

Grag 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 *tathāgatas* of the ten directions are described bowing to a guru who

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 *Gurovārārdhanapañjikā* (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 *tathāgatas* 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 *tāntrikas* 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. *grhin*; 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,

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 grhī vā navako pi vā / vandyo vratadharair buddhyā lokāvadhyañāhānaye // 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

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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” (*lokāvadyāna*) 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.

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. *anupasampanna*; 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 *vinayas* 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 *gurumaṅḍala* 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. *Graggs 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” (*sākyā'i dge bsnjen*) in the commentary's colophon.¹⁸

3. *Graggs pa rgyal mtshan's Exegesis of Verse Two*

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* (*Anuttarayoga 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.

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Graggs pa rgyal mtshan begins his exegesis of verse two of *Fifty Verses on the Guru* (which declares that the *tathāgatas* 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 Graggs 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 Graggs 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.

Graggs pa rgyal mtshan continues by explaining that when the root text states that *tathāgatas* bow to the guru, the term “*tathāgatas*” is being

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* / Graggs 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* / Graggs pa rgyal mtshan 2006: 379.6–380.1.

²² As synonyms for the lama, Graggs 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 *tathāgatas* 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 *tathāgatas* 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 *tathāgatas* 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

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 bzhiin 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.*

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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 *tathāgatas* 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

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. *Munimatālamkāra*; 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

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 kyi 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* (Munimatālamkāra), 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 kyi 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*

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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 *bhūmis* 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 *bhūmis* 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 *tathāgatas* 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 *tathāgatas* 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

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 *tathāgatas* 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 alaṅkāra*). 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

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 *tathāgatas* 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*).

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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

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, "*Ita 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

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 nams 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.

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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.

Graggs 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, Graggs 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, Graggs 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*, Graggs pa rgyal mtshan rhetorically amplifies Vāpilla's statement that *tathāgatas* 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 Graggs 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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