

# Did Gene Smith Invent *Ris med*?: The Dialogic Emergence of Tibetan Buddhist Pluralism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>1</sup>

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**R***is 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.<sup>2</sup> Modeling the tolerance they hoped to see reflected in the broader populace, the government-in-exile's constitution mandated that the Dalai Lama's

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup>

*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.<sup>5</sup> This nondiscriminatory approach also proved popular among Anglophone religious liberals interested in Vajrayana Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> 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.

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

<sup>4</sup> 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 1) 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 1) 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.”

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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, Chogyi 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.<sup>7</sup>

Two competing myths, in Bruce Lincoln's sense of the term, have emerged to explain the origins of *ris med*.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teachers inevitably ascribe the concept to a 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 19<sup>th</sup> century Khampa Nyingmapas came together in a moment of

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

<sup>8</sup> See Lincoln 1999: 207–216.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

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existential anxiety to establish a common identity and preserve threatened teachings, so the 20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> However, most now include the disclaimer that *ris med* was a 20<sup>th</sup> century invention rather than a 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance the recent edited volume Mathes and Coura 2021.

<sup>12</sup> See Gayley and Schapiro 2017: 2–3.

This has since become a mainstream position. Although most scholars of 19<sup>th</sup> 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,”<sup>13</sup> “contemplative revival,”<sup>14</sup> “period”<sup>15</sup> “zeitgeist,”<sup>16</sup> “activity of a network of people,”<sup>17</sup> and “school,”<sup>18</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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*

<sup>13</sup> Deroche 2019: 323-325. Gardner provides a similar list of alternatives to a “*ris med* movement” in Gardner 2019: 348.

<sup>14</sup> Deroche 2018: 129.

<sup>15</sup> Gardner is here quoting Jann Ronis. See Gardner 2019: 348.

<sup>16</sup> Gardner is here quoting Rachel Pang. See Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Deroche 2018: 136.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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.”

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*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 20<sup>th</sup> 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”),<sup>20</sup> recipient (“everyone”),<sup>21</sup> subject (e.g. “the teachings and beings together”),<sup>22</sup> temporality (“all the time,” “spontaneously”),<sup>23</sup> and amount (“boundless”).<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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!<sup>26</sup>

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.”<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Deroche 2018.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 141. Deroche is quoting the *Ḍākinīsarvacittadvayācintyajñānavajra-vārāhitāntra*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

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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,<sup>29</sup> Douglas Duckworth,<sup>30</sup> myself,<sup>31</sup> and Alexander Gardner in his generational study of Kongtrul,<sup>32</sup> 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,"<sup>33</sup> 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."<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Guarisco and McLeod 2005: 50.

<sup>30</sup> 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."

<sup>31</sup> Taylor 2021: 216–217.

<sup>32</sup> See Gardner 2019.

<sup>33</sup> 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.

<sup>34</sup> Gardner 2019: 222.

<sup>35</sup> *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*).<sup>36</sup> 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*).<sup>37</sup> 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,<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> 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*

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

<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> See 'Jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 1973.

<sup>39</sup> 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 Chökhörling Monastery (Thub bstan chos 'khor gling): 'Jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 2002b, especially 893.

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*med* compound in its title, the other being his autobiography.<sup>40</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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,”<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> If this is a coincidence, it is a telling one. Similarly, Kongtrul’s disciple Nesar Tashi Chopel (Gnas gsar bkra shis chos ‘phel, b. 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> 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.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> 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 Mkhayen-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.

<sup>41</sup> ‘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.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Gardner 2019: 344.

<sup>43</sup> Tashi Chopel describes him this way throughout, but see for instance Gnas gsar bkra shis chos ‘phel 2002: 750.

<sup>44</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup>- or early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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

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*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.

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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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.”<sup>47</sup> 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.

<sup>45</sup> 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.

<sup>46</sup> 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 Mipham, 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.

<sup>47</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>48</sup> 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*.<sup>49</sup> 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*

<sup>48</sup> Sde gzhung rin po che 2003: 488.

<sup>49</sup> 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*).<sup>50</sup>

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*

<sup>50</sup> 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.

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*rnying ris med bstan dang bstan 'dzin kun la*), an important step away from Kongtrul's doxography of the eight chariots.<sup>51</sup> 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.

<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> century, publishing an important edition of the *Hundred-thousand Nyingma Tantras*,<sup>53</sup> editions of Mipham's writings, and numerous commentaries on Longchenpa's Dzogchen teachings.<sup>54</sup> 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 Khyentse 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.<sup>55</sup> 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,<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup>

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

<sup>52</sup> See Hartley 1997: 86. Hartley in turn cites Rigzin and Russel 1987: 14.

<sup>53</sup> This version is commonly known as the "Gting skyes edition." See An., *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum* (36 volumes) 1973–1975.

<sup>54</sup> See, for instance, Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1999.

<sup>55</sup> Guarisco and McLeod 2008: 32.

<sup>56</sup> Schaeffer 2001: 2. See also Yachin and Fischman 2022: 112–113.

<sup>57</sup> See Jackson 2003: 302.

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revealed terms and other writings still extant from his time in Tibet.<sup>58</sup> 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*),”<sup>59</sup> “the teachings and transmigrators alike (*ris med bstan 'gro*),”<sup>60</sup> “the old and new teachings alike (*gsar rnying ris su ma chad pa*),”<sup>61</sup> and “toward oneself and others alike (*rang gzhan phyogs ris med gnas shog*).”<sup>62</sup> 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,<sup>63</sup> 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*).<sup>64</sup>

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.<sup>65</sup> 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*,<sup>66</sup>

<sup>58</sup> 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.

<sup>59</sup> See, for instance, Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994f: 145b.

<sup>60</sup> See Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994a: 240a.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 182b.

<sup>62</sup> Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994d: 262b.

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

<sup>64</sup> Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994g: 166a.

<sup>65</sup> See, for instance, Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994b: 258.

<sup>66</sup> 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*,<sup>67</sup> and *Opening the Door of Dharma: A Brief Discourse on the Essence of All Vehicles*<sup>68</sup>—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.<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup>

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.<sup>71</sup>

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

<sup>67</sup> 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.

<sup>68</sup> 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.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> ‘Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros 2019.

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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.<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup>

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

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<sup>72</sup> Pearcey 2017: xv.

<sup>73</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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,<sup>74</sup> 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*)."<sup>75</sup> 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."<sup>75</sup> 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

<sup>74</sup> See Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994e: 59a.

<sup>75</sup> 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.

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Nyingma teachings from you in order to make a connection with them.<sup>76</sup>

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.”<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup>

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.<sup>79</sup>

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,

<sup>76</sup> 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 bhūmis 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.

<sup>77</sup> For the Tibetan original see Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994h: 22a. For the English translation see Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 2017: 293. Brackets mine.

<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, Dil mgo mkhyen brtse 1994h: 32a, 44b, and 76b.

<sup>79</sup> 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-20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup>

### 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

<sup>80</sup> For the Tibetan original, see *ibid.*, 186b–197a. For the English translation, see Dilgo Khyentse Wangpo, *Life of Dilgo Khyentse Wangpo* (2017): 538.

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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.<sup>81</sup>

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup>

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.<sup>83</sup> Kongtrul emerges as a full person

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

<sup>82</sup> Gardner 2006: 111.

<sup>83</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> 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

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

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