does not appear that all the document summaries migrated as well.

> beings; to (maintain) the inner and outer service for the monastery, [to secure] primary funds for monks' tea, leased (land and fields) in the estate, a herd of leased animals in the North, a religious fund that depended on both humans and wealth, and the great murals in a religious hall *Kun-dga' ra-ba*, which need to be accomplished. Furthermore, there should not be any obstacle to get back all the interest on grain stored in the inner and outer treasure houses; which had been lent to (villagers).

After the oracle was consulted with these requests, Rdo rje drag mo replied with brief oral utterances of the practices the requesting monks should undertake; those utterances are recorded by a scribe in the hierarchy space, numbered to correspond with the numbered list of questions, and sealed with the oracle's seal.

According to Tibetan epistolary conventions, this letter demonstrates that the writers of the letter——the monks and officials of Blo gsal gling—— are positioning themselves respectfully below the dharma protector Rdo rje drag mo, the recipient of the letter. When we compare this letter to the letters to local gods and demons, we gain a clearer sense of where lamas and yogis are positioned in Tibetan cosmology: they are higher than the local gods and demons, but they are subordinate to the oracles and protector deities. We should notice too that the petitionary components of this letter (unlike the reply) do not evoke orality tropes. Here, the letter is offered before Rdo rje drag mo's throne as *paperwork*, and the oracle's utterance is transformed by the scribe (in the form of his numbered list) as *paperwork*. In our contemporary experience too, paperwork is a task that underlings perform. A king doesn't fill out paperwork; a king merely speaks and things happen (even if the "thing happening" is that a secretary transcribes his utterance and issues it as a written decree). There is a pattern at play in Tibetan letters to non-human recipients, just as in Tibetan letters to human recipients, where those writing "up" employ tropes of literacy and those writing "down" employ tropes of orality.

Concluding thoughts

Tibetan letters to non-humans skillfully employ tropes of orality and literacy to communicate distinct and unequal power positions within a richly populated cosmos. With the interpretive help of epistolary manuals, Tibetan letters to gods and oracles convey much information about *where* tantric specialists are positioned in the richly-populated landscape of non-human beings as well as *how* they express that

positioning. The roles of orality and literacy are central to claiming or ceding power in these epistolary relationships. These findings encourage further attention in Tibetan Studies to the ways that orality and literacy tropes may be functioning to express hierarchy in a variety of settings beyond epistolary composition.

For example, these findings lead to new considerations regarding Geoffrey Samuel's heuristic of shamanic and clerical Buddhism, which (despite the limitations any heuristic necessarily has) continues to hold purchase in both macro- and micro-historical research in Tibetan Studies. In *Civilized Shamans*, Samuel links literacy to clerical Buddhism and orality to shamanic Buddhism.[31] He is careful not to make too strict of a division between these interplaying modes, emphasizing that the two modalities "go right through all of Tibetan Buddhist practice," and that is exactly what we see in these Tibetan letters to non-humans.[32] For example, a letter is itself a written document, but a letter might call itself a *bka' shog*: the word *bka'* appeals to the authority of spoken word, while the word *shog* means paper. Orality and literacy are necessarily intertwined in epistolary texts, where words are transformed from voice to ink.

Yet even when orality and literacy are intertwined, they can nonetheless be traced within their contexts as performing distinct kinds of work. From Tibetan letters to gods and oracles, we learn that what Samuel identifies as shamanic and clerical modes of Buddhism are integrally tied to hierarchical position within a given relationship or event. In the same epistolary document, or in the same ritual event, the higher-ranking actor assumes an oral/shamanic mode of expression while the lower-ranking actor assumes a literate/clerical mode of expression. Different actors' adoption of either shamanic or clerical orientations within a shared interaction may be largely influenced by their hierarchical positions within that event. In other words, it may not be the event that exhibits clerical or shamanic Buddhist modalities, but rather the actors who assume those modalities in their distinct (and possibly shifting) roles in relationship to others. To push the hypothesis further, I suggest that what Samuel calls "clerical" and "shamanic" modes of Buddhism may have less to do with the aims involved (whether enlightenment or worldly benefits), and more with the social hierarchies at play among the relevant actors.

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[31] Samuel 1993: 19.
[32] Ibid.: 19.

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Zhulen (*Zhus lan*) as Scripture: Authenticating Treasure in Medieval Tibet with Narratives[1]

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From an early statement that "whatever is well said is the word of the Buddha," to the famous teaching of *upāya* (*thabs shes*), or expedient means, the varying contexts Buddhism found itself in often inspire new (and renewed) forms of doctrine and practice. When the Buddha of our age, Śākyamuni, passed away into *parinirvāṇa* well over a thousand years ago, the question arose as to what counts as genuine Buddhist teaching, and who gets to decide. In Tibet, with an added interruption of transmission lineages (commonly called the "Dark Period" of Tibetan Buddhism), how does one determine the authenticity of any newly surfaced Buddhist teachings? In this article, I suggest that the literary genre of *zhulen* (*zhus lan*), or question-and-answer, in the context of Treasure (gter ma) literature, was created with a scriptural model in mind, and functioned to authenticate revealed Treasure teachings. Furthermore, this new method of scriptural creation allowed continued revelation over the next millennium.

After some three hundred years of economic, cultural, and religious renaissance, the 13th and 14th centuries in Tibet was a time for development and further creation.[2] It was also a time when things

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[2] The period of Tibetan renaissance, according to Davidson 2005: 2–3, is characterized by the following four themes: the weaving-together of a Tibetan religious system heavily influenced by late Indian Tantric Buddhist ideologies; textualization of Tibetan culture through translating the massive corpus of Indian (or Indic) materials—both religious and secular; central Tibet replacing India" as the preferred source of international Buddhist ideology;" and the rise of monastics as a new form of aristocracy. In the 13th and 14th centuries, the first two themes

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Tibetan gained currency: many of the religious sects and sub-sects that remain operative today were formed during this time period; efforts were made to create Tibetan canons, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike;[3] not only were newly-introduced Indian philosophical, religious, and literary works interpreted and rearranged in Tibetan ways, but Tibetan writers also started to claim authorship for their own treatises and write about Tibetan concerns. For the Nyingma (*Rnying ma*) Buddhists, who claimed their scriptural authority to originate not from the new, post-imperial waves of imported Indian teachings, but rather from the so-called rediscovery of the old forms of Buddhism from the time of the Tibetan Empire, its priority lied in responding to new challenges: the impressive growth of literature in its rival New Translation (Gsar 'gyur) School; the burgeoning prestige of mass institutional monasticism; and the ongoing criticism of their own practice of scriptural revelation. An important way to reclaim this ancient imperial authority is through Treasure revelation. These revealed Treasures claimed authenticity and authority for Nyingma teachings and practices, connected their lineage back to the "Golden Era" of Tibetan history, and helped to cement a sense of shared identity in the otherwise decentralized Nyingma communities, which was heavily tantric in its practice.

Central to the Treasure identity was the legitimacy of these revealed teachings. Since their source of transmission comes from a time and space inaccessible in mundane means, Treasure revealers had to be creative in staking their claim to authenticity. In the context of Treasure revelations, *zhulen* imitated a canonical narrative frame, thus qualifying themselves (and by extension, texts within the same cycle) as authentic Buddhist teachings and identifying its author, usually Padmasambhava, as an enlightened buddha.[4]

With the exception of some brief discussion on dialogues in the

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have subsided and shifted to indigenous Tibetan inspirations; while the third and fourth continued to feature prominently in the picture.

[3] For a study on the compilation of two sets of authoritative translations of Indian Buddhist texts, the *Kangyur* (*Bka' 'gyur*) and the *Tengyur* (*Bstan 'gyur*), see Schaeffer and van der Kuijp 2009. *The Collected Teachings of Bon* (Bon po bka' 'gyur) also started to take its shape at the same time. Kværne 2013: 183–95. Also see Martin, Kværne, and Yasuhiko 2003.

[4] Another way to authenticate otherwise questionable teachings by Nyingma apologists is to invoke a set of "three witnesses" (*dpang po gsum*) of prophecy (*lung bstan pa'i dpang po*), person (*gang zag gi dpang po*), and scriptural coherency (*lung 'brel ba'i dpang po*). As argued by Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo (Rong zom chos kyi bzang po, 1012–1088) in the case of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, if a teaching is prophesied by someone considered authoritative by the opponent, or is associated with such a person, or corresponds in key concepts with established authority accepted by the opponent, then it should be accepted as authentic. Dorji Wangchuk 2002: 278–282.

Manifold Sayings of Dagpo (*Dwags po'i bka' 'bum*)[5] or in association with other texts within the same corpus,[6] *zhulen* or *drilen* (*dris lan*) as a literary genre has received less scholarly attention.[7] As the name suggests, *zhulen* or *drilen* took the format of a series of questions and subsequent answers: *zhu* or *dri* means to request or to ask (*zhu* is the honorific form), while *len* is the answer. Sometimes it was also written as *zhus len*, literally "asking [a question] and receiving (*len*) [a reply]." These questions and answers covered a wide range of topics, including detailed explanations on doctrinal points, instructions for practice, or even refutations that form a part of an ongoing polemical debate. These texts closely align with the classic dialogical framework of Mahāyāna sūtras (and subsequent tantras). Further, their emergence as a literary genre should be considered in connection with the theological concern for authenticating sacred texts in this post-renaissance period of Tibetan Buddhism. This is especially true for the Treasure revelatory practices as a literary response to the influx of newly transmitted teachings and texts from India by the Nyingma School, representative of the older tradition.[8]

By highlighting the formal similarities between Treasure *zhulen* texts and early Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures/exoteric Buddhist scriptures in dialogue format, I examine the Treasure *zhulen*'s function of authenticating teachings. Through appropriating the canonical format, these dialogues acted as scriptures and authenticated revealed or newly transmitted teachings. For comparison, I also include another two collections of *zhulen* from the Zhije (*Zhi byed*) School that were compiled around the same time. The Zhije collections are comparable to the Treasure ones in their narrative framework as well as key features that inform their self-identification as canonical scriptures. However, the Zhije *zhulen* did not have as lasting an effect as their Nyingma counterpart; their discontinued production is worth probing. Lastly, by comparing standard *zhulen* in the 14th and 15th

5 Kragh 2015: 301. Kragh considers *zhulen* an emerging genre in the 12th century that takes its inspiration from two canonical texts bearing the word *zhulen* (**praśnottara*) in their titles. See below for a discussion on the content and format of these two texts: *Śri Saraha's Dialogue with King Maitripa* (Tib. *Dpal sa ra ha dang mnga' bdag mai tri pa'i zhu ba zhus lan*, Skt. **Śrīsarahaprabhumaitrīpādapraśnottara*) and *The Dialogue concerning Vajrasattva* (Tib. *Rdo rje sems dpa'i zhus lan*, Skt. **Vajrasattvapraśnottara*), in *Bstan 'gyur dpe bsdur ma* 1994-2008, 48: 142–145, 407–421.

6 Rheingans 2011 presents a case study of a single *drilen* text by the Eighth Karma pa Mikyo Dorje (Mi bskyod rdo rje, 1507–1554) and argues that the genre provides the opportunity for authors to offer concise doctrinal points within a limited space.

7 The first systematic study of Tibetan literary genres, *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre* (Lhundup Sopa, Cabezón, and Jackson 1996), includes a chapter on the genre of *zhal gdams* or advice, but not a separate treatment of *zhulen*.

8 For a discussion on the rise of Treasure revelation and its historical developments, see Davidson 2005: 210–243.

century with earlier examples from Dunhuang,[9] I argue for their distinct legitimizing function in the Nyingma and Zhije context.

1. Texts and Genres in the Treasure Tradition

Treasure is a uniquely Tibetan form of scriptural creation that locates its religious authority in Tibet's imperial past by revealing Buddhist teachings hidden in both material and immaterial forms. The practice of concealing sacred substances or texts in stūpas, caityas, or statues predates Buddhism and was adopted as Buddhism gained popularity in the subcontinent.[10] The extraction of sacred objects from hidden places is also not a new phenomenon. Nāgārjuna is said to have received Treasures from the hand of the king of nāgas, hidden since the time of the Buddha. Tibetan Treasure is distinct because it represented a systematic effort to make revealed scriptures one of the main and preferred sources for canonical texts. It presented unique ways to encounter, extract, and decode these concealed teachings in a systematic manner. The personages and places involved in Treasure revelation were also included in this literary world.

In its early years, the sources for these revealed teachings were many. Treasures can be attributed to a number of imperial figures, including King Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po, r.617-650), King Tri Songdetsen (Khri srong sde btsan, 740–798), and two Indian teachers who visited Tibet during Tri Songdetsen's reign: the tantric master Padmasambhava and the monk Vimalamitra. One of the important early Treasure revealers, Nyangrel Nyima Özer (Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer, 1124–1192) helmed literary efforts to construct Padmasambhava as "the second Buddha" in the 12th century. In the culmination of his apotheosis in the 14th century, the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava gradually replaced the two kings and the monk Vimalamitra as the central figure for Treasure transmission.[11]

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[9] In her work on possibly the earliest text with *zhulen* in its title, the *Dialogue concerning Vajrasattva* (*Rdo rje sems dpa'i zhus lan*) from Dunhuang, Takahashi only made brief comments on how this "catechistic literary form" also embodies the text's concern of bringing together the ritualistic and philosophical aspects of Mahāyoga. Takahashi 2010: 86. Van Schaik 2015: 19 lists six types of Tibetan and Chinese Zen texts, among which the second type are "treatises on Zen doctrines in the form of questions and answers." These texts also assumed the dialogue format but did not contain *zhulen* or *drilen* in their titles.

[10] See, for example, Ramachandran 1953.

[11] There are three strands for early Treasure transmissions: those transmitted from the ancient Tibetan kings, Songtsen Gampo and Tri Songdetsen; from Padmasambhava; and from Vimalamitra. For a discussion on the association of Tibetan kings and their royal ideology with Treasure discovery, see Davidson 2005: 217–224, 231. Also see Germano, "Revealing Ḍākinīs in 14th Century Tibet,"

The classical Treasure legend narrates the story of how Padmasambhava converted Tibet into a land of Buddhism. Upon leaving Tibet, he is said to have conferred numerous teachings to his disciples, foremost among them Yeshe Tsogyel (Ye shes mtsho rgyal).[12] She had assumed the responsibility of translating these teachings into a secret code language, concealing them all over Tibet, entrusting them to local guardian deities, and ensuring their rediscovery by future generations.

These narratives about how Treasures came about are usually preserved in the paratextual sections of Treasure texts, including Treasure certificates, colophons, and framing narratives of *zhulen* accounts. For example, in the epilogue of the *Copper Island Biography*, a *Life* of Padmasambhava discovered by Nyangrel Nyima Özer, Yeshe Tsogyel is said to be the disciple who is responsible for the transmission of Treasures:

> The emanation of Sarasvatī, Queen Mother Tsogyel has attained the *siddhi* of infallible memory. For the sake of future generations, she has written down the mind transmission of the Master, the royal testament of King Tri Songdetsen, and the virtues of the Great Compassionate One. Having buried them as precious Treasures, she concealed them for the sake of [future] fortunate ones. [She] applied three layers of seals on them. Seal of Treasure. Seal of Concealment. Seal of Entrustment. This is a secret text.[13]

By the 14th century, the innovative practice of Treasure revelations had grown steadily over time. Treasure texts continued to grow in volume as well as variety. These texts usually centered around Padmasambhava, with the occasional addition of other Imperial personages. They can be roughly divided into three categories: instructional (instruction on practice, advice, or commentary), ritual (empowerment, evocation ritual, or supplication), and narrative (account of lineage masters, religious history, or hagiography). In the case of *zhulen*, it did not fit neatly into one of these three categories. *Zhulen* texts were named after their formal feature, viz., dialogues that happened between a master and a disciple, usually Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyel. However, Treasure dialogues also contained a

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for a discussion on the convergence of Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava's tradition in the Treasure cycles of Tsultrim Dorje and Longchen Rabjam Drime Özer (Klong chen rab byams dri med 'od zer).

[12] Treasure *zhulen* texts also present Yeshe Tsogyel as the ideal intermediary for Treasure transmissions to take place.

[13] *Padma bka' chems rgyas pa*: 122b–123a.

particular narrative framework that is more stylized than non-Treasure ones. They took on the dual task of establishing itself as a Buddhist scripture, and at the same time authenticating a transmission lineage that is Buddhist beyond doubt.

2. *Early Treasure* Zhulen

Pre-14th Century *Zhulen*

Some of the earliest Treasure *zhulen* texts are attributed to Nyangrel Nyima Özer. He was said to have revealed a collection of twenty-seven *zhulen* texts collectively titled *Dialogues with the Queens*, and a number of individual *zhulen* texts preserved in a cycle titled *Direct Teachings from the Guru: Instructions and Dialogues* (hereafter *Direct Teachings*).[14]

A *zhulen* usually began with a narrative of the time, location, and retinue for the occasion of the teaching. Sometimes this was prefaced by a brief account of how Padmasambhava came to Tibet, ranging from a few sentences to a long passage that listed his achievements. After introducing Padmasambhava as one "who was born miraculously from a lotus, untainted by a womb," an untitled *zhulen* recorded a conversation that took place between him and seven female disciples. Having prepared flowers, a golden *maṇḍala*, and made a feast, each woman initiated a question to the master, starting with Yeshe Tsogyel:

> The Great Master known by the name Padmasambhava, who was born miraculously from a lotus, untainted by a womb: when he was invited by the powerful king of Tibet, he tamed the ground of Samye. At this time, he was residing at the

[14] For example, "Bla ma dmar khrid kyi zhal gdams zhus lan skor," in 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976-1980, 92: 184-710. Since *Direct Teachings* first appeared as a whole in Jamgön Kongtrul Lodro Thaye's ('Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, 1813–1899) 19th century *Treasury of Precious Revealed Teachings* (*Rin chen gter mdzod*), its attribution to Nyangrel as a 12th century revelation is not unproblematic, see Hirshberg 2016: 122 n. 229. However, a number of individual texts within *Direct Teachings* can be dated back to an earlier time. Some texts in the *Dialogues with the Queens* were also found in 14th century Treasure cycles revealed by Rigdzin Godem. Individual texts in *Direct Teachings* can also be located in literary sources from the 12th century onwards, either by title only or reproduced in full. For example, "Treasure from the Lotus Crystal Cave: Direct Instructions from Śrī Siṃha (*Padma shel phug gi gter ma śri sing ha'i dmar khrid skor*)" (*Jo mo la gdams pa sogs* n.d.: 600–612) is also present in the 14th century Treasure cycle the *Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Primordial Purity* by Rigdzin Godem, which will be discussed below shortly. In Godem's revelation, this text is titled *Introduction to Natural Awareness and Natural Luminosity* (*Ngo sprod rang rig rang gsal*).

> Juniper Ridge of Crystal Pearls. These exceptionally noble women — Lady of Kharchen, Yeshe Tsogyel; Lady of Shelkar, Dorje Tso; Lady of Cokro, Pelgyi Chone; Lady of Dro, Matingma; Lady of Margong, Rinchen Tsuk; Lady of Chims, Sale Ö; and Lady of Ruyang, Mati —altogether seven, prepared turquoise flowers as the seven royal treasures[15] in the middle of a cubit-sized golden *maṇḍala*. Having made a feast of thick rice wine and various food offerings, they made the following request:
>
> "Great master! Pray confer on us your immaculate body, your pristine speech, and your mind which is free from conceptualization!"
>
> Queen Tsogyel, Lady of Kharchen, made the following question to Master Padma:
>
> "A disciple like me, who is a woman with little wisdom and a dull mind; I have limited understanding and am narrow-minded. May I request an oral instruction on enlightenment in this lifetime with a female body, a teaching that is easy to know, to grasp, to understand, and to realize!"[16]

Padmasambhava replied with instructions on the true nature of the Buddhist teachings.[17] Then, each female disciple, in succession, beseeched him to give an oral instruction and received teachings from him. The text concluded with the conferral of teaching to Yeshe Tsogyel:

> The seven ladies rejoiced in the master's teachings, made prostrations to him, circumambulated him, and prepared extensive feast offerings. The queen, Lady of Kharchen, with the intention of benefitting future generations, recorded [the teaching] in writing at that very time, at the Juniper Ridge of Crystal Pearls.[18]

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15 The seven royal treasures are the precious possessions of a universal monarch. They include: the precious wheel (*'khor lo*), jewel (*nor bu*), queen (*btsun mo*), elephant (*glang po*), minister (*blon po*), horse (*rta mchog*), and general (*dmag dpon*).

16 "Untitled," in 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980, 92: 474–475. This text is also translated by Erik Pema Kunsang (Padmasambhava 2008: 111–120).

17 "Untitled," in 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980, 92: 475.

18 Ibid.: 493–494.

Other dialogues are also found in 13th and 14th century Treasure cycles. Guru Chöwang (Gu ru chos dbang, 1212-1270) included in his autobiography a visionary conversation between him and Padmasambhava, titled *Dialogue with the Retinue* (*Nye 'khor zhu* [sic] *len*).[19] Here he inquired of the master about his fellow disciples in his previous birth as king Tri Songdetsen. Another influential Treasure collection for the prospering cult of Padmasambhava, the *Seminal Heart of the Khandromas* (*Mkha' 'gro snying thig*), discovered by Tsultrim Dorje (Tshul khrims rdo rje, 1291-1315/17), also contained a dialogue between Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyel, titled the *Golden Rosary of Nectar* (*Zhus lan bdud rtsi gser phreng*).[20] The opening passage shared a similar structure with the *zhulen* texts in *Direct Teachings*:

> Homage to the great master Padmasambhava! Orgyen Padma Jungne, emanation of the Buddhas of Past, Present, and Future, the All-Knowing One, the Vajra-like Vidyādhāra, was invited to Tibet by the powerful king [Tri Songdetsen]. During his stay in Tibet, I, Tsogyel, served as his *karmamudrā* (*las rgya*) and attendant. While he was meditating in the cave of Zhodö Tidro, he introduced me to the meaning of the *Most Secret, Most Excellent Seminal Essence of Great Perfection*. I have gained certainty about the nature of existence by directly seeing it without any analytic thinking.
>
> Struck by its wonder, I, Lady of Kharchen, asked:
>
> "Ema! Great master, since all the key points in the *Seminal Essence of the Secret Tantra* are held within the three key aspects of essence, nature, and capacity, are there any deviations from these three or not?[21]

After receiving the answer from Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyel continued with a series of eight more questions. They start with the three key points in the Seminal Essence teaching — the essence, nature, and compassion — and end with teachings on abandoning thoughts on food, clothing, and body. Similarly, this text concluded with Padmasambhava exhorting Yeshe Tsogyel to record and conceal these teachings for the benefit of future generations.[22]

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19 Gu ru chos dbang 1979, 2: 498.3–498.7. Also see Phillips 2004: 172–73.
20 "Zhus lan bdud rtsi gser phreng," in Dri med 'od zer 2009, 5: 349–368. This text is translated in full by Erik Pema Kunsang (Padmasambhava 1994: 44-60).
21 Dri med 'od zer 2009, 5: 349.
22 Dri med 'od zer 2009, 5: 367–368.

Zhulen Collections in Rigdzin Godem's Revelations

Perhaps the most dedicated use of *zhulen* as a vehicle for establishing textual authority is found in a later Great Perfection Treasure cycle. Entitled *the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen, Primordially Pure Great Perfection* (*Rdzogs chen ka dag rang byung rang shar*). This Treasure cycle was discovered by the Treasure revealer Rigdzin Godem (Rig 'dzin rgod ldem, 1337–1409) and consists of primarily sacred conversations between various enlightened figures.[23] After a preliminary practice and a supplication to the Great Perfection transmission lineage, the majority of titles within this volume were framed as either dialogues between enlightened and/or soon-to-be-enlightened figures, or oral teachings from Padmasambhava:[24]

I. *Key Points in the Precious Preliminary Practice: The Five Nails*: a preliminary practice
II. *Supplication to the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen, Primordially Pure Great Perfection Lineage*
III. *Notes on the Key Points of Dialogue Coming from the Eastern Conch Shell Treasury*: a dialogue between Yeshe Tsogyel and Padmasambhava
IV. *The Precious Spike Testament*: an oral instruction from Padmasambhava
V. *Stages of Guidance on the Points of the Path: Distilling the Quintessential Elixir, Light Dispelling Darkness*: a dialogue between Yeshe Tsogyel and Padmasambhava

[23] Rig 'dzin Rgod kyi ldem phru can 1979b. This is a reproduction of a manuscript originally housed at Tsamdrak (Mtshams brag) Monastery in Bhutan. The cycle is later included as the fifth and last volume of an anthology of Great Perfection teaching cycle, collectively titled the *Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po'i dgongs pa zang thal*). Two versions of *Unimpeded Realization* are available to us: (1) the Adzom (A 'dzom) version: *Dgongs pa zang thal gyi chos skor* (Rig 'dzin Rgod kyi ldem phru can 1973). This is a reproduction of block prints prepared by Adzom Drugpa Rinpoche (A 'dzoms 'brug pa rin po che, 1842–1924) in his own monastery in the early 1900s; (2) the Nechung (Gnas chung) version: *Dgongs pa zang thal gyi chos skor* (Rig 'dzin Rgod kyi ldem phru can 1979a). This is a reproduction of block prints prepared by the eleventh Nechung Tulku Śākya Yarpel (Gnas chung sku rten Shākya yar 'phel, 19th century). The Nechung version does not include this *Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen, Primordially Pure Great Perfection* volume. In the Adzom version, the text titled *Rdzogs pa chen po rang byung rang shar gyi rgyud las byung ba'i man ngan gsal ba'i sgron me* is not included. On the other hand, this version contains two extra texts: a *zhulen* between Padmasambhava and Namkhai Nyingpo (Nam mkha'i snying po), titled *Sku gsum gtan la dbab pa'i rgyud*, and an oral teaching by Padmasambhava, titled *O rgyan padmas mdzad pa'i zhal chems sgron ma rnam gsum*.

[24] Kapstein 1996 provides an overview of the *zhal gdams* or advice genre. Also see Schapiro 2012: 66–75.

VI. *Distilling the Quintessential Elixir: Wisdom Empowerment*
VII. *The Ten Steps of the Profound Key Points*: a dialogue between Yeshe Tsogyel and Padmasambhava[25]
VIII. *Introduction to Natural Awareness and Natural Luminosity*: a dialogue between Padmasambhava and Śrī Siṃha
IX. *Treasury of Precious Gems that Remove Obstacles*: a dialogue between Yeshe Tsogyel and Padmasambhava
X. *Illuminating Lamp: Oral Instructions from the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Great Perfection Tantra*: an oral teaching from Padmasambhava
XI. *The All-Liberating Vajrasattva Tantra*: a tantra in the form of a conversation between Vajrapāṇi and Vajrasattva
XII. *The Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Great Perfection Root Tantra*: a tantra in the form of a conversation between Vajrasattva and Samantabhadra
XIII. *Introduction to the Five Intermediate States*: a dialogue between Tri Srongdetsen and Padmasambhava

The arrangement of titles in this volume progressed in chronological order as one moves on with practice. It began with an introduction: *Key Points in the Precious Preliminary Practice: The Five Nails* is a preliminary practice text; while *Supplication to the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen, Primordially Pure Great Perfection Lineage* was a supplication to the lineage masters. These were customarily placed at the beginning of a volume. Except for the first two texts, all other titles in the collection assumed the format of conversations or oral instructions. These conversations made up the majority in this volume. They took place between buddhas and bodhisattvas, teachers and disciples, with their locations ranging from mythical abodes to human realms, from India to Tibet. *Introduction to Natural Awareness and Natural Luminosity* was a dialogue between Padmasambhava and his teacher, Śrī Siṃha; while all other accounts were teachings from Padmasambhava, the cultural hero for Rigdzin Godem's Treasure activities. These were conversations between Padmasambhava and his two disciples (Tri Songdetsen and, most frequently, Yeshe Tsogyel[26]) or oral teachings from him.[27] The location of sacred conversations then moved up to the

[25] Turpeinen 2018: 164–175, provides a detailed analysis of this text as a narrative of Yeshe Tsogyel's experiences and transformations when she undertook the Direct Transcendence (*thod rgal*) training with Padmasambhava.

[26] These two disciples (sometimes with the addition of Namkhai Nyingpo) were already considered the main disciples responsible for transmitting Padmasambhava's teachings in the earlier Treasures of Guru Chöwang. Turpeinen 2015: 33–34.

[27] For example, Text IV, *The Precious Spike Testament*, did not belong to the dialogue genre. Judging from the use of phrases like "Listen (*nyon cig*)!" and the scene-

divine realm, represented by *The All-Liberating Vajrasattva Tantra* and *The Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Great Perfection Root Tantra*, two tantras that formed the basis of the primordial purity teachings. The volume concluded with *Introduction to the Five Intermediate States*, a text on the five after-death intermediate states, or bardos.

Similar to those attributed to Nyangrel Nyima Özer and Tsultrim Dorje, these dialogues also started with a scene-setting narrative about the life of Padmasambhava, followed by a series of questions and answers. Consider the following opening passage from *Notes on the Key Points of the Dialogue Coming from the Eastern Conch Shell Treasury*:

> While Master Padmasambhava was residing at Samye Chimphu, Lady of Kharchen, Tsogyel, was slightly distracted regarding worldly appearances during the day. One night, deeply immersed in her sleep, she dreamed that on the side of a massive rocky mountain, a boy [with a body] of light was sitting on a throne of precious jewels. He was surrounded on all sides by brilliant flower stalks of various colors. [Tsogyel] was very happy and set out to walk there. She went there and encountered a fearsome large snake: then she was scared and became unconscious.[28]

Yeshe Tsogyel then descended into a crack that opened in the mountain, went through many types of sensory experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, and finally arrived at a whirling lake with a sky-reaching tree trunk in the center, fire ablaze at the root, various flowers on the branches, and pure fruits hanging in the air. Having woken from the dream, she approached master Padmasambhava and asked him about the causes and conditions that gave rise to this dream. The master replied with a teaching on the emptiness of the external world and sentient beings inhabiting it (*phyi snod nang bcud*). He then went on to explain the practice of eradicating delusional appearance by upholding the fortification of natural awareness.[29] In the end, Yeshe Tsogyel received the full textual transmission of the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Primordial Purity from Padmasambhava:

> The great master Padmasambhava, for the sake of Lady of Kharchen, Queen Tsogyel, according to the profound yet concise *Great Perfection Tantra of Self-Arising and Self-Appearing Awareness*, entrusted to her the following teachings: the eight

setting narrative in the beginning, they were still first-person voice teachings given by Padmasambhava to his disciples.

[28] Rig ʼdzin Rgod kyi ldem phru can 1979b: 42–43.

[29] Ibid.: 48–53.

> *upadeśa*s, and the two tantras, being ten altogether. Among those are:
>
> - *Notes on the Key Points of Dialogue*
> - *The Precious Spike Testament*
> - *Light Dispelling Darkness*
> - *Distilling the Quintessential Elixir: The Wisdom Empowerment*
> - *Quintessential Steps of the Profound Instruction*[30]
> - *Introduction to Natural Awareness and Natural Luminosity*
> - *Treasury of Precious Gems that Remove Obstacles*
> - *Illuminating Light of Instructions*[31]
> - *The All-Liberating Vajrasattva Tantra*
> - *The Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Root Tantra*
>
> These ten, along with proceedings of offering to the Treasure protectors, amount to eleven.
>
> [He] bestowed them to the Lady of Kharchen, Queen Tsogyel. Tsogyel, having been liberated from delusory appearances on her own, for the sake of later generations, hid all the instructions in a white clockwise-turning conch treasure inside a dark maroon chest made of rhinoceros hide, on the waist of a rocky mountain like a pile of poisonous snakes, in the northern region of Thoyor Nakpo.[32]

In this case, not only was a dialogue used as a vehicle in itself to transmit Padmasambhava's teachings, it also extended outward to other titles within the same collection and gave validation to these titles as well. By including titles of texts within the same cycles, this dialogue authenticated not just itself, but all the text mentioned within as genuine teaching transmissions from Padmasambhava. It also spelled out its place of concealment and subsequent revelation, which can be used to validate the retrieved texts from the same location.

3. Zhulen as Scripture: Shared Stylistic Features with Mahāyāna Scriptures

As seen above, the narratives framing these dialogical accounts share a common structure, which can be summarized as follows:

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30 This title refers to *Ten Steps of the Profound Key Points* in this cycle.
31 This title refers to *Illuminating Lamp: Oral Instructions from the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Great Perfection Tantra*.
32 Rig 'dzin rgod kyi ldem phru can, 1979b: 53–54.

- Padmasambhava was residing at [place]
- Description of the time, location, and retinue
- A disciple (usually Yeshe Tsogyel) raises a question
- Padmasambhava answers that question
- (Another question is brought up and answered)
- End of the teaching: entrusting and concealing Treasures

For anyone familiar with the narrative structure of classical Buddhist scriptures, the resemblance is evident. A few more detailed observations can be made of this narrative structure. It contained the five elements or "perfect conditions" (*phun sum tshogs pa lnga*)[33] under which a Buddha-voiced teaching (Tib. *sangs rgyas kyi bka'*, Skt. *buddhavacana*) takes place: the teacher, the time, the location, the audience or retinue, and the teaching. The conversation format was adopted by the Buddha in his teaching career and became the literary convention for Buddhist canonical literature. These conversations took place between the Buddha and his disciples, between the Buddha and other deities, and among disciples themselves. They were used to address concerns for skeptics, to defend doctrinal positions, and to propagate new teachings and practices.

A sūtra usually started with the phrase "Thus have I heard, at one time, the Buddha was residing in [a certain place], accompanied by [a retinue of various classes of beings]." Then a disciple or a bodhisattva would stand up and raise a question, initiating the sequence of a sacred conversation. In the end, the retinue invariably rejoiced at this most excellent teaching and resolved to commit it to practice. For example, the *Mahāvaipulya Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, a Mahāyāna scripture, encased the content of the Buddha's teaching (in this case on Tathāgatagarbha) in the narrative frame of a dialogue.[34] New teachings continued to be incorporated into the canon—the reinvention of Buddhist canon was perhaps as old as the Buddhist scriptures themselves—but with the same dialogical format. Modifications to the strict definition of

[33] In a specifically Mahāyoga generational stage ritual context, these five perfection conditions could also be: the place, the principal practitioner, the retinue, the requisite substances, and the time. See Mayer and Cantwell 2010: 8 n. 10. This fivefold trope continues in the Treasure tradition. For a Treasure revelation to successfully take place, five "auspicious connections" (*rten 'brel*) need to come together. According to the Third Dodrupchen, Jigme Tenpai Nyima (Rdo grub chen 'Jigs med Bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1865–1926), these five are: the right person or Treasure revealer, the right place, the right time, meeting with the holder of these teachings (*chos bdag*), and encountering the right consort or ḍākinī. Jacoby 2014: 206–207.

[34] Grosnick 1995: 92–106.

Buddhist scripture as *buddhavacana* came as early as when the first collection of sūtras were settled and agreed upon. Even for sūtras from the first assembly after the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, not all of them were considered to be preached by the Buddha – some teachings were given by his disciples. In this case of *pratibhāna* or inspired utterances, the Buddha invited his disciples to give a spontaneous sermon or to offer versified reflections on the spot, which he then affirmed, stamping the sermon with his authority.[35]

Tantras also imitated the sūtric narrative style. The beginning chapter of *Compendium of Principles of All Tathāgatas* (*Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*) presented a reimagination of the enlightenment narrative of Prince Sarvārthasiddhi or Siddhārtha, the future Buddha. Here, instead of proceeding with his samādhi and attain enlightenment, he was instructed by all the Tathāgatas that the process of awakening includes self-visualization and the chanting of mantras, starting with "Oṃ! I penetrate the mind! (*Oṃ cittaprativedhaṃ karomi*)." It was only after doing so that he could attain perfect enlightenment and realize the true nature of all the Tathāgatas.[36] Here again, the narrative followed the established framework of a Buddhist *sūtra* (interestingly, the *Tattvasaṃgraha* also referred to itself as a *sūtra* rather than tantra), but recast in decidedly tantric terms.[37]

With this long-standing and continuous tradition of canon expansion in mind, Treasure *zhulen* adopted a similar dialogical format and served to effectively elevate the status of Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyel as part of the enlightened pantheon in Tibetan Buddhism. The beginning of these texts omitted the phrase "Thus have I heard," which could be explained by the fact that these accounts replaced the Buddha with Padmasambhava, who was equal to the Buddha. Through Padmasambhava's voice, the teachings transmitted in these dialogues were also recognized as authentic *buddhavacana*. Yeshe Tsogyel was responsible for memorizing and transmitting his teaching lineage, replacing Ānanda, the faithful disciple of the Buddha. The list of titles bestowed to her in the aforementioned *Notes on the Key Points of the Dialogue Coming from the Eastern Conch Shell Treasury* was one example.

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[35] For a discussion on this canonical genre of spontaneous, inspired utterances that extends the authorship of Buddhist scriptures beyond the Buddha, see MacQueen 1981 and 1982.

[36] For a translation of the opening scene in *The Compendium of Principles of All Tathāgatas*, see Giebel 2001: 19–24.

[37] Weinberger 2003: 49ff. Note that Hindu tantras are also commonly formed as conversations between gods and goddesses.

4. Dialogues Discontinued: The Zhije Zhulen *Collections*

This appropriation of a scriptural format in Treasure *zhulens*, as well as their function of authenticating new teachings and expanding the Buddhist pantheon, were not a new phenomenon.[38] The true creativity of Treasure *zhulen* texts was its regenerative ability, which made continued revelation over the next millennium possible. This new feature in scriptural creation is better appreciated when we look at a parallel example, the Zhije School. This was a contemporaneous, and in many aspects comparable, Tibetan Buddhist school to the Nyingma tradition. Like Padmasambhava, the legendary founder of the Zhije School, Dampa Sanggye (Dam pa sangs rgyas, 11th century–1117),[39] was also said to have come from India. He was one of the central actors in the renaissance of Tibetan Buddhism, sharing the stage with early Nyingma Treasure revealers and their New Translation School contemporaries. His disciples also composed dialogues to record his teaching.

Zhulen accounts were found in at least two collections of Zhije teachings, respectively titled *The Early, Middle, and Late Pacification Corpus* (*Zhi byed snga phyi bar gsum gyi skor*, hereafter *The Corpus*)[40] and *The Collected Teachings of the Early, Middle, and Late Pacification School* (*Zhi byed snga phyi bar gsum gyi chos skor phyogs bsgrigs*, hereafter *The Collected Teachings*).[41] *The Corpus* contained a bundle of dialogues with the collective title *Six Dialogues on the Truth with the Black Ācārya* (*A tsa ra nag po'i don gyi zhu lan drug*).[42] *The Collected Teachings* included a total of five dialogues, three of them were by Dampa Sanggye and the other two by Dampa's foremost disciple, the female Buddhist master Machig

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[38] The earliest Tibetan texts with *zhulen* in their titles include manuscripts from Dunhuang and several canonical texts. In the Dunhuang texts, there are three copies of the same work, all titled *Dialogues Concerning Vajrasattva*. They are IOL Tib J 470 and IOL Tib J 578/Pelliot tibétain 819, and Pelliot tibétain 837, see Dalton and van Schaik 2006: 214–216, 279–280. The same title is also included in the *Tengyur*, see "Dpal sa ra ha dang mnga' bdag mai tri pa'i zhu ba zhus lan," *Bstan 'gyur dpe bsdur ma* 1994-2008, 48: 142. For a critical edition and a complete translation of the text, see Takahashi 2010: 114–140, also see Schaeffer 2005: 28, 193–194 n. 46.

[39] For a brief sketch on Dampa Sanggye's life, see Martin 2006: 111–114.

[40] Thugs sras kun dga' and B. N. Aziz 1979. The manuscript basis for this collection can be dated back to the mid-13th century, see Martin 2015: 340 n. 8.

[41] The last volume of this collection contained a discussion of the compilation process. Texts were gathered from old manuscripts in the main temple to Dampa Sanggye in Tingri (Ding ri), Gdams ngag mdzod, and collections of Chö (*gcod*) or Cutting teaching by Machig Ladron. However, no information was given with regard to specific texts within the collection. Dam pa sangs rgyas and Ma cig lab sgron 2012–2013, 13: 433–439.

[42] "The Black Ārcārya" refers to Dampa Sanggye.

Labdrön (Ma gcig lab sgron, 1055–1149).[43]

The Zhije *zhulen* collection also opened with a scene-setting narrative. Additionally, following the convention of translated canonical texts in the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur*, it began with listing both the Sanskrit and Tibetan titles of the text:

> In Sanskrit, [the title] is *Paramabuddhoktānandabodhisatvānāgatakālavyākaraṇāvavāda*; in Tibetan, *The Instruction of Phadampa Sanggye to Bodhisattva Ānanda Regarding Prophecies for Future Times*.
>
> Homage to the Guru! Homage to the Precious Excellent Buddha, Dampa Sanggye!
>
> At that time, it is said that Dampa had been crying for a while. Kunga asked, "Excellent [Teacher]! Why are you crying?"… [44]

Another conversation between Dampa Sanggye and his twenty-four female disciples also listed its title in both Sanskrit and Tibetan:

> In Sanskrit, [the title] is *Caturviṃśatyāryāpraśnottaraitihāsasahitaṃ*; in Tibetan, *The Account and Dialogue with the Twenty-Four Ladies*.[45]

The Sanskrit title was absent in teachings by Machig Labdrön, perhaps because of her Tibetan, not Indian, identity. After a brief homage to her, without any of the scene-setting narrative, the text started directly with the first question, "Why is obtaining a human life precious?" and proceeds with Machig's answers.[46]

Since *zhulen* texts in the Zhije collections did not identify themselves as revealed teachings, they ended not with a narrative of Treasure concealment, but general concluding prayers. Their authenticity relied on the Indian identity of the teacher, Dampa Sanggye, and by extension the alleged Indian origin of his textual transmission, as

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[43] The three attributed to Dampa Sanggye are: *The Instruction of Phadampa Sanggye to Bodhisattva Ānanda Regarding Prophecies for Future Times* ("*Pha dam pa sangs rgyas kyis byang chub sems dpa' kun dga' la ma 'ongs pa'i dus lung du bstan pa'i zhal gdams*," Dam pa sangs rgyas and Ma cig lab sgron 2012–2013, 2: 573–582); *The Account and Dialogue with the Twenty-Four Ladies* ("*Jo mo nyi shu rtsa bzhis zhus lan dang lo rgyus*," ibid., 3: 663-688); and the *Hundred Thousand Explanations on the Mirror of Mind in Dialogue: A Garland of Perfect Views on the Profound Meaning* ("*Zhus lan thugs kyi me long gi bshad 'bum zab mo'i don rnam par gzigs pa'i 'phreng ba*" ibid., 4: 1–544).

[44] Ibid., 2: 574–575, 577.

[45] Ibid., 3: 664.

[46] Ibid., 7: 192.

suggested by the Sanskrit titles. This kind of bilingual title was only occasionally found in Treasure cycles. Since they both came from India masters, one might expect Sanskrit titles to be carried in Dampa Sanggye and Padmasambhava's teachings. However, the apotheosis of Padmasambhava meant that his teachings were no longer brought from India, but as given directly in his identity as Second Buddha. As with the absence of "Thus have I heard," here, Dampa Sanggye was the transmitter of teachings, Padmasambhava the originator.

The following table (fig. 1) offers an overview of the narrative framework in *sūtra*, tantra, Treasure *zhulen*, and Zhije *zhulen*:

NARRATIVE ELEMENTS			
	Setting the Scene	***First Four of the Five Perfection Conditions***	***The Fifth Condition: The Teaching***
SŪTRA	"Thus have I heard," ...	Description of the teacher, time, location, and retinue	A disciple or a bodhisattva asking a question
TANTRA (*SARVATATHĀGATATATTVASAṂGRAHA SŪTRA*)	"Thus have I heard," ...[47]	Description of the teacher, time, location, and retinue	Aroused by All the Tathāgatas, the future Buddha asking them how he should practice
TREASURE *ZHULEN*	Brief narrative about Padmasambhava	Description of the teacher, time, location, and retinue	A disciple (usually Yeshe Tsogyel) asking a question
ZHIJE *ZHULEN* TAUGHT BY DAMPA SANGGYE	Sanskrit and Tibetan titles of the text; homage to the teacher	Description of the teacher, time, location, and retinue	A disciple of Dampa Sanggye asking a question
ZHIJE *ZHULEN* TAUGHT BY MACHIG LABDRÖN	Homage to the teacher	Description of the teacher, time, location, and retinue	A disciple of Machig Labdrön asking a question

[47] This is found in the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha Sūtra*, but not necessarily other tantras. For example, the later *Cakrasamvara Tantra* begins simply with an homage to Śrī Cakrasamvara; while the *Hevajra tantra* begins with "Thus have I heard ..." See Gray 2007: 155; Snellgrove 1959: 47.

	The Fifth Condition: The Teaching **(continued)**		*End of the Teaching*
SŪTRA	The Buddha, a bodhisattva, or a senior disciple answering the question	(Another question being brought up and answered)	Rejoicing at the teaching and resolution for practice
TANTRA (*SARVATA-THAGATA-TATTVA-SAṂGRAHA SŪTRA*)	All the Tathāgatas answering his question	(Another question being brought up and answered)	Binding the teaching with seals of secrecy and verses of praise
TREASURE *ZHULEN*	Padmasambhava answering that question	(Another question being brought up and answered)	Binding the teaching with seals of secrecy and verses of praise
ZHIJE *ZHULEN* TAUGHT BY DAMPA SANGGYE	Dampa Sanggye answering that question	(Another question being brought up and answered)	Concluding prayers
ZHIJE *ZHULEN* TAUGHT BY MACHIG LABDRÖN	Machig Labdrön answering that question	(Another question being brought up and answered)	Concluding prayers

Fig. 1 — Comparison of Narrative Frameworks in Sūtra, Tantra, Treasure and Zhije zhulen

As seen above, except for the scene-setting narratives and endings (these two elements vary in different contexts but are nonetheless indispensable components of the genre), exoteric sūtras, esoteric tantras, and *zhulen* texts in the Treasure and Zhije traditions all provided the required five perfect conditions to frame the transmitted teachings. Unlike the buddhas or bodhisattvas, who resided on a timeless plane of enlightened activities, the identity of Padmasambhava and Dampa Sanggye required clarification. In carving out a space for its doctrinal and historical authenticity, both Treasure and Zhije traditions employed the formal features of canonical dialogue with some modifications to fit their own contexts. They identified the founders of their respective lineages as masters from India—the origin site of Buddhism—and further declared them to be enlightened buddhas. Like Padmasambhava, whose epithet "the

second Buddha" (*sangs rgyas gnyis pa*) emerged at this time,[48] Dampa Sanggye was also referred to as "the second Buddha."[49]

The unrealized potential for the Zhije *zhulen* genre compared to the prosperous Treasure dialogue literature reveals further innovations on the Treasure tradition's part. Both traditions apotheosized an Indian master and canonized his teaching through the hand of a Tibetan female disciple.[50] The process of canonization, in both cases, involved emulating the well-established sūtra format and elevating the status of the speaker to an enlightened Buddha. Compared to the continued revelation of many more dialogical accounts after the 14th century, the composition of Zhije *zhulen* came to a halt after the time of Dampa Sanggye and Machig Labdrön. One explanation for the thriving scriptural production in Treasure could be the logic of its revelation. Without the ongoing discovery of previously concealed texts through reincarnations of enlightened personalities, it would be difficult to continue engaging in scriptural creation after the departure of their founding father. On the other hand, the Zhije tradition lacked the innovative mechanism and leadership to build and maintain a separate tradition.

5. Dialogue Reinvented: What Is New with Treasure Dialogues?

The comparison between Zhije and Treasure *zhulen* texts is instrumental for understanding how the Treasure *zhulen* composed themselves as authentic *buddhavacana*. In its inception, and especially prior to its adoption into Treasure cycles, *zhulen* as a literary genre may not have the expressed ambition of self-identifying as scripture. In the Nyingma Treasure and Zhije traditions, the addition of a canonical narrative framing the dialogues and the identification of the teachers as buddhas enabled this transformation to Buddha-voiced teachings.

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[48] Gyatso 1993: 114 discusses the role of Padmasambhava in Treasure transmissions not as a buddha, but as "part of the authoritative pantheon that confers legitimacy on the discoverer's revelation." The epithet "second Buddha" alone may not offer sufficient ground to celebrate Padmasambhava's prestige; however, when combined with his elevation of status in these dialogical narratives as the single source of authentic teachings, effectively substituting the Buddha, his apotheosis has reached its peak. The role of a "middle woman" or "codifier" is assumed by his disciple, Yeshe Tsogyel, who was responsible for ensuring that Treasures were ciphered, concealed, and, in later times, rediscovered.

[49] For example in, "Zhus lan thugs kyi me long gi bshad 'bum zab mo'i don rnam par gzigs pa'i 'phreng ba," Dam pa sangs rgyas and Ma cig lab sgron 2012–2013, 4: 3.

[50] Teachings attributed to Dampa Sanggye straddled the line between canonical and extra-canonical, for some of them (for example, his tantric verses) were included in the *Tengyur* section of the Tibetan Buddhist canon as well. Schaeffer 2007: 7–9.

The narrative framework of conversation between teacher and disciples is the default canonical format in both exoteric and esoteric Buddhist literature. As a literary genre, the Tibetan *zhulen* was first identified in short texts within the *Tengyur* and in Dunhuang manuscripts.[51] In the later spread of Tibetan Buddhism, extra-canonical *zhulen* proliferated, especially in the Nyingma Treasure tradition. This scriptural genre was used by Treasure revealers to elevate their revelations as *buddhavacana*. In these sacred conversations, Padmasambhava replaced the Buddha as the originator of teachings, Yeshe Tsogyel replaced Ānanda as the transmitter. These instructions left behind by Padmasambhava were not only identified as authentic Buddhist teachings of its time, through the mechanism of concealment and revelation at a later time, Padmasambhava's teachings continued to resurface and renew themselves as an authentic source of scriptural production. The creativity of Treasure revelation ensured that Treasure texts can regenerate themselves throughout generations, and that Treasure teachings continue to proliferate.

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[51] See note 38 above.

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Hearing Goddesses in Rivers: Contemplative Design and Religious Experience in the Great Perfection

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Sitting next to a river on an early autumn day, the valley sloping, opening to mountains off in the distance, you listen to the rushing sounds of the water flowing swiftly across the rocks. You listen deeper, more intently, and the longer you listen, the more those sounds become music – the most beautiful music you've ever heard, as if a goddess was singing a sublime melody. Now you hear more goddesses playing flutes, lutes, zithers, and drums from all the five Buddha families. You begin to hear the order of transcendent reality resound for you.

Sound is a fundamental component of Tibetan Buddhism. It has a rich history of music in rituals, with specialized instruments, compositions, and chants, as well as in contemplative practices with mantra recitations and visualizations (or auralizations) that place mantric particles within divine worlds and the body's interior. These are more than just incidental aesthetics – they are fundamental tools in how Tibetans have historically made and experienced religion. However, within Tibetan and Buddhist studies, these aural dimensions are often overlooked or relegated to supportive roles and lush backgrounds rather than focused on as primary makers of Tibetan religiosity. This is especially the case in the discussion of contemplation and religious experience in the Great Perfection (*Rdzogs chen*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Much scholarly emphasis is placed (and justifiably so) on its unique philosophies, poetics, cognitive practices, and experiences described as either ineffable or visionary, yet Buddhist studies scholarship has largely not attuned to the roles of sound and hearing in the Great Perfection's diverse locales, divinities, contemplations, and experiences.

We find a concentrated source of aural engagement within this tradition in a collection titled the *Seventeen Tantras* (*Rgyud bcu bdun*) of the Great Perfection's Heart Quintessence (*Rdzogs chen snying thig*) tradition, specifically in the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* (*Sgra thal 'gyur*).

Liddle, Adam, "Hearing Goddesses in Rivers: Contemplative Design and Religious Experience in the Great Perfection," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 75, March 2025, pp. 93-113.

Here, I will focus on a featured set of preliminary contemplative practices from that text and its 12th century commentary, the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* (*Sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud*), on the sounds of the elements (*'byung ba'i sgra*). In these aural contemplations, a Buddhist meditator goes out into the wilderness to focus on an array of natural sounds. It is an emblematic practice for this tantric tradition that heralds hearing as an important pathway for religious experience. It both opens our understandings of the rich aural world of the Great Perfection and problematizes academic conceptions of Great Perfection sensory models which tend to focus primarily on vision.

I argue that the sense of hearing is being employed in this textual tradition to produce innovative pathways for religious experience and attainment in 11th–12th century Tibetan Buddhism. The tradition both crafts contemplative practices and spaces for listening to the elements and establishes frameworks for the interpretation of such practice wherein heard sounds become transcendent and felt sensations are indications of physical transformation and spiritual awakening. It is through the combination of these factors that I contend the contemplative practices in this tantra and its commentary reveal new understandings of Tibetan Buddhist sensory models in which both hearing and the sounds of our environment are valued as a path towards awakening.

In this article, I will thus explore the ways the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* and its commentary produce pathways for religious experience by breaking down the process into two core concerns found in the texts: contemplative design – the organization of spaces, materials, bodies, and activities; and descriptions of experiences – the resulting physical, emotional, perceptual, cognitive, and transcendent experiences that arise during the course or as a result of contemplative practice.

I will demonstrate how the sense of hearing suffuses and connects both the design of these practices and their experiences for this tradition, used both as a central focal point for the contemplative design as well as the primary medium of the resulting experiences. I will also discuss three other themes that are centered in these listening practices – environments, bodies, and socialization. Considering each of these themes in turn can help us identify and understand core concerns of the tradition.

Finally, I will offer concluding reflections on this tradition's logic concerning the process of religious experience. I will discuss the place of the aural in contemplative practices of the Great Perfection, arguing that while the visual remains a major focus for much of Tibetan Buddhism's sensory practices, these aural practices provide new ways of understanding the Great Perfection's sensory model at this time and

alternate ways they engaged with contemplation and religious experience. Further, I find that such aural encounters in this tradition are not merely productive of untethered experiences but are framed as transformative or liberative – revealing transcendent reality from amidst the mundane appearances of our world. Last, I propose that such religious experiences occur through the relationship of aural experience and Great Perfection ideological frameworks of cosmogony, cosmology, and agency, forming interpretive frameworks for the production of specifically religious experiences.

1. *Sound and Sight in the Great Perfection*

The Great Perfection is often traditionally presented as the highest textual and practice-oriented tradition of the *Rnying ma*, or 'Ancient,' school of Tibetan Buddhism. In the Tibetan Renaissance of the 11th–12th centuries, we see an incredible textual output from this tradition featuring the *Seventeen Tantras* as the core of the *Experiential Precepts* class (*Man ngag sde*) of the Great Perfection, including the *Unimpeded Sound*.[1] This tradition values spontaneity and natural liberation over effortful and controlled practices. This theme forms the basis for their ultimate view, namely that our world and ourselves are naturally free from the bonds of suffering – we are already naturally transcendent. The highest practice of the Great Perfection tradition has long been considered a set of visionary experiences called Direct Crossing (*thod rgal*), which is described elsewhere in this set of literature, and has been the focus of much theoretical and practical traditional commentary (as well as contemporary academic scholarship) since.[2]

However, in the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* and its commentary, we find an increased range of sensory practices that feature hearing, taste, smell, and touch alongside visual models of practice. These texts spend particular time focusing on aural practices and sonic imaginations, detailing five ways sound "descends" (*babs so*) into our world to explain the word *Sound* in the tantra's title. The tantra thus declares:

> The expressions of sound (*sgra'i brjod pa*) are such that
> [They] are an amazing wonder
> Not explained in other tantras -
> Listen to me through my elaborations.
> The site of sound's descent (*sgra'i babs so*) is fivefold:
> Brahmā (*tshangs*), Viṣṇu (*khyab 'jug*), the [kala]pingka bird

[1] Germano 2005.
[2] For example, see Hatchell 2014.

> (*ping ka*),
> The elements' sounds (*'byung ba'i sgra*), and the teacher's voice (*ston pa'i gsungs*).
> The doctrines emerging (*'byung ba'i chos rnams*) via these five [sonic sources]
> Are practiced (*spyad*) in a great play (*rol pa chen por*) at your pleasure (*ci dgar*).[3]

The commentary clarifies that each of these five descents of sound map onto a type of sound found in the world: Brahmā utters linguistic sounds, Viṣṇu creates numerical sounds, the kalapingka bird sings melodies, the elements resonate with material sounds, and the teacher's voice expresses doctrinal sounds.[4] These descents of sound into the world represent ways that beings are deluded into confusion, such as the way the sounds of language can substantiate conceptions of ourselves and our emotions, and the ways numbers can delude by delineating the world into pieces. However, listening and voicing these sounds in specific ways is also imagined as capable of revealing reality, such that listening to the sound of the teacher's voice can grant superhuman sensory capacities.[5]

From among these five sources of concealing and revealing sounds, the material sounds of the elements are privileged as the principal sonic pathway for religious experience and attainment. The *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary indicates that there is a direct connection between the sounds of the exterior four elements, their resonance within human bodies, and humans' capacity to realize the gnosis of reality along with awakened bodies.

> Now is the fifth subtopic, the presentation on closely planting the seed of the emanation body in reliance on the external locations of the sounds of the four elements. "Elements" is as follows: if we ask where they emerge, the characteristics of beings with awareness are made to emerge in dependence on inanimate material. [In other words,] the four elements of the

[3] "*(Ka) Rin po che 'byung bar byed pa sgra thal 'gyur chen po'i rgyud*" 2000: 18.4–6. I also use several other witnesses of the text for translations. Please refer to the bibliography for a list of the editions used. In citations, I will simply cite the page numbers used in the *Adzom* edition cited here. It will be referenced by its condensed title, "Sgra thal 'gyur." Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

[4] Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 108.6–158.3. I will also be using several witnesses to the commentary in my translations. In the notes, I will cite the Tsering Gyatso edition of the text. Please refer to the other versions in the bibliography.

[5] For a full discussion of the sonic imagination of this text, please refer to my dissertation: Liddle 2023.

> internal body are made to emerge upon dependence on the four external elements. Thus, they are "emergent [or] elements" (*'byung ba*). Since the primordial knowing of awareness is made to emerge in direct immediacy in dependence upon the four elements of the internal body, they are called "emergent [or] elements." Since the fruit of Buddhahood emerges without hindrance in dependence on the immediacy of the direct perception of awareness, they are called "emergent [or] elements."[6]

In this description that plays on the dual meaning of the Tibetan word *'byung ba* as emergent or elements, the four elements of the material world are depicted as giving rise to the internal elements of humans. This enables them to realize primordial knowing of reality and thus (eventually) attain Buddhahood. The elements' sounds are further related back to that reality through cosmogonical scenes elsewhere in which the "natural sound of reality" (*chos nyid kyi rang sgra*) expresses itself to create the elements which in turn materialize as the physical world and its sounds.[7] These elemental sounds are also constantly referenced throughout the other four descents of sound as important practices, including the assertion in the commentary that all the Buddhas of the three times attained enlightenment through the practice of listening to them.[8] Finally, they are also the only sounds that get taken up as a core preliminary practice for the text.

2. *Listening to the Sounds of the Elements*

In its twenty-fifth sermon of chapter one, the *Unimpeded Sound* features a set of four different preliminary contemplative practices, one for each of the natural elements of water, earth, fire, and wind.[9]

> The stages for training on the three awakened bodies (*sku gsum*)
> prioritize the sensory qualities of the elements (*'byung ba'i 'dod yon*).

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6 Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 144.1–4.
7 Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 158.6–169.6.
8 Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 149.1–5.
9 While the *Unimpeded Sound* also uses a five-fold system of elements that includes space, for the purpose of sonic practice and elemental calculations, it largely omits this fifth element, explaining that it is "neuter and empty" (*ma ning stong pas*) and thus outside the purview of such practical engagement. "Sgra thal 'gyur" 2000: 20.2.

> Best [among these] are the sounds of earth, water, fire, and wind.
> Via training on these, there will certainly be accomplishment.[10]

These are presented as sonic trainings on the three awakened bodies (*sku gsum*), through which one can accomplish their individual dynamic qualities (*yon tan*) such as the six super-knowledges and freedom from the harmful effects of the environmental elements.[11] The *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary summarizes and clarifies these sounds, as the root text remains vague on their sources.

> Those who wish for supreme accomplishments [should] train on the sound of earth in the [clacking of] round rocks (*sgong gi rnam pa*), the sound of water in the sound of a cleansing (*gshang ba'i sgra*) [river that flows] down a valley, the sound of fire in a mass of sandalwood flames (*tsan dan gyi me dpung*), and the sound of wind in a [mountain-top house] with windows in [all] directions (*phyogs kyi skar khung*).[12]

Each of these sounds reflect material and spatial considerations for contemplation, all of which will be more fully engaged in their individual sections detailed below. As a group, these mostly indicate a particularly intense form of the element – such as a speedy downhill river, a bonfire, or the wind at the top of a mountain – where the sound of it will be strong.[13] They are also all found in natural environments that are typically isolated from other people, a point the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary is eager to foreground.[14]

A practitioner chooses which sound to engage based on a set of elemental calculations that indicate the practitioner's elemental body

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10 "Sgra thal 'gyur" 2000: 54.2–3.

11 I.e., drowning in water, being impeded by earth, burning in fire, and being scattered by wind.

12 Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 275.1–3.

13 One exception to this is the sound of earth. Instead of an earthquake or rockslide, which would more likely be the most intense forms of earth's sounds, the commentary describes the clinking together of stones. Neither the tantra nor the commentary reflect on the reasons for this, indeed the sound of earth contains the least amount of description among the four practices. We may reflect that rock slides are too sporadic and dangerous to make for reliable sites of contemplation, and that stones better reflect the normal occurrence of earth's sounds, described in the tantra as "cool and heavy."

14 This is one of the qualities the commentary lists for each of the four practices, and the only quality it gives for the practice on the sound of earth.

type or constitution.[15] To this end, the tantra declares that "if a yogi's [elemental] body [type] aligns with [the external element being practiced], there is no doubt they will accomplish [the practice]."[16] In this way, one's interior elemental constitution is presented as a central factor in the efficacy of these contemplations.

In describing these elemental sound practices, the tantra provides one verse for each, beginning with water:

> Within the cleansing (*bshang ba*) sound of water,
> [one can] apprehend (*'dzin*) the melodious sounds (*sgra dbyangs*) of the Sky-Dancer goddesses.
> If one makes this a constant habit (*rtag tu goms byas*),
> they will certainly accomplish even the emanation body.[17]

The tantra itself gives scant details on the practice. However, the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary presents enough practical instructions about the contemplation for practitioners (and us) to better understand both its design and the experiences that arise during it. Thus, the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* indicates:

> If the yogi's [elemental] constitution is water, [they should go] "to the cleansing sound of water," indicating a well-formed southward-facing valley that slopes downward (*lung pa kha lhor lta ba/ rab tu gzugs la thur*) in which water flows down it fiercely (*chu drag po 'bab pa*) and the sound of water grows most intensely (*chu'i sgra mchog tu che bar song*) … If the cleansing sound of water is particularly strong (*rab tu gshang na*), various activities will be accomplished.[18]

For further clarification, the commentary also directs readers to another text, the *Conch Letters* commentary,[19] which outlines the

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[15] This can be understood in similar ways to Indian, Chinese, or Western astrological calculations, where one's date of birth and time in the calendrical cycle have an effect on their physical body and what courses of action they should take. However, instead of basing these calculations on the movement of the stars, these are based on regular changes in the elemental makeup of the world, a subject the text deals with extensively. Elemental constitution types such as a fire constitution or a water constitution describe the makeup of a person based on these calculations. Methods for understanding one's elemental constitution and the complex of factors, sub-types, and related effects are found throughout the text. For a more complete account of these calculations, see Zuckerman 2024.

[16] "Sgra thal 'gyur" 2000: 55.1–2.

[17] "Sgra thal 'gyur" 2000: 54.3–4.

[18] Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 275.4–6.

[19] *The Conch Letters* (*dung yig can*) is a part of the cycle, *the Heart Quintessence of Vimalamitra* (*bi ma snying thig*) and is referenced by the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*

practice and provides detail for several sonic, environmental, and physical factors:

> In the late autumn, when the grains have been harvested, the yogi who practices on the sound of water should perform preliminary practices and then [go] to an empty valley in which a fierce river flows downwards with extremely powerful waves and the rushing sound of "shwa." It is key that their body is in a squatting position with the ankles parallel, that their awareness is focused on the center of the river, and that their eyes should not move around, looking out with the elephant gaze. They [should] meditate in this way for one month… continuously listening to the sound of water.[20]

With both of these commentarial exegeses, we can begin to reconstruct the contemplative apparatus to which the tantra gestures. The practice of listening to the sound of water should be performed alone in a river-valley that slopes down off the mountain and opens towards the south. This description would entail a variety of practical consequences, such as the speed and strength of the river as it flows down (as opposed to a possibly slower river on flat ground), and the amount of light and heat that a practitioner would get with the sun coming in from the open South. The designers clearly want a strong river, likely to generate the most sound possible. In both commentaries, the strength of the sound is foregrounded, as its ability to confer more attainments. The specific sound is indicated also by the onomatopoeia, "shwa," again suggesting a rush rather than a babble.

The practitioner's activities are also outlined in the *Conch Letters*. There are instructions for their bodies, which should remain squat, their vision, which should stay steady (possibly on the river), and their auditory awareness, which is cast into the center of the sound's source. Instructions for the other sounds generally keep these three concerns, though awareness (*rig pa*) is sometimes replaced by ear consciousness (*rna ba'i rnam shes*), which too is cast into the center of the elemental sounds. Finally, a time parameter is set. While this quote indicates one month, that is only for the initial set of experiences to arise. The total practice takes two and a half months.

The other three listening practices are similarly described in the tantra.

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as a source for further details around this practice. *The Conch Letters* does not contain a full explanation of the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*, though notably focuses on these aural practices of the sounds of the elements.

[20] Bi ma la mi tra 2009a.

> The sound of earth is cool and heavy (*bsil zhing lji*)[21].
> It possesses the voice of Great Brahmā.
> If one constantly listens to this,
> They will certainly accomplish the complete enjoyment body.
>
> Training on the lengthening (*ring byed*) sound of fire
> Reveals the melodious speech of Great Viṣṇu.
> Whoever listens to this,
> Will certainly attain the dynamic qualities of the reality body.
>
> The sound of wind is oppressive and fierce (*gzir zhing drag*).
> [It reveals] the connecting speech of *khyung* birds.
> If one understands this [properly though its] constant recitation,
> One will train on [that which is] common to the three awakened bodies.[22]

The first line of each verse details the sound to which one listens to the cool and heavy knocking of earth, the ever-lengthening roar of fire, and the overwhelming whistles of wind. In this way, practitioners with different elemental constitutions are instructed to practice on their respective sounds. The *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary further explains that a person with an earth constitution should go to an extremely isolated place and acquire rocks the size of eggs (*sa'i sgo nga*), listening to the noise as they strike them with their hand or manually hit them together (*lag pa'i 'du byed*) for seventeen months.[23] A practitioner with a fire constitution will go to a sandalwood forest, collect several dozen large logs,[24] and start a raging bonfire, listening to its roar for twenty months.[25] Finally, a person whose primary constitution is wind will climb to the top of a mountain, to a house that is open on all sides (*phyogs kyi skar khung*), and listen to the wind whistle and whip around them for sixteen months.[26]

Each of these practices unfolds into unique experiences for their listeners. The descriptions of these experiences, while multi-sensorial

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[21] Interestingly, the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary takes these as experiences where one's body turns cool and their mind becomes heavy when listening to the sound of earth, as opposed to descriptors of the sound itself. Parsing between the intention of the tantra and the commentary's interpretation of it is often a challenge in between these texts.

[22] "Sgra thal 'gyur" 2000: 54.4–6.

[23] Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 278.2–280.6.

[24] The exact number is based on their age.

[25] Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 280.6–283.6.

[26] Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 283.6–286.1.

at times with tactile, visual, and even olfactory experiences, are most directly focused on the transcendent aural experiences that arise from listening to the mundane environmental sounds. The root verses describe the experience of listening to water: "Within the cleansing sound of water, [one can] apprehend the melodious sounds of the Sky-Dancer goddesses."[27] In the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary, it describes such aural experiences as the culminating experience of the listening practice, though several other-sensory experiences are given along the way:

> In the first month, there will appear (*snang*) various sounds of water and [the practitioner will] feel agitation in their body's elements. Then, there will appear snippets of Brahmā's clear voice (*tshang pa'i skad kyi gdangs 'ga'*), followed by guttural and unarticulated ghostly speech *('dre'i skad lce dang mchus ma bsgyur pa dag*), an occasional eagle's screech (*nam mkha' lding gi skad*) of "ka hring," and Indra's speech (*brgya byin gyi skad*) of "prati dreng" will resound (*grags par 'gyur*). After another half-month, there will emerge resounding calls (*grags pa dag 'byung*) of ordinary beings of the six realms [crying] "di ri ri!" A half-month later, the beautiful sounds of the kalapingka bird resounding in particularly melodious ways (*ka la ping ka'i sgra rab tu dbyang kyis snyan pa dag*) will emerge. Then, in another half-month, there will be [the melodious] sounds of the [five] sky-dancer goddesses… which sound [respectively] like a *piwang* lute (*pi wang*), a flute (*gling bu*), a zither (*drwa ba*), a clay drum (*rdza rgna*), and refined [singing] *('phra ma'i lta bu'i sgra*).[28]

The commentary presents a timeline of aural and other-sensory experiences that arise from listening to the sound of water in the ways presented previously. These include a variety of deities' voices, suffering cries of beings in different realms, and the musical tones of the Sky-Dancer goddesses. The experience of listening to these goddesses' melodies are examined in further detail by the commentary, which aligns with the tantra's presentation of them as the major experiences of listening to water.

> Then in half a month, the first sound of the Sky Dancer goddesses will resound, "Bhuddha Ḍakkini Dharma Kasu" in long tones (*rab tu ring bar grags*). Then, one will hear (*thos pa*)

[27] "Sgra thal 'gyur" 2000: 54.3.
[28] Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 276.1–277.4

> [the goddess'] own melody (*de nyid kyi dbyangs*) which [sounds] extremely tormented, refined, subtle, and clear (*rab tu gdung ba dang/ bsing ba dang/ 'phra zhing gdangs pa*). Thus, even the body will tremble and [that trembling will] speed up (*'dar zhing rings pa*). One will start to feel intoxicated (*myos pa'i nyams*). Then, they will lose feeling in their body (*reg 'joms kyi myong ba*).…
> Upon hearing these resound, they will experience them as bliss, great bliss, and utter bliss (*sgra grags pa dag thos pa'i tse na/ bde ba dang/ bde ba chen po dang/ rab tu bde ba la spyod*). If the yogi constantly familiarizes themselves with these kinds of sounds, they will accomplish the authentic dynamic qualities of the emanation body.[29]

Each of the goddesses of the five Buddha families is represented in turn. They all pronounce their family membership in Sanskritized phrases as the Awakened, Adamantine, Jewel, Lotus, and Action Sky-Dancers.[30] Each is presented in a small section, though the Awakened family goddess detailed in this passage is given the most description. Her musical instrument is her voice, which is described using a variety of intonation markers such as tormented and refined. The other four goddesses express sounds like musical instruments: a *piwang* lute, a flute, a zither, and a drum.

Hearing these melodies leads to other kinds of feelings, such as trembling, intoxication, numbness, and bliss. Ultimately, though, the commentary indicates that listening to these sounds leads to attainment of the dynamic qualities of the emanation body, the first of the awakened bodies of the Buddha. A primary quality noted by the commentary relates to the element to which the practitioner is listening. For the sound of water, this entails becoming constantly buoyant in water and never drowning. Thus, one's spiritual and physical body transform throughout this process.

Similarly, listening to the other elements evokes a wide range of transcendent aural and physical experiences. Listening to the clinking of earth's stones primarily manifests experiences of Brahmā's voice and the six distinctive cries of beings in different Buddhist realms, such as the injured screams of hell beings (*sdug bsngal reg ldan zhes bya ba'i*

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[29] Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 276.4–277.5.

[30] It is not clear if these are meaningful Sanskrit phrases. Some appear to be, while others seem inscrutable. However, their names, arguably the most recognizable and significant portion of their utterances, are all the Sanskrit names of the five Buddha families. Here they are as they appear in their Tibetan transliterated forms: *Bhuddha Ḍakkini Dharma Kasu, Badzra Ḍakkini Ngadu Puka Ho, Ratna Ḍakkini Mahā Dhara Ho, Padma Ḍakkini Jñāna Dharma Suka Dhara, Karmā Ḍakki Adma Krama Sarnya*.

sgra), tormented wails of ghosts (*sgra rab tu gdung byed*), confused grunts of animals (*sgra myogs spyod*), and the blissful but guarded tones of gods (*skad bde skyob*). In addition, the body cools, one undergoes a physical transformation whereby they can bore underground (*sa la 'dzul bar nus*), relating to the element of earth, and they attain other qualities of the enjoyment body – the second member of the trio of awakened bodies.

The fire's roar causes one's body to shake and levitate while bliss spreads through it. A practitioner begins to hear transcendent sounds of Viṣṇu's voice (*khyab 'jug chen po'i gsung*) and the fierce sounds of demons and wrathful goddesses (*mkha' 'gro ma sdigs 'byin pa'i sgra*). In the end, their body becomes immune to being burned (*mes mi 'tshig pa*) and they can control the element[31] as a part of the transcendent transformation whereby they attain the qualities of the reality body – the third awakened body.

Finally, via listening to the whistling sound (*shu sgra*) of the wind, one's mind and body become uneasy, with goosebumps, crawling skin, and shaking limbs (*khams 'khrugs cing phung po skyi zing byed pa dag*). From the whistles of the wind there emerge the unifying[32] sounds of the King of Birds (*mkha' lding rgyal po'i sbyor ba'i gsung*), a kalapingka bird calling "ung ung ung" and "yam yam yam," the latter a mantric particle associated with the torrential destruction of wind. Here, the dynamic qualities common to all three awakened bodies are described as becoming complete (*sku gsum ka'i thun mong gi yon tan rdzogs*).

3. *Design and Experience in the* Unimpeded Sound Tantra

By examining the contemplative design and resultant experiences for each elemental listening practice in these ways, we can begin to understand the categories with which these texts are constructing this set of practices. We find their contemplative design focused on an interaction between two major categories: environments and humans. Environments are broken down into their landscape components, their attributes, the season, and any material objects, either present in the locale or brought along. Water's landscape is a southern-sloping river-

[31] This is glossed elsewhere as being able to burn anything one touches and to internally heat up enough to destroy anything harmful within the body.

[32] This is a difficult term to translate. The Tibetan is *sbyor ba,* which can mean to unite. This section discusses the attainment of the qualities that are common to all three awakened bodies and later describes sounds from the kalapingka related to the individual elements. I have taken this to indicate that the kalapingka bird is uniting the different elements and awakened bodies in their call.

valley in winter or late-autumn,[33] fire is listened to in a sandalwood forest in the summer, earth's locale is an isolated place in spring, and wind's is the top of a mountain with an open-air hut in the fall. Items can include proper food, cloth to wrap your head up when the sounds of water cause agitation, egg-shaped stones, and human-sized logs of sandalwood to burn in a bonfire. The final, and arguably most important component of environments for these practices is their soundscapes. These are given using descriptors, such as "fierce" water, and onomatopoeic syllables (e.g., the wind goes 'shu' and the water goes 'shwa'). At times, the commentaries give more clear descriptions regarding dynamics, timbre, and length (e.g., the sound of the fire grows louder and longer in duration as one listens to it).

Humans are discussed in terms of their body's primary elemental constitution and their activities – what do they do in this space both physically and with their aural attention, and for how long. For all the sonic contemplations, practitioners are required to have certain characteristics, such as faith in the Buddhist doctrine, and need to make offerings to a teacher. During the actual listening portions of the practice, the designed activities then diverge according to the different elemental constitutions they possess and sounds to which they listen. A person with a water constitution needs to squat near the river and focus their mind and hearing faculty on the center of that river for up to two and a half months. Those with an earth constitution find egg-shaped stones and strike them together in their hands, listening to the sound of earth hitting together for fifteen months. Fire individuals find logs as big as their body and construct a bonfire, listening to its sound for fourteen months. Finally, wind constituted people sit and listen to strong winds whip and whistle around them, relying on hearty meat, butter, and brown sugar to see them through.

It is important to note here that these two broad categories, environments and humans, are deeply related for the *Unimpeded Sound* and its main commentary. To optimize results, a person must line up their body and activity with the environment, such that only a wind constituted person should go to the top of the mountain to listen to the wind. It is through this designed relationship between humans and environments that transcendent experiences arise.

Experiences can be broken down into several categories: physical reactions, perceptions, cognitions, social experiences, and existential or transcendental insights.[34] Physical reactions in these practices are

[33] While the tantra identifies winter as the season of water, this is described as "late autumn" in the *Conch Letters* commentary, which further clarifies this as right at the end of autumn, closer to the winter solstice, though these are potentially quite far apart.

[34] This classification system is based on one found in Gabrielsson 2010.

sometimes physiological, including trembling, numbness, cooling, heating, goosebumps, crawling skin, and shaking limbs. Alternately, they can be quasi-physical feelings of intoxication, floating, and bliss. A final physical category of experience is the promised outcomes of physical transformations related to the elements themselves, such as always floating in water, being able to bore through solid rock, and burning anything one touches. Perceptions deal with the preceptory experiences that *arise from* listening to the elements.[35] These experiences are mostly auditory, but there are also visual, tactile, and even olfactory perceptual experiences. Cognitions deal with the arising thoughts or associations made in conjunction with the listening practice. Here we find an association of experiences with a Buddhist world ordering, including types of beings, divinities, and so forth. Social experiences here can be seen in terms of community building with cosmological orderings, placing one within a larger Buddhist world of beings, both suffering mundane beings of the six Buddhist realms and transcendent divine beings such as the goddesses of the five Buddha families. Existential experiences deal with the nature of the world, seen here in terms of the six realms of the mundane Buddhist cosmology, while transcendent experiences go beyond this mundane world, revealing the sounds of divine realms and granting one realization of the three awakened bodies.

4. Themes Connecting Design and Experience

When considered in conjunction, these understandings of the typologies for both design and experience, the input and output of this practice, will give us purchase to interpret how and on what levels this textual tradition is producing pathways for religious experience and attainment. This pairing can help us reconstruct both important themes that arise throughout this practice literature and the tradition's theoretical view of the contemplative process more generally. I will begin with the former and discuss four themes I find active in these practices, moving between their designs and experiences – hearing, environments, bodies, and social organizations. Reflections on these themes can help provide insight into the broader theories of religious experience at work in this contemplative tradition.

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[35] Meaning that the mundane sounds of the elements are not included in this category. The assumed conditions of the practice for the text include sounds heard in the environment. They are more concerned then with how those sounds give way to, or manifest, other types of sounds or sensory experiences, often transmundane ones – sounds or experiences not generally perceived under normal conditions.

This first theme is the most obvious for this context, but it is certainly not a given. Both the design and experiential elements of this practice operate on a sensory level, in particular an aural one. The practitioner is told to listen to the sounds of the material elements at the beginning of the practice and is given detailed instructions in what to listen for, how to listen, and for how long. The intent here is a total and sustained immersion into specified auditory worlds, making up the core of the practice. This engagement with the aural sphere is receptive listening as opposed to active recitation (found elsewhere in the text and in other tantric Buddhist contexts such as in mantra chanting).[36]

This listening to the mundane and material world then gives way to transcendent aural experiences where they hear the voices and music of other realms of beings and divinities. The five goddesses of the Buddha families perform sublime music with a variety of instruments, their melodies heard as beautiful, haunting, and refined. But these sounds can be harrowing as well, such as the suffering cries of beings or the terrifying screams of wrathful goddesses. Each of the four listening practices offers their unique transcendent soundscapes with a signature voice that recalls the remaining four transcendent sounds of the tantra's five-part sonic typology – Brahmā, Viṣṇu, the kalapingka bird, and the teacher, heard here as the goddesses of the five Buddha families.

Environments comprise the second theme. The design of the practice indicates what the material natural environment should be. One is either in a river-valley, an isolated rocky terrain, a forest, or a mountain. These places are indicated both by their landscapes and their soundscapes. The landscape types are given descriptions that are both detailed, such as the shape and direction of a river valley, and general, such as an isolated place. This gives enough instruction to normalize the possible environmental interactions, while keeping it open enough so that practitioners might actually find proper locales. They also describe the location based on certain materials that need to be present, such as stones or sandalwood. In addition, the soundscapes are prescribed with details of required sounds, such as whistling sounds of the wind or a strong enough rush of the water. Thinking with the tradition's elemental theory explained in the tantra's descriptions of the five descents of sound, these material and aural environments are manifestations of elemental templates that resounded from the natural sound of reality – the elements and their sounds are at the core of the material environment. By going to places

[36] For a more robust distinction between these two forms of listening and their ramifications, see Liddle 2023.

that specifically showcase these elemental sounds, that sonic-elemental cosmogony is echoed. Thus, the placement of practitioners in such landscapes and soundscapes that are paradigmatic of the material world and its cosmogony and heightens the relevance of the environment to the contemplations on sound.

When experiences then arise, new environments are signaled by the changing of soundscapes from natural and mundane to transcendent, melodic, and frightening in ways as outlined above. The deeper one listens to the soundscapes that comprise their mundane natural environments, the more they give way to these transcendent soundscapes that surround them. Visual and spatial descriptions of environments drop off here, but through the language of soundscapes, the texts make evident how one's environment is not the same. A practitioner's relationship with the elements of the natural world also changes. As their body undergoes transformations, they no longer need to fear elemental dangers such as drowning or burning. Indeed, they can now control fire, fly, and burrow through stone with ease. They have at once transcended the limits placed by harsh environments and taken upon themselves their qualities, such that the boundaries between their environments and their bodies become malleable.

These transformations lead into the third theme – bodies. The designs of these practices are explicit about what types of bodies are required for each practice. To engage with the fire listening practice, for example, you need a fire constitution, which the tantra and commentary help you determine through their sets of elemental calculations. This is not an arbitrary connection. Rather, the commentary describes human bodies as emerging from the external elements and their sounds. The duo of the body and environment are thus fundamentally paired and implicitly described as a causative basis for the elements' sonic effects on practitioners. Bodies are further implicated in the design for the practice with specific instructions for postures and eye movements, relationships to material aspects of the practice including building a fire with logs as big as one's body and moving stones around in one's hands, and prescriptions for resolving complications in practice, such as laying down with one's head wrapped in cloth if they get agitated while listening to water. In this way, we find that bodies are central to the consideration and fulfillment of each of these listening practices.

By performing the contemplations, one experiences a variety of physical sensations. These include agitation, goosebumps, numbness, trembling, shaking limbs, cooling, and heating. They also feel quasi-physical experiences such as intoxication, floating, and bliss. In addition, the theme of bodies extends to metaphors of the three

spiritual bodies and their associated physicalities and realizations. A practitioner will attain the qualities of the emanation body with the sound of water, the enjoyment body with earth, the reality body with fire, and the qualities of all three with wind. Not only do these represent spiritual attainments central to the tantric path, but they also come with transformative effects for the body discussed above, whereby one attains physical mastery over the elements.

Finally, fourth is a social theme engaging community or isolation. The designs are clear about the need for social isolation when performing these listening practices. Indeed, the only real environmental description for the practice on the sound of earth is an isolated place. While some preliminary stages in the practices mention receiving teachings from, or making offerings to, teachers, all the descriptions indicate that a practitioner should enter these sonic environments alone and away from all others.

In contrast, the experiential worlds that emerge from these sonic practices are highly social. One is set among the beings of the other realms of existence – hell beings, ghosts, animals, titans, and gods who cry out to them, experientially gaining a broader sense of the myriad suffering beings that share in cyclic existence with the practitioner. These social soundscapes of suffering give way to those of transcendent figures: Indian deities such as Brahmā, Visnu, and Indra; mythical beings such as the kalapingka bird; and Sky-Dancer goddesses of the five Buddha families. The practitioner is now surrounded by communities of transcendent and awakened beings that express mantric particles, frighten practitioners with blood-thirsty screams, soothe them with sublime music, and teach Buddhist doctrine. Throughout this experiential process, the practitioner is never alone, though their bodies remain in isolation.

Conclusion: Sonic Contemplations in the Great Perfection

This leads us to a richer understanding of the ways the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* is considering and producing pathways for religious experience and attainment. First, for this tradition, it has become clear that the senses, and hearing in particular, are critical pathways for religious experience. We have a taste of this already in the Great Perfection, with its highest practice of *Direct Crossing* consisting of visionary experiences. However, this complicates our understanding of the sensory model employed by Tibetan Buddhists at this time and introduces hearing as its own pathway for achieving high levels of Buddhist realization. This sensory aspect of religious experience infuses both the contemplative design of the practice and their

resultant experiences. Hearing is the medium through which humans and environments interact, an important relationship that is further emphasized by the specificity of bodies to elements. More broadly, religious experience in this practice is sensory in nature, as opposed to ineffable or indescribable conceptions of such experience found elsewhere in both Buddhism and the Great Perfection.[37] Here we find experiences of divine realms laid out in terms of their sensory qualities. Furthermore, the sensory mode of the religious experience matches the ordinary sense used to arrive there. Listening to the world leads to hearing the divine, clearly indicating that the production of religious experience in this contemplative practice is aural in nature.[38]

Second, we find that this process of gaining religious experience and attainment is constructed on a foundation of mundane experiences and concerns. Religious experience is a process of transformation (or natural liberation from the perspective of the Great Perfection). Our mundane world is revealed to be a naturally transcendent one, free from its normal constraints. The *Unimpeded Sound* substantiates the core Buddhist ideology of transcending the suffering inherent in cyclic existence by demonstrating how the mundane senses such as hearing become free from their normal limitations and start to hear transcendent soundscapes through contemplative practice. Mundane sounds that typically delude beings into further calcification of cyclic existence become sublime and revelatory. This process of liberation happens on the other major levels of this practice as well – the environmental, physiological, and social. Natural and material environments lose their physical dangers and are sublimated into divine soundscapes, one's ordinary body is optimized and invigorated with bliss, and individuals in isolated practice conditions find themselves deeply connected to a wider Buddhist universe.

Finally, we come to understand the kinds of ideological work that's being done on both sides of design and experience to encode a Buddhist framework onto a process of sensory engagement to produce specifically religious experiences. From a methodological perspective, these experiences occur through an easeful and natural process – all

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[37] For a discussion of how sensory religious experiences complicate views of ineffable experiences, see Kapstein 2004: ix–xiv.

[38] It is outside the scope or intent of this study to educate on the actuality of these sounds – whether the transcendent soundscapes that emerge in the practitioner's experience are new sounds that appear from beyond the practitioner's perspective, hallucinatory experiences caused by intense and prolonged periods of meditation, or simply divergent ways of apprehending the sounds of the elements. Regardless of their origin, the tradition is keen to generate frameworks for the interpretation of those sounds in Buddhist terms, making these sensory encounters religious in nature as discussed below.

one has to do is listen. Practitioners do not actively change or transform anything themselves, inscribing Great Perfection ideas of natural freedom and spontaneity onto these unfolding sensory experiences. Cosmogonically, the natural world is seen as a manifestation of core elements emerging from the natural sound of reality. Our bodies likewise arise as the next stage of this process, and their major elemental constitutions are known based on given calculations of elements across calendrical time. Extraordinary sensory experiences are then overlaid with Buddhist cosmologies of suffering beings and transcendent deities, all of which provide experiential understandings of expressed Buddhist typologies and world-orderings, found both in this this tantra and in normative Tibetan Buddhist cosmologies. This is most evident in hearing the goddesses' melodies in the river, experientially substantiating the importance of the teacher's voice in the tantra's taxonomy of transcendent sound while invoking broader tantric ideologies in Tibetan Buddhism surrounding the five Buddha families. Thus, by weaving Great Perfection Buddhist ideas into designed contemplations on natural soundscapes and the emergent sounds and feelings they invoke, the *Unimpeded Sound* is able to offer not only unique aural experiences, but *religious* experiences.

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The *Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*, Social Kinds, and the Boundaries of Buddhism in Tibet

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Among the various genres of literature, narratives represent a particularly dynamic and boundary-crossing phenomena. A few poetic examples include the Ramayana, which despite originating in India, is found across Asia and a 2008 American iteration dubs it "the greatest breakup story ever told." In this version, it is Sita's eventual rejection of Ram that serves as the story's denouement.[1] Similarly, Hongmei Sun has discussed *Journey to the West* and the famous figure of Monkey King Sun Wukong as a dynamic and transforming figure, representing alternately a hero of Maoist China, a symbol of the mythic Orient in western media, and a representation of Asian-Americans' own perception of their otherness in wider American culture.[2] A final poetic example can be found in the story of Cinderella and her missing slipper, which has its earliest origins in a late 1st century Greek story,[3] but variously re-appears in 9th century China,[4] a Vietnamese legend that remains undated,[5] and eventually 12th century France.[6] Stories have the unique ability to swiftly move across cultural and historical boundaries.

But, conversely, narratives can also throw particular types of boundaries into relief. Because the value of a given story is largely personal and subjective, it has the potential to expose the assumptions a given reader or listener may bring to a topic. Literary critic Edmund Wilson famously condemned J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy as "juvenile trash"[7] and described H.P. Lovecraft as an incorrigible hack,[8] demonstrating his distinctively rational orientation towards the fantastical or unreal. Over beers a few years ago, an unnamed

1 Paley 2008.
2 Sun 2018.
3 Hansen 2017: 86–87.
4 Beauchamp 2017.
5 Bach-Lan 1957: 43–56.
6 Anderson 2000: 24–42.
7 Wilson 1956.
8 Wilson 1946.

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colleague dismissed the Gesar epic tradition as "just the Ramayana in Tibetan clothes," revealing his own Indian-centric view of the world and preferential status given to an "original." Narrative—and I would argue especially popular or non-elite narratives like the ones highlighted in these examples—can shed light on the unspoken and implicit bias one might carry.

This article, therefore, examines what boundaries can be revealed by examining one particular popular narrative as an informative case study—the final episode of the Gesar epic, the *Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*. Through a comparison of how Euro-American scholars and contemporary Tibetan Buddhists approach and evaluate this text, this article hopes to do two things: (1) first, demonstrate the importance of the *Dmyal gling* as a tool eastern Tibetan Buddhists use to think about and enact Buddhist traditions with and (2) interrogate why, despite this central role in both historical and contemporary Tibetan Buddhist lifeworlds, the *Dmyal gling* remains overlooked in contemporary scholarship. Often relegated to a secondary position in academic framings of Buddhism, popular literature like the Gesar epic actually plays an important role in forming ethical dispositions and shaping Buddhist practice. It creates imaginative spaces to think inside and may take on a greater role in individuals' spiritual decision-making than a doctrinal or philosophical treatise. Through this case study, therefore, this paper argues for a reappraisal of our deployment of inherited academic boundaries concerning "Buddhism" and "buddhicized" literature in Tibet. Employing Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm's concept of "social kinds" as a theoretical lens, this article hopes to consider how we can balance emic and etic understandings of a religious tradition to engender a much-needed appreciation for the diverse tools Tibetan Buddhists use to make their world meaningful.

1. Highlighting Buddhist Themes in the Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po

Prevalent across the Himalayas, but especially in the eastern Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo, the popular Gesar epic details the heroic adventures of the divine King Gesar as he battles demon-kings threatening the practice of Buddhism. The epic is structured in the chantefable style of rapidly spoken prose punctuated by expansive song breaks relating the perspective of different characters. Until recently, the epic was told primarily in oral settings, most famously where bards known as *sgrung mkhan* experience a form of spirit possession and in this possessed state sing new episodes of the epic. These inspired bards generally undergo an initiatory illness before the

story is "awakened" in their mind—often with the help of a local Buddhist monk or lama who assists in healing the bard and pulling the story out of them. Other bards might memorize the epic, look into a bronze mirror, blank paper, or other device as if reading from a book—though these particular typologies are less well-known.[9] The epic has also recently become a publishing phenomenon assisted by the extensive backing of the Chinese government—who has invested in preserving the Gesar epic as a piece of Intangible Cultural Heritage.[10] Indeed, contemporary Gesar festivals, temples, and religious sites receive significant financial sponsorship from the Chinese government as tourist destinations that support local culture.

The text that purports to be the final episode of the Gesar epic—the *Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po* or as I have translated it, *The Great Perfecting of Hell*—was first published in the early 20th century at Wara monastery in Chab mdo. It may have been circulating orally before that, and many oral texts call themselves the *Dmyal gling* or even the *Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po,* but do not share the exact features of the Wara publication. The remainder of this article will rely on the Wara-published *Dmyal gling,* but it is important to note the potential naming confusion. This particular telling details King Gesar's descent to hell to save his mother, his final Buddhist teachings, and the death of himself, his horse, and his divine kingdom of heroes. The earliest published telling of the *Dmyal gling* is a revealed treasure text from the region of Gling tshang by an otherwise unknown treasure revealer Drag rtsal rdo rje.[11] The text claims to be authored by 'Dan bla ma Chos kyi dbang phyug, who is a character in the narrative itself, where he leads a funerary procession from Gling to Hor after the murder of the local regent.[12] While this telling's exact date of revelation is unknown, its publication at Wara Monastery occurred under the sponsorship of retreatant Dam chos bstan pa, possibly in preparation for producing the *Wara Bka' 'gyur*. Reflecting the boundary-crossing narratives that opened my paper, scholars like Matthew Kapstein and others have

[9] Thurston 2019; Yang 1995.

[10] Mikles 2019; 2024.

[11] While little is known about Drag rtsal rdo rje's life, two other texts have recently come to light via the efforts of the Buddhist Digital Resource Center that are popularly identified as being authored or revealed by Drag rtsal rdo rje: (1) a manual of rdzogs chen teachings that survives only in a *'bru 'grel* commentary by Lung rtogs rgyal mtshan (d. 2011) and (2) a little-known Gesar episode pertaining to the taming of a demon called A yan (2005). Despite these popular associations, however, the relationship between these texts to the Drag rtsal rdo rje of the *Dmyal gling* remains unclear.

[12] Chos kyi dbang phyug. The Wara Monastery edition is accessible only in photographic reproductions, but a 1984 edition was published in Thimphu under the editorial direction of Lopon Pemala. A further, heavily edited edition was published by the Sichuan Minorities Publishing House in 1986.

seen in this episode influence from the Chinese narrative of Buddhist hero Mulian saving his mother from hell.[13] However, many Buddhist heroes besides Mulian, save their mothers from hell and the significant differences between the two stories make it hard to argue for any connection with certainty.

Indeed, King Gesar embodies many important Buddhist roles in the *Dmyal gling* outside of savior in hell, often with the help of key Tibetan Buddhist divinities. Like many episodes of the Gesar epic, Padmasambhava frames the narrative of the *Dmyal gling*, inspiring his epic quest and remaining an important figure throughout. To this point, the text begins with Padmasambhava bringing Gesar to the Copper-Colored Mountain, affirming his divine status, and giving him high-level initiations for tantric practices.[14] During this section, Gesar worries about the future of Buddhism in Ling; listing the work he has done for suffering beings, he notes that although "I have acted as a mother for the whole six realms…the White Ling remains swamped in afflictive emotion."[15] Padmasambhava impresses upon him the need to teach advanced tantric practices to the peoples of his empire and, with this command, Gesar returns to Ling.

Once more in his kingdom, Gesar follows Padmasambhava's instructions and takes on the role of formal Buddhist teacher for the peoples of Ling. In the longest song of the text, he provides basic ethical guidelines modeled on *sngon 'gro* practices—preparatory exercises focused on developing ethical and doctrinal awareness undertaken before commencing more advanced meditative practice. In fact, the guidance offered in this song closely follows that found in *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* and metaphors appear throughout the song in a similar sequential order. These metaphors are common in many Buddhist teaching environments and their presence here is not a "smoking gun" indicating direct influence. However, they are significant for demonstrating that the *Dmyal gling* directly participated in the larger milieu surrounding its early 20th century eastern composition, where *"ris-med"* communities actively promoted, discussed, and employed Klong chen snying thig teachings, of which *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* is an important part.[16] This participation in

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13 Kapstein 2007.

14 Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 54–78. This section also features a lengthy song prophesizing coming troubles for Buddhism in Tibet and the end of Gesar's kingdom. Due to its potential political ramifications, it was heavily edited in the 1986 Chengdu edition.

15 *ma rigs drug 'khor ba'i 'gro don lnga / tshe gcig bsod nams de tsam red / de nas slob dpon rin po che / nga gling dkar nyon mongs 'dam rdzab la / ma mkha' 'gro de nyid bsu ma mngags*/ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 55.

16 Scholars still debate what best to call the community of thinkers and practitioners that thrived in late 19th and early 20th century eastern Tibet. While predominantly

Klong chen snying thig teachings is further apparent later in the chapter, where Gesar initiates each community of people that make up his empire—Hor, 'Jang, Mon, Pal po, Dbus, and so forth—into a different Klong chen snying thig teaching. This episode acts, therefore, as something of a "hype man" for popularizing religious scriptures prominent in eastern Tibet at the turn of the century. We see in this initial section of the *Dmyal gling* that the text is an active participant in larger elite Buddhist practices and movements surrounding its historical milieu.

Beyond this explicit involvement in the promotion of Klong chen snying thig teachings, discussions of Buddhist karma and the ethics of violence form a central theme throughout the text. After giving initiations, King Gesar goes on meditative retreat, during which time his mother dies and is reborn in hell. Shocked at his mother's fate, as she was a devout Buddhist, King Gesar descends to hell to demand answers from King Yama. What follows is a lengthy song exchange debating the relationship between karma and violence. Much of the throughline of the Gesar epic focuses on Gesar's incarnation as a tantric demon-slayer destroying the demonic evil forces who surround his land.[17] As he kills each one in bloody, dramatic fashion, the epic generally praises his ability to preserve the purity of Buddhist dharma and ensure a favorable rebirth for those he kills in battle. Even in the *Dmyal gling* itself, the opening section praises King Gesar as "the conqueror of all Mara's hosts, all enemies, and all hindrances—he who tames and purifies all that which seeks to harm the precepts of monastic discipline…the great conqueror who battles the adversaries with vast kindness."[18]

Once Gesar descends to hell, however, the *Dmyal gling* uses the confrontation between King Gesar and King Yama as an opportunity to undermine this narrative of the tantric demon-slayer. Yama declares

called the *ris-med* movement in early scholarship of the period (Smith 2001), later scholarship has pushed back against this designation, noting that *ris-med* materials were not quite so non-sectarian as previously presented and that it is unclear how much the intellectuals thought of themselves as a unified movement with shared goals and values (Gardner 2006). Indeed, in this issue itself, Andrew Taylor identifies Smith as primarily a popularizer of the term *ris-med* rather than a creator from whole-cloth (Taylor 2025). Others choose to highlight the heavy Nyingma presence in these communities (Karma Phuntsho 2010: 50), though it seems especially limiting to only look at Nyingma elements. In light of these valid critiques, but also with an understanding that something deeply generative and intertextual seemed to be happening in eastern Tibet at the time, I elect to call the association of late 19th and early 20th century thinkers the "*ris-med*" or "non-sectarian" community.

17 Dalton 2011.

18 *dgra bgegs bdud dpung ma lus kun 'joms pa* / *'dul ba'i lung skyongs nyer 'tshe tha dag 'dul* / … *drin chen pha rol g.yul las rab rgyal zhing* / Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 2.

that King Gesar is a "butcher who kills in the morning, but acts like a lama in the afternoon,"[19] and that Gesar's heroic companions "kill as meaninglessly as making water."[20] When Gesar retaliates, challenging Yama for his own acts of violence—directing individuals' rebirths towards hell and overseeing the torture there—King Yama explains that he does not commit acts of violence based on his own whims, but rather "as the result of my own calculations of the cause and effect of each 100 chunks of virtuous and non-virtuous action with each grain of a white mustard seed."[21] When Gesar, enraged by this news, attacks Yama, the King of Hell emanates a *maṇḍala* of buddhas in defense. Gesar soon discovers that every strike against Yama becomes a strike against himself.[22]

Most damning of all, in this confrontation Gesar discovers it is not his mother's sins that have led to her infernal rebirth, but rather his own violent activities. While chiding Gesar's violence, Yama also reveals that Gesar's claimed abilities to control his enemies' future rebirths—the foundation upon which themes of martial tantric practice depend—are false. As a result, Gesar's mother remains in the deepest pit of hell, surrounded by all the men he has ever killed in battle: to save her, he must save them. While certainly contributing to larger debates about the role of karma, this experience may also further reflect the *Dmyal gling's* participation in promoting Klong chen snying thig materials. As a systematic path placing Rdzogs chen as the highest form of practice, the Klong chen snying thig—especially as practiced in its *ris-med* incarnations—largely de-emphasized the violent imagery that had previously served as an important component of Tibetan tantra. In its place, it celebrated a discourse of naturalness and spontaneity.[23] While not quite an outright repudiation, this questioning of tantric violence also reflects other contemporaneous eastern Tibetan efforts to challenge or otherwise question violent imagery in religious practice.[24] Undermining the position of a paradigmatic tantric demon-slayer in the *Dmyal gling*, therefore, may serve to enhance the *ris-med* community's championing of Klong chen snying thig practice.

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19 *ma tshad thams cad bsad nas snga dro gsod pa'i shan pa phyi dro 'dren pa'i bla ma byas kyang.* Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 160.

20 *gling dpa' bdud kyis don med chu bzos kyi bsad* Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 160.

21 *nga chos rgyal gyis chos yod med thams cad dmyal bar bzhag pa min pas las dge sdig gi rgyu 'bras de skra'i jag ma re la brgya gshag nas rgyu 'bras rtsis pa dang yung dkar 'bru re la dge sdig gi rgyu 'bras dum bu brgya re rtsis pa'i 'bras bu yin no gsungs so.* Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 160–161.

22 Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 162.

23 Germano 1994.

24 Dalton 2011.

After Yama provides Gesar with the *'pho ba* ritual to free those suffering in hell and ensure them a new favorable rebirth, Gesar's journey to rescue his mother becomes an opportunity to learn about karma's effects. Despite teaching about the horrors of hell earlier in the text while presenting *sngon 'gro* practices, when visualizing these effects firsthand, Gesar balks and becomes filled with rage.[25] He calls the hell workers "demonic buddhas interested only in cutting, killing, and tormenting," and describes plans to march an army of buddhas to hell to destroy their torments.[26] The hell workers' responses defending their role in the karmic system mitigates only slightly Gesar's anger, and as I have written elsewhere, this may be the very point. As a popular narrative, the *Dmyal gling* creates an imaginative space in which one can express the fact that karma, though an unchanging law, can be difficult to accept sometimes. Chagrined and shamed, Gesar eventually finds his mother and saves her, leading her—and his former enemies—to a future rebirth in the heavens.

Upon Gesar's return to Ling, the text swiftly rattles towards its ending. After a prophetic dream from his cousin Néchung, the heroes of Ling die one by one. Each death is accompanied by miraculous revelations of divine status, the appearance of buddhas and dakinis emanating in the sky, and exhortations to remain devout in Buddhist practice. Finally, Gesar and his beloved horse Kyangbu die, with proclamations from Gesar that he will always be with the black-haired Tibetans, as he is himself inseparable from Padmasambhava.[27] Likely inspired by the Kālachakra tantra, the text hints at a coming apocalyptic battle where Gesar and Padmasambhava will together challenge demonic forces to re-establish a purified Buddhist practice. In this way, the kingdom of Ling as a model Buddhist kingdom ends. This prophetic return as a warrior on the battlefield may seem to throw into question the text's earlier challenge to the martial imagery of the tantric demon-slayer; however, it reflects widespread popular beliefs of King Gesar that exist outside the text and remain an important source of influence that cannot be fully dismissed. Indeed, in my 2015 field research, I continually encountered a disinterest in or repudiation of the *Dmyal gling's* reframing of King Gesar as a chastised demon-slayer. When I asked research informants why Gesar's mother was in hell in the *Dmyal gling,* answers ranged from "She took too much joy in Gesar's battlefield triumphs" to "She had relied on her son's good karma to ensure her future rebirth" to "In secret, she had not been a good Buddhist." Only one person, a scholar at the Southwest

[25] The author discusses the implications of this further in Mikles 2019a.

[26] *khyed las mkhan sangs rgyas yin pas zer / sangs rgyas bdud kyi lam lugs la / bsad bcad mnar gsum so nam red.* Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 213.

[27] Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 344.

University for Nationalities in Chengdu, repeated the reason given in the text itself. As will be discussed below, this interpretative drift demonstrates the centrality of the *Dmyal gling* as a living text being continuously re-framed and re-interpreted within the environment of a larger Buddhist community.

2. *Framing the* Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po *as "Buddhicized" Text*

Analyzing the Buddhist themes in the entire plot of a 300-page text in a single article is an impossible task. However, this article is using the *Dmyal gling* as an important case study comparing how Euro-American scholars and Tibetan Buddhist practitioners frame a text and what academic boundaries they see as important. For our point, therefore, the brief discussion above serves to demonstrate in a variety of ways how the *Dmyal gling* is doing important Buddhist work: (1) it promotes Klong chen snying thig practices through both Gesar's role as Buddhist teacher promoting *sngon 'gro* practices in the first third of the text and the later challenge to martial models of tantric practice; (2) it provides intellectual space to think through the uncomfortable implications of foundational doctrines like karma; (3) the deaths of Gesar and his court of heroes reveal a kingdom of divine emanations whose dedication to Buddhist practice hints at an eventual return in an apocalyptic battle mirroring that found in the Kālachakra tantra practice cycle. That this Buddhist work takes place in the context of a popular narrative with talking horses, fighting kings, and evil sorcerer-uncles makes it no less important and no less effective. In other publications, I have described the Gesar epic as a Buddhist midrash,[28] and the *Dmyal gling* speaks to the potential for popular or fantastical literature to contribute to and influence larger doctrinal debates happening within.

In spite of this important Buddhist work, however, the Gesar epic and the *Dmyal gling* in particular have generally been framed as a "buddhicized" narrative that reflects the culmination of Buddhist influence in Tibet. In his brief reference article describing the relationship of the Gesar epic to Buddhism, Solomon George FitzHerbert has noted that the amount of "Buddhism"[29] in the epic varies between different geographic versions; in his interpretation, "This observation suggests that the Buddhism of the [Gesar] epic represents a relatively late interpretative layer, while the archaic core

[28] Mikles 2019a.

[29] As will be elaborated on below, the idea that Buddhism is a single thing measurable in a text is a reflection of the World Religions paradigm arising from the Orientalist foundations of the field of History of Religions itself.

of the epic lies in a secular folkloric orientation only lightly touched by Buddhist influence."[30] Geoffrey Samuel describes Gesar as a liminal figure who has close links to local forms of shamanic religion that later became core components of the Tibetan Buddhist milieu.[31] In his German translation of the epic, Matthias Hermanns argues that the epic reflects pre-Buddhist ideas of sacred kingship in Tibet that became co-opted by Buddhist monasteries.[32]

While FitzHerbert, Samuel, and Hermanns are excellent scholars who have made incredible and invaluable studies of the Gesar epic, their assumptions about the epic's origins reflect a very particular line of reasoning: Tibetans used to have a variety of shamanistic religious practices, of which the Gesar epic tradition preserves many in its form of bardic storytelling. As Buddhism spread in Tibet and dominated non-Buddhist indigenous practices, these practices became enveloped within its sacred canopy. Therefore, the role of Gesar as Buddhist teacher and Buddhist savior in the *Dmyal gling* is the most complete iteration of that phenomenon, reflecting the ultimate triumph of Buddhism in Tibet.[33] This particular idea is so prevalent that it is often taken as a given in scholarship and not even explicitly stated, all while remaining an important foundational belief evident in the boundaries created by our larger academic communities. To this point, the International Association of Tibetan Studies has sponsored close to half a dozen large panels on King Gesar, while the International Association of Buddhist Studies has had only one single paper in the past two decades, despite hosting many panels on minute and specific topics in Tibetan Buddhism. Gesar is understood as a uniquely local, Tibet-specific concern that is not a component of larger Buddhological history.

This particular historical narrative of buddhicization, however, is based largely on conjecture and assumptions about the nature of pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion. While it might be true, there is little to no concrete evidence for the argument itself. FitzHerbert himself acknowledges this concern in a 2022 article, noting an "absence of any hard documentary textual evidence regarding Ling Gesar before the 14th or 15th centuries" and acknowledging it very well may not have existed earlier than that.[34] Indeed, our earliest textual evidence of the Gesar epic is a 1716 publication in Mongolian sponsored by Qing dynasty rulers, in which Gesar is already framed as a Buddhist

30 FitzHerbert 2017.
31 Samuel 1993: 540.
32 Hermanns 1965.
33 So pervasive is this narrative the author herself unreflectively repeated it in earlier scholarship. See further, Mikles 2016.
34 FitzHerbert 2022: 122.

figure.[35] Such meager evidence allows for the very real possibility that scholars might project their own specific suppositions onto the Gesar epic. This possibility comes closer to reality with the fact that any knowledge of pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion is sparse. In fact, the very category of "shamanism" as a single global phenomenon identifiable in communities as diverse as the Aboriginal Australians, Tibetan nomads, and African tribes is problematic at best and dangerous at worst.[36] While the author is not stating that historical arguments about Gesar or pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion more generally are always untenable or inappropriate, this particular historical argument concerning the origins of and beliefs about the epic itself is made with little hard evidence and may, instead, reflect our own assumptions about the nature of pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion.

But the most important critique of this particular academic narrative is that, as will be discussed below, for the vast majority of eastern Tibetans today and in the recent historical past, Gesar is understood as a fundamental component of their Buddhist lives, not a secondary "buddhicized" element. As seen in the discussion of the *Dmyal gling* in the previous section, the text *is* doing important Buddhist work through both ethical contemplation and supporting the *ris-med* promotion of rdzogs chen practices. This involvement in *ris-med* thought was further evident in the Gesar sādhanā rituals composed by 19th century Tibetan Buddhist thinkers like 'Jam mgon kong sprul, Mi pham rgya mtsho, and others in the *ris-med* community that situate Gesar as a tutelary deity—often in his form as Nor bu Dgra 'dul.[37] Many of these rituals are still practiced today and have been further developed by contemporary Tibetan Buddhist thinkers, though often generating little academic interest.[38] Indeed, in his forward to a recent book of Gesar sādhanā rituals, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche commented on the widespread academic disinterest in Gesar despite its centrality to Tibetan Buddhist practice, writing, "Pompous modern scholars tend to turn their noses up at Gesar's stories and chuck the entire tradition into the basket of myth and legend... Mipham Rinpoche, who had himself invoked the spirit of profound brilliance, recognized that everything about Gesar of Ling had the potential to inspire authentic presence and an appreciation of nowness. And he didn't think twice about making use of any of it."[39]

Gesar's importance as a religious figure is further reflected in the contemporary religious landscape of eastern Tibet. Several monastic

35 Damdinsuren 1957; Samuel 2017 [2005].
36 Kehoe 2000; Taussig 1991.
37 Forgues 2022.
38 Kornman 2005. See further, Jamgön Mipham 2023.
39 Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche 2023: xvii.

complexes in eastern Tibet house temples where Gesar appears in both wrathful and peaceful forms, or where relics of King Gesar—his sword, his bones, his sash, or his bridle—are worshipped with offerings next to those of more traditional buddhas.[40] Prominent statues of Gesar or other characters from the epic loom large in a variety of towns across eastern Tibet. In Gser thar County, there exists a thriving tradition of Gesar stone carving meant to represent important Buddhist values. 'Dri stod county features two honored Gesar sites—a large white conch shell painted on the mountain representing the location of Gesar's palace and a series of sacred pools where Gesar's wife Drugmo supposedly washed her hair.

Gesar's role as a Buddhist figure in contemporary eastern Tibet is especially apparent in interviews performed during my most recent period of fieldwork in Yul shul. A local monk at the Gesar temple in A phyug—which claims to be Gesar's place of birth—explained to me that Gesar should be propitiated before any arduous undertaking. He showed me several sites around the temple that miraculously revealed evidence of Gesar's touch.[41] These sites are so important to local expressions of Buddhist practice that the Chinese tried to destroy many of them during the Cultural Revolution.[42] During that same trip in Yul shul, I spoke with several local intellectuals about the role of King Gesar in their own Buddhist practice. Local historian and employee at the Yushu Office of Cultural Preservation Karma lha mo explained, "Although it looks like King Gesar is fighting and killing, he is really freeing all these people who are suffering and helping them—he truly has the kind heart of a buddha, not the bloody sword of the king."[43] While the figure of King Gesar more generally is perceived as an important Buddhist hero, the *Dmyal gling* especially has an important place in everyday Buddhist life. The heads of both the Kaḥ thog and Lha gong monastic colleges explained that they assign junior monks the *Dmyal gling* as preparation for more advanced

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40 Prominent among these is Rta na Monastery and Kaḥ thok Monastery, though the author has personally visited several smaller, local temples in Yul shul and Mgo log that have their own set of relics claimed to be from Gesar.

41 A personal favorite is a stone about 200 meters from the temple that bears the imprint of Gesar's butt-cheeks and spine as he laid down upon the rock to gaze at the sky and hunt crows.

42 Bkra shis 'od kar (Caretaker and lead practitioner at Gesar Temple in Axu village), interview with author, July 24, 2015.

43 Dkar ma lho mo (Local historian with the Yushu Office of Cultural Preservation), interview with author, July 18, 2015. As noted previously, while this contradicts somewhat the actual text of the *Dmyal gling*, it also evidences the Gesar epic as a continued source of interpretative materials.

Buddhist practice.[44] Similarly, a monastic teacher at Ya chen sgar explained to me the *Dmyal gling* is an ideal study text for lay individuals interested in Buddhism, as it is both entertaining and enlightening.[45]

Indeed, the physical text of the *Dmyal gling* in particular is treated as a powerful book of Dharma that has agency to affect everyday reality. Like many powerful texts in Tibetan culture, the *Dmyal gling* must be kept covered and secured when not in use and never allowed to touch the floor. Indeed, several Tibetan friends explained that discussing the text too much invites inauspiciousness. When I asked for elaboration, my friend said, "Gesar dies in it. It is not good to discuss the death of a buddha too much."[46] Indeed, this particular association with inauspiciousness extends to the bardic tradition as well. When a bard receives the episode of Gesar's descent to hell to recite in a moment of possessed inspiration, Tibetans say the karmic thread of his life is growing thin and his death is swiftly approaching. Many people I spoke with in Qinghai had a story of one or another village where the bard received the *Dmyal gling*, then soon died, and one individual told me that a Tibetan should make sure to attend such a bard's performance because of the significant good karma gained.

In short, from the lived perspective of eastern Tibetans on the ground, King Gesar—and the *Dmyal gling* in particular—is central, not secondary to Buddhist practice. While certainly not all Tibetans celebrate Gesar as a central Buddhist figure and there is debate within the Tibetan tradition as a whole,[47] this evidence neither contradicts, nor cancels out the experience of eastern Tibetan Buddhists. Many Tibetan Buddhist practices and traditions are the subject of intense debate within communities of practitioners, and the Gesar epic tradition is no different. But to focus on claims about origins and label the epic as "buddhicized," especially with so little hard evidence for these proposed pre-Buddhist realities, ultimately disenfranchises the voices of contemporary, living Tibetans. By using the term "buddhicized" rather than "Buddhist" we're either privileging one group of Buddhists over another or presupposing an idea of what Buddhism is that exists apart from the lived realities of everyday, actual Buddhists.

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[44] Kaḥ thok Bsha grwa mkhan po, interview with author, August 17, 2015; Lha gong Bsha grwa mkhan po, interview with author, August 14, 2015.

[45] Mkhan po sprul sku dam chos rinpoche, interview with author, August 16, 2015.

[46] Tshe khrim rin chen, personal communication with author, July 17, 2015.

[47] Mkhan po Thub bstan rnam rgyal from 'Ba' thang bsam grub gling monastery explained to me that reading and thinking about King Gesar was ultimately detrimental to religious practice because he was too wild and too violent. Geoffrey Samuel describes a Geluk lama once telling him that Gesar epic was a Chinese plot to undermine Tibetan culture. Samuel 2001: 179.

3. The Problem of Defining Buddhism and a Social Kinds Solution

The *Dmyal gling*, therefore, introduces a weighty question of definition: is Buddhism considered (either explicitly or by assumption) first and foremost those things that arose in India or in Indian-mirroring monastic institutions or is it what local Buddhists identify as Buddhist, regardless of origin or lineage? How do we academically label the texts, practices, and beliefs arising and enacted outside formal Buddhist institutions like monasteries? How do our choices as to what to research continue to privilege a (potentially suspect) historical narrative over the viewpoints of living Tibetan Buddhists on what is valuable and what is not?

Tomoko Masuzawa traces the stratification of culture that surrounds the *Dmyal gling* to the 19th century divide between Orientalism, which formulated Buddhism as a "world religion," and anthropology, which framed all vernacular beliefs and folkways as examples of "primitive religion."[48] Literature like the Gesar epic found only in Tibet and a relatively specific swath of East Asia and the Himalayas—with its fantastical battles, bloodthirsty demons, and talking horses—has been largely dismissed by scholars of Buddhism, therefore, as a folk story that was "buddhicized," not a Buddhist text to be studied for how it informs individual practice and belief. This particular formulation of what has been called the World Religions paradigm creates a boundary that divides the world into universal, transnational traditions and local folk traditions that are perceived as ephemeral, interchangeable, and secondary to the global traditions. In this perspective, the traditional academic narratives of the *Dmyal gling* fall firmly into the second camp—a local folk story made Buddhist that is secondary to the "true" Buddhist materials found in the local monastery. As evidenced in Masuzawa's work, critiques such as these have already been made for decades in academia. And yet, we instinctively fall back on these assumptions that reveal a predilection towards origins as, in large part, the categorically-defining feature.

It is important to note that this argument does not seek to reproduce the very faults it claims to fix. To say our definition of Buddhism would be correct if only we included this particular thing, or that something is obviously Buddhist and something else is obviously not—such an approach would simply be reproducing the sins of the father, so to speak. Furthermore, this argument is not saying that Buddhism is an entirely constructed category in and of itself. While the urge to proclaim everything to be the construction of our historical

[48] Masuzawa 2005: 17–18.

forebears is tempting, scholars like Urs App have challenged this idea and stated that any claims that "Buddhism" is only a made-up category are "a problem of faulty optics."[49] As early as the 16th century, Catholic and Protestant missionaries recognized a unified religious practice in the "East" that centered on the single figure of the Buddha.[50] Buddhist thinkers throughout the centuries may have vehemently disagreed on how best to practice, but they recognized a shared kinship of practice that only became more pronounced in the colonial and post-colonial era.

So, we should not throw out the intellectual category of Buddhism entirely, nor can we constantly add ever more items underneath its conceptual canopy until the term is rendered without meaning. Rather, we must find ways to balance our etic and emic perspectives in ways that are honest, explicit, and situationally-specific. To begin accomplishing these goals, I tentatively offer Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm's concept of "social kinds" discussed in his recent book *Metamodernism*. He states, "conceptual categories are less about determining sharp edges around concepts than focusing attention on particularly relevant features of the environment."[51] While it is tempting to say, especially after the "linguistic term" of the 1960s, that nothing exists *but* conceptual categories, I am taking direction from Storm to instead say that the problem is how we as scholars focus our attention and refine our scholarly lens on what are very real existing phenomena. We are constantly re-creating our categories in every moment of use. In that vein, I am suggesting here that the focus of many Buddhologists' attention has been a rather disproportionate interest in historical origins. We know something is Buddhist if it originated in India or, at the very least, in a monastic or institutional environment that can be traced back to India. While this might be a "relevant feature of the environment" if we are interested only in charting out a textual history, it does little to help us apprehend how Tibetan Buddhists may understand their world today. Worse, it ignores and deems irrelevant or mistaken the lived perspectives of actual Tibetans.

In response to the constructed nature of academic and conceptual categories, Storm offers the idea of "social kinds" as replacement. In Storm's words, social kinds are, "temporary zones of stability in unfolding processes, which are instantiated in their materialization."[52] While Storm's work goes into exceptional detail about the creation of social kinds based on homeostatic property clusters, for our purposes,

[49] App 2010: 185.
[50] Pascal 2019.
[51] Storm 2021: 178.
[52] Storm 2021: 106.

the critical part is that social kinds are (1) dynamic clusters (2) demarcated and anchored by various historic and social causal processes. This perspective places our attention on the doing and the creating of stability in the midst of a constantly transforming marker, rather than the static nature of the thing being created.

By labeling the *Dmyal gling* as alternately "Buddhist" or "buddhicized," we are implying a necessary ontology that exists above and beyond its social construction; but a social kinds perspective focuses our attention on the dynamic position of the *Dmyal gling* and the Gesar epic more generally—throughout Tibetan history, within Tibetan Buddhist communities, and comparatively between the perspectives of eastern Tibetan practitioners and Euro-American scholars. Framing such conceptual categories as dynamic actions rather than ontologies requires us as scholars to be honest about the casual processes influencing our creation and deployment of boundaries. As seen in this case study, labeling the *Dmyal gling* as "buddhicized" gives disproportionate weight to a (potentially dubious) historical narrative of origins at the expense of the perspectives of at least some living Tibetan Buddhists. By calling the *Dmyal gling* Buddhist, I am highlighting my preferential commitment to a lived perspective that radically privileges what contemporary Buddhists say is Buddhism. Both can be valid perspectives if we are honest about what relevant features define the environment. This article suggests the danger arises when we mistake the dynamic cluster we as the scholar have focused on as the thing itself. Like one of those visual tricks where you may see a duck or a rabbit, an old woman or a young woman at her dressing table, the Gesar epic is only or buddhicized or Buddhist in direct correlation to what we deem as relevant. A social kinds perspective, therefore, throws these boundaries into focus so that we can be explicit about what "relevant features of the environment" are important to our work.

Conclusions

This paper has used the case study of the *Dmyal gling* in both its literary and lived forms to argue for a larger change in perspective concerning the creation and deployment of academic boundaries. When examining texts like the *Dmyal gling,* academics have historically relied on categorical designations like "Buddhist" or "buddhicized" that speak to the text's ontology. However, such an ontology-focused evaluation reifies potentially suspect historical narratives concerning the origins of the Gesar epic and the nature of pre-Buddhist Tibetan

religion, while also silencing the perspectives of living Tibetan Buddhists. In contrast, a social kinds perspective puts emphasis on the researcher as the center of a dynamic process of knowledge-building. Such a perspective encourages us to be honest about what assumptions we bring to our work, where our attentive focus lies, and where we draw our own boundaries. If we're going to say the perspectives of contemporary eastern Tibetans are mistaken, then we need to say that explicitly.

Beyond challenging our academic inheritance, being honest about the central role of the researcher when examining narratives like the *Dmyal gling* allows us to interrogate other boundaries as well. When I approach reading Gesar, am I the detached scholar who has just happened to turn my attention to this topic in my quest to create knowledge? Or am I the lover of epic narrative who dreams of riding across the grasslands with victory banners waving and sword in my hand? We're all embedded in academic systems that ask us to be the former, to be an objective voice outside the box of culture, to hide that we might actually *like* the thing we study or that we can be personally affected by it. As a crisis of the Humanities grows in higher education and university systems around the world question whether they *need* a program in Religious Studies, Buddhist Studies, or Tibetan Studies, being honest about why we take personal joy in our research might help convince students of its value, demonstrate what can be learned from the devoted study of other cultures, and ward off even greater cuts to research funding. As discussed in the vignettes that opened this article, narratives both cross boundaries and throw boundaries into perspective. They can also be an ally in defending the value of our academic positions.

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Grags pa rgyal mtshan's Case for Bowing to a Lay Lama

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Tibetan Buddhists use numerous methods to mark political and religious status, including honorific language, epistolary conventions, and precise seating arrangements on ceremonial occasions. Ritual is another way of demonstrating respective rank, perhaps most succinctly through the performance of physical prostrations.[1] Half prostrations, in which the knees, hands, and forehead touch the ground, are differentiated from full prostrations, in which the entire body is extended forward and down. The various ways of bowing stand in contrast to the ubiquitous sense that one should never prostrate to an inferior. Indeed, the very act of bringing the body low is a direct way of displaying acceptance of a hierarchy in which an object of devotion—a deity, Buddhist scripture, or respected elder—holds the elevated position.

The issue of who should prostrate to whom is something of a trope in Tibetan literature. Even brief references to this practice have been understood by scholars to indicate changes in the hierarchies of Tibet. In an early version of the *Testament of Ba* (*Dba' bzhed*), for example, the famed Indian adept Padmasambhava prostrates to the Tibetan king Khri srong lde btsan, whereas in later versions it is the king who bows to the tantric guru.[2] Scholars have interpreted such shifts as evidence for the rise of Buddhist authority in Tibet, as well as a growing deference to Indian figures in the 11th and 12th centuries. But, passing references still leave much to guesswork when it comes to the everyday hierarchies of Buddhist institutions.

Buddhist authors do, in some cases, provide more detailed discussions about who can serve as a proper object of prostration practice. The *Fifty Verses on the Guru* (Skt. *Gurupañcāśikā*; Tib. *Bla ma lnga bcu pa*), a collection of Indic social codes for beginners on the tantric path, celebrates the veneration of the lay guru. The author of this text,

[1] The anthropologist Roy Rappaport argues that bowing communicates acceptance of an institutional order even more effectively than verbal declarations. 1999, 142.

[2] Dalton 2011: 124, 251 fn. 60; Wangdu & Diemberger 2000: 54 fn. 152. The Indian pandit Śāntarakṣita is also treated with more respect by the king in later versions of the *Testament*. See: Van Schaik & Iwao 2008: 481–483.

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the pandit Vāpilla, nevertheless cautions against bowing in front of those who do not hold the tantric guru in such high esteem.[3] Contemporary Sanskrit materials confirm that the figure of the lay guru was highly controversial in the 9th and 10th centuries. Péter-Dániel Szántó has even suggested there was an "all-out doctrinal war against non-monastic officiants" during this period.[4] *Fifty Verses* thus advises that, before bowing, one should consider the status of the guru in a given Buddhist community.

The *Fifty Verses on the Guru* was routinely cited in Indic texts, but was perhaps even more influential in Tibet.[5] In the 12th century, the lay Sa skya patriarch Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147–1216), penned a commentary to the *Fifty Verses*, arguing that even lay lamas should be venerated by monks.[6] Although *Fifty Verses* itself contains numerous rules for how to relate to a guru, Grags pa rgyal mtshan's commentary focuses almost exclusively on its opening passages, in which Vāpilla discusses bowing. Grags pa rgyal mtshan provides a series of arguments for why the root text is wrong to express caution about prostrating to a lay guru. While this contrarian position could be seen as simply reflecting a change between Indian and Tibetan Buddhist customs, Grags pa rgyal mtshan does not make such a claim. Instead, he carefully draws from three genres of Buddhist scriptures (Śrāvaka, Mahāyāna, and Tantra) to present a robust justification for why bowing to the lama is a universal practice. Grags pa rgyal mtshan's lengthy arguments about who should bow to whom surely reflected his own status as the lay leader of a Buddhist monastic institution, providing an apt example of how conventions around bowing differ among Buddhist traditions.

1. Fifty Verses on the Guru

In the opening verse of *Fifty Verses on the Guru*, bowing to the feet of the guru is said to lead to the exalted state of Vajrasattva. In verse two, the *tathāgata*s of the ten directions are described bowing to a guru who

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3 On the authorship of *Fifty Verses on the Guru*, see: Szántó 2013: 445.

4 Szántó 2010: 294.

5 Numerous commentaries have been composed in Tibetan, including one by Tsong kha pa (1357–1419). The *Gurvārārdhanapañjikā* (Tib. *Bla ma'i bsnyen bkur gyi dka' 'grel*) was composed in Sanskrit, although its authorship is unknown and it is only extant in Tibetan. The translation is attributed to Vanaratna (1384–1468) and 'Gos lotsāwa gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481), but Vanaratna was not the author of the commentary. Damron 2021: xv.

6 The full title of Grags pa rgyal mtshan's commentary is *Elucidation of Fifty Verses: Methods for Honoring the Lama* (*Bla ma bsten pa'i thabs shlo ka lnga bcu pa'i gsal byed*), in *Sa skya bka' 'bum*, Kathmandu, Sachen International, 2006, vol. 6: 367–394.

has received tantric initiation:

> The *tathāgata*s who abide in the worlds of the ten directions always prostrate to the guru who has received the highest initiation.[7]

As even the buddhas in all world systems prostrate (Skt. *vandanā*; Tib. *phyag 'tshal ba*) to the guru, they serve as a model for tantric disciples who, in verse three, are instructed to do the same.[8] Yet, in the very next verse, Vāpilla warns that bowing to a lay or novice guru might elicit scorn from onlookers. The fourth verse thus indicates that *tāntrika*s should not physically prostrate in the presence of persons who do not respect the guru:

> For those holding the tantric vows, [the guru who is] a householder or novice monk ought to be mentally venerated—after first placing in front a sacred object of some sort—for the sake of avoiding worldly criticism.[9]

In the presence of those who do not acknowledge the status of a guru who is a layman (Skt. *gṛhin*; Tib. *khyim pa*), tantric disciples are instructed to disguise their devotion. They should bow to an acceptable object of worship and only mentally (*buddhyā*) venerate the guru. Following verses one through four, we see that while bowing to the lay guru was mandatory within the confines of the guru's own household (*gurukula*), Vāpilla considered it prudent to caution tantric disciples about performing this practice in front of those who do not venerate the guru.

Fifty Verses on the Guru assumes, on the whole, that the tantric guru is a married layman who possesses wealth.[10] In verse four, however,

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[7] *abhiṣekāgralabdho hi vajrācārya tathāgataiḥ / daśadiklokadhātusthais trikālam etya vandyate // Gurupañcāśikā.*, vol. 2, ed. Szántó 2013: 446.

[8] The Sanskrit verb *√vand* (Tib. *phyag 'tshal*) does not always describe a physical prostration, as it can also indicate veneration in more general terms. In verse three, as the disciple is instructed to touch the head to the guru's feet, physical prostrations are clearly being discussed.

[9] *saddharmādīn puraskṛtya gṛhī vā navako pi vā / vaṃdyo vratadharair buddhyā lokāvadhyānahānaye //* Ibid.: 447.

[10] In verse twenty-six, for instance, Vāpilla instructs tantric disciples to properly relate to the guru's wife (*aṅganā*), material possessions (*dravya*), and community (*loka*). (See: Szántó 2010: 292.) The fact of the guru having such relations (which likely included additional family members) is itself not seen as surprising, suggesting that it was taken for granted by Vāpilla. As discussed by Jan Nattier, when "incidental mention is made of items unrelated to the author's primary agenda" these details tend to be historically valuable (2003: 66). Verse twenty-six

reference to the possibility of a novice (*navaka*) guru calls to mind the monastic hierarchy, which is organized according to seniority. Indeed, the *vinaya* famously declares that those who more recently became monks ought to honor and venerate those who have been ordained for a longer period of time. As gestures of respect are to be performed on the basis of seniority, monks should not bow to a lay person who stands entirely outside of the monastic order.[11] The injunction against venerating laypersons is not a formal *prātimokṣa* rule that is recited by monks, and yet it is accorded clear importance by being attributed to the Buddha. In *Fifty Verses*, Vāpilla does not indicate whether the warning put forward in verse four is primarily meant for monks (or whether it is to be followed by all the disciples of the guru), but it is likely that "worldly criticism" (*lokāvadhyāna*) would be stronger for a monk seen bowing to a lay guru.[12]

Fifty Verses on the Guru reflects emerging tensions between institutions organized according to monastic seniority and a tantric model in which the authority of the guru is paramount. Vāpilla's advice against bowing to a lay or novice guru in front of those who do not hold him in high esteem suggests further that these Buddhist worlds were in regular contact, and perhaps—if indeed verse four was primarily meant for monks—that lay gurus were even attracting monastic disciples. Although a broader discussion of the interactions between these communities is beyond the scope of this paper, one possible outcome is that rites for venerating the guru were increasingly incorporated into Indian monastic curriculums.[13] The rise of the guru in India also informs our understanding of lay lamas in Tibet, the topic to which we now turn.

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thus supports the impression that the guru's lay status was a norm, not an exception.

11 In the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, the opening section of the *Śayanāsanavastu* discusses the issue of who should pay respect to whom in the monastic community. After a series of discussions, the Buddha decrees that monks should not venerate other monks who are on probation or have been suspended, as well as "he who is a layman; and one who is not ordained." Schopen 2000: 103. Lay Buddhists (Skt. *upāsaka*; Tib. *dge bsnyen*), who abide by precepts, and the "unordained" (Skt. *anupasaṃpanna*; Tib. *bsnyen par ma rdzogs pa*) are both mentioned as unsuitable objects of veneration for a monk.

12 The conduct of a monk is meant to avoid such disapprobation: "the *vinaya*s are, in fact, preoccupied—if not obsessed—with avoiding any hint of social criticism." Schopen 1995: 362.

13 The *Light on the Foundational Practices* (*Ādikarmapradīpa*), a late 11th century compendium of rites composed by Anupamavajra in the vicinity of Vikramaśīla Monastery, includes the *gurumaṇḍala* as a daily practice. The importance of this rite, during which the guru is imagined as a buddha, is bolstered with a series of citations from *Fifty Verses on the Guru*. See: de la Vallée Poussin 1898: 221–222.

2. Grags pa rgyal mtshan's Commentary to Fifty Verses on the Guru

Buddhism did not arrive in Tibet in a neat package. As in India, the status of the lay guru or lama (*bla ma*) differed across traditions. In some cases, lay Buddhist masters and their followers were brought under the supervision of monastic authorities, whereas elsewhere they established their own lineages and institutions.[14] In the 11th and 12th centuries, lay movements often integrated tantric teachings with mainstream practices. The lay Sa skya patriarch Bsod nams rtse mo (1142–1182) and his younger brother Grags pa rgyal mtshan, for instance, dedicated much of their scholastic careers to domesticating tantra.[15] Grags pa rgyal mtshan was also a pioneer in an approach to the three vows (Skt. *trisaṃvara*; Tib. *sdom pa gsum*) genre that reconciled Śrāvaka, Mahāyāna, and Tantric doctrines.[16] The tantric vows regarding the guru are included within this system.

In his commentary to *Fifty Verses on the Guru*, Grags pa rgyal mtshan declares that the majority of social codes found in the Indic text are easy to understand (and thus not in need of explanation), but he examines the practice of bowing to the lay lama from a variety of perspectives. Grags pa rgyal mtshan draws from numerous Buddhist scriptures to defend the view that the lama—including the lay lama—is a universal object of worship.[17] The bulk of the commentary indeed focuses on this singular issue. The question of whether monks should bow to a lay lama appears to have been a topic of personal relevance for Grags pa rgyal mtshan, who calls attention to his own status as a "lay Buddhist" (*sākya'i dge bsnyen*) in the commentary's colophon.[18]

3. Grags pa rgyal mtshan's Exegesis of Verse Two

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[14] See: Martin 1996a and 1996b.

[15] Davidson 2005: 352–370.

[16] Sobisch 2002: 1–2 and passim.

[17] *Fifty Verses on the Guru* is said to summarize the views of the tantras, and Grags pa rgyal mtshan lists some of the sources used by Vāpilla in the composition of the text: *Rnam snang sgyu 'phrul dra ba* (*Vairocana Māyājāla*), *Rdo rje gtsug tor* (*Vajroṣṇiṣa*), *Gshin rje gshed dgra nag po'i rgyud* (*Yamāntaka*), *Dpal mchog dang po* (*Ādiparamaśrī*), *Rnal 'byor bla na med pa gsang ba 'dus pa* (*Anuttrayoga Guhyasamāja*), and the *Rdo rje gur* (*Vajrapañjara*). Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 372.5–6. Grags pa rgyal mtshan refers to a number of these same scriptures in his own commentary. In most cases, he does not directly cite these works, but invokes their perspective (*dbang du byas na*) on tantric ritual and then glosses any relevance for the question of bowing to the guru.

[18] In addition to the five precepts incumbent on an *upāsaka*, Grags pa rgyal mtshan was also said to uphold the vows of a celibate (*brahmacarin*), along with other abstentions. Davidson 2005: 344.

Grags pa rgyal mtshan begins his exegesis of verse two of *Fifty Verses on the Guru* (which declares that the *tathāgata*s of the ten directions bow to the tantric guru) by explaining why the buddhas of this eon, including Buddha Śākyamuni, prostrate to the Buddha Dīpaṃkara three times per day:

> In this fortunate eon, enlightened buddhas such as Śākyamuni who dwell in the worlds of the ten directions always prostrate to Dīpaṃkara, at the three times, for the sake of returning his kindness.[19]

Dīpaṃkara is the paradigmatic buddha of this eon, upon whom later buddhas have depended on to complete their own spiritual journeys. Accordingly, even after attaining enlightenment, Śākyamuni and others prostrate thrice daily (Skt. *trīkala*; Tib. *dus gsum du*) as a way of demonstrating their appreciation.[20] For Grags pa rgyal mtshan, the fact that Śākyamuni prostrates to Dīpaṃkara quickly leads to the conclusion that ordinary students also should prostrate to the lama:

> Accordingly, what need to mention that future students who are common, ordinary beings prostrate to the master?[21]

The example of Buddha Śākyamuni prostrating to another being is a limit case that demonstrates that ordinary beings (*so so skye bo tha mal pa*) should also prostrate, as a matter of course, to the Buddhist master (*slob dpon*).[22] Grags pa rgyal mtshan uses the statements "what need to mention" (*smos ci dgos*) and "what need to even mention" (*lta smos kyang ci dgos*) throughout the text to rhetorically emphasize that disciples need not think twice about the need to prostrate to the lama.

Grags pa rgyal mtshan continues by explaining that when the root text states that *tathāgata*s bow to the guru, the term "*tathāgata*s" is being

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[19] *bskal pa bzang po 'di la sangs rgyas pa'i de bzhin gshegs pa shākya thub la sogs pa'i gnas phyogs bcu'i 'jig rten gyis khams na bzhugs pa rnams kyis slob dpon mar me mdzad la drin lan bsab pa'i phyir dus gsum du phyag 'tshal ba'o* / Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 379.3–6.

[20] In Indic literature, the standard three times for performing such devotional rites are the early morning, noon, and dusk.

[21] *de bzhin du ma 'ongs pa'i so so skye bo tha mal pa'i slob mas slob dpon la phyag 'tshal ba smos ci dgos* / Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 379.6–380.1.

[22] As synonyms for the lama, Grags pa rgyal mtshan uses the terms "master" (*slob dpon*), "ordinary master" (*slob dpon tha mal pa*), and "common master" (*so so skye bo'i slob dpon*) throughout the commentary. The variation in terminology reflects the Indic material he cites, yet as a whole the root text and commentary are specifically addressing the status of the guru.

used as a metonym for tenth-level bodhisattvas (because the five *tathāgata*s sit on the crowns atop their heads). Bodhisattvas, who have given rise to the mindset to assist all beings, bow their heads to the feet of the guru because they are grateful for the benefit he provides to others through granting initiations and teaching. Grags pa rgyal mtshan uses a familial metaphor to illustrate why bodhisattvas bow to those whose activities lighten their own task:

> For example, consider a person who has many children, but they are each raised by various family members. At a later time, since the parents entrusted [their children] to these caretakers, the parents will thank them, saying things like "You helped by raising our kids and lightening our workload!"[23]

Just as overworked parents appreciate help with their children, and will later thank those that assisted them in this task, advanced bodhisattvas bow in gratitude for the work that the ordinary master (*slob dpon tha mal pa*) does to benefit beings. Grags pa rgyal mtshan again closes with a rhetorical question: "what need to even mention that an ordinary disciple would prostrate to a master?"[24] The repetition of this refrain already suggests that he is building a comprehensive argument for why everyone should bow to the lama.

Thirdly, Grags pa rgyal mtshan draws from the *Guhyasamāja* and *Vajrapañjara* tantras to account for why *tathāgata*s bow to a guru. In this case, he asks the reader to imagine a surprising situation in which a student receives initiation and then "gains enlightenment before the master" (*slob ma sngon du sangs rgyas*). The diligent student nevertheless bows to the lama:

> [The student] directly prostrates, at the three times, in order to repay the kindness of the lama who did not attain buddhahood due to having less diligence. The *tathāgata*s of the past prostrated to the masters of the past. It will be just like that in the future, and it is like that now.[25]

In this example, the lama who initially bestowed initiation should not

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[23] *dper na mi gcig la bu mang po yod pa la kho'i nye du rnams khyis bu re re gsos te / phyis cher tshar tsa na pha ma de la gtad pas pha mas mi rnams la gtang rag khyed kyis nged kyi bu gso ba'i grogs byas te khur phri'o zhes gtang rag gtong ba lta bu'o* / Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 381.2–3.

[24] *slob ma tha mal pas slob dpon la phyag 'tshal ba lta smos kyang ci dgos* / Ibid.: 381.3–4.

[25] *brtson 'grus chung bas bla ma sangs rgyas ma thob pa la drin lan bsab pa'i phyir dus gsum du ngos su phyag 'tshal te / 'das pas slob dpon rnams la 'das pa'i de bzhin gshegs pa rnams kyis phyag 'tshal ba la / ma 'ongs pa dang da ltar ba'ang de dang 'dra ba'o* / Ibid.: 381.6–382.1.

be forgotten, even when surpassed by the disciple. Prostrations are again presented as a method of expressing gratitude to a Buddhist master. At the end of this section, Grags pa rgyal mtshan concludes that if enlightened disciples continue to bow to an "ordinary master" (*so so skye bo'i slob dpon*), why even question the need for ordinary students to also prostrate to the lama.[26]

The examples of the *tathāgata*s and advanced bodhisattvas bowing to the lama are meant to strengthen the broader argument that regular disciples should also prostrate to a Buddhist teacher. All three passages have the same structure. Grags pa rgyal mtshan first summarizes the perspective of a tantric scripture to establish the validity of a limit case—the buddhas and bodhisattvas bowing to the master—and then uses that example to conclude that ordinary disciples bowing to a teacher should be considered self-evident. Grags pa rgyal mtshan does not specify the status of these disciples (i.e., whether they are monks or laypersons), but in his analysis of verse four he adds specific reasons for why even monks might prostrate to a layman.

4. Grags pa rgyal mtshan's Exegesis of Verse Four

Commenting on verse four, Grags pa rgyal mtshan confirms that even for monks the lay lama should be considered a worthy object of veneration. In arguing that ordination status and seniority are not the main factors that inform the directionality of prostration practice, he cites Mahāyāna texts wherein it is considered viable for senior monks to bow to novices and for monks to bow to laymen. In these citations, spiritual attainments and qualities such as *bodhicitta* are valorized over external rank.

Grags pa rgyal mtshan first cites a passage from the *Questions of the Girl Sumati*, in which the great Śrāvaka disciple Maudgalyāyana declares to the Buddha that he will bow to anyone who has the mindset of attaining enlightenment for the benefit of all beings:

> Oh Bhagavan, I shall prostrate to all bodhisattvas, beginning with those who have just given rise to *bodhicitta*![27]

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[26] The term *so so skye bo'i slob dpon* is a rare way of describing a Buddhist master. It may indicate the flesh-and-blood lama (in contrast to the *dharmakāya* lama) or specify that the teacher is not being considered an *arya* or advanced bodhisattva. In this context, however, it may simply indicate that the master has not progressed far on the path.

[27] *btsun pa mau dgal gyi bu chen pos gsol pa / bcom ldan 'das bdag sems dang po bskyed pa'i byang chub sems dpa' las brtsams te byang chub sems dpa' 'di thams cad la phyag bgyi'o zhes gsungs so* / Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 385.3. See: '*Phag pa bu mo blo gros bzang mos zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo* (*Āryasumatidārikāparipṛcchā*), Toh. 74,

In this case, and in subsequent citations, *bodhicitta* levels the playing field when it comes to the question of who should prostrate to whom. After citing such passages, Grags pa rgyal mtshan returns to his now-familiar refrain: if senior monks and bodhisattvas would even bow to one who has just given rise to *bodhicitta*, then of course they would also bow to a lama.

Next, Grags pa rgyal mtshan problematizes the *vinaya*'s injunction against bowing to laymen. Regarding this as the view of the Śrāvaka scriptures (*nyan thos kyi sde snod*), he cites the *Ornament of the Sage's Thought* (Skt. *Munimatālaṃkāra*; Tib. *Thub pa'i dgongs pa'i rgyan*), a work that is of a piece with other Mahāyāna texts that diminish the standing of arhats in relation to bodhisattvas:

> The Buddha said: "Arhat monks must prostrate to those bodhisattvas who are not ordained, and who maintain the appearance of householders, perceiving them as a buddha.[28]

The *vinaya*'s dictum against bowing to a layman is cast here as a provisional statement, as the Buddha declares that even arhat monks (*dge slong dgra bcom pa rnams*) should bow to a bodhisattva who maintains the status of a householder. In this passage, as Grags pa rgyal mtshan nears the end of his exegesis of verse four, it is significant that he explicitly states the suitability of monks bowing to laymen.

Grags pa rgyal mtshan concludes his argument that monks should bow to the lay lama by citing two passages from Bhāviveka's *Blaze of Reasoning* (Skt. *Tarkajvālā*; Tib. *Rtog ge 'bar ba*). Following the intent of this 6th century philosopher, Grags pa rgyal mtshan notes that "the objections of Śrāvakas [to monks bowing to lay bodhisattvas] can be refuted with their very own scriptures."[29] The first citation from the *Blaze of Reasoning* reiterates that even beginner bodhisattvas are venerable,[30] and the second adds animals as a limit case that could

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Sde dge Bka' 'gyur, vol. 43 (dkon brtsegs, ca): 216a–222a. In the canon, this passage is worded somewhat differently (219.6–7). Grags pa rgyal mtshan thus appears to drawing this passage directly from Abhayākaragupta's *Ornament of the Sage's Thought* (p. 83b.6–7), a 12th century treatise that includes this passage and is also cited later in Grags pa rgyal mtshan's commentary to *Fifty Verses*.

28 *bcom ldan 'das byang chub sems dpa' bsnyen par ma rdzogs pa dang khyim pa'i cha lugs 'dzin pa la yang ston par 'du shes pas dge slong dgra bcom pa rnams kyis phyag bya'o zhes thub pa dgongs pa'i rgyan las gsungs so* / Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 386.3–4. See: Abhayākaragupta, *Thub pa'i dgongs pa'i rgyan* (Munimatālaṃkāra), Toh. 3903, Sde dge Bstan 'gyur vol. 210 (dbu ma, a): 73.b–293.a. The cited passage is on p. 83b.2.

29 *slob dpon legs ldan byed kyis kyang rtog ge 'bar ba las* / *nyan thos kyi rtsod pa bzlog pa'i phyir de dag nyid kyi lung gsungs pa* / Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 386.4–5.

30 *byang chub sems bskyed nas brtsams nas* / *drang srong che la bdag phyag 'tshal* / *byang chub kyi sems bskyed par mdzad ma thag de la yang bdag phyag 'tshal lo* / *mngon par*

potentially be worthy of veneration:

> Is it the case that a monk should prostrate to all householders who have just given rise to *bodhicitta*? Yes. Some abide on the *bhūmi*s and are known to have received a prediction of their future enlightenment. One must also bow to some animals, such as the Rabbit and the King of Geese, so what need to even mention [beings] such as people?[31]

In addition to *bodhicitta*, other hidden qualities are seen to establish householders as suitable recipients for prostrations. Some may abide on the *bhūmi*s and have received a prophecy of their future enlightenment (Skt. *vyākaraṇa*; Tib. *lung bstan pa*).[32] The final limit cases are provided by the Buddha's past lives as a Rabbit and the King of Geese, and they are used to again support the broader argument that ordination and seniority should not be the only factors that inform prostration practice. In this case, Grags pa rgyal mtshan follows Bhāviveka himself, who whimsically concludes, "what need to even mention people?" as a suitable object of veneration. As in earlier passages in Grags pa rgyal mtshan's commentary, a surprising example is used to introduce a more everyday possibility.

5. Grags pa rgyal mtshan's Rhetorical Style

In his commentary on *Fifty Verses on the Guru*, Grags pa rgyal mtshan is primarily concerned with the shift from verse two—in which *tathāgata*s are said to bow to the tantric guru—to verse four, where Vāpilla warns disciples about bowing to a lay or novice guru. Verse two describes *tathāgata*s bowing in somewhat poetic terms, whereas verse four offers practical advice for navigating contemporary Indic social norms. In assessing this shift, Grags pa rgyal mtshan entertains

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rdzogs par sangs rgyas pa de la yang bdag phyag 'tshal lo / chos kyi 'khor lo bskor ba la yang bdag phyag bgyid do / bsil bar gyur pa la yang bdag phyag 'tshal lo / Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 386.5–6. See: Bhāviveka, *Rtog ge 'bar ba* (Tarkajvālā), Toh. 3856, Sde dge Bstan 'gyur vol. 98 (dbu ma, dza): 40b.7–329b.4. The cited passage is on p. 177.b.4–5.

31 *ci byang chub tu sems bskyed pa tsam gyi khyim pa kun la yang rab tu byung bas phyag byas pa yin nam zhe na / yin par brjod par bya ste / gang dag sa la bzhugs pa dang / lung bstan pa yin par thos pa de dag ni gang dag ri bong dang ngang pa'i rgyal po la sogs dud 'gror gyur pa la yang phyag bya ba yin na mi la sogs pa rnams la lta smos kyang ci dgos zhes gsungs so* / Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 387.1–3. Bhāviveka, *Rtog ge 'bar ba:* 179b.1–2.

32 Especially in Mahāyāna sutras, the Buddha grants prophecies about the future enlightenment of advanced bodhisattvas.

the possibility that the directionality of prostration practice could depend on institutional context, noting that in a "Śrāvaka place" (*nyan thos gnas*) it might be prudent to refrain from physically bowing to a lay lama.[33] Ultimately, he rejects this idea, however, concluding that *Fifty Verses* itself is "contradictory" (*'gal ba*) precisely because Vāpilla asserts that *tathāgata*s bow to the guru, but then restricts this practice.[34] Grags pa rgyal mtshan uses three principal strategies to convince his audience that the impact of verse two outweighs the cautionary nature of verse four.

First, Grags pa rgyal mtshan draws from a wide selection of Indian tantras and Mahāyāna texts. Instead of making declarations about how things should be done at Sa skya Monastery or noting that certain conventions might have changed as Buddhism made its way from India to Tibet, he draws from Indic scriptures to present monks bowing to the lay lama as consonant with Buddhist tradition. In Grags pa rgyal mtshan's commentary, even passages from the *vinaya* are reinterpreted to fit a hierarchical model in which the elevated position of senior monks is supplanted by the office of the lama. In sum, instead of just making prescriptive statements, he aims to convince via scholastic prowess.

A second aspect of Grags pa rgyal mtshan's rhetorical style is the repeated use of a limit case to establish a general conclusion. This approach might be characterized as a "corroborative argument" (Skt. *arthāntaranyāsa alaṃkāra*). In arguments with this structure, a specific example is used to introduce a general rule, and here in Grags pa rgyal mtshan's commentary we see a similar pattern. The limit cases of Buddha Śākyamuni bowing out of gratitude or a senior monk prostrating to a novice are used to establish the general conclusion that all ordinary students should also prostrate to a lama. In some passages, the repetition of the term "prostrate" (*phyag 'tshal ba*) at the end of successive sentences emphasizes the connection between the limit case and the more everyday day practice of bowing to the lama.

Finally, Grags pa rgyal mtshan repeatedly uses the refrain "what need to even mention?" (*lta smos kyang ci dgos*) to reconcile the different registers used by Vāpilla in verses two and four of *Fifty Verses on the Guru*. In *vinaya* literature, the Buddha often uses the same rhetorical phrase ("what need to even mention?") to underscore the rules for

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[33] Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 384.4.

[34] According to Grags pa rgyal mtshan, the caution put forth in verse four goes against the idea of *tathāgata*s bowing to the guru (which has already been stated in verse two). In addition to going against the adduced Mahāyāna and Tantric perspectives, it "also contradicts the text of this very master [Vāpilla]." (*slob dpon 'di nyid kyi gzhung dang yang 'gal bar 'gyur* / Ibid.: 387.3).

monks.[35] Grags pa rgyal mtshan could thus be seen as appropriating a canonical phrase in order to advance his own position on the issue of bowing to a lay lama. As a literary device, the repeated use of the phrase also ties together the diverse arguments put forward in the commentary, reiterating that one need not think twice about his desired conclusion.[36]

Intriguingly, Grags pa rgyal mtshan may have been inspired by Bhāviveka's approach to the topic of bowing in chapter four of the *Blaze of Reasoning*. As discussed by Skilling (1997), Bhāviveka justifies the idea of monks bowing to lay bodhisattvas by citing a series of passages from the Śrāvaka canon.[37] In a similar vein, Grags pa rgyal mtshan uses scriptural citations to show that bowing to the lay lama is consonant with Buddhist tradition. Moreover, the second passage he cites from the *Blaze of Reasoning* includes a corroborative argument and the phrase "what need to even mention?". All three of Grags pa rgyal mtshan's principal rhetorical strategies are thus found in the work of an earlier proponent of the view that monks can bow to a layman.

6. At Sa skya Monastery

In the colophon of his commentary, Grags pa rgyal mtshan explains that teachings on *Fifty Verses on the Guru* were passed down in the Sa skya lineage, and eventually received by his older brother Bsod nams rtse mo.[38] Bsod nams rtse mo was also a lay lama, but he did not compose a commentary to *Fifty Verses on the Guru*. In *Gateway to the Dharma* (*Chos la 'jug pa'i sgo*), a primer for beginners on the Buddhist

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[35] In the "Chapter on Going Forth" (Skt. *Pravrajyāvastu*; Tib. *rab tu 'byung ba'i gzhi*), for instance, the Buddha uses minor infractions—such as stealing the husk of a sesame seed and killing an ant—to demonstrate that avoiding more grievous wrongdoings hardly needs to be mentioned (Skt. *kaḥ punarvāda*; Tib. *smos ci dgos*).

[36] Incidentally, "*lta smos kyang ci dgos*" appears to have been a favored expression for Grags pa rgyal mtshan. In the *Profound Path of Guru Yoga* (*Lam zab mo*: 195.1), written by Grags pa rgyal mtshan's nephew, Sa skya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) cites his uncle using this exact phrase to dismiss the possibility of performing preliminary hardships (*dka' ba*) for an entire year.

[37] Bhāvavika states that "the scriptures of the majority of the eighteen schools declare that a bodhisattva should be worshipped." (*sde pa bco brgyad phal chen gyi gzhung las kyang / byang chub sems dpa' la phyag bya bar rab tu grags te* / Bhāviveka, *Rtog ge 'bar ba*: 175.a.7–175.b.1). See: Skilling 1997: 605. Grags pa rgyal mtshan paraphrases this passage in his commentary. Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 387.1.

[38] "From 'Brog and Mal gyo, [teachings on *Fifty Verses on the Guru*] came down in succession and, as only a little bit was written in the presence of the All-Pervading Glory, the Lord of Sa skya, the Supreme Son Bsod nams, it was expanded on by me. May there be enlightenment!" (*'brog dang mal gyo dag las rim 'ongs zhing / grags pas kun khyab rje btsun sa skya pa'i / sras mchog bsod nams zhal sngas cung zad bsdebs / rgyas par bdag gis bgyis pas sang rgyas shog* / Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 393.5–6).

path, he does note that an elder should not prostrate to the feet of a novice because that would generate "worldly scorn" and "harm the Buddha's teachings."[39] Although he does not discuss the figure of the lay lama in this context, he does approvingly cite the entirety of verse four from *Fifty Verses*. Reading between the lines, we might wonder if his reluctance to promote the figure of the lay lama had anything to do with his own status as a layman living in the famed monastic college of Gsang phu sne'u thog.[40]

In making a formal case for why it is acceptable for monks to bow to a lay lama, Grags pa rgyal mtshan appears to have developed the received teachings on *Fifty Verses* to situate them in his own institutional context. Specifically, he notes that Bsod nams rtse mo only wrote down a little bit (*cung zad*) about *Fifty Verses*, and that this "was expanded on by me" (*rgyas par bdag gis bgyis*). The extended focus on bowing to the lay lama reflects Grags pa rgyal mtshan's own position, as in contrast to his older brother's short tenure, he served as the head of Sa skya Monastery for over half a century.[41] According to the Tibetan historian Tāranātha (1575–1634), Grags pa rgyal mtshan's status as an *upāsaka* gave the visiting Indian pandit Vibhūticandra pause when it came to bowing. Even though Cyrus Stearns considers this particular anecdote suspect, its presence in the historical record evokes the type of situation Grags pa rgyal mtshan may have hoped to foreclose through writing his commentary.[42]

Conclusion

As *Fifty Verses on the Guru* is a mnemonic summation of the social codes for relating to a guru put forward in the tantras themselves, it does not provide an elaborate rationale for why prostrating to a lay or novice guru might give rise to criticism. Indeed, for the most part, Vāpilla's protocol for venerating the tantric guru is not explained so much as prescribed. The disjunct between Buddhist practices done inside the

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[39] *gal te bdag ni rgan la / de gsar bur gyur na rkang pa la phyag mi btsal lo / de ci'i phyir zhe na / 'jig rten pa dag smod pa'i phyir te des bstan pa la gnod pa'i phyir ro* / Bsod nams rtse mo 2006: 580.5.

[40] Bsod nams rtse mo only served as abbot of Sa skya for three years (1158–1160), after which he traveled to study at Gsang phu. Bsod nams rtse mo completed *Gateway to the Dharma* in 1167, toward the end of the period in which he was actively studying under Cha pa chos kyi seng ge (1109–1169) at Gsang phu. Davidson 2005: 367–369.

[41] Although there is some debate about his official status during Bsod rnams rtse mo's time studying at Gsang phu, Grags pa rgyal mtshan effectively served as abbot of Sa skya Monastery for fifty-seven years, from 1160 until his death in 1216.

[42] Stearns 1996: 133–134.

gurukula and those performed beyond it nevertheless offers a glimpse of a period in which the lay guru was becoming more influential, but was not widely accepted as an object of devotion.

Grags pa rgyal mtshan's long-standing abbacy, together with numerous other examples of influential lay leaders in 11th and 12th century Buddhist institutions, demonstrates the ascendance of the lay lama in Tibet. Still, Grags pa rgyal mtshan's exegesis of *Fifty Verses on the Guru* suggests that the idea of monks bowing to a lay lama remained somewhat controversial. Certainly, the monastic *vinaya*'s position on the directionality of prostration practice was well known to this Buddhist scholar par excellence. In his commentary, Grags pa rgyal mtshan nevertheless reframes prostration practice from the perspectives of Mahāyāna and Tantric texts. This exegesis grounds his view in traditional discourse, solidifying his own position as the lay abbot of a monastic institution.

In his commentary to *Fifty Verses*, Grags pa rgyal mtshan rhetorically amplifies Vāpilla's statement that *tathāgata*s bow to the guru and dismisses the warning expressed in verse four. The structure of his arguments, the scriptural citations, and the recurring phrase "what need to even mention," all support the conclusion that the lama is at the top of the Buddhist hierarchy, regardless of ordination status or seniority. Rhetorically, the necessity of bowing to the lama is said to be hardly worth discussing, and yet Grags pa rgyal mtshan himself took the time to compose a carefully organized treatise that strongly advocates for monks to bow to the lay lama.

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Did Gene Smith Invent *Ris med*?: The Dialogic Emergence of Tibetan Buddhist Pluralism in the 20th Century[1]

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Ris med emerged in the early 1970s as one of the most important analytic categories for displaced Tibetan intellectuals trying to imagine new modes of Tibetan-ness far from the Plateau. When the Dalai Lama and other religio-political leaders were forced to forge an identity common to the thousands of people who had followed them into exile in India, a motley crew hailing from a region roughly the size of India itself who spoke mutually unintelligible dialects of Tibetan and drew upon distinct pantheons of gods and canons of Buddhist philosophy in their respective religious practices, they dreamt of a *ris med* society: The emergent Tibetan people would not (*med*) discriminate (*ris*) based upon one's home region, language, or form of Buddhism.[2] Modeling the tolerance they hoped to see reflected in the broader populace, the government-in-exile's constitution mandated that the Dalai Lama's

[1] I would like to thank Alexander Gardner for his feedback on an earlier draft of this paper and Jann Ronis for his help securing elusive manuscripts. Some of the information included in this article related to the writings of Jamgon Kongtrul has been revised from a similar discussion in my dissertation. See Taylor 2021.

[2] Although I prefer "nondiscrimination" as an acontextual translation of *ris med* to the more common "non-sectarianism," throughout this essay I will leave the term largely untranslated to avoid having the English obscure the radical transformations undergone by this deceptively simple compound comprised of *ris*, "to discriminate," "to divide into factions or classes," "to show bias," "to draw a line of demarcation between two things," and *med*, a simple negative existential verb meaning "to not have," "to lack." The phrase has been variously phoneticized as *ris-med*, *rimay*, and *rimé*. Translations that discuss "nonsectarianism" or "impartiality" are often translating *ris med*, though occasionally *phyogs med* or some combination thereof. Since this is a journal of Tibetology, I will generally leave *ris med* untranslated so that specialists can observe its semantic journey and decide for themselves how they might translate it in each context. However, in my forthcoming work that seeks to engage an audience of religious studies scholars beyond Tibetan Buddhism, I generally use "reemay," as an informal poll of my students and colleagues showed that none of the other phonetic possibilities led to anything resembling the standard pronunciation.

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cabinet would include representatives from each region of Tibet and each of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism.[3]

The Dalai Lama and other Tibetan leaders were strikingly successful in convincing Tibetans to adopt this nondiscriminatory orientation, and today one can speak coherently of a unified Tibetan people and Tibetan Buddhism and be easily understood. *Ris med* soon acquired primarily religious overtones, describing what Alexander Gardner calls a "consciously and decidedly nonsectarian" approach with respect to Buddhist practice, one that is "non-partial in regards to doctrinal positions, or even syncretic."[4]

Ris med gradually expanded from an intra-Tibetan to an intercultural discourse. The concept gave the Dalai Lama an intelligible framework by which Buddhism could participate in discourses of religious pluralism without renouncing its own uniqueness or alienating the non-Buddhist international community whose support the exile community so desperately needed.[5] This nondiscriminatory approach also proved popular among Anglophone religious liberals interested in Vajrayana Buddhism.[6] Even though Tibetan history is rife with instances of sectarian persecution and even warfare fought along Buddhist denominational lines, an influential generation of teachers who taught in America in the 1960s and 70s positioned Buddhism as more practice-oriented and tolerant than the monotheistic traditions in which many Americans were raised.

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[3] For more information on this process, see Nowak 1984, especially the discussions on 65 and 90. See also Brox 2016: 60–103.

[4] Gardner 2006: 117. The original passage reads in full: "Western authors now refer to a 'Rimay movement' that has two main and four minor characteristics: it is l) consciously and decidedly nonsectarian, and 2) non-partial in regards to doctrinal positions, or even syncretic. Moreover, adherents to the so-called movement are said to have l) favored 'practice' over 'institutions,' 2) advocated a return to fundamentals, 3) endeavored to collect and preserve texts and teaching lineages, and 4) embraced the *gzhan stong* position. All of these were supposedly means to surmount sectarian divisiveness and to embody a non-biased approach to Buddhist traditions."

[5] The Fourteenth Dalai Lama frequently uses the phrase *ris med chos lugs*, among other formulations, sometimes to describe intra-Buddhist non-sectarianism and other times to describe broader tolerance among all religions. For one example, see his introduction to a volume of Mipham's *Gateway to Knowledge*, where he lauds a publisher for publishing texts from all of the Buddhist schools as well as the Kagyu in particular. See Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho 2009: front matter. The Dalai Lama also began using *chos lugs ris med* to translate the English "secularism," which he interpreted as formal impartiality with respect to religious traditions. See Brox 2016: 191–198. See also Okada 2016.

[6] I use "Tibetan Buddhism" to reference the forms of Buddhism practiced by the Tibetan people and "Vajrayana Buddhism" to denote the larger system of thought and practice that has been practiced by a variety of non-Tibetan Himalayan peoples and increasingly others from around the globe. For more on the popularization of *ris med* in Anglophone spheres, see Gardner 2006: 115–128.

Missionary teachers such as Dilgo Khyentse (Dil mgo mkhyen brtse, 1910–1991), Kalu Rinpoche (Kar lu rin po che, 1905–1989), Dezhung Rinpoche (Sde gzhung rin po che, 1906–1987), and, perhaps most significantly, The Eleventh Zurmang Trungpa, Chokyi Gyatso (Zur mang drung pa 11 chos kyi rgya mtsho, 1939–1987), better known in Anglophone spheres as Chogyam Trungpa (Chos rgyam drung pa), promoted a *ris med* orientation, as did their first generation of converts. The concept became equally popular in Tibet proper, and today Larung Gar (Bla rung sgar) and Yarchen Gar (Ya chen sgar), the two largest Buddhist institutions within greater Tibet, both describe themselves as *ris med* despite having strong institutional and doctrinal affinities with the Nyingma school.[7]

Two competing myths, in Bruce Lincoln's sense of the term, have emerged to explain the origins of *ris med*.[8] Contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teachers inevitably ascribe the concept to a 19th century movement led by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye ('Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, 1813–1899) and other Khampa luminaries like Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo ('Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po, 1829–1892) and Chokgyur Lingpa (Mchog gyur gling pa, 1829–1870) to establish a doctrinally nonsectarian framework wherein diverse Buddhist practices could flourish. The source of this ascription is the major concern of this article, but for now I will merely observe that *ris med* has been almost synonymous with Kongtrul since the 1970s. For instance, the learned Ringu Tulku, who has been influential in shaping both Tibetan and Anglophone conceptions of *ris med*, opens his 1985 monograph on the subject:

> The First Chapter, "The Meaning of Ri-me," describes the nonsectarian understanding and the manner in which Jamgon Kongtrul and other masters show that there are no fundamental contradictions among the Buddhist teachings that came to Tibet.[9]

In this account, Jamgon Kongtrul and other Khampa masters cultivated teachings and practices from the many lineages of Tibetan Buddhism without privileging those of their own respective schools, preserving many teachings that might have otherwise disappeared due to Gelug hegemony or popular indifference. Just as the 19th century Khampa Nyingmapas came together in a moment of

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7 See Bianchi 2018; Hardie 2021; Liang and Taylor 2020; Padma'tsho and Jacoby 2020.

8 See Lincoln 1999: 207–216.

9 See Ri mgul sprul sku 1985. The work was translated into English as Ri mgul sprul sku 2006. For the quotation, see Ri mgul sprul sku 2006: xiii.

existential anxiety to establish a common identity and preserve threatened teachings, so the 20th century Tibetans needed to put aside ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences to preserve a core common to them all.

A second myth, this one accompanied by extensive footnotes, has proven equally prevalent among Tibetan Studies academics: Alexander Gardner has argued compellingly that these Khampa masters referenced above did not know that they were part of a unified movement, popular, intellectual or otherwise. Nor were they especially concerned with doctrinal nondiscrimination even as they adopted a broadly ecumenical approach to gathering teachings. Rather, in this understanding, the so-called "*ris med* movement" was an ex-post-facto designation attributed to these teachers in a 1969 article by Tibetologist Gene Smith (1936–2010), a pizza effect *par excellence*, an analytic concept invented by an Anglophone scholar that later scholars and Tibetan Buddhist teachers mistook for a key attribute of traditional Tibetan Buddhism.[10]

This deconstructive critique has not led to a decrease in studies of *ris med*; if anything, such treatments are only increasing given the endurance and prevalence of the category in Tibetan theorizing.[11] However, most now include the disclaimer that *ris med* was a 20th century invention rather than a 19th century phenomenon before continuing to employ *ris med* as an analytic category. In one representative example, Holly Gayley and Joshua Schapiro introduce their *ris med* primer with the caveat,

> Rimé represents an ecumenical attitude in the face of the many differences among Buddhist systems but does not constitute its own school, sect, or denomination.…What Smith characterizes as a 'movement' might be better understood as a preservation project carried out by a few influential teachers, together with the broader literary circle within which they flourished.[12]

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[10] Gardner does not attribute the creation of *ris med* exclusively to Smith, but to the uncritical scholastic interpreters of his article. Gardner writes, "Smith's excellent essays have been endlessly cited in Western publications, to the extent that his insightful suggestions have long since been transformed into truisms. The essays were so rich in detail and so widely cast in scope that for three decades authors have mined their many aspects and created a 'Rimay' that ultimately defies definition." See Gardner 2006: 113. On Ibid.: 118, Gardner writes more directly, "Certainly Smith brought this exciting period of Tibetan history to the attention of the world, but I would argue that he did not so much reveal the existence of the 'movement' as create it." Smith's introduction, originally published in 1969, is most easily accessed today in Smith 2001b.

[11] See for instance the recent edited volume Mathes and Coura 2021.

[12] See Gayley and Schapiro 2017: 2–3.

This has since become a mainstream position. Although most scholars of 19th century Kham agree that there was some kind of broad shift in the religious zeitgeist of the region effected by Jamgon Kongtrul and Khytentse Wangpo, the language of "movement" has been displaced by terms like "renaissance,"[13] "contemplative revival,"[14] "period"[15] "zeitgeist,"[16] "activity of a network of people,"[17] and "school,"[18] but the notion of a self-conscious, unified entity has been abandoned.

This essay has the modest aim of filling a gap between two seemingly secure data points: How was *ris med* used in Tibetan religious writings in the period between Kongtrul's death in 1899 and Smith's seminal article in 1969? Was Smith vocalizing an existing understanding of *ris med* among his Tibetan interlocutors, or did he inadvertently invent the *ris med* movement himself? How did an adverbial phrase become nominalized into an analytic category?

I wish to stress that this paper treats only transformations in *ris med*'s semantic usage during the early-to-mid 20th century. The broader notion of extending tolerance toward schools and lineages other than one's own is of course as old as the Tibetan reception of Buddhism, a point that Smith himself makes in the article in question.[19] Rather, I merely hope to explain how the term expanded from Kongtrul's use of it to describe esoteric states of Dzogchen meditation and the interrelationship of the eight practice lineages (*sgrub brgyud shing rta chen po brgyad*) to the Dalai Lama's understanding of *ris med*, which hews closer to Smith's, as prescribing doctrinal nondiscrimination among the four supposed Tibetan Buddhist schools. I demonstrate that the invention of *ris med* was the byproduct of Smith's interactions with an existing Tibetan historiographical tradition that already associated *ris med* with Kongtrul and other 19th century Khampa luminaries. Nevertheless, Smith's article was the first to reify *ris med* into a distinct concept that could be theorized and debated. In other words, we might better understand Smith as the popularizer of the "*ris*

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13 Deroche 2019: 323-325. Gardner provides a similar list of alternatives to a "*ris med* movement" in Gardner 2019: 348.

14 Deroche 2018: 129.

15 Gardner is here quoting Jann Ronis. See Gardner 2019: 348.

16 Gardner is here quoting Rachel Pang. See Ibid.

17 Deroche 2018: 136.

18 See Trungpa 1981: 89–91. For a critical analysis of Trungpa's use of *ris med*, see Gardner 2006: 116. Gayley and Schapiro explicitly oppose this view, writing, "Rimé represents an ecumenical attitude in the face of the many differences among Buddhist systems but does not constitute its own school, sect, or denomination." See Gayley and Schapiro 2017: 2.

19 See Smith 2001b: 237. Smith writes, "The roots of eclecticism and tolerance are sunk as deep into the soil of Tibetan tradition as those of sectarianism and bigotry."

med movement" and the analytic category the movement spawned rather than as their sole inventor.

1. Jamgon Kongtrul

We must first understand how *ris med* was being used at the time of Kongtrul's death in 1899 to establish a baseline from which to chart its 20th century transformations. Unsurprisingly, Kongtrul was likely to use *ris med* phrases with roughly the same semantic range as the authors from previous centuries whose works he devoted his life to preserving and anthologizing: to reference a lack of inhibition with respect to location ("everywhere"),[20] recipient ("everyone"),[21] subject (e.g. "the teachings and beings together"),[22] temporality ("all the time," "spontaneously"),[23] and amount ("boundless").[24] The term was used both adjectivally and adverbially (e.g. to describe the manner in which something might be given), and was applied most often to offerings, respect, and compassion, particularly the compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas who choose to remain in the world to benefit all beings rather than depart samsara.

But Kongtrul also used the term in more specialized contexts. Broadly speaking, there were four interwoven goals of Kongtrul's long religious career:

(1) Preserve and revive teaching lineages that he feared were on the cusp of extinction.

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[20] As in adverbial phrases like *rnam pa thams cad pa'i stong par ris med par 'char ba*. See one such usage in 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1999b: 414.

[21] In phrases like *phyogs dang ris med pa'i 'gro kun* and *sems can ris med pa*. See for instance 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 2002d: 935. For an adverbial sense in which one gives to all sentient beings indiscriminately, both in amount and recipient, see 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1999d: 139.

[22] As in the phrase *ris su ma chad pa'i bstan 'gro* or *ris med bstan 'gro*. See 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 2002a: 337.

[23] This usage often recurs in Great Perfection contexts to show that in the state of primordial play, no discursive thoughts arise and so there is no distinction between periods of practice and non-practice. See, for instance, 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1999e: 188. For a similar usage see 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1999a: 34. *Ris med* rarely means "spontaneously" in its own right but is often paired with other terms to describe the realization of the ground, which is instantaneous and devoid of conceptualization.

[24] As in phrases like *phyogs ris med pa'i snying rje*, *sbyin pa phyogs ris med par btang bar*, *ris med par byams dang snying rje sgoms*, *ris med du sbyin pa*, *sems can la phyogs ris med pa'i snying rje dang phan sems 'byung ngo*, *thugs rje phyogs ris med*, and *ris med mchod pa*. This last sense is used especially often in Great Perfection texts to describe offerings made to Samantabhadra. See for instance the dedication in 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1999f: 468.

(2) Preserve Khampa Buddhisms from the threat of Gelug and other hegemonies.
(3) Establish the "eight practice lineages" as a primary doxographical schema by which to organize and interpret the Buddhist teachings that had been transmitted into Tibet.
(4) Elevate Dzogchen practice and an other-emptiness metaphysics.

This last goal is worth underscoring; the importance of Dzogchen to Kongtrul's thought cannot be overstated. Marc-Henri Deroche, to whom all scholars of *ris med* owe a great debt, has shown in a seminal paper that the semantic range of *ris med* in early Tibetan sources like the Kagyur (*Bka' 'gyur*) and Tengyur (*Bstan 'gyur*) vastly exceeds the sense of "nonsectarianism" captured by Smith, especially in Dzogchen contexts.[25] Deroche shows that in translations of early Mahayana literature, *ris med* was used synonymously with *phyogs med*, which was itself used to translate the Sanskrit *apakṣapāta*, which describes the manner in which bodhisattvas bestow compassion impartially toward all beings. Deroche translates *ris* as "bias" in many of these early works, for instance in a Ḍākinītantra in the Kagyur that includes the following lines:

> This view without bias (*phyogs ris med*)
> See it with the primordial mind![26]

The tantra elaborates: "Know the supreme view without bias (*phyogs ris med*) to be like space!" Deroche expounds, "The example is like space, which is all-pervading, neutral, equal, or isotropic."[27] The practitioner should be similarly equanimous in striving to realize this isotropic view. Deroche concludes his tour through early canonical literature by summarizing that the terms

> *phyogs/ris med*:
> (1) do not deal with the level of religious tolerance;
> (2) render a variety of Sanskrit terms;
> (3) apply as epithets to different soteriological ideas;
> (4) and through the negation of bias express non-dual, transcendental or 'universal' perspectives.[28]

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[25] Deroche 2018.
[26] Ibid., 141. Deroche is quoting the Ḍākinīsarvacittadvayācintyajñānavajra–vārāhitantra.
[27] Ibid., 141.
[28] Ibid., 143.

Although *ris med* acquired a much wider breadth of signification over the ensuing centuries, the four senses of *ris med* given above also describe Kongtrul's use of the term, particularly the fourth, which Kongtrul commonly employs in Dzogchen contexts. Almost all scholars of Kongtrul, including Deroche, the Kalu Rinpoche translation team that translated the *Treasury of Knowledge* in its entirety,[29] Douglas Duckworth,[30] myself,[31] and Alexander Gardner in his generational study of Kongtrul,[32] agree that Kongtrul posits a hierarchical doxographical system that culminates in Dzogchen in many of his writings. To provide one prominent example, Kongtrul's best-known work, *The Treasury of Knowledge*, is often described as an "encyclopedia,"[33] but it is additionally a doxography that culminates in Dzogchen practices. In the first seven books of the *Treasury*, Kongtrul provides a basic overview of fundamental Buddhist concepts, including the Buddhist cosmos, the life of the Buddha, the spread of the dharma, and the origin of the eight chariots. Book Eight provides a chronological survey of esoteric meditative practices, beginning with the Lesser and Greater Vehicles before proceeding to individually explicate each of the eight chariots. In the last two books, Kongtrul treats "the paths and results of these trainings, with Great Perfection being presented last, as the final, and the highest, attainment."[34] As Gardner concludes,

> Not only does the entire work conclude with a discussion of the Great Perfection completion stage of tantric practice, but also most books likewise conclude with a discussion of it. Great Perfection, we are to understand, is the highest teaching, the final development of the Buddhist doctrine and the most effective path to liberation for those with the capacity to pursue it.[35]

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29 Guarisco and McLeod 2005: 50.

30 See Duckworth 2014. He writes on 340, "Despite the shared aims among the traditions that came to be called the 'nonsectarian movement,' we clearly find hierarchies of philosophical views as well as strategies of marginalization laid out to show the superiority of one tradition over another."

31 Taylor 2021: 216–217.

32 See Gardner 2019.

33 Smith was influential in this characterization. See, for instance, Smith 2001a: 211, where he describes the *Treasury of Knowledge* as "the finest flower of the Tibetan encyclopedic tradition." Ngawang Zangpo qualifies this characterization in Zangpo 2010: 18.

34 Gardner 2019: 222.

35 Ibid., 223.

Of course, not everyone possesses the capacity to pursue the Great Perfection, hence the need for complimentary paths. But Kongtrul often suggests that the path to enlightenment runs through the Great Perfection, which is in some sense the final path along the ridge to the summit rather than one of eight equal paths that runs alongside.

Another of Kongtrul's popularizations, if not innovations, in his use of *ris med* was his application of the term to the "eight chariots of accomplishment," or "eight great lineages of practices." Indeed, Kongtrul rarely referenced what have become known as the four schools or orders of Tibetan Buddhism, but instead employed this eightfold schema for organizing the Buddhist teachings that dates to Sherab Ozer (Shes rab 'od zer, 1518–84): (1) Nyingma (2) Kadampa (*Bka' gdams pa*) (3) Sakya Lamdre (*Lam 'bras*) (4) Marpa Kagyu (5) Shangpa Kagyu (6) Pacification (*Zhi byed*) (7) the Six Yogas (*Sbyor drug*) and (8) the Approach and Accomplishment (*O rgyan bsnyen grub*).[36] Kongtrul was the foremost popularizer of the eight chariots, using the organizing schema ubiquitously in his works, including to structure his magnum opus *The Treasury of Knowledge, The Treasury of Precious Instructions* (*Gdams ngag mdzod*), and his history of how the dharma arose and came to Tibet from India, *The Necklace of Clear Understanding* (*Ris med chos kyi 'byung gnas mdo tsam smos pa blo gsal mgrin pa'i mdzes rgyan*).[37] Moreover, Kongtrul includes the eight chariots in the title of his own autobiography (*Phyogs med ris med kyi bstan pa la 'dun shing dge sbyong gi gzugs brnyan 'chang ba blo gros mtha' yas kyi sde'i byung ba brjod pa nor bu sna tshogs mdog can*), showing the importance of the chariots to his preservation project,[38] and frequently mentions the chariots in his letters and in addresses to ordinary monks and nuns at Pelpung, showing it was not purely a scholastic category.[39] The *Necklace* and the eight lineages more generally might initially seem to represent a promising source for locating a turning point in *ris med*'s transformation. After all, as Gardner has observed, this history of the dharma is one of only two texts written by Kongtrul to include a *ris*

[36] For more on the origin of the eight lineages as a doxographical schema and Kongtrul's adoption of it, see Deroche 2009.

[37] Gardner 2019: 254 observes that the text is difficult to date, as we do not know when Kongtrul wrote it or who commissioned it. The references to the Fourteenth Karmapa and Ninth Situ (but not the Fifteenth and Tenth, respectively) lead me to believe that it was not written any later than 1853, the year of the Ninth Situ's death. The *Ris med chos 'byung* is translated in its entirety in Gardner's dissertation, see Gardner 2006: 219–243.

[38] See 'Jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 1973.

[39] For an instance in his letters, see 'Jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 2002c: 283. See also his address to the monks at Tupten Chökhorling Monastery (Thub bstan chos 'khor gling): 'Jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 2002b, especially 893.

med compound in its title, the other being his autobiography.[40] And yet, apart from the title, *ris med* is not used in the text at all, not even to describe the relationship between the eight chariots. Although Kongtrul occasionally stumbles into usages coincidentally similar to those in the 20th century, as in his definition of a "nonsectarian disciple" as one who has "freedom from bias toward one's own spiritual tradition and a dislike of others' traditions,"[41] he is far more likely to use *ris med* to describe meditative states than tolerance in doctrine or practice.

Kongtrul's infrequent use of *ris med* despite its later association with his religious career prompts the question: Did Kongtrul himself actively theorize the concept or is his association with *ris med* a later attribution?

There is some evidence that the term *ris med* was already associated with Kongtrul by the time of his death in 1899. Gardner shows that the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, for instance, mourned Kongtrul's passing by memorializing him as "a learned and accomplished saint whose being is endowed with the intent of the teachings without sectarian bias (*ris med*), who led beings to clarity and veneration of the Buddha," signaling that the phrase was associated with Kongtrul in his own lifetime.[42] If this is a coincidence, it is a telling one. Similarly, Kongtrul's disciple Nesar Tashi Chopel (Gnas gsar bkra shis chos 'phel, b. 19th century) who penned a brief account of the funerary ceremonies just after Kongtrul's death in 1899, similarly described him as a *ris med* master, and, as we will see below, the phrase became associated with Kongtrul long before Smith's essay.[43] Moreover, there is at least some evidence that Kongtrul personally encouraged this association. His most common official signature was, "Yonten Gyatso Lodro Thaye, who has complete faith in the *ris med* teachings."[44]

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[40] It is clear from his notes that Smith was thinking along similar lines. He subcategorized Kongtrul's *Necklace* under the heading "Ris med – History" in his so-called "Green Books," a series of Tibetan texts that Smith transliterated and annotated in some detail. See Smith N.d.: 101. Elsewhere, Smith identifies a poem by Do Khyentse (Mdo mkhyen brtse, 1800–1866) as a "Visionary Poem of Mdo Mkhyen-brtse on *Ris Med*." See Smith 1971–1973: 57. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer who recommended consulting Smith's Green Books. For Kongtrul's autobiography, see 'Jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 1973 and 2002c. For Richard Barron's excellent translation of the autobiography into English, see 'Jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 2003.

[41] 'Jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 1998: 54. For the Tibetan original see 'Jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 2013: 553.

[42] Quoted in Gardner 2019: 344.

[43] Tashi Chopel describes him this way throughout, but see for instance Gnas gsar bkra shis chos 'phel 2002: 750.

[44] In the quotation I have translated *ris med kyi bstan pa la mi phyed dad pa thob pa yon tan rgya mtsho blo gros mtha' yas pa*; another common formulation was *ris med rgyal*

And yet, it does not seem that Kongtrul elevated *ris med* into one of his primary analytic categories, as he did for the eight chariots or as the Dalai Lama would do with *ris med* seventy years later. There is, of course, no way to demonstrate this negative conclusively, but it represents the balance of extensive engagement with Kongtrul's voluminous corpus. When one reads through the relevant documents through the eyes of a 19th- or early 20th century reader, *ris med* is of course only one of many adjectives in passages filled with laudations extolling Kongtrul, one that happens to stand out to contemporary readers because of the term's later prominence. If there had been an intense piety movement in 20th century Tibetan Buddhist communities, then we might remember Kongtrul's valedictions as much for his "unshakeable devotion" (*mi phyed dad pa thob pa*) as for his *ris med*. Similarly, in Kongtrul's encyclopedic works, particularly the *Treasury of Knowledge*, there is nothing he loves more than etymologizing and defining key terms, but we see no such *ces, zhes bya,* or even *ni* applied to *ris med*, or any other indication that Kongtrul considered it especially significant beyond the occasional poetic usage. In short, there is little in Kongtrul's corpus indicating that he actively theorized *ris med* as a concept.

To reiterate, this is not to say that Kongtrul did not innovate upon the usages of *ris med* that he inherited; he undoubtedly did, particularly in his application of the compound to the eight chariots doxography that perhaps prefigured its eventual usage in exile. But there is little evidence that Kongtrul organized these activities under a *ris med* rubric. If a later scholar were to tell Kongtrul that he had become known as the founder of a so-called *ris med* movement, if the reader will permit a moment of speculation, my impression is that he would have been surprised, though perhaps not displeased, to hear his life characterized as such.

In any case, at the time of Kongtrul's death, we see that *ris med* is lightly associated with him and his companions, is used mostly in Dzogchen soteriological contexts, and refers to the eight chariots. How then do we end up with a term that references mostly the four schools, has a quasi-political association with doctrinal nondiscrimination, and

ba'i bstan dang bstan 'dzin la gus pa thob pa. There are a number of instances of these usages in Kongtrul's works as both were common signatures. See, for instance, the colophon in 'Jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 1999g: 43. Those inclined to read Kongtrul hierarchically might note that he often used this signature in Shangpa Kagyu works, an identity that he seized to create distance between himself and the Karma Kagyu milieu in which he operated, and in commentaries on Kadampa works, which were synonymous with the Gelug school occupying Derge as Kongtrul was writing. See, for instance, 'Jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 1999c: 615.

no direct connection to Dzogchen? That is what the rest of this essay will seek to answer.

2. *Mipham Gyatso*

Although Smith's *ris med* movement would become associated primarily with Kongtrul, Smith also cited Mipham Gyatso as a key *ris med* figure in his early articles on the subject. Smith calls Patrul Rinpoche (Dpal sprul rin po che, 1808–1887) a "great teacher of the nonsectarian movement," and positions Mipham as his student, one who was also "one of the most talented figures of the nonsectarian movement" in his own right.[45] The characterization is intuitive: Mipham studied under Kongtrul, albeit briefly, and, like Kongtrul, sought to strengthen Nyingma and Kagyu institutions against encroaching Gelug hegemony.

Douglas Duckworth has argued that Mipham was attempting to resist Gelug hegemony on Gelug terms, by building Nyingma institutions and showing the possibility of systematizing Nyingma philosophy, both innovations for the comparatively decentralized Nyingma school.[46] Mipham, like Kongtrul, saw Dzogchen as the apex of Nyingma practice and his use of *ris med* unsurprisingly tracks closely with that of Kongtrul and Longchenpa. He primarily uses the term in discussions of Samantabhadra and Dzogchen meditative states, for instance in the following passage: "The all-ground consciousness is the holder of all the seeds implanted by the aggregates, elements, and sources. It is the basis for cognitive acts and, without bias, it is merely cognizant and conscious."[47] This translation uses "without bias" to translate *ris su ma chad pa*, and yet, we can see even in this brief passage that that is not quite the sense unless "bias" is conceived very broadly. Here it is not that the all-ground consciousness is not biased in the sense of not favoring one school or practice over another; rather, it is conscious but does not discriminate among conceptual objects: such discrimination is the task of the cognitive acts for which it is a basis. In this particular context, a translation like "without discriminating" might be closer to the mark.

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[45] Smith 2001c: 230–231. Karma Phuntsho also reads Mipham as an active participant in the *ris med* movement despite his Nyingma commitments. See Phuntsho 2005: 51–54.

[46] See Duckworth 2016, throughout, but especially 49–51. Markus Viehbeck notes that, "The term *ris med* appears nine times in Dpa' ris rab gsal's three letters to Mi pham, albeit never to designate a group of political opponents, but almost always in its most inclusive sense, meaning 'all, without distinction, without bias.'" See Viehbeck 2011: 297.

[47] Mi pham rgya mtsho 1997: 33–34.

Although he is more likely to use *ris med* phrases in meditative contexts, Mipham occasionally uses the term to reference the Buddhist community writ large, though never, to my knowledge, to describe the four schools. For instance, in one of his polemics against Pari Lobzang Rabsal (Dpa' ris blo bzang rab gsal, 1840–1912), Mipham uses *grub mtha' ris med kyi dge 'dun grangs tshang* to reference the entire sangha. Later in the same text he uses *ris med rgyal pa'i bstan pa dar ba* to reference the entire religion of Buddhism over and against those of the "barbarians (*kla klo*)" in his desire that the Buddhist teachings generally might spread. And yet, Mipham does not rely extensively on the four schools or eight chariots, though he was familiar with both schemas.

There are couple of minor novelties in Mipham's usage of *ris med*. For one, he is more likely to nominalize the term than Kongtrul and others were, though he was certainly not the first. He also commonly employs the nominalizer that would become one of Dezhung Rinpoche's favorite descriptors, "the nondiscriminatory holders of the teachings (*ris med bstan 'dzin tshogs rnams*)." And yet, on balance Mipham seems to use *ris med* with roughly the same range and frequency as Kongtrul. Mipham does not employ the four schools as his primary doxography, nor does he use the term primarily to signify doctrinal nondiscrimination, but rather states of nonconceptual esoteric meditation. It seems safe to say that Smith did not find his "*ris med* movement" in Mipham's writings.

3. Dezhung Rinpoche

Dezhung Rinpoche represents perhaps the most obvious potential bridge between Kongtrul's and Smith's respective usages of *ris med*. Although he was a Sakyapa, Dezhung Rinpoche studied widely in many traditions, and was a close friend of Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro ('Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse chos kyi blo gros, 1893–1959), who was recognized as a rebirth of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo by Kongtrul himself. Dezhung Rinpoche, alongside Dilgo Khyentse, Kalu Rinpoche, and Chogyam Trungpa, was part of an influential generation of lamas who carried the dharma from Tibet to Tibetan exile communities to America, and hence were influential in both Tibetan and Anglophone Vajrayana Buddhist discourses. Most relevantly, Smith studied with Dezhung Rinpoche in Seattle throughout the 1960s, and opens his influential essay by saying that he first learned about the *ris med* movement from the great teacher. We should of course take Smith at his word. But it remains ambiguous if Smith meant that in his article he was articulating Dezhung Rinpoche's

understanding of *ris med* or if he was merely inspired to learn more about Jamgon Kongtrul and Khyentse Wangpo after first hearing about them from Dezhung Rinpoche.

For readers who believe it is likely that Dezhung Rinpoche was teaching the same content in the 1960s that he was in the 1980s, then he is undoubtedly among the most important figures in shaping the contemporary conception of *ris med*. For instance, in his 1983 dharma talk "Buddhism Without Sectarianism," he implores his listeners to "Recognize and avoid this danger: it is called 'narrow-mindedness'. It manifests in sangha circles in the form of sectarianism: an attitude of partiality, a tendency to form deluded attachments to one's own order and to reject other schools of Buddhism as inferior."[48] Dezhung Rinpoche proceeds to show how each of the four schools—and, significantly, not the eight chariots—is susceptible to its own form of pride, and prescribes that each of the four follow the example of Kongtrul, a *ris med* teacher whose example should serve as a model for all to overcome their sectarian tendencies.

Nor is "Buddhism Without Sectarianism" the only later work in which Dezhung Rinpoche associates *ris med* with Kongtrul and his confidants, continuing a trend that, as Gardner has shown, began in Kongtrul's own lifetime. For instance, in his *Great Tea Offering* (*Ja mchod chen mo*), Dezhung Rinpoche runs through a litany of historical figures to whom he wishes to pay homage, dating all the way back to the Buddha and Guru Rinpoche, but only Kongtrul and Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro are described as *ris med*.[49] Throughout his writings, Dezhung Rinpoche consistently depicts the relationship of Kongtrul, Khyentse Wangpo, and Chokgyur Lingpa as being karmically destined and a model for future practitioners insofar as the teachers worked together to preserve the dharma, indicating something broadly like a "movement." Moreover, Dezhung Rinpoche continues this narrative through the careers of Mipham and Jamyang Chokyi Lodro, tracing an indirect lineage between the generations of masters. Significantly, Dezhung Rinpoche describes this lineage as *ris med* on occasion, as in the example above, though he does not explicitly deem it a "*ris med* movement."

To reiterate, the passages indicated above postdate Smith's article, but, assuming that Dezhung Rinpoche was saying something similar in the 1960s, it seems conceivable that he might have described Kongtrul and these other early teachers as being part of some sort of *ris med* movement during teachings or in conversation. It is theoretically possible that Dezhung Rinpoche was not teaching *ris med*

[48] Sde gzhung rin po che 2003: 488.
[49] See Sde gzhung rin po che 2005b: 671.

in exactly this way in the 1960s, mentioned the concept offhand to Smith, who codified it into a movement, and then that understanding was back-translated into Tibetan where it became operative and ultimately influenced Dezhung Rinpoche, in a rapid pizza-effect. I personally consider it more likely that Dezhung Rinpoche's teachings in the early 1980s correspond roughly to his teachings in the mid 1960s. Nevertheless, for the rest of this essay I will assume a skeptical reader who might argue that Smith influenced Dezhung Rinpoche rather than the other way around. However, even in this understanding, Dezhung Rinpoche still represents a key link in the *ris med* genealogy. If we confine ourselves exclusively to works written prior to Smith's article in 1969, there are still important continuities and transformations between Dezhung Rinpoche's and Kongtrul's respective usages of *ris med*.

In his pre-1969 writings and teachings, Dezhung Rinpoche uses *ris med* in all of the mundane senses described in previous sections, e.g. for the teachings to spread everywhere indiscriminately. Like Kongtrul and Mipham and others, he also uses it to describe states of conceptual nondiscrimination in esoteric meditation, as in *A Light for the Path to Liberation*, where he writes,

> During emptiness, one experiences naked clarity, absorbed in a state that transcends concepts and defies expression. This state of emptiness is beyond grasping, its luminosity unable to be impeded by the lucid mind, beyond extremes and discrimination (*mtha' bral ris med*).[50]

Unsurprisingly, Dezhung Rinpoche is less likely to describe specifically Dzogchen states of meditation as *ris med*, as befits his Sakya heritage.

Many of Dezhung Rinpoche's extant works that were written before Smith's article also use *ris med* to describe the four schools rather than the eight chariots of practice. For instance, in a history of the Sakya monasteries in Khams that Dezhung Rinpoche composed in 1965, he twice uses the fourfold scheme *sa dge dkar rnying*, the first time to describe a series of monasteries, and the second time to describe the lineage-holders of the four schools and their teachings (*sa dge dkar*

[50] Sde gzhung rin po che 2005d: 146. The text was written in the early 1970s; I use it here merely to show that Dezhung Rinpoche sometimes used the term in meditative contexts, not to show causal influence on Smith. For a further discussion of the text, see Jackson 2003: 560. Jackson says that Richard Barron translated the text under the title *A Light for the Path to Liberation: A Way to Cultivate a Profound Absorption of Tranquil Abiding and Penetrative Insight*, though he did not publish it.

rnying ris med bstan dang bstan 'dzin kun la), an important step away from Kongtrul's doxography of the eight chariots.[51] This formulation of *sa dge bka' rnying ris med* that was historically more popular among the Dalai Lamas and Gelugpas but became increasingly common in contemporary Tibetophone dharmic discourses among the other schools is already approximated here in Dezhung Rinpoche's writings in 1965.

Dezhung Rinpoche continues to associate *ris med* with Kongtrul and Khyentse Wangpo, but unmoors the term from Dzogchen and the eight chariots, such that it begins to drift toward doctrinal nondiscrimination and the four schools. But another continuity between Kongtrul and Dezhung Rinpoche is that *ris med* does not seem to have been a central analytic concept for either teacher; it is possible that Smith uses the phrase more often in his article than Dezhung Rinpoche does in his entire corpus. In one sense, Dezhung Rinpoche seems to represent a key link in the *ris med* transmission, insofar as he acquainted Smith with the importance of the term and its association with Kongtrul. But there is nothing that indicates that he himself was theorizing the term beyond its previous usage as a descriptor. A skeptical historian can imagine Dezhung Rinpoche telling Smith about the *ris med* masters of yore and Smith interpreting that as a movement or elevating it to one, but the term does not recur commonly throughout his writings unless one actively seeks it out.

4. Dilgo Khyentse

Dilgo Khyentse has served as a peripheral figure in the discussions of *ris med* above, but in this section I will suggest that he might well have been the most important theorist and popularizer of *ris med* in Tibetophone discourses between Kongtrul and Smith. Previous scholarship has already shown that Dilgo Khyentse was a strong proponent of *ris med* and explicitly used the term in his own teaching.

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[51] Sde gzhung rin po che 2005a: 725 and 736. The relevant passage on 736 reads, *sa dge dkar rnying ris med bstan dang bstan 'dzin kun la dag snang dang/ zhabs tog mchod 'bul/*. Although it is likely that *dkar* is a mistaken transcription of the more common *bka'*, the manuscript clearly reads *dkar*. For a similar usage that postdates Smith's article, see also Sde gzhung rin po che 2005c. In this brief autobiography, Dezhung Rinpoche uses *ris med* to describe teachers who draw from a variety of different intellectual traditions, for instance Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro and Khunu Lama (Khu nu bla ma, 1894-1977), and says that he studied with over 40 teachers from across the four schools, much as the term is commonly used today. Dezhung Rinpoche lists a long group of teachers and describes them on 620 as *sa dge bka' rnying grub mtha' ris med kyi bla ma dge ba'i bshes gnyen bzhi bcu tsam las/ mdo sngags rig gnas kyi chos du ma zhus/*

For instance, Lauran Hartley describes Dilgo Khyentse as distinguishing two forms of *ris med*, one for highly realized teachers who had the capacity to receive and practice teachings from across the gamut of Buddhist traditions, and one for ordinary beings who should follow a programmed path but nevertheless show respect for Buddhist schools and traditions other than their own.[52] This explicit theorization of the term is precisely what is present in Smith and absent in Kongtrul. The example that Hartley provides comes from 1987, well after *ris med*'s ascension, but I hope to show in this section that similar usages are found in Dilgo Khyentse's earlier writings as well, and that *ris med* had already acquired meanings and usages similar to Smith's prior to his popularization of the term.

Dilgo Khyentse was famously identified and blessed by Mipham Gyatso as an infant, and Dilgo Khyentse would fulfill his charge by becoming one of the most important Nyingma institutionalists of the 20th century, publishing an important edition of the *Hundred-thousand Nyingma Tantras*,[53] editions of Mipham's writings, and numerous commentaries on Longchenpa's Dzogchen teachings.[54] As might be expected of one eventually known as a *ris med* exemplar, Dilgo Khyentse was also famous for the breadth of his learning, receiving teachings from many schools. For instance, Dilgo Kheyntse also studied the works of Kongtrul closely and sometimes gave commentaries on the *Treasury of Knowledge*, including to Kalu Rinpoche's translation team that translated the entire work into English.[55] Like Dezhung Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse fled Kham for exile in the early 1960s, but, unlike Dezhung Rinpoche, did not reach America until 1975, spending most of his time in Bhutan, Nepal, and India instead. Most of the works I examine below were written during this period. Smith studied with Dilgo Khyentse during his forays to Asia in the 1960s,[56] and, even when Smith was in America, Dezhung Rinpoche would consult Dilgo Khyentse if Smith posed a question that Dezhung Rinpoche did not feel confident answering.[57]

Dilgo Khyentse used the term *ris med* and its variants with far greater frequency than every other Tibetan master mentioned in this article (including Kongtrul) across his entire corpus, even in his

52 See Hartley 1997: 86. Hartley in turn cites Rigzin and Russel 1987: 14.
53 This version is commonly known as the "Gting skyes edition." See An., *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum* (36 volumes) 1973–1975.
54 See, for instance, Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1999.
55 Guarisco and McLeod 2008: 32.
56 Schaeffer 2001: 2. See also Yachin and Fischman 2022: 112–113.
57 See Jackson 2003: 302.

revealed termas and other writings still extant from his time in Tibet.[58] It is clear that *ris med* was not a concept he first encountered abroad. Many of these usages followed the mundane usages indicated above. For instance, in *The Quintessence of the Longevity Lotus* (*Pad+ma tshe yi snying thig*), we see *ris med* being used in the sense of "alike," for instance in the case of showing compassion or reverence toward "friends and enemies alike (*dgra dang gnyen du phyogs ris med*),"[59] "the teachings and transmigrators alike (*ris med bstan 'gro*),"[60] "the old and new teachings alike (*gsar rnying ris su ma chad pa*),"[61] and "toward oneself and others alike (*rang gzhan phyogs ris med gnas shog*)."[62] Other times, Dilgo Khyentse followed Kongtrul and ancient Tibetan texts in using *ris med* to describe esoteric states of meditation, including in the prominent *rang snang ris med* usage that occurs so often in Dzogchen contexts,[63] and, in *The Quintessence of the Self-Born Lotus*, generating the supreme mind that is free of *phyogs* and *ris* (*phyogs ris bral ba'i sems mchog bskyed*).[64]

However, there were also important innovations in Dilgo Khyentse's use of *ris med*. Dilgo Khyentse describes Jamyang Chokyi Lodro and his disciples as *ris med* with special frequency, a usage that we have already seen in Dezhung Rinpoche, but it seems likely that the latter was following Dilgo Khyentse's lead given the relative gap in frequency of the term in each of their writings.[65] Indeed, this usage is somewhat curious given that, although the religious career of Jamyang Chokyi Lodro was broadly associated with Kongtrul and Khyentse by both himself and his disciples, we do not see a wide semantic expansion of *ris med* or its explicit theorization in Chokyi Lodro's own writings. Indeed, some of Chokyi Lodro's most famous teachings that have become well-known exemplars of the *ris med* orientation—for instance, *A Sun to Banish the Darkness of Wrong Views*,[66]

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58 The question of terma authorship is of course a fraught one. Here I merely wish to show that Dilgo Khyentse was already familiar with an expansive conception of *ris med* before he ever set foot in exile.

59 See, for instance, Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994f: 145b.

60 See Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994a: 240a.

61 Ibid., 182b.

62 Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994d: 262b.

63 This usage is extremely common, but see, for instance, Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994c: 276.

64 Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994g: 166a.

65 See, for instance, Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994b: 258.

66 All three of these texts have been translated by Adam Pearcey, who has undertaken the ambitious project to translate the entire corpus of Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro into English, which will be an enormous scholarly contribution. For the Tibetan original see 'Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros 2012a: 389–393. For the English translation see 'Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros 2019.

Aspiration for the Spread of the Teachings of the Eight Great Chariots,[67] and *Opening the Door of Dharma: A Brief Discourse on the Essence of All Vehicles*[68]—do not mention the term *ris med* at all, even as they elaborate on the foundation that Kongtrul had laid. For instance, Chokyi Lodro observes in *Opening the Door of Dharma* that "In the Noble Land there was no distinction between New and Old," and so Tibetans too should cease fighting over the authenticity of the respective transmissions.[69] Similarly, in a passage that might serve as a representative articulation of one contemporary understanding of *ris med*, he argues that:

> There are thus a great many systems of Dharma teaching in Tibet,
> But aside from their nominal variations,
> There is really no significant difference between them—
> All share the crucial point of seeking ultimate awakening.[70]

In this passage, the "many systems" is used in reference to the "four schools" of Vajrayana Buddhism, but he often makes the same point with respect to the eight chariots employed by Kongtrul, as in the titular work mentioned above. Chokyi Lodro also sometimes uses the term to describe the states of nonconceptual meditation favored by Kongtrul. In *The Sun to Banish the Darkness of Wrong Views*, Chokyi Lodro writes:

> Clinging to one's own view as paramount
> Is a defilement, to be discarded through meditation;
> Whereas possession of the authentic view
> Naturally releases the knots of attachment and aversion
> And frees from the constraining cage of conceptual elaboration.[71]

The passages above and Chokyi Lodro's larger corpus broadly reflect a constellation of values that would later be associated with the so-called *ris med* movement, including a concern for the preservation of dying lineages, an emphasis on the supposedly pre-sectarian Buddhism of India, and a belief that many different Buddhist paths

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67 For the Tibetan see 'Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros 2012b: 253–255. For Pearcey's English translation see 'Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros 2020a.

68 For the Tibetan see 'Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros 2012c: 49–64. For Pearcey's English translation see 'Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros 2020b.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 'Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros 2019.

have soteriological benefits. Indeed, it is telling that Adam Pearcey has tagged each of these translations as belonging to the "nonsectarianism" subheading in *Lotsawa House*, his wonderful translation repository. Moreover, in his translation of *Opening the Door of Dharma*, Pearcey has added a subheading entitled "Nonsectarianism" not present in the original Tibetan to help organize the translation. Nor was he wrong to do so; Jamyang Chokyi Lodro's message corresponds almost exactly to contemporary usages of *ris med*, and the editorial guidance provided by such headings is indispensable to the translation process. But it is worth emphasizing that none of these texts or passages mention *ris med* or any of its variations, even as Dilgo Khyentse would come to eulogize Chokyi Lodro as a *ris med* master. Chokyi Lodro uses the term with roughly the same frequency and semantic range as Kongtrul, showing that even though the idea of a "movement" centered on Kongtrul and Khyentse Wangpo had begun to emerge, *ris med* itself still had yet to acquire its post-Smith signification of meaning.

And yet, Dilgo Khyentse incessantly describes Jamyang Chokyi Lodro as *ris med*, showing that even though the term did not originate with Jamyang Chokyi Lodro, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche nevertheless found it a useful descriptor to encapsulate Chokyi Lodro's long career. Although Dilgo Khyentse uses *ris med* commonly throughout his writings, far more commonly than any of the thinkers given above, here I will focus on his usages in his life of Chokyi Lodro, henceforth the *Life*, for three reasons: First, Dilgo Khyentse commonly used the term to describe his teacher, so it recurs with special frequency. Second, the text was written in the early 1960s, which means it predates Smith's article but coincides with roughly the period when Smith would have been studying under Dezhung Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse.[72] Third, the biography has already been ably translated into English by Drubgyud Tenzin Rinpoche and Khenpo Sonam Phuntsok, which allowed me to consult their readings of difficult passages.[73]

Unlike for the thinkers described above, including Kongtrul, *ris med* is a common term for Dilgo Khyentse in the *Life*. Indeed, the challenge in his case was not finding usages of *ris med*, but rather deciding which to use as representative examples. There are perhaps four dimensions of Dilgo Khyentse's use of *ris med* that are worth underscoring in light of Smith's eventual usage of the term.

First, Dilgo Khyentse often uses *ris med* phrases in passages describing the accomplishments of Jamgon Kongtrul and Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, as well as Mipham Gyatso and Chokyi Lodro. (It

[72] Pearcey 2017: xv.
[73] Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 2017. For the Tibetan see Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994h.

is worth remarking in a parenthetical that Chokgyur Lingpa is conspicuously absent.) Indeed, Dilgo Khyentse seems to have understood Chokyi Lodro, and thereby himself, as inheriting the mission and orientation of these 19th century luminaries. Even given that Chokyi Lodro was identified as a rebirth of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, a disproportionate number of pages in the *Life* are devoted to Kongtrul and Khyentse. Indeed, passages grouping these teachers together and describing them as *ris med* can be found in Dilgo Khyentse's termas revealed in Tibet,[74] and are foregrounded in the title of the *Life*, where Chokyi Lodro is described as one who has "raised the victory banner of the *ris med* teachings (*ris med bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan*)." The *Life* is filled with descriptions of the unity of Kongtrul and Khyentse Wangpo, saying of their relationship: "These two great masters were both student and teacher to one another. Their minds merged inseparably, and their aspirations and activities were as one."[75] If this is indeed what Dilgo Khyentse was orally teaching in the 1960s, it is easy to see how Smith might have gotten the impression of a "movement."

Second and third, the *Life* provides two differing, perhaps complimentary conceptions of *ris med*. The distinction Hartley references between one *ris med* for ordinary beings and one for masters is already being drawn as early as the *Life* of 1965. Dilgo Khyentse suggests that ordinary practitioners should follow a single religious path but nevertheless respect others running parallel alongside. Masters, by contrast, can receive teachings from each of the different traditions, and Dilgo Khyentse praises Kongtrul, Khyentse, and Chokyi Lodro for widely receiving teachings. We see both of these themes illustrated in the following didactic story, in which—significantly—a Gelug master overcomes his sectarian prejudices to receive Nyingma teachings:

> 'As a follower of the Gelug tradition,' [Lobsang Tenzin Gyatso from Sido Monastery] said, 'when I first began my studies, my attitude was sectarian. Now, having heard teachings from all traditions and having understood the essential points, I realize there is no fault greater than having prejudices about different traditions, imagining some are good and others bad. I now follow the example of the early Kadampa masters and consider that no teaching contradicts any other. I will now receive

[74] See Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994e: 59a.

[75] For the Tibetan, see Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994h: 15b. For the English see Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 2017: 281. See also similar descriptions in Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994h: 12b–13a and the ensuing passage on 15b.

> Nyingma teachings from you in order to make a connection with them.'[76]

The *Life* lauds Kongtrul, Khyentse, Mipham, and Chokyi Lodro for receiving teachings from diverse schools on multiple occasions. For instance, Khyentse Wangpo vows with his last words to be reborn in order to "benefit all lineages of the Buddha's teachings."[77] Chokyi Lodro, Khyentse Wangpo's rebirth, makes good on this vow, and, according to Dilgo Khyentse, does not exhibit sectarian discrimination and furthermore "received profound teachings from all lineages," and provided material support to each of their institutions.[78]

Fourth, it is worth emphasizing that even though Dilgo Khyentse uses a wide variety of doxographical schemes and acknowledges that the luminaries he is studying did likewise, the so-called "four schools" is certainly one of them, and perhaps even the most prominent. The "four schools" are not fixed, and occasionally Jonang and Shalu are included among them, but the repeated presence of the Nyingma, Sakya, Gelug, and Kagyu schools as representing the entirety of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition indicates that the doxography was not exclusively or even primarily an invention of Western or Chinese scholars.[79]

In short, Dilgo Khyentse uses the term *ris med* in much the same way that Smith and eventually broader Tibetan society would come to use it: as referencing doctrinal nondiscrimination among the four schools in a manner that sometimes borders on syncretism. Moreover,

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[76] For the Tibetan original see ibid.: 25a-25b. For the English translation see Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 2017: 296. Brackets mine. For a similar passage, see Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994h: 40a–40b. The passage reads in translation: "The authentic teachings are like the purest and most refined gold. They were established by the great founders who attained all the sublime bhumis and successive learned and accomplished lineage holders who examined the teachings using three kinds of valid cognition, actualized signs of having accomplished the path, and attained supreme realization through practice and meditation. To try to examine these pure teachings using just an ordinary, discursive mind can only result in the accomplishment of utter ruin! Therefore, it is best to put all your energy into establishing an absolute certainty in the view and in the philosophical tenets of the tradition you have entered, and to consider that your practice is the quintessence of all teachings. At the same time, it is crucial that you abandon all negative, sectarian attitudes about other schools and, by perceiving them purely, train yourself to appreciate them. Not only that, if you can perceive the commentaries to the sutras and tantras purely, a close reading will show you that when understood in context, each teaching method and interpretation has its own unique characteristics." Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 2017: 314.

[77] For the Tibetan original see Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994h: 22a. For the English translation see Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 2017: 293. Brackets mine.

[78] See, for instance, Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994h: 32a, 44b, and 76b.

[79] See, for instance, ibid.: 114b and 134a–134b.

Dilgo Khyentse located this spirit of nondiscrimination as being especially prominent in the Buddhism practiced and taught by nineteenth and early-20th century Khampa masters, especially Jamgon Kongtrul, Khyentse Wangpo, and Jamgon Chokyi Lodro. Indeed, the idea of a *ris med* lineage—one might dare say "movement"—is crucial to Chokyi Lodro's understanding of the concept. I will close the section by quoting a passage of Chokyi Lodro's autobiography that Dilgo Khyentse felt was significant enough to quote at length in the *Life*. Chokyi Lodro says of Khyentse Wangpo:

> He gave teachings that suited each individual's capacity, and all the schools—Sakya, Gelug, Kagyü, and Nyingma—considered him to be one of their own lineage teachers. Although I lack the qualities of my predecessor, I look upon each of the eight great chariots of the Land of Snows with the purest perception. Unstained by the obscurations of wrong view, I have abandoned prejudice and the denigration of all traditions. I have endeavored, with great perseverance, to receive all the empowerments, explanations, pith instructions, and tantric oral transmissions for which lineages still exist and aspire to receive even more. Wishing, with the purest of intentions to preserve the teachings, in the spirit of Rimé, everything I receive, I also teach; I have also abandoned criticism, jealousy, and disdain of all beings, supreme and ordinary. I have generated bodhichitta and made aspirations, with the intention, as pure as the white of a conch shell or lotus root, to benefit all beings; and I have given meaning to the lives of everyone who has a connection with me. This is the essence of my biography.[80]

Conclusions

I hope the passages above have shown convincingly that when Gene Smith laid the foundation on which the Anglophone conception of *ris med* was eventually built, he did not create the *ris med* movement *ex nihilo*. Rather, the idea of Jamgon Kongtrul, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, Jamyang Chokyi Lodro, Dezhung Rinpoche, and Dilgo Khyentse working together across the generations to foster doctrinal nonsectarianism among the four schools was already an assumption of at least one strain of Tibetophone historiography, even if these

[80] For the Tibetan original, see ibid., 186b–197a. For the English translation, see Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 2017: 538.

teachers could not have predicted *ris med*'s eventual emergence as one of the central analytic categories of Tibetan theorizing under the Dalai Lama. However, Smith was the first to nominalize *ris med* into a noun or shorthand for a larger movement or attitude; even Dilgo Khyentse uses *ris med* almost exclusively as an adjective or adverb. No one thinker or group invented *ris med*, though Dilgo Khyentse was perhaps the first of this lineage to explicitly theorize the term; instead we see a progression from a Dzogchen soteriological term to one that also described the eight chariots to one that described the four schools and was associated primarily with doctrinal nondiscrimination. This transformation is no more surprising than observing the etymological journeys undergone by similarly important but nebulous terms like the English "spirituality" or "pluralism." This journey will undoubtedly continue; new usages of the term continue to emerge across Anglophone and Tibetophone discourses in ways that scholars and teachers alike cannot anticipate.[81]

Nevertheless, this does not mean that contemporary scholars, writing in Tibetan or English, must accept this historiography uncritically. Gardner has proven conclusively that Kongtrul and Khyentse Wangpo never knew that they were part of a *ris med* movement. Indeed, the complex story of the discursive emergence of *ris med* in the 20th century serves as a reminder that scholars are not immune to the shifting power dynamics by which we so often analyze our subjects and deceased theorists, but too often ignore in our own work. At the moment that Gardner was dissertating, the notion of a *ris med* movement had become an analytic impediment, a reification that led later scholars and practitioners to overlook the astonishing uniqueness of a particular group of individuals in 19th century Kham. Gardner wrote,

> I will argue that 'Rimay' has become so unbounded that it has been rendered meaningless. More than that, it (whatever it may have been) has become so all-encompassing that it obscures the remarkable events of the period and the achievements of those involved.[82]

The great triumph of Gardner's monograph on Kongtrul was restoring a sense of particularity to the polymaths formerly glossed as simple members of the *ris med* movement.[83] Kongtrul emerges as a full person

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81 Nisheeta Jagtiani has identified many such innovations, which will be analyzed in her forthcoming dissertation, "*Rimé*—Tibetan Impartiality in Buddhism and Beyond."

82 Gardner 2006: 111.

83 See Gardner 2019.

in Gardner's thorough account, one who endured gossip arising from his practices with a consort, struggled with his monastery's finances, and sponsored a weeklong funeral for his deceased housecat—a far more interesting depiction than the staid narrative of an iconoclast focused exclusively on doctrinal nonsectarianism that had come to symbolize his life.

By contrast, Smith faced a very different threat at the time that he introduced Kongtrul's *ris med*. The teachers that we today take for granted as being among the most important in bringing the dharma to America, like Dezhung Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche, and Dilgo Khyentse, still occupied tenuous positions in exile. In 1969, Dezhung Rinpoche had yet to found his Sakya Monastery in Seattle, and did not know if he would spend the 1970s in America or elsewhere. Moreover, the relatively unified Tibetan identity that we today take for granted had yet to be settled, and Smith offered a model that might allow Tibetans and sympathizers to imagine a common identity in which unity, diversity, survival, and even flourishing, could reciprocally inform one another.

Although I have always preferred the company of scholars who maintain that their work does not matter and is only read by six colleagues at the same few conferences to those who have a false sense of their own importance, the complex story of *ris med* demonstrates that scholars do in fact play important roles in the formation of analytic categories of the discourses they purport to observe, for good or for ill. The concept of *ris med*, which has become one of the most important Tibetan analytic categories of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, could not have emerged without the writings of Jamgon Kongtrul, Dilgo Khyentse, Gene Smith, or any of their crucial intermediaries. The myth of *ris med* has proved alternately generative and stultifying for practitioners and scholars alike. In his own day, Kongtrul fretted about the disappearance of teachings and devoted his entire life to preserving them. Smith was similarly stirred in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, and his preservation projects marked the beginning of a new era of Anglophone Tibetan Studies that centered Tibet rather than India in its inquiries. Gardner has taken on a preservation project of similar importance as editor of the *Treasury of Lives*, which, alongside Smith's TBRC (now the BDRC), hopefully ensures that the cultural destruction witnessed by Kongtrul and those who survived the Cultural Revolution will never happen again. The lots of Tibetan Studies scholars and Tibetan communities are inextricably linked, and young Tibetologists would do well to emulate Smith and Gardner, as well as Kongtrul and Dilgo Khyentse, in envisioning our scholarship and mythmaking as a vocation concerned

first and foremost with enabling the continued flourishing of Tibetan culture and communities.

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The Tibetan Diaspora and the Digital Landscape: Voices of Pluralistic and Decentralized Narratives

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Pema[1] migrated to the United States as part of the Tibetan Rehabilitation Program, a product of the 1990 Immigration Act that brought 1000 Tibetans from India and Nepal and resettled them in the United States. During one of our conversations, she remarked "I will always be grateful to the US Government for all it has done for me and the Tibetan people. But foremost of all, I am a Tibetan, and the Tibetan Government-in-exile is my government and Tibet is my home."

Tenzin Chemi is a 24-year-old graduate student at New York University, born in India. As we sipped coffee together, she muses

> When you see a picture of *Chungba* (a township in Chinese-occupied Tibet) for example, my feelings would be the same as seeing a picture of people in Africa. So that is why when I hear about Tibetans in Tibet facing difficulty giving their exams in Chinese, I don't understand since we, being in America, give our exams in English. We don't complain saying it's not our language. We work hard and assimilate. I always feel like a third person. I think I am so withdrawn from the true community in Tibet that I can relate in some ways to it but that would be my feeling with anything else. For me, I truly see myself as a global citizen.

These two widely differing conversations offer an appropriate view of the primary thesis of this paper: with the advent of wider access to digital landscapes and the distancing of the Tibetan diasporic population, physically and ideologically, from the exilic centers of discourse i.e. the Tibetan Government in exile and the various exile

[1] Pema was born in Tibet and lived a significant part of her adult life in India, where she served as a Member of Parliament of the Tibetan Government-in-exile. She is the mother-in-law of my cousin. Due to her deep involvement with the Tibetan diaspora, whether it be in Government, I requested an interview with her, which was conducted over three separate sessions at her home in Virginia.

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cultural and religious institutions, Tibetans have constructed and expressed views on regional diversity, identities, history, culture, and belongingness to the conceptual notion of Tibet as home, ones that reengage and reinterpret the narratives constructed by the exile polity and exile Tibetan Nationalism.

Carol McGranahan writes:

> Historical truths are always social truths. The making of history is a social and political process, not a neutral rendering of what happened in the past … certain pasts are converted into histories while others are not … belonging or alignment with and acceptance by a community is a process subject to constant negotiation and change.[2]

These historical "truths" have played their way into the construction of grand narratives by the exile polity, marginalizing regional and sectarian affiliations to the nation–state project. These are useful to analyze in the context of understanding current depictions of Tibetan nationhood in exile, one that is symbolic of the exile population's need to present the diaspora as "a 'modern' desire to project a sense of continuity with the past while distancing from oppressive elements of history."[3] These depictions are not a phenomenon exclusively stemming from the exile polity but rather have precedents in the past 250 years of Western fascination with Tibet, both as an object of almost a voyeuristic desire as well as part of its imperial expansionist and colonial project.

1. Research Methodology

Methodologically, this paper is built on 16 interviews with young Tibetans, all of them living in the United States conducted between 2018–2020. Some of the interlocutors' names have been altered with respect to their wishes, but to protect anonymity even further, I have not indicated whose names have been altered. The interviews were primarily conducted in English and Tibetan, with frequent crossing between both languages during conversations. The interlocutors were primarily chosen based on prior acquaintances and interactions during gatherings, workshops, conferences, etc.

The limitation of my selection of interviewees is quite apparent. The Tibetan community in the United States is a minority within the

[2] McGranahan 2010: 3.
[3] Anand 2002: 12.

diaspora and more importantly it is a very recent community.[4] Tibetans in the United States differ from those in India as they are spatially and, in many cases, ideologically away from the exilic centers of discourse that influence much of Tibetans in South Asia. Furthermore, most of my interlocutors hold a US passport. Therefore, their voices would be qualitatively different from those who live in proximity (physical and ideological) to such exilic centers of discourse in India since most Tibetans in India are registered as stateless foreigners by the Indian State. Therefore, my findings need to be taken into consideration in this context and not be seen as definite 'evidence' of such a digital diaspora but rather as an indicator of the emergence of one.

However, my interlocutors are also uniquely placed to answer the questions posed in this paper. Most of them migrated to the United States from India and grew up under the Tibetan School System in India as well as lived in the various Tibetan settlements. Many of them were born in Tibet and those who were not retain close kinship and personal ties to Tibet. All of them have lived for a substantial period in the United States as students and professionals. Therefore, their pluralistic experiences of being a refugee, stateless foreigners, and then legal citizens, along with having roots in the different provinces of Tibet while being educated under the exile Tibetan school system, positions them between the nationalist narrative of exile and the emerging alternatives that run counter to them.

2. Defining the Tibetan Nation-in-exile

The model of the nation-state was introduced to Tibet in the 19th Century, due to the changing conditions of an increasingly 'Westphalian' world structure[5] as well as a modernizing China. In reality, 'pre-modern' Tibet[6] was not characterized by the unity between territory and governance, like a typical definition of a modern state, but rather the three 'provinces' that correspond to modern-day

[4] The first large group of 1000 Tibetans entered the United States in 1991 as part of the "Tibetan U.S Resettlement Project." However, the rate of immigration from India has risen substantially, and thus the diasporic community in the United States is the largest outside India and Nepal.

[5] A "Westphalian world structure" is one that emerged out of the 1648 Westphalian treaty signed between members of the European powers after the defeat of Napoleon. It laid the foundation of western model of nation states, that included notions of sovereign borders, statehood and bureaucracy, one that was adopted in various shapes by other nations once Europe lost its colonies.

[6] I take the historical period from 1642, when the 5th Dalai Lama assumed his power, to 1950 which signaled the invasion of Tibet by the PLA, as 'pre – modern Tibet'.

provinces of U-Tsang, Amdo, and Kham were connected by complex layers of religious and cultural affiliations, primarily to Central Tibet, as well as shifting allegiances.[7] Geoffrey Samuel contends,

> Premodern Tibet contained a greater variety of social and political formations than is often appreciated. Certainly, it makes little sense to think of Tibet as a strongly centralized state ruled by a theocratic government at Lhasa… The Dalai Lama's regime at Lhasa was only one, if in recent times the largest, of a variety of state formations within the Tibetan region.[8]

Furthermore, Georges Dreyfus argues that the reason for a lack of national self-awareness cannot be based on the fact that Tibet was never colonized i.e. physically occupied and directly governed by an external power before the invasion of the People's Liberation Army but because of the conscious decision of the Central Tibetan Government ruling elite to isolate Tibet from Asia during the 18th and 19th Centuries, which prevented it from "developing the kind of institutions, such as print capitalism, a well-equipped army, a census, and schools that could have led to the development of a modern nationalism and a successful process of nation–state."[9]

Within the discourse of the Tibetan exile polity, the narratives of Tibetan modern history i.e. pre-1959 Tibet, the nature of Tibet, and its national self-awareness have been defined differently. The nation-state building project was based on the objectives of constructing a narrative that could run against the Chinese colonial state-building project inside Tibet, deeming it as illegitimate and repressive, while at the same time appropriating the Westphalian model of the nation–state to gain acceptance from the West (which remains its primary supporter) as well as to conform to international norms. As Carole McGranahan defines it, "[a]s a transnational state centered within the territorial boundaries of another state (India), the exiled Tibetan state departs from geographic expectations of statehood but meets other norms."[10]

An in-depth discussion on the definition of this exile nation–state vis–a–vis the de facto sovereignty of the Tibetan Government–in–exile

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[7] These provinces comprise the modern day concept of Bod Cholka-sum or 'Greater Tibet', which remains at the center of the Tibetan national imagination, particularly in exile, one that runs counter to China's division of Tibet into the Tibet Autonomous region (largely U-Tsang) and Amdo and Kham being incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Qinghai and Sichuan.

[8] Samuel 1993: 3.

[9] Dreyfus 2002: 39.

[10] McGranahan 2010: 15.

is beyond the scope of this paper.[11] What is of importance for this particular argument is that the idea of a "Tibetan nation–state" in exile is closely linked to the construction of an almost 'pan-Tibetan national identity' that is shared within the exile polity. Dibyesh Anand puts this notion in perspective when he writes,

> The study of Tibetan national identity should be placed within the larger theoretical debates over nationalism … the need to present one's community as a nation … it has been argued that 'invented traditions' are used to create imagined communities.[12]

Similarly, on the notion of the construction of national political identity among the exilic polity, Tsering Shakya argues:

> The Dalai Lama's demand for unification of the entire Tibetan–speaking area under 'Bod Cholka–sum' has become deeply embedded in the political culture of the Tibetan diaspora, where the core of the refugees' political identity lay in the conception of Tibet as a unity of Kham, Amdo, and U-Tsang. This has been crucial in forging unity among diverse refugee groups. But although the idea enjoys universal support among the exile community, it has no recent historical base and it is difficult to assess the extent of support it might enjoy inside Greater Tibet.[13]

Furthermore, the exilic discourse around the constituents of a 'Tibetan' identity is built around the imagination of a unified Tibetan polity that comprises a uniform Tibetan language, culture, and history but in reality, is primarily Lhasa- or Central Tibet- centric in nature.[14] As McGranahan argues in her exposition of the use of history as a means for political governance, "The exile histories homogenize the nation in service to the state, specifically to the political struggle of the Tibetan state versus the Chinese state."[15]

Anderson's "imagined community" contains assumptions of shared values and identities, often at a national level, and that these values would incorporate an understanding of a shared common

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[11] For further readings, see Bridge 2011; Hess 2009; McConnell 2009; Vasantkumar, 2013.
[12] Anand 2000: 273.
[13] Shakya 1999: 387.
[14] McGranahan 2010: 16–17. For further readings see Barnett 2001; Bell 1928; McKay 2001.
[15] McGranahan 2010: 22.

history, language, institutions, et cetera.[16] The notion of a 'common history' in the study of nation-states has been subjected to much criticism as history, languages, and ethnicity are not universally shared or drawn by such neat territorial boundaries. History is a product of social and political processes, which goes into the construction of certain pasts that are historicized while others are marginalized, silenced, or not recognized. The anthropologist Michel–Rolph Trouillot articulates this well in his much-acclaimed text on the Haitian Revolution, *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History*, where he writes:

> Thus, the presences and absences embodied in sources … or archives … are neither neutral nor natural. They are created. As such they are not mere presences and absences but mentions or silences … Mentions and silences are thus active, dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis.[17]

In the context of the Tibetan diaspora, this marginalization or 'silencing' can come primarily in the context of regional Tibetan identities and histories. McGranahan contends that the aspect of 'region' is a key category through which Tibetan identities are grounded. She goes on to argue that,

> In Tibet before 1959 and in exile society after 1959, the region serves as a central marker for the difference. Central Tibetan social and political forms before 1959 were privileged over those from other regions; after 1959 these same Central Tibetan norms were recast in exile as a shared Pan -Tibetan identity.[18]

The exile polity has attempted to construct a narrative of a 'modern' form of Tibetan ethnic nationalism, as a way to legitimize its claims to an independent state, one that has a shared sense of ethnic homogeneity in terms of history, culture, and language.

3. Beyond the Nation-State

Methodological nationalism can be defined as scholarly research that takes the nation as a 'natural' container for understanding the social and political form of the modern world".[19] Arjun Appadurai asserts

[16] Anderson 1991.
[17] Trouillot 1995: 4.
[18] McGranahan 2010: 4.
[19] Quayson and Daswani 2013.

that the nation-state no longer remains the only medium of organization or construction of an imagined community.[20] Different landscapes such as economic, digital, ideological, etc. play increasingly heightened roles in forming communities and cross-border networks. The study of diasporas since its early scholarship has essentially criticized the model of methodological nationalism, arguing that diasporic identity formations and connections can transcend borders, opening up new avenues of social interactions and spaces that cannot be contained within the rubric of the nation-state.[21]

This paper takes a tangent to this position, drawing from the rich research on transnational diasporas to argue that the Tibetan diaspora itself cannot be subsumed under the rubric of methodological nationalism that is apparent within the nation-state building project of the exilic centers of discourse. There is a dearth of research on the emerging alternate narratives from the Tibetan diaspora in the West concerning the 'Tibetan' nation-building discourses produced by the Tibetan government-in-exile and traditional religious and cultural centers of power in exile. Julia Meredith Hess has written perhaps one of the few full-fledged scholarly works on the Tibetan diaspora in America, where she notes the tension within the hybrid citizenry of Tibetan-American citizens.[22] Although she does elucidate on the process of the construction of a "modern nation Tibetan State" in exile, she asserts that the Tibetans in America have developed a "diaspora consciousness which will bind Tibetans together in the future", a consciousness that she argues is built on persevering connections to an imagined "homeland" and loyalty to the aspirations of a "nation" being constructed in exile.[23]

I draw upon interviews, which I have quoted in the following sections, with my respondents to lay an alternative claim, that is, the increased spatial and temporal distance from the centers of traditional exilic centers of discourse are generating instead a diasporic detachment from the dominant narratives produced by the exile polity in India since many do not identify either with the totalizing historical and cultural discourses or they seek to escape the hybridity of citizenry and loyalties altogether through recourse to ideological spaces such as "global citizenship". More importantly, the realm of digital spaces or digital "diasporas" are particularly emerging as de-territorialized and decentralized spaces for Tibetans to posit their narratives and

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[20] Appadurai 1996.

[21] For works criticizing methodological nationalism see Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1994.

[22] This conjecture is based on insights drawn from my own research into the subject as well as a number of reviews by other scholars. For example, see Yeh 2010.

[23] Hess 2009: 8.

positionality to the landscapes of ideologies, politics, and history put up by the dominant discourses in exile.

"My history wasn't there"[24]

Kirti Kyab[25] is a 26-year-old male who was born in Amdo, Tibet. He left his village at the age of 14 for India, where he completed his education at one of the Tibetan schools, pursued his master's degree in the US. He now works in Washington D.C.

> *Me: How did you learn history?*
> *Kirti: I think when I was in TCV* [one of the major Tibetan school systems in India], *the little bit of history that we learned was very Buddhist-oriented and centered around one person, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and nothing else. That is why we got a very, very small glimpse of what Tibet was or is. And then we hear these stories of people protesting and about the Chinese oppression. So, we just have this singular story centered on one person and certain events. Then there is this recent news on social media coming out of Tibet of protests, and self-immolations which happened outside of TAR* [Tibetan Autonomous Region] *in Kham and Amdo but we never learn this history of Kham or Amdo. I think the exile school system did not do justice to us as a new generation. We all had to do this ourselves, study our history. We read books, listened to people, and watched documentaries. That is how we learned our histories. We did not learn through the school system.*
>
> *Me: So why do you think history was taught in that way?*
> *Kirti: There are different reasons. There aren't enough resources since it is a small institution. The other reason could be that there was a huge sense of insecurity as a community of a lost nation and so they don't necessarily bring a lot of diverse perspectives all at once. It is always easier to choose a sort of singular, unifying narrative. I do think it has counterproductive repercussions. When I was studying history in exile, my history wasn't there. "My" in the sense that the place where I come from did not exist, did not matter. Amdo is not at all important. So, there is a denial of the entire part of Tibet. Then you are fighting for a cause that you think you are a part of, but you are learning something different.*

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[24] A quote from an interview with Kirti Kyab, one of my interlocutors.

[25] I have known Kirti for almost ten years, since he and I went to the same high school as well as undergrad colleges. We reconnected in the United States, since he had already been here two years prior to my arrival.

The nation–state-building project in exile is constructed around a homogenizing narrative of modernity, one which is exclusive and streamlined. Kirti's dissatisfaction, his understanding of the marginalization of regional histories as 'the exile system did not do justice to us as a new generation' and his frustration that his 'history wasn't there … the place that I come from did not exist, did not matter', highlights the ruptures and tension between the grand narratives and the marginalised 'pasts' that is existent in an increasingly globalized diaspora stepping out of the frameworks of the exilic nation-building project. Victoria Bernal and Donya Alinejad note similar ruptures within the Eritrean and Iranian diasporas respectively, between dominant nationalist discourse and alternative perspectives, ruptures that are personified and expressed through spaces in the digital media.[26] As Kirti notes, the images of self-immolations and protests are from the regions of Amdo and Kham, but their histories and narratives are silenced within the grand narratives of a Tibetan modern nation.

Tenzin Choekyi,[27] a Tibetan–American citizen, expressed similar opinions:

> *Me: So when you moved to India and studied in TCV, did you face difficulties in adjusting to life especially since in exile?*
> *Choekyi: I remember having difficulty learning the formal U - Tsang dialect, using zhe-sa* [Translation: Honorifics]. *Back home we just called our parents Ama and Aba while here in India, we have to call them Ama La and Pa La* [the "La" syllable is a connotation of respect]. *It was very uncomfortable. It wasn't hard to learn but I forgot my own dialect. After eight years, I met my Dad in India at Bodhgaya* [the holiest of all Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India] *and I talked to him for an hour and he was like: "Whatever you said, I couldn't understand anything," and that really disappointed me. When I met him, from the station to the hotel it was an hour's drive and during that time I was talking and crying the whole time and at the end, he couldn't even understand me.*

Choekyi's conflict of forgetting her dialect at the expense of learning the one favored by the exilic leadership as the Tibetan language and her inability to converse with her father reflects the regional affiliations and ideational markers that have been flattened and silenced in the pursuit of constructing a nation that is homogenous, linear and

[26] Alinejad 2017; Bernal 2006.

[27] Tenzin Choekyi is a graduate student at Penn State University. Having met her at a Tibetan Youth Forum event in New York, I learnt that she was from Lithang, a region in Eastern Tibet and came from a nomadic family and later moved to India for her education. In 2010, she moved to the US at the age of 17 years.

'modern', one that plays into Kirti's account of feeling a loss of his history, that was also regional and as he calls it a denial of the entire part of Tibet'.

Several other researchers have argued that the nation-state building project in exile has frozen the modern Tibetan historical memory of Tibet to one before '1959,' i.e., before the modernization of Tibet under the governance of the People's Republic of China, as a cultural milieu to reclaim a supposed primordial ethnic past that is crucial for building a sense of modern nationalism.[28] This desire is reflected in Pema's evocation for the youth and the Tibetan Government-in-exile to save the Tibetan 'culture':

> *Pema: Traditional Tibet is no longer there, and, in some ways, it is good there is modernization, but it has also led to the degradation of our culture. Due to influence from outside, Tibet remains Tibet in a geographical sense, but the traditional Tibet is no longer there. The Chinese have systematically attempted to destroy our culture on all pretexts. Our resilience is then extremely important, and we must attempt to preserve all the good aspects of our traditions. In exile, external influences play a role while inside Tibet, it's the government itself that is responsible, so there won't be anything authentically Tibetan.*

The notion of an 'authentic Tibetan' is one that Anand argues is an essential trope of the exile political discourse, as "a time when it is vital to preserving a pure form of this civilization since it is itself under erasure in the original home."[29] As Tibetans gradually move away from these exilic centers of discourse and gain access to alternative sources of information and perspectives, these assumptions, of a frozen past and the authenticity it entails that is being preserved in exile, are being subjected to much scrutiny. Tenzin Yewong is a Columbia University doctoral candidate, whose research focuses on the history of Chinese Material Culture and the Himalayas.[30] Her response to my questions played out the skepticism she maintained toward the notion of an 'authentic Tibetan':

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28 Anand 2000: 277; Smith 1996: 21.

29 Anand 2002: 19.

30 Tenzin Yewong was born in Nepal and was educated in one of the Tibetan schools in India. She later pursued her High School education from United World College in England and then moved to the United State for her further education. Yewong and I have known each other for two years, having had a number of informal conversations on Tibet and history, and we met at a Tibetan Youth gathering, organized by Machik, an NGO that works inside Tibet.

> *Me: Besides the political tone that receives more expression in the diaspora, do you see other narratives or images that are coming out of the diaspora and Tibet?*
> *Yewong: I do notice the differences in language. Most Tibetans who come from Tibet have a better grasp of the language than I do. I feel like we always say that it is in exile where we preserve the Tibetan language while in Tibet it is not being allowed to survive but somehow people from Tibet have better Tibetan than we do. I never noticed this in school much but as I went to UWC* [United World College] *and then later to America, I met these Tibetans and saw shows from Tibet as well as the music, which gave me the idea that our language is better in Tibet.*

Lekey Leidecker is an individual of mixed heritage, the only one among all of my respondents, and someone who is quite active in her organization's work inside Tibet.[31] As it goes with most interviews, my question regarding differing images between those from inside Tibet and outside, elicited answers that were indicative of a different line of inquiry altogether.

> *Me: Do you think that images of rituals or ceremonies from Tibet are more authentic than those that come from India?*
> *Lekey: I don't think that makes it any less authentic. I truly don't feel that. Like both of us right now are communicating in English but it does not make us any less Tibetan. I think when you talk about being authentic, it changes from place to place. For example, wearing Pangdhen* ["Pangdhen" refers to the apron-like clothing that Tibetan women in different parts of Tibet and Bhutan wear as a symbol of their married status]. *You won't find it in every place in Tibet. How do we even know it is Tibetan? Even the culture in Tibet is continuously evolving. I don't think we have to be stuck in the old ways. Nothing is going to remain the same. Sticking to the past is not healthy.*

Both Lekey's and Yewong's responses are indicative of the distancing of Tibetans from the grand narratives of the exilic leadership, particularly on two accounts: one, that the "authentic" Tibetan culture

[31] Lekey Leidecker is an individual of mixed heritage. Her father is a Tibetan while her mother is ethnically German but an American citizen. She was born in the United States and currently is employed at Machik, an NGO that works for social and educational empowerment inside Tibet. I have known her for two years, having met at a student event organized by Machik which later led to us collaborating as organizers for Machik Weekend, an annual gathering of Tibetans organized by Machik.

and identity is singular and frozen in a past before the formation of the exile community in 1959 and second, that the Tibetan Government-in-exile has the legitimacy to define the contours of this authenticity. Yewong's observation that the Tibetans from Tibet that she met had better mastery over the language than those from exile (the validity of which can be debated but the central point of note here is her observation of this difference) went counter to what was propagated in exile and Lekey's assertion that the notion of being Tibetan is constantly changing and subject to negotiation and that it is "not healthy to stick to the past" lays challenges to the authority of both the narratives constructed by the Tibetan-Government-in-exile and to its position as the centers of production of discourse defining the frameworks of Tibetan identity.

Perhaps the strongest assertion of such distancing from the Tibetan government-in-exile's construction of a nation in exile can be found in my conversation with Rinzin Wangmo, with whom I conversed through Skype (an excellent example of the trans-territorial connections that digital forums allow individuals to engage in).[32] After we spoke about her life and the pathways she had taken to get to this point, her frustrations with the exile community and the centered space that the voices have to exist in echoed in her response.

> *Me: So, you spoke about feeling a sense of frustration when you left school and joined your college in Bangalore. Could you elaborate on that?*
> *Rinzin: When I was in school and even later, there was never a space for a third voice. You're living in one narrative and have a singular perspective, a Umay Lam* [can be translated into Middle Way Approach, the official policy of the Tibetan Government-in-exile][33] *since Upper TCV* [her high school in India] *is located in the hub of it all. There are no third voices. The irony is that CTA claims to be a democracy, but do we really give space for other voices, other than UmayLam and Rangzen [independence]? We as a democratic society should allow this space and I am not 100% sure we allow this space. We need to reimagine, rethink, and reprocess what democracy means to us. One strong person, one Rinpoche puts*

[32] Rinzin Wangmo is currently a Teacher's Assistant at CUNY Graduate School. She was born in Tibet but later, at the age of eight, moved to India where she pursued her education in a Tibetan school located in Dharamsala, moved to Bangalore for her higher education, and then continued to pursue her education in the United States. She has been involved in Tibetan activism in New York City.

[33] The Middle Way Approach is the official diplomatic position of the Tibetan Government in exile since 1988, one that seeks autonomy under Chinese rule, but includes the provinces of U-Tsang, Amdo and Kham under the autonomous governance of a Tibetan provincial government.

> *their words in our mouths but sometimes we need to think for our own. Even if one does it, do we have the space to express our voices?*

Rinzin's observation that, although the Tibetan Government-in-exile draws its legitimacy from being a democratic polity, there is a lack of public space for the expression of "third voices" besides autonomy or independence, alludes to the political struggle for meaning that has emerged in the Tibetan diasporic population, the former of which is the official polity of the exile leadership, one formulated by the 14th Dalai Lama since the 1970s. Her assertion that it was vital to "reimagine, rethink and reprocess what democracy means to us" and her skepticism that even if such a process, would there be a space for its expression is a central concern that cuts to the theme of this paper.

Robert Cohen argues that "victim diasporas" has become the normative way of defining and thinking about the study of diasporas.[34] Diasporas emerge out of dispersals from one land of origin, usually due to a cataclysmic event or events.[35] The loss of "homeland" remains a key image-building narrative of the exilic discourse on Tibetan identity and one that has been presented as such to the outside world. One of the central narratives that emerged out of my interactions with my respondents is this un-identification with the victimhood mentality associated with being refugees (or bearers of that legacy). What I argue and this runs counter to the arguments of Hess, is that with the attempt to escape from the identification of victimhood, Tibetans in the West who are legal citizens of their host countries (although I have not conducted any interviews in India for this paper, the stateless political status of Tibetans roots them much more to the "Tibetan" discourse of the Tibetan Government-in-exile) are increasingly turning to alternative pathways of identification.

My conversation with Chemi Dolkar,[36] a Tibetan-American citizen, is illustrative of this tension between identifying oneself as a Tibetan but being unable to reconcile with the dominant narrative of victimhood and loss that is aligned with its political characteristic:

> *Me: Do you think that the idea of Tibet being a unique place and a unique situation was a larger narrative created by the exile society?*
> *Chemi: Yes, I think. The problem I have with the narrative is that it is one of victimization. Maybe that is what I'm resisting. Being a victim in the sense that you are not in control of your own situation or your life, to some extent that you are not governing your own*

[34] Cohen 1997.
[35] Quayson and Daswani 2013.
[36] Chemi Dolkar was born in Nepal but moved to the United States at a young age, so she was practically raised and educated outside Nepal and India.

> *constituency, that it is being governed by outside forces, that you are just a recipient of what is happening and you are always waiting for someone to rescue you, for someone to provide welfare for you. Whatever it is, I don't think that it is healthy if you plan to have a freedom struggle, for people's self-esteem. I think you should now be able to do things on your own. In the beginning, such help was required but now that has become such a strong part of our narrative "Oh Please help us! We have this Buddhist rich culture, so unique but this terrible thing has happened to us, our people are suffering!" This is true but then it's just like why go out to ask for help? I am kind of tired of it.*

Similarly, Kirti espoused similar frustration with the notion of being a "victim diaspora."

> *Kirti: We always hear negative stuff about Tibet, how poor and suffering it is and we see Tibet through this lens. And then we want to see Tibetans as being poor, suffering and when we see these images, we get happy. That satisfies the exile community image of Tibet. But there are Tibetans who are doing well in Tibet, in business and otherwise. The information that the exile community gets is very limited. If they hear an alternative narrative, then they may think it's fake news, news of Chinese propaganda.*

Both accounts, representative of a number of my other respondents, are symbolic of the rupture between a Tibetan identity constructed by the nation–state project and alternative Tibetan identities that are growing in a changing Tibetan diaspora. Kirti's assertion that images of successful Tibetans in Tibet are seen as Chinese propaganda or counter to the exile community image of Tibet can be analyzed as clashes with the exile government mode of legitimacy, in the sense that they, the Government, represent the alternative model of governance to Chinese modern state project, one that is democratic, "pure" and successful in contrast to Tibetans in Tibet who lack freedom, are losing their cultural identity and are oppressed.

4. Spaces and Voices: Agency in the Digital Forum

The rise of mass media and literacy allowed the political, cultural, and commercial elites of "imagined communities" of nation-states to construct the grand nationalist narratives that would define these

states.[37] Such media then constructed consensus among the citizens on ideals of "national unity" which were defined by the elites. These mass media spaces such as newspapers and radio were in many ways centralized apparatuses, with the relationship between them and the population being one of producer and consumer respectively.

Robert Saunders argues that the rapid technological advancements that followed the end of World War II challenged the cultural hegemony of the elites, as Information Communication Technology (ICT) rapidly developed, thus creating networks of communications that crossed borders and resisted, successfully, control of these elites.[38] He further notes that the advent of the internet successfully de-territorialized communications, allowing a near simultaneity between the production and consumption of information as well as decentering it at the same time. Alinejad's work on the Iranian-American diaspora shows that in today's world of digital communication which has conglomerated all different forms of communications, the relationship between the producers and consumers is no longer 'fixed' but rather it is a dialectical one, with the consumers having agency to choose what they want as well as 'speak back' to the narratives and agendas put out on the digital space.[39] As Bernal puts it, while discussing the Eritrean diaspora, the Internet "assists in the development of Habermasian transnational public sphere where marginalized groups can produce and debate narratives of history, culture, democracy and identity."[40]

Before dwelling further into the interviews, an acknowledgment must be made concerning the nature of the internet and access to it in the context of the Tibetan community inside and outside Tibet. Internet within Tibet is severely censored by the Chinese Government, and Tibetans must be extremely careful about how they use it, whether it be communication applications such as WeChat or browsing websites. Furthermore, Tibetans inside Tibet access the internet using VPNs, particularly popular websites like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Google which are banned by the Chinese Government. Much of the content that is available on popular digital platforms is, therefore, curated by Tibetans who can access VPN services or by those who have access to Chinese social media platforms such as Douyin, Weixin, Weibo, et cetera. In the exile community, access to these digital spaces is much easier but they also give rise to challenges. India, for example, banned WeChat in 2021, along with a host of other applications that originate from China, and thus Tibetans in India have turned to using VPNs to remain in connection with their families and

[37] Anderson 1991: 114.
[38] Saunders 2011: 2.
[39] Anlinejad 2017: 2.
[40] Bernal 2006: 61.

friends inside Tibet. It is also vital to note that access to the internet, like everywhere else, is a social, economic, and educational privilege, one that is not available to everyone.

My conversation with Tsering Sangpo, a naturalized American citizen, who was born in Tibet and grew up in India, represents similar views that my other respondents have shared with me on this particular issue of the decentralized nature of the Internet as a public space.[41]

> *Me: So, if we think of Tibetans in exile who lack an intrinsic connection to Tibet but have a connection to Tibet in a digital sense, either through social media or digital forums, have these mediums changed the connection to Tibet?*
> *Sangpo: Certainly, it has changed. I think it has made Tibet seem a little more real to Tibetans who have never seen Tibet but now those who grew up in exile, including me, have the ability to know what is happening in Tibet which gives us a very diverse idea of what Tibet is. Tibet is not the Tibet of old anymore.*
>
> *Me: How important then do you think social media or digital media play in this idea of this new connection to Tibet?*
> *Sangpo: I guess it played an indispensable role. In 2009 I only had Facebook, but the information was faster and almost curated, where I could choose whom to follow or whose posts to read. That is the power of social media for me where to an extent I do have the power to curate whom I listen to. These days I don't feel like listening to much exile news because it's all political news and it's the same news. I want other kinds of news and information and so I follow artists and musicians on social media. It's just about finding my own space, my own tribe, and people who think in other ways and then seeing how they are doing it.*

His assertion that access to social media allowed him to know a new diverse Tibet, one that is different from 'old Tibet', is a break from Pema's earlier assertion of her desire to retain a traditional Tibet that is in danger from modernization. His statement on the plurality of sources of information, as the ability to "curate whom I listen to" and the expression of his agency to avoid "exile news because it's all political news" and his desire to "find my own space, my own tribe" is indicative of the potential of digital spaces for the construction of alternative "imagined communities" through the ability to foster

[41] Tsering Sangpo was born in Tibet (Central Tibet), from where he moved to India at a young age with his family. He later moved with his parents to the United States.

connections across borders and outside of the framework of the nation- project in exile. It plays into the notion of decentralized and demonopolized digital media access, where one's agency can be expressed in defining one's transnational connections.

Rinzin's description of her presence on social media is highly indicative of this decentralized and pluralized nature of the digital forum, particularly in the context of exercising one's ability to choose sources of and express one's narratives and consequently, the potential for such spaces of choice offered by it.

> *Me: Do you have an active social media presence?*
> *Rinzin: Yes. I am quite active on social media. It's a great platform for expressing oneself.*
>
> *Me: So why and how do you express yourself on social media platforms?*
> *Rinzin: Social media is a great tool to reach out to your audience while staying in the comfort of your home. I use Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram but I use them all differently. I feel Instagram is something the younger generation uses for sharing their personal pictures or videos while Facebook is a much larger platform for doing the same as well as organizing activities and events. I prefer Twitter for more serious conversations because in general, I feel that the discussions are more serious since the tweets are limited to 150 characters and so most discussions are rather brief and to the point.*

Similarly to Sangpo's assertions, Rinzin's statement that social media platforms allow her to connect to her audience from her home indicates the potential of digital forums to create virtual communities that are as imagined as Anderson's notion of imagined communities, since both entail individuals and communities that share commonalities of experience, ideas, and symbols but have in most probability never physically met each other. In particular, her observation that different forums of the digital landscape such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, allow her to diversify her use of social media, assigning different roles and expectations based on her perceived nature of each, is vital in the context of understanding how the digital landscape is decentralized, pluralistic and expressive of individual agency and choice.

I was able to conduct a simultaneous interview with Tenzin Yewong and Tenzin Dechen, a resident of Boston.[42] I had already

[42] Tenzin Dechen is a Boston resident, who has known Yewong since their school days in India as well as studied together at United World College in London. We

interviewed both of them multiple times in the past, but this was the first that we three met together. Seated in a small breakfast joint in Queens New York, we shared a meal and an insightful discussion.

> *Me: Since both of you mentioned earlier that you have a strong social media presence, what do you think of the narratives and stories put forward by Tibetans in these digital forums?*
> *Yewong: I believe that social media plays a great role in allowing Tibetans in exile and from Tibet to express themselves. For example, the music of Phur* (a very popular song in the diaspora that was produced in Tibet by the two-person band "Anu") *and all these new artists are coming up through digital platforms. They are trying to do the same thing, that is tell the modern Tibetan story. I don't see myself or anyone else so different from them. So yeah, in that way, it's more like we are just the same. They are trying to take authority over their own stories and are not afraid to criticize their community. In our exile society there are different expectations set by the Government-in-exile on what makes you Tibetan and these songs respond to those whereas, in Phur, it's not about being Tibetan in a fixed way. The language is Tibetan, but you can be anyone. I have been following this singer called Tibchick on Instagram whose songs are about falling in love and she talks like me. My Tibetan is not like "standard" and she herself talks like that. When I speak Tibetan, I speak with an Amdo accent which comes with its slang and a number of abbreviations and some people look at it, they look at it as ghetto Tibetan. In her songs, she talks about having no fear since like hair regrows, you will also get your documents* (referring to political asylum in Europe). *So that like throwing it out there and it captures our current reality.*
> *Dechen: There is a Tibetan photographer that I follow on Instagram who studied in London and now is in Lhasa. Her images are political in the sense that she makes fun of how people exoticize Tibet. It's such a powerful work and I can see how people in, and outside Tibet are trying to find their own voices and they want to tell the Tibetan story on their own terms. I can totally connect to these kinds of stuff.*

> *Me: Earlier you mentioned that when you went to the UK for High School and met Tibetans from Tibet, it made Tibet a lot more real for you, away from the narratives of loss or suffering. You relate to those stories of Tibetans that you met, and it seems more genuine to you.*
> *Dechen: I think whatever the Tibetan Government-in-exile says and*

met at a "Tibetan Student Retreat" event which she had organized, and I had registered to participate.

> *their narratives, there is an element of truth to it since mostly they are made by Tibetans who have come from Tibet in the past. It's the reality of our grandparents or parents and they have experienced that loss and suffering. I don't deny their narratives but in today's world, there are new experiences and narratives also.*
> *Yewong: By a modern story, I mean a secular national culture. That is what makes this pop culture modern because until recently culture has been about religion but now, we are trying to find a secular culture so that is what makes it modern.*

The transformative power of the digital space is not just in its decentralized and demonopolized access to information but rather, as argued, the ability to construct spaces of dissent, discussion, and expression of pluralistic narratives, allowing netizens to tell their own story and create their networks while at the same time, challenge official grand narratives and "collectively struggle to narrate history, frame debates and see to form shared understanding beyond the control of political authorities or the commercial censorship of mass media."[43] Yewong's feelings of shared connections to the new artists that she follows on social media are because like her, they all are telling the 'modern Tibetan story', one which I would argue is for a pluralistic account of histories, a decentering of ideals of "belongingness as a Tibetan" and space where one can freely speak 'Amdo accent' or 'Ghetto Tibetan' without any element of exotification. The ability to "tell their own story" is key to this digital Tibetan diaspora which allows for the construction of multiple shifting imagined communities and connections in contrast to the unitary, fixed concept of an imagined community of a Tibetan exilic nation, one that is not fixed as an ontological whole through the constraints of fixed imperatives such as language, traditions, and so on.

There is a reason for such decentralized ideals and narratives and the increasingly plural voices that are emerging through various platforms, digital or, otherwise, in the Tibetan diaspora. I argue that as Tibetans in diaspora move away from exilic centers of discourse, physically and ideologically, whether it be within India or Nepal or increasingly to the Western countries, they adopt hybrid identities (most of my respondents are Tibetan–Americans and received varying degrees of education in the United States), the importance of which is that it allows them the conceptual tools and space to challenge the homogenized description of exile society and its history. Jennifer Brinkerhoff, in her case study of the internet chat forum known as "TibetBoard", argues that "Tibetan diasporans use TibetBoard to

[43] Saunders 2011: 9.

negotiate their identity, questioning their traditional home culture as they embrace values, experience, and culture from their host lands."[44]

When I asked Tenzin Choekyi about what led her to question the frameworks of her identity as a Tibetan, after a long pause, she replied,

> *In India, we are all living together in schools and settlements, so we don't really question our identities. All we do is listen to a lot of Rangzen [Independence] but we never really think about who we are in America, I started thinking about all of that, a lot more individualism. Whatever they said was right, I never questioned what the teachers taught us. Coming to America, you have to question everything."*

Rinzin Wangmo was more evocative of her frustration with the education system in Tibetan schools and the critical capacity she developed once she moved away from these exilic centers.

> *Me: As you moved to Bangalore* [a metropolitan city in India] *for your higher education and then to the US, did you attempt to renegotiate your identity as a Tibetan?*
> *Rinzin: Yes, I certainly did in a big way. When you are in school, the teachers will act like a big store of knowledge, with an emphasis on memorizing whatever they taught us. We never questioned what we were taught or our identities as Tibetans. When I came to the United States and studied here, everything was questioned. I did not have to take a book just to read it, but I had to critically question it and see whether I liked it. My own idea of being a Tibetan has gone through so many changes as American education encourages individualism.*

In both accounts as well as in the cases of my other respondents such as Kirti who moved away to the United States or Dechen and Yewong who pursued their higher education in the United States, the commonality of developing the capacity and the space to question one's identity as a Tibetan after leaving their respective Tibetan schools and coming to the United States is representative of the relationship between the emerging ruptures in the homogenized narratives of the exile leadership and the distancing of its diasporic population from its centers of discourse. The virtual and transnational community that is developing in the digital landscape concerning the Tibetan diaspora is representative of both the sense of the 'nomadic' nature of diasporas or as McGranahan describes it "one of lived

[44] Brinkerhoff 2009: 77.

impermanence vis-à-vis the world" [45] but also of escape from the rigidity of methodological nationalism, physically as well as ideologically in the case of the Tibetan diaspora.

Conclusion

This is by no means an exhaustive work on the narratives of the Tibetan diaspora, because as Kirti Kyab mentions "stories and experiences always change and never are the same". What I have sought to attempt is to lay the emerging network and array of voices, histories, and identities that have been long silenced either by the West through its orientalist fascination with a certain idea of "Tibet" or by the Tibetan Government-in-exile through its nation-state project in exile.

"Tibet" and the notion of "Tibetanness" are constantly being negotiated, challenged, and changing. The Tibetan diaspora is no longer static, both in an ideological and physical sense, with an incremental rise in the movement of the population from India and Nepal to the West. Therefore, as the Tibetan diaspora starts to spread out and more importantly, the younger generation who are either born in the West or educated as such, start to lose identification with the grand narratives of "Tibet" and its construction of a nation in exile, absorbing hybrid identities or as Chemi calls them "being globalized citizens", as well as conceptual tools outside of those portrayed by the Tibetan exilic centers. The images of the Tibetan nation are not born in a vacuum but rather have precedents in the Western construction of 'Tibet'. The Tibetan diaspora has reacted against as well as appropriated these images in their pursuits of agency and narratives, whether it be for the aspiration for a nation or identification with their history, culture, and society.

I have argued throughout this paper that from an appropriation of these images by the exile leadership, we now see emerging alternative narratives, images, and expressions of identity that fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of such national narratives, effectively stepping out of the rigidity of methodological nationalism as personified by the nation – state-building project in exile. Tibetan nationalism in exile is dependent, besides other factors, on the community's desire for a nation in the future. The political debates within the diaspora for or against the Tibetan Government-in-exile-led policy of the Middle Way Approach have further complicated the association of the Tibetan diaspora with the idea of a nation. As the

[45] McGranahan 2010: 13.

community further spreads out, the identification with the imagination of the Tibetan nation as defined by the Tibetan Government–in–exile will undergo further ruptures as Tibetans increasingly identify with regional loyalties and across multiple strands of linguistic, cultural and historical trajectories, that may or may not be contained within the narrative of 'Tibet' as a nation as defined by the exilic leadership.

I have also attempted to lay out the digital landscape and the Tibetan Diaspora engagement with it as a potential space for the expressions of such alternative narratives and the formation of virtual imagined communities, decentering the traditional centers for the production of such ideational discourses. Although the Tibetan Government–in–exile does not exert the same control over the digital space, as most states do in varying degrees, there are still cultural and ideological barriers that hinder the emergence of the digital diaspora as a true transnational public space. The Tibetan digital diaspora is still in its budding phase. Consequently, there are also avenues of distrust among the Tibetan diaspora about the nature of digital landscapes. As Rinzin notes, "There is another part, the bad part. With regards to American politics and in other places, there is a hate crime. Within Tibetan society, there is a danger of social media being a forum of rumors for regional and sectarian politics and chaos creating agenda."

Yet, as the diaspora moves away from exilic centers of discourse, physically and ideologically, and experiences greater freedom for cross-cultural and cross-border interactions, the space for digital diaspora for alternative narratives and expression of agency will grow and change. McGranahan argues that "historical arrests fix the linear truth of official history… spaces are secured for officially authorized truths only." [46] The arena of digital media and its transnational, decentralized, and pluralistic nature could serve as a potential space for such 'unofficial' truths, as the Tibetan diaspora speaks back to the past constructions of their identities and histories. However, this article is unable to clearly delineate the dimensions of these alternative narratives and the particular nature of the histories, cultures, and regional and religious identities they seek to construct within these digital spaces. The reason for this inability lies in both the limitations of my interviews, i.e., in terms of the number of interlocutors, their experiences, geographical location, and time. Furthermore, there is a lack of literature that dwells on this issue about the Tibetan diaspora that one draws upon, and this article is an attempt to contribute to this emerging field.

[46] McGranahan 2010: 26.

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"Lamaism is Not Buddhism!" Public Criticism as a Catalyst for Localizing Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan

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Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché (Mkhan po chos nyid don rtogs rin po che, b. 1964), a Nyingma teacher originally from Dzachuka (Rdza chu kha) in Kham, takes a deep sip of tea and sets his cup down gently on a saucer. "So, you want to know about the [Taiwan International Tibetan Buddhism] Study Institute, right?"[1] We are sitting at a heavy wooden table in his dharma center in Taipei's Shilin District. A wall of colorful, porcelain teapots and several shelves of carefully arranged Buddhist scriptures and gilded statues form a backdrop as Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché leans back and begins to recall. "There were four of us founders: Khenpo Tsülnam, Tulku Thubten Norbu, Kathok Rigdzin Chenmo, and myself. The four of us [started the Taiwan International Tibetan Buddhism Study Institute] in 2009."[2] Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché takes another sip of tea before continuing,

> We knew that within the general state of Taiwanese society and religion in Taiwan, the situation of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan was extremely acute. We knew this clearly. At that time, we were even a bit afraid. There were people publicly condemning the Outer, Inner, and Secret [Teachings], and those who said Tibetan Buddhism isn't pure. Even among Buddhists, there were those who didn't like [us] and wanted to stop [Tibetan Buddhism. Their opposition] here became very intense. [They were opposed] to the entirety of Tibetan Buddhism, not only to us Nyingma or the Kagyü or Sakya. They said the very existence of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan is

[1] "*da zhib 'jug tshogs pa'i skor 'dra po red ba/*" Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, January 6, 2023.

[2] "*nga tsho dang po 'go 'dzugs mkhan mi bzhi yod red/ mkhan po tshul rnams red/ sprul sku thub bstan nor bu red/ kaḥ thog rig 'dzin chen mo red/ a nas nga red/ nga tsho mi bzhi 2009 gyi lo ['go 'dzugs pa red/]*" Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, January 6, 2023.

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undesirable.

> There is one organization in Taiwan called the True Enlightenment Practitioners Association. From what I understand, [they] published pieces in the press, in different newspapers, and in pamphlets [criticizing Tibetan Buddhism]. They also spoke to people all over the place. They did a lot of things like this. As a result, we were naturally hurt and strong feelings arose from the depths of our hearts.[3]

Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché explained how fragmented the hundreds of independent Tibetan Buddhist centers in Taiwan were at the time. Without any organized network, individual monastics felt powerless to respond to public criticism. The four monastic teachers decided they must do something. He continued,

> Then one day, around Tibetan New Year, we got together in the afternoon for tea and a meal… We're dharma friends and since we hadn't seen each other in a long time we chatted about our classes, and this and that. Then we said, 'We have some work to do,' and we started to discuss. If that person [Xiao Pingshi, the leader of True Enlightenment Practitioners Association] brings a lot of people together, he'll become pretty powerful. So, we talked back and forth about this and said we must do something. We discussed and [someone said] 'Well then, what if we start an organization? If we are going to draw attention to [Tibetan] Buddhism, to spread it, and resist them, what do we need to do?'
>
> We discussed that although we [as individuals] were utterly

[3] "*spyir tha'e wan gyi spyi tshogs kyi 'gro stangs dang / khyad par du chos lugs kyi 'gro stangs/ de'i nang nas bod brgyud nang bstan tha'e wan la yod pa'i bod brgyud nang bstan gyi gnas stangs de ha cang gi dza drag zhig yin pa nga rang tshos shes kyi yod red/ gsal po zhig shes kyi yod red/ nga tsho la de'i gnas skabs na spyir gtang gi cig zhed snang zhig yong gi yod red/ phyi nang gsang gsum nas dma' 'beb byed mkhan dang / bod brgyud nang bstan 'di rnam dag ma ni ma red zer mkhan dang / nang pa rang gi nang nas bod brgyud nang bstan la mi dga' mkhan dang / dgag mkhan de nas sngon ma yod pa zhig red/ yod na yang 'di bar de la dpe dza drag cig chags pa red/ bod brgyud nang bstan spyi yongs la la red/ nga tsho rnying ma gcig po ma red/ bka' brgyud la ma red/ sa skya la ma red/ bod brgyud nang bstan zer yag 'di tha'e wan la yod pa yag po ma red zer ba red/ tha'e wan gyi tshogs pa gcig yod red ba/ Zhengjue zer gyi yod red/ khong tsho dpe/ ngas go tshod la bslebs nas gsar shog 'dra mi 'dra dang / tshags par 'dra mi 'dra dang / 'grems shog 'dra mi 'dra la bkrams/ de nas mi ga sa ga la skad cha bshad sogs de 'dra po bzo yod red ba/ de 'dra byas yong dus nga tsho la rang shugs kyis gnod pa zhig dang sems kyi gting la tshor ba zhig gtan gtan slebs kyi yod red/*" Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, January 6, 2023.

> powerless, if we were to start an organization and if we were to put a lot of effort in this direction, it would be beneficial to growing, publicizing, and disseminating Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan.[4]

For the next hour, Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché described how the Taiwan International Tibetan Buddhism Study Institute (Tib. Tha'e wan rgyal spyi'i bod brgyud nang bstan zhib 'jug tshogs pa, Chin. 中華民國國際藏傳佛教研究會) was structured and the range of their projects.

When we finished speaking and said our goodbyes, I headed out into the damp January air. Leaving the interview, I was struck most by the stark terms in which Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché described ITBSI's founding impetus. This organization, which I encountered during my fifteen months of fieldwork as the largest trans-sectarian Tibetan Buddhist organization in Taiwan with several hundred monastic members, first emerged in response to vocal critics of Tibetan Buddhism. In an ironic twist, public criticism intended to halt Tibetan Buddhism locally ended up catalyzing Tibetan Buddhist monastics' collective efforts to further localize their traditions in Taiwan.

1. Introduction

Tibetan Buddhism has grown tremendously in Taiwan since its introduction to the island in 1949. Initially Tibetan Buddhism was practiced in only a modest number of semi-covert communities led by a handful of Tibetan, Mongolian, Han, and Manchu teachers. With the gradual opening of Taiwanese society in the 1980s and the end of martial law, Tibetan Buddhism started to grow rapidly in Taiwan with an influx of new Tibetan Buddhist teachers from the global Tibetan

[4] *"de nas lo gsar skabs kyi nyi ma zhig phyi dro la 'thung ba yin/… nga tsho chos grogs red/ de nas rgyun ring po ma thug pa yin tsang skad cha 'dra mi 'dra bshad/ da nga tshos zhig 'dzin grwa zhig 'dug min 'dug skor yar mar bshad/ de nas nga tshos da nga rang tsho la las rgyu zhig yod sa red dam ces nga rang tshos gros bsdur zhig byas pa red ba/ mi zer yag de kho rang mang po zhig mnyam du 'dzoms bzhag na tog tsam nus pa thon yong gi yod red/ de nas yar mar bshad dus da nga tshos cig byed dgos sa red zer/ de 'dra zhig gros bsdur byung ba red/ da byas na da tshogs pa zhig btsugs nas nga rang tsho'i nang chos 'di la do snang byed yag zhig dang / dar spel gtong yag zhig dang / yang na khong tsho la gdong len byed dgos na gang 'dra byed dgos zer skad cha byung ba red/ da nga tshor nus pa gang yang med pa'i thog nas da nga rang tsho tshogs pa zhig 'dzugs na nga rang tsho'i bod brgyud nang bstan rang nyid sa khul 'di la yar 'phel yag khyab bsgrags dang khyab spel gtong yag dang de'i phyogs la 'bad brtson zhig byed na phan thog gi red zer nas de 'dra gros bsdur zhig byung /"* Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, January 6, 2023.

diaspora[5] and centers being founded "like bamboo shoots after spring rain."[6] The number of dharma centers and Taiwanese patrons of Tibetan Buddhism increased markedly following the visits of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama to Taiwan in 1997 and 2001, leading some to declare a "Tibetan Buddhist Fever" (藏傳佛教熱) had swept across Taiwan.[7] By the mid-2000s, there were an estimated 600,000 practitioners and more than 200 Tibetan Buddhist dharma centers across the island,[8] an increase of more than 140 percent over one decade earlier.[9] By the mid-2010s, this number had further increased to 473 centers,[10] a 477 percent increase over the eighty-two Tibetan Buddhist communities in Taiwan in 1996.[11] Already by 2000, sociologist Yao Lixiang claimed that Tibetan Buddhism enjoyed such popularity that "in terms of the frequency of [Tibetan Buddhist] empowerments, Taiwan is the first in the world outside of areas where Tibetan Buddhism is endemic."[12]

While Tibetan Buddhist traditions have experienced remarkable growth in Taiwan, particularly over the last three decades, they have also been plagued by a handful of media scandals and become subject to vocal public critiques. The most vehement and prominent voice opposing Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan has been the True Enlightenment Practitioners Association (佛教正覺同修會) or TEPA, led by their founder Master Xiao Pingshi (蕭平實 b. 1944). By the late 2000s and early 2010s, TEPA's protests of Tibetan Buddhism and accusations that Tibetan Buddhist teachers were primarily interested in sexually and financially exploiting Taiwanese disciples had spread to cities across Taiwan and even onto the front pages of Taiwan's major newspapers.

These protests and public condemnations of Tibetan Buddhism did not go unnoticed. Besides private responses from individual Tibetan Buddhist teachers and Taiwanese disciples, and the Taipei-based Tibet Religious Foundation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (the Central Tibetan Administration's de-facto Taiwan office), TEPA's criticisms also precipitated the formation of the Taiwan International Tibetan

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5 Jagou 2011: 57–59; Jagou 2021: 92–107; Yao Lixiang 2008: 586–595.

6 "如雨後春筍" Chen Yujiao 陳玉蛟1990: 108; Yao Lixiang 姚麗香 2000: 336; Yao Lixiang 姚麗香2007: 316.

7 Wang Ying 王瑩 and Chen Miaoling 陳妙鈴 1997: 78.

8 Jagou 2018: 11.

9 Zablocki 2009: 391.

10 Weng Shijie 翁仕杰 2018: 34.

11 Yao Lixiang 姚麗香 2007: 118.

12 "以灌頂法會的頻率而言， 除了藏傳佛教的跟本地之外，台灣可算是居世界之冠了。" Yao Lixiang 姚麗香 2000: 334.

Buddhism Study Institute or ITBSI in 2009. As described above, ITBSI was initially the modest vision of four Taiwan-based Tibetan Buddhist teachers. Over the next fifteen years, ITBSI grew swiftly to become a leading body among the hundreds of otherwise disparate and independent Tibetan Buddhist centers and religious teachers in Taiwan. Today, ITBSI offers resources to monastics across all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, represents Tibetan Buddhism to other Buddhist and non-Buddhist religious groups in Taiwan, media outlets, civil organizations, and the Taiwanese government, and even offers educational and chaplaincy services to Taiwan's small ethnic Tibetan community.[13]

This article examines the founding of ITBSI and the ways this organization has addressed TEPA's public criticisms of Tibetan Buddhism. Being confronted with aggressive condemnations of their tradition, ITBSI's founders and early leaders called for greater unity and collective action among Tibetan Buddhist monastics across sectarian traditions. Rather than engaging in direct debate, ITBSI responded indirectly to TEPA's attacks on Tibetan Buddhism through public outreach efforts, pursuing intra- and inter-religious dialogue, and providing guidance on ethical conduct for Tibetan Buddhist teachers. Engaging with discussions of religious localization, I argue that ITBSI's efforts to curate a space for their own public self-representation have served as a critical avenue for helping Tibetan Buddhism find a home within Taiwan's broader religious landscape.

First, I discuss religious localization and strategies for the creation of the "local" in the context of religious traditions on the move. I then overview TEPA's public criticisms of Tibetan Buddhism. Finally, I describe ITBSI's founding and strategy of responding to their critics by creating spaces for their own self-representation. Through a close examination of one of ITBSI's earliest and longest continuous public outreach efforts, their organization of public prayer ceremonies for disaster victims, I argue that ITBSI's pursuit of alternative spaces for their members to represent Tibetan Buddhism to the Taiwanese public has contributed to the localization of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan. In this way, ITBSI's activities demonstrate how responding to local critics may serve as a successful strategy for the localization of religious traditions in new contexts.

2. Creating Local Buddhisms

The concept of "localization" has been applied in numerous studies,

[13] For further discussion of ITBSI, see: Yonnetti 2024.

yet is often left rather vaguely defined. Perhaps this lack of clarity is out of necessity or conviction, an acknowledgement that the process of how initially "foreign" phenomena become accultured and adapted into novel settings is so tied to the specifics of what is being localized, along with where and how, that any broad definitional statement extrapolated from a particular case would inevitably prove inadequate. Additionally, in the context of our globalized world, the very idea of the "local" has come under question. As Arjun Appadurai noted nearly thirty years ago, the production of locality is occurring in a world that is increasingly deterritorialized, diasporic, and transnational.[14]

Although these trends have only intensified during the subsequent decades, nevertheless, Appadurai's contention that "displaced, deterritorialized, and transient populations" continue to be "engaged in the construction of locality, as a structure of feeling, often in the face of the erosion, dispersal, and implosion of neighborhoods as coherent social formations"[15] continues to warrant attention. Writing in the same period, Roland Robertson similarly noted that while contemporary realities require us to think in global terms, this does not necessitate that "all forms of locality are thus substantially homogenized."[16] In fact, he contends, globalization "has involved and increasingly involves the creation and the incorporation of locality."[17] Or, as Ludovic Lado summarizes succinctly, "there is no globalization without localization."[18] Accordingly, as critical as attending to universalizing trends within globalization is, studying the continued creation of the "local" by peoples in motion remains equally vital.

Several scholars of Buddhism have applied localization in analyses of how Buddhist traditions have moved across and established roots within new geographies and communities. The most common strategy identified for religious localization involves the adoption, either intentionally or unintentionally, of new religious, social, or cultural practices, beliefs, and norms to "localize" a religion within a new setting.[19] This is often associated with instances of religious hybridity or syncretism with local forms of religious praxis.[20] Other localization strategies scholars have identified include translation,[21] cooperation with local political authorities,[22] and imputing new meanings onto the

14 Appadurai 1996: 188.
15 Ibid.: 199.
16 Robertson 1995: 31.
17 Ibid.: 40.
18 Lado 2009: 93–94.
19 Chia 2020: 132–152; Soucy 2014; Tan 2018: 62–82.
20 Jagou 2018: 14–20.
21 Chia 2020: 293–298; Wang Bin 2020: 144–145.
22 Chandler 2004: 276–285; Chia 2020: 141–151.

physical environment.[23] Localization can proceed diffusedly through the gradual osmosis of local cultural norms and practices or intentionally through specific agents who actively facilitate the "transplantation"[24] of their religion.

In the absence of a sizable heritage Tibetan Buddhist community, individual teachers have been the primary agents catalyzing the localization of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan by adapting how they present their traditions within the local religious, social, and linguistic environment. Through coordinating Tibetan Buddhist teachers across sectarian traditions, ITBSI has especially helped to facilitate Tibetan Buddhism's localization within Taiwan. In addition to employing some of the strategies mentioned above, ITBSI has also actively worked to localize Tibetan Buddhism through responding to local critics of Tibetan Buddhism. By finding ways to reply indirectly to criticism and create alternative spaces to promote their own image of Tibetan Buddhism, ITBSI has helped Tibetan Buddhism to move in from the edges of Taiwanese religious life and grow deeper, local roots.

3. TEPA's Opposition to Tibetan Buddhism

TEPA was founded in 1997 by the Chinese Buddhist teacher Master Xiao Pingshi and is based in Taipei's Datong District, with branches across Taiwan's major cities as well as Hong Kong and Los Angeles. TEPA became especially well known locally during the 2000s and early 2010s for distributing leaflets outside transportation hubs, hanging banners denouncing Tibetan Buddhism outside their headquarters that are clearly visible from Yuanshan Metro Station,[25] and organizing protests at major Tibetan Buddhist events. Their supporters often hold banners, chant slogans such as "*Lamajiao bu shi fojiao!*" (喇嘛教不是佛教！ Lamaism is not Buddhism!) or "*Xiu shuangshenfa de lamajiao bu shi fojiao!*" (修雙身法的喇嘛教不是佛教！ Lamaism, based on the Couple Practice Tantra, is not Buddhism!), and distribute pamphlets to dissuade passersby from engaging with

[23] Gyatso 1989: 41–44.

[24] Baumann 1994: 35.

[25] These banners have been hung since at least 2010. As of October 2023, the bilingual banners read "避免宗教性侵害,請遠離藏傳佛教喇嘛 To avoid religious sexual abuse please stay away from the lamas of Tibetan Buddhism," "喇嘛的無上瑜伽是男女交合的雙身法The Highest Yoga Tantra cultivated by lamas is essentially a yab-yum practice of sex," and "藏傳佛教非佛教 喇嘛非佛門僧人 Tibetan Buddhism is definitely not Buddhism; the lamas are not Buddhist monks or nuns."

Tibetan Buddhism. Perhaps TEPA's most notable public demonstration occurred in 2009 when approximately 400 of their members protested outside a prayer ceremony led by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Kaohsiung for the victims of Typhoon Morakot. In 2011, TEPA's criticisms made literal headlines when they published half-page "advertisements" blasting Tibetan Buddhism on the cover pages of four of Taiwan's major newspapers.

The reasons for TEPA's opposition are documented extensively across more than twenty books[26] written by Xiao Pingshi critiquing Tibetan Buddhism. For evidence, Xiao Pingshi draws upon a variety of Tibetan Buddhist scriptures and works about Tibetan Buddhism in Chinese translation. Repeating critiques leveled against Tibetan religion by numerous Chinese Buddhists and literati since at least the Yuan Dynasty,[27] Xiao Pingshi condemns Tibetan Buddhism for "taking sexual practices between a man and woman as orthodox Buddhist practice."[28] He is convinced[29] that Tibetan Buddhism is based on practices of sexual yoga, places the position of the guru above the Buddha, and employs violence, alcohol, and sexual fluids in its practices. He further insists that Tibetan Buddhist teachers come to Taiwan primarily to financially and sexually exploit Taiwanese students and TEPA amplifies media coverage of several scandals involving Tibetan Buddhist monastics in Taiwan to support their critiques.[30]

In addition to repeating many historical critiques of Tibetan Buddhism, Xiao Pingshi also condemns its promotion of Madhyamaka philosophy. He claims that Tibetan Buddhists "promote the theory of causelessness [of phenomena, which advocates] contemplating the empty nature of dependent arising and negates all the Consciousness-

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[26] Among these, Master Xiao Pingshi's most thorough critiques are made in the four volumes of *Crazy Wisdom and True Wisdom*, the first volume of which was translated into English in 2017. Xiao Pingshi 蕭平實 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2002d; 2017.
An extensive library of articles and videos containing TEPA's critiques of Tibetan Buddhism in English and Chinese can be found here: True Enlightenment Education Foundation n.d.; Zhengjue jiaoyu jijinhui 正覺教育基金會 2022.

[27] Charleux 2002: 139–145; Shen and Wang 2008: 269–287.

[28] "密教以男女雙身淫合之法，作為佛法正修" Xiao Pingshi 蕭平實 2002a: 19.

[29] One TEPA leader told me that although Xiao Pingshi had not studied these texts with any Tibetan Buddhist teacher during this lifetime, he is reportedly able to "decode" their "true" meaning due to karmic seeds planted during a previous life when he was a reincarnate teacher in the Jonang school of Tibetan Buddhism. Focus group participant in discussion with author, Taipei, October 24, 2022.

[30] Zhengjue jiaoyu jijinhui 正覺教育基金會 2012.

Only scriptures of the Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma."[31] Specifically, Xiao Pingshi objects to Tibetan Buddhists' denial of the permanence of the eighth consciousness (Tib. *kun gzhi'i rnam shes*, Chin. 藏識/阿賴耶識), a position which he maintains causes them to "fall into nihilism and causelessness."[32] Xiao Pingshi attacks Tibetan and even several prominent Chinese Buddhist teachers, such as Master Yinshun (印順導師 1906–2005), for what he sees as their mistaken views regarding Buddhist theories of causality.

There is clearly an apocalyptic tone to how Master Xiao Pingshi describes the existential threat posed by Tibetan Buddhism. For example, he writes that,

> It's a fact that tantra flourished and Buddhism faded in ancient Indian history.[33] The thriving of tantra inevitably led to Buddhism's decline. If it flourishes enough, [tantra] will undoubtedly replace Exoteric Buddhism[34] and will destroy Buddhism [again]. This is because the dharma of tantra really isn't the true buddhadharma, but [only] the superficial appearance of Buddhism.[35]

Master Xiao Pingshi and TEPA's members follow more than half a millennia of historical precedent among numerous Chinese critics whose use of the terms *mizong* (密宗) or "tantra" and *lamajiao* (喇嘛教) or "Lamaism"[36] aimed at disaffiliating Tibetan religion from Buddhism.[37] Xiao Pingshi objects to what he sees as Tibetan Buddhists advocating "non-Buddhist" practices and worries that "Lamaism" may eclipse and ultimately replace other Buddhist traditions. If that occurs, he fears that "true" Buddhism (which presumably references the

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31 "推廣無因論之緣起性空觀，否定第三轉法輪之唯識諸經" Xiao Pingshi 蕭平實 2002a: 18.

32 "墮於斷滅論及無因論中" Ibid.: 6 [38].

33 A senior student of Master Xiao Pingshi explained that from their interpretation of historical events, TEPA maintains that Buddhism in India was destroyed because Muslim invaders explicitly objected to tantric practices. Focus group participant in discussion with author, Taipei, October 24, 2022.

34 Xiao Pingshi considers Exoteric Buddhism (顯教) to be the "true" Buddhism (佛教) and equates tantra with heresy (外道).

35 "密教興而佛教亡，是古印度之歷史事實。密教之興盛，必將導致佛法之衰落；興盛至極而完全取代顯教已，則必滅亡佛教；此因密教之法並非眞正佛法,乃是外披佛教表相" Xiao Pingshi 蕭平實 2002a: 19.

36 Lopez suggests the term *Lamaism* and other European language equivalents (*Lamaismus*, *Lamaïsme*, etc.), which also disconnected Tibetan religion from other forms of Buddhism, may have emerged in the late 18th or early 19th centuries influenced by the Chinese term. Lopez 1999: 19–24.

37 Charleux 2002: 134–135; Shen and Wang 2008: 288–297.

Buddhism he teaches) will be lost akin to how it disappeared in India.[38] Viewing "Lamaism" as an existential threat, TEPA continues to invest significant resources in campaigns to dissuade the Taiwanese public from engaging with Tibetan Buddhism.

The founders of ITBSI, along with many other Tibetan Buddhists in Taiwan, have been profoundly hurt by TEPA's multi-media campaigns. Many supporters of Tibetan Buddhism accused TEPA of receiving funding from the Chinese Communist Party, akin to other organizations that have worked to sow seeds of distrust in Tibetan Buddhism globally. This is a claim that TEPA firmly denies.[39] Regardless of the source of their funding, by the late 2000s TEPA had become so vocal in their criticisms of Tibetan Buddhism that the founders of ITBSI decided they must present an alternative view to the public. To do so, they needed to create spaces for Tibetan Buddhist monastics to represent their own traditions.

4. Responding to Critics of Tibetan Buddhism

ITBSI was founded in Taipei, Taiwan by four Tibetan Buddhist leaders: Tulku Thupten Norbu Rinpoché (Sprul sku thub bstan nor bu rin po che, b. 1965), a Nyingma teacher from Amdo, Kathok Rigdzin Chenmo Rinpoché (Kaḥ thog rig 'dzin chen mo rin po che, b. 1973), a Nyingma teacher from Nepal, Khenpo Tsülnam Rinpoché (Mkhan po tshul rnams rin po che, b. 1968), a Kagyü teacher from Kham, and Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché. All four teachers had centers in Taipei and led their own communities of Taiwanese followers. In response to what they perceived as attacks on their religion, the founders decided to step out of their individual dharma centers and collectively defend Tibetan Buddhism to the Taiwanese public.

From the beginning, ITBSI's leaders decided not to confront TEPA directly. As one of ITBSI's early chairmen, Khenpo Tsering Tashi (Mkhan po tshe ring bkra shis, b. 1976), noted, other Tibetan Buddhist leaders had already debated TEPA to little effect. "They [TEPA] wouldn't listen to debates with them. There were debates already. Khenpo Södargye wrote a book and Alak Dorjé Sang also wrote a book, but they [TEPA] don't give any reasons… They just mostly continued with their aim of slandering the views of Tibetan Buddhism for the public."[40] Another former chairman of ITBSI, Geshé Lharampa

[38] This belief does not recognize the continuation of Indic Buddhist traditions, most notably among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley.

[39] Li Tong 李潼 2011.

[40] "*khong tsho rtsod pa rgyab nas nyan gi mi 'dug rtsod pa rgyab yod red da/ mkhan po bsod dar rgyas kyis deb bris yod red dang a lag rdo rje bzang gis deb bris yod red/ khong tsho'i*

Hashen Rinpoché (Dge bshes lha ram pa ha shen rin po che, b. 1975) concurred, noting "ITBSI couldn't go and pick a fight with Xiao Pingshi in Taiwan. If I were to write a lot of books saying, 'what you've said isn't true,' then [we would just] write back and forth and back and forth. There would be no benefit from that."[41] Instead of debating with TEPA directly, the founders of ITBSI sought to collectively build their own platform from which Tibetan Buddhist voices could represent their own religious tradition.

From its founding four members, ITBSI expanded participation in its projects significantly among Tibetan Buddhist teachers in Taiwan. By 2013 then-chairman Katok Rigdzin Chenmo Rinpoché reported ITBSI had more than one hundred members.[42] Exact membership over the years is difficult to calculate as most Tibetan Buddhist teachers must frequently leave Taiwan and leadership turnover is high in many centers. In 2020, ITBSI's new chairman Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel (Mkhan po 'jigs med rnam rgyal) formalized the membership process slightly through efforts to personally reach out to monastics and invite them to join a mobile messaging group for ITBSI. As of December 2022, Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel had individually spoken with and recruited over 200 teachers from all schools of Tibetan Buddhism to this group.[43]

Although ITBSI has not directly engaged TEPA through their projects, it would be incorrect to say that ITBSI has not responded to the critiques leveled by Master Xiao Pingshi and TEPA. One of ITBSI's early efforts to present what they saw as accurate information about Tibetan religions to the Taiwanese public was an internet-based "television" station called Taiwan Tibetan Buddhism Web TV or TTBTV (台灣藏傳佛教網路電視台). Officially launched in 2013, TTBTV aimed "to plant widely the correct knowledge and correct views of Buddhism in people's hearts, to allow each lama and virtuous teacher to collectively cooperate and spread the dharma through the unlimited world wide web… so the world can see the dharma."[44] TTBTV produced content that included teachings by Tibetan Buddhist

rgyu mtshan thog 'gro gi yod ma red da/ … bod brgyud nang bstan la lta stangs yag po med par bzo yag rang gi dmigs yul byed nas bshad bzhag 'dug ga" Khenpo Tsering Tashi, interview with author, virtual, November 10, 2022.

41 *"bod brgyud nang bstan zhib 'jug tshogs pa gyis tha'e wan la Xiao Pingshi la nga tshos Xiao Pingshi la a 'dzing ka 'gro gyi thub kyi yod ma red ba/ ngas khyod bshad pa bden pa ma red zer yag deb mang po 'bri na/ phar zhig 'bri tshur zhig 'bri phar zhig 'bri tshur zhig 'bri 'bri 'bri/ phan thogs yod ma red/"* Hashen Rinpoche, interview with author, Linkou, New Taipei City, September 23, 2022.

42 Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2013: 1.

43 Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel, interview with author, Taipei, December 16, 2022.

44 "藏傳佛教網路電視台成立的宗旨是為了將佛法的正知正見更能夠廣植於大心，藉著網路電視的無遠弗屆， 讓每一位上師和善知識們共同合作弘揚佛法…讓世界看見佛法。" Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2013: 7.

leaders, interviews, panel discussions, and public talks that were posted on their website and on YouTube.

In addition to TTBTV, ITBSI started a series of dialogues with Buddhist teachers from other traditions. In large part, these overtures seem motivated by ITBSI's hopes to gain allies among Chinese Buddhist traditions who until recently have had a rather uncertain relationship with Tibetan Buddhism. Hashen Rinpoché noted that ITBSI hopes engaging with Chinese Buddhist monastics makes a statement to the Taiwanese public.

> At large Taiwanese monasteries, we participate jointly in dharma assemblies [celebration of] the Buddha's birthday, and so forth. This is because Xiao Pingshi keeps criticizing Tibetan Buddhism, saying it's not real Buddhism. We [go] and at the center of these renowned monasteries where [Chinese Buddhist] masters and their many monks are, we are wearing these [red] robes. We recite together, we eat together, and we perform rituals together. This sets an example. Why? Through these monasteries we [show] people that what Xiao Pingshi has been saying is not true. We [Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist monastics] are the same.[45]

By gathering with Chinese Buddhist monastics to perform rituals, pray for the public wellbeing, and engage in dialogue, ITBSI's leaders have sought to improve the public perception of Tibetan Buddhism.

Thus, over the last fifteen years ITBSI has pursued diverse avenues to create a public image for Tibetan Buddhism of their own making in Taiwan. In addition to responding to TEPA's critiques through curating a media channel for Tibetan Buddhist teachings and partnering with the Chinese Buddhist sangha, ITBSI has also engaged the Taiwanese public through prayers for disaster victims. As I will describe in the next section, ITBSI's public prayers have proven an especially important space for both capturing public attention and for creating a public image of Tibetan Buddhism on their own terms.

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[45] "*tha'e wan nang gi dgon pa chen po tsho gyi tshogs 'tshogs yag de 'dra mnyam du ston pa'i 'khrungs skar la sogs pa/ de 'dra mnyam zhugs byed kyi 'dug de gyi lan zhig ga re red zer na Xiao Pingshi gyis bod brgyud nang bstan de nang pa ma red zer skyon brjod byed kyi yod red ba/ nga tsho gyis tha'e wan nang la yod pa'i dgon po skad grags chen po la bla ma mang po kho rang tsho'i grwa pa fashi mang po yod sa dkyil la/ nga tsho grwa chas 'di gyon nas mnyam du 'don pa 'don/ mnyam du kha lag za/ mnyam du tshogs pa 'tshogs/ de dpe mtshon byed kyi 'dug de ga re red zer na mi mang nang la Xiao Pingshi khyed rang tsho la lab yag de dgon pa 'di gyi thog nas de red mi 'dug nga tsho gcig pa red 'dug*" Hashen Rinpoché, interview with author, Linkou, New Taipei City, September 23, 2022.

5. A Space of their Own: ITBSI's Prayers for Disaster Victims

Since 2010 ITBSI has organized prayer ceremonies led by a trans-sectarian group of their members for the victims of earthquakes, fires, and other calamities. Offering condolences and praying for the victims of these disasters is a way for ITBSI to demonstrate to the Taiwanese public their conviction that compassion and care for sentient beings lies at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism. Furthermore, these prayers are also an important way for ITBSI's members to embody locally legible practices of Buddhist monastics praying for the dead and have often attracted broader media coverage.

Some of the prayer ceremonies ITBSI has organized have been for victims of distant tragedies, such the 2010 Qinghai earthquake, the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, and the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. Most, however, have been for the victims of local disasters in Taiwan. Since its founding, ITBSI has convened and dispatched trans-sectarian delegations to pray at disaster sites and organized dharma assemblies to pray for the victims of nearly a dozen tragedies across Taiwan. These include prayers for the victims of the 2014 Kaohsiung gas explosion, the 2014 mass killing in New Taipei City's Jiangcizui Metro Station, the 2014 and 2015 TransAsia plane crashes, the 2016 Neihu Murder, the 2017 earthquake in Tainan, the 2018 Puyuma train derailment, the 2021 Hualien train derailment, and the 2021 Kaohsiung Chengzhongcheng Building fire. Most recently, ITBSI participated in a five-day prayer ceremony for the victims of the April 2024 Hualien earthquake. As Hashen Rinpoché noted, in all these cases ITBSI's approach is quite simple: "Wherever the site of a disaster is, we will go [there] to offer prayers."[46]

Some of the prayer ceremonies have been relatively modest, such as a candlelight vigil held outside Jiangcizui Metro Station for the victims of a mass killing[47] or a make-shift public memorial in Neihu for the brutally murdered "Little Lightbulb" (小燈泡).[48] Others occurred at venues ITBSI arranged, such as a large tent near the site of the 2014 Kaohsiung gas explosion.[49] Still others were held at officially designated prayer spaces, such as a prayer hall organized by Tzu Chi (慈濟) following the 2021 Hualien train crash,[50] a municipal funeral

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[46] *"dka' ngal sprod sa gang yin nga tsho 'don pa 'don yag 'gro yag"* Hashen Rinpoché, interview with author, Linkou, New Taipei City, September 23, 2022.

[47] Tha'e wan rgyal spyi'i bod brgyud nang bstan zhib 'jug tshogs pa 2014a.

[48] Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2016.

[49] Tha'e wan rgyal spyi'i bod brgyud nang bstan zhib 'jug tshogs pa 2014b.

[50] Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2021a.

home organized by the Kaohsiung city government for victims of the 2021 fire,[51] or the Hualien Municipal Funeral Home organized by the Hualien County government for the victims of the 2024 earthquake.[52]

ITBSI recruits participants for these events from among its monastic membership. While ITBSI often gathers between twenty and forty geshés, khenpos, rinpochés, and other monastics, sometimes they have mobilized significantly more participants. For example, Khenpo Tsering Tashi recalled leading several hundred monastics to Kaohsiung in 2014.[53] Returning to Kaohsiung in 2021, ITBSI organized more than sixty participants to pray for the victims of the Chengzhongcheng Building fire.[54] Although ITBSI organizes its members, their participation is voluntary as monastics must bear the individual costs associated with attending these prayer ceremonies.

In many cases, ITBSI's members are mobilized and on site within twenty-four to thirty-six hours of a disaster. For example, following the train derailment in Hualien on the morning of April 2nd, 2021, ITBSI organized and dispatched a group of around twenty monastics from Taipei who arrived in Hualien in time to lead prayers at eleven in the morning of April 3rd.[55] Similarly, following an earthquake that struck Tainan in the early morning hours of February 6th, 2016, more than twenty ITBSI members departed from Taipei and arrived in Tainan that same evening, where "the many rinpochés and masters, sitting on ground strewn with rubble, and in the cold temperatures, recited sūtras and prayed [for the victims]."[56]

Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel described these prayer ceremonies as a way for ITBSI to contribute to Taiwanese society. He noted,

> For many years, ITBSI has [discussed] what we can do for Buddhism? What work can [we] do for Tibetan Buddhist monks in Taiwan? Similarly, [we have discussed] how can we serve Taiwanese society? For one thing, there are many earthquakes in Taiwan. Many disasters happen here. Whenever these occur, we go to offer sympathy. When a lot of buildings collapsed due to an earthquake, when a man killed a young girl, when there was a train crash, when there were plane crashes, or last year when a building burned down, and so on. Without exception,

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51 Ba Sang 巴桑 2021.

52 Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2024.

53 Khenpo Tsering Tashi, interview with author, virtual, November 10, 2022.

54 Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2021b.

55 Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2021a.

56 "多為仁波切，上師席地坐於散佈瓦礫的地上，在寒流低溫中以佛經唸誦，進行祈福。" Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2017.

> we go to offer sympathy. We've done this many times. Our work has been a success by offering people's hearts some relief.[57]

By visiting the sites of tragedies and praying for the victims, ITBSI views its expressions of sympathy as a way to "serve Taiwanese society." While ITBSI's members pray as Mahāyāna Buddhists for all sentient beings to be freed from suffering and attain happiness, their prayers for the victims of these earthquakes, floods, and traffic accidents are oriented specifically at tragedies that happen on Taiwanese soil and to Taiwanese people. In doing so, as Khenpo Tsering Tashi noted, ITBSI demonstrates that "Tibetan Buddhism offers some care to the Taiwanese people."[58]

While ITBSI's disaster responses have been on a rather modest scale, their swift responses that rally sizeable groups of Tibetan Buddhist monastics have not gone unnoticed. A number Taiwanese media outlets have reported on ITBSI's public prayer events over the past decade. ITBSI's mobilization of several hundred monks following the 2014 gas explosion in Kaohsiung was covered by both television[59] and online print media.[60] Similar media coverage was given for ITBSI's prayers for "Little Lightbulb,"[61] the victims of the Hualien train derailment,[62] and the Chengzhongcheng Building fire.[63]

These reports reveal generally favorable public feedback to ITBSI's prayer ceremonies. For example, a Taiwanese disciple who accompanied ITBSI's monastics to Kaohsiung in 2014 recalled that "when we got out of the taxi, the driver knew that we had come there

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[57] *"de nas da nga tsho gyi rgyal spyi bod brgyud nang bstan zhib 'jug tshogs pas da nga tsho 'das pa'i cha la lo mang po zhig la nang pa'i chos kyi thog la ga re byed thub yag tha'e wan bod brgyud dge 'dun pa'i thog la ga re las ka las thub kyi 'dug de nang bzhin tha'e spyi tshogs la tog tsam zhabs phyi 'dra/ da gcig tha'e wan la sa yom mang po rgyug yag yod red/ skyon chag mang po slebs kyi yod red/ de ga dus yin na nga tshos kyi gdung sems mnyam skye 'gro gyi yod red/ dang po de la zhig da sa yom rgyug nas khang pa mang po ril smyong yod red/ bu mo chung chung mi gyis bsad shag chog 'dra po/ gnam gru 'dzag chog 'dra po/ de nas me 'khor brdab skyon byung yag la sogs pa/ de tsho la sogs pa da nga tsho gyi na ning khang pa me 'bar yag la sogs pa nga tsho de 'dra gcig med na ma gtogs gdung sems mnyam skyed gyi ched du nga tsho 'gro gyi yod red/ de tsho dpe mang po 'gro nas/ 'gro nas mi sems khul thebs yag 'dra po gyis las ka yag po thon yod red/"* Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel, interview with author, Taipei, December 16, 2022.

[58] *"bod brgyud nang bstan gyi zhig tha'e wan gyi mi dmangs de tsho tog tsam sems khur thebs yag"* Khenpo Tsering Tashi, interview with author, virtual, November 10, 2022.

[59] Lian Peibei 連珮貝 2014.

[60] You Hongqi 游宏琦 2014.

[61] Lin Jinsheng 林金聖 2016.

[62] Deng Wei 鄧崴 2021.

[63] Zhong Zhipeng 鍾志鵬 2021.

to hold a dharma assembly for the disaster zone and refused to accept our payment. He said, 'Thank you for coming to help. You are the first group who has held a transcendence prayer service here.'"[64] Additionally, in 2021 a news anchor shared a photograph of more than a dozen ITBSI members on a train to Hualien and noted how "many netizens were extremely touched by looking at this photograph" of monastics going to pray for the victims of the train derailment.[65]

In addition to praise in local media, ITBSI's prayers have also been welcomed because praying for the deceased is a widely legible, expected, and lauded activity for Buddhist monastics in Taiwan. One of the cornerstone activities of Chinese Buddhist monastics historically and today is the performance of funerary rituals.[66] Indeed, for many Taiwanese who are not members of Buddhist organizations, perhaps their only interactions with Buddhist clergy occur in the context of rituals following the deaths of family and friends. Thus, by enacting rituals for the victims of tragic events, ITBSI's members perform activities that Taiwanese expect of virtuous Buddhist monastics. While it is certainly true that performing funeral rituals is an important activity for Tibetan Buddhist monastics beyond Taiwan, ITBSI's prayer ceremonies are unique in their trans-sectarian participation and very public performance that often inspires local Taiwanese to join in.[67] In this way, ITBSI's public prayers for disaster victims have contributed to overcoming TEPA's caricatures of Tibetan Buddhism as non-virtuous and non-Buddhist.

The more than a dozen prayer ceremonies ITBSI monastics have organized and participated in publicly manifest Tibetan Buddhist monastics' virtue and their "care" for the victims of these tragedies. That most victims are Taiwanese further manifests ITBSI's commitment to the spiritual wellbeing of Taiwanese people, both in this life and in future rebirths. Through these efforts, ITBSI has not only curated an alternative public image of Tibetan Buddhism for the broader Taiwanese public, but also helped to move Tibetan Buddhism in from the margins of public religious life in Taiwan. Far from TEPA's predatory image, the photos of twenty, forty, or more of ITBSI's members praying consistently show Tibetan Buddhist monks doing what the Taiwanese public expects virtuous Buddhist monastics to do: "to wish the victims might be free from suffering and obtain

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64 "下車時,當計程車司機得知我們是來這裡為災區舉行法會,堅持不收車資。他說:「謝謝你們來幫忙,你們是第一個在這裡辦超渡法會的團體。」" Li Zhenyan 李真延 2014: 61.

65 "讓部分網友認為這一張照片看起來的確很感人" Deng Wei 鄧崴 2021.

66 Jones 1999: 30, 195, 200–205.

67 Lin Jinsheng 林金聖 2016.

happiness, be reborn in the Western Pure Land, obtain the blessings of the Three Jewels… and to console the grief in the hearts of the victims' families."[68]

Conclusion

This article has traced ITBSI's origins and their strategies for overcoming criticisms and curating their own image of Tibetan Buddhism for the Taiwanese public. I have argued that what began as a response to TEPA's negative characterizations of Tibetan Buddhism ultimately became a path for ITBSI's members to further embed Tibetan Buddhism within Taiwanese religious life. In addition to a video media channel, and intra-religious dialogue, public prayer ceremonies for the victims of disasters have proven an effective pathway for ITBSI to demonstrate both the virtue and public service Tibetan Buddhist monastics provide. Through these efforts, ITBSI has transformed responding to local criticism into an avenue for the further localization of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan.

I conclude by considering just how successful ITBSI has been at overcoming TEPA's criticism and claiming their own space in the public eye. While it is certainly true that TEPA's anti-Tibetan Buddhism stance remains unchanged, ITBSI's activities have led to tangible changes. Some transformations have been noticed by ITBSI's members. For example, Khenpo Tsülnam Rinpoché noted the decreased use of the term "Lamaism" by Chinese Buddhists across Taiwan. "What are the accomplishments of our efforts? Earlier, among people in Taiwan very few Chinese Buddhist masters would say 'Tibetan Buddhism' is [a form of] 'Buddhism.' They called [Tibetan Buddhism] 'Lamaism'… Today there are very few people who say 'Lamaism.'"[69] Tulku Thupten Norbu Rinpoché concurred, noting "Now our relationship with Chinese Buddhists has really improved. For example, we have a great relationship with the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China's chairman and director general… We also have a good relationship with Tzu Chi… [Chinese

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[68] "祝願罹難者離苦得樂，往生西方淨土，並期待借用三寶...的加持，能撫平罹難者家屬心中的哀傷" Zhong Zhipeng 鍾志鵬 2021.

[69] "*nga tsho'i nus pa zhig ga 'dre don 'dug zer na/ sngon ma tha'e wan gyi mang po nas rgya bla ma de tsho gyis Zangchuan fojiao zer yag de fojiao de dbe spyod 'don mkhan dpe nyung nyung yod red/ lamajiao zer...deng sang lamajiao zer mkhan dpe nyung nyung 'dra po yod red/*" Khenpo Tsülnam Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, November 11, 2022.

Buddhists'] view of Tibetan Buddhism has really improved."[70] In this way, two of ITBSI's founders cite the increased use of "Tibetan Buddhism" over "Lamaism" and more friendly relations with Chinese Buddhist teachers and organizations as evidence of the greater local acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism.

Externally, there are other signs that ITBSI's efforts have borne fruit. For example, as late as 2012, the Central Tibetan Administration's former Representative Dawa Tsering (Zla ba tshe ring, b. 1963) recalled being attacked by a monk and nun representing the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (中國佛教會) or BAROC in a meeting of religious leaders in Taiwan's Control Yuan. "[I] was surprised. As they began their speech, they said Tibetan Buddhism is not a true [form] of Buddhism. They also stated that regardless of whether or not you [Tibetan Buddhists] are a true [form] of Buddhism, it would be best if you stayed in your own place. Why do you have to come to Taiwan?" Dawa Tsering also reported these monastics presented TEPA's brochures with their critiques of Tibetan Buddhism to the meeting's conveners.[71] Several years later, due ITBSI's public outreach BAROC has started to actively partner with ITBSI to host tri-tradition Buddhist forums and celebrations of the Buddha's birthday. Not only that, but BAROC's chairman has even accepted a position as head of ITBSI's Board of External Advisors and has been an invited guest and speaker at their Dharma Promotion Forums.

Accordingly, ITBSI's efforts to overcome TEPA's criticisms of Tibetan Buddhism have led to felt changes in the way Tibetan Buddhism is viewed, referenced, and interacted with by Taiwanese people and other Buddhists in Taiwan. In recent years ITBSI has been invited alongside Taiwan's most prominent Buddhist organizations, such as Tzu Chi, Dharma Drum Mountain (法鼓山), and Buddha's Light Mountain (佛光山) to attend Buddhist prayer services. In 2021, ITBSI even received direct recognition from Taiwanese President Tsai Ying-wen, who exchanged bows with ITBSI's then-chairman Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel and thanked ITBSI for their prayers for the victims of the Hualien train derailment.[72] What began as part of ITBSI's initiative

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[70] "*da lta rgya brgyud dang mnyam 'brel dpe yag po chags song / dper na Zhongguo fojiaohui da lta gyi dongshizhang dang lishizhang/ de 'dra 'brel ba chen po yod red/... de 'dra Ciji yang 'brel ba yag po yod red/…bod brgyud nang bstan gyi zhig lta stangs ci yag song /*" Tulku Thupten Norbu Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, November 11, 2022.

[71] "沒想到他們一開又就講西藏佛教並不是真正的佛教，期間還講不管你是不是真正的佛教，待在自己的地方就好了，為什麼要跑到我們臺灣來等" Dawa Cairen 達瓦才仁 and Suolang Duoji 索朗多吉 2020.

[72] Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2021a.

to create a counter image of Tibetan Buddhism has ultimately helped to further facilitate its integration into the local Taiwanese religious landscape. In this way, ITBSI's work demonstrates how countering local critiques can serve as a powerful strategy for the localization of a religious tradition within a new context.

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The Chapter on the Theory of the Elements (*'byung ba'i gnas*) in Klong chen pa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (*Theg mchog mdzod*)

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This paper explores an account of the theory of the primary elements (*'byung ba*) particular to the Great Perfection Heart Essence (Rdzogs chen snying thig) tradition of the 14th century, as presented within the *Theg mchog mdzod* (*Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*) by Klong chen pa (1308–1364). The longest text in Klong chen pa's *Mdzod bdun* (*Seven Treasuries*) collection, the *Theg mchog mdzod* covers an extraordinary range of topics within the Great Perfection Heart Essence universe of ideas. Functionally an interpretive commentary on the *Man ngag sde'i rgyud bcu bdun* (*Seventeen Tantras of the Instruction Series)*, Klong chen pa's text systematically reorganizes and recasts these earlier texts. While many 14th century texts discuss the elements, most often within the context of cosmology or human anatomy, the *Theg mchog mdzod* is distinctive in its concentration of elemental ideas within a single chapter. This essay offers translation and analysis of key aspects of the chapter – its theoretical and philosophical content regarding elemental theory, as well as its structural role within the project of the *Theg mchog mdzod*. It also interrogates the role of elemental theory in this text, exploring the ways that Klong chen pa's interpretation of the elemental theories of the *Seventeen Tantras* materials differs from the presentation of elemental theory within the 12th century commentaries to those texts attributed to Vimalamitra, raising questions about the implications of those patterns of dissonance.

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1. Introduction

The theorization of matter in terms of the primary elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space is among the most enduring philosophical and cosmological schemes in Buddhist history. Yet there has been little discussion in contemporary Buddhist studies of the variety of elemental theories belonging to diverse Buddhist traditions. This may be a result of the prevailing belief that elemental discourses are mainly the purview of the Buddhist materialist philosophies associated with the *Abhidharma* traditions. A counter example to this assumption, however, is found among the literatures of the *Rdzogs chen snying thig* ("Great Perfection Heart Essence") tradition, which has a rich history of thematizing elemental ideas in its own distinctive philosophical idiom, with the nature of elemental discourse evolving meaningfully within the tradition over time.

Rdzogs chen snying thig is an esoteric transmission consisting of proprietary philosophies, doctrines, and contemplative practices associated with the *Man ngag sde*, or Instruction Series of *Rdzogs chen* literature in the *Rnying ma* school of Tibetan Buddhism. Klong chen rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, or Klong chen pa (1308–1364), is perhaps the most widely recognized scholar of this tradition in its long history. The fifteenth chapter of Klong chen pa's *Theg mchog mdzod* (*Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*) is a particularly noteworthy example of Buddhist philosophical engagement with elemental theories: While it is common for texts of all Buddhist denominations authored during Tibet's 14th century "classical era" to discuss the elements to some extent, most often within the context of cosmology, human anatomy, embryology, or funerary practices, the *Theg mchog mdzod* is unusual in that it contains a chapter that is entirely dedicated to the philosophy of the elements. Though this is not the only place in the text where the elements are discussed, the presence of a chapter devoted to the elements indicates that, for Klong chen pa, elemental ideas were simultaneously prevalent enough within the broader Rdzogs chen snying thig universe of ideas to require their own space of analysis, and homogenous enough that they could be sequestered from their embedded role in other kinds of knowledge systems, for instance in embryology, and still remain a coherent philosophy.

This article offers an account of this chapter, including a summary and analysis of its theoretical and philosophical content regarding elemental theories. In particular, the essay brings attention to the ways that Klong chen pa interprets elemental ideas inherited from earlier Rdzogs chen snying thig literature, namely, the text collection known

as the *Man ngag sde'i rgyud bcu bdun,* the *Seventeen Tantras of the Instruction Series,* colloquially known as *Rdzogs chen rgyud bcu bdun* (*Seventeen Great Perfection Tantras*) or simply the *Rgyud bcu bdun* (*Seventeen Tantras)*. The chapter on the elements draws most frequently from three texts in this collection: the *Rig pa rang shar* (the *Naturally Arisen Awareness Tantra*), the *Mu tig phreng ba* (the *Pearl Necklace Tantra*), and the *Sgra thal 'gyur* (the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*). Focusing on a set of prominent elemental motifs that emerge in Klong chen pa's writing, the essay examines how Klong chen pa integrates the elemental ideas of these earlier works, blending distinctive Snying thig concepts with classical Buddhist philosophies into a novel synthesis.

In this regard, the major questions underlying this essay concern the drivers of change in elemental ideas over time, and how we might account for patterns of dissonance expressed within a series of related texts particular to a single contemplative-philosophical tradition. The degree to which elemental ideas and their significance to the Rdzogs chen snying thig tradition changed over the centuries is attested to in the 18th century writings of 'Jigs med gling pa who, in the early pages of his *Ye shes bla ma,* quotes a passage from the *Sgra thal 'gyur* describing the critical role of the *Sgra bzhi rnal 'byor* or "Yoga of the Four Sounds [of the Elements]" to the wider Rdzogs chen snying thig rubric for contemplative practice. He writes:

> Even though this quotation indicates that one should do the practice on the four sounds [of the elements], since these days there are few who are established in this practice, it is acceptable to omit it.[2]

This is to say, in effect, "no one does these practices anymore." The extent to which this statement speaks for the tradition broadly at this time or previously is of course not entirely clear from this brief quotation alone. But it does seem to point to an idea that's represented elsewhere in the literature, if only by absence. Namely, that at some point in the centuries that elapsed between the era in which the *Rgyud bcu bdun* were first popularized (11th century, tentatively), and the time that 'Jigs med gling pa set out to write the *Ye shes bla ma*, practices of meditation and of scholarship involving the elements which appear to be so important to the early Rdzogs chen snying thig tradition, evidenced by their prevalence in the *Sgra thal 'gyur* in particular, ceased to be upheld in a significant way. Why that seems to be the case

[2] *ces sgra bzhi rnal 'byor du bya bar gsungs kyang / deng sang lag len la 'debs pa nyung bas ma byas kyang rung ngo.* Kun mkhyen 'Jigs med gling pa n.d.: 3. See also Kun mkhyen 'Jigs med gling pa 2008: 20–21.

is a driving question that underlies this essay, and the larger body of research of which it is a small part. And while I do not expect to provide definitive answers to that question here, a natural starting place is with the work of Klong chen pa, whose *Mdzod bdun* have become the authoritative sources on the *Rgyud bcu bdun*, exceeding in popularity and common usage within Rnying ma monastic curricula both the tantras themselves and their early commentaries attributed to Vimalamitra, dated to the 12th century.[3] This is, at any rate, the rationale for such a study of the *Theg mchog mdzod*'s "Chapter on the Theory of the Elements."

2. *The* Theg mchog mdzod, *or* Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle

The *Theg mchog mdzod,* formally the *Theg pa'i mchog rin po che'i mdzod,* is found among Klong chen pa's seven-volume masterwork, the *Mdzod bdun, or Seven Treasuries,* a massive interpretive and commentarial project composed of seven individual works on various topics that, together, seek to offer an exhaustive account of the Rdzogs chen snying thig path. The *Theg mchog mdzod* is the largest single work in the collection, with the *A 'dzom* edition of the text totaling 2,179 folia. Organized into twenty-five overarching topics or chapters, it is a systematic recasting and reinterpretation of earlier foundational Rdzogs chen snying thig texts, namely, and with few exceptions, the *Rgyud bcu bdun*.

There are numerous editions of the *Theg mchog mdzod* in circulation. It is commonly found along with the other texts in the *Mdzod bdun* collection in various editions of the *Klong chen gsung 'bum*, as well as in free-standing editions of the *Mdzod bdun*.[4] The translations and analysis contained within this article are based upon versions of the *Theg mchog mdzod* found within the *A 'dzom, Sde dge,* and *Mang yul Gung thang* editions of the *Mdzod bdun*.[5]

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[3] These commentaries are found within the formulation of collected works known as the *Extensive Collection of the Spoken Transmission (Bka ma shin tu rgyas pa)*, in the edition compiled by Khenpo Munsel (1916–1993). See: Vimalamitra 1999a.

[4] Five editions of the *Klong chen gsung 'bum* are available in the Buddhist Digital Resource Center's library, a ten volume edition; a six volume *dbu med* edition; a twenty-six volume "dpal brtseg" edition; a woodblock edition from Sde dge, and a facsimile of this edition, which is said to have been edited by Rdzogs chen Mi 'gyur nam kha'i rdo rje (1793–1870). There are also seven independent editions of the *Klong chen mdzod bdun* available.

[5] My translations are based primarily upon a word-searchable copy of the A 'dzom edition of the *Mdzod bdun* that was created by Tsering Gyurme, and edited by David Germano, Khenpo Ngawang Dorje, and Christopher Hatchel. I've also consulted the Sde dge edition of the *Mdzod bdun*, and the Mang yul Gung thang

As David Higgins has noted, the text is organized according to a certain "architectural metaphor."[6] In the colophon to the text, Klong chen pa describes the text as a "*mchod rten*," a *stūpa* which "the author has assembled and reverentially offered for the sake of preserving the Snying thig teachings for posterity out of fear that they would otherwise disappear."[7] Its twenty-five chapters are, accordingly, described as "*rim khang*," as stories or steps of the stupa, organized into five overarching parts that are further broken down into five subsidiary topics each.[8]

If we are to interpret Klong chen pa's words in this way, clustering the chapters into five topical sets of five, the chapter on the elements is located at the conclusion of a section that deals with Rdzogs chen snying thig characterizations of human experience, including the creation of the physical body through karmic habituation, the creation and use of the contemplative technologies of the subtle body including the four wheels (*'khor lo bzhi*) and the four lamps (*sgron ma bzhi*), as well as important Rdzogs chen-specific characterizations of Buddhist categories such as mind (*sems*), primordial gnosis (*ye shes*), all-ground (*kun gzhi*), and reality body (*chos sku*). Thus, the chapters break down in the following order: the eleventh chapter deals with embryology and the creation of the body (*lus grub tshul*).[9] The twelfth chapter describes the constitution of the energetic body in terms of the four wheels.[10] The thirteenth chapter describes the "four lamps which depend upon primordial gnosis" (*ye shes kyi rten sgron ma bzhi*).[11] And the fourteenth chapter, the chapter on "distinctions," describes the distinctions between the "all ground and reality body" (*kun gzhi dang*

facsimile edition published with an introduction by Franz-Karl Erhard under the title *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab 'byams-pa's Theg Mchog Mdzod* (2000). Very few variations are noted between these three witnesses. There is, however, meaningful variation between Klong chen pa's quotations of the tantras and the tantras themselves. This is largely due to the fact that the A 'dzom edition of the tantras has been heavily edited. Where there are variations, I have included references in the footnotes to those translations, emphasized in **bold typeface**. A thorough account of the text-critical details of the *Theg mchog mdzod* relative to the tantras is included in my forthcoming dissertation.

6 Higgins 2012: 296.

7 *Gnas gzhan grub pa'i glang po gzims las de yi gzhung lugs mig zum la / gnas gzhan grub pa'i gom tshugs 'khyor zhing zab mo'i gnad rnams 'thor dogs nas*. Higgins 2012: 296 fn. 714; Klong chen pa 1999b: 593; 2000: 501a–501b; 1983 v. 4: 548:

8 *Theg mchog mnyam pa'i sa gzhi la/ 'od gsal rdo rje snying po'i rtse / rim khang lnga phrag lngas brgyan pa / zab cing rgya che'i bkod pas mdzes*. Klong chen pa 1999b: 593; 2000: 501b; 1983 v. 4: 548.

9 As described by the summary of the previous chapter located at the beginning of each chapter. Klong chen pa 1999b: 491.

10 See Ibid.: 491–554.

11 Ibid.: 555.

chos sku), and "mind and primordial gnosis" (*sems dang ye shes*).[12] The cluster of topics that follows the chapter on the elements, chapters sixteen through twenty, move into a discussion of distinctive Rdzogs chen snying thig contemplative practices, culminating with the nineteenth and twentieth chapters on breakthrough (*khregs chod*) and direct transcendence (*thod rgal*) practices respectively, widely considered to be the pinnacle contemplative practices of the Rdzogs chen snying thig path.

Thus, according to Klong chen pa's own description of the organizational structure of the text, the chapter on the elements is situated at the conclusion of a section on the body and embodied technologies for contemplative practice and transformation, and a section on the means of attaining that transformation. This is perhaps an indication of the importance of elemental ideas specifically to Rdzogs chen snying thig contemplative practices. To borrow another common Buddhist informational paradigm, the chapter on the elements forms a vital part of the "ground" relative to the "path" described in chapters sixteen through twenty.

3. The Organization of the Chapter on the Elements

A comparatively short chapter, the chapter on the elements is a total of 22 folio pages in the *A 'dzom* edition. The chapter is composed of numerous quotations from multiple texts among the *Rgyud bcu bdun* collection, with additional expository remarks by Klong chen pa of varying degrees of detail. By far the most frequently quoted text in the chapter is the *Rig pa rang shar* (*The Naturally Arisen Awareness Tantra*), which is quoted sixteen times. After that, the *Mu tig phreng ba* (*The Pearl Necklace Tantra*) is quoted a total of seven times, the *Sgra thal 'gyur* (*Unimpeded Sound Tantra*) is quoted three times, and the *Nor bu phra bkod* (*Inlaid Jewels Tantra*) is quoted once. In addition to these, the *Thig le kun gsal* (*Total Illumination of the Bindu*) is quoted twice in the chapter, and the *Gsang ba spyod ba sa bon kyi rgyud* (*Seed of Secret Conduct Tantra*) is quoted once. The *Thig le kun gsal* is, like the *Khros ma'i rgyud* and the *Klong gsal bar ba'i rgyud*, often closely associated with the *Rgyud bcu bdun* collection. The *Gsang ba spyod ba sa bon kyi rgyud* is the core tantra of the *Gser yig* division of the *Bi ma snying thig (Heart Essence of Vimalamitra)*. It is regularly quoted in Klong chen pa's *Mdzod bdun* collection.

The chapter consists of a detailed topical outline (*sa bcad*), the primary division of which is between the "common" (*thun mong gi dbye*

[12] Ibid.: 597.

ba) and the "specific" (*so so'i rang bzhin*) characteristics of the elements. Under the heading of the "common" are the qualities of the elements that are common to, or shared among, all five elements. The "specific," by far the longer portion of the chapter, then deals with each of the elements individually. Both topics are further divided by a distinction between the "outer elements" (*phyi'i 'byung*) and the "inner elements" (*nang 'byung*/*nang gi 'byung*). Generally speaking, the category of outer elements refers to the material elements that comprise the structure of the surrounding environment, while the category of inner elements refers to the material elemental constituents of the human body. In addition to its role as an organizing motif in elemental thought broadly, this idea of outer and inner elements provides an important occasion for material-philosophical discourse. I return to this matter below.

Another notable informational paradigm within the *sa bcad* of the chapter involves the analysis of the elements according to ten distinctive analytical categories. These ten are a mix of intuitive and somewhat opaque categories, including the elements' "essence" (*ngo bo*), "etymology" (*nges tshig*), "purpose" (*dgos ched*), "characteristics" (*mtshan nyid*), "process" (*las rim*), "reality" (*chos nyid*), "metaphors" (*don sbyar*), "the way in which they are free" (*grol tshul*), "distinctions" (*dbye ba*), and "the way in which they are complete" (*tshang tshul*). While nearly every chapter in the *Theg mchog mdzod* contains some version of this list as part of its approach to discursive analysis of a wide variety of topics, most commonly as a combination of the categories of essence (*ngo bo*), etymology (*nges tshig*), and distinctions (*dbye ba*), chapter fifteen's list is unusually extensive and includes the unique categories of "process" (*las rim*), "correlations" (*don sbyar*), "the way in which they are free" (*grol tshul*), and "the way in which they are complete" (*tshang tshul*)—analytical categories which are not found elsewhere in the text.[13] It appears to be the case that when these unusual analytical categories are employed in the informational paradigm, it's because they are natural to discussions of the elements

[13] In Chapter four we find a combination of *ngo bo, nges tshig, dbye ba, dgos pa, 'bras bu*. Chapter five has *ngo bo, nges tshig, dbye ba*. Chapter six has *ngo bo, nges tshig, dbye ba*. Chapter seven has *ngo bo, nges tshig, dbye ba, rten, phan yon, nyes dmigs, bskang thabs, bsrung thabs*. Chapter twelve has *ngo bo* and *nges tshig*. Chapter thirteen has *ngo bo, nges tshig, dbye ba* (and *ngo bo, nges tshig, dbye ba, mtshan nyid, gnas, sgo, rang bzhin, yul snang, tshad, sgron ma dngos, de nyams su len thabs, mthun dpe*). Chapter fourteen uses *ngo bo, nges tshig, dbye ba*. Chapter sixteen uses various combinations of *ngo bo, nges tshig, rang lus, mtshon dpe, rtags, snang ba, gnas, mtshan nyid, yul,* and *dbye ba*. Chapter seventeen has *ngo bo, nges tshig, rang bzhin, chos nyid*. Chapter twenty-two uses a combination of *ngo bo, nges tshig, dbye ba, mtshan nyid, 'bras bu,* and *ngo bo, rgyud, dbye ba*, and *'bras bu*. Chapter twenty-three has *ngo bo, nges tshig, dbye ba*. Chapter twenty-five has *ngo bo, nges tshig, dbye ba*.

in the tantras, rather than second-order generic categories created by Klong chen pa for the purpose of general exposition of diverse topics. In almost every case, these *sa bcad* are populated by quotations from the tantras with few to no expository comments from Klong chen pa himself. In every case, the term, i.e. "process" (*las rim*), or "the way in which they are free" (*grol tshul*), is in fact drawn from the quotation under consideration. For instance, the "process" (*las rim*) of the elements contains only the following quotation from the *Sgra thal 'gyur*:

> The *process* (*las rim*) of the inner elements is as follows:
> Earth creates the foundation of the body
> and, through generation, is asserted to ripen as flesh.
>
> Water draws the entire body together
> and, through generation, is asserted to ripen as blood.
>
> Fire ripens the entire body
> and, through generation, is asserted to ripen as heat.
>
> Wind suspends the entire body
> and, through generation, ripens as breath.[14]

"Process," as such, refers to the process or stages of development of the elemental body. Since the concept of "process" is not found elsewhere in the *Theg mchog mdzod* as an organizational category, we can conclude that it is being used as a term of art specific to elemental ideas arising from the *Sgra thal 'gyur*. Similarly, the category of *don sbyar*, translated here as "correlations," has to do with the correlations between the elements and their corresponding "meanings" or "realities" (*don*) at the level of Rdzogs chen snying thig gnostic metaphysics. In other words, the elements' divine or "ultimate" reality. This section includes two quotations from the tantras, the first from the *Rig pa rang shar*, and the second from the *Nor bu 'phra bkod*. The *Rig pa rang shar* quotation is as follows:

> These are the correlations (*don sbyar*) of the elements: In the sense that the essence of its nature never changes, the originally pure Reality Body (*chos sku*) is the earth element. In the sense

[14] *nang 'byung las kyi rim pa ni / sas ni lus kyi gzhi byas te / bskyed pas sha yi smin sor 'dod / chos ni lus kun bsdud nas ni / bskyed pas khrag tu smin par 'dod / mes ni lus kun smin byas te/ bskyed pas drod di smin par 'dod / rlung gis lus kun 'degs pa la / bskyed pas dbugs su smin par byed.* Klong chen pa 1999b: 7; 2000: 272a; 1983 v. 4: 108. This quotation is found in the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, see Anonymous 2000b: 45–46.

> that it engages the meaning, awareness-gnosis (*rig pa'i ye shes*) is also the fire element. In the sense that it arrives in the expanse unperturbed, awareness-gnosis is also the wind element. In the sense that it draws together the three sheaths (*sbubs gsum*), awareness-gnosis is also the water element. In the sense that it dissolves into a state that is non-dual, empty, and clear, gnosis is the element of space.[15]

The "correlations" of the elements thus involve the analogy of each of the elements to a corresponding meaning within an "ultimate" or divine dimension characterized in Rdzogs chen snying thig contemplative metaphysics: the earth element to the reality body (*chos sku*), and the remaining elements to properties of gnosis—specifically fire, wind, and water to the intrinsic, self-conscious quality of awareness-gnosis (*rig pa'i ye shes*), and space simply to gnosis (*ye shes*) itself. These comparisons, the quotation concludes "are the *don sbyar* of the elements."[16]

The second quotation under the heading of "*don sbyar*" is from the *Nor bu 'phra bkod* which uses the related phrases "*dang sbyor,*" and "*dang sbyar*" meaning more literally to "connect with." The implication however appears to be the same, namely, that each of the elements is "connected" metaphorically to an aspect of gnosis. The *Nor bu 'phra bkod* quotation is as follows:

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[15] *'byung ba'i don sbyar 'di lta ste / chos sku gdod nas dag pa'i rang bzhin la / ngo bo 'gyur ba med pas 'byung ba sa yang yin / rig pa'i ye shes don la spyod pas 'byung ba me yang yin / rig pa'i ye shes ma bskyod dbyings su gshegs pas 'byung ba rlung yang yin / rig pa'i ye shes sbubs gsum gcig tu 'dril bas 'byung ba chu yang yin / ye shes stong gsal gnyis med ngang du thim pas 'byung ba nam mkha' yin.* Klong chen pa 1999b: 7–8; 2000: 272a; 1983 v. 4: 109. There are some notable discrepancies between the version of this quotation that appears in the A 'dzom edition of the *Theg mchog mdzod* and the A 'dzom edition of the *Rig pa rang shar*, namely, in the line "*rig pa'i ye shes ma bskyod dbyings su gshegs pas 'byung ba rlung yang yin*" the *Rig pa rang shar* has *shes pa* instead of *gshegs pa;* in the following line "*rig pa'i ye shes sbubs gsum gcig tu 'dril bas 'byung ba chu yang yin*" the *Rig pa rang shar* has *sku gsum* rather than *sbubs gsum*; and in the final line "*ye shes stong gsal gnyis med ngang du thim pas 'byung ba nam mkha' yin*" the *Rig pa rang shar* omits the initial *ye shes*. A translation of this quotation according to the *Rig pa rang shar* would thus read: "The metaphor of the elements is like this: In the sense that the essence of the nature of the originally pure Reality Body never changes, it is the earth element. In the sense that it engages the meaning, awareness-gnosis is also the fire element. In the sense that it apprehends the undisturbed expanse, awareness-gnosis is also the wind element. In the sense that awareness-gnosis draws together the three Enlightened bodies, it is also the water element. In the sense that emptiness-clarity dissolves into a state of non-duality, it is the space element. These are the metaphors of the elements." See Anonymous 2000c: 465.

[16] Klong chen pa 1999b: 8; 2000. 272b; 1983 v. 4: 110.

> All the elements which appear externally are connected with (*dang sbyor*) awareness-gnosis, and are therefore ordinary phenomena (*thun mong gi chos*). To distinguish among them: since the main characteristic of earth is hardening, it's connected with the aspect of awareness-gnosis that is free from creation and destruction. Since the main characteristic of air is suspension, it's connected with the aspect of awareness-gnosis that is unobstructed. Since the main characteristic of fire is burning, it's connected with the aspect of awareness-gnosis that is not coming under the influence of the afflictions. Since the main characteristic of water is moisturizing, it's connected with the aspect of awareness-gnosis that is omnipresent. Since the main characteristic of space is vastness, it's connected with (*dang sbyar,* sic.) the aspect of awareness-gnosis that is expansiveness.[17]

As with the quotation from the *Rig pa rang shar*, the "*dang sbyor*" of the *Nor bu 'phra bkod* involves a series of comparisons between each of the "externally appearing" elements as material phenomena to the distinctly Rdzogs chen snying thig contemplative-philosophical concept of *intrinsic* gnosis, that is, awareness-gnosis (*rig pa'i ye shes*). Again, like the category of "process" (*las rim*), the concept of connections ("*don sbyar,"* or *"dang sbyor"*) between the elements and gnosis appears to be original to the tantras. Klong chen pa's creation of the analytical category "*don sbyar*" functions to piece together these related ideas.

The category of *grol tshul*, the "way in which [the elements] are free" includes a single quotation from the *Mu tig phreng ba*:

> Because space is empty even within its pervasiveness,
> It is freed as substantiality.
>
> Because wind appears in the absence of any object of apprehension,
> It is freed as the activity of drawing entities together.

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[17] *phyi 'byung ba lnga nyid thun mong rang rgyud kyi chos yin te / phyir snang ba'i 'byung ba thams cad rang gi rig pa nyid dang sbyor bas na thun mong gi chos yin te / de yang dbye ba 'di lta ste / sa'i mtshan nyid sra bar byed pa nyid kyang / rig pa'i ye shes skye 'jig dang bral bar sbyor ro / rlung gi mtshan nyid 'degs par byed pa nyid kyang / rig pa'i ye shes thogs pa med pa dang sbyor ro / me'i mtshan nyid bsreg par byed pa nyid kyang / rig pa'i ye shes nyon mongs pa'i dbang du ma song ba nyid dang sbyor ro / chu'i mtshan nyid rlan par byed pa nyid kyang / rig pa'i ye shes yul kun la 'jug pa dang sbyor ro / nam mkha'i mtshan nyid yangs pa nyid kyang / rig pa'i mtshan nyid rgya ma chad pa dang sbyar bar bya'o.* Klong chen pa 1999b: 8; 2000: 272a–272b; 1983 v. 4: 109–110.

Because fire consumes offerings in a ripening way,
It is freed as movement, separating the pure from the stale.[18]

Because earth generates and supports,
It is freed as a limitless voidness lacking substance.

Because water is wet in a way that draws things together
It is free as burning, as the activity of ripening.[19]

This quotation indicates that each of the elements becomes free into qualities and activities which represent the opposite of their standard qualities. Thus, space is free as substantiality (*dngos po*), earth is free as emptiness (*stong ba*), water is free as burning (*bsreg pa*), and wind is free as cohesion (*sdud pa*), a characteristic usually associated with water in elemental literature. [20] The theory at play in this example is that each material element becomes free in the inversion of its ordinary qualities. This quotation appears within the *Mu tig phreng ba*'s fourth chapter which deals broadly with the concept of "natural freedom" (*rang grol*), one of five kinds of ontological freedom that are classically discussed in Rdzogs chen snying thig literature, along with primordial freedom (*ye grol*); naked freedom *(cer grol);* unbounded freedom (*mtha'*

[18] The A 'dzom, Sde dge and Mang yul editions of the *Theg mchog mdzod* have "*bskyod cing dangs brnyings 'byed par grol*." The A 'dzom edition of the *Mu tig phreng ba* has "*bskyod cing dangs snyigs 'byed par grol*" indicating, I suspect, a correction in the A 'dzom edition of the tantra. A fuller examination of the philological details of this line, with reference to additional variants of both the *Theg mchog mdzod* and the *Rgyud bcu bdun,* is included in my forthcoming dissertation. See the following footnote for the complete transliteration of this passage in both texts.

[19] *nam mkha' nyid ni khyab stong pas / nam mkha' nyid ni dngos par grol / rlung ni gzung yul med snang bas / dngos po sdud pa'i las su grol / me ni smin byed byin za bas / bskyod cing dangs brnyings 'byed par grol / sa ni skyed byed 'degs pas na / dngos med mtha' yas stong par grol / chu ni sdud byed rlan pas na / sreg byed smin pa'i las so grol.* Klong chen pa 1999b: 8–9; 2000: 272b; 1983 v. 4: 110: See also Anonymous 2000a: 448–449, *nam mkha' nyid ni khyab stong pas / nam mkha' nyid ni dngos par grol / rlung ni gzung yul med snang bas / dngos po sdud pa'i las su grol / me ni smin byed byin za bas / bskyod cing dangs snyigs 'byed par grol / sa ni skyed byed bdegs pas na / dngos med mtha' yas stong par grol / chu ni sdud byed rlan pas na / sreg byed smin pa'i las so grol.* The primary difference between these two editions is found in the line *"bskyod cing dangs brnyings 'byed par grol*."

[20] A verse from the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* describes the dissolution of the material world in the context of the attainment of the mandalas, as such: "Space will emerge solid as indestructible reality. That will burn, and then the fire too will be incinerated. Turning into water, it will cascade in the appropriate way. This world-system will be dispersed – All will be emptied and will collapse." Klong chen pa's *Phyogs bcu mun sel* commentary to this verse offers a similar rationale to that which we find in the *Mug tig phreng ba,* in particular, that "space" will resolve as solid. See Dorje 1987: 608–609.

grol); and unique freedom (*gcig grol*).[21] The *Mu tig phreng ba* devotes significant discussion to the natural freedom of the elements in this chapter which, in making the argument for the ontological freedom of both the material world of the container (*snod*) and its contents (*bcud*, i.e., sentient beings), postulates that the five elements, as the most fundamental constituents of that material reality, are themselves effortlessly and naturally free.[22]

The final category in this section discusses "the way in which [the elements] are complete" (*tshang tshul*). It contains a somewhat more elaborate set of subsequent *sa bcad* and a greater amount of exposition compared with the other "unique" categories discussed above. All quotations in this section are derived from the *Mu tig phreng ba*'s seventh chapter which, according to the chapter's colophon, deals with "the perfection of all phenomena of cyclic existence and transcendence in oneself" *('khor 'das kyi chos thabs cad rang la rdzogs par bstan pa*).[23] Some of the quotations that Klong chen pa references in the chapter use the word "*tshang ba*" while others use the synonym "*rdzogs pa*" following the *Mu tig phreng ba* chapter seven colophon. Each of the quotations used by Klong chen pa refer to the idea that the apparent phenomena of both the relative and ultimate existential domains, construed as cyclic existence *('khor*) and transcendence (*'das*), are present in ordinary aspects of human experience. This includes the physical realities of the body and environment, the mental realities of cognition and affect, and the contemplative reality of awareness (*rig pa*). The following quotation from this section is expressive of this idea:

> Awareness is precisely as follows:
> The sun and the moon are wisdom and method;
> birth is the ground,
> women, the path.
>
> Planets are the pinnacle of realization, stars are phenomena,
> clouds are all-pervasive compassion;
> trees are phenomenality, the expansive path;
> mountains are the view, unchanging;
> crags are the reality body, created but free from degradation.
>
> Roots are the common basis of all phenomena;
> branches are the limbs of enlightenment;
> the trunk is the single taste of emptiness.

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[21] This list is present in multiple tantras but can be found in the *The Pearl Garland Tantra* (*Mu tig phreng ba'i rgyud*). See Anonymous 2000a: 445–446.
[22] Ibid.: 436–454.
[23] Ibid.: 520.

> Petals are the pervasive expanse of reality;
> flowers are the light of primordial gnosis;
> fruits are the self-perfected three bodies.
>
> Sound is the sensory domain of the nature of reality;
> smell is Buddha's speech resounding;
> taste is the taste of the bliss of experience;
> touch is great meditative absorption.
>
> Musical instruments are the perfect mandala of the five lights;
> ribbons are creative luminosity manifesting as color;
> canopies are protective wisdom;
> parasols are the key points of instruction (*man ngag*);
> victory banners are realization, manifest enlightenment.
>
> To the nature of mind, all things
> exist in a manner spontaneous and primordial.
> So it follows that rational thought and all manifest phenomena
> are merely symbols.[24]

Additional quotations in this section continue the metaphor, drawing connections between the outer world and the physical and sensory features of the yogic body as it is implicated in religious experience. This idea is summarized at the conclusion of this section as follows:

> The phenomena which display going beyond suffering
> abide completely within the body and mind.
>
> If you ask what is the essence of self-evident awareness,
> it is the perfection of reality, however it appears.[25]

Like the categories of "process" (*las rim*), "metaphors" (*don sbyar*), and

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[24] *rig pa nyid la 'di lta ste/ nyi ma zla ba shes rab thabs/ skyes pa gzhi la bud med lam / gza' ni rtogs tshad skar ma chos / sprin ni thugs rje kun la khyab / shing ni chos nyid rgyas pa'i lam / ri ni lta ba 'gyur ba med / brag ni chos sku skye 'jig bral / rtsa ba chos kun rgyu gcig pa / yal ga byang chub yan lag nyid / stong pa stong par ro gcig ste / 'dab ma khyab byed chos kyi dbyings / me tog ye shes sgron ma nyid / 'bras bu sku gsum rang rdzogs so / sgra ni chos nyid yul gyi sgra / dri ni sangs rgyas gsungs du grags / ro ni nyams myong bde ba'i ro / reg ni bsam gtan chen po'o / rol mo 'od lnga'i dkyil 'khor rdzogs / 'phan ni kha dog gsal ba'i gdangs / gdugs ni skyob pa shes rab ste/ bla bre man ngag che ba'i gnad / rgyal mtshan rtogs pa mngon sangs rgyas / sems nyid ngo la chos rnams ni / ye nas lhun grub tshul du gnas/ de phyir blo dang dngos po yi / chos rnams thams cad btags pa tsam.* Klong chen pa 1999b: 14–15; 2000: 274b–275a; 1983 v. 4: 114–115.

[25] *myang 'das mtshon pa'i chos de rnams / lus dang sems la rdzogs par gnas.* Klong chen pa 1999b: 14; 2000: 274b; 1983 v. 4: 114.

"the way in which they are free" (*grol tshul*), the "way in which they are complete" (*tshang tshul*) also appears to be drawing on ideas that are distinctive of and original to the tantras. These become analytical categories in Klong chen pa's list, less as a matter of second-order analysis of the philosophy of the elements, and more as a way of faithfully capturing and reproducing salient ideas as they appear in the tantras.

Thus, despite there being relatively few expository remarks from Klong chen pa in this chapter overall, a great deal of contextual meaning is borne out through its organizational structure. Indeed, through the *sa bcad* we can begin to see the kind of curatorial work that Klong chen pa is engaged in, including the systematic reorganization of ideas from the tantras, and the incorporation of elemental concepts and terms of art into the text's elaborate *sa bcad*. While this kind of curatorial activity is rather characteristic of the *Theg mchog mdzod* and the *Mdzod bdun* broadly, it is also through these organizational categories that the unique aspects of the text's elemental theory begin to emerge. The remainder of the essay examines two organizational motifs in the chapter and the philosophical propositions they entail.

4. Outer and Inner, Greater and Lesser Elements

Two dichotomies form the primary structural organization of the chapter. These are, firstly, the distinction between outer and inner elements, followed closely by the distinction between "greater" and "lesser" elements. The distinction between the outer and inner elements is as old and venerable a concept as the elements themselves in Buddhist thought. Some of the earliest references to this idea in Buddhist literatures are found among the oldest known texts of the Pāli *Suttapitaka*.[26] In these contexts, as well as that of the subsequent *Abhidharma* literatures, some of which had popular continuities in Tibet, the distinction between the inner and outer elements defines the domains of personal and environmental kinds of matter as they are experienced by a human subject: The "interior" and "exterior" forms of a given element are understood as dual manifestations of what is in fact a continuously experienceable material quality. Thus, earth's solidity, water's fluidity, fire's temperature, and wind's motility, manifest alternately as external material and meteorological phenomena in the surrounding environment, and internally as bodily

[26] The *Mahāhatthipadopamasutta* (MN28), *Mahārāhulovādasutta* (MN62), and *Dhātuvibhaṅgasutta* (MN140), describe the internal and external elements in virtually uniform detail. See Bhikkhu Nanamoly and Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995.

tissues, fluids, metabolic and respiratory processes.[27]

Klong chen pa elaborates on these conventions regarding the outer and inner elements paradigm by describing the distinction between the two in terms of support relations. Early in the chapter, he writes "The five outer *form* (*gzugs*) elements originate as the appearing of the environing world and the basis [for the existence of] sentient beings. The five *actual* (*dngos*) inner elements originate as the basis for mind and awareness."[28] This quote introduces a series of symmetries which define the mode of relationship between the outer and inner elements to one between "form" (*gzugs*)—the outer material elements as the environing world in which sentient beings operate—and the "actual" (*dngos*) inner reality of the elements which are the basis for the operation of "mind" and "awareness," in other words, the physical body. The "form elements," Klong chen pa continues, "are the presently externally appearing earth, water, fire, wind, and space. The *actual* elements are the five bodily properties of 'hardness' and so forth, which create the support conditions for the five inner elements."[29]

Klong chen pa's rearticulation of the outer and inner elements paradigm, which up until this point is consistent with earlier Buddhist renderings, is thereafter complicated by a second distinction made between "great" (*'byung ba chen po*) and "lesser" (*'byung chung*) elements. In the same passage as the above, Klong chen pa writes,

> There is no such thing as the sentient being or Buddha who does not rely upon these two [inner and outer elements]. Sentient beings operate within the space (*dbyings*) of straying *('khrul ba*) with respect to the elements, but they innately possess the Great Elements *('byung ba chen po*). Buddhas reside in the space of the elements beginning with 'earth lacking firmness' and they experience the total exhaustion of that which shrouds the five Great Elements.[30]

The term "Great Elements" (*mahābhūta* or *'byung ba chen po*) is of course

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27 See Vasubandhu 1982b: 31b–32a; Vasubandhu 1990: 68–70.

28 *phyi 'byung gzugs lnga ni sems can gyi rten snod kyi snang bar chags pa / nang 'byung dngos lnga ni sems dang rig pa'i rten du chags pa ste.* Klong chen pa 1999b: 5; 2000: 271a; 1983 v. 4: 107.

29 *'byung ba dngos ni lus kyi chos sra ba sa la sogs pa lnga ste nang 'byung gi rten di gyur pa lnga'o*. Klong chen pa 1999b: 3–4; 2000: 270b–271a; 1983 v. 4: 107.

30 *'di gnyis la ma brten pa sems can dang sangs rgyas gang yang med de / sems can rnams 'byung lnga 'khrul pa'i dbyings la spyod cing / 'byung ba chen po rang chas su ldan /sangs rgyas rnam don dam dag po'i 'byung lnga sa sra ba med pa la sogs pa lnga'i dbyings la bzhugs shing / 'byung ba chen po lnga'i dri ma shin tu zad pa la spyod do / de'ang 'byung ba chen po ni 'od gsal ba'i ye shes kha dog lnga ldan yin la.* Klong chen pa 1999b: 3; 2000: 270b; 1983 v. 4: 106.

not original to Klong chen pa's oeuvre. Indeed, the definition of the elements as "great" is a matter of concern in Buddhist literatures as early as Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (*Chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi bshad pa)* where the elements are defined as "great" because they are the primary matter out of which secondary forms of matter are derived.[31] For Klong chen pa, instead, the Great Elements represent a distinct ontological category. He writes, "moreover, the Great Elements possess the five colors of wisdom illumination; the lesser elements are the quintet of earth, water, fire, wind, and space."[32] Thus for Klong chen pa the Great Elements are also equivalent to the five lights (*'od gsal lnga*), which are both present in the "lighting up of the ground" and correspondingly implicated in the contemplative phenomenon known as "rainbow body," wherein the coarse bodily elements are resolved into their ultimate nature as light. This appears to be what is meant, in the earlier quote, by the phrase "earth lacking firmness," as well as the idea that Buddhas experience the exhaustion of "that which shrouds the Great Elements." Elaborating on this, Klong chen pa writes "having purified the five confused elements, you arrive at the space of the five lights and meet with the internal expanse. This is equivalent to the Great Elements, which are [in reality] the manifestation of the [Ground's] spontaneous presence (*lhun grub*)."[33]

That Klong chen pa would proffer his own creative etymology of *'byung ba*, or *'byung ba chen po*, however, is not particularly unusual or innovative in the *Rdzogs chen snying thig* context. There are numerous instances among the *Rgyud bcu bdun* and their early commentaries of the creation of original definitions of *'byung ba*. The *Mu tig phreng ba* commentary, for instance, addresses the etymology of *'byung ba*, writing, "when we call them *emergent* elements (*'byung ba*), out of what do they emerge (*'byung*)? They emerge from the basic state of reality, thus they are 'emergent' elements." Here the etymology plays on the literal sense of *'byung ba*, an intransitive verb meaning "to come about," or "to be created," in a way that reappropriates its conventional usage in service of advancing a distinctive Rdzogs chen

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31 See Vasubandhu 1982b: 31b: "The four great elements are so called because they are the support of all other form" (*'byung ba chen po bzhi rnams zhes bya ba ni 'di dag gzugs gzhan thams chad kyi rten nyid du rigs pa'i phyir na chen po nyid do*). See also Vasubandhu 1990: 68–69*: bhūtāni pṛthivīdhāturaptejovāyudhātavaḥ / ityete catvāraḥ svalakṣaṇopādāyarūpadhāraṇād dhātavaścatvāri mahābhūtāny ucyante / mahattvameṣāṃ sarvānyarūpāśrayatvenaudārikatvāt*.

32 *de'ang 'byung ba chen po ni 'od gsal ba'i ye shes kha dog lnga ldan yin la / 'byung chung ni sa chu me rlung nam mkha' lnga'o.* Klong chen pa 1999b: 3; 2000: 270b; 1983 v. 4: 106.

33 *'khrul 'byung lnga dag nas 'od gsal lnga klong du phebs te nang dbyings la thug pa dang / lhun grub kyi snang ba'i 'byung chen dang pa bzhin no.* Klong chen pa 1999b: 3; 2000: 270b; 1983 v. 4: 106.

philosophical idea.[34] Rather than being "emergent" in the sense of "that out of which secondary forms of matter emerge," here the elements themselves *emerge* from the basic state (*gnas lugs*). A similar definition is found in the *Sgra thal 'gyur* commentary:

> Why are they called [emergent] elements (*'byung ba*)? Because, on the basis of inert matter (*bem po*), the capacity for awareness (*rig bcas*) emerges. And on the basis of the outer elements, the internal bodily elements emerge. On the basis of the internal bodily elements, the direct experience of awareness-gnosis emerges. On the basis of the direct experience of awareness, the fruition of Buddhahood emerges. Thus, we call them emergent elements.[35]

This definition, which also plays on the verbal sense of the term *'byung ba*, offers a rationale for how the materiality of the body becomes serviceable to the soteriological goals of contemplative practice: How, through a series of support-relations, even inert matter (*bem po*) is constitutive of Buddhahood. Klong chen pa's most important influence in this regard, however, appears to be the *Rig pa rang shar*. The following etymology is quoted directly by Klong chen pa:

> The etymology of the elements (*'byung ba*) is as follows:
> They do not emerge (*ma byung*) through being formed—they are the spontaneously present (*lhun gyis grub*) elements.
> They create all—thus they are Great elements (*'byung ba chen po)*.
> Thoroughly pervading sentient beings, they are Great Elements.
> Arising instantaneously, they are Great Elements.
> Existing unto themselves (*rang la yod pa*), they are Great Elements.
> Having no source (*'byung ba med pa*), they are Great Elements.
> Perceived collectively, they are Great Elements.

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[34] The *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* has "'*thob pa dang/ yong ba/ skye ba/ 'bab pa*" as synonyms. See Krang dbyi sun, ed. 1985.

[35] *'byung ba zhes pa ni gang 'byung bar byed na / bem po la rten nas rig bcas kyi mtshan nyid 'byung bar byed la / phyi rol gyi 'byung ba bzhi la brten nas / nang lus kyi 'byung ba bzhi 'byung bar byed na / 'byung ba zhes bya la / nang lus kyi 'byung ba bzhi la brten nas / rig pa'i ye shes mngon sum du 'byung bar byed pas na / 'byung ba zhes bya la / rig pa mngon gsum la brten nas sangs rgyas kyi 'bras bu thogs pa med par 'byung bas na 'byung ba zhes bya'o*. Vimalamitra 2009 v. 107: 144.

This is the etymology of the Great Elements.[36]

This quotation contains both motifs that are present in Klong chen pa's etymology of the elements, namely, the play on the verbal sense of *'byung ba* which reverses the conventional definition of elements as productive of secondary forms of matter, as well as the use of the modifier "great" (*chen po*) to frame the elements according to proprietary Rdzogs chen snying thig ideas. In this regard, as we've already established, it is not particularly surprising that Klong chen pa draws upon a reservoir of previously established ideas and distinctive informational practices arising from the tantras, since the *Theg mchog mdzod* is functionally a commentary to those texts. The innovation on the part of Klong chen pa with respect to the "great elements" is rather the creation of a "lesser elements" category, which thereby establishes a theoretical hierarchy of matter corresponding to different registers of actualization: the Great elements being equivalent to clear light (*'od gsal*) itself, and the lesser elements—the material process of earth, water, fire, wind, and space that sentient beings interact with at the level of ordinary perception—merely that which "shrouds" them.

5. Elemental Contemplative Practices

By way of concluding, I would like to return momentarily to the issue of elemental contemplative practices—those that 'Jigs med gling pa described as "acceptable to omit." References to these practices known as "yogas of the four sounds [of the Elements]" (*sgra bzhi rnal sbyor*), which are discussed at length in the *Rgyud bcu bdun*, and particularly in the *Sgra thal 'gyur,* are conspicuously all but entirely absent from the fifteenth chapter of the *Theg mchog mdzod*. They are referred to only once by Klong chen pa in the chapter, who simply writes that "the *Sgra thal 'gyur* discusses attaining ordinary *siddhis* by training on the sounds and meanings of the elements," followed by brief quotations from the *Sgra thal 'gyur* and *Gsang ba spyod pa sa bon gyi rgyud*.[37]

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[36] *'byung ba'i nges tshig 'di lta ste / byas pas ma byung lhun gyis grub / skyed par byed pas 'byung ba yin / 'gro ba yongs la khyab pas 'byung ba chen po yin / cig car skye bas 'byung ba chen po yin / rang la yod pas 'byung ba chen po yin / 'gyur ba med pas 'byung ba chen po yin / mthun par snang bas 'byung ba chen po yin / 'byung ba chen po'i ches tshig de bzhin no*. Anonymous 2000c: 464.

[37] Klong chen pa 1999b: 10; 2000: 273a; 1983 v. 4: 111. Klong chen pa also includes two brief quotations on the s*gra bzhi rnal 'byor,* one from the *Sgra thal 'gyur* which reads: *de yi sgra don bye brag gis / spyi yi rnam pa nges bstan pa / gzugs la bslabs pas lus zad 'gyur / sgra yis skad rnams shes par 'gyur / dris ni bcud kyis len pa 'grub / ros ni dngos po bdud rtsir 'gyur*. A second quotation from the *Gsang ba spyod pa sa bon gyi*

However, elemental contemplative practices are discussed at greater length elsewhere in the *Theg mchog mdzod*: The seventeenth chapter, which describes itself as the chapter on "the gradual path which involves taking an object of meditation" (*dmigs pa yul gyi blo rim can*), consists in a compendium of all the associated Rdzogs chen snying thig practices which make use of a referential object as the locus of meditation. Here the elemental practices are included as part of the repertoire of twenty-one practices which "focus the mind" (*sems 'dzin*).[38] There is also a discussion of a kind of "extracting the essence" (*bcud len*) practice that is described as "equalizing the tastes of the elements" (*'byung ba ro snyoms pa*).[39] They are also referenced in the eighteenth chapter which deals with the topic of direct transcendence (*thod rgal*) practices, where they are included as preliminary practices (*sngon 'gro*), preceding the practices for distinguishing cyclic existence and transcendence (*'khor 'das ru shan*).[40] There, the elemental practices are entitled "guidance to the three enlightened bodies" (*sku gsum gyi sna 'khrid*).

To readers who are sensitive to such elemental matters, or who are familiar with the tantras and their contents, it is odd that an entire chapter devoted to the elements should include so little information about these practices which appear so frequently in the very texts that Klong chen pa so expressly seeks to preserve. I think that there is a rationale for this: Klong chen pa's organizational strategies situate the practices of engaging with the elements, perhaps narrowly, within the topic of contemplative practices rather than the topic of human embodiment, which characterizes chapters eleven through fifteen of the *Theg mchog mdzod*. While such a strategy is consistent with Klong chen pa's general approach to organization and the synthesis of Rdzogs chen snying thig ideas broadly, it also functionally extracts and isolates the elemental contemplative practices from the broader domain of elemental ideas in which they appear to be so foundationally situated in the earlier tantras. While such a minor difference is, understandably, easily overlooked by modern readers of Rdzogs chen, it's nevertheless significant. In the context of the *Sgra thal 'gyur* and its accompanying commentary, where the elemental contemplative practices are most elaborately fleshed out in Rdzogs chen snying thig literature, the elements function as both material and informational categories governing knowledge of time, seasonal change, medicine, and physiology. In each of these contexts,

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rgyud reads: *sa chu me rlung 'byung ba bzhi'i / sgra don rnams la goms pa yi / rigs drug rnams kyi rang skad kyi / mngon shes 'char ba 'dis 'grub bo*.

38 Klong chen pa 1999b: 86; 2000: 302a; 1983 v. 4: 164.

39 Klong chen pa 1999b: 90; 2000: 303b; 1983 v. 4: 167.

40 Klong chen pa 1999b: 136–144; 2000: 321b–324a; 1983 v. 4: 200–205.

knowledge of the elements, and of elemental body typologies and elemental time-keeping practices which are thereby derived, are theorized as having direct implications for how practitioners approach contemplative practices involving the elements, and arguably the entire repertoire of practices included in the Rdzogs chen snying thig path. The elements, in this sense, comprise something like a total system. This is all to say that, while much of the elements and elemental theories from the earlier tradition ultimately found expression in the *Theg mchog mdzod*, a great deal more, evidently, did not.

In this regard, it is very possible that these vaster elemental knowledge systems, of which the "four sounds" practices were a key part, were already on the margins of Rdzogs chen snying thig scholarship by Klong chen pa's time, at least one century after the *Sgra thal 'gyur* commentary is theorized to have begun circulating. Indeed, the trajectory of the declining popularity of these contemplative practices in Rdzogs chen snying thig thought over the course of multiple centuries remains, perhaps unsurprisingly, unclear. I think we can say, however, that the relative absence of the broader context of elemental knowledge systems—namely, knowledge of elemental physiology, elemental time, and the correspondences between the two—in the work of Klong chen pa is undoubtedly among the conditions of possibility for 'Jigs med gling pa's statement that "there are few at present who are established in these practices." At the very least this raises an important question, best left to future studies, of the extent to which the four sounds of the elements practices could remain present in the tradition independent of the ambient cultures of elemental thought in which they appear to have first originated, like fire without air.

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