

WHITE ROBES, MATTED HAIR: TIBETAN TANTRIC HOUSEHOLDERS, MORAL
SEXUALITY, AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF ESOTERIC BUDDHIST EXPERTISE IN
EXILE

by

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ABSTRACT:

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White Robes, Matted Hair: Tibetan Tantric Householders, Moral Sexuality, and the Ambiguities of Esoteric Buddhist Expertise in Exile

Thesis supervised by Professor Carole A. McGranahan

This dissertation offers an ethnographic study of ngakpa/ma (*sngags pa/ma*, m.f.) – Tibetan Buddhist non-monastic, non-celibate tantric yogis and yoginis – living in the Tibetan diaspora. Like monks and nuns, ngakpa/ma are professionally religious, yet unlike their monastic counterparts they can marry, have families, and pursue worldly work. Living in ‘the village’ like ordinary laypeople but also spending much of their time in retreat or working as ritual specialists for hire, ngakpa/ma occupy a shifting, third space between monastic renunciation and worldly attachments. Based on roughly five years of fieldwork research conducted in Tibetan and Tibetan Buddhist communities in India, Nepal, Northeastern Tibet, and the United States, this thesis explores how ngakpa/mas’ historically decentralized, morally ambiguous esoteric expertise has become implicated in various projects of cultural preservation and reform for exile Tibetans, even as it has come to circulate and have meaning well beyond the purview of ethnic Tibetan communities and interests. Chapters One to Five offer an overview of how ngakpa/ma and ngakpa/ma orientations have been pinned down (or have failed to be pinned down) in exile, via language; gendered divisions of labor; in physical space and permanent institutions; through hair, clothing, and embodied comportment; and as part of new family and career trajectories. Chapters Six to Nine examine how contentious esoteric tantric yogic practices, associated with sexuality and Tibetan medicine in particular, are being popularized and reframed in exile in new ways and for new audiences as part of increasingly transnational networks of exchange. In these chapters, I underscore the polysemous quality of tantric practices, and reflect on my own collaborations with a Tibetan ngakpa-doctor to translate and share information on Tibetan tantric yogic practices more widely. In conclusion, I assess trends and quandaries that have dominated the academic study of secrecy and esoteric religions and highlight the implications and value of an ethnographic approach to researching tantric traditions.

Keywords: sngags pa (ngakpa); Tibet; Buddhism; esotericism; anthropology

DEDICATION:

To every true yogi and yogini, hidden and otherwise.

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This thesis has been a long time in the making. I began my PhD program in the Anthropology Department at the University of Colorado, Boulder in August 2010, and I find myself writing these acknowledgements for this last stage of things a full nine years and two months later. I did not intend for things to take so long. Still, what I have come to think of as my impressively bad bureaucracy/visa karma helped draw things out for me, regardless. My entry into the field was delayed for seven months or so in 2014 for political reasons. Simply put, applying for an Indian research visa to work with Tibetan refugees while living in the U.S. on a student visa as a South African national was no mean feat. Indian bureaucracy required that I mail my physical passport to be processed at the Indian embassy in Pretoria, South Africa as part of my application. From what I can gather, I was the first South African to ever formally request a research visa for working with Tibetans in India; this, coupled with extremely tense and complicated geo-political relationships between South Africa, India, China, and the Dalai Lama (who has been barred from South Africa since 2008), ultimately led Indian officials in South Africa to hold my passport hostage and stall on my application for several months. With bureaucrats refusing to move on my visa application or provide me any information about its status or the return of my passport despite continued requests for updates, I was prevented from signing a work contract as a T.A. at the university, which in turn threatened my ability to support myself and remain enrolled at the university to fulfil the terms of my U.S. immigration status.

Eventually, with the threat of deportation from America looming, my advisor Dr Carole McGranahan called in some favors and was able to get the Indian ambassador in Washington, D.C. to light a fire under officials in Pretoria on my behalf, who after a tense negotiation on the phone in the Anthropology Department, agreed begrudgingly to return my passport and to confer on me a two month rather than two year research visa, about a week before I would have been forced to seek asylum at the Los Angeles South African embassy, since the emergency travel document bureaucrats there had promised they would send me so I could leave the U.S. without a passport before I would be blacklisted for defaulting on my American student visa-status never arrived. “He will have to work it out when in India if he wants a longer visa” the Pretoria officials said, after also claiming, as a justification of last resort when pressed, that they had ignored my application because my hairstyle “did not look like that of a genuine scholar”.

Work it out I did, however, and following the release of research funding, I was ultimately able to secure a research visa extension at the Foreigner Regional Registration Office in Dharamsala after only a week or two of bureaucratic adventures. Things unfolded fairly smoothly until 2016, when I experienced more obstacles attempting to apply for a research visa in Nepal, which prompted me to cut my fieldwork time in Kathmandu short. Returning home to South Africa in October 2016 to apply for a new U.S. student visa in Cape Town, my application was then denied two times by an official at the U.S. consulate. After about three months of deliberation and various back-and-forths with doctors and lawyers and so on, this official then reversed his previous decisions and granted me a visa at the eleventh hour, allowing me to return to Colorado to write this thesis and complete my program. Which is a suitably complicated and protracted way, I guess, of saying that I’m very happy and thankful to be here.

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Christiana: the support you provided me during my fieldwork and later, in the wake of my visa issues, was incredible. I am awed and humbled by your effortless and unpretentious generosity, by the continual kindness you have shown me. One minute we were chatting on Facebook, the next we were developing a Buddhist publishing company. Swift blessings indeed! Working with you has been a dream (let's keep dreaming!). Gen la: you changed the course of my research and of my life. Your confidence in me has encouraged me to attempt things I never would have otherwise dared, your expertise has enabled and enriched my work. Your abiding faith and the joyous, undaunted example of a life lived through and for Dharma which you embody has deeply inspired me. You advised me on practices to do during my immigration struggles which helped me cut through obstacles so that I could return to finish my degree. You introduced me to the blessings of Yutok's lineage and to the nature of my own mind. You have empowered me, you have shown me the meaning of fearlessness, and that there is truly a way out of all this wandering. No words are sufficient to repay this kindness, yet still. Thank you, thank you.

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This is a long dissertation and yet so many people (and so many rum-and-coke nights) that played such a meaningful role in my life during my time in the field have gone entirely unmentioned or have received very short shrift in these pages. To all my McLeod friends who appear in here and who don't, thank you. I cherish you and am so grateful for your putting up with me, that you still somehow enjoyed my company. In many ways, fieldwork was amazing, thrilling, but it also made me realized that I wasn't as confident a researcher or person as I thought I might be. I so often felt rudderless, alienated, insecure, and lonely during my fieldwork, overwhelmed by an unreasonable sense of shame that I wasn't already doing and understanding more, that I was incapable, unmotivated, and a fraud. You pulled me out of myself and shared your worlds and troubles with me and I will be forever grateful.

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agreeing to assemble at such short notice, and with so little preamble. I cannot think of a better, more formidable team of eyes, hearts, and minds to hand my work over to.

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To everyone I have mentioned and to those I have not, to all who have contributed to this thesis in ways big and small, I thank you. All faults are my own.

May whatever merit exists in this work be of benefit to others.

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INTRODUCTION:

In March 2016, I found myself in a tiny conference room in an equally pokey hotel on a busy street in Bengaluru, India. I had traveled to the Karnataka capital from McLeod Ganj, Himachal Pradesh where I had been living for the last fourteen months to meet Dr Nida Chenagtsang¹, a Tibetan ngakpa (*sngags pa*) – i.e. non-monastic, non-celibate tantric Buddhist ritual specialist – and practitioner of Sowa Rigpa (*gso ba rig pa*) or Tibetan medicine. Born and raised in a nomad community in Mahlo, Amdo, northeastern Tibet, Dr Nida was recognized as a child as the reincarnation of the seventeenth century founder of one of the largest and longest standing communities of ngakpa in Tibet, the so-called *sngags mang* or “householder tantrist community” of Rebkong. After years training and practicing as both a ngakpa and a physician in northeastern and central Tibet, Dr Nida relocated to Rome where he eventually became the founder and director of Sorig Khang International Foundation for Traditional Tibetan Medicine, an educational organization devoted to the study and development of Tibetan medicine and Buddhism around the world. Under the auspices of the organization Dr Nida now taught classes on Tibetan medicine and tantric yoga throughout the year in more than forty countries. I had come to Bengaluru to attend classes he was offering over the course of three days in Nejang (*gnas sbyangs*) yogic self-healing massage techniques and “mantra healing” (*sngags bcos rig pa*) practices.

I first encountered Dr Nida through his Tibetan language writing on ngakpa, essays which he had published in the early 2000s via the NGO he had developed with his brother, a fellow ngakpa. This NGO, the *sngags mang zhib 'jug khang* or “(Rebkong) ngakpa community research house/center” seeks to preserve, edit, and publish traditional texts relating to the Rebkong ngakmang and ngakpa practices and histories more generally, and

helps disseminate new and original commentaries on these topics for Tibetan-literate audiences. Reading Nida's work, I was immediately struck by the clarity, expertise, and frankness with which he discussed Tibetan esoteric Buddhist practices. I translated excerpts of his writings into English and shared these via my Facebook page. A friend I had travelled in India with years before saw my translations and shared them with a friend of his, an American woman named Christiana who was a longstanding student of Dr Nida. Both Christiana and Dr Nida himself reached out to me on the site and encouraged me to come to Bengaluru to attend Dr Nida's upcoming teachings. Nida told me over Facebook messenger that he was very happy with my translations and the contextualizing introductions I'd provided with them and told me I should not worry about costs for the classes, but just try to get there so that we would have a chance to meet while we were both in India. This was to be Nida's second ever visit to India, so both he and Christiana thought it was quite lucky that I could meet up with him.

A short plane ride, accommodation in the city arranged with friends of a colleague, and some rather dramatic, longwinded taxi rides to the teaching venue later, I found myself in a room in Bengaluru awaiting Nida's arrival. I knew that with my spastic cerebral palsy and bony backside it would be hard for me to sit cross legged on the floor for a long time without adequate padding (this was in short supply), so I joined a few of the other participants² who were older or had physical conditions in sitting on one of the available chairs. I chose one close to the back of the small room, close to the altar to the Medicine Buddha that Ram the local event organizer had set up for the proceedings. Altogether, including myself, there were twelve students on the first day for Nejang, and eleven on day two and three for mantra healing. Nida came in and we all rose. As I looked at him I felt something stir inside me, a vaguely disorienting jolt of *déjà vu* that gave way to a flush of recognition. For a few seconds I felt weightless, as my awareness pulsed and expanded beyond the limits of my body and I

was unmoored for an instant from what felt like that time-and-place. Images rose to inner vision, thoughts and feelings jostled for attention like the shape of scenes glimpsed through frosted glass or the almost see-through membrane of a slick shower-curtain. The contours of other encounters and arrangements, elsewhere yet concurrent, like conversations in an adjacent room. The swell of sensation passed. There was no denying that Nida felt instantly, pleasantly, portentously familiar to me. Yet I was left to wonder whether I had just felt the giddy charge of the ripening of karmic imprints, had just reconnected with a teacher from previous lives, or whether I was merely experiencing the consequences of newly digitalized global Dharma: I had watched several videos of Nida on Facebook before coming to Bengaluru after all. Who was to say that my feelings of recognition were not merely the result of being primed by social media? Opting to abide in ambiguity, I studied Nida further.

I noted too that Nida was wearing lay ‘civilian’ clothes and was not in religious robes. I’m not sure if I had expected that Nida would wear items of traditional ngakpa dress or not – I was well aware by that point that these days ngakpa and ngakma often do not stick to uniform – but I was struck by Nida’s clothing and demeanor all the same. There was no teaching throne set up for him as is customary for lamas giving religious transmissions and so after prostrating to the makeshift Medicine Buddha altar three times, Nida sat down on the hotel chair which Ram had placed at the front of the room close to the whiteboard. I was suddenly filled with deep anxiety, as I realized that I and other students were seated on identical chairs at the same height as Nida, a significant breach of traditional lama-disciple etiquette. I quickly realized, however, that this was not going to be much of a problem. Nida seemed to care little for pleasantries and engaged with us in a relaxed, playful and familiar fashion.

Over the course of the next three days Nida offered us practical instruction in and historical context for Tibetan mantra and tantric yogic breathing and massage-based healing

techniques. He transmitted these procedures – historically practiced and perfected by hereditary ngakpa with extensive training in esoteric Buddhist or ‘Secret Mantra’ (*gsang sngags*) tantric meditative disciplines - to us, a group of non-Tibetans who lacked any such expertise or pedigree, explaining the most basic requisites we would need to make such methods efficacious as forms of everyday first aid and healing for ourselves and others. The twenty four Nejang massage and breathing techniques Nida taught were derived from a text of pith, esoteric instructions (*man ngag*) penned by a great Tibetan monk-scholar and tantric practitioner from the fourteenth century. Nida had undergone training in these yogic ‘body refinement’ or ‘purification’ practices (*lus sbyong*) under the supervision of teachers in Tibet who held the oral lineage of initiation and instruction for these secret practices, themselves ultimately understood to be connected with the *dus kyi 'khor lo* or Kalachakra ‘Wheel of Time’, a relatively late cycle of esoteric Buddhist teachings that were transmitted to Tibet and translated in the eleventh century.

Over the two days of mantra healing instruction, Nida bestowed on us via loong (*lung*) or direct mouth-to-ear reading transmission, one hundred individual healing mantras, which he had himself organized into a ‘mantra pharmacy’ booklet to form the standard “Mantra Healing Level 1” course that formed part of Nida’s international teaching curriculum. Nida had himself picked out these mantras, intended to treat a full gamut of physical, mental, and spiritual maladies, from a range of existing Tibetan mantra manuals or tantric grimoires (*sngags kyi be'u bum*), with which he was familiar and for which he had received transmissions. These grimoires were themselves either the collations of previous adepts or were so called ‘treasure texts’ (*gter ma*), scriptures of ritual instruction revealed through visions by past, accomplished ngakpa. Nida and his brother had collected, edited and published several of these texts in affordable, western paperback book format, as part of their *sngags mang zhib 'jug khang* publishing activities in Tibet (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla

he ru ka 2006). The ‘Mantra Pharmacy’ manual we were transmitted thus represented Nida’s choice distillation of such historical material, repackaged for teaching to predominantly non-Tibetan students enrolling in Sorig Khang International courses offered abroad.

Over the weekend Nida and I got to know one another, and I was able to ask him various questions relating to his work and my research on contemporary ngakpa practices and lineages. We liked each other right away, and after meeting on the first day of classes he asked me privately if I would be interested in translating some commentaries he had written on the Dzogchen Ati Yoga (*rdzogs chen; a ti yo ga*) or ‘Great Perfection’ meditation instructions found in the Yutok Nyingtik (*g.yu thog snying thig*) or ‘Heart-Essence of Yutok,’ a cycle of esoteric Buddhist teachings from the twelfth century said to have been received via visions by the founder of Tibetan medicine – himself a celebrated ngakpa - Yutok Yonten Gonpo. Uniquely medical in its orientation to Secret Mantra, the teaching cycle is remarkable for the extent to which it pitches its instructions on tantric yoga at busy ngakpa-doctor (*sngags sman*) professionals. I came to learn that as an initiate and lineage-holder of the tradition, Dr Nida felt that the text’s methods were particularly suited to the needs and circumstances of contemporary, increasingly non-monastic practitioners of Buddhism, and that he is one of the most prominent disseminators and advocates for the lineage and its teachings today.

Dr Nida had brought a print out of his Tibetan Ati Yoga commentaries with him to Bengaluru by chance, which he was able to pass onto me to look over. In Nida’s estimation, this was just one of several indications that our aligning with one another at that time in that way was a case of *tendrel zangpo* (*rten ‘brel bzang po*), a good omen or auspicious connection working across lives and mutual karma (perhaps there was something to my *déjà vu* dissociation - which I did not mention to Nida - after all). Having next to no experience in translating such advanced and technical material, I initially demurred but after some

coaxing and with Nida's blessing and encouragement I agreed to produce an initial rough translation in close collaboration with him. The original plan was that this commissioned translation would serve as a textual supplement for the forty or so students who were slated to attend teachings on Yutok's Ati Yoga that Nida would be giving for the first time in the U.S. a few months later in Portland, Oregon. As things turned out, however, my very fledgling translation efforts ultimately became two books published by Sky Press (Chenagtsang 2016; Chenagtsang 2017). Christiana who had reached out to me via Facebook, created Sky Press to serve as a platform for publishing Nida's writing and the multiple translation projects that Nida and I began collaborating on following our meeting in Bengaluru.

Christiana offered to serve as my occasional patron and co-editor and she, Nida and I would go on to prepare a third book together in 2018, one devoted to the topic of Karmamudrā practice or Tibetan Buddhist partnered tantric sex, as presented in the Yutok Nyingtik in particular (Chenagtsang 2018). This was the first book-length treatment of such historically secret practices ever composed for general, uninitiated audiences, in a language other than Tibetan. While tantric vows proscribe the disclosure of secret practices to the vulgar or uninitiated, Nida nonetheless felt that the time had come to reveal at least some basic information about esoteric sexual yoga procedures to dispel widespread misrepresentations and misunderstandings of traditional practices. Nida was especially concerned about widespread cases of sexual abuse in Tibetan Buddhist communities, as part of which "tantric sex" has frequently served as a lofty-sounding blind for male gurus to exploit female students for their own self-serving gratification. Nida explained that he had personally encountered both Tibetan and non-Tibetan disciples in Asia and the West who had been manipulated and traumatized by such unscrupulous lamas. Thus, while secrecy may have helped maintain the integrity of easy to misunderstand and misuse esoteric practices, it was now being used in the service of harm, and was somewhat ironically, enabling the abuse

and deterioration of those very same teachings. In light of this, Nida felt that the benefits that a widely disseminated, English language education on Karmamudrā could bring would far outweigh any potential harm that might result from disclosing traditionally secret information.

Nida also observed that students and would-be students of Buddhism around the world would go on experiencing sexual desire, having sex, ejaculating, and having orgasms (transformative or otherwise) every day, regardless of whether lamas saw fit to disclose information about what had historically been quite elite practices of tantric sexual yoga or not. Since so many Buddhist practitioners today are living non-celibate lives, Nida recognized the need for students around the world at all levels of training to have access to at least some sort of instructions, however basic, for incorporating sexuality into their religious practice. Rather than reveal complex details of initiated sexual yoga practices that would be beyond almost any reader's capacities, Nida's aim was to instead provide certain traditional meditation techniques that could be used by any reader to learn how to deal with desire and have more "mindful" sex. As it happens, quite unusually, albeit in keeping with its strongly pragmatic, medical orientations, the Yutok Nyingik presents two distinct levels of sexual yoga training: what Nida calls "classic" Karmamudrā training, for practitioners who had already mastered advanced and demanding meditative training to gain control over the 'channels-winds-and-drops' (*rtsa rlung thig le*) of their subtle energy bodies, and more entry-level instructions for practitioners who have not trained in these typical prerequisites. To Nida's mind at least, these latter teachings offered a basis from which to offer instructions on sexual yoga practice for more common, less elite practitioners who wished to find a way to incorporate sexual desire into their spiritual practice.

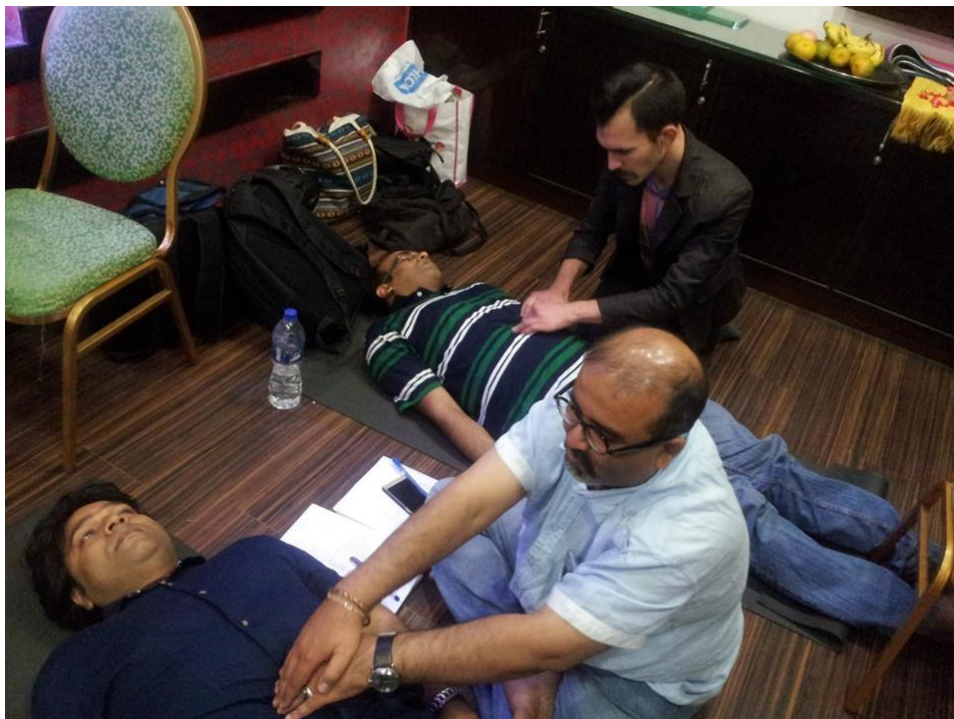
At the end of the third day of class, we arranged bottles of water and dishes of medicinal substances on the altar and blessed them as a group by chanting mantras aloud and

telling prayer-beads in unison and then blowing over the materials, following the instructions Nida had provided us. Properly consecrated and sealed through such actions, the *materia* were then distributed, consumed and carried off by participants. At the close of the training, some students gave Nida gifts and there was time for photo opportunities. A German and Indian woman posed together for a photograph with Nida. The two ladies stood on either side of Nida with their palms pressed together reverentially, heads slightly bowed. Right before the camera clicked, Dr Nida suddenly straightened his back and extended his arms out stiffly to his sides. Arranging his face into a hard, unsmiling expression of exaggerated seriousness, he called out suddenly and aggressively: “Lamas go like this!” The two women looked startled for a split second. Comedic timing on point, he unspooled his affected solemnity in an instant. “And Yogis go like *this!*” Punchline delivered, he reached his arms around the two women pulling them into a hug as he and they broke into smiles and laughter. The camera flashed and I was left to ponder the implications of the distinction between lamas and yogis (here a synonym for ‘reincarnated, revered monk teachers’ and ngakpa, respectively) Nida had modelled so dramatically with his body.





Dr Nida Chenagsang reciting mantras and blessing water next to our makeshift Medicine Buddha altar in the boutique hotel in Bengaluru, March 2016 (photo courtesy of Sorig Khang India)



The anthropologist practicing a mantra healing technique, an anesthetic mantra which Dr Nida explained we could recite while massaging painful areas on our own and others' bodies (photo courtesy of Sorig Khang India)

This dissertation is about the esoteric knowledge and ritual power associated with a type of Tibetan Buddhist specialist known as ngakpa (*sngags pa*). In the pages that follow I explore how ngakpas' ritual expertise, their conventionally secret, lineage-bound knowledge associated with the idea of transforming worldly, impure, and 'demonic' phenomena into transcendent, pure, enlightened awareness, is being circulated and mediated in novel and increasingly global ways. Taking Nida's cue, I seek to understand ethnographically how distinctions between celibate monastic and non-celibate, non-monastic tantric yogic orientations are being understood and performed by practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism today. In each section of this study, I offer a series of case-studies that explore how esoteric Tibetan Buddhist practices and knowledge are being transmitted and translated for different audiences. I focus in particular on how ngakpas' restricted, specialized traditional knowledge has become implicated in various projects of national preservation and reform across the Tibetan diaspora yet at the same time has come to circulate and have meaning well beyond the purview of ethnic Tibetan communities and interests. Drawing on several years of ethnographic research with Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in India, Nepal, Tibet, and the United States, this dissertation explores how ngakpas' historically decentralized, at times strongly marked yet at other times strategically hidden and difficult to read esoteric expertise is being made legible in new ways and for new audiences as part of increasingly transnational networks of exchange. At its heart, this dissertation is concerned with knowledge: how is highly valued yet historically restricted knowledge being shared, regulated, and reformed in a period of exile? What role is such knowledge playing in the formation of particular moral imaginaries in Tibetan exile? How do the esoteric orientations and practices of religious elites nonetheless play a role in the lives and subjectivities of lay Tibetans living in diaspora?

Like monks, ngakpa are professional Buddhist renunciators, individuals who have taken formal vows to devote their lives to religious attainment and liberation. Unlike monks, however, ngakpa are non-celibate and can engage in activities forbidden to the monastics. While monks and nuns comprise the ‘yellow’ (*ser*) or saffron-clothed community of shaved hair renunciators (*rab byung ngur smig gi sde*) and laypeople are ‘plain’ householders (*mi skya*, i.e. ‘grey [robed] people,’ clothed in no particular religious uniform), ngakpa, with their long, sometimes matted hair and white and-red cotton shawls and robes, are known as the gökar janglo de (*gos dkar lcang lo sde*) or ‘community of white robe[d] and willow-leaf [shaped] dreadlocks [wearing religious vow holders]’. While monks and nuns’ monastic vows prohibit them from consuming alcohol or having sexual intercourse, ngakpa are not only permitted to engage in these activities, they may in fact be required to as part of their religious practices. Able to marry, have families, and pursue worldly work, ngakpa nonetheless spend much of their time in retreat or employed as ritual specialists for hire. Although from at least the twelfth century, high ranking lamas (*bla ma*, religious teachers) in charge of monastic institutions have passed on their titles, charisma, and holdings through reincarnation via *bla rgyud* or ‘[reincarnated] lama lineages’, from the earliest periods of Buddhism in Tibet, ngakpa have continued to pass on their knowledge, status, and practices through hereditary (especially father-to-son and uncle-to-nephew) transmission (*gdung rgyud*) as well.

As non-monastic holders of tantric Buddhist vows (*dam tshig*), ngakpa have historically specialized in exorcistic, ritual practices focused on the forceful subjugation of unruly or demonic forces. Ngakpas’ capacity to perform such rites effectively is linked both in the cultural imagination and in terms of ngakpas’ specific religious training with their mastery of a range of contemplative, ritual disciplines known as yogas (*rnal ‘byor*). In Tibetan esoteric or tantric Buddhism yogis and yoginis (*rnal ‘byor pho mo*, i.e. male and

female practitioners of yoga) learn to identify their individual bodies, speech-energy, and minds with the bodies, speech-energy, and minds of various meditational deities called *yidam* (*yi dam*, *yid dam*). By thoroughly identifying with these iconographic-contemplative models of Buddha nature, yogis and yoginis aim to effect the alchemical transformation of ordinary perceptions and everyday ‘poisonous’ emotions like sexual desire, aggression, and confusion into sources of both temporal/temporary power and ultimate liberation from rebirth and suffering.

With the invasion of Tibet by the People’s Republic of China in 1950, thousands of Tibetans fled their homeland and set about rebuilding and securing their political, socio-cultural, and religious institutions in exile as stateless refugees. As a major spiritual authority and the (erstwhile)³ chief political leader for Tibetans, the Dalai Lama has for decades spearheaded efforts to both preserve and to reform Tibetan life in exile. He has stressed that the modernizing of Buddhism – a kind of Protestantization and aligning of it with scientific rationality and democracy - together with secularization of education and government, re-constitution of large-scale monasteries in exile, and increased ecumenical cooperation between religious sects, will stabilize and unify Tibetan society in the face of debilitating restrictions on Buddhism and Tibetan culture in occupied Tibet. Still, modern reforms notwithstanding, ritual knowledge, power, and politics remain vital to the Dalai Lama's social engineering vision and continue to play roles in the officially secular and democratic structures of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) or Tibetan government in exile.

Anthropological research on religion in diaspora has made important contributions to our understanding of how cultural histories, practices, and institutions are sustained and transformed cross-generationally in contexts of major change and upheaval (Harris 2006; Ho 2006). Scholars have detailed how shared religious beliefs and practices can serve as a basis for political mobilization, the legibility of diasporic groups, and the forging of transnational

moral communities, ethno-nationalist imaginaries, and marked forms of cultural identity (Axel 2001; Hansen 2012; McAlister 2002; Ong 2003). Yet, such research has rarely considered how religion, identity, and politics may intersect in situations where the distribution of religious knowledge and power is highly unequal, and where religious authority and practices that contribute to cohesive moral communities in diaspora depend upon secrecy, ambiguity, and restricted occult expertise. A study of ngakpa in exile addresses these points directly. Ngakpa have only rarely been the subject of sustained ethnographic investigation by researchers, but they and their distinctive tantric knowledge provide a rich context for analyzing cultural and religious changes and politics in Tibetan diaspora, and for exploring key consequences of the increasing globalization of Tibetan Buddhism.

This dissertation focuses on the socio-cultural politics surrounding the popularization of esoteric Tibetan Buddhist knowledge and practices. In the chapters that follow I investigate how ngakpas' 'secret' knowledge is being popularized and made legible in a variety of ways for both Tibetan and non-Tibetans today. In attending to these processes, I show how the preservation of traditional indigenous knowledge obliges materialization in books, bodies, and institutions. Secret or esoteric religious knowledge – and knowledge pertaining to ultimately intangible, and ineffable spiritual experience or 'gnosis' (*ye shes*, 'primordial[ly present] wisdom') in particular - possesses a complex relationship with materiality. In what follows I show how mediations and reifications of traditional, cultural knowledge play essential roles in specific national projects, making legible particular visions of a Tibetan diasporic polity and helping to stabilize specific sorts of Tibetan subjectivities in exile. At the same time, materializations and translations of highly valued indigenous knowledge open up new possibilities for circulation and interpretation – possibilities which produce new opportunities but also anxieties around cultural (re)production, appropriation, and authenticity in the process. Such anxieties are particularly pressing when it comes to

articulations of Tibetan-ness, of ideas about national belonging and the status of indigenous knowledge and its reworking, co-optation and commodification by outsiders and those with improper motivations.

Following Jones (2014) in his recent assessment of the anthropology of secrecy, I take up the media “through which social relations involving secrecy are transacted” (56) as a primary focus for my analysis. In doing so, I aim to obtain a more precise understanding of the role that the circulation and regulation of esoteric knowledge plays in promoting notions of a stable Tibetan polity in contemporary exile and in negotiating boundaries between Tibetan and non-Tibetan communities. Throughout various ethnographic case studies, I pay careful attention to how secrets move across different media as part of inter- and trans-medial knowledge flows (Jones 2014). I propose that investigating cultural politics, contentions, and compromises relating to the mediation and materialization of esoteric Tibetan Buddhist knowledge can shed light on how different registers and logics of authority are enabled and called into question by different modes of mediation. In the case studies that follow, I pay specific attention to relationships that exist between embodied and entextualized knowledge, between immaterial and material expertise, and more and less centralized and standardized systems of control and regulation of esoteric knowledge in exile.

While numerous excellent studies of esoteric Buddhism exist (Davidson 2003; Urban 2003, White 2006; Wedemeyer 2012), these mostly trace the historical evolution of Indo-Tibetan Tantra through a predominantly textual lens. My research responds to the need for on-the-ground ethnographic studies of contemporary tantric practitioners in South Asia (and elsewhere) to complement such text-based scholarship, to reveal how authoritative tantric texts are being circulated, regulated, translated, interpreted, mediated and engaged with in the context of everyday life (McDaniel 2012). My work here attends to the lived socio-cultural contexts in which the transmission of esoteric teachings is conceived and managed. As such,

it aims to extend theorizing in anthropology on the role of occult power in colonial and post-colonial state formations (Johnson 2006; Taussig 1997; Whitehead and Wright 2004), but from within a diasporic context where stateless refugees are working towards a democratic nation-in-exile, which nonetheless retains continuities with older Tibetan social patterns that blended the bureaucratic rationality of centralized states with de-centralized "shamanic orientations" (Samuel 1993).

Fostering Relationships: On Researching and Researching with Buddhist Esoteric Ritual Specialists in Exile

When I first began my doctoral fieldwork, I had planned to focus my research on the life and legacies of a well-known ngakpa by the name of Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche (1926 - 1993). Born and raised in Kham, Eastern Tibet, Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche ended up becoming the official ritual weather-controller for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile during the latter part of his life as refugee in India. I had initially intended to make the ngakpa dratsang (*grwa tshang*), the 'tantric college' or gompa (*dgon pa*, i.e. temple-cum-monastery) that Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche built in the Tibetan diasporic center of McLeod Ganj, Himachal Pradesh, India, the primary focus of my research. I first visited Yeshe Dorje's gompa, named Zilnön Kagyeling (*zil non bka' brgyad gling*), while I was doing preliminary fieldwork in McLeod Ganj during the Summer of 2011. At the time I was exploring the possibility of conducting a different research project on Tibetan spirit mediums (*lha pa/mo*, m.f.) in exile and I visited Zilnön Kagyeling – which I later learned was the first and only Nyingma gompa in McLeod Ganj – on a whim. Perched on a steep hill on the bend of a road leading out of town, the gompa commanded a majestic view of the hillside and larger valley. At the time of this first visit the gompa was running a small café for tourists and the few Tibetan and non-Tibetan visitors to whom it rented out rooms on its premises. While sitting in the café that day studying Tibetan vocabulary I met and chatted with a Nyingma khenpo (*mkhan po*) or

high-ranking monk-scholar connected with the gompa who was visiting from his primary institution in South India. We quizzed each other about our respective lives and activities over tea and lemon soda and he encouraged me to stay at the gompa when I visited McLeod Ganj in the future.

Quite some time after this visit, following subsequent preliminary fieldwork in Nepal and after I had made the decision to redirect the focus of my research to ngakpa in exile, I happened upon a biography of Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje produced by two American women (Woolf and Blanc 1994). Reading this short text, I realized that the gompa which I had visited a year before was the same one that ngakpa Yeshe Dorje had founded to serve as a training and retreat center for ngakpa and monastics. I learned too that when Yeshe Dorje was a teenager he had absconded from his destined career as the head of a monastery in Eastern Tibet. Disillusioned with monastic life, he had chosen to forego high office and live as an independent, wandering Chödpa (*gcod pa*), a special type of Tibetan tantric exorcist and yogic ascetic. When the Chinese invasion forced him into exile, however, his reputation as a meditator and sorcerer preceded him. He soon found himself encouraged by the Dalai Lama to take up the job of weather controller for the Tibetan exile government, and to build Zilnön Kagyeling as a base for his ritual activities and the preservation of teachings connected with his reincarnation lineage. This trajectory – non-monastic monastery drop-out turned state-sponsored sorcerer and monastery-founder – intrigued me. I determined that I would return to Zilnön Kagyeling as a primary field site for doctoral dissertation research to explore how the extraordinary charisma and legacy of one prominent Tibetan ngakpa was being institutionalized, incorporated and mediated in exile. Zilnön Kagyeling would serve as a primary space for assessing how ngakpas' historically de-centralized occult expertise was being incorporated and pinned down in exile in new ways and was becoming implicated in material and symbolic economies both local and transnational in scope.



Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche blowing a rkang gling or tantric human thigh-bone trumpet and wielding a phurpa or tantric three-edged ritual dagger or stake as part of an aggressive, exorcistic ritual to manipulate the weather (India, location/date unknown, photo courtesy of Philip Hemley, as found in Woolf and Blanc 1994, 28)

When I returned to Zilnön Kagyeling in 2015, however, I found the ngakpa dratsang languishing. The property was in noticeable disrepair compared to my last visit, the café was closed, and there were considerably fewer residents and far less activity on site than before. A prominent Nyingma lama who in the past had used the gompa as a site for holding teachings

when he visited McLeod Ganj had found new premises in another part of town, and perhaps most tellingly of all, although there were several ngakpa living in McLeod (many of whom had been taught by or had collaborated with Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche) there was not a single ngakpa then resident at the gumpa. I thus found myself in India with funding⁴ to research a religious institution where ngakpa lived and practiced, only to discover that there were no longer any ngakpa living there. This of course was a significant finding in itself, and while Zilnön Kagyeling did not become a daily field site in the way I had imagined it would, I was nonetheless able to learn more about it and speak with a range of religious specialists, exile government officials, scholars, and friends and students of Yeshe Dorje about some of the matters I'd proposed to study.

Overall though, things did not go quite as planned. Many ngakpa I met, while friendly, were too busy to be interviewed or were actively not interested in being questioned about their own lives in any formal or lengthy way. I found it difficult to come up with reasons to spend extended time with ngakpa as an ethnographer: many ngakpa I encountered were focused on a day-to-day basis with religious and worldly work, with family and teaching responsibilities, or were preoccupied with personal spiritual practices. One Tibetan ngakpa with whom I became acquainted called Ngakpa Dawa, sensed the dilemma I found myself in when it came to relating to ngakpa as a researcher. A prominent student of Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche based in McLeod Ganj, Ngakpa Dawa today divides his time between being with family, performing sponsored rituals, teaching students internationally, and serving as a pilgrimage guide and cultural liaison for foreign student and Buddhist practitioner groups. When I mentioned some of the challenges I was experiencing, Ngakpa Dawa suggested that I seek out a "poorer" and less cosmopolitan ngakpa, one who lived in a rural village somewhere in the Nepal-Tibet borderlands or in a more isolated Tibetan refugee settlement or shijak (*gzhis chags*) somewhere else in India. Such a ngakpa would have more time, Ngakpa

Dawa suggested, and I would be able to shadow him and set myself up as a sort of ritual attendant and thereby learn more about the sorts of ritual services ngakpa traditionally performed as part of village life.

This was good advice and revealed a lot about rural, subsistence-based village life as the quintessential site of the ‘traditional’ ngakpa, but it was still not immediately helpful. As I explained to Ngakpa Dawa, my specific intention was to study how ngakpa were living and practicing *outside* of such traditional contexts. I was interested in how ngakpa lineages, orientations, charisma, and expertise were operating in relationship to various modes of institutional authority in Tibetan exile, how they were interacting with reconstituted state power in diaspora, which was why I had decided to focus on doing research with ngakpa in a hegemonic and more Gelukpa-affiliated center like McLeod Ganj, rather than head right away to more Nyingma-dominant settings in other parts of India and Nepal.

My choice to focus on McLeod Ganj and Yeshe Dorje’s institution was informed by an assessment of existing anthropological literature about esoteric knowledge, occult power and institutional authority. While I was familiar with anthropologists’ longstanding interest in the connections between secrecy, cultural knowledge and power (Barth 1975; Evans-Pritchard 1976; Herdt 2003; Luhrmann 1989), as well as in how state authorities in various parts of the globe have co-opted occult powers for their own ends (Johnson 2006), I also knew that these latter studies were mostly concerned with how totalitarian regimes appropriate malevolent spiritual forces to legitimate their rule. Such studies have tended to be top-down and have often ignored the ways in which mediations of religious power between institutional authorities and ritual specialists may be more benign, dialogic and open-ended – more collaborative than co-optive. I felt that without such an understanding, scholars would be left with inadequate analytical resources for understanding how powerful religious knowledge comes to be valued and regulated by institutional authorities and is ultimately

made relevant and meaningful for individuals in situations of dislocation and change. I had hoped that Zilnön Kagyeling would serve as a perfect case study for addressing such phenomena and the under-emphases I had noticed in the anthropological literature.

As mentioned, the institution was also the first Nyingma gumpa built in the Geluk-centric location of McLeod Ganj. Ngakpas' decentralized, non-celibate, householder orientations are especially associated with the Nyingma or 'Old' School (*rnying ma*) of Tibetan Buddhist practice and textual translation. This school traces its canon back the earliest period of state-sponsored translations of Indian Buddhist texts in Tibet, the so-called 'earlier diffusion' or spread of the teachings (*snga dar*) which took place during the seventh and eighth centuries, during Tibet's imperial period. The Nyingma school is contrasted with the so called 'New' or Sarma (*gsar ma*) translations of Indian Buddhist teachings which were transmitted to Tibet from about the eleventh century as part of the 'later dissemination' (*phyi dar*). The Geluk school to which the Dalai Lama belongs is the youngest of the Sarma schools and its adherents have often been particularly zealous in challenging the legitimacy of Old Translation school scriptures, orientations, and practices⁵. As the home of the Dalai Lama and center of his erstwhile government, McLeod Ganj thus offered an interesting context to explore the sectarian dimensions of ngakpas' expertise as well.

For several months I felt somewhat at a loss for how to redirect my research in McLeod Ganj. I toyed for some time with the idea of following Ngakpa Dawa's advice and leaving McLeod entirely, to find ngakpa in more isolated refugee settlements or border regions who might be inclined to humor me as a researcher. Yet the ngakpa communities and dratsang I knew of in other parts of the sub-continent were places with which I was less familiar, where I had fewer contacts and which were more complicated for me to access officially and bureaucratically as a foreigner in India, as well as physically, as a researcher with spastic cerebral palsy. While living in McLeod, I spent a lot of time trying to just

recognize and locate ngakpa. As I would come to discover, in contrast to monks and nuns, ngakpa rarely spent the majority of their time in one designated location or institution and unlike monastics, they did not always wear a consistent uniform or hairstyle. To complicate things further, not everyone who was or who could be called a ngakpa necessarily went by that name or consistently preferred the title. Definitions of who counted or ought to count as a ngakpa also seemed to shift considerably depending on whom I asked. Moreover, talk of ‘fake’ or imposter ngakpa (*sngags pa rdzun ma*) abounded: virtually everyone I spoke with, both ngakpa and non-ngakpa alike, seemed to agree that even when you saw a ngakpa with your own eyes, you couldn’t be sure he was genuine, no matter how much he looked the part.

During my first year or so in the field in McLeod Ganj, I practiced speaking and reading Tibetan, interacted with and interviewed various people in town, and did archival work at the *pendzökhang* (*dpe mdzod khang*) or Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA) to uncover primary sources that highlighted significant developments in the lives and lineages of Tibetan ngakpa from the 1950s until the present. All of this proved deeply useful and rewarding yet I still felt that I had failed to cultivate more sustained and intimate relationships with ngakpa. Part of this had to do with my subject position as a researcher. I wanted to learn about ngakpas’ training and religious experiences but these were not always easy things to ask about as a drop-in researcher. I was well aware that as tantric initiates, ngakpa were oath-bound to not gratuitously discuss the details of tantric Buddhist practices with the uninitiated and talking too much about one’s own spiritual accomplishments was considered at best ill-advised and at worst sinful. My strategy for engaging with religious specialists about their lives was to stick to a primarily historical, biographical register. While talking about one’s own intimate spiritual experiences or attainments was potentially inappropriate, discussing the accomplishment of one’s teachers and other respected figures was by contrast a socially valued, meritorious activity.

This work-around helped but was again of limited usefulness in light of the hesitance many ngakpa I met exhibited in the face of the biographical mode in general. Moreover, I became accustomed to religious practitioners admonishing me that perhaps one of the biggest wastes of time was to research Buddhist practices merely out of intellectual curiosity or for purely academic purposes. The Buddha's teachings, after all, were meant to be practical, and practiced. Given that they represented a path to ultimate and abiding happiness, to permanent freedom from suffering, they were *the* most precious knowledge in existence. When speaking to lamas and other Tibetans focused strongly on Buddhist practice, I repeatedly got the feeling that for these interlocutors at least, the idea of studying Buddhism without personally implementing it was one of the daftest and most regrettable notions imaginable.

Insider Knowledge, and Anthropology as Spiritual Probation:

Discussing her ethnographic research with female Freemasons in Italy, Lilith Mahmud (2014) develops the concept of the “profane ethnographer” to describe her ambiguous status in the field as someone who was not technically an initiate but was at the same time regularly invited to involve herself with esoteric practitioners and their institutions, knowledge, and activities. During the first year of my fieldwork, I, like Mahmud, was a knowledgeable but uninitiated outsider, one, who likewise occupied the often awkward position of profane ethnographer. Unlike Mahmud, however, I was regularly assumed by interlocutors in the field to already be an initiated practitioner of the esoteric traditions which I was studying. Both lay and vocationally religious Tibetans in McLeod Ganj and Kathmandu, my two primary field sites, tended to assume that white travelers to these places who were dedicating considerable time to studying Tibetan language, culture, and history were converts to Tibetan Buddhism (inji nangpa, *dbyin ji'i nang pa*, or ‘white foreigner Buddhists’⁶). Tibetans I met would often inquire about who my ‘tsawey lama’ (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*) or ‘root guru’ was or ask me what my Tibetan name was, taking for granted that I was a

committed Buddhist practitioner and convert. Since I had not then undergone a formal ceremony of Refuge or tantric initiation and since I tend to find the idea of being a white person with a Tibetan name a little strange and uncomfortable, for the better part of fieldwork I explained to those who asked that I did not have a Tibetan name⁷.

Although Dr Nida would later give me a Tibetan name and I would subsequently go on to receive initiation or ‘empowerment’ (*dbang*) into specific lineages of esoteric practice from him and a few other lamas, at the start of my fieldwork I was unaffiliated and uninitiated. During this time my go-to line when people asked me if I was a Buddhist was something like “I’m not a Buddhist but I’m very interested in Tibetan Buddhism and culture and would like to learn more.” I would explain that I was following the Dalai Lama and the historical Buddha’s own advice to investigate Buddhist teachings to see for myself whether they had validity in terms of my own experience, before I made a personal commitment. Sometimes I would add that I was deeply inspired by many of the Buddha’s teachings, that they had affected me in very positive ways, that I had faith in many of the things I’d so far learned. Nonetheless, I would clarify that I didn’t have a lama or guru, a qualified teacher who had mastered Buddhist practices and could serve as my guide in practice, that I had not received initiation into any specific tantric practices, that I had not completed ngöndro (*sngon ‘gro*) or extensive rounds of preliminary practices that serve as preparation for involvement with higher level tantric practices. Perhaps I would practice more fully in the future, I told those who asked, provided I found a guru with whom I had a good connection. Overall, while an interest in Tibetan Buddhism and a desire to potentially practice more deeply in the future had indeed initially inspired my decision to pursue a cultural anthropology PhD focused on Tibetan Studies, I ultimately framed my period of anthropological fieldwork as a sort of probation period. During this time I aimed to do as much as I possibly could to learn about the historical and contemporary complexities of Tibetan cultural and religious life in exile, so

that I could develop a well-informed and nuanced understanding of what my involvement in Tibetan Buddhism as a queer, white, non-Tibetan convert with a history of involvement with Western esotericism and magical traditions might mean.

Open Mysteries: Avoiding and Accepting Initiation in the Field and an Anthropologist's Transformation into a Textual Translator

Perhaps awkwardly for a researcher of esoteric Buddhism, I did not rush to attend wang, or tantric Buddhist initiation ceremonies, during my fieldwork. Given that wang, loong, and tri (*dbang, lung, khrid*) – empowerment/initiation; reading transmission; and oral instruction – from a qualified, lineage-holding teacher are a basic requirement for making sense of and implementing tantric practices, it might have seemed reasonable for me to attend as many wang as I could as part of my research. Wang, loong, and tri are the *sine qua non* of esoteric transmission in Vajrayāna. Wang refers to the tantric initiation ceremony proper. As part of this process, a qualified tantric expert who has received transmission for and who has ideally mastered a particular set of esoteric meditative and ritual practices (known as a *sādhana* in Sanskrit or *grub thabs* in Tibetan, ‘means of accomplishment’) introduces would-be practitioners of these procedures to the basic ‘mysteries’ or ‘secrets’ (*gsang ba*) on which these practices depend, and ritually empowers such students to take such practices up as a path to liberation. Those tantric Buddhist practices which specifically require wang fall under the heading of so-called ‘Highest Yoga Tantra’ (*bla na med pa'i rgyud*) or ‘Inner Yoga’ (*nang gi rnal 'byor*) texts and practices. These advanced esoteric disciplines focus on yidam practice or deity yoga (*lha'i rnal 'byor*) and procedures for manipulating and cultivating the subtle body and subtle states of awareness associated with these. Ideally, wang is said to ‘ripen’ (*smin pa*) the channels, winds, and energy ‘drops’ (*rtsa rlung thig le*) of initiands’ subtle bodies and to authorize and prepare initiands to identify with the meditational deities connected with the wang in question⁸.

Ideally, empowerment introduces the initiand to the body, speech and mind of the patron yidam, and further reveals these as the initiand's own nature. All phenomenal appearances are revealed to be the deity's perfected mandala (*dkyil 'khor*) or cosmogram. Regular performance of deity yoga meditation post-initiation reminds initiates of the gnostic insights hopefully imparted during the empowerment ceremony and habituates them to the 'pure view' (*dag snang*) of perceiving themselves and all apparent phenomena as divine. Deity yoga appears as a central component in a range of tantric yogic systems designed to work with and transform aspects of embodied human experience in targeted ways, across states of waking consciousness, dreaming, dreamless sleep, and sexual stimulation/orgasm. Loong, on the other hand, refers to the transmission that initiands receive by hearing each word of the *sāghanā* text or practice liturgy read aloud by the initiating lama. While loong can occur as a stand-alone event separate from wang (as with Nida's oral transmission of the one hundred healing mantras that he taught us in Bengaluru, for example), it is frequently incorporated into the performance of wang. Aural transmission rather than intellectual or cognitive understanding is primary for loong. Prayers and instructions received and written down by great adepts of the past are spoken, sung, or chanted aloud in the presence of the initiand and an aural lineage is brought to life⁹. Tri, '[oral] instruction/guidance,' is explanation from one's teacher about technical details connected with the meditative practices into one has been initiated: information about how many times to do certain procedures, when to do them, and so on. Tri may be personalized and includes guidance from one's personal teachers about signs and trouble-shooting on the path of practice.

When I began my doctoral dissertation fieldwork, I knew that attending an empowerment ceremony was how one became initiated into Secret Mantra or tantric Buddhism, and so I avoided going to such events because I wasn't sure I was ready to do this. I wanted to properly understand wang and what it implied before I considered participating. I

knew that empowerment presupposed an ideal guru-disciple relationship of direct, oral transmission: the conferral of teachings, insights, and empowering blessings from the charismatic person of an accomplished and properly authorized adept into the ears and minds of worthy students or properly prepared ‘containers’ (*snod ldan gyi slob ma*). I knew that wang was the way in which tantric vows were conferred onto initiates, ritual obligations which forge bonds between master and disciple, disciple and yidam, and co-initiates who receive transmissions from the same teacher. I knew that ties between such alternative, religious kin or ‘adamantine’ or ‘vajra’ siblings (*rdo rje’i mched lcam*) were said to endure across lifetimes, that bonds of mutual obligation between vajra-siblings were the glue that held together tantric communities.

Then again, I also knew that my reservations about attending wang ceremonies were largely over-played, willfully idealistic, and even romanticizing. While empowerments for Highest Yoga Tantra practices may have been much more secret and restricted affairs for tantric Buddhists in India in centuries past, for hundreds of years wang in Tibet have been large-scale *public* events. Today, wang are offered quite regularly by lamas in various locations all over the world. Many wang are large-scale, open events with no strict door policy or post-event follow up. Whereas in Mahmud’s Freemasonic context (or in the case of other ethnographers who have conducted research into esoteric religions) being granted initiation might require one to undergo years’ worth of preliminary training, to pass specific probationary tests, possess unique personal qualities, secure approval from human and other-than-human authorities, have cultivated extensive social networks and relationships of trust, or to belong to a particular ethnic group, in many cases all one needs to receive wang today (especially when these take place in Tibetan and Himalayan communities) is to show up for a ceremony and perhaps provide some form of monetary offering¹⁰. Between 1970 to 2019, the current and fourteenth Dalai Lama has granted the full wang for the Kalachakra tantra, a

remarkably elaborate set of esoteric Buddhist teachings, thirty two times in diverse locations around the world, including in Madison Square Gardens in New York in 1991 with several high-profile international celebrities and journalists in attendance (McLagan 2002). The most recent event, held in Bodhgaya, Bihar Province, India in 2017, was estimated by the Central Tibetan Administration to have attracted more than 200,000 devotees from at least ninety countries, and the main teaching ground where the transmissions took place boasted a total capacity of 80, 000 (**Tibet.net 2017). Further, the various ceremonies and teachings associated with this event, which spanned over multiple days, were webcast for millions of viewers worldwide who attended remotely.

While not all wang are as widely attended, publicly advertised or as covered by media as the Dalai Lama's Kalachakra ceremonies, Tibetan tantric initiations nonetheless operate today both as communal events with distinct social, cultural, political and economic dimensions affecting the flow of capital, goods and people, even as they also provide contexts for esoteric transmission and the interior transformations ideally associated with this. As such, it is quite common for individuals who have little to no intention of developing an enduring master-disciple relationship with a lama and who are not planning to uphold tantric vows or practice yidam meditations on a daily basis to nonetheless attend empowerment ceremonies. About a year and a half into fieldwork, I eventually decided to attend my first wang ceremony. After this, between June 2016 and October 2019, I attended five subsequent empowerment ceremonies. The first wang I went to in June 2016 was given by Lama Tsering Wangdu (1935 –) at his gumpa near Boudhanath, Kathmandu. This wang was for the Chöd (*gcod*) or 'cutting' meditation practice known as 'The Far-reaching Laughter of the Dākinīs' (*gcod yul mkha' 'gro gad rgyang*), associated with the Longchen Nyingtik tradition of Tibetan tantric Buddhism (I discuss the practice of Chöd further in Chapter Five of this dissertation). I first met Lama Wangdu, a widely respected Chöd yogi, when I visited him at

his gumpa in Kathmandu in 2012 during a bout of preliminary fieldwork. I had asked him to perform a quick divination for me, to see if it would be good and beneficial if I redirected my research focus to study ngakpa and ngakpa practices in exile (the results of the divination or *mo*, which Lama Wangdu performed with special dice, were affirmative). Friends in Kathmandu were attending the wang and encouraged me to join and I thought it would be a good opportunity to reconnect with Lama Wangdu.

The other empowerments I attended were two complete transmissions of the Yutok Nyingtik cycle of teachings given by Dr Nida in June and December of 2017, in Lafayette, Colorado and Topanga, California, respectively. I also attended an empowerment for the practice of a tantric yidam, the Goddess Kurukulle (Tib. *rig byed ma*), that took place in January 2018 in Boulder, Colorado, which was conferred by Tulku Yeshe, a Nyingma monk who is a friend of Dr Nida's and from the same region as him in northeastern Tibet. I received a short Yutok Nyingtik 'essential' or condensed empowerment (*don dbang*) that Dr Nida gave in Topanga, California at the end of two days of teaching on Yutok's Karmamudrā or sexual yoga practice in the then half-built Yutok temple space at Pure Land Farms in September 2018 as well. A plot of land which Christiana bought and has developed into a base for Dr Nida's teaching activities in the United States, Pure Land Farms is a burgeoning center for spiritual retreats, medical and religious education, inter-cultural events, and the cultivation of medicinal plants. I returned to the land to attend an empowerment ceremony for the same Chöd practice I had received from Lama Wangdu in 2016 in Kathmandu, when Christiana invited Lama Wangdu to come to Pure Land Farms to confer this initiation in the then almost completed Yutok temple in February of 2019.



Lama Tsering Wangdu beating a double-headed Da ma ru or tantric drum and ringing a bell (dril bu) during the Chöd empowerment he conferred in Yutok Ling temple at Pure Land Farms in February of 2019 (photo courtesy of Christiana Polites)

As mentioned, I first met Dr Nida through reading and translating his Tibetan writings on ngakpa, and with time he became both my personal *bla ma* or guru/spiritual teacher and primary research collaborator. Meeting Dr Nida proved to be a major turning point in my research. Whereas before I had struggled to meet and speak with Tibetan ngakpa in sustained ways, here I was suddenly being asked by a Tibetan ngakpa who wrote and taught prolifically about ngakpa practices to join forces as a research collaborator. Prior to connecting with Nida, I had actively avoided quizzing ngakpa about the details of advanced esoteric tantric Buddhist texts or practices. Being a non-initiate and not being a formal student of any of the ngakpa I was interviewing, I had not felt like it was my place to ask detailed, technical questions about high-level esoteric practices like tantric sexual yoga. By contrast, Dr Nida actively encouraged me to ask him questions about these very subjects. He had been looking

for someone who could assist him with the translation of Tibetan language materials relating to Tibetan medicine and tantric yoga and was keen to work together to produce new, high-quality English language publications on these topics. In the course of our partnership, Dr Nida shared esoteric texts with me that I would have never known about or had access to on my own. He tirelessly answered my many questions and provided me with an enormous amount of explanatory commentary so that I might better understand, translate, and comment upon texts he had shared with me, so I could in turn assist him in sharing information about these texts with wider audiences.

Nida explained he had had problems in the past finding Tibetan-to-English translators who he felt comfortable working with. He told me that he had appreciated the contextualizing commentary I had included with the excerpt of his essay on *ngakpa* I had translated and shared on Facebook just before we met in Bengaluru, and encouraged me to write more social media posts with contextualizing “stories” like these to share with the public. Having spent a lot of time in the field worrying that my interests as an ethnographer might clash with *ngakpas*’ priorities as religious teachers and practitioners, I was encouraged to discover that my anthropologically-oriented voice and translation efforts, aligned with Nida’s own agendas and preferences. More than this, I quickly came to appreciate Nida’s unique efforts to make aspects of *ngakpa* traditions available and intelligible to both Tibetan and English-reading audiences, and I was happy to assist him however I could.

After having proposed to study day-to-day activities at a single Tibetan Buddhist institution in exile, I thus found myself rather unexpectedly engaging very closely with the translation, dissemination, and mediation of Tibetan Buddhist esoteric literature instead. My initial intention had been to study how the charisma and esoteric expertise of one *ngakpa* (i.e. Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche) had been transmitted cross-generationally and materialized in a particular institution in exile. I had not originally intended to work closely with particular

texts as part of my research, and when I arrived in India to begin dissertation fieldwork at the start of 2015, I was barely literate in Tibetan. Unlike many more textually oriented Tibetan Studies scholars I had not come to the field to read, study, and translate a particular religious text or textual-cycle. And yet, ironically but also tellingly, it was only after I improved my ability to read Tibetan and began studying and translating religious texts, only after I received initiation and instruction in the Yutok Nyintik cycle that I became useful to many Tibetan Buddhist teachers and practitioners and had a point of entry into what mattered for them. As will become clear in the chapters to come, within Tibetan communities both past and present, the translation of esoteric literature has been linked with cultural revitalization and preservation on the one hand and moral corruption and danger on the other. My unplanned recasting from ‘anthropologist’ to ‘textual translator’ helped me to understand just how much this was so in a deeply personal way.

During the latter portion of my fieldwork, I worked closely with Dr Nida and his various organizations, projects, and associates, which significantly affected the direction and emphasis of my research. In May of 2016 I relocated from McLeod Ganj to Kathmandu, Nepal. While I had previously considered spending some months in Nepal to interview ngakpa and examine ngakpa-affiliated institutions there, my shift to Kathmandu came at Nida and Christiana’s recommendation. Nida and Sorig Khang International had assisted with the opening of a new Sowa Rigpa or traditional medical college in the city, one which was accepting both Tibetan and non-Tibetan students with and without prior Tibetan language training for its inaugural term. This was an unprecedented move for a Tibetan medical institution in exile and Nida suggested that, since I was thinking of being in Kathmandu anyway, I should stay at the college and serve as a sort of liaison between the international students and local Tibetan and Nepali staff and students, keep an eye on things for him, and help out in whatever ways I was able. Christiana offered to pay the school on my behalf for

my room and board and I ended up living at the college for some five months or so, during which time I helped with translation projects and offered English lessons to some of the students. For a little over three weeks in August 2016, Christiana also paid for me to join her, Nida, and a small transnational group of students on one of Dr Nida's annual medical training and religious pilgrimage tours to Amdo, Tibet.

An Outline of the Study Ahead:

This dissertation is organized into two sections and nine chapters. The material addressed in these chapters unfolds roughly chronologically: Chapters One to Five, which together comprise Section One, draw heavily on fieldwork I conducted in McLeod Ganj/Dharamsala, India between January 2015 and March 2016, while the last four chapters of this work are more squarely focused on research activities I have undertaken since meeting Dr Nida in March 2016 until the present. The first section of this dissertation, titled 'Pinning Ngakpa Down in Exile', addresses several key themes which emerged consistently over the course of my fieldwork and which I explore to make sense of ngakpas' distinct subjectivities, ambiguous charisma and social status and unique forms of power in exile.

Chapter One starts by defining ngakpa as specific sorts of Tibetan Buddhist ritual specialists, explaining how they contrast with monastic religious professionals and highlighting the specific ritual practices, skills, and forms of social organization with which they are associated. Chapter Two addresses some of the gendered dimensions and dilemmas of householder tantric yogic practice. It explains why ngakma (*sngags ma*), the female equivalent of ngakpa, is a far less familiar and widespread category of practitioner and discusses other religious roles and labels which exist for women tantric specialists in Tibetan Buddhist contexts. Chapter Three investigates ngakpas' complicated relationships with centralized political and religious authority, both historically in Tibet and into the present in exile. I reflect on some of the issues that prevented Zilnön Kagyeling from flourishing in the

way that the Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama, and other Tibetan exile officials had initially hoped, demonstrating how these difficulties shed light on key ngakpa tendencies, orientations and preferences. Chapter Four focuses on ngakpas' transparency and legibility in exile. Exploring contradictions and controversies involved in tensions between the outward signaling versus inward cultivation of non-celibate tantric commitments and orientations in exile, it calls attention to the cultural politics of display and discretion, authenticity and modesty which inform contemporary ngakpas' strategies of self-disclosure and concealment. I discuss anxieties surrounding monks' and ngakpas' inconsistent comportment in exile and show how calls to standardize and reevaluate ngakpas' distinctive modes of religiosity align with wider conversations about collective moral and socio-political orders in exile and their preservation and reform. Chapter Five, which concludes Section One, moves on to discuss secularization, changing demographic patterns and educational trajectories for newer generations of exile-born Tibetans and the influence these factors have on inter-generational transmission of ngakpa-related expertise and opportunities for 'tantric professionalization' in diaspora contexts.

Altogether, Chapters One to Five offer an overview of how ngakpa and ngakpa orientations are being pinned down (or are failing to be pinned down) in exile through language; gendered divisions of labor; in space and permanent institutions; through hair, clothing, and embodied comportment; and as part of new family and career trajectories. In the second section of the dissertation ('The Yoga of Sex and the Dharma of Medicine') I shift focus to discuss some of the work I have engaged in with Dr Nida in my capacity as anthropologist-translator. Although Chapters One through Five discuss tantric practices and orientations at length, in Chapter Six, I offer a more sustained and in-depth treatment of what Tantra and tantric Buddhism entail, focusing specifically on the place of sexuality and 'tantric sex' in Tibetan esoteric Buddhism. This chapter is a contextualizing segue or 'bridging'

chapter. It aims to provide a crash course in Buddhist sexual yoga practices, the role of ejaculatory and non-ejaculatory sex in Vajrayāna, and key details about the tantric initiation, yogic disciplines and subtle tantric anatomies, so as to prepare readers for the ethnographic material explored in the final three chapters of the dissertation.

In Chapters Seven and Eight, I explore the genre of Tibetan *döbay tenchö* (*'dod pa'i bstan bcos*, Sanskrit *kāmaśāstra*) or 'Treatises on Desire'. Highlighting contemporary Tibetan critiques that lay Tibetans (and especially male lay Tibetans) do not know how to have "good sex", I describe the processes and circumstances through which an American sexologist's neo-tantric manual on the cultivation of male multiple orgasms was translated into Tibetan by two ex-monks in McLeod Ganj and recast through a distinctly Tibetan medical lens in response to an apparent crisis of premature ejaculation and sexual dysfunction in Tibetan communities. In Chapter Seven I describe the launch event I attended in McLeod Ganj in 2015 for these ex-monks' translated book and explore some of the ways in which moral lay sexuality has been articulated historically and is currently being debated in Tibetan contexts. In Chapter Eight I contrast the ex-monks' translation with existing examples of the genre of Tibetan *döbay tenchö* and discuss my own involvement with translating an original Tibetan-language, three-part *döbay tenchö* which Dr Nida completed in 2012. Reflecting on these texts as both translations of foreign sexological expertise and as original Tibetan compositions, I highlight their unique hybridity and capacity to cross and blur categories of worldly, medical and trans-worldly esoteric religious knowledge. I show how Tibetan *döbay tenchö* are implicated in debates over the relative value of 'modern', cosmopolitan knowledge and indigenous Tibetan expertise, and how the cultivation of male sexual self-mastery and vitality is linked with larger concerns about strengthening and securing Tibetan futures and polities in exile.

Chapter Nine moves to explore in more detail the activities I have engaged in with Dr Nida as part of his efforts to make information about Tibetan tantric yogic practices, and especially Tibetan Buddhist tantric sex practices, available to wider audiences. In this closing chapter I examine Nida's vision of reviving the once normative, now lapsed historical model of the 'ngakpa-doctor' (*sngags sman*) who practiced medicine and Secret Mantra in integrated ways. I discuss Nida's promotion of the Yutok Nyintik lineage in light of the considerable secularization of Tibetan traditional medicine and analyze a range of Tibetan tantric ritual healing practices which Nida has attempted to revive and popularize in a number of ways and places. Reflecting on our English language Karmamudrā publication, I address how Nida has justified his more inclusive approach to sharing information on Secret Mantra practices and reflect on the ways that the sense and locus of tantric secrets shifts as esoteric Buddhist practices come to be mediated and materialized in diverse ways and in various contexts globally. I highlight once again the remarkable capacity of tantric knowledge to cross and undermine epistemological domains or genres and reflect on longstanding contentions surrounding the translation, publication, and circulation of esoteric instructions concerning tantric meditative and ritual healing practices. In my conclusion, I offer some thoughts on key methodological and theoretical quandaries that have been associated with the anthropological study of secrecy and esoteric religions and outline some of the ways that I believe this current work might contribute to future developments in the ethnographic study of tantric traditions.

With this overview in hand then, let us move now to Chapter One, in which I define ngakpa as particular types of Tibetan ritual specialists in more detail, situate them in Tibetan social and religious landscapes, clarify their specific sorts of expertise, and outline their common forms of social organization.

SECTION ONE:
PINNING NGAKPA DOWN IN EXILE

CHAPTER ONE:

THE WHITE ROBED, WILLOW-LEAF HAIRD COMMUNITY: DEFINING NGAKPA ORIENTATIONS AND EXPERTISE

What is a ngakpa? What are some of ngakpas' defining characteristics? In what ways do they differ from Tibetan Buddhist monastics and laypeople? In this opening chapter I will provide some broader historical and ethnographic context for making sense of ngakpas' social status and expertise and will address the different ways in which ngakpas' knowledge and practices have been represented and evaluated by both Tibetans and outsiders. My goal here is to provide a sketch of the ngakpa as a historical, cultural, and religious figure to set the stage for the chapters to come. I begin by discussing the broad and specific senses in which the term ngakpa can be understood, and ngakpas' status as a community of Buddhist vow-holders and religious professionals in Tibet, parallel to yet distinct from monastics. I then reflect on the types of religious practices and expertise that are most associated with ngakpa and highlight the extent to which ngakpas' perceived closeness to worldly spirits, activities, and problems has contributed to their ambiguous status as powerful but shifty sorcerers. I then close by outlining ngakpas' typically decentralized forms of authority and social organization and offer some insights into how non-monastic, non-celibate tantric communities have generally been organized and regulated in Tibetan and Himalayan societies.

Let us begin then with the word ngakpa (*sngags pa*) itself.

1) LABELING AND DEMARCATING AFFILIATIONS AND EXPERTISE

What is a ngakpa? Looking at the word itself, a *sngags pa* is quite simply ‘one who practices [Secret] Mantra’ or [Tibetan] tantric Buddhism. As Dr Nida explains in an essay titled “On Ngakpa or Mantra Users’ Education and Practices” (*sngags pa’am sngags mkhan gyi slob gso dang nyams len skor*):

“Since ‘ngakpa’ is the name for a possessor of Secret Mantra or for someone who uses mantras, [ngakpa] are also called ‘doers of Tantra/Mantra’ (*sngags mkhan*). Generally speaking, the ‘sngags/ngak’ in *sngags pa/ngakpa* refers to the tantric systems or traditions (*sngags lugs*) of *gsang sngags/Sang Ngak* [‘Secret Mantra’], *rig sngags/Rig Ngak* [‘Awareness Mantra’], and so on. Given that ‘pa’ is the nominalizing or ‘personifying’ particle, ‘ngakpa’ is the name for someone who studies ‘ngak’ – mantras or tantra – and who practices these. For example, ‘*brog pa*, ‘nomad’, is a similar term made up with a suffix, which designates people who do nomadic-pastoral work (*brog las*).” (Nyi zla he ru ka and Ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 92; cf. also Joffe 2017b)

Strictly etymologically then, a ngakpa could be anyone who has received Highest Yoga Tantra empowerment, who upholds tantric vows (*dam tshig*) and cultivates initiatic practices. As mentioned in the introduction, however, just attending an empowerment or initiation ceremony does not mean that one necessarily intends to uphold *dam tshig* or commit oneself to regular tantric Buddhist yogic practice. Further, highly trained monastics who receive wang and do take up tantric yogic pledges and practices rarely if ever self-identify as ngakpa, even if they might describe themselves as students and practitioners of Secret Mantra. In an everyday, colloquial sense then – ethnographically rather than etymologically – ngakpa thus suggests something much more specific than just a practitioner and upholder of tantric Buddhism in general.

The sense in which ‘ngakpa’ could function as both a broader, more inclusive label and as a much more specific name for a particular sort of tantric Buddhist ritual specialist was brought home for me during a dinner I had one night in July 2015 with Jamyang, a Tibetan

Geluk monk acquaintance of mine who lives in McLeod Ganj, Jamyang, a former chant master (*dbu mdzad*) at Nechung monastery, the monastery dedicated to the Tibetan state protector-deity Dorje Drakden/Pehar and his medium, affirmed that, technically speaking, the Dalai Lama, a life-long celibate monk, was also a *ngakpa* insofar as he was a master of advanced tantric Buddhist yogic practices. At the same time, Jamyang acknowledged that his use of the term this way in our conversation was didactic, an overly technical invocation intended to drive home the point that both monks and non-celibate householders could practice the methods of Secret Mantra at a high level. He agreed that no one would ever call the Dalai Lama a *ngakpa* if faced with a choice between calling the revered Buddhist teacher either ‘*ngakpa*’ or ‘monk (*grwa pa, btsun pa*)’. He confirmed that, sans qualifications, for most Tibetans in most contexts, the term *ngakpa* would immediately suggest a stereotypically long-haired tantric ritual specialist, one who mostly likely had sexual partners and/or children, and at least in some cases, who also had considerably less scholastic Buddhist education than a fully ordained monk or *gelong* (*dge slong*). To casually refer to the current Dalai Lama – someone considered by many Tibetans to be a paragon of monastic discipline – as a *ngakpa* would thus be considered deeply misrepresentative and controversial. Considered in relationship to other less accomplished monks, however, the Dalai lama could certainly be thought of as a (monastic) *ngakpa*.

These dinner-table ruminations raise the question of what exactly the relationship between monks and *ngakpa* is in Tibetan contexts. In an article about seventeenth century Tibetan artist and monk-turned-*ngakpa* Yolmo Tendzin Norbu, Tibetan Studies scholar Benjamin Bogin (2008) highlights how non-Tibetan outsiders have often confused *ngakpa* – that Tibetan “class of non-celibate tantric priests” – with monks (2008, 85-86). Bogin notes British soldier-photographer Frederick Spencer Chapman’s comments upon encountering prominent Kagyu lineage Tibetan *ngakpa* Ajo Repa Rinpoche, who was the abbot of a

monastery, during the Basil Gould British diplomatic mission to Tibet between 1936-1937. Having photographed Ajo Repa Rinpoche next to some monks, Chapman seemed at a loss for how to account for the lama's appearance, which he observed in his diary was "surely unusual for a monk" (Bogin 2008, 85 – 86).



Ajo Repa Rinpoche poses for a photograph along with some red-robed monks, displaying a piled mass of tantric yogic dreadlocks, white robe and circular human bone earrings ("Monks at Kargyu Monastery," The Tibet Album/bod kyi par phyogs bsdus [British Photography in Central Tibet 1920 – 1950, accessed October 16, 2019, http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/photo_1998.131.131.html]

Reminding us that there is no "precise correlate in Western religions or languages" for ngakpa, Bogin (2008) notes that "questions about the status of the *ngakpa* do not arise from foreign attempts at interpretation alone...[rather, the]...long and often contentious history of the figures of the monk and the *ngakpa* has played a central role in the constitution of Tibetan Buddhism" (86). Simply put, the figure of the ngakpa can be understood primarily in relationship to that of the monk. Anthropologist Nicolas Sahlé argues that "the duality of 'monk' and 'tantrist' (i.e. ngakpa)" functions as a 'fundamental binary' or logic that pervades Tibetan and Himalayan societies. Drawing on his extensive and pioneering ethnographic

research with a community of hereditary, village ngakpa in Baragaon, Nepal, Sihlé makes clear that the poles involved in this cultural binary are inherently uneven:

“The important binary of monk and tantrist evoked here is not symmetrical: it is undergirded by a cluster of relationships and hierarchies. In the frequent Tibetan characterization of the ngakpa as a specialist “who marries,” the implicit point of reference is the monastic. Conversely, the latter, as Buddhist practitioner par excellence, does not require ‘ngakpa’ in order to be defined.” [my translation from the French] (2014, 16)

Sihlé goes on to propose a basic schematic for understanding key features of this duality, as these typically apply in Tibetan and Himalayan societies:

Monk = purity of renunciation; production of [religious] merit [i.e. on behalf of the laity]

Ngakpa = sins/impurity of worldly life; performance of powerful and violent rituals [again typically on behalf of the laity]” (Sihlé 2004, 21).

Several further characteristics of ngakpa emerge from these primary distinctions.

Firstly, the quintessential ngakpa is a married householder (*khyim pa*). Ngakpa have sexual partners, biological children, and develop families and households. They also regularly do work not typically performed by monks, such as farming and animal husbandry. As such, ngakpa are closer to the sins or impurity of worldly existence, the realm of Samsara (*'khor ba*) or death, rebirth, and karma, at least as far as the external conditions in which they live, work, and often practice Buddhism go. In Sihlé’s schematic, ngakpa are associated with impure worldly life in opposition to monks, who, in entering the monastery, take on the status of world-renouncers.

This arrangement is an ideal rather than actual one. As anthropologist Geoff Childs (2004) observes, while Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries are idealized as “islands” of solitude (*gling*) or places of refuge in the midst of worldly suffering and attachments, they nonetheless remain the “focal point of a community’s religious life, situated within close proximity to the village...not necessarily a solitary place of meditation...[the village

monastery] functions as a center for the ritual activities through which communal cohesion is achieved.” (31). Still, this disclaimer notwithstanding, *householder* village life remains the conventional foil to the idealized (even if not always actual) purity or social disengagement of professional monastic renunciation, a fact readily apparent in a common colloquial Tibetan expression for sexual intercourse, i.e. *grong pa'i chos*, ‘the villagers’ Dharma’. As such, against monastic discipline and modes of renunciation, ngakpa fall, by definition, closer to the ‘impure, sinful villager life’ side of things. It was precisely ngakpas’ ambiguous closeness to worldly life and sexuality that Nida was calling attention to and poking fun at with his joke in Bengaluru about the difference between upright (monastic) lamas who stand at a remove from women or who fear being intimate with them, and ngakpa, who do so gladly as part of their social and religious commitments. Ngakpa are also commonly associated with specific forms of tantric ritual expertise, namely, exorcistic tantric practices which involve ritualized violence. We can thus see that ngakpa are strongly aligned in the Tibetan cultural imagination with two key domains, those of (ritualized) sexuality – which implies householder life as a context for religious practice – and ritualized (violence), or the subjugation of powerful, unruly spirits and forces of misfortune and adversity.

Sihlé’s proposed divisions of religious labor and tensions between pure/impure, worldly/monastic ascetic orientations is not static, neat or universal, however. A great many monks engage in the same advanced, initiatic, non-dual tantric practices as ngakpa. More often than not, however, such monks engage with such practices – which involve ritualized sexuality and violence, which seek to repurpose and transmute the afflictive emotions, and to dissolve absolute divides between pure and impure and ‘this worldly’ and ‘trans-worldly’ engagements – in monastic settings and while maintaining celibacy. Likewise, both monks and nuns in Tibetan and Himalayan societies are far from piously uninvolved in worldly life or divorced from social, political, and economic activities (Gutschow 2004; Yü 2011).

Ngakpa for their part also study non-tantric sutric Buddhist texts and accumulate merit on behalf of lay patrons. Despite their engagement with conventionally ‘impure’ activities, ngakpa are furthermore deeply concerned about not succumbing to purely worldly, deluded orientations, attachments, and motivations even as they live ostensibly lay, ‘worldly’ lives. Just as monks and nuns do this by upholding the religious vows specific to them (*dge slong gi/dge slong ma’i sdom pa*), ngakpa do this by maintaining the tantric vows appropriate to them and their practices and lifestyles. It is thus essential to understand that while ngakpa may live or appear to live lay lives, they constitute a community of professional religious renouncers just as much as monastics do. Rather than being a perfect map of orientations then, Sihlé’s scheme is a heuristic one – a working model meant to make clear important and productive cultural patterns, tensions, and contradictions. In the chapters that follow we will explore in more precise detail how tantric Buddhist practitioners of various kinds navigate the duality he describes and shift between categories and orientations in everyday contexts.

Tantric Householder Orientations: Establishing Ngakpa as a Distinct Group of Religious Professionals

There are few religious practices performed by ngakpa which are not also at some time or other performed by tantra-competent monastics. As such, it can be quite difficult to define ngakpa solely by the types of religious activities in which they participate. For this reason, I propose that it is more useful to think of ngakpa as embodying a particular sort of religious and socio-cultural orientation. This orientation is thrown into sharper relief in two seminal Tibetan hagiographies of Padmasambhava (‘The Lotus Born one’ or *pad+ma ’byung gnas*, also known to Tibetans as Guru Rinpoche, the ‘Precious Guru’), the mythic eighth century tantric Buddhist saint or ‘second Buddha’ (*sangs rgyas gnyis pa*) from India who secured the spread of Buddhism in Tibet. Padmasambhava is the original ngakpa in Tibet and he and his hagiographies continue to function as ideal models for ngakpa today. Both

hagiographies – the ‘Edicts of the Copper Island [Pure Land]’ or Kathang Zanglingma (*bka’ thang zangs gling ma*) and the ‘Edicts of the Lotus [Master]’ or Pema Kathang (*pad+ma bka’ thang*) – are revealed scriptures or ‘treasure’ texts (*gter ma*) which are said to have been unearthed by prominent ngakpa ‘treasure revealers’ (*gter ston*) or tantric visionary prophets.

The first of these hagiographies, the Kathang Zanglingma is the earliest such biography of Padmasambhava. Having been revealed in the twelfth century by Nyangral Nyima Özer (*nyal ral nyi ma ‘od zer*, 1124/1136 - 1192/1204), the text is credited with inaugurating a still vital historiographical tradition that positions Padmasambhava as Tibet’s preeminent Buddhist hero. The second text, revealed and written down in the fourteenth century by ngakpa and treasure revealer Orgyen Lingpa (*O rgyan gling pa*, 1323 - ?), further elaborates on Padmasambhava’s mythology¹¹.

In what has become something of a truism in Tibetan discussions of ngakpa, the Pema Kathang describes ngakpa in Tibet as forming a parallel religious community to monastics, an equal but different grouping of authentic Buddhist vow-holders. As the text states, matter-of-factly:

“Since Holy Dharma (*dam pa’i chos*) means conducting oneself properly/ [Let] the community of monastic renunciators and the community of ngakpas [be] establish[ed]/Let people choose whichever of these two Dharma [i.e. Buddhist] traditions/systems (*chos lugs*) they prefer” (O rgyan gling pa 1987, 397).

These two communities of vow-holders are said to have been officially established in the eighth century during Tibet’s imperial period, through the decree of the Padmasambhava, the Tibetan King Trisong Deutsen, and the Indian monk-abbot missionary Shantarakshita. Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche (1904-1987), one of the most celebrated ngakpa of the last century and the first official head of the Nyingma school of Buddhism in Tibetan exile, explained the creation of these communities in a *bca’ yig* or code of conduct he wrote in 1979 called “The Mirror Clarifying what to Take Up and what to Reject: A Code of Conduct

[explaining some Do's and Don'ts] for [the Monastic] Sangha and Vidyādhara [‘Awareness-Holder’, i.e. Ngakpa] Religious Communities” (*dge ‘dun rig ‘dzin ‘dus sde’i bca’ yig blang dor gsel ba’i me long*):

“When, in the past, the light of the lamp of the teachings of the Buddha was made to blaze in the realm of darkness that was Tibet [illuminating it] from its very ground of being, the three [luminaries], the monastic Abbot [Shantarakshita], the Tantric master [Padmasambhava], and the Dharma King [Trisong Detsen] directly decreed that there were [to be] two divisions of sangha [*dge ‘dun*, i.e. communities of Buddhist practitioners]: the Sutric community of shaved-haired monastics and the Tantric community of dreadlocked yogis or ngakpa. [This constitutes] as the well-known expression goes, the “two sangha communities which were an object for offerings or reverence for the King,” (*rgyal po’i dbu’i mchod gnas dge ‘dun sde gnyis*) both of which endure to the present day. While there is some slight difference between these two communities of monastics and ngakpa in terms of their dress/comportment, the external markers they exhibit, and the specific ways in which they perform the individual liberator or pratimoksha vow liturgy (*las chog*), both groups are completely alike in how they observe the three sets of vows [Hinayana; Mahāyāna; Vajrayāna] and practice both Sutra and Tantra in an integrated way so as to develop the spiritual qualities of inner realization.”¹²

Dudjom Rinpoche’s more recent framing of monks and ngakpa as differing primarily in terms of dress and outer comportment is mirrored in the Pema Kathang as well, which, while mentioning doctrinal differences (i.e. sutric versus tantric classes of Buddhist scripture), likewise defines ngakpa in reference to fairly quotidian details of diet, dress, comportment, livelihood, and living arrangements:

“Monastic renunciators and scholars [*mkhan po*] should conduct themselves in accordance with the rules of the vows that have been conferred on them and in line with the explanations given in the Tripitaka [i.e. the body of canonical Sutric Buddhist scriptures]. The [monastic] sangha should quench their thirst with milk and tea, they should eat grains, molasses, honey, and cream cheese as their food. They should wear lower skirts of saffron as their clothes. They should live in monastic communities for their place of residence. They should not resort to alcohol, meat or adulterated foods.” (O rgyan gling pa 1987, 398 - 399)

By contrast, it is explained that ngakpa and [tantric] lamas or gurus should:

“...Act according to the binding tantric samaya vows they proclaim and [the code of conduct] explained in the tantric texts. They should quench their thirst with chang [i.e. beer/alcohol] and should not get involved with [in a compromising way]/

misappropriate the alms or property of the monastic sangha (*dge 'dun dkor ma 'bags*). They should indulge in whatever they like for food but should not eat anything poisonous. They should wear white, red, or black tantric garments for their clothing. They should station themselves in places of meditation/retreat-houses as their residence to proliferate positive spiritual qualities or virtues. In order to protect the received/heard [teachings] they willingly volunteer their time to *sādhana* practice, to spiritual accomplishment.” (O rgyan gling pa 1987, 399)

When it comes to Nyangral Nyima Özer’s earlier hagiography, in discussing the ngakpa community in Tibet Padmasambhava focuses a little more closely on the religious practices and commitments expected of authentic ngakpa. The twenty eighth chapter of the Kathang Zanglingma records Padmasambhava’s ‘parting words of advice’ or ‘final testament’ (*zhal chems*) for the ngakpa of Tibet. The chapter follows a loose model used in several pre- and proceeding sections which present advice and admonitions for a range of different social and religious demographics in Tibet. Each tailored ‘last testament’ is described as being prompted by a particular disciple of the Lotus Master, who stands in as a sort of chief representative for each group of people. In Padmasambhava’s chapter of advice for Tibetan ngakpa it is the famous Nyingma exegete and ngakpa Sangye Yeshe of the Nub clan who solicits the counsel from the foreign master. We read:

“Then Tibetan ngakpa like Sangye Yeshe of the Nub clan asked the Guru: “If you don’t remain in Tibet and depart to India how should Tibetan ngakpa of later generations practice, what should they keep in mind? To which the Master replied:

“Take heed, ngakpa yogis of Tibet, Tibetan followers of the tantric path! Seek out a root-guru [who is a] siddha [one who has achieved spiritual accomplishments!] Open the door of the [tantric] teachings of the Secret Mantra through the various levels of empowerment! Protect your tantric samaya vows purely as the very life-force of the Secret Mantra! Respect and invest in the tantric initiator [i.e. the *rdo rje slob dpon* or ‘Vajra-Master’] as you would the limbs and head of your own body! Hold the yidam within you as you would the heart in your own breast! Cleave to the oath-bound khandro or *ḍākinī* as you would the shadow of your own body! Cherish the profound esoteric, pith instructions as you would your own eyeballs! Accumulate the profound condensed mantra [of the yidam] with every breath [that stirs] in your breast! Cultivate the Creation and Completion stages [of tantric Buddhist meditation] as you would your own body and life-force! Practice the threefold [scheme of realized] View or Meditation, Conduct, and Result as instructed! Abandon the ten non-virtues and adopt the ten virtues! [Be willing to exchange/] sacrifice your very life for the sake of the Dharma! As your primary practices, engage carefully in the [*b*] *snyen bsgrub*

‘service and accomplishment’ practices [of the yidam]! Hold tantric feast-gatherings, offer sacrificial tormas cakes and do protector propitiation-amendment rites on the new and full moon, on the eighth lunar day of Medicine Buddha, on the twenty-fifth day [i.e. *Dākinī* day] and the twenty-ninth day of the lunar month [i.e. spirit-protector day]! Do not engage in low-caste behavior nor act presumptuously, rely well on the tantric Master! Do not engage in [heretical, non-Buddhist] *bönpo* style chanting and ritual activities, align your chanting practices with meditative cultivation! Pursue the four modes of tantric ritual activity [associated with] the ‘service and accomplishment’ yidam practices as outlined in the scriptures! Abandon doubts or second thoughts about the purity of the Secret Mantra! Do not [inappropriately] spread the Secret Mantra or sell it to get wealthy! If you can accomplish [all this] yourselves, then you will achieve any *siddhi* you can think of, whatever spiritual accomplishments you wish. I, Padmasambhava, am moving on now. So, *ngakpa* who reside in Tibet right now and *ngakpa* to come, take heed, bear this in your hearts and minds!”

Looking at these sets of injunctions from two *ngakpa*-revealed hagiographies of Padmasambhava we can start to get a clearer picture of a general *ngakpa* orientation. Although *ngakpas*’ specific vows, modes of dress, living arrangements, particular ritual specialties, lineage and textual commitments, relationships, priorities etc. (in short, their everyday lived realities and concerns) are highly diverse across time and space, such a broader picture is nonetheless useful for analysis. The ideals presented in these sources continue to be looked to by *ngakpa* today and provide a helpful framework for further ethnographic investigation. Padmasambhava’s chapter of advice to Tibetan *ngakpa* in the Kathang Zanglingma is part of a larger section outlining several parallel speeches of counsel. This series begins from chapter twenty four, opening with Master Padma’s advice to Tibet’s kings (*rgyal po rnams*). From there Padmasambhava offers advice to Tibet’s ministers (*blon po rnams*); male and female monastic vow-holders (*btsun pa pho mo rnams*); scholastic religious teachers or *geshes* (*dge bshes ston pa rnams*); to *ngakpa* (*sngags pa rnams*); to meditative-anchorites or hermit contemplatives (*sgom chen rnams*); yogis (*rnal ‘byor pa rnams*); [lay, i.e. non-professionally religious] men (*skye bo rnams*); [lay] women (*bud med rnams*); [lay] religious patrons/sponsors (*yon mchod/yon bdag rnams*); physicians (*sman pa rnams*); [tantric] preceptors/initiating masters involved with Dharma (*slob dpon chos ‘brel*

byed pa rnams); and finally Tibetan subjects or commoners [*mi 'bongs spyi mthun rnams*).

This list alone is revealing. We see that as a social-religious category ngakpa are singled out from ordinary lay householders and commoners, monks and nuns, scholastic and initiating teachers, political authorities, and meditative ascetics. The paradigmatic ngakpa appears as a tantric vow-holder who practices high level esoteric Buddhist practices ‘at home’, in the midst of various social relationships. Three other categories in this larger list overlap considerably with the activities and personhood of ngakpa: that of ‘yogi’, ‘hermit contemplative’, and ‘initiating [tantric] preceptor’. Ngakpa may at various times occupy these other subject positions. By definition, ngakpa are practitioners of tantric yoga, and therefore yogis, they may also undertake extended closed retreat to hone their skills in various tantric yogas or meditative disciplines and therefore appear in the guise of meditator-ascetics or hermits. Experienced ngakpa may also serve as tantric preceptors, granting initiations and instructions to others.

This closeness if not synonymity between yogic/contemplative expertise and ngakpa is readily apparent in Bhutan, where the colloquial name for non-monastic, non-celibate householder tantric yogis is in fact *sgom chen* (literally, ‘great meditator’, see Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi 2005). Likewise, one of the most common responses I received when I asked Tibetans in McLeod Ganj about ngakpa was that people mentioned the community of togden (*rtogs ldan*) or full-time tantric yogic anchorites who lived at a retreat center at the reconstituted Khampagar/Tashi Jong monastery located about two hours’ drive from McLeod Ganj¹³. Togden (lit. ‘realized one’), is a technical term used to refer to accomplished tantric yogis and yoginis, especially in the Drukpa Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Like ngakpa, togden wear white yogic shawls and leave their hair to become long and matted. For many Tibetans I spoke with, these practitioners – who are required to spend thirteen consecutive years in full-time retreat cultivating core tantric yogic disciplines involving the

energies of the subtle body and meditation on the ultimate nature of mind before they can be awarded the title togden – could also reasonably be called ngakpa. In the Drukpa Kagyu context, however, in contrast to non-monastic, non-celibate ngakpa, togden are most often ordained monastics who go on to specialize in tantric yogic training. Indeed, celibacy is a strict requirement of the intensive yogic disciplines they undertake (Huber 1999, 91). While some individual togden from Khampagar have in recent decades gone on to marry and lead the lives of householders, neither the term *rtogs ldan* nor *sgom chen* as used by Tibetans quite captures the specific lifestyles and forms of ritual expertise evoked by the word *sngags pa*.

2) NGAKPA AND DEITY YOGA

For both Padmasambhava and Tibetans I talked with as part of my research, terms like *rnal 'byor pa*, *rtogs ldan*, and *sgom chen* imply for the most part practitioners living somehow at a remove from householder life and obligations. Insofar as ngakpa engage in tantric contemplative disciplines in retreat they too are yogis and hermits, at least for a time. Yet while Padmasambhava's advice for yogis and hermits is almost entirely focused on injunctions about not succumbing to conceptuality and partiality while meditating and persevering in the face of distractions while in retreat practice, his counsel to ngakpa is in contrast, notably centered on tantric ritual responsibilities and obligations to both human and non-human persons. The broad flavor of ngakpas' practices is clear: ngakpa are those who, having pledged themselves to a tantric guru and having received the empowerments, i.e. having been initiated, then dedicate their time to realizing offering and meditation practices associated with the so called 'Three Roots' (*rtsa gsum*) of the Lama (*bla ma*, i.e. Guru); Yidam (*yi dam*, the initiatic, meditational tantric deity or Buddha); and Khandro/ma (*mkha' 'gro ma*, the tutelary tantric 'sky-going' goddess/es). Lineage-specific protector deities (*srung ma*) are also often included or added to the third category as well. These Three Roots are sources of spiritual blessings, power, protection, and liberation. Through regular performance

of *sādhana* involving visualizations, prayers, offerings, and the recitation of mantras practitioners affirm their ultimate non-duality with these Three Roots, who are all different expressions of enlightened Buddha-nature. Padmasambhava's statements suggest that *ngakpa* are those who have accumulated thousands of recitations of the mantras of their specific meditational deity or deities, who spend their time going through life constantly perceiving their inseparability with the Three Roots.

Sādhana practices of the Three Roots are especially linked with the *bskyed rim* or the 'Creation Stage' of advanced tantric meditation, the first of the 'two stages' (*rim gnyis*) of tantric Buddhist meditation referenced by Padmasambhava above. In this stage practitioners imagine that they are the *yidam* and their apparent surroundings are the deity's perfected mandala. Creation Stage practices are especially associated with the Mahā Yoga class of tantric scriptures in the Nyingma school. The root scriptures and *sādhana*s of this class revolve around a set of especially ferocious *yidam* deities and as such Mahā Yoga, the first of the three most advanced or 'inner' tantric yogic approaches in the Nyingma system, is said to be the 'antidote' for the poison of anger/hatred/animosity (*khong khro 'i/zhe ldang gi gnyen po*). It is these deity yoga practices which Sahlé has in mind when linking *ngakpa* with "powerful and violent" exorcistic rituals. After Creation Stage practices connected with Mahā Yoga tantras, Nyingma practitioners then move onto the second 'Completion or Perfection Stage' (*rdzogs rim*) of tantric meditation, connected with the Anu Yoga class of texts. As a part of these practices, which are the antidote or remedy for the poison of desire (*'dod chags kyi gnyen po*), ritualists go on to conceive of themselves (with or without a physical partner) as the *yidam* in ecstatic union with a divine partner¹⁴.

Padmasambhava's advice in the Kathang Zanglingma is replete with strikingly visceral, corporeal imagery. *Ngakpas'* bodies, speech, and imaginations are all to be brought into a sort of ritual alignment or coordination focused on perceiving the experiences and

appearances of everyday life as the ‘pure appearance’ or ‘immaculate perception’ (*dag snang*) of the tantric deity. Through tantric contemplative discipline, ngakpa should come to think of their initiating gurus as being as precious and fundamental to their embodied being as their limbs and head, they should perceive their yidam as their very heart, its mantra should become inseparable from their every breath, they should stick to their tantric goddess as their shadow adheres to and follows after their own body, and so on. In 1951, revered twentieth century Tibetan ngakpa Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910 – 1991) travelled to Rebkong in Amdo province, northeastern Tibet, where he granted extensive empowerments and instructions to the local *sngags mang* or community of ngakpa there. This community is one of the largest and longest standing community of non-monastic, householder tantric yogis and yoginis in Tibet, having been founded by Dr Nida’s previous incarnation, Rigdzin Palden Tashi (1688 – 1743) in the mid-eighteenth century.

Asked to offer some advice to the ngakpa community in 1951, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche did so by providing commentary on Padmasambhava’s own words of advice as found in the Kathang Zanglingma. Expanding on Padmasambhava’s comments about how ngakpa should accumulate the essential mantra [of the yidam] with every breath in their breasts, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche notes:

“Since the source of the magical power to accomplish deity [yoga practice] and the doorway to every *dnegos grub* [siddhi or spiritual/yogic power] is the recitation of mantras, recite the mantras [and the associated visualizations] for serving or approaching whichever yidam you rely on unceasingly, day and night, like an ever-flowing river.”¹⁵

We can thus see that, as ‘mantra wielders’, ngakpas’ primary training, their core mode of cultivation, revolves around the ‘service and accomplishment’ (*bsnyen bsgrub*, *nyendoob*) practices of the yidam, i.e. deity yoga. These procedures, involving the entrainment of body, breath, speech and imagination through liturgical recitation coupled with complex inner visualization procedures, enact increasing stages of intimacy with the deity, through which

the ritualist draws progressively ‘nearer’ (*bsnyen* can mean both ‘wait upon/serve’ and to ‘draw close to’) to the meditational deity, eventually coming to experience complete inseparable union with it and its enlightened qualities and capacities. Crucially, it is through increasing self-identification with the yidam that ngakpa come to master the ‘definitive accomplishments’ (*dngos grub*) – the spiritual or yogic powers – of the four rites or tantric actions (*las bzhi*), or powers of pacifying (*zhi ba* – the curing of diseases, calming of adverse conditions, imbalances etc.); increasing (*rgyas pa* – increasing riches, resources, intelligence, memory, prestige etc.); controlling (*dbang* – exerting influence over humans, animals, and spirits, drawing people and things to oneself etc.); and forcefully subduing or destroying (*drag* – utterly eradicating enemies, adverse forces, obstacles etc.).



Ngakpa Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche seated surrounded by local ngakpa from the Rebkong ngakmang in 1951 (Dilgo Khyentse’s two daughters, Chime Wangmo and Traga, can be seen in front of the left pillar as well. Cf. “Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche – Gallery 1,” A Tribute to a Century of Blessings, accessed October 16, 2019, http://dilgokhyentsevancover.ca/dilgo_khyentse_rinpoche_gallery1/content/Dilgo_Khyentse_Rinpoche_3_of_11_large.html)

Bsnyen bsgrub practices are strongly associated with this sort of practical tantric Buddhist magic, or what we might call instead, in an effort to avoid that fraught, potentially ethnocentric term, “Buddhist ritual arts of efficacy” (White 2017). ‘Assorted Rites’ or tantric ritual actions (*las tshogs*) connected with specific yidam typically appear after *bsnyen sgrub* *sādhana* instructions in Tibetan textual cycles describing particular versions of the Three Roots, as the expression ‘the three [processes] of Service/Approach, Accomplishment, and

Actions’ (*bsnyen bsgrub las gsum*) suggests. Dr Nida made the connection between ‘self’-cultivation through identification with the yidam and the ideally altruistic performance of miscellaneous efficacious ‘actions’ (i.e. *las tshogs*) for others clear during a one day teaching he gave on mantra healing in Lafayette, Colorado, in May 2019. He explained that just repeating “May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering” over and over – the standard Mahāyāna Buddhist aspiration that forms part of the recitation of the ‘Four Immeasurables’ prayer (*tshad med bzhi*) which practitioners repeat thousands and thousands of times as part of tantric preliminary practices – was not enough. One had to actually do something to actualize this intention. To fail to do so he said, was the same as if a person was constantly telling their partner, “I love you, I love you!” but never did anything to show it, never took any actions to demonstrate this to be true. In this way, the quintessential ngakpa is one who cultivates strong spiritual efficacy or power (*nus pa*) through the recitation of mantras and visualization of deities in order to help others and demonstrate their love.

3) AMBIVALENT WORLDLINESS: NGAKPA AS SHIFTY SORCERORS AND DISGUISED SHAMANISTS

In light of the foregoing, ngakpa are thus those practitioners who, having completed tantric preliminaries, “perform the *bsnyen (b)sgrub* of the Three Roots of the Creation Stage both in secluded retreat and at home” (Nyi zla lce nag tshang and ye shes sgröl ma 2015, 108) and as a result gain spiritual powers (*dnegos grub*) through which, at least ideally, they are able to make good on Buddhist aspirations to benefit beings. Accordingly, the model ngakpa is a tantric ascetic who maintains orthodox Buddhist philosophical orientations and ethical motivations in the midst of lay life and community. He is a capable and altruistic sorcerer, a socially engaged yogi. Monastic initiates of Secret Mantra also regularly meditate on the Three Roots, also practice Mahā Yoga deity yoga ‘service and accomplishment’ procedures, also develop powers of the four tantric actions. But Padmasambhava’s testimony makes it

clear that for ngakpa, cultivation of these practices and capabilities is part of their vocation, a key component of their professional expertise and subjectivity¹⁶.

That Padmasambhava warns Tibetan ngakpa to not chant their ritual texts like “bönpos” – that is, like non-Buddhist ritual specialists¹⁷ – is telling here. *Bon* refers to the pre-Buddhist state religion of Tibet but *bon po* as used here should be understood as a rhetorical foil, a catch-all term for ‘non-Buddhist’ ritual practitioners in general, a floating signifier mobilized to concretize an ‘orthodox’ Buddhist position. No other category of tantric Buddhist practitioner to which Padmasambhava offers parting advice is similarly warned against lapsing into non-Buddhist orientations in the very course of performing Buddhist practices. Padmasambhava tells ngakpa to do Buddhist ritual practices (‘chanting’, *gyer pa*) but guard against doing them like non-Buddhist sorcerers, to be careful to chant “in line or conformity with [Buddhist] meditative cultivation” (*gyer dang bsgom du bstun*). As Dilgo Khyentse comments in this regard:

“Reciting tantric rituals without having empowerments or doing the *bsnyen sgrub* practices of the Creation and Completion Stages is [what Padmasambhava means when he says] ‘bönpo chanting’ for drawing wealth, which is wrong. Rely on a qualified guru, perfect the *bsnyen sgrub* practices of the yidam – if you have pure and total faith then you will have entered onto the tantric path properly, so practice like this!” (Dil mgo mkhyen brtse rin po che, *zhal gdams*)



Revered ngakpa treasure revealer, scholar, and inaugural head of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism in exile, Dudjom Jigdrel Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche, photo copyright Arnaud Desjardin via <http://erik-pema-kunsang-a-live-biography.blogspot.com/2014/04/empowerment-reading-transmission-and.html>.

Dudjom Rinpoche offers a similar warning in his 1979 code of conduct for ngakpa and monks, pointing in this case to the importance of maintaining unbroken lineages of practice, specific ritual precedents developed by realized tantric Buddhist virtuosi. Discussing the proper way to play music while performing Secret Mantra rituals, he notes:

“Furthermore, playing music as part of tantric rituals is not about making them seem like more inherently beautiful and majestic sorts of Dharma [practice]. As the Great [Lotus] Master said: “If one spurs on Secret Mantra [practices] with music, blessings [come] quickly”. If one makes use of the specific melodies and music styles practiced by the vidyādhara awareness-holders [i.e. accomplished tantric yogi/nis] of previous generations [continuing their use] in an unbroken way, the blessings will be great. Otherwise, if one just makes as much loud or dramatic racket as one can, with no connection to the specific words and music of the rituals of [authentic traditional] sources, this is what is known as ‘chanting as a bönpo’ (*bon du gyer ba*) and is something to be avoided¹⁸.”

Such comments alert us to the fact that ngakpa are practitioners not only specifically associated with the performance of ‘Buddhist ritual arts of efficacy’ but also the

reprehensible, to-be-avoided possibility of performing such arts and actualizing their intended practical effects outside of strictly Buddhist ritual/ethical frameworks or understandings of reality.

The idea that ngakpa might be only nominally Buddhist bönpo or bönpo-like sorcerers has been repeated by non-Tibetan commentators as well. In her 1933 book titled *Grand Tibet: Au Pays Des Brigands Gentilhommes* [‘Great Tibet: In the Country of Gentleman Brigands’]¹⁹ French explorer and early convert to Tibetan Buddhism and practitioner of Tibetan tantric yoga Alexandra David--Néel describes visiting with resident ngakpa at a ngakpa dratsang (*sngags pa grwa tshang*) or ‘tantric college’ located a short distance away from the main Gelukpa monastery of Labrang, in Amdo, northeastern Tibet called Labrang Tashikyil (*bla brang bkra shis ‘kyil*). *Sngags pa grwa tshang* can be literally translated as ‘a monk’s college for ngakpa’. The term is most commonly used to describe educational centers that provide specialized training in tantric Buddhist ritual practices, especially the sorts of rites essential to the conducting of large-scale empowerment ceremonies. These centers are for the most part a product of Geluk approaches to monastic education. The official curriculum for Geluk monks is concerned virtually exclusively with non-tantric exoteric or sutric (*mdo ’i*) scholasticism, which includes subjects like philosophy, ethics, logic, epistemology, cosmology, and so on. While Geluk monks may well study esoteric tantric texts privately, and practice tantric preliminaries (*sngon ’gro*) and more advanced tantric yogic practices extramurally, while enrolled in the monastery they are typically only allowed to study and practice such material - even sometimes after hours in the privacy of their rooms - after having completed five or six years of mainstream, exoteric studies. Following reforms put in place by the previous, thirteenth Dalai Lama around the same time that David-Néel visited the ngakpa dratsang in Labrang, monks who completed their geshe training²⁰ were subsequently required to undertake about three years of official, specialized training in tantric

ritual methods under the supervision of individual tutors at their nearest, affiliated ngakpa dratsang²¹. Given that the primary ‘tantrists’ attending Geluk ngakpa dratsang are fully ordained monastics, the ‘ngakpa’ in ngakpa dratsang thus signifies the broader sense of ‘Secret Mantra practitioner in general’ discussed above.

The ngakpa dratsang affiliated with the great Geluk monastic university of Labrang Tashikhyil that David-Néel describes visiting was different, however. Rather than a Geluk educational center for highly qualified monks pursuing advanced training in tantric rites, the ‘ngakpa temple’ which David-Néel describes was a Nyingmapa institution staffed by a cohort of non-celibate, non-monastic Nyingma ngakpa, who, as David-Néel explains, were an important source of outsourced ritual labor for the neighboring monastery. David-Néel recounts how Labrang ngakpa were able to sell their unenviable but valuable talent for subduing demons to monastic authorities, thus earning partial incorporation into more centralized local institutions and administrative structures, as well as payment, privileges, and a measure of recognition and prestige. As she explains:

“Several other days were taken up with more serious matters: with consulting texts and questioning certain erudite lamas. I paid a visit as well to a monastery of ngakpa situated in the countryside, a small distance from Labrang. Ngakpa - ‘men of secret words’ - are magicians, heirs to the Bönpo shamanists who, prior to the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet, held the place presently occupied by the lamas. Stripped of their power by the latter, the Bönpo shamans took their revenge, thanks to the innate penchant for superstition of their adversaries. The whole thing came about naturally, organically, without any conscious strategy on the part of the conquered...In fact, a lot of the beliefs and rites of the Bönpos continued to exist under another name, in the Buddhism of Tibetans, while the Bönpos - and most especially the white Bönpos - incorporated into their own religion a good number of Buddhist elements. So, it was that, disguised with the name of ‘ngakpas’, bona fide shamans were absorbed and subsumed into the lamaist clergy. Still, they occupy a distinct place within it, at the margins of the regular clergy and their role consists principally in communicating with demons. There exist independent groups of ngakpa who possess temples of their own, where they meet together at certain times, living the rest of the time with their families (ngakpas marry). Other ngakpas who do not belong to any group, but who have been initiated by a master of their sect, practice the rites that he has taught them alone, either for their own benefit, or as is most common, for remuneration when requested by people who wish to free themselves from ills caused by demons, or who harbour less innocent designs: like wanting to harm an enemy or destroy him. That

which is commonly termed black magic is within the domain of ngakpas' [expertise], and even if they do not all practice it they are all at least considered to be capable of doing it (or give the impression that they can).

Certain of the great lamaist monasteries of the "Yellow Hat" [i.e. Geluk] sect have thought it useful to attach themselves to a group of ngakpas, who, outside of the enclosure of the monastery, hold in their place a constant traffic with evil spirits. There are certain rites whose celebration does not consist in subjugating these spirits, but in giving them a sort of worship, a 'cultus', which pacifies them. Since such rites are forbidden to the monks of this sect, they have devised an indirect means of assuring themselves against the attacks of those malicious beings of the other world, by making the ngakpas pay these ill-intentioned beings the homage that satisfies them or by making them offer to these beings on their behalf the nourishment they require. In this way illness and accidents are diverted from the monastery and its prosperity as well as that of its members is assured. In exchange for their services, the ngakpas attached to the ngakpa temple affiliated with the monastery receive a grant from it...Ngakpa are often friendly people, devoid of the haughtiness that affects their sorcerer-peers from the regular clergy, with the exception of some among them who are held to possess very extensive supernatural powers and who as such enjoy a considerable reputation. The air of simplicity with which ngakpa comport themselves probably has to do with the fact that their position in the ecclesiastical world is considerably inferior to that of monks who belong to a lamaist monastery. Still, I have met some whose civility came from their somewhat sceptical notions, which prevented them from taking anything at all too seriously. This gave rise in them to a sort of universal or indiscriminate benevolence, a slightly pitying, slightly ironic and ultimately detached attitude that they extended to everyone and to everything, without forgetting to include e themselves in the bargain. I was very cordially received by the ngakpas of Labrang. I spend several hours chatting and drinking tea with them after which I returned to my lodgings..." (David-Néel, 1933, pp. 97 – 101, my translation from the French).

I reproduce David-Néel's account at length here not only because it has not been discussed in a scholarly context before but also because it offers some useful insights into ngakpas' unique orientations and the extent to which their non-celibacy, their closeness to the 'wildness' of both everyday, worldly life and worldly spirits is part of what makes them powerful and sought after but also ambiguous. Non-Buddhist ritual specialists and shamans also cultivate rituals connected with the four tantric actions, they, like ngakpa, propitiate, control, and placate powerful boon-and-disaster granting worldly (i.e. non-enlightened) spirits (*jig rten gyi lha 'dre*). Padmasambhava underscores the importance of maintaining harmonious relations and tantric pacts with a range of non-human entities, specifically tantric goddesses and protector-deities. He instructs ngakpa to "host tantric feast-gatherings (*tshogs*,

rituals of communal prayer, food offering and sharing, vow renewal etc. connected with the Three Roots), offer sacrificial *gtor ma* cakes, and do *skong gsol* (i.e. propitiation prayers for protector deities, ones which ‘satisfy’ them and ‘amend’ – *skong ba* – breaches of ritual contract between initiates and these oath-bound spirits)” on key dates of the ritual calendar (the new and full moon, the eight lunar day associated with the Medicine Buddha, the twenty fifth lunar day associate with the Khandromas, and the twenty ninth day dedicated to the protector deities). A ngakpa who does not regularly cultivate relationships with these spirits is no ngakpa at all but at the same time true ritual efficacy derives from a full and proper understanding of Buddhism and its teachings. Dilgo Khyentse exhorts the Rebkong ngakpa to “abandon things like drinking alcohol wantonly, smoking or snorting tobacco, sexual misconduct, emulating [the behavior] of border peoples [*mtha’ mi*, i.e. uncivilized, non-Buddhists], and [whatever] goes against the rules of the *ngakpa* community” (Dil mgo mkhyen brtse rin po che, *zhal gdams*).

This sort of polemical, inter-religious and cultural comparison is strongly linked with ngakpa subjectivities and histories. Gelukpa monk turned non-sectarian ngakpa Rigdzin Palden Tashi, who founded the Rebkong ngakpa community, caused controversy when he granted tantric teachings to Bönpo as well as Buddhist students (Stoddard 2013, 103), celebrated wandering tantric yogi Shabkar (1781 -1851) from the same community was repeatedly queried about whether he was a Buddhist or a bönpo (Sihlé 2018b). As Samuel (1993) has famously argued, Vajrayāna’s remarkable success in pervading and becoming entrenched in almost all aspects of Tibetan and Himalayan societies had to do with the extent to which it meshed with Tibetans’ pre-existing ‘shamanic’ orientations and managed to outcompete and supplant pre-Buddhist ritualists by providing a newfangled repertoire of methods for propitiating spirits and managing natural forces. In an interview with prominent ngakpa Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche (1920 – 2009), Jeff Cox directly queries the extent to

which ngakpa can be thought of as tantric Buddhist ‘shamans’ or as ‘shamanic’ practitioners.

In the Tibetan master’s opinion, the primary difference between ngakpa and shamans lies in the ultimate intentions and orientations motivating their practices:

“Q: Is a ngakpa lineage more involved with working with the natural forces, the deities of the weather, the local deities? Do they have a more shamanic tradition?”

A: They are engaged in similar rituals and ceremonies as those in the shamanic tradition but there is a distinct difference. This is, for the ngakpa the purpose and final goal is enlightenment in order to liberate others and self. Usually in the shamanic tradition no one talks of enlightenment—it’s only for healings and temporary performance which are maybe only for this life’s well-being. The goal is not as high.

Q: I see. You are saying that ngakpas will do similar kinds of things as shamans but the purpose is for creating better conditions for enlightenment, either mental or physical?

A: Yes. Simply, ngakpas do what they do not only for the present moment’s well-being but also for future enlightenment.”²²

It is not clear here whether Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche means indigenous Tibetan spirit-medium ‘shamans’ (*lha pa, dpa’ bo* etc) or practitioners from other ethnic, cultural contexts. Whatever the case, his distinctions were repeated by my own research interlocuters. Wangchuk, a Tibetan hereditary ngakpa and spirit-medium (*lha pa, lha ‘bab [mkhan]/dpa’ bo*) born in Nepal who I interviewed twice in McLeod Ganj in July 2011²³ likewise invoked the parallels and divergences between Buddhist and non-Buddhist ritual specialists when he noted during dinner one night that Nepali *jhankri* (shamans) did many similar healing and exorcistic rituals to him, except they relied on the actual blood sacrifice of animals (specifically chickens), something he explained was strongly disapproved of by authentic Buddhists²⁴.

Stressing his central argument about a co-operative, integrated model of so-called ‘shamanic’ and ‘clerical’ orientations in Tibetan societies, anthropologist Geoffrey Samuel has emphasized that:

“...It is very clear in the Tibetan ethnography that these village shamans [i.e. *lha pa*, *dpa' bo*] and similar ritual specialists by and large act as part of the wider Tibetan religious system and under the authority of the lamas²⁵. It is only in ‘marginal’ areas such as parts of northern Nepal (Mumford 1989) and of course in Mongolia (Heissig 1980), that the village shamans and lamas can be seen as distinct and competing systems” (2005, 14)

This picture of cooperation notwithstanding, in her exploration of dreaming as a site of dialogue between Buddhism and shamanism in Tibetan contexts, Angela Sumegi (2008) points out the frequency with which Tibetan tantric Buddhist adepts have engaged in magical contests with non-Buddhist magicians and shamans, a phenomenon equally described by Mascarinec (1995), Mumford (1989) and Ortner (1995). Accounts of both monastic and non-monastic tantric masters’ superior power over such rival specialists have served to buttress claims of Buddhism’s moral superiority over local religions and have played an important role in conversion narratives and processes of Buddhization and Tibetanization (Dargyay 1988; Ehrhard 1999; Ramble 2008; Templeman 1999). Sumegi (2008) echoes Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche’s take in her comparison of shamanic and Tibetan Buddhist approaches to ‘worldly’ ritual. In contrasting shamanic and Tibetan Buddhist orientations to dream, Sumegi (2008) questions whether shamanisms could ever rightly be called ‘soteriological’. Following Jonathan Smith’s proposed dichotomy between ‘locative’ and ‘utopian’ religious world-views, Sumegi demonstrates how soteriological features such as a focus on transcendence from an imperfect, current human condition, moral perfectibility, and the notion of ‘ultimate good’ cannot be said to obtain in classically shamanic orientations. She comments:

“From a shamanic perspective, the shaman’s ability to work with the spirits is measured, and his authenticity established, by his practical efficacy relative to the demands of his community or clients. For the Buddhist, expertise in delivering individual practical benefits must serve the greater goal of universal liberation...The flexibility and range of shamanic activity is a function of an open-ended pragmatic interest in what works; the lama’s activity rests on the flexibility and range of the mind, but is circumscribed by a soteriological framework that has already established what works...For the lama, the ritual, dream, or vision, while true or valid in a practical, conventional sense, must at the same time be seen in a liberation-orientated way, and, therefore, be denied any ultimate status or truth. There is, in effect, from the

Buddhist perspective, no absolute contradiction, but there is a tension – lest the practical use of a dream displace or ignore the soteriological aim.” (113)...In Tibet, where the Buddhist lamas took over the role of shamans as ritual experts engaged in prolonging life, defeating demons, and guiding the spirits of the dead, it would be important that these worldly activities not demean or devalue the superior aim of Buddhist practice. The lama is expected by the community to exhibit his mastery over spiritual forces. At the same time, however, he must take care not to be identified simply as an accomplished shaman. The validation for his power must be based on Buddhist ethical and soteriological concerns; otherwise there is no evidence for claiming spiritual superiority.” (87-88)

In his memoirs, Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche describes his own magical duel and professional competition as a “foreign lama” with a “local non-Buddhist [Bhotia] priest”, a storm-making sorcerer rival Yeshe Dorje encountered in Darjeeling in the 1960s. Contra Yeshe Dorje’s own methods, this priest and his wife relied on elaborate non-Buddhist ritual procedures and the sacrifice of a rooster to produce rains. Aggrieved by the pagan priest’s uncouth activities, Yeshe Dorje directs magical emanations towards him via wrathful deity yoga practices, which results in a devastating magical storm that renders the rival sorcerer’s wife unconscious from shock and floods their house and carries away all their belongings while leaving nearby houses untouched (cf. Woolf and Blanc 1994, 50 – 51). Here, closeness and capacity for comparison gives rise to competition and often violent efforts at religious boundary-making and marking.

4) VAJRA-KIN: DECENTRALIZED AUTHORITY, INSTITUTIONALIZATION, AND NGAKPA SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Towards the end of my first lengthy, wide-ranging interview with him at his home in McLeod Ganj in April 2015, Ngakpa Dawa, Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche’s student, let me know what he thought made ngakpa special:

“Ngakpa are a little bit crazy. They can just stay at home and do their practice and not worry about what people say or think about them. Ngakpa don’t have to live at the monastery, they are decentralized.”

Our conversation had been partially in English and partially in Tibetan, and Ngakpa Dawa used the English word ‘decentralized’ and it especially caught my attention. Once again, we see that a key feature of ngakpa orientations is defined in contrast to monastic lifestyles. While monks and nuns are obliged to stay put in monasteries as part of their education and ritual responsibilities, ngakpa are not subject to any centralized authority or institution. As Ngakpa Dawa suggested, they can pursue high level practices at home, while living outwardly ordinary lives, without having to necessarily submit to regular or direct oversight by anybody. While they are busy with either ensconced or wandering retreat ngakpa are likewise not subject to very much ongoing supervision. This cultural scheme of ‘monastic: monastery, institutional oversight’ ngakpa: shifting locations for practice, no/minimal oversight’ was neatly captured in a children’s Tibetan language primer which Eeva, a Finnish student at the International Sorig College in Kathmandu, showed me one day in July 2016. The book had a cartoon drawing of a monk on one side of the page, captioned “I am a monk. I live in the monastery”. On the facing page was a line drawing of a smiling ngakpa, with long, matted hair, human bone earrings and a double-headed tantric drum or *Dama ru* in his hand. “I am a ngakpa. I practice Chöd (*gcod*),” the caption read. Intensive Chöd practice is commonly associated with wandering retreat and meditation in out of the way, dangerous places haunted by noxious spirits (*gnyan sa*). Here the figure of the monk (*grwa pa*) commonsensically indexes institutional affiliation. By contrast, the ngakpa-yogi implies the practice of contemplative disciplines beyond the pale of the monastery and its centralized authority. He is identified primary through his activities and expertise (i.e. the practice of exorcistic, apotropaic rites associated with potentially harmful spirits and natural forces) rather than any institutional setting.

Practicing at home or in retreat, outside of centralized institutions does not mean practicing entirely alone or being left to one’s own devices, however. While individual

Tibetan and Himalayan villages might boast one or two (or even no) hereditary ngakpa households, larger concentrations of ngakpa or ngakpa communities (*sngags sde*) have occasionally appeared, often in the wake of the development of so-called chögar (*chos sgar*) or religious encampments which have formed around charismatic celibate and non-celibate treasure-revealers or other tantric teachers. Such encampments develop when students and attendants along with their families settle near a prominent tantric yogic virtuoso and their hermitage or household (Germano 1998; Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2014; Jacoby 2010). In some cases, such encampments may evolve into permanent towns or villages with a high density of tantric practitioners. On the other hand, ngakpa may also predominate in areas in which large-scale monasticism has historically been absent (Childs 2004).

Divergences between Tibetan monastics and householder tantrists' social organization, institutions, and codes of conduct have contributed to the consistent perception by both Tibetans and outside observers that so-called 'married lamas' were altogether unregulated, disorganized, and dissolute. It is somewhat ironic then that the earliest *bca' yig* or codes of conduct for Tibetan Buddhist vow-holders currently known is a set of community regulations or guidelines for ngakpa written by Rongzom Chokyi Zangpo (1012 – 1088)²⁶, a prominent ngakpa and defender of the Nyingma school and its texts and styles of religious practice. As we will see in Chapter Three, chief critiques of Nyingma or 'Old Translation' (*snga 'gyur*) adherents were that their canon of older translated Buddhist texts were inauthentic Tibetan forgeries without valid Sanskrit originals or Indian pedigree, and that the ngakpa who had preserved them during Tibet's post-imperial era of fragmentation (*sil bu'i dus skabs*) when state patronage for monastic institutions had foundered, were poorly educated, self-serving, morally corrupt, fake teachers and black magicians who had perverted true tantric Buddhist teachings as an excuse to binge on alcohol and meat and engage in overly literal rites of tantric sex and ritual murder.

Rongzom put out his charter for ngakpa (*rong zom chos bzang gis rang slob dam tshig pa rnams la gsungs pa'i rwa ba brgyad pa'i bca' yig*, 'The Charter describing the Eight Enclosures as taught by Rongzom Chokyi Zang to his Own Students who have Damtsik [bonds with him]') in the face of such anti-Nyingma polemic. By laying out on paper clear rules for how non-monastic Secret Mantra vow-holders and practitioners should behave towards others inside and outside of the so-called 'Vajra/Adamantine Enclosure' (*rdo rje rwa ba*) of their spiritual community, Rongzom helped legitimize ngakpa communities and make them legible as a valid, organized presence in the deeply heterogenous, rapidly transforming and reforming social and religious landscape of eleventh century Tibet (Sur 2017).

Rongzom's charter and various other writings arguing for the legitimacy of Nyingma tantric scriptural translations and the superiority of tantric over sutric approaches (Koppl 2008) offered direct and indirect pushbacks against newly reformed political and monastic institutions in Western Tibet which sought to speak for 'authentic' Buddhism under their increasingly hegemonic mantle of patronage and centralized authority. Rongzom's charter shows how decentralized ngakpa communities in the eleventh century were organized primarily around bonds of obligation (*dam tshig*) that existed between co-initiated spiritual 'siblings' or companions (*rdo rje spun grogs/mched grogs*), between disciples and lama, co-initiates and yidams, protectors, and *dākinīs*. Rongzom's charter makes clear that the managing and prospering of smaller-scale, close-knit non-monastic tantric communities or 'families' demands a high level of accountability and transparency and a strong commitment to putting the needs of others before oneself lest communities of esoteric practitioners invested in subtle and demanding spiritual disciplines implode deleteriously.

A Holiday with and from Family: The Ngakkhang and Communal Ritual

Rongzom's depiction of initiatic family and the importance of maintaining harmony within esoteric communities remains relevant today, and his charter is still read and studied

by contemporary ngakpa²⁷. Padmasambhava, Dudjom Rinpoche, and Dilgo Khyentse all stress that a significant requirement of being a ngakpa is continual involvement in collective rituals of offering and celebration for the Three Roots, a form of group ritual gathering commonly referred to in Tibetan as *tsok* (*tshogs*). As mentioned above, these take place on particular days of the lunar calendar and provide opportunities for non-monastic tantric practitioners to come together and worship. Ngakpa Dawa was adamant that if there was one, single activity that I should participate in and observe in order to understand *sngags chos* (ngakpas' or tantric Buddhist practice), it was *tsok* on Guru or *Ḍākinī* day (i.e. the tenth and twenty fifth day of the lunar month known as 'waxing day tenth' and 'waning day tenth', *yar ngo'i tshes pa bcu* and *mar ngo'i tshes pa bcu*, respectively). He explained with a chuckle that these occasions were 'holidays' in more ways than one. Not only were they sacred, commemorative points in the monthly tantric Buddhist calendar²⁸ (*dus chen*) but they were refreshing 'breaks' or 'vacations' (*gung seng*) as well, when ngakpa could take a breather from focusing on their own wives and familial duties, their everyday domestic obligations and fixations, and focus on their spiritual family and the enlightened Buddha couple of Guru Rinpoche and his partner the great Khandroma Yeshe Tsogyal instead²⁹.

Generally, when ngakpa, their families, and lineage co-initiates come together for such events, they will congregate in a so-called ngakkhang (*sngags khang*, 'ngakpa house'). Ngakkhang can take many forms. While in some cases, ngakkhang may be elaborate, stand-alone structures used for no other purpose than ngakpa congregation, ngakkhang also frequently take the form of designated rooms or spaces in specific ngakpas' homes. Nida explains that "when there exists some sort of holy place (*gnas*) which was founded by a lama who was a ngakpa and which resembles a gompa one finds names like *sngags dgon* 'ngakpa gompa' (i.e. temple)" but that the "principle name for ngakpa temples is nonetheless *sngags khang*". This is "the house/room/building (*khang*) in which ngakpa study, practice, make

offerings and in which they gather together” and “the center (*lte ba*) where ngakpa request or receive empowerments, reading transmissions and oral instructions [for tantric practices], where they get an education, perform tsok, do practices, and undertake matters relating to their religious system” (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgröl ma 2015, 112). He goes on to explain that since every village in Rebkong usually has a few ngakpa among its population these ngakpa will generally work together to pool their resources and build a ngakkhang as a site for the preservation of ngakpa knowledge and practices (2015, 112-113).

While some ngakkhang may only be composed of one or two rooms or sections (a space for tsok, a protector deity shrine, kitchen etc.) ngakkhang may occasionally be more elaborate. Such ngakkhang may have a room for tsok gathering, an attached protector shrine room (*mgon khang*), a hail protection ritual room, a library room, retreat rooms, rooms for darkness retreat practice, and a tea room or kitchen. Nomad ngakpa may also practice tsok in tents (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgröl ma 2015, 113). Larger ngakkhang may sometimes host visiting lama teachers, or function as regular spaces for empowerments and teachings, much like the ngakpa house of inji ngakpa Lama Pema/Bob in Lafayette, Colorado, who hosted Dr Nida for teachings and empowerments on several occasions. As noted above, unlike in monastic settings, the primary, if not only mode of authority in the ngakkhang is between guru and disciple (“most of the responsibilities associated with the ngakkhang are carried out in accordance with the [chief] ngakpa lama’s instructions,” and the *rdo rje slob dpon*, the tantric preceptor or initiating guru of the ngakkhang is its primary teacher and leader, notes Nida; Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgröl ma 2015, 113). In the specific context of both the Labrang and Rebkong ngakpa communities, however, more formalized administrative positions have emerged in connection with more permanent ngakpa institutions in these areas. Labrang and Rebkong ngakpa may elect designated ‘disciplinarians’ (*dge bskos*), disciplinarian’s assistants (*dge g.yog*), treasurers (*phyag*

mdzod), chant masters (*dbu mdzad*) and a ‘protector of alms’ (*dkor srung*) or temple caretaker who is in charge of protecting and taking care of the items in the ngakkhang, keeping it clean and so on (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 113; Dhondup 2013). Ngakpas’ roles and activities in relation to a ngakkhang are not always so clear-cut, hierarchical formalized. Indeed, the pattern in Amdo is fairly unique and is symptomatic of more centralized Gelukpa monastic authorities’ recognition – and incorporation or co-optation – of ngakpa in the area as seen above in David-Néel’s early twentieth century account.

Not all ngakpa have the luxury of a set apart ngakkhang, however. For ngakpa I met in the United States who did not operate large Dharma centers, home shrine rooms doubled up as ngakkhang for group events. Lama Bob’s ngakkhang in Lafayette was the basement shrine room of his and his wife’s large Lafayette house, inji ngakpa students in the broader Boulder area of Tulku Yeshe from whom I received empowerment in January 2018, practiced tsok at the home of a young married, practitioner couple who volunteered to host tsok for co-initiates, and the Dharma center of a Bhutanese ngakpa in Los Angeles where I attended tsok the day after Lama Wangdu’s 2018 empowerment was the same property where this ngakpa, his wife, and children all lived as well. This flexible, circumstantially amplified sacralizing of the domestic space is a key element of ngakpa orientations as well as a major feature of Dharma center institutional development histories in the United States. In contrast to the continually ‘staffed’ educational, ritual, and political center of the large-scale monastic gompa, the ngakkhang is often an occasional, circumstantial space, a private shrine-room turned gathering place for initiates.

Ngakpa Dawa and other ngakpa living in McLeod Ganj drew on donations from students across the world, Ngakpa Dawa’s travel guide business, and money pooled from other *pha yul* and *chos lugs gcig pa* ngakpas and practitioners (that is, practitioners from the same birth regions of Tibet and the same lineages of tantric practices) to develop a stand-

alone ngakkhang, where Ngakpa Dawa could host regular tsok gatherings separate from his own living quarters. While he still did practices, made offerings, and hosted religious get-togethers in his personal *lha khang* or shrine rooms at home, the small ngakkhang located a ten or fifteen minute walk from his house served as a preferred, designated meeting place for performing tsechu and other regular collective rituals. Even so, although Ngakpa Dawa and his co-ritualists would frequently assemble and practice in the ngakkhang steadily from the early morning until the early evening, the ngakkhang might still potentially remain closed for a considerable portion of the month.

Ngakpa Dawa and his co-ritualist's ngakkhang had recently been renovated and repainted when I first attended a tsechu tsok there in 2015. The ngakkhang consisted of two main rooms: a large meeting hall/shrine room with several glass-fronted cabinets filled with religious icons, statues, and cloth-wrapped scriptures and a small kitchen space in the back where ngakpas' wives could prepare tea and food to serve during tea and lunch breaks between chanting. Raised wooden platforms lined the longer side of each *thang ka* (religious tapestry)-decorated facing wall in the main practice room, atop which practitioners sat in rows cross-legged and read loose-leaf *sādhana* texts or *dpe cha* off small tables on which were placed key ritual implements like vajras (*rdo rje*), bells (*dril bu*), human thigh-bone trumpets (*rkang gling*), bowls of rice for scattering as offerings, and so on. The most senior ngakpa of the ngakkhang – both in age and retreat experience – sat on the highest seat in the right corner of the room and directed the course of several-hours' worth of chanted recitations and offerings. Ngakpas' wives participated in the ritual proceedings at key moments by presenting offerings, singing, and waving ceremonial arrows, and so on, but only intermittently when their specific role was required, and they did not sit on the platform and read the liturgies continually with their husbands. For the most part, they remained in the kitchen preparing meals and saw that the ngakpa ritualists' tea was constantly replenished.

On the question of men and women practicing together, Dr Nida notes in his essay on ngakpa practices that ngakkhang are sometimes divided into two separate rooms or temples, with ngakpa and ngakma (*sngags ma*), or female tantric yogini householders meeting separately. Still, he stresses that “the fact of the matter is that [traditional] explanations of tsok are extremely clear that yogis and yoginis assembling together is the correct form of tsok practice” and notes that “it was absolutely Dudjom Rinpoche’s practice for men and women to do tsok together” (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 112 - 113). With Ngakpa Dawa’s ngakkhang, we see a situation where although male and female practitioners routinely celebrate together, division of labor, ritual or otherwise, is nonetheless highly gendered³⁰.

I turn now to consider the question of female non-celibate, non-monastic tantric householders and the gendered dimensions of tantric Buddhist expertise in more detail.

CHAPTER TWO:

NGAKMA AND KHANDROMA: TANTRIC YOGINIS AND THE GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF TIBETAN TANTRIC BUDDHIST PRACTICE

So far in this discussion, despite referencing ngakpa getting married or having sexual partners, I have done little to dispel the notion that non-celibate, non-monastic householders who practice tantric yoga are exclusively men. While one often comes across the feminine equivalent of ‘yogi’ (*rnal ‘byor*), i.e. ‘yogini’ (*rnal ‘byor ma*), in Tibetan writing and everyday conversation, ngakma (*sngags ma*) is very rarely encountered by comparison. In delaying the introduction of ngakma as a term and concept, I have sought to highlight the implicit masculinity of the term *sngags pa* and the way in which this fact points to the gendered nature of spiritual ‘labor’ and subjectivities in Tibetan tantric Buddhist worlds more broadly.

Nicolas Sihlé observes that “in contrast to monasticism [i.e. with its figures of both *monk* and *nun* etc.], the category of tantrist [ngakpa] is essentially masculine” (2013, 17). Sihlé’s comments here are based on ethnographic insights drawn from his fieldwork with a community of village-based, hereditary ngakpa in Baragoan region in Mustang, in the Tibet-Nepal borderlands. Here, just as in the case of Aziz (1978), Childs (2004) and Ramble’s (2008) work with other Tibetan populations in the borderlands, all ngakpa are by definition male. Only men from particular family lineages are trained for the ngakpa-vocation and land,

holdings, resources, ritual implements, religious texts and status and so on, are inherited patrilineally, typically from father to son or sometimes uncle to nephew. In his more recent research exploring the social organization and ritual practices of ngakpa in Rebkong, Sihlé reiterates his earlier point, arguing that “throughout Tibetan areas [ngakpa] belong to a very masculine part of the religious field: according to most Tibetan understandings, tantrists are always men, and non-monastic female members of the Buddhist clergy are virtually unheard of in many areas.” (2018b, n/p). Tellingly, while Padmasambhava addresses both male and female monastics explicitly in the Kathang Zanglingma, offering distinct advice to each, when it comes to householder tantrists, he speaks solely to ngakpa and not ngakpa and ngakma. While, linguistically speaking, *sngags pa* and *sngags 'chang* are not *explicitly* gendered terms, the assumption that ngakpa are by and large men is made clear in Dilgo Khyentse’s 1951 commentary on Padmasambhava’s words. Dilgo Khyentse’s advice is pitched directly at men – he instructs ngakpa on how to relate to family duties and “your wives” (*chung ma*) rather than how tantric practitioners in general should relate to their partners.

The word ngakma was barely intelligible to Tibetans with whom I interacted across exile communities in India and Nepal and I almost always had to explain what I meant by it if I attempted to use it in conversation. Barring cases where interlocutors were familiar with the Rebkong ngakmang, I almost never heard the term ngakma used as a feminine counterpart to ‘ngakpa’ in everyday conversation. Tellingly, neither *sngags ma* nor *sngags mo* appear as entries in the Great Dungkar Dictionary, the most comprehensive contemporary Tibetan-Tibetan dictionary (Tibetan dictionary app 2019). By contrast, I noticed that usage of ngakma/mo was relatively widespread and consistent among non-Tibetan (and especially inji) Buddhist practitioners I encountered, who regularly used it as a self-designation and often did not seem aware of its limited currency among Tibetans³¹.

The extent to which *ngakma/mo* wasn't a go-to term for exile Tibetans for describing non-celibate female tantric yogic specialists was brought home to me strongly one day when I paid a visit to Dechen, a Tibetan acquaintance of mine in McLeod Ganj, in the early months of 2015. Dechen, a spry, resourceful woman in her sixties with a keen appetite for gossip, lived in a tiny two room apartment whose front door fed directly onto one of McLeod's three main streets. I had first met Dechen in 2010, when I procured her services as a teacher of conversational Tibetan. Visiting her several years later, I filled her in on what I had been doing, on my PhD program and my plans to study *ngakpa* in exile. In the course of our conversation, Dechen asked me if I knew of or had met a certain elderly female tantric adept who lived in a little tin house along the high ridge of town leading to the village of Dharamkot, in a neighborhood mostly reserved for dedicated *mtshams pa* or religious retreatants. I had not. Dechen explained that this woman, who had been a nun for several decades and a close disciple of the great Chöd practitioner nun who revitalized Shugseb nunnery Lochen Chönyi Zangmo (*lo chen chos nyid bzang mo*, 1853 – 1950/51), now spent much of her life in closed retreat, although she sometimes received visitors³². This woman was a highly accomplished practitioner of tantric yoga and like the *togden* mentioned earlier, had accordingly not cut her matted dreadlocks or tantric yogic 'retreat hair' (*mtshams skra*) for a very long time. I had been asking Dechen whether she knew of any *ngakpa* around town and the old nun had popped into her mind. Tellingly, rather than refer to this revered practitioner as a *ngakma* or *ngakmo*, Dechen called her 'the nun *ngakpa*' (*a ni sngags pa*). Her turn of phrase was striking and revealed the extent to which *ngakpa* needed a qualifier to become feminine and the degree to which a celibate yogini in retreat at a remove from householder responsibilities was her own sort of category³³.

Nida offers the following explanation for why ngakma is rarely used as an equivalent feminine term for ngakpa, despite the longstanding existence and prominent role of ‘married’ or householder tantric yoginis in Tibet and the Rebkong ngakmang in particular:

“...[M]ale individuals who apply themselves to the practice of Secret Mantra are understood to be Sang Ngakpas [‘Secret Mantrists’] or ngakpa, and females are referred to as ngakyema (*sngags skyes ma*, ‘women mantrists/tantrists’) or ngakma. However, in Tibet, it so happens that female practitioners of the Secret Mantra are called by the term ‘ngakma’ much less often than by the names khandroma (*mkha’ dro ma/khandroma*, *dākinī*, sky-going lady), jetsunma (*rje btsun ma*, reverent lady/noblewoman), and nenjorma (*rnal ’byor ma*, yogini). Although women are recognized as consummate practitioners, as the precious ‘secret mothers’ or spiritual partners (*gsang yum*) of great lamas or as someone who has thus achieved difficult to obtain levels (of realization), they aren’t generally seen as ‘ngakma’. The many ngakma who are members of the tantric community in Amdo, Rebkong are called ‘Ama’ (*a ma*, ‘Mother’) and ‘Jomo’ (*jo mo*, ‘High-ranking Lady’). Jomo is particularly fitting, since *Dākinī Yeshe Tsogyal* is also called ‘Jomo or Lady Yeshe Tsogyal’ or ‘The Guru’s Lady’ and Jomo Menmo and other such ngakma of previous generations have in fact borne the title. Nowadays, in some places in Amdo, female monastics are called Jomo, and ‘Ani’ in Central Tibetan dialects, and so on, [but people] don’t realize this doesn’t accord with the true way of things. Jomo is the name for a female householder and tantric practitioner and ‘Ani’ refers to one’s father’s sister by blood or extended relation. In the Sutric system, [one finds] so-called genyen pa ma (*dge bsnyen pha ma*, or male and female lay precept-holders)...and likewise getsulma and gelongma (*dge tshul ma; dge slong ma*, i.e. novice and fully ordained nuns) are names or titles that have been genuinely obtained by female monastics...” (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 92 - 93)

Nida’s point here is that although female practitioners of Secret Mantra may be legitimate vow-holders and may have virtually identical training or abilities as male ngakpa, they are rarely if ever referred to as ngakma. Much of this, as already mentioned, has to do with the extent to which ngakpas’ role as village ritual specialists is associated with patrilineal inheritance and culturally masculine duties and privileges. As such, ngakma sounds peculiar to the Tibetan ear less for doctrinal reasons or the wholesale exclusion of women from non-celibate tantric Buddhist practice and more for sociological ones.

As Nida notes, women married to ngakpa and/or who serve as the spiritual companions or tantric sex partners of male lamas are typically referred to by the honorific

title khandroma or sangyum. Although ‘khandro(ma)’ most often implies non-celibacy and the practice of tantric sex, celibate women as well and unpartnered, non-celibate women who possess spiritual abilities may also be labelled this way (Schneider 2015, sangyum by contrast, automatically implies the practice of tantric sex with a male partner). Khandroma – ‘sky-goer; she who moves through space’ – is a complex, multivalent term, difficult to translate neatly into English. On one level, khandroma can refer to a particular quality or activity of enlightened awareness, to the creative, dynamic and conventionally/symbolically feminine aspects of Buddha-nature. On another level, it can mean a particular class of non-human spirits, tantric goddesses who can take forms both fair and foul and who function as celestial messengers, helpers, and partners in various modes of ritual congress³⁴. On yet another level, khandroma can refer to human women who are understood to be the physical embodiment of such beings and their qualities, and who engage and excel in tantric yogic disciplines. Human and non-human khandroma overlap in several ways. As female practitioners accomplished in tantric deity yoga practice, khandro are embodiments of female Buddhas or yidam with which they may be associated in the context of sexual yoga practice. At the same time, tantric vows admonish male practitioners to maintain the pure vision that *all* women, regardless of their standing, are ultimately khandro or *rig ma*, embodiments of pure, non-dualistic awareness.

As Prude (2016) shows with great clarity in her article on female delog (‘*das log*’), women who die only to return with first-hand accounts of their travels through the intermediary realm and realms of rebirth, the significant overlap for Tibetans between gendered religious categories of khandro and delog can be understood in light of the fact that “relaying messages and acting as a go between have long been depicted as tasks appropriate for women” and both figures “share a [gendered] predilection for journeying to other realms and...[returning] with messages (2016, 77). The common synonym for khandro found in

Indo-Tibetan tantric texts, *pho nya mo* or ‘messenger’, testifies to this bridging and mediating function.

This Lowly Rebirth, This Inferior Body? Female Tantric ‘Helpers’ and Women’s Agency

As Nida mentions above, perhaps the most paradigmatic khandro in Tibetan history is Khandroma Yeshe Tsogyal, the eighth century Tibetan princess who served as Padmasambhava’s disciple and *las kyi phyag rgya* (Skt. Karmamudrā, ‘action/worldly seal’ or sexual yoga partner). By practicing with Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyal helped the Indian saint to bring forth, write down, and secure special tantric teachings in Tibet and ensured the flourishing of Buddhadharma for later generations. The practice of sexual yoga (a major topic of the second half of this dissertation) is associated with ngakpa in their role as treasure-revealers in particular. Perhaps more than any other higher-level tantric yogic practice, the practice of heterosexual ‘tantric sex’ is believed to facilitate the subtle states of consciousness and special auspicious circumstances (*rten ‘brel*) required to reveal and decode treasure teachings (Gayley 2017). The experience of inseparable bliss-and-emptiness enabled through sexual yoga allows ngakpa-treasure revealers to “re-create the state of mind they were in when they originally received a treasure from Padmasambhava during an [sexual] initiation ceremony [in a previous lifetime]” (Gyatso 1999a, 256) As Jacoby (2014) notes the Treasure tradition “maintains a distinctly substantial connection between sex and text, more specifically between channel and wind practices involving sexuality and the revelation of scriptures and religious artifacts...[I]n the Treasure tradition, a special by-product of generating bliss through releasing circulation blockages within the subtle body is the release of what we might call “writer’s block.” In other words, generating bliss enhances the Treasure revealer’s ability to discover, decode, and write down revelations” (205). Women’s role as ritualized sex partners, in emulation of Yeshe Tsogyal’s original status, thus forms a

crucial part of maintaining an open canon in Tibetan Buddhism through the facilitating of scriptural revelation.



A postcard icon, bought by the anthropologist from a bookstore in Nepal, showing Yeshe Tsogyal in ecstatic tantric embrace, the so-called ‘Holy Father-Holy Mother’ (yab yum) pose of tantric Buddhas, with her partner Padmasambhava/Guru Rinpoche. The mantra of Guru Rinpoche – OM AH HUNG BANDZA GURU PEMA SIDDHI HUNG – radiates outwards in the form of rainbow-colored light from their sexual union (as seen on the anthropologist’s bedroom wall in Denver)

Although scholars have next to no concrete contemporaneous evidence to prove her historical existence, Yeshe Tsogyal and her mythos serve as a quintessential model for tantric Buddhist yoginis today, for the possibility of achieving Buddhahood in a single *female* human body and lifetime, despite widespread insistence outside of Vajrayāna Buddhist contexts that achieving Buddhahood in a female body is impossible (Gutschow 2004)³⁵. Although remembered as Padmasambhava’s sangyum and spiritual ‘secretary’, Yeshe

Tsogyal stands as an accomplished practitioner in her own right as well. Still, opportunities for Tibetan women to function as religious authorities separate from their relationship with powerful men can be limited.

Yeshe Tsogyal's life-story makes it clear that being a female tantric practitioner is far from easy. The Tibetan female hagiographical tradition shows the extent to which female practitioners have struggled to navigate and assert their own agency in the midst of patriarchal worlds and institutions (Jacoby 2014; Gayley 2017). Yeshe Tsogyal herself undergoes various hardships that are specifically tied to her gendered experience (in one particularly gruesome episode she is set upon by a group of men and gang-raped, but ends up, through her tantric power and compassion, using the opportunity to transform these male aggressors' minds and bring them onto the Buddhist path). In another striking episode in a hagiography of Yeshe Tsogyal said to have put down in the eighth century but which was revealed through visions by a ngakpa treasure revealer in seventeenth century Tibet, Yeshe Tsogyal lists to Padmasambhava a litany of difficulties that she faces as a female practitioner and demands to know how under such circumstances a woman can possibly become accomplished in the Dharma when it is hard enough just to survive in the world as a woman, period (Changchub, Nyingpo and Tsogyal 1999). Like the Great *Ḍākinī*, contemporary *khandro* also wrestle with gendered expectations, obligations and structural inequalities, yet they, like her, find ways as well to triumph and retain their agency as independent spiritual virtuosi. Tibetan women often face resistance when they seek to forgo marital and reproductive responsibilities to become nuns who can (in theory) devote their lives solely to religion³⁶. As an alternative form of female religious professionalism, becoming the partner to a great yogi or treasure revealer has provided Tibetan women with important social leverage and opportunities for spiritual practice and attainment (Jacoby 2014). Still, becoming a *sangyum* can give rise to additional problems as well, which may jeopardize

khandros' authority or limit their opportunities to devote time to religious cultivation on their own terms.

Yudrön, an exile-born Tibetan woman in her early thirties who is the daughter of a prominent Nyingma ngakpa and reincarnate lama (*sprul sku, rin po che*) who heads his own monastery in India and who has thousands of students and patrons internationally, shared with me a little over coffee one day in McLeod in 2015 some of the tensions she felt as a high-ranking Rinpoche's daughter. As the descendant of several Nyingma luminaries and the daughter to a Ngakpa Rinpoche some of her aunts felt that it was a foregone conclusion that she, like her mother, would become the wife to a prominent ngakpa lama. These female relatives' expectations and encouragements clashed dramatically, however, with her own mothers' feelings and advice. Yudrön explained that before marrying her father and while living in Tibet, her mother had had deep, albeit somewhat idealistic, reverence for great male Nyingma lamas. At that time, the idea of becoming a sangyum to figures like these had been awe-inspiring, had seemed like one of the best ways imaginable to express her devotion and deepen her practice. After coming to India, getting married, and having kids, however, Yudrön's mother had become somewhat disillusioned. She had become more familiar with (and occasionally directly embroiled in) the fraught, internecine conflicts of male religious authorities, and had discovered that khandro life did not always entail more opportunities for religious cultivation. "If you truly want to practice Dharma, don't become a khandro! Become a nun while you still can!" Yudrön's mother had warned her repeatedly. As Yudrön explained, her mother had come to feel that the burden of maternal, domestic, and marital duties as a khandro made it virtually impossible for her to function autonomously and find the time to devote to intensive practice. As such, she had come to feel that being a spouse or consort to a lama was a trap – or in her exact words, as reported by Yudrön, "a passport to hell/the hell realms"³⁷.

Neither Nun nor Laywoman, Neither Agent nor Object: On Negotiating Female Tantric Authority

Tibetan tantric Buddhist sexual yoga practices have often been generalized or caricatured by non-Tibetan commentators as inherently and inevitably orientated towards male bodies, needs and priorities, as being fundamentally about exploiting sangyum as nothing but disposable tools for men's spiritual advancement (for a survey of such takes, see Bentor 2008; Gayley 2018; Joffe 2018a). Blanket characterizations of tantric sexual yoga as inherently disempowering for women have been roundly challenged by recent scholarship (Allione 2018; Biernacki 2007; Gayley 2017; Jacoby 2014, Shaw 1995). Still, it remains nonetheless true that female practitioners have indeed been exploited and abused by male practitioners under the guise of 'tantric sex' (Chenagtsang 2018) and that Tibetan women have found it difficult to operate as religious authorities without some sort of relationship with or ratification by powerful men (Schneider and Schrempf 2015). The status and uses of non-celibate sexuality in Tibetan tantric Buddhist contexts continues to be contentious. While marriage and/or sangyum relations with a prominent non-celibate tantric master may well legitimize khandro by shoring up their authority and providing them with avenues for self-advancement, khandros' resistance to the advances of would-be tantric suitors have also played into strategies of authentication and legitimization. As such, in navigating through decidedly patriarchal, heteronormative social, religious, and political worlds, Tibetan women who aim to dedicate their lives to advanced tantric Buddhist practice must negotiate the pros and cons of practicing independently and with and through partnerships with men.

In her extensive autobiography, famed early twentieth century female Tibetan treasure revealer Sera Khandro (1894 – 1940) highlights some of these dilemmas especially clearly. Underscoring her strong desire from early childhood to pursue a life devoted solely to religious practice, Sera Khandro describes leaving home to escape a politically strategic

marriage arranged for her by her Mongolian/Qing aristocrat father and documents multiple visionary encounters with tantric goddesses and saints. Having fled her familial home in Central Tibet, she outlines the trials she endures as part of living in a religious encampment (*chos sgar*) in Golok, Eastern Tibet as the disciple and consort of the ngakpa treasure revealer Drime Ozer (1881 – 1924). Mistrusted as a Central Tibetan outsider and a source of jealousy for rival sangyum for much of her life, Sera Khandro repeatedly frames herself in her autobiography as “neither a nun nor a [conventional lay] wife” (*jo min nag min*; she never refers to herself specifically as a ngakma, though). Throughout her life, Sera Khandro both refused and embraced the role of sangyum. While non-celibate practices of sexual yoga in the context of treasure revelation have a longstanding and socially accepted pedigree, Tibetan Studies scholar and biographer of Sera Khandro Sarah Jacoby (2010) shows how the Tibetan yogini worked to frame her choice to engage in such practices as part of a higher calling, a transcendent rather than merely personal agenda. Sera Khandro represents herself as acquiescing to tantric goddesses’ demands when it comes to engaging in sexual yoga, emphasizing how she was led to do so not out of personal desire but out of an altruistic commitment to fulfilling prophecy on behalf of others.

Tensions between celibate and non-celibate religious orientations in Sera Khandro’s autobiography speak to not only personal struggles but socio-economic organization and politics in Golok as well (Jacoby 2010). Encampments and monastic institutions in Sera Khandro’s time both shared and competed over patrons, resources, and students. The legitimacy of non-celibate or celibate lifestyles thus hinged as much on “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (to quote Marx) as on public opinion. When it came to engaging with consorts and non-celibate practice, Sera Khandro not only had to deal with the difficulty of determining who was a properly motivated, qualified, and prophetically mandated partner for sexual yoga but with the reality as well “that others in [her] social

milieu at times had difficulty distinguishing between religiously sanctioned consort relationships and the impure sexual relations of lay householders” (Jacoby 2010, 68).

Throughout her autobiography, Sera Khandro presents herself as resisting the advances of monastics and non-monastics (both in the flesh and in lucid dreams) who request that she engage in sexual yoga practice with them (usually to extend these men’s lifespans, reveal new teachings or avert disasters³⁸).

Sera Khandro’s experiences alert us to the complicated and at times seemingly contradictory stances and negotiations that female practitioners of Secret Mantra must pursue to preserve their legitimacy and create spaces for spiritual advancement. As Jacoby has it, Sera Khandro’s depictions of consort practices “cast a pall on arguments that claim Buddhist Tantra is pro-woman or sex-positive, given the many indignities she suffered and the endless talk against her,” yet in their complexity they make it impossible for us to declare categorically that Tibetan Buddhist sangyum are “either agents or objects” (2014, 248). Jacoby underscores that Sera Khandro was not merely a passive object to be passed around and exploited by men. She makes it clear that Sera Khandro too derived the kinds of benefit from consort practice that her male partners often did and highlights the ways in which the celebrated khandro reoriented the terms of sexual yoga and treasure revelation to embody, however subtly, more gynocentric perspectives (Jacoby 2014). Still, even the relationships Sera Khandro forged with her most significant male teachers, collaborators, and benefactors remained fragile. Notwithstanding her great achievements, she remained vulnerable for much of her life, subject to constant suspicion and scrutiny from other sangyum, monastic authorities, and lay Tibetans.

In her revisiting of interpretations of the social status of the Tibetan sangyum, Gayley notes that on the one hand, “with their elevated public stature” known consorts of high-ranking lamas “remain revered figures in Tibetan communities well beyond the passing of

their partners...especially when consorts serve as companions to esteemed Buddhist lamas in their final years” (2018, 6). Although partnered tantric sex practices are understood to offer both male and female consorts opportunities to cure sickness and increase longevity given the extent to which senior, male practitioners are prioritized when it comes to life-enhancement through sexual yoga, however, it is not uncommon for sangyum in their prime to become life partners (or, as was often the case with Sera Khandro for example, temporary ones) to men much older and with poorer health than them. This arrangement of younger, more vital women partnering with older, ailing men means that sangyum often outlive their partners³⁹. Gayley notes that although Tibetan sangyum like Tsering Chödrön (who was a consort to the ecumenical master Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö, 1893–1959, during the last eleven years of his life and who outlived him for a further fifty two years) have been greatly revered in their widowhood as independent teachers in their own right, they have at the same time “remained in the background and refused to teach, [as] a gesture of humility, as well as adherence to social convention,” that is, regarding the appropriateness of women teaching publicly on their own authority (8).

In certain exceptional instances, non-celibate female tantric specialists have succeeded in carving out spaces of significant autonomous authority. The case of Khandro Tare Lhamo (1938-2002), for example, a hereditary female treasure revealer who was recognized as Sera Khandro’s reincarnation offers one example. In her book about Khandro Tare Lhamo and her karmically appointed monastic consort Namtrul Rinpoche (1944-2011), Gayley (2017) outlines a situation where a talented yogini was the primary initiator of tantric partnership, where a woman was in charge and enjoyed considerable agency. Gayley details how the tantric couple envisioned and enacted a shared destiny aimed at revitalizing Tibetan Buddhism as members of a disenfranchised ethnic minority in post-Maoist colonized Tibet. She shows how, like Sera Khandro, Tare Lhamo navigated ideals of ‘selfless’ tantric sex,

both as a woman and as a representative of religious tradition. Unlike Sera Khandro, however, Tare Lhamo was the child of prominent treasure revealer parents and her father's legacy provided her with significant cachet, credibility, and opportunity⁴⁰.

While figures like Jamyang Khyentse's sangyum Tenzin Chödrön are celebrated for being "hidden yogini" (*sbas pa'i rnal 'byor ma*), extremely spiritually accomplished practitioners who nonetheless live thoroughly ordinary, self-effacing lives, several other factors than just great humility influence the degree to which male and female practitioners end up presenting themselves or acting as public religious authorities. As Yudrön's mother highlighted above, becoming a sangyum who bears a ngakpa's children often means taking on child-rearing and domestic responsibilities, unless couples outsource such care to boarding schools or hired nannies and domestic workers. Beyond simply having the time to function as a prominent teacher traveling far and wide to transmit teachings to students, even highly qualified female lineage-holders frequently appeal to male authority to justify or excuse their acting as teachers. The case of Jetsun Kunshok Chimey Luding (1938 –), the elder sister of Ngawang Kunga (1945 –), the 41st Sakya Trizin or head of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism, is revealing here. Succession in the Sakya school is hereditary and the position of Sakya Trizin is passed from non-celibate ngakpa fathers to ngakpa sons rather than determined via non-biological, reincarnation-based succession. It is common for elder daughters in the Sakya lineage to take ordination as nuns and devote themselves to preserving the family's Tibetan Buddhist lineage-practices, which Jetsun Kushok Chimey Luding did at the age of seven. She received transmissions for every practice of her lineage, trained intensively in these from childhood, undertaking her first extended retreat at the age of eleven with a tutor. At twelve she was already granting tantric empowerments to nomad communities in Tibet⁴¹.

After escaping into exile in India in 1959, Jetsun Kushok Chimey Luding decided to disrobe and in 1964 her aunt arranged a marriage for her and she subsequently had five children between 1965 and 1970. In 1971, she relocated to Canada and became a full-time stay-at-home mom. While she offered classes on Buddhism, meditation, and Tibetan language in her home in Vancouver to interested individuals from time to time, and occasionally conferred tantric empowerments to small groups in her home, she did not advertise herself publicly as a lama. In 1979/80, however, after her brother visited the United States for a second time, he instructed her to begin teaching Westerners in a more public capacity in locations around the world. As she explained in an English-language interview she gave in 2018:

“His Holiness Sakya Trizin came to the, [his] second visit in the New York, then he talked in public, I don’t know where he talked... Womens are talking to him, “Tibetan Buddhism have only men teacher, why don’t have a woman teacher?” Then after that he come to Vancouver then he tell me I teach. Then I said “In Tibet, [if] you are no [longer a] nun you can’t teach – because the students are all monks and nuns and the layperson on top of us, is not really good and doesn’t work that way. So, His Holiness is telling me three reasons [i.e. why I should teach...] First thing is: these Westerner practitioners are not nuns and monks they are all lay peoples, the second thing is you can teach kind of role models for them, because you are a householder, you are a working position lady, so you are a lay [person] so you have to teach, and then [thirdly] Sakya Trizin is my root guru [closing eyes while speaking] I can’t say no, whatever Guru says I have to do.”

Although she had not broken her nun’s vows but simply returned them and segued into the lifestyle of a non-monastic, non-celibate tantric householder (in a word, a ngakma), Jetsun Kushok Chimey Luding explains that monks and nuns in Tibet would nonetheless have rejected her authority as an ex-monastic ‘layperson’⁴². In an earlier written interview, she elaborates on the reasons given by her brother, adding that the Sakya Trizin had noted that in Tibet laypeople would have no faith in her. “Only if you are a great, great, great lama, and you have a wife, would they have faith in you, but mostly they don’t. Traditionally it was like that in Tibet.” Non-Tibetan converts who were predominantly laypeople themselves

would have no such prejudices, her brother explained, noting that as a householder tantrist she could serve as an inspiration for similarly positioned working Western women with families, who could look at her example and think "If she can do it and get enlightened...of course we can do it and get enlightened too."⁴³



A still from an August 1, 2018 oral history interview with Sakya lineage-holder and non-celibate, non-monastic female tantric householder Jetsun Kushok Chimey (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YO41EQmMFp0>)

The Newness of Ngakma: Emerging and Aspirational Identities

Women identified as ‘khandro/ḍākinī s’ or ‘yoginis’ may possess similar vows, knowledge and training, and exhibit similar abilities to ngakpa, yet they are rarely identified as ngakma. Indeed, ngakma as an equivalent title to ngakpa has only begun to enjoy more widespread use in both Tibetan and non-Tibetan contexts quite recently. The increased popularity of terms like ngakma and ngakmo can be chalked up to developments unfolding both within and outside of ethnically Tibetan communities. On the one hand, the use of ngakma/mo as an equivalent term to ngakpa has been significantly promoted by adherents of the Aro gTér lineage community. This transnational, albeit fairly small Buddhist community is made up of overwhelmingly non-Tibetan converts, all of whom practice Vajrayāna as householders. Headed by a white, European ngakpa, Ngakpa Chögyam (also known as

Ngak'chang Rinpoche), and his wife, Khandro Déchen, the Aro gTér lineage practices unique Nyingma-style, predominantly Dzogchen-focused teachings said to be derived from pure vision (*dag snang*) revelations received by Ngak'chang Rinpoche himself. Ngak'chang Rinpoche has consistently claimed that his tradition is not an innovation but rather a continuation in the West of an earlier Tibetan lineage of revelatory teachings connected with a line of originally exclusively female treasure revealers. His own previous Tibetan incarnation, an albino ngakpa called Aro Yeshe received the teachings of something called 'The Mother Essence lineage' from his own biological mother, Aro Lingma, a yogini who Ngak'chang Rinpoche explains was originally destined to give birth to a daughter to carry on her ancient line, which Ngak'chang Rinpoche claims originated with Yeshe Tsogyal.



A photograph of Khandro Déchen and Ngak'chang Rinpoche, shared on the couple's public Facebook page "Khandro Déchen and Ngak'chang Rinpoche" on July 11, 2019 (a religious tapestry of Aro Yeshe in the unique Aro gTér appliqué style can be seen hanging behind Ngak'chang Rinpoche).

Ngak'chang Rinpoche claims that his revelations have been ratified by prominent Tibetan ngakpa and Nyingma lineage-holders⁴⁴. While he has produced precise dates of birth and death for figures in the Aro lineage, so far little material evidence has come to light outside of Ngak'chang Rinpoche's own claims and visions to corroborate the historical existence of these putative nineteenth and twentieth century treasure revealers⁴⁵. Ngak'chang Rinpoche's lineage and some of the Aro gTér's more idiosyncratic teachings, iconography, material culture, ritual practices, and terminology, as well as Ngak'chang Rinpoche's credentials as a reincarnate lama and tantric visionary remain points of contention for other Vajrayāna practitioners. Whatever the case, Ngak'chang Rinpoche has explained that he sees it as his mission to revitalize the 'Mother Essence lineage' of Aro by empowering female practitioners as teachers and lineage-holders. His organization has placed special emphasis on the training of ngakma. New male and female members in his organization undergo an extended apprenticeship which culminates in the conferral of formal vows as householder practitioners, specific to the lineage (Ngakpa Chögyam Rinpoche 1994). Male and female vow-holders are required to view each other as one another's teachers and lamas in the lineage routinely identify and introduce their partners publicly as such when giving presentations and teachings⁴⁶.

As one of the earliest non-Tibetan promoters of non-celibate, non-monastic, householder orientations in Vajrayāna in English in the West, Ngakpa Chögyam and his community have done much to promote terms like ngakma and ngakmo among non-Tibetans since the 1980s⁴⁷. That said, Nida and other Tibetan practitioners connected with the Rebkong ngakmang have also promoted the idea of ngakma as at least theoretically equivalent practitioners to ngakpa. Writing about hairstyles among the Rebkong ngakmang, Nicolas Sihlé makes the following observations about ngakpa, gender, and female practitioners in the region:

“Laywomen [in Rebkong] keep their hair very long, and nuns keep theirs shaven or very short. As for tantrists [i.e. ngakpa], throughout Tibetan areas they belong to a very masculine part of the religious field: according to most Tibetan understandings, tantrists are always men, and non-monastic female members of the Buddhist clergy are virtually unheard of in many areas. In Repkong, however, and to a lesser degree in some neighboring areas, a new phenomenon has powerfully emerged over the past generation (with modest roots going back at least to the early twentieth century): female non-monastic tantric practitioners, trained in the same ritual traditions as the local tantrists. These are now increasingly called ngakma [sngags ma], a term that until a decade ago was still very uncommon in Repkong, and remains unknown in most areas beyond the neighboring counties. Nyingma masters who have been providing support to the Repkong ngakma have advised them to wear their hair in a single braid, as many (male) tantrists do, instead of the common female hairstyle with two braids, one on each side of the head. However, not all ngakma have followed this recommendation: most women have a large amount of long hair, so some ngakma have chosen to keep two braids, arguing that a single, thick braid is too stiff and unwieldy for domestic work.” (2018b, n/p)

Finnish anthropologist Tiina Hyytiäinen has documented this recent emergence of self-identified ngakma in Rebkong in more detail. Drawing on ethnographic research she conducted in Mahlo county, Rebkong (Nida’s home region) in 2007 and 2008, Hyytiäinen (2011) notes that there were by then approximately two hundred ngakma living across various farming and semi-pastoral villages in Rebkong. Indeed, in the village where Hyytiäinen did fieldwork, ngakma actually outnumbered ngakpa fifty to thirty. Hyytiäinen explains that this specific community of ngakma was established in 1988, after nine wives of ngakpa who were participating in a collective ritual at the main village gompa asked if they too could participate. The ngakpa reincarnate lama (or Alak, *a lag*, in the local dialect) who headed the gompa granted their request and a formal congregation of ngakma was founded by this group of women pioneers. Still, notwithstanding such formal recognition and support and despite steadily swelling numbers over recent years, ngakma have found it difficult to dedicate themselves to religious practice to the same extent as their male counterparts. While householder responsibilities constrain both men and women’s abilities to engage in long periods of study and meditative retreat, domestic and childrearing duties as well as already relatively limited opportunities for formal education have presented extra challenges for

would-be ngakma. While attending the large-scale Zhitro ritual gathering held between June 21st to 24th 2017 in the village of Shakarlung (*zha dkar lung*) in Rebkong, for example, Tibetan Studies scholar Georgios Halkias was told by the head officiating lama for the ceremony that although there were about one hundred ngakma/mo in the Rebkong area⁴⁸ “they don’t usually join public rituals because many of them are illiterate and can’t follow the recitation of ritual texts” (2018, 121). While Hyytiäinen (2011) also acknowledges the obstacle of limited literacy among some ngakma, her research findings from 2007/2008 demonstrate that at least some ngakma are adequately literate and sufficiently trained to participate in group rites. The fact that not a single ngakma attended the Zhitro gathering a decade later in 2017 thus points more to gendered expectations and conventions than a question of pure ability.

Hyytiäinen (2011) notes that while the ngakma she interviewed regularly practiced as a group, they never engaged in ritual or meditative activities directly alongside assembled groups of ngakpa. Additionally, while ngakpa were often able to accumulate preliminary practices in the context of closed retreat, ngakma she spoke with tended to recite prayers while engaging in demanding agricultural, pastoral, and domestic work. Hyytiäinen represents this as a specific concession granted by the Alak, who understood very well the additional demands on women’s time and bodies. She explains that the Alak emphasized to her “the interdependence of the ngakpa and ngakma activities. He explained that practitioners mutually support each other’s practices in a given place” noting that “if there were already ngakpas in the local village, the activities of the ngakmas arose almost naturally. Otherwise it was impossible to initiate lay female [practitioners].” Female practitioner’s relationship to ngakpa as wives or relatives is thus enabling as well as constraining.

Rinchen, a white American practitioner and longtime student of various Tibetan ngakpa in the Nyingma school who runs her own ngakkhang out of her home, emphasized to

me during a private email communication how much gendered divisions of labor influenced the Rebkong ngakmas' religious practices and opportunities. Drawing on information she had heard over the years from Lama Tharchin, a ngakpa from the Rebkong ngakmang who was one of her primary teachers, Rinchen shared the following thoughts in response to a comment I had made about ngakpa practices being "heteronormative":

"In Repkong, the cycle of practice went along with the cycle of agriculture. Men did their retreat each winter when they were done with their heavy outdoor labor, and were presumably snowed in. Lama Tharchin Rinpoche heard from his father and uncle that it would be really weird for a ngakpa to be seen out in the street in the winter months--their job was to do retreat. But I can't imagine that women's work stopped in the winter. With no reliable birth control and a rural cultural value on having as many children as possible, for the majority of ngakmo, mantra recitation would be interwoven with work at almost all times. What I have seen is that the husband and wife may sit down together in the morning and sing a few practices together, such as the Twenty-one Tara or Riwo Sangcho, perhaps a little dogpa [i.e. *zlog pa*, misfortune averting exorcistic practices], such as a short sengdongma. All as time allows. Ideally, a true ngakpa or ngakmo would have done the nyenpa or drupa [i.e. *bsnyen sgrub*] of at least one deity. In the Nyingma, this would typically be three, the guru, yidam, and *dākinī*. Each nyen-drup requiring three months minimum. So, two things are necessary: time and literacy to meet the formal requirements. After the nyen drup, a true ngakpa would be expected to master the lower activities of a wrathful yidam, requiring additional months in retreat. That is before even considering completion stage practices required to engage in union with a consort, much less Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā. While there are definitely exceptional women, e.g. Sera Khandro or Shugsep Lochen, who did these retreats- I'm thinking it was uncommon. More common would be for women to accumulate a 100 bums [i.e. ten million recitations] of vajra guru [i.e. Guru Rinpoche's] mantra or the mani, like other older lay people, after the kids have grown up, perhaps while circumambulating a stupa. So, saying the ngakpa model is heteronormative doesn't even begin to address the cultural differences between ngakpas east and west, even now."

Still, despite such challenges, ngakma in Rebkong have continued to pursue tantric cultivation as householders. Hyytiäinen records several reasons why women "already quite busy being farmers, herders, wives, daughter-in-laws and mothers" opted to train as ngakma:

In interviews, the women explained that they had aspired to become ngakmas in order to do something truly meaningful with their lives. After losing someone close to them, like a mother or a husband, some had turned to religion for consolation. Others said that by becoming a ngakma, they had fulfilled a wish expressed by their parents. They also often had inspiring examples of ngakpas or ngakmas in their family or among their relatives. I observed that becoming a ngakma was almost like a contagious fad among the village women. I assumed that it gave them a sense of purpose amidst their

hard, repetitious rural life, as well as a sense of true community. It additionally provided the women with the possibility of using their reading and writing skills, however minor.” (2011, 26)

Several of these points about opting for religious professionalization despite everyday constraints in a patriarchal society were echoed by statements made by Drukmo Gyal, a thirty-year-old, unmarried, hereditary Tibetan yogini and singer of mantras and prayers from the Rebkong ngakmang community who I first met in August of 2016 during my visit to Amdo. Drukmo currently lives in Estonia, having been sponsored to relocate there by some of Nida’s students, and performs as a singer internationally, in between working as an instructor, translator, and tour guide for Dr Nida’s global organization. Drukmo spelled out some of her thoughts on ngakma lifestyles’ potential to empower women during an independently organized TED talk presentation she gave in English in Tartu, Estonia in November 2016.

In this seventeen minute talk titled “Female in Buddhism,”⁴⁹ Drukmo pointed out the differences between monastic renouncers and Tibetan non-celibate, non-monastic yogis and yoginis, explaining how these different schools of Tibetan Buddhism “hold opposite views”. She noted that whereas in Vajrayāna male practitioners take a root tantric vow to never disparage women, in the (non-tantric) “monastic system older monks will tell younger monks that all women are ugly, dirty and dangerous.” This definition of the female was “not the main point” for laypeople, however. Drukmo suggested that such views about women were part of “mind trainings for monks to destroy their desire upon [sic] female beauty” to overcome their biological need for physical sex⁵⁰. In contrast, she asserted, with yogis and yoginis in the yogi tradition (i.e. in the Rebkong ngakmang), “both genders share equality in learning, practicing and teaching Buddhism.” Drukmo explained that she understood this as a kind of “Buddhist feminism”⁵¹ because “female practitioners in the yogic tradition can have far more opportunities than other women in the Tibetan society.”



Screenshot of Drukmo giving her TEDx talk in Tartu, Estonia, December 2016.

Towards the end of her talk, Drukmo also offered an account of her own path to becoming a ngakma (although she used the word ‘yogini’ instead), one which, recalling Hyytiäinen’s research, highlights the important of both women’s solidarity and historical exemplars for negotiating religious opportunities in the present. Drukmo explained that her grandparents had had twelve children together, four of whom died and eight of whom lived, two sons and six daughters. Her hereditary ngakpa grandfather:

“...was not very happy when he found out that neither of his two sons wanted to continue the yogi family lineage. Plus, Tibetan society is a patriarchal society and [the] monastic system and all the males, most of the males have [the] predominant belief that only males can continue the lineage. This made my grandfather even more panicked...[But] then my grandmother skillfully brought up Yeshe Tsogyal the first yogini ever in the Tibetan history and her importance as a female Buddha, [a] master of Buddhism . She also mentioned about Machik Labdron who was a single mother with three children but even founded her own Buddhist school called Chöd, to ‘cut’, [what] one practices in order to cut fear and excessive ego. And she also mentioned about Sera Khandro who was a very precious princess of a noble family in central Tibet and then she ran away at the age of fourteen from an arranged marriage to [the] Northeastern part of Tibet and she worked as a servant girl for years, and practicing Buddhism, finally Buddhist teachers spotted her out from the crowd and she became an influential master. So, after hearing all these stories my grandfather completely changed his view about his six daughters and their potential in the family and spirituality. So, he started training all of them equally, so now my mother, my aunts

all are continuing the family lineage. My family has been practicing [the] yogi tradition for six generations and I'm grateful that in a speedy, modern world like today young yogis and yoginis like myself can still get in touch with the ancient wisdom and to balance ourselves..."

Here, appeals to exceptional female hagiographical models help to secure cultural and familial continuity in a moment of shifting generational aspirations and education and employment opportunities and incentives. The recognition of Drukmo's considerable talents as a singer, translator, and teacher was facilitated both by the approval of men (her Grandfather's earlier choices, Nida's taking her under his wing, encouraging her to practice and teach Vajrayāna methods and the Yutok Nyintik more extensively etc.) but also by female relatives like her Grandmother, who could "skillfully" push against patriarchal conventions through invoking historically recognized exemplars of female tantric power and authority.

Like Drukmo, Dr Nida has worked in various ways to acknowledge and promote ngakma in his teachings and publications. In both his English and Tibetan language writings, Nida has consistently made a point of emphasizing the ultimate equality of ngakpa and ngakma, and has on occasion even suggested that female practitioners might be superior practitioners to male ones⁵². Both Nida and Drukmo's specific attention to and encouragement of female practitioners stands in striking contrast to the earlier words of advice for ngakpa we have assessed composed by an earlier generation of international ngakpa teachers. Yet while Nida pushes for the recognition of ngakmas' equality, his words in no way suggest that ngakma's circumstances, status or challenges are equivalent to those of ngakpa. As this chapter has made clear, gendered divisions of labor and differing standards for men and women across various domains of life absolutely shape women's engagement with non-celibate forms of tantric yogic practice. Nida's regular references to ngakpa *and* ngakma in his work are avowedly aspirational, corrective even – he is well aware of women's historically marginal status in his home tantrist community and in other parts of Tibet and the

Himalayas, even if he wishes that it were different. Indeed, Nida made his wish that women practitioners might be more acknowledged and centered in Tibetan Buddhism clear during teachings he gave on Yutok's Karmamudrā practice in Amsterdam in May 2016. Discussing his appreciation for Yeshe Tsogyal, the first Tibetan to achieve Buddhahood as a result of sexual yoga and Dzogchen practice, he stated:

“And then of course, Yeshe Tsogyal, she did *so* much – I am a big fan of Yeshe Tsogyal. She did so much. Of course, we know, Guru Padmasambhava gave the teachings and many things, of course. [Everyone knows] she respected her Guru, right, and she represented Guru Padmasambhava in Tibet so strongly, but Yeshe Tsogyal, she did all [the] work, huh?! You know the proverb [that] says, “there’s a great woman [at the] back of every successful man? You understand? Padmasambhava [was] so successful in Tibet because of Yeshe Tsogyal! Uhuh? She’s great, she was great. So why I’m telling you about Yeshe Tsogyal is [because] she is the first person who practiced Karmamudrā in Tibet – so I like that story. Because of course, many people, they think, ‘Oh, Karmamudrā is a practice for men...[that when] men learn Karmamudrā ...[it is just about] how...[men] can maintain like, [their] sperm and then like how [they] can have sex with others, they think...something like that. But Karmamudrā it’s...an equally practiced [thing]...both for men and women. I think that concept is very important.”

To emphasize his investment in women's empowerment, Nida then commented on the Tibetan convention whereby, when Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyal are shown together in artwork, Yeshe Tsogyal is often represented to the side of and as much smaller in size than Guru Rinpoche. “I hope one day there will be a Buddhist center [where] there is a *huuuuge* Yeshe Tsogyal and there's a small Padmasambhava!” he concluded, before moving on with the teachings.

Dr Nida has reiterated his vision of promoting yoginis to me and others on several occasions. While taking students of his from different countries around the sacred sites of Bhutan and giving them teachings based on Yutok's Ati Yoga, Nida offered some thoughts on cross-cultural patriarchy and women's empowerment. As part of a recorded interview conducted near Paro Taktsang, the famous mountain pilgrimage where Padmasambhava engaged in consort practice, Nida noted how men had always been prioritized in every

culture in human history, “it’s the same in Indian culture, Chinese culture, Tibetan, Bhutanese, it doesn’t matter.” That said, he pointed out that things were “shifting”. Whereas thirty or forty years ago most (Tibetan) doctors were men and you’d struggle to find any women physicians, now sometimes sixty to seventy percent of doctors in hospitals are women. “This means medical science is being taken over by women and I think in many other academic studies and scientific fields...[it seems] like women are coming up and spiritually I think [it’s] also the same thing.”⁵³

In this chapter, I outlined some of the gendered aspects of non-celibate, householder tantrist practice. I demonstrated how on the one hand, the figure of the ngakma is new, modern, and aspirational, yet at the same time can only be made sense of in terms of longstanding patterns and tensions within Tibetan social and religious worlds. While this chapter focused primarily on the role of biological family structures in shaping conditions of possibility for tantric Buddhist practice, in the chapter that follows, I shift the focus to investigate non-biological forms of relatedness – initiatic or tantric modes of kinship – in more detail. Returning to the pattern of monastic Geluk authorities incorporating and institutionalizing Nyingma ngakpa expertise mentioned in Chapter One, I take up Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche’s ngakpa dratsang in McLeod Ganj as a useful case-study for exploring some of the cultural politics that have surrounded attempts to pin ngakpa down spatially and to materialize their particular forms of expertise in permanent institutions in exile.

CHAPTER THREE:

TANTRIC SORCERERS AND THE STATE: DECENTRALIZED NGAKPA, CENTRALIZED AUTHORITY, AND INSTITUTIONAL INCORPORATION IN EXILE

As groups of ‘vajra-siblings’ who do not live in any permanent religious institution, communities of ngakpa and ngakma have organized themselves primarily through ties of spiritual kinship, initiatic bonds centered on the charismatic person of the lineage-guru. During key moments in the monthly calendar, ngakpa come together as tantric families to worship and reaffirm their lineage commitments. On occasion, they may participate in voluntary communal rituals at the supra-local, cross-village and lineage level to generate religious merit and receive a share of material offerings (Sihlé 2013). When not gathering for collective events, however, individual ngakpa remain focused on their own domestic and religious activities. They go about their daily householder routines or undertake retreat as they and their families see fit, with minimal oversight or regulation from centralized authorities. In short, as Ngakpa Dawa emphasized, they are “decentralized” and that makes them a little “crazy”. At the same time, notwithstanding their tendency to live within the village or to prioritize time in extended retreat, highly-qualified or regarded ngakpa have also sometimes been in charge of or have founded permanent religious institutions like hermitages and monasteries, As we have seen, ngakpas’ demon-taming expertise has also been in

demand by monastic or state institutions, all of which places them in a flexible, ambiguous relationship to centralized power.

In the following chapter, I explore how ngakpas' tantric power has been sought out and incorporated by state authorities. I look at some of the ways that ngakpa, with their quintessentially decentralized expertise, have both cooperated with and chafed against such incorporation. To begin, I return to the figure of Padmasambhava/Guru Rinpoche as 'inaugural' ngakpa in Tibet, and highlight the way in which 'transgressive', non-monastic practices associated with initially foreign scriptural traditions were both supported by and posed a challenge to centralized state authority. Highlighting tensions that have been apparent from the very beginnings of state-sponsored Buddhism in Tibet, I consider the role that ngakpas' ambiguous, esoteric ritual expertise has played in actualizing specific visions of the Tibetan state, in contexts where categories of religious and political authority have tended to overlap and collapse into one another, troubling etic notions of 'secular' versus 'theocratic' rule (Cüppers 2004). Having examined how imperial era Tibetan authorities conceived of and coveted ngakpas' expertise, I then move to look at how the current Dalai Lama has sought to incorporate ngakpa and their skills into his own reimagining of a centralized state in exile.

As a central case study, I explore the development of Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche's ngakpa temple and retreat center in McLeod Ganj. Tracing the institution's checkered history and the social relationships and politics implicated in its evolution, I reflect on how the activities of tantric teachers and lineage-holders are regulated in the absence of highly developed, standardized bureaucratic procedures in exile. In doing so, I argue for the salience of what I call 'tantric kinning' processes as part of regulating religious power in the absence of highly standardized, formalized, or consistent state bureaucracy in exile. A distinctly Tibetan form of biopower and statecraft, I use the term tantric kinning to refer to 'family ties' and obligations articulated through the medium of past life memories and reincarnation. I contend

that these unique forms of relatedness are natural mechanisms for mediating and managing power and relationships in a setting where, for many Tibetans, the state-in-exile continues to be experienced and materialized through the individual charismatic person of authorities like the Dalai Lama. As such, I argue that the charisma of “crazy, decentralized” ngakpa emerges as a useful, hitherto little explored lens through which to investigate the unfolding politics of institutional and religious reform in exile.

To kick off this discussion then, let us turn now to the eighth century and the arrival of tantric Buddhism in the form of Tibet’s first ngakpa.

Tantric Sorcerers and the State: Padmasambhava as Saint and Scoundrel

As we have seen, Tibetan historiographers and Tibetan ngakpa themselves widely concur that the establishing of a community of householder tantric yogis in Tibet can be traced to the arrival in the country of an Indian siddha (*grub thob*) or miracle-working tantric saint by the name of Padmasambhava. Padmasambhava is said to have arrived in Tibet in the eighth century C.E. during Tibet’s lionized imperial era, a period when Tibet enjoyed a level of centralized, autonomous state-power and military might that has not been repeated since. Padmasambhava is said to have originated from a region called Oddiyana, a stronghold of tantric Buddhism in India during the early Medieval period, believed by most scholars to have been located somewhere in or around the Swat Valley in modern-day Pakistan. Post-imperial histories claim that King Trisong Deutsen, the second of the three great ‘Dharma Kings’ (*chos rgyal*) in Tibet, wished to promote and develop Buddhism in the country and thus invited Shantarakshita, a monk-abbot from Nalanda monastic university in India, to come and build Tibet’s first monastery near Lhasa.

The building of this monastery known as Samye (*bsam yas*, ‘inconceivable’) is said to have been repeatedly obstructed by the hostile intrusions of Tibet’s autochthonous land-

spirits. Despite his accomplishments (which did not exclude familiarity with tantric Buddhist ritual), Shantarakshita did not possess the requisite power to subdue these beings. It was Padmasambhava, the original and quintessential ngakpa, who would do this, after his renown as a tantric Buddhist exorcist led to Shantarakshita summoning him to Tibet for assistance. Through taking the form of various wrathful yidams via deity yoga and through implementing the same key components of tantric Buddhist rites of efficacy relied upon by ritualists today – mantras (*sngags*), consecrated substances (*rdzas*), mudras (*phyag rgya*)⁵⁴, and meditative concentration (*ting nge 'dzin*) Padmasambhava ‘tamed’ (*'dul ba*) the vast hordes of spirits that animated Tibet’s landscape. Binding them with oaths, he civilized them and converted them to the Buddhist cause, transforming them from demonic aggressors into better-behaved sources of power and protection.

By practicing and transmitting tantric teachings in Tibet, taming and converting local spirits, and amassing a dedicated group of core disciples which included King Trisong Deutsen and Padmasambhava’s main Tibetan consort, Yeshe Tsogyal, Padmasambhava became the preeminent securer of Buddhism in Tibet. As we have seen, he also became a prototype as well as an object of veneration for ngakpa who succeeded him in Tibet. While Guru Rinpoche is celebrated for his command over demons actualized through his own mastery of yidam practice, today he himself appears in various guises as a meditational deity with whom practitioners identify. A plethora of later visionary hagiographies revealed by ngakpa treasure revealers who remember their previous incarnations as Padmasambhava’s disciples describe the Indian ngakpa as having had no human mother and as having been born miraculously from a lotus and couch his life in a language of “devotional extravagances connected with tantric pure vision” (Cantwell and Meyer 2013, 35)

Conversely, more contemporaneous historical material on The Lotus Master can be hard to find. Tibetan Studies scholars have up until now at least loosely credited the possible

historical existence of an Indian ngakpa by the name of Padmasambhava who may have transmitted teachings and visited Tibet, even if only briefly⁵⁵. That said, there is little evidence related to Padmasambhava and his life outside of later hagiographical materials. Sources from closer to the eighth century describe Padmasambhava as having played a somewhat more modest and ambiguous role in the flourishing of Buddhism in Tibet than later devotional treatments. For example, the likely ninth or tenth century ‘Testament of Ba’ (*sba/dba bzhad*)⁵⁶ describes Master Padma as a gifted exorcist and water-diviner who although he possesses miraculous powers and extraordinary proficiency in tantric rites of subjugation much like in later hagiographies, is said to have been run out of Tibet following the completion of the demon-taming work that he was hired to do. Believing that he had designs on the throne and suspicious of his attempts to develop irrigation systems around Samye, Tibetan officials convince King Trisong Deutsen to ask the foreign wonder-worker to leave. The sovereign, already well aware of the ngakpa’s power, does this as cautiously and politely as he can⁵⁷. His offence at the king and ministers’ dismissal and baseless insinuations notwithstanding, Padmasambhava assents and sets out for Nepal. Nonetheless, still afraid of the siddha for whatever reason, Tibetan officials send a team of archers to follow him. As his final act in Tibet the disgruntled foreign ngakpa/development worker ends up using his tantric power to freeze the troops in their tracks, before going safely on his way (Cantwell and Meyer 2013; Van Schaik 2011).

Traditional Transgressions: Establishing Orthodoxy and Policing Power

The details in the Testament of Ba paint a rather different picture to later accounts that portray Padmasambhava as an unambiguously celebrated figure pre-destined to ‘civilize’ and Buddhicize Tibet, one who travels throughout the country dispensing precious esoteric wisdom for years and years, before finally flying off to his personal paradise ‘The Copper Colored Mountain,’ where, immortal, he continues to reside up until today. The ambiguity

that surrounds Padmasambhava and his ‘unaffiliated’ tantric yogic expertise in the Testament of Ba is perhaps not surprising given the millennia’s worth of depictions of ‘sinister’ yogi sorcerers in South Asian sources more generally (White 2010). Still, the ambiguous charisma of this original ngakpa is worth mentioning here, since it points to a crucial dimension of higher-level tantric Buddhist teachings and their early dissemination in Tibet. Namely, that ngakpas’ esoteric knowledge – connected with demon-taming, subduing of the landscape, and sexual yoga – was simultaneously coveted and feared by Tibetan state authorities.

While Tibetan Studies scholars Cantwell and Meyer (2013) note that “it is unclear how to assess the Padma sections of the dBa’ bzhed, since we do not yet know who wrote them or when” (39), they speculate that the portrait of Padmasambhava offered in the Testament captures something of the immediately *post*-imperial zeitgeist of Tibet’s ‘Dark Age’, the so-called ‘period of fragmentation’ (*dus sil bu*, approx. 842 to 986 C.E.) during which large-scale monastic institutions and centralized state patronage of religious power foundered in Tibet (Dalton 2011; Van Schaik 2011). Rather than capturing the socio-political dynamics of the earlier imperial period which it purports to chronicle then, the pair argue that the Testament’s account of Padmasambhava offers a window into a later moment of more dispersed authority:

“To our imagination, some parts of [the Padma sections of the Testament] invoke a moment in the time of fragments (*sil bu’i dus*), when aristocrats were beginning to articulate a fading of hopes for the old centralised imperial ways, and reinvent themselves as independent princely tantric lineage holders, even while engaged in civil wars that pitched Buddhist against Buddhist. But what is clear is that Padma is shown here as the mythic role model for aspiring aristocratic lay mantrins.” (Cantwell and Mayer 2013, 38)

Irrespective of how one chooses to interpret these accounts or understand their hagiographical value, however, they point to a clear situation in which Tibetan state authorities treated foreign figures and the tantric Buddhist knowledge which they were seen to possess with apprehensive interest. In sum, while the Tibetan ruling aristocracy in the

eighth and ninth centuries supported tantric Buddhist traditions “it also actively sought to constrain and control them” (Weinberger 2010, 153).

Despite the increasing acceptance and mainstreaming of tantric methods into normative Buddhist institutions in Tibet, the figure of the independent, unregulated ‘law-unto-himself’ *ngakpa*, the shifty non-celibate tantric sorcerer distorting and exploiting easily misunderstood tantric Buddhist teachings for his own selfish and sinister ends continued to be a persistent trope and source of anxiety in the Tibetan imagination. As tantric Buddhism ultimately entrenched itself and became thoroughly mainstream in Tibet from the eleventh century onwards, the focus of anxiety shifted away from Secret Mantra’s ‘foreignness’ but anxiety remained all the same. As Van Schaik (2008b) puts it, it is “amazing to think that even by the 10th century in Tibet the main threat to tantric Buddhism was not perceived to be from another religion, and not even from other forms of Buddhism, but from [the] spread [of] the Vajrayāna itself, such was its uncontested success. Thus, the center of concern about secrecy moved on to the misuse of the secret texts, rather than criticism of them” (n.p.). Phrased differently, here the problem is not so much “that Buddhism is dying out in Tibet, but that it is flourishing so much that it is impossible to control it. The problem is a lack of authority: with nobody to judge who is a genuine tantric master and who is not, masters outnumber students, and people wrongly believe themselves to have fully accomplished the deity yoga” (Van Schaik 2008b, n.p).

Anxieties over the exact role and significance of high-level esoteric and especially non-celibate Buddhist practices have thus animated the Tibetan religious landscape right from the first moment of such practices’ arrival in Tibet. When advanced esoteric or tantric Buddhist texts about rites of ‘union and liberation’ (*sbyor sgrol*) - antinomian practices of ritualized sex and violence - first arrived in Tibet from India during the ‘early dissemination’ (*snga dar*), or initial large-scale incorporation and state patronage of Buddhism in Tibet from

the mid-seventh until mid-ninth centuries C.E., access to these texts and the teachings they contained was highly curtailed. Although in the eighth century pro-Buddhist factions within the Tibetan court saw the value of tantric scriptural cosmologies and ritual technologies, they recognized too that the widespread circulation of practices of liberation and union (and especially the violent rites of the former) could have challenged imperial authority and undermined the fostering of wider social harmony and stability (Kapstein 2000). The *sgra sbyor bampo gnyis*, a charter and guidebook for translators of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and Chinese into Tibetan issued by Tibetan imperial authorities around probably 814 C.E. (Scherrer-Schaub 2002) expresses great reservations about the translation of high-level esoteric or tantric Buddhist texts from India containing easy to misunderstand esoteric practices:

“The tantras of the Secret Mantra must be kept secret as per [the stipulations of] foundational tantric scriptures themselves. It is not right to explain or to teach/reveal them to the those who are unfit or unworthy recipients. In the interim though, some people have translated and put [some such texts] into practice – [they have done so] without having understood any of the explanations of the ‘crooked’ or enigmatic [character of these texts] and have taken these texts literally and wrong or perverted practices have arisen. Even though it is known that [passages] have [already] been [cherry] picked from among tantric scriptures and translated into Tibetan, henceforth, unless authorized by decree from on high, translations of dharanis, mantras, and tantric scriptures may not be made, and [individuals] shall not collect tantric scriptures or pick out tantric terminology and translate these.”⁵⁸

Likewise, the sixteenth century Tibetan historian Tsuglag Trengwa notes that during the reign of King Tritsug Deutsen (805 -838), Tibetan translations of certain tantric texts, especially scriptures that would later come to be categorized as ‘Mother’ tantras (*ma rgyud*) of the ‘Highest Yoga Tantra’ (*bla na med pa'i rgyud*) variety, were forbidden (Karmay 1980). Fourteenth century Tibetan historian Butön Rinchen Drup also notes that during the earliest sponsored translation of the root-text of the “The Compendium of Principles” (an important Indian tantric scripture of the Yoga Tantra class) in the eighth century, those portions of the text that revealed how to perform *mngon spyod kyi las tshogs* (i.e. assorted

rites of “direct/manifest action”, that is, tantric rites of violence/killing) were purposefully not translated as part of the official rendering (Weinberger 2010). As the stipulation of the *sgra sbyor bam po gnyis* makes clear, translators at the time who wished to produce Tibetan versions of texts had to receive approval from a special council (*‘dun sa*) and editorial board connected with the imperial palace, and high-level esoteric texts (especially those which contained information about practices of tantric sex and violence) were widely regarded as being unfit for general, public consumption or circulation among commoners. At the time, such texts were at least ideally the preserve of monastic and political elites and were subject to their oversight and stipulations (Dalton 2011).

Statements like these from the *sgra sbyor bam po gnyis* testify to the strong desire on the part of imperial authorities to regulate the official circulation of such texts in strict terms and to label prevailing, unsanctioned appropriations, interpretations, and executions of Indian tantric ritual knowledge as problematic and deviant. At the same time, they attest to the wider and less regulated circulation of esoteric tantric knowledge in Tibet from a very early point, such regulations notwithstanding. With the collapse of the Tibetan empire and of centralized state and institutional monastic oversight and translation bureaus along with it, tantric practices percolated more widely through Tibetan society. Following the assassination of the Tibetan emperor Lang Darma⁵⁹ in 841, until about 986, Tibet experienced its abovementioned anarchic ‘Dark Age’ or ‘era of fragmentation’. During this time, monasticism is said to have gone somewhat underground, with the bright lamp of Buddhism dwindling to an ember as a surviving handful of ordained monks escaped to western and eastern Tibet with the breakdown of thriving, permanent monastic institutions in the central part of the country.

Conversely, ngakpa lineages were consolidated and elaborated during the era of fragmentation. Transmitting esoteric teachings within families and aristocratic clan lineages,

outside of monastic and state surveillance and regulation, ngakpa were instrumental in adapting and indigenizing tantric Buddhist teachings from India and in helping to keep such traditions alive during a time of intense social and political upheaval. At the same time, less centralized translation efforts of Indian tantric Buddhist scriptures continued during the era of fragmentation, as newer, even more ‘transgressive’ texts of the Mahā Yoga and Yogini Tantra classes made their way into the country from India. These texts captured the Tibetan imagination and offered ritual technologies that seemed suited to the times. As Weinberger observes:

“Although the official translation bureaus disbanded, in all probability at least some translation activity continued during the “dark” period. Identifying with any certainty these new texts and traditions is problematic, but they likely represented the latest developments in Indian tantric Buddhism. These would have included the burgeoning corpus of texts later classified as Mahāyoga and Yoginī Tantras, in which the tendency toward extreme and antinomian practices involving sex, violence, and the like was becoming more pronounced. The disorder and anti-institutional flavor of these traditions was no doubt well suited to the chaotic cultural context of Tibet between the middle of the ninth and middle of the tenth centuries. As was the case with the development of tantric Buddhism in politically decentralized medieval India, the ethos and ideology of tantric Buddhism in Tibet mirrored the violent and divisive social and political landscape of the chaotic period following the collapse of the Tibetan empire.” (2010, 155)

The democratization and circulation of esoteric knowledge associated with the period of political fragmentation induced significant anxiety in some commentators (Van Schaik 2008a; 2008b). Manuscripts from the period attest to considerable concern over the preponderance of ‘village ngakpas’ (*grong sngags*) claiming for themselves all manner of titles and accomplishments, willing to bestow diverse tantric teachings and empowerments upon all and sundry. The so-called ‘Ordinance of Lha Lama Yeshe Ö’⁶⁰, a decree written by King Yeshe Ö (947–1010/24?), who in the late tenth century became an important patron for the revival of institutionalized monasticism following the age of fragmentation⁶¹, demonstrates clearly these sorts of institutional anxieties about unregulated Tantra. Descendants of Tibet’s royal dynasty, Yeshe Ö’s relatives had fled civil unrest in Central

Tibet and seized control of Ngari, Tibet's western province. Not long after inheriting the small kingdom of Purang-Guge which his relatives established there, Yeshe Ö renounced lay life and took full monastic ordination, becoming one of Tibet's first and most famous monk-kings. As part of his new model of theocratic rule, Yeshe Ö issued a series of official proclamations (*bka' shog*) which registered his objections to current religious trends in Tibet and outlined his vision of Buddhist orthodoxy and orthopraxis. In his open letter to "the ngakpa of Tibet" Yeshe Ö strenuously refuted the legitimacy and value of ostensibly Buddhist tantric ritual practices that were apparently widespread in Tibet at the time.

Yeshe Ö charges village preceptor (*grong gi mkhan po*) ngakpa with promoting heterodox tantric scriptures and practices which he argues lack any authentic Indian Buddhist pedigree. Echoing earlier comments from the *sgra sbyor bam po gnyis* cited above, chief among the King's targets are ngakpa who practice tantric rites of 'union and liberation' (*sbyor grol*, i.e. ritualized sex and violence) in what he describes as perversely literal ways. It is clear from Yeshe Ö's open letter that he found esoteric, antinomian tantric practices suspect in general. In addition to calling out sexual yoga and tantric procedures for the ritual killing of human and non-human enemies, the king also refutes the legitimacy of *rdzogs chen* or Great Perfection teachings and various other tantric ritual technologies. Beyond claiming that such practices go against authentic Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics and philosophy he also associates specific impure tantric practices with the breakdown of appropriate moral and social order in Tibet: the popularization of rites of 'liberation' has resulted in sheep and goats being sold off for slaughter; the popularizing of tantric sexual yoga has led to different social classes becoming mixed up and confused with each other; the spread of tantric rites for consecrating medicine (*sman sgrub*) has cut off patients from access to medicines; the prevalence of rites for raising and transforming corpses to gain magical power (*bam sgrub*) has emptied charnel-grounds of offerings for the dead; the spread of 'offering rites' (*mchod*

sgrub) has led to people being ‘liberated’ alive (i.e. to human sacrifice); the giving of offerings to flesh-eating *srin po* (fearsome cannibalistic spirits) has led to the emergence of human and livestock diseases; and the sending up of smoke through burnt offerings has caused the local tutelary gods and water spirits (*yul gyi lha klu*) to flee their residences disastrously. Further, he criticizes tantric practices of using consecrated, conventionally impure substances like meat, alcohol, sexual fluids, feces, and urine in rituals as thoroughly un-Buddhist and as both a symptom and cause of moral degeneracy and social ruin in Tibet.

The extent to which the king’s complaints and claims should be taken as proof of actual widespread Tibetan trends as opposed to more localized phenomena or as just powerful political rhetoric seeking to justify new or renewed oversight over the distribution of religious knowledge and power is debatable. To date, there remains a dearth of corroborating contemporaneous evidence for Yeshe Ö’s striking portrait of the socio-political context of tantric knowledge in tenth and eleventh century. That said, scholar of early Tibetan history Sam Van Schaik suggests that there is reason to believe that the king’s concerns were not entirely idiosyncratic or inflated. He points to a poem (Pelliot tibétain 840) found in the Dunhuang corpus whose monastic author, like Yeshe Ö, comments with considerable alarm on the degree to which Buddhism in post-imperial Tibet is expanding without proper regulation. After noting that tantric and sutric masters conducted themselves in accordance with the Buddhist scriptures and did not mix up their respective codes of conduct during the time of King Trisong Deutsen, the author regrets that in his own post-imperial tenth century context:

“Without even knowing about ethical conduct or the vinaya [i.e. monastic discipline] rules,
A vajra assistant can be bought with a donkey.
Without even having the empowerments of an assistant,
A guiding master can be bought with an ox.
Without even having the empowerments of a guide,
A vajra regent can be bought with a horse.

Without even having the empowerments of a regent,
A vajra king can be bought with an antelope.

Masters who are lost in the errors
Of not judging the levels of meditative experience
Know nothing of the transworldly meaning.
For every hundred students there are a thousand teachers,
And nobody listens to the divine dharma.
For every village there are ten masters,
And the number of vajra assistants is uncountable.
Everyone thinks “I am accomplished as the deity.”
In the end, since there are so many of this type,
Won’t the vajra body be destroyed?” (Van Schaik 2008a, n.p.)

While King Yeshe Ö’s ordinance gives the impression that specific tantric practices are entirely heterodox or erroneous, we can see that concerns in this broad period hinge less on the legitimacy of Secret Mantra per se, and more on concerns about its unregulated circulation, interpretation, and appropriation. Indeed, the king’s all-out refutation of erroneous esoteric Buddhist practices is somewhat ironic, given that the later dissemination of tantric Buddhist translations and teachings from India that he helped instigate in the name of religious reform ultimately ended up legitimating and institutionalizing advanced antinomian tantric Buddhist practices in Tibet on a wider scale than ever before. Yeshe Ö sent twenty one boys to Kashmir to determine whether or not tantric practices of ‘union and liberation’ were heretical and went against the spoken teachings (*bka’*) of the Buddha. Only one of these boys, the great monk-translator Rinchen Zangpo (958 – 1055), survived.

Bringing back texts and insights gained from his time studying with Kashmiri tantric Buddhist masters, Rinchen Zangpo helped inaugurate widespread Buddhist reform and revitalization of institutionalized monasticism in Tibet. While the monk wrote his own polemical tracts refuting texts and practices that would later be labelled as Nyingma as inauthentic, he and later great translator-practitioners who visited India and returned to Tibet to promote newer tantric scriptures confirmed that practices of union and liberation were indeed orthodox and an institutionalized part of monastic and non-monastic forms of tantric

Buddhism abroad. Illustrious monastic and non-monastic Tibetan translators would engage in such practices and be celebrated as blameless, and with time, advanced ‘non-dual’ esoteric forms of Buddhism would become an essential and highly valued component of institutionalized monastic life and authority in Tibet (Davidson 2008).

Whose State of Exile? Producing and Contesting a Unified Polity in Tibetan Diaspora

How do these snapshots of Tibetan politics several centuries ago relate to conditions in exile today? When Secret Mantra texts involving practices of ritualized violence and sex were still fairly new and unconventional in Tibet, the nature of institutionalized and/or centralized political power among Tibetans looked quite different to how it looks now, post-Chinese invasion and diaspora. In the section that follows, I shift gears to outline some of the ways that centralized state authority has been reorganized and reimagined in Tibetan exile over the last sixty years or so. I ask what new-fangled centralized authorities’ attempts to incorporate or regulate ngakpas’ expertise in a very different diasporic socio-political milieu tell us about the nature of institutional authority and the regulation of Vajrayāna today.

Since the Chinese invasion of 1950 and the mass exodus of thousands of Tibetans following the failed Tibetan uprising in Lhasa in 1959, Tibetans across a now considerably transnational diaspora have busied themselves with the task of salvaging, reconstituting, and reforming Tibetan institutions in exile. What social, political, religious, economic and cultural institutions ought to be preserved and how, and which should be jettisoned or amended was not easily agreed upon, however. From the 17th century, the lineage of Dalai Lamas had wedded spiritual and secular rule under a centralized, Mongol-backed government based in Lhasa. Yet until the imposition of Chinese Communist rule in the 1950s, Tibet, although unified by shared ways of life, religious histories, and language, remained a factious and fragmented socio-political landscape, comprised of diverse religious, political, and

economic arrangements and institutions characterized by fluctuating and uneven patterns of alliance and antagonism. Anthropologist and historian of Tibet Carole McGranahan (2010a) notes that the modern and hegemonic notion of the nation-state, the sort “created out of European historical conditions and interpreted and implemented differently around the world,” was only introduced in Tibet at the start of the twentieth century, and then only with limited success. She explains that premodern Tibet was not defined by internationally agreed upon cartographic boundaries or by “the modern logic of a seamless unity between territory and politics” but was instead “a national community...determined through a broad set of connections and combined with shifting center-periphery relationships of influence and allegiance” (40). Elaborating on this distinction, she notes that:

“In his monumental study *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (1993), Geoffrey Samuel argues that premodern Tibet is best thought of not as a centralized or even decentralized state, but as a series of societies existing in a continuous social field. There was a wide variety of political and social formations across Tibetan societies: large agricultural states, smaller agricultural states, agricultural populations on the edges of states, and nomadic pastoralists. Some of these groups were subordinate to others, and some were self-governing, many, but not all, of these groups were subordinate to the Dalai Lama’s administration in Lhasa. Yet the administrative aspects of rule were not weighted more heavily than the ritual or performative aspects of rule; for example, control of people, which relied on performative practices, was considered more important than control of land, which relied on administrative practice. With this in mind, Georges Dreyfus contends that Tibet should be understood as a semibureaucratic state, one in which the inequalities in bureaucratic administration across Tibetan territory are “typical of any pre-modern state, which is defined not by boundaries but by a complicated network of overlapping allegiances”. That is, for premodern Tibet, what mattered was not where or if lines were drawn on a map, but the sentiments and allegiances of people and communities to the central state.” (40 - 41)

This multiplicity of social arrangements and ambiguity or fluidity of geo-political, ‘on the map’ boundaries proved and continues to prove a source of contention in debates about Tibet’s historical and contemporary political status vis-à-vis China. Following the ill-fated uprising of 1959, the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans fled Tibet and resettled in India and Nepal as stateless refugees. Coming from across the Tibetan plateau, from diverse

regions, social classes, religious lineages, and ways of life, first-generation Tibetan exiles were cast suddenly together in the wake of shared catastrophe, joined in mutual struggle for basic survival. Arriving on Indian soil, the Dalai Lama's first point of order was to repudiate the PRC's claims regarding its occupation of Tibetans' country. Having done so, he and ministers from the previous Ganden Potrang (*dga' ldan pho brang*) or Central Tibetan government set about reconstituting their administration as an extra-territorial state apparatus-in-exile (Brox 2016; McConnell 2016). With salvaged Tibetan government funds, assistance and donation of land and other resources from host country governments, through foreign aid and the labor of countless refugees, the exile administration was with time, able to develop and manage its own settlements, schools, creches, libraries, hospitals, agricultural and handicraft initiatives, and administrative and legislative bodies (Forbes 1989).

The reconstitution of governmental structures provided a chance for reform. The promulgation in 1963 of the new-fangled Constitution of Tibet marked the beginning of a series of amendments aimed at reforming Tibetan political institutions in exile. Drafted in collaboration with an international team of lawmakers and activists, the charter opened the way for the secularization and democratization of legislative and political power in diaspora (McConnell 2016). Still, at least until his formal devolution of political authority to an elected Prime Minister in 2011 and despite theoretical legislative mechanisms in exile allowing for his impeachment, in practice the Dalai Lama enjoyed direct authority over the Tibetan government in exile, in a way that complicated modern, Western understandings of secular governance (French 2001; 2002). In contrast to the older center-periphery relations highlighted above, political reformation in exile and the Dalai Lama's rising global profile post-1959 has arguably allowed him (and to a lesser extent the central administration which was until 2011 under his official authority) to exercise a greater level of soft power influence over a broader spectrum of Tibetans and Tibetan affairs than ever before in history.

The current and fourteenth Dalai Lama has served as a vital, national unifying figure for Tibetans across the world since 1950. As a leader, he has consistently urged Tibetans to abandon divisive practices and has invested considerable resources into developing new institutions to promote regional cooperation and non-sectarianism in exile. The Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile (TPiE), for example, was established in 1960 at the Dalai Lama's behest, as a cornerstone of drives for the democratization of Tibetan governance in exile. As the TPiE's website explains:

“The Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile is the highest legislative body of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). It is one of the three pillars of Tibetan democratic governance – the Judiciary, Legislature and the Kashag (Executive)...The democratisation of the Tibetan polity has long been an aspiration of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. He had, in fact, initiated the reforms in Tibet itself but this was interrupted due to China's invasion in 1949/50. Prior to the Chinese invasion, Tibetans experienced little or no democratic governance since important decisions were taken by the Tsogdu (National Assembly), a composition of Kalons (Cabinet members), abbots of the three great monasteries and societal representatives. No direct elections were held. Following His Holiness the Dalai Lama's escape into India in 1959, he formally outlined an introduction of democratic polity in Bodhgaya, India in February 1960. He advised the exile Tibetans to set up an elected body comprising three exile representatives from the three traditional Tibetan provinces and one each from the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Elections were duly held and 13 representatives termed 'Deputies' were elected and designated as the 'Commission of Tibetan People's Deputies' (CTPD). They took their oath on 2 September 1960. This historic date was later celebrated as 'Tibetan Democracy Day'.”⁶²

Today, the 45 member strong parliamentary body includes ten elected representatives (*spyi 'thus*) for each of the three traditional provinces of Utsang, Kham, and Amdo; two elected officials for each of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Geluk) and Bön; two officials to represent Tibetans in Europe; two for Tibetans in North America, and one representative for Tibetans in Australasia/Asia (outside of India, Nepal, and Bhutan). In addition, religious and cultural affairs are managed in a general and officially non-sectarian fashion by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA)'s Department of Religion and Culture (*chos rig las khungs*), headed by a nominated, five-year term minister⁶³. The Dalai Lama has also supported the decision of adherents of the Nyingma

school, which had previously never recognized any single lineage ‘head’ or leader, to appoint such a representative through internal selection processes. The ‘King of Ngakpas,’ Dudjom Rinpoche was “unanimously” selected for this role “by great Nyingma teachers, monks, and practitioners” (Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal 2008, 111) in 1960 with support from the Dalai Lama and CTA. The Nyingma school has continued this innovation since Dudjom Rinpoche’s passing in 1987, with the elected head serving as a general representative for Nyingma interests in the context of ecumenical conferences and in relations with the CTA in exile. While the role is largely administrative, the lamas chosen to fulfil it have consistently been some of the most spiritually accomplished and revered in the Nyingma school⁶⁴.

The Dalai Lama’s efforts to promote a sense of unity and national coherence through the development of new political structures and secular educational institutions in exile have been considerable. Still, the unprecedented influence that he and authorities associated with him have come to wield over exile Tibetans with a diverse set of loyalties has at times proved contentious, especially when his authority has come to bear on sectarian religious and lineage succession issues beyond his perceived purview as a Gelukpa hierarch. As Yeshe Lama (2018) notes, democratization in exile began overwhelmingly as a top down process, a fact which has allowed *sku drag* (aristocrats) and Gelukpa religious authorities who were political elites in pre-1959 Tibet to preserve their status in the new exile order. As a result, top-down calls for Tibetan ‘unity’ (*gcig sgril*) and inter-regional/sectarian cooperation linked with the Dalai Lama and CTA have occasionally been treated with suspicion and interpreted as masked attempts on the part of Central Tibetan/aristocratic/Gelukpa elites to control, co-opt and silence political and religious rivals.

One especially striking example of this dynamic can be seen in responses to the formation in 1963 of the political party known as the ‘Organization for the Unification of the Three Provinces [of Tibet]’ (*chol gsum gcig sgril tshogs pa*, otherwise described as the Three

Provinces United Movement (TPUM), United Party, Tibet United Association). This party, whose constitution was based on that of the Indian National Congress, was devised in Dharamsala and subsequently handed over to be managed by the Dalai Lama's older brother Gyalo Thondup who was based in Darjeeling at the time. While the United Party aimed, as its name suggests, to unite Tibetans in diaspora across regional and sectarian divides, in the minds of "at least some Tibetans...it still represented the Lhasa/Dharamsala status quo (McGranahan 2010a, 147). As Yeshe Lama explains, "while democracy entertains inclusion of difference, the need for the exile Tibetans to rally behind the Dalai Lama for their survival led to certain discursive practices that would level out their regional and religious identities and discourage any difference of opinion." (2018, 182). The United Party was instrumental in shutting down several other nascent political groups in exile, and quickly caused controversy.

Another political group, known colloquially as the 'Thirteen Groups/Tribes' (*tsho khag bcu gsum*), was formed in direct protest to the United Party's proposed reforms. The collective was made up of thirteen exile Tibetan settlements that banded together to register their official opposition to what they saw as Lhasa/Dharamsala/Gelukpa elites' dominance and interference in the name of 'unity'. The thirteen settlements were represented overwhelmingly by Tibetan lamas and hereditary headmen from various ancestral homelands (*pha yul*) in Eastern Tibet who were adherents – and in some cases some of the most important lamas – of various Nyingmapa and Kagyupa lineages. A great many members of Chushi Gangdruk (*chu bzhi gang drug*), or the Tibetan resistance army, were also closely associated with the Thirteen Group (McGranahan 2010a)

Resisting the CTA's settlement policies, members of the Thirteen Group secured alternative sources of support and funding, relying in part on expanding transnational networks between charismatic and increasingly cosmopolitan Kagyu and Nyingma lamas and their disciples and patrons abroad. This alternative funding in turn gave rise to rumors that

these settlements were being secretly financed by Chinese, Taiwanese, and other (at the time at least) equally treasonous political actors (Zablocki 2009). Tensions between the Dharamsala establishment and the Thirteen Group reached a high point with the (unsolved) assassination of Gungthang Tsultrim, the General Secretary of the Thirteen Group in 1977. All of this serves to highlight the way in which Tibetans' relationships with (often widely dispersed) regional and sectarian authorities may clash with or take precedent over obligations to reformed centralized exile institutions.

Lamas Serving the State: Tales of a Demon Suppressing Temple

Any investigation of religious authority and the regulation of religion in Tibetan exile must take into account the complex and sometimes surreal administrative twilight zone in which exile Tibetans find themselves today. As stateless refugees in countries like India and Nepal (neither of which are signatories to the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention), Tibetans live precariously, bereft of many basic rights and protections (McGranahan 2018b). At the same time, the CTA runs its own schools, hospitals, media outlets, as well as religious, cultural and political institutions, and is able to fund social welfare services for Tibetan refugees through foreign donations and various internal sources of revenue. A chief example of the latter is the system of taxation operated by the CTA known as the "voluntary tax booklet for exile Tibetans who cherish [Tibetan] freedom/a free Tibet" (*btsan byol bod mi'i rang dbang gces 'dzin dang blang pya dngul lag deb*) or the 'green book' (*deb ljang gu*) program, as it is known more colloquially. Despite the fact that no foreign power formally recognizes Tibet's existence as a sovereign state, the CTA's green book system allows it to extract taxes from its 'citizens' just as any de jure state government might. Tibetans in exile sign up to receive a green, bureaucratic booklet which resembles a passport and which serves as a record of their voluntary financial contributions to the CTA. On the one hand, this system helps maintain government institutions and fund social services in exile. On the other, the very existence of

the book “symbolizes the Tibetan people’s recognition of CTA as their legitimate representative...[and] payment exhibits Tibetan people’s support for CTA’s financial needs until Tibet regains freedom.”⁶⁵. First instituted in 1972, the de facto passport is intended to allow exiled Tibetans to “claim their rights” from the government-in-exile and to serve as a basis for claiming citizenship in the event of Tibet’s emancipation from Chinese control. As the CTA’s website explains, it is currently used “for school admission, school or university scholarship, and employment within the exiled community. Payment of the voluntary contribution is a condition to gain voting rights in parliamentary elections.”

The green book is one example of how de facto citizenship and allegiance to centralized authority is performed in exile. As an important dimension of the ‘rehearsal’ of Tibetan nationhood and statecraft in diaspora (McConnell 2016), the green book helps to promote a sense of shared belonging across a highly dispersed and internally heterogenous global diaspora (Hess 2009; McConnell 2016, McGranahan 2018b)⁶⁶. It is worth noting that Tibetan exile monastics and other religious professionals possess green books and make contributions to the CTA along with laypeople. Yet despite this, and notwithstanding the fact that reconstituted monasteries and other religious institutions in exile will occasionally receive some financial assistance from the exile administration for their projects, gompa in exile are not officially taxed by the CTA (Roemer 2008). As we have seen, lamas secure their own funding and pursue their own agendas worldwide with limited formal oversight, answerable only to their personal disciples, patrons, immediate institutional superiors and peers, and whatever public opinion may exist for their actions. Like Padmasambhava before them, individual ngakpa continue to relate to more centralized religious and political authorities in complex ways. The example of Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche’s ngakpa dratsang in exile provides a useful context to explore further how the charismatic authority of

individual lamas has both aligned and clashed with the interests of more centralized, institutionalized authorities in exile.



A panoramic view of Zilnön Kagyeling gompa captured in a photograph by Roy James Shakespeare as part of a photographic essay on the institution, along with a picture of the dratsang's entrance sign (see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zilnon_Kagyeling.jpg and Roy James Shakespeare, "Zilnon Kagyeling Nyingmapa Monastery," self-published Issuu content, 44 pp., March 23, 2013, <https://issuu.com/velvetrooms/docs/zkl>)

Zilnön Kagyeling (*zil gnon bka' brgyad gling*), the small gumpa or ngakpa dratsang that Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche helped establish in McLeod Ganj in 1986, was the first ever Nyingmapa institution built in the decidedly Gelukpa-centric town. Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche's reputation as a powerful ngakpa had preceded him, and in addition to retaining his services as a weather manipulator, the Dalai Lama encouraged him to establish a Nyingma ngakpa dratsang that could serve as a training and retreat center for both monastics and ngakpa. More specifically, the Dalai Lama wanted someone to create a temple dedicated to the Jangter (*byang gter*) and Kagye (*bka' brgyad*) Nyingma teachings that had been held and practiced by the Great Fifth Dalai (1617 – 1682)⁶⁷. Despite the Great Fifth Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso's status as a Gelukpa hierarch, he patronized and maintained strong, personal relationships with Nyingma practitioners and institutions throughout his life, much to the chagrin of Geluk chauvinists in his midst (Gardner 2009). Although he was a celibate, Gelukpa monk, the Great Fifth also revealed his own 'pure vision' treasure teachings (*dag snang gter ma*) connected with Nyingma Jangter and Kagye practices.

He transmitted and entrusted these to two prominent Nyingma lamas: the ngakpa treasure revealer Terdak Lingpa (1646 – 1714) who was one of the Great Fifth's teachers, and Pema Trinley (1641 – 1717), the chief lama of Dorje Drak monastery. Pema Trinley was recognized as the fourth incarnation of Rigdzin Gödem (1337 – 1408), the ngakpa treasure-revealer who brought forth the Jangter or 'Northern Treasure' teachings and was enthroned as the head of his predecessor's monastic seat at the age of six. Rigdzin Gödem appeared regularly to the Great Fifth in visions and as a major advocate and practitioner of the fourteenth century ngakpa's revelations, the Dalai Lama took Pema Trinley and his institution under his wing. The current Dalai Lama sees himself as a protégé of the Great Fifth and has worked in various ways throughout his tenure to recreate the non-sectarian,

Nyingma-patronizing ritual order envisioned by his predecessor as a specific cosmological basis for the Tibetan state in exile (Dreyfus 1998).

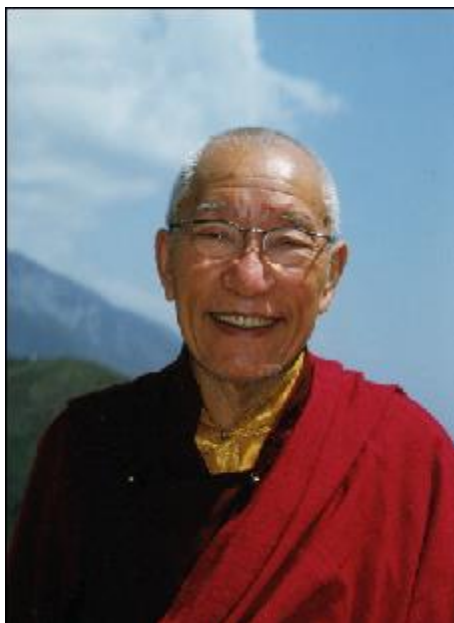
Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche relocated to Dharamsala from Darjeeling with his family in the late 1960s. Not long after his arrival, CTA officials got wind of his prowess as a weather manipulator (pun intended) and requested that he work to stop rainfall during official government functions. Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche lived modestly in town for several years, plying his trade as a ritual specialist both locally and in locations further afield (he was quite in demand among Indian farmers in Himachal Pradesh and regions further afield in India, who greatly valued his rain-controlling abilities). During this period, while living near the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV), where he had enrolled his two sons from his first wife, he established a makeshift gompa or ngakhang "made of burlap bags" as a regular place to gather with other lamas and practitioners for tsok (Woolf and Blanc 1994, 56). The Dalai Lama already knew of him and his activities and had crossed paths with him before but much to Yeshe Dorje's amazement came to the modest ngakhang in person in 1975 to quiz the ngakpa about which lineages he held, his activities, current center, and livelihood. Following this meeting, the Department of Religion and Culture called Yeshe Dorje to see them and requested that he remain in Dharamsala and gave him leave to accept donations for his gompa. After a dramatic trip to Ladakh to control the weather on behalf of the Dalai Lama during the latter's conferral of the Kalachakra empowerment in 1976, the Dalai Lama's Private Office gifted Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche some land in their possession in McLeod Ganj, situated below the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts or TIPA. As Ngakpa Tom, an inji American scholar and teacher of Tibetan Buddhism and former student of Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche explained, the Dalai Lama then granted Yeshe Dorje some \$30, 000 of "seed money" for the ngakpa to commence construction of Zilnön Kagyeling as a center for the Great Fifth's teachings.

To further secure the vitality of the Great Fifth's Nyingma lineage teachings in exile, the Dalai Lama also enlisted the help of Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche (1927 –). Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche, who worked for several years in the Department of Religion and Culture, is another Nyingma ngakpa and reincarnate lama on whom the current Dalai Lama has relied for the performance of powerful Nyingma rituals. These rituals have focused on the pacification of adverse forces, the propitiation of protector spirits connected with the state, the fulfilment of prophesied ritual prescriptions, the securing of the Dalai Lama's longevity, and the overall success of all the Dalai Lama and CTA's religious and political activities ('jam dbyangs don grub 2007). After having worked with the Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche for several years in his capacity as a civil servant and ritual specialist, in 1987 the Dalai Lama personally requested that Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche remain in Dharamsala and not travel far from there for too long for the rest of his life. The leader explained that "on occasion there is a need to perform 'Old Translation' [i.e. Nyingma] Dharma-cycles and it is important that we



The Dalai Lama (center) with Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche (right) at the inauguration of the latter's monastery Lhundrup Chime Gatsal Ling in Sidhpur, Dharamsala, India in 2009, photo via <https://karmapadevotees.tumblr.com/post/175589359142/his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-center-his-holiness>, from the now defunct online CTA news article, <http://tibet.net/2009/04/his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-consecrates-monastery-in-dharamshala/>.

have someone very familiar with [these practices on hand]”. Since Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche was already well-known to the community and “a longstanding acquaintance” his staying in the area permanently would be beneficial (2007, 296 -297). Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche had



received transmissions for the Fifth Dalai Lama’s entire written corpus of teachings or *gsung ‘bum*, had expertise in the Nyingma practices the Great Fifth was involved with, and had even interacted with the former lama-statesman in visions, so Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche requested that he assist him with getting the first group of retreatants set up and with various ritual matters relating to the institution⁶⁸.

Photo of Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche, courtesy of https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Garje_Khamtrul_Rinpoche

A Ngakpa Temple Without Ngakpas: Interrupted Transmissions and Unreliable Yogis

Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche was an interesting choice for this project. On the one hand, the ngakpa who began Yeshe Dorje’s reincarnation lineage had been close with the Great Fifth, had practiced some of the same practices as him, and had been instructed by the Geluk hierarch to reincarnate. On the other hand, as Ngakpa Tom told me, Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche did not himself hold the lineages of teachings for which the dratsang was to be a focus. Tom explained that one other prominent Nyingma ngakpa in India, Chime Rigdzin Lama, held these teachings but Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje did not “have amicable relations with him” so eventually another Nyingma Rinpoche, Trulshik Rinpoche (1923 – 2011), was brought out to Dharamsala from Solu Khumbu in Nepal to bestow the requisite initiations and

transmissions. Tom described his teacher Yeshe Dorje as having “mixed emotions” about taking on the responsibility for Zilnön Kagyeling. “On the one hand, it was a great honor to be asked by the Dalai Lama, whom he deeply loved and respected; on the other hand, it was a lot of hard work, and was very different from his Ngakpa lifestyle”⁶⁹.

Indeed, by his own admission, Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje had chosen to abscond in the night from the monastery in Kham where he was being educated as a tulku as a teenager – having encountered a group of itinerant tantric yogi-exorcists or *gcod pa*, he had been inspired by their example of dedication to practice and had quit his institutional responsibilities to pursue such a lifestyle full-time. Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje’s extensive experience practicing wandering retreat in terrifying and unusually remote locations in Tibet was a large part of how he gained his tantric power, charisma, and expertise. It is thus somewhat ironic that these accomplishments, linked as they were to Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche’s *refusal* of institutional responsibility, were in part responsible for his nomination for the role of gompa/dratsang founder in exile.

Construction of Zilnön Kagyeling began in 1979. Over the course of the remaining fourteen years of his life, Yeshe Dorje made several trips to South India, and later to Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States to secure further funding for the institution⁷⁰. Yeshe Dorje hoped that the dratsang retreat centre and temple would be able to expand its property and evolve into a thriving Nyingma shedra (*bshad grwa*) or training college, where Nyingma lamas from around the diaspora could send their students. During Yeshe Dorje’s lifetime, Zilnön Kagyeling hosted more than one batch of three year, three week, three month monk and ngakpa retreatants. The Dalai Lama performed various ceremonies to inaugurate and bless the dratsang in early October and mid-November of 1987, during which the first batch of six retreatants (which included Ngakpa Dawa) were present.

Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche's vision for the dratsang did not come to pass, however. As mentioned in the introduction, when I first visited the dratsang in 2011, the institution felt somewhat active. There were a handful of long-term religious practitioner residents there, some foreigners were still making use of the cheap but quite run-down rentable rooms on site, and the small dratsang café and store was open most days. When I returned in 2015 things were much quieter and subdued. The shop was rarely open now, the proliferation of higher-end lodgings all over town had lured tourists away, and I learned that there were now no ngakpa living on site. After Yeshe Dorje's death, prominent Nyingma monk-tulku and scholar Khempo Yurmed Trinly (1950 – 2005) was appointed the chief khenpo or abbot of Zilnön Kagyeling but he was rarely on-site. For a while, another Nyingma monk tulku, Chamtrul Rinpoche, used the dratsang as a base for his teachings, but shifted away from the space after securing a building of his own in another part of town. Likewise, as mentioned in Chapter One, despite his strong connection to Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche and his status as an inaugural Zilnön Kagyeling graduate, Ngakpa Dawa and many of his ngakpa colleagues chose to meet in a separate ngakkhang that Ngakpa Dawa had built not far from his house.

I heard a variety of reasons for why the Dalai Lama and Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche's earlier vision for the dratsang apparently failed. Ngakpa Tom saw the breakdown of hereditary succession as being primarily to blame. All of Yeshe Dorje's sons had gone elsewhere to attend school and none had lived with him consistently enough to apprentice as a ngakpa. Yeshe Dorje's status as a Nyingma lineage-holder, his significant retreat experience, and expertise in the practices of Throema Nagkmo (*khros ma nag mo*) and other yidam sādhanās was part of what made him a viable candidate for taking on the Dalai Lama's project. His older, secularly educated sons became involved in business and exile politics, while his younger son who was recognized as the reincarnation of a Nyingma ngakpa but ordained as a monk, received his education elsewhere, and did not take up his father's mantle.

While Yeshe Dorje's oldest (lay) son in McLeod claimed the dratsang property following the ngakpa's death, as Ngakpa Tom put it, "he was not trained as a ngakpa...and therefore could not carry on the activities of Ngakpa-la...[He] did not have the talents to connect with Ngakpa-la's supporters abroad, and thus raising support for the resident monks was problematic."⁷¹.

Interpersonal tensions were also a problem. According to Woolf and Blanc (1994) Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche was married once in Tibet (he had a son with this woman but it seems that neither left Tibet with him), had another two sons with a second wife, and then had three subsequent children (two sons and a daughter) with his third spouse, Tenzin Drolkar, a yogini from Dingri who had already practiced for several years in retreat by her late teens well before she met Yeshe Dorje⁷². Ngakpa Tom explained that there was considerable animus between Yeshe Dorje's biological sons and his stepchildren (Tenzin Drolkar had previously been married to another ngakpa in Tibet and had had several children by him). Khandro Tenzin Drolkar and Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche separated in the 1980's. According to Ngakpa Tom, Tenzin Drolkar was "seduced" by another ngakpa and Yeshe Dorje arrived back from a weather-controlling/fundraising trip in South India to find the dratsang locked and abandoned and Tenzin Drolkar gone.

I do not know whether the couple's split was the primary reason for the supposed bad blood between Yeshe Dorje's sons and Tenzin Drolkar's children, but according to Ngakpa Tom's report at least, the yogini's older children were "banned" from the dratsang by their stepbrothers (Yeshe Dorje and Tenzin Drolkar's tulku son was apparently also 'banned' for whatever reason). I did not meet with or interview any of Yeshe Dorje's children but several individuals I spoke with seemed to feel that family disagreements and financial mismanagement were largely to blame for the languishing of Zilnön Kagyeling. A prominent Tibetan scholar in McLeod Ganj who I asked about the dratsang remarked with some

disapproval that both Yeshe Dorje's children and the CTA had managed the dratsang's funds poorly – the temple-and-retreat center (*lha khang dang grub grwa*) was His Holiness' the Dalai Lama's project and this was thus quite regrettable. Dechen, my former Tibetan conversation partner, emphasized as well that Yeshe Dorje's sons were "big business men" and not ngakpa and suggested, somewhat vaguely, that Yeshe Dorje's marriage to Khandro Tendzin Drolkar ended because married ngakpa living together on the same premises with monks "wasn't good" and could "create problems" (*dka' ngal*).

To better understand Zilnön Kagyeling's apparent decline, I scheduled a meeting with the Religion and Culture Department minister in 2015, Pema Chinnjor la. When I visited the tall, broad-shouldered Kalön in his office and had tea, he stressed that he himself did not really know much about ngakpa and clarified that his department did not really keep any sort of formal or consistent records relating to things like weather-controlling or spirit-appeasing rituals that ngakpa might perform at the Dalai Lama and CTA's request⁷³. For his part, Kalön Pema was strikingly agnostic about such services. He explained that in the past there had been Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje who was said to have some special power to control the rain and he apparently did so on behalf of His Holiness and the CTA. But Pema la asserted that decades later, "people would never believe such things". Perhaps it was just a coincident that it didn't rain or stopped raining, he explained raising his hands from his desk in a shrug.

I told Pema la how I had noticed a deterioration in the ngakpa dratsang since I first visited in 2011, explaining that I was saddened to learn that there were no resident ngakpa there and that many of the monks who were there now seemed to be part-time renters from monasteries in the South who were not permanent residents (*gtan 'jags kyi sdod mkhan*). Agreeing that things had deteriorated, the minister explained that unlike virtually any other gompa in town, Zilnön Kagyeling had been established as part of a special arrangement with the Dalai Lama, and thus fell under the direct jurisdiction of his Private Office rather than the

Department of Religion and Culture. Given that the institution was a special project of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama was concerned about its current state. What he really wanted was for a qualified ngakpa to be resident there and to take up responsibility for the temple and retreat center's activities. The minister explained that my visit was well-timed, since just two or three days prior, along with representatives from the Religion and Culture Department and his Private Office, the Dalai Lama had met with a hereditary ngakpa treasure-revealer from Derge, Kham called Ösel Dorje Rinpoche to come up with a plan to revitalize the dratsang.

As it happened, I had run into the treasure revealer, a strikingly tall man with long combed back, grey, thinning hair wearing a plain maroon robe, not long before in the streets of McLeod. I had asked him if he was a ngakpa and whether he'd be interested in talking more later about his practices and lineage⁷⁴. Kalön Pema la explained that Ösel Dorje Rinpoche had been living for years in the Dalai Lama's *pho brang* (i.e. his 'palace', that is, his reconstituted private compound adjacent to the main temple or Tsuglakhang in McLeod) when he wasn't travelling internationally to engage in religious activities or give teachings. Ösel Dorje had several sons who lived all over, possibly some in the US, and who were also lamas, the minister said, and he had an existing relationship with the Dalai Lama⁷⁵. His Holiness was very keen to find a knowledgeable and spiritually capable ngakpa to be resident full-time at the institution, to be responsible for giving teachings, directing religious activities, and just generally representing ngakpa forms of practice there.

The team at the meeting had urged treasure revealer Ösel Dorje to take up the task, offering him a wage and assuring him he need not have to be involved with any administrative or bureaucratic duties at all as head yogi and retreat master. The team's plan was to call upon Kalön Pema's predecessor, a knowledgeable Nyingma monk, to take up the work of actually managing and improving the dratsang. In this way, Ngakpa Ösel Dorje could focus purely on religious activities. "A ne, sngags pa de ga re lab song?" "So, what did the

ngakpa say, then?” I asked Kalön Pema la. The minister paused briefly, thinking, then said that he thought that he’d said yes, he would do it. Although this sounded like a solid plan, I got the impression things were still fairly provisional. Pema la’s face softened. “It will be good for you and your research,” he said, since as per the plan they would hopefully be making improvements to the dratsang in the next few months, attracting more ngakpa to do retreat there, and Ösel Dorje Rinpoche would be there more regularly too to give teachings and explain the ngakpa way of things. I told Pema la that I got the impression that ngakpa didn’t want to stay in one place. He agreed. They were often in the mountains, in caves in retreat, he said, adding in English that today it was difficult because there weren’t really yogis like in the past. “*Rnal ‘byor pa,*’ yogis”, I glossed in Tibetan. He agreed but offered a further gloss of his own, *jatrelwa (bya bral ba)*, “true ascetics” or “renouncers” of worldly life. He said that these days many yogis “looked around” – I forget whether he used a Tibetan expression, English or both – but he employed a very explicitly visual term. Nowadays, in these degenerate times, even yogis looked around and saw things of the world and grew greedy or desirous. This included material things and beautiful women, he explained.

Selfish Ngakpa and Soft Power: On Tantric Kinship and Yogi Patriotism

A few weeks after my meeting with Kalön Pema, I went to the Dalai Lama’s Private Office to find out how the plan for the dratsang was progressing. Kalön Pema and his assistant had suggested I speak to personnel there and connect with Kalön Pema’s monk predecessor to discuss matters further. The front room of the Private Office is a peculiar space. Visitors from all over the world wander in haphazardly, asking for information, insisting that they be admitted to see the Dalai Lama. I had sent an email to the Private Office in advance, introducing myself and recounting my meeting with Pema la but had received no response, so I visited the office in person with my letter in hand. After some waiting and discussion, an official came out to the main desk in the waiting area to speak with me. He

read over my letter and I recounted some of my earlier conversations at the Department of Religion and Culture.

“No, no! The former minister is not here!” the official explained. “He went to South India weeks ago to help with projects at Nyingma monasteries there, he’s not involved with the ngakpa dratsang!” I was surprised. I asked the official what was happening with the plan that Kalön Pema had outlined and whether Ösel Dorje Rinpoche was still on board. “We sent a letter! This is the Dalai Lama’s wish, we explained to the ngakpa. But these ngakpa are selfish!” He explained that “these ngakpa” only thought about their own interests - they did not want to stay in McLeod Ganj in one place and fulfil His Holiness’s wishes; as far as this official was concerned they were too busy (as per Kalön Pema’s earlier critiques) travelling around all over the place, seeking money and fame. “We sent a letter explaining,” the official repeated. “What else can we do?” he asked rhetorically, seemingly utterly exasperated. I frowned and tut-tutted in sympathy. The subject was clearly a source of frustration for him, and he was already flustered and preoccupied with other matters. I thanked him for his time and left.

So much for McLeod Ganj ngakpa dratsang revitalization, then. There were clearly many complications involved in the Dalai Lama’s project, not least of which was the question of precisely whose ‘temple’ Zilnön Kagyeling was. In his memoirs, Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche explains that:

“That [same] year [i.e. 1987], for the benefit and wellbeing of sentient beings and the teachings, the all-knowing Lord of Refuge, His Holiness [the Dalai Lama] gave as a gift to Ngakchang Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche a previously established temple with representations of the deities and their surroundings, [requesting that] the great ngakpa make new representations of the eight principal deities, which came from the ‘Peaceful and Wrathful Manifestations of the Eight *Kagye* Yidams’, the root [text] of the pure vision Dharma teachings [that were revealed] by the Great Fifth Dalai Lama” (‘jam dbyangs don grub 2007, 299)

Ngakpa Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche is explicit that Zilnön Kagyeling ('The Island of the Eight Kagye Deities that Suppress [all adverse forces] with their Splendor') was initially the Dalai Lama's *lha khang* or temple, his own property which he gave as a gift (*gsol ras gnang ba*) to Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche. Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche describes himself as helping his ngakpa colleague with both improving the existing institution (*yar rgyas*) and building it anew (*gsar bskrun*), as well as the reconstruction of the eight yidam statues (*brgyad gsar 'dzugs*).

When I asked Ngakpa Dawa about why no ngakpa in town had taken up responsibility for the dratsang, he explained that many ngakpa were busy with their own practices, families, and livelihoods. This was a great honor but also a great responsibility, and there few who were – or felt they were – up to the task. And yet, despite all this, it seemed that Yeshe Dorje's sons felt some claim to the institution even if they weren't involved in its religious activities. I did not end up making a full study of Zilnön Kagyeling and Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche's legacy as planned. Still, even this broad sketch of the institution and the ngakpa associated with it should help make clear how many different modes of authority operate all at once in exile, in fraught, precarious alignment, when it comes to preservation of religious traditions and the mediation and institutionalization of religious power.

The trials and tribulations of Zilnön Kagyeling reveal how centralized control of tantric expertise in exile is at best partial and inconsistent. State authorities in this context have a very limited capacity to influence the actions and decisions of individual, de-centralized lamas and lineages. On closer inspection, religious lineages' and specialists' incorporation into state structures hinges less on bureaucratic injunction than on mechanisms of spiritual 'kinning' – relations and boundaries produced through dynamics of past life memory and reincarnation. Howell (2003) defines kinning as the process whereby "a foetus, new-born child, or any previously unconnected person, is brought into a significant and

permanent relationship that is expressed in a kin idiom” (465). Reckoning kinship through rebirth (*yang srid*) and emanation or emanated embodiment (*sprul pa, sprul sku*) is a pervasive feature of Tibetan and Himalayan societies. Further, since its institutionalization in the 14th century in the context of the Karmapa lineage (Gamble 2018), succession via reincarnation has been one of the primary mechanisms for the transmission of political and religious status in Tibetan contexts. Despite this, anthropological theorizing on ‘fictive kin’ and kinning has largely ignored the phenomenon of reincarnation.⁷⁶

Almost three decades ago, anthropologist Timothy Mitchell (1991) argued for an approach to analyzing the state that focused on the everyday, social processes through which elusive, shifting and porous boundaries between something called ‘the state’ and something called ‘society’ are produced in specific cultural and historical settings. With this approach, the state appears as an *effect*, as the product of “detailed processes of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification, and supervision and surveillance, which create the appearance of a world fundamentally divided into state and society” (95). In the case of Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche and Zilnön Kagyeling, we see how the Dalai Lama himself comes to personify the Tibetan state-in-exile, even as his charismatic person exceeds the de facto state’s mobile boundaries.

By affirming his special past life connections with the predecessors of individual tantric specialists and their associated lineages and expertise, the current Dalai Lama is able to reframe and contain the activities and charisma of religious virtuosi. The framework of past life connection brings such individuals into the fold of an ecumenical dispensation in exile operating under the Dalai Lama’s stewardship. As noted above, this dispensation is modeled in part on the specific ritual or cosmological order that the Great Fifth Dalai Lama developed during his lifetime in the mid to late seventeenth century. As part of this order, Nyingma tantric rites which the Great Fifth had received in visions and learned from his

Nyingma teachers were executed both as regular, public state performances and as as-needed private ceremonies, as part of which Nyingma ngakpa were called upon to provide their services⁷⁷.

From the time of the seventh Dalai Lama Kelsang Gyatso (1708 – 1757), rituals of statecraft and those performed in the Dalai Lama’s private monastic college were returned to a ‘purer’ Geluk-centric format, as less ecumenically minded, nationalist figures than the Great Fifth came to predominate in the Ganden Potrang. As Dreyfus notes (1998), the fourteenth Dalai Lama has revived the regular performance of explicitly Nyingma rituals in his personal monastery of Namgyal in McLeod Ganj, has instituted the annual accumulation of mantra recitations and ritual worship connected with Padmasambhava, and has promoted the more Nyingma-friendly state oracle protector spirit Nechung over and above his rival Dolgyal/Dorje Shugden, a previously relied upon Geluk-supremacist protector-spirit (*srung ma*) whose propitiation the Dalai Lama has, since the 1970s, identified as a major threat to his own wellbeing, to the wellbeing of Tibetans, and the security of a unified Tibetan polity in exile⁷⁸.

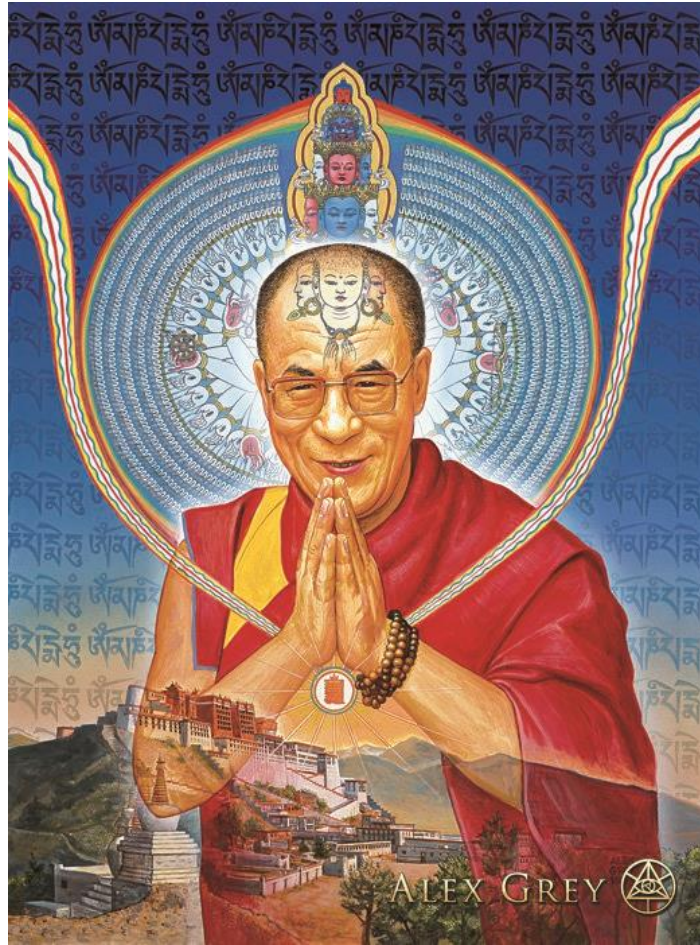
Father of the Nation: The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Emanation Histories, and Pastoral Care

From about the eleventh century, Dharma-promoting Tibetan kings of the seventh to ninth century imperial period were reframed in histories and revealed treasure teachings as emanations of realized Buddha-beings or Bodhisattvas. As time went on, this “new Buddhist ideology...was often consciously used to legitimize the rule over the people and country by a Buddhist monk who represented the human form of a Bodhisattva...first by the Karmapas and later by the Dalai Lamas” (Karmay 1988, 3)⁷⁹. Drawing on this logic, the Great Fifth Dalai Lama erected his Potala Palace on the site of an earlier royal palace that had been built by Songtsen Gampo, the first Tibetan king to explicitly patronize Buddhism, in the seventh

century. In doing so, the Great Fifth consciously sought to crystallize the connection between the Dalai Lama's reincarnation lineage and the rulers of a once mighty, centralized state.

It should thus come as no surprise that the Great Fifth later came to be revered as an emanation of the greatest of the Dharma Kings, Trisong Deutsen. As Karmay (1988) notes, the reign of the Great Fifth “marked the reunification of almost the whole of Tibet under one sovereign leader for the first time since the collapse of royal authority in the ninth century...and the restoration of peace and prosperity in...[a] country which had recently been so ravaged by sectarian and political strife” (12). Understanding this, the current Dalai Lama's attempts to recreate aspects of his illustrious predecessor's state apparatus in the fractured, precarious context of exile make more sense.

The Dalai Lama is the preeminent emanation of Chenrezig (*spyan ras gzigs*) alive today. Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of unconditional Compassion, serves as a sort of national patron Buddha of Tibet. Influential treasure histories like the *Mani Kabum* (*ma Ni bka' bum*)⁸⁰ present Chenrezig as a sort of holy eugenicist of the Tibetan people and a supreme guide and protector of the Tibet nation⁸¹. In this respect, the Dalai Lama is more than just a political authority for many Tibetans. Rather, his very material person crystallizes and anchors a particular vision of the Tibetan nation. This vision is still strongly linked in many Tibetans' minds (more recent political reforms notwithstanding) with an ideal of centralized, hyphenated religious-political authority. Just as according to national myth, Chenrezig once literally ‘fathered’ the Tibetan people by emanating in the form of a monkey and having sex with a ferocious, autochthonous female demoness in Tibet (Joffe 2015c), the Dalai Lama, despite his status as a celibate monk, continues to play a strongly paternal role for Tibetans today.



A 1995 painting of the Dalai Lama as the embodiment of the thousand armed form of Chenrezig, by artist Alex Grey. The leader is seen here superimposed over Chenrezig's mantra and the Potala Palace in Lhasa, the historical seat of the Dalai Lamas' power (via alexgrey.com).

This was highlighted with exquisite clarity in statements made by the Dalai Lama himself to a group of mostly elderly Tibetans who came to have an audience with him in McLeod Ganj on the 27th of May 2019. Sitting on a chair, the Dalai Lama offered some remarkable advice about death to the group of devotees seated on the ground at the foot of the stairs to his audience chamber. The leader pointed out that many in the audience were old and sick and were slowly but surely heading towards death. “But rest easy!” (*blo bde pos cig sdod shog*), he assured them. “There’s an expression that’s used, *tshe rabs nas tshe rabs* (‘from succession of lifetimes to the next, from lifetime to lifetime’), he explained. “We aren’t talking about one human life [with this phrase], are we?” (*nga tso mi tshe gcig gi skad cha*

ma red ba), he went on, explaining that when Tibetans say “from succession of lives to succession of lives” they mean that there is an undeniable continuity between generations, one secured through the dynamics of consciously directed rebirth and focused aspiration to benefit others. He explained that this phrase was exemplified by the way that every one of the Dalai Lama incarnations, from the first of the line, Gendun Drub (1391 – 1474) to himself, had continued in an unbroken succession of rebirths in order to “render service” (*zhabs phyi zhu ba*). Characteristically self-effacing, he noted that while he himself does not claim that he is someone “especially noble or distinguished” (*khyad du ‘phags pa*) like these predecessors, he was nonetheless committed to being of service like them. He reminded his audience that, as explained in many histories (*lo rgyus*), the Noble Chenrezig was the very reason (*rgyu mtshan*) for Tibet and had a “special or extraordinary connection” (*thun mong min pa’i ‘brel ba*) with the Tibetan people.

These days, he went on, when one asks where Chenrezig is located people often say he exists on the top of the transcendent Potala mountain, the divine peak of which the Potala Palace in Lhasa is a proxy, but the Dalai Lama stressed that he himself was Chenrezig’s “public relations officer” or “chamberlain” (*mgron gnyer*), his “stand-in” or “representative” in body, speech, and mind in the world (*sku yi tshab, gsung gi tshab, thugs kyi tshab*)⁸². As a result of this, because these Tibetans had made his acquaintance, had made a connection with him, when the time came for them to die, he assured them that he would “carry a white offering scarf” (*kha btags shig ‘khyer*) to Chenrezig on their behalf and make the request that since “this person has a connection with me, I request that through the succession of their lifetimes you will grant them Refuge”. For this reason, these Tibetans did not have to feel fear or regret in the face of death. They had had the great good fortune to meet with him and the Dharma in this life and thereby make their human incarnation meaningful (*don dang ldan*

pa)⁸³. Shifting gears, the Dalai Lama then concluded by stressing that while still alive his audience should encourage the younger generation of Tibetans to study Tibetan language.



His Holiness reassures Tibetans of his special mandate as Chenrezig's representative on earth to protect them after death in McLeod Ganj in May 2019.

Here the Dalai Lama points to two crucial mechanisms of continuity in the fractured, disrupted state of exile: 1) continuity through spiritual commitments that endure across lifetimes and incarnations and 2) the continuity ensured by the cross-generational transmission of cultural knowledge and values within the limits of a single lifetime. Recalling Kantorowicz's classic analysis of medieval kingship which foregrounded the twofold

‘immortal, sacred body’ and ‘mortal, perishable body’ of Divine Kings (Kantorowicz 1997), the Dalai Lama underscores the possibility of a sacred or transcendent continuity in the face of both his and his audience’s inevitable mortality. The Dalai Lama makes plain here how he understands his own profoundly pastoral role for Tibetans in exile, who by virtue of their shared homeland of Tibet and mutual special connection to Chenrezig are one people under Chenrezig’s and the Dalai Lama’s unflagging protection. This is a powerful example of national belonging expressed through an idiom of kinship: by affirming his status as the human representative or stand-in of Chenrezig, the Dalai Lama positions himself as a spiritual father to Tibetans in general, across sectarian and regional differences.

As discussed in Chapter One, bonds between tantric initiates are expressed through an idiom of kinship. Through initiation the co-disciples of a particular lama are reconfigured as family, subject to the commands of a shared root-guru teacher or spiritual parent. Vajrasiblings of a common guru are bound throughout lifetimes (*tshe rabs nas tshe rabs*), destined to continue to be reborn in close proximity to one another as a result of their shared aspirations and tantric vows. While they may reappear in different forms and in reconfigured social relationships, initiates’ shared spiritual commitments (as well as their cultivation of consciousness through yogic practice) ensure a certain continuity of purpose and expression across lifetimes. This form of tantric kinship extends beyond the boundaries of communities of formally initiated yogis and yoginis, however, and influences nationalist expressions of belonging. Indeed, it is not uncommon for lay Tibetans in exile who are not dedicated practitioners of Secret Mantra to cite the current Dalai Lama as their by-default ‘root guru’ (*rtsa ba’i bla ma*), the spiritual parent and guide to whom they are bound and whose protection they enjoy in this life by sheer virtue of their Tibetan-ness.

A Guardian Spirit Genealogist in Queens: Past Life Memory, Forgotten Kinship, and the Security of a Polity-in-Exile

Processes of divine emanation and incarnation are thus clearly distinctly implicated in articulations of state power and collective, national belonging for both non-specialist lay Tibetans and Tibetan religious professionals in exile. Emanation and reincarnation operate as “nonbiological reproductive technologies,” ones that serve to produce (at least for the most part) “all-male transnational “families” and lineages” (Bernstein 2013). The expectations and obligations that exist between new incarnations or ‘emanated bodies’ (i.e. *sprul sku*, *sprul pa’i sku*) and their existing kin in these sorts of all-male ‘outsourced womb’ families are often fairly clear-cut: the “heart son” (*thugs sras*) or chief disciple of a prominent lama who was his personal attendant in life takes on the responsibility of leading the search party to discover the child who is his reincarnation following the master’s death, and disciples of one revered incarnation of a lama raise the child and continue to serve him, and so on (Baratz 2008).

In cases where hereditary and reincarnation-based succession intersect, kinship ties may become dense and over-determined, as in the case of celebrated householder tantrist Chogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche (1938 – 2018), whose biological son Yeshe Silvano Namkhai was recognized as the reincarnation of Namkhai Norbu’s own maternal uncle and guru. Here, a lama is simultaneously parent, colleague, and disciple, distinct subject positions emerging from interaction to interaction and across father and son’s life cycle. Likewise, a biological son in turn struggles to negotiate his relationship to and expectations of a man who at times acts (or who he wishes would act) like his biological father and other times occupies the role of spiritual parent instead, not just to his son but to thousands of genetically unrelated initiate/disciple family members across the world as well⁸⁴.

The responsibilities and expectations implied by past life connections between figures who are not immediately or directly implicated in the same, specific *sku 'phreng* or “succession of lives”⁸⁵ may not always be immediately clear until they are confirmed and crystallized through various mechanisms, however. Articulated via multiple human and non-human channels, such connections remain subject to negotiation, can be contested, revised, and ignored. Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche offers a useful example of some of these dynamics in his memoir. He explains that, shortly after he arranged for the Dalai Lama to inaugurate and inspect Zilnön Kagyeling in 1987, he was invited by Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche’s American consort and by other American students to come and teach in the U.S. This request coincided with one Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche had already received from the Geluk lama Rato Khyongla Rinpoche to come to the U.S. and give him the full oral transmission of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama’s collected teachings. Rato Khyongla Rinpoche, who Khamtrul Rinpoche notes was the Fifth Dalai Lama’s *mchod dpon* or offerings master in a previous life, arranged for Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche to stay with two of his students at their home in Queens, New York. In the early hours of the morning while staying there in 1988, Khamtrul Rinpoche recounts that he dreamed “a disturbing array of appearances”. He explains:

“A number of companions and I were walking down a steep and narrow path when a man suddenly appeared out of nowhere and said, “Hurry up! Behind this mountain is a great monastery. Avalokiteshvara and several of his retinue have come from Mount Potala and are throwing wide open the door to benefit and bliss for a great number of limitless beings. Is there one among you named Khamtrul Rinpoche?” I thought, “He can't be blamed for not recognizing me. After all, I don't have the look of a lama. And when the only sign one has to go on is the clothes I wear, no one would recognize me as a lama.” He then fixed his eyes on me and said, “Oh! I didn't recognize you, but in fact, you are he! Do you recognize me?” I replied, “I have the feeling I've seen you before, but at the moment I can't recall who you are. “True, true. You are not to blame; it's been many lifetimes. I was the servant, the red one, bound to obey the Conqueror Gendun Gyatso [the second Dalai Lama]’s every command. At that time, you were his secretary, Sungrab Gyatso. You and I were close, you poor thing! In the Conqueror Sonam Gyatso [the third Dalai Lama]’s time, I was the small red protector⁸⁶. You lived for quite some time then. In the time of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, I protected those who kept their samaya, while I assumed human form to vanquish those who did not. Appearing in the aspect of Gushri Tenzin Choegyal [the

leader of the Mongol armies who defeated the Great Fifth's Tibetan rivals], I caused the enlightened activity of the Conqueror's [i.e. the Dalai Lama's] body, speech and minds to spread until it was equal to and pervasive as space. You were the fully ordained monk Jamyang Drakpa, and your devoted service to Him, devoid of pretense and guile, surpassed all others. Then for a few lifetimes you took rebirth in the lands of Kham and Amdo until, in this lifetime, you were born into the family of the seventh Dalai Lama's stable manager. You are a man taken into the fourteenth Dalai Lama's heart. Your heart is unblemished and with the highest of intentions, you have served Him in whatever way was appropriate, both spiritually and temporarily, in the satisfactory way you had hoped. Your mind my rest at ease. Henceforward, rouse yourself with the pure intention to carry out the worthy wishes of His Holiness. By doing just that, you will live a long life and great good fortune will come your way. I too will not waver; I will not slack but will help you. Nowadays, Rato Khyongla Tulku, who was Ngawang Sherab, the Great Fifth Dalai Lama's shrine master, is receiving with great faith and devotion the oral transmissions for the Great Fifth's collected works in their entirety. I wholeheartedly approve. I have been helping to bring about this endeavor that you two have embarked upon and will continue to ensure that things go smoothly from now on. As this is an auspicious link to ensure that the wishes and projects of the Lord of conquerors increase like a lake swelled by summer rains, I offer you, venerable one, my best wishes." (Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche 2009, 280 – 281)

Although the Dalai Lama had already enlisted Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche's assistance as a CTA minister and Nyingma ritual expert as part of state-building activities in exile well before this dream, through it the ngakpa confirms the trans-incarnational significance and salience of these working relationships. The appearance of the Tibetan state oracle deity Nechung/Pehar ratifies the resonance and continuity between the Great Fifth and fourteenth Dalai Lama's activities. The Nechung protector, with his superior clairvoyance and magical power, his extended lifespan and past life recall, picks up the slack, filling in the gaps and making up for lapses in more fallible human memory. Nechung's triangulating of Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche's incarnations, his narrative stringing of beads on a thread serves to emphasize the consistency with which the ngakpa has served the Dalai Lamas' interests across lifetimes. Here we can see clearly how reincarnation and tantric discipleship – what Bernstein (2013) calls "Buddhist techniques of the body" and "technologies of cultural reproduction" – not only elucidate "a particular kind of sovereign body that is able to control

the processes of both death and rebirth” but allow too for “the blurring of identities, the compression of times and spaces, and the crossing of a variety of boundaries” (88).

Ngakpas Running Around and Running Away: On the Perils of Staying Put

Still, despite the Dalai Lama’s status as an emanation of Chenrezig and overarching, consolidating national figure and notwithstanding the power of past life memories to pull individual ritual specialists into relationships of familial reciprocity, tantric experts in exile – and decentralized ngakpa in particular – must all the same juggle a range of competing demands and affiliations. Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche worked hard to fulfil obligations to various spiritual kin throughout his lifetime, calling on his root-guru and the head of his own school Ngakpa Dudjom Rinpoche for encouragement and advice in seeking to fulfil the Dalai Lama’s wishes (Woolf and Blanc 1994, 61; 67; 68). Still, despite all his and the Dalai Lama’s efforts, tensions with other types of family came to bear on the institution and its development. Likewise, despite Tertön Ösel Dorje Rinpoche’s own father’s connection to the Dalai Lama and the exile administration through prophecies and revelations and despite Ösel Dorje’s apparent readiness to assist the Dalai Lama ritually, taking on the responsibility of being full-time retreat manager at Zilnön Kagyeling was a great commitment, one that risked compromising the ngakpa’s mobility. Both Kalön Pema and the official from the Dalai Lama’s Private Office painted contemporary ngakpa as flighty, unreliable characters. Both bureaucrats suggested that ngakpas’ unwillingness to commit, their refusal to stay put and to render service to institutional authorities was motivated by selfishness and greed. Unlike their more authentic, true renouncer legendary forebears, ngakpa today were too focused on money, international fame, and worldly relationships. They were too busy “looking”, “moving”, and “running around”.

This specific vocabulary of “running” or “moving” around when it comes to distinguishing between (usually dubious) village ngakpa and (probably more virtuous) retreatant/renouncer ngakpa appears to be quite ingrained in the Tibetan imagination. In his essay on ngakpa, for example, Dr Nida notes that critics of householder tantric yogis have caricatured them as “a type of religious practitioner who just *runs around* performing village rituals for material gain” (*rgyu yi ched du grong chog kho nar rgyug pa'i chos pa rigs shig*, my emphasis). Emphasizing the way that ‘staying put’ is popularly associated with monasticism and heightened virtue, he goes on to problematize the association:

“Thus, without concerning themselves with just their own happiness or gain, mantra-holders go out to do village rites, averting obstacles facing families, curing harm from the outer and inner elements, and applying remedies for human and livestock sicknesses as best they can. Still, some fat/arrogant/well provided for/self-satisfied monks (*grwa rgyags kha shas* – the adjective *rgyags pa* can mean all of these) malign ngakpa by saying that ‘they are village ritualists who chase after payments of food and money for religious services’ (*lto dang dkor*). In this [these monks] are just digging up dirt on other people without acknowledging their own faults. What person [alive] doesn’t chase after food/resources (*lto*) for the sake of survival? There can’t possibly be any difference between staying in a monastery and having ‘black’ [i.e. dubiously obtained] donations (*dkor nag*) just be handed to you and receiving offerings of money after you have gone to the difficulty of going out [to people’s homes to get it, so in other words these monks have nothing to complain about].” (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 109)

In this striking passage Nida inverts a common-sensical hierarchy between virtuous monks who stay put in monastic institutions studying, teachings, and performing rituals and village ngakpa like Yeshe Dorje or Ösel Dorje Rinpoche who traveled and travel widely doing ‘house calls’ to offer their tantric services. Here it is monks, typically more esteemed targets for lay donations, who are revealed to be selfish and materialist. Ensnared comfortably in well provisioned monasteries, monks are fat and self-satisfied (*rgyags pa*). Resources merely come to them without effort while they criticize others’ religious hustle from their own position of material security.

There is an abiding link between inner and outer movement and worldly distraction in Tibetan Buddhist contexts. This link is summed up well in the polyvalent term *zang nge zing nge/zang zing* in Tibetan. Perhaps best translated as ‘hurly burly’, *zang nge zing nge* is used to describe a range of situations involving a lot of confused, distracting, and chaotic movement. It can be used to describe blustery weather, loud, boisterous crowds of people, or a shifting, confusing, or disturbing progression of inner mental images (as Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche describes his early morning dreams cited above). The expression is often used to describe the endlessly moving, constantly disturbing sights and sounds of Samsara. At the same time, *zang zing* also refers to material goods or resources. As such, we can see that there is an almost intuitive cultural connection between inner turbulence, a mind disturbed by unstable ‘subtle winds’ and afflictive emotions, and attachment to material resources.

Here Nida reframes such connections, pointing out that even if monks are going to criticize ngakpa for chasing after money for religious services, ngakpa are at least going out of their way on behalf of others for such rewards. The term Nida uses to describe this ‘difficulty’ (*dka’ spyad*) suggests voluntary hardship or sacrifice, and is the same term used in many contexts to describe religious asceticism or yogic austerities. Nida thus recasts ngakpas’ moving around as a virtue, a point he drives home in the lines immediately following the excerpt quoted above, where he concludes that ngakpa with proper training and practical expertise are people who “protect the wellbeing of beings and render service to society through the four tantric activities” (Nyi zla he ru ka and sgrol ma 2015, 109).

While the Dalai Lama and his Office might have wanted ngakpa to stay put at the ngakpa dratsang, being pinned down at an institution and made subject to oversight, regulations, and external authority chafes against key yogic sensibilities. While ngakpas’ refusal to stay in one place might have seemed selfish and self-serving to others, detachment from social institutions and obligations is conversely the hallmark of the idealized heroic

yogic practitioner who quits worldly concerns to cultivate him or herself for the sake of others. In Nida's presentation, monks who survive comfortably in monasteries risk becoming *dkor za mkhan*, those who "eat/eat off of the material offerings of others". While asking for his help with translating Nida's passage above, my lay Tibetan translator friend Gyurme in McLeod Ganj brought up the fact that when he had lived as a monk in a large monastery in Amdo as a child, young, poorly trained novitiates were routinely derided as "little donation eaters," i.e. *dkor za mkhan*, since they were surviving off of other's resources and their limited education meant they had little to offer in return.

Indeed, Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche framed his own decision to flee the gompa in Tibet where he was a tulku out of a fear of not having freedom there, of not being able to practice "real Dharma", and of turning into just this sort of non-virtuous, ill-gotten *dkor* eater.

As he explains:

"One day I met three Dregung Kagyue [sic] *chodpas* who were returning from a long pilgrimage to eastern Tibet and China. I was deeply moved by them. I told myself, "If you want to become a practitioner, you should take their example." That was a turning point in my religious life. Then and there I decided to become something like them. Soon after, I prepared to leave the monastery because I thought I should learn to depend upon myself instead of others. In the monastery most people offered things, and these donations helped the monasteries to survive and grow. I thought this method of living was a way of accumulating things, and I thought it would be better if I earned and spent my own money rather than spending the money of others. I did not want to accumulate much nonvirtue. Also, in the monastery, you do what the others do and not what you want to do. So you do not get the chance to think separately for yourself. In the monastery, I had depended all of my life on the offerings of other people, but I had not done anything for them. In my country, when people die they make offerings to the high lama so that he will send some help to the spirit of the person who has died. I thought to myself that, until this time, I had no powers. I had just accumulated the offerings of other people. It seemed to me that I had accumulated a lot of nonvirtue because I could do nothing for others without such powers. Lord Buddha said, "To practice the Dharma perfectly you should disown all material things, we should not be attached to worldly things." I believed there was much wealth in the monastery. If I stayed there I would live off of this wealth and not truly practice the *dharma*. Lord Buddha also said, "If you want to do the real practice of the *dharma*, you should go away from your relatives and your belongings. You must go out into the world that you have never seen, which is not near family. You should disown your wealth, everything." It is the teaching of the Lord Buddha that one should go for a distance that would take three years of just walking to find. After

making this walk for three years, there will be a place to practice real *dharma*, and then you should not go on walking. You should stay there. If you are a common person you should live at least three days walking distance from your family, relatives, and children. I left the monastery secretly. I ran away...” (Woolf and Blanc, 1994, 13 –15)

Like Kalön Pema then, Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche believed that a true yogi was a *bya bral ba*, someone who had abandoned all worldly affairs and investments. Unlike him perhaps, he, like Nida, also understands yogic peripateticism to be a sign of selflessness and spiritual mastery. Celebrated ngakpa and Dzogchen master Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche (1920 – 1996) likewise notes at length in his memoirs how he and his yogi teachers all struggled at various points in their lives to resist the commands of their religious and political superiors to take up institutional responsibilities, with the hopes that they could realize their dreams of, their “obsessions” with, remaining for extended periods in caves in secluded retreat, at a symbolic if not actual remove from society. Indeed, Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche makes his thoughts about these sorts of imposed responsibilities crystal clear when he refers to “that particular form of samsara known as monastery management” (Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche 2005, 287)⁸⁷.

Containing Charisma, or the Limits of Lama Lineage Oversight in Exile

Kin ties and duties expressed through past life memories offer undeniably powerful mechanisms for incorporation and cooperation across both time and sectarian affiliation. Still, ideals of yogic ‘independence’ and fears of institutional cooptation may outweigh whatever impact past life recognitions may have. During the Summer of 2012, I interviewed Zablam Rinpoche, a Nyingma ngakpa in his early forties from Golok in Eastern Tibet. Zablam Rinpoche had travelled from Eastern Tibet to Nepal and then India, after having visions of the Dalai Lama/Chenrezig, who urged him to come to India to seek out his destined teachers. After several years travelling around India and Nepal receiving teachings, doing retreats, and

studying and teaching at different monastic institutions in exile, he eventually relocated to Boudhanath, Nepal with his wife Nyima, who had grown up in Nepal as a Tibetan refugee and who was the old classmate of a Tibetan friend of mine from Pokhara. The two started a family together and Zablam Rinpoche began offering regular public teachings on the Nyingma tradition at his and Nyima's home, which attracted many local and foreign students.

Zablam Rinpoche's life had been characterized, from childhood, by lama 'recognitions' (*ngos 'dzin byed pa*). During my interview with him, he explained how when he had lived in Tibet various lamas had made pronouncements to his parents, written him letters later in life and so on, recognizing him as the reincarnation of this-or-that significant figure in their respective lineages. Rather than finding this flattering or momentous, he explained that he mostly found it tiresome. Each new recognition, each new verdict of his capacities, bestowing of a new title, set of robes, praise poem and so on, came with a new set of expectations. While he took emanation and reincarnation seriously as phenomena and was no stranger to past life memories and century-spanning visions himself, he seemed keenly aware of the socio-economic and political dynamics that could surround such recognitions. While it is quite possible that he was merely being self-effacing as befitted an experienced lama being quizzed about his spiritual accomplishments, I was struck nonetheless by the dismissive, almost jaded tone with which he discussed past life recognitions.

Several commentators have suggested that the last half century or so of exile has been marked by a seeming proliferation of tulku lineages. Wangchuk, for example, (2017, 202) notes that "phrases such as "lama factory" (*bla ma factory*) and "lama's time" (*bla ma'i dus tshod*) are quite common among Tibetans living in exile in India these days," and observes that the "growth in the number of incarnate beings has much to do with interest in Tibetan Buddhism among Western and East Asian supporters and with Tibetan religious elites' enthusiasm for the preservation of their religion in exile and in the Buddhist Himalayan

regions.” (202). Almost sixty years before him, Pallis (2008 [1960]) offered similar observations, reporting that “it is said...[i.e. by Tibetans in exile] that there has been a noticeable increase in the number of Tulkus” (185). Pallis explained that these new reincarnations were said to have been increasingly discovered in “well-to-do families”. He notes that this happened formerly but more rarely, explaining that “the reason for this may well be a wish, unconscious or half avowed, in the minds of some of the members of the lamaseries concerned, to draw the wealth of a big family towards their own community by electing its child as abbot” (185). While these cases were “still probably few” they were nonetheless a point of anxiety for Tibetans in the early days of exile. Excessive proliferation of tulkus was also connected with concerns about whether tulkus had been correctly (and not purely strategically) identified, and whether they were receiving enough training to enable them to at least match the expertise of their predecessors.

In a 2019 Facebook post that collects together comments from several Tibetan lamas and Tibetan Studies scholars who have expressed concern about the apparent tulku boom over the last few decades, independent investigator of institutional abuse in Tibetan Buddhist Rob Hogendoorn argues for the statistical reality of this increase and for it being motivated by ultimately ulterior, materialistic motives. He notes that the current Dalai Lama has often emphasized that the tulku recognition system is a specifically Tibetan cultural tradition rather than pan-Buddhist doctrine, and has expressed reservations about the institution. He cites comments made by the Dalai Lama in this regard in a recent book co-authored with white American Tibetan Buddhist nun Thubten Chodron:

“In the 1960s I discussed limiting the number of tulkus, but one adviser told me that would be difficult because it is the Tibetans' custom. Nowadays being recognized as a rinpoche has become a position of social status, not one of religious import, and this is not healthy. We should seek teachers who are well-educated in the Dharma, practice it sincerely, and have compassion for others. In looking at Tibetan society, I often see people ignoring learned geshe and khenpos but showing great respect to rinpoches who are not learned. I tell the young rinpoches that they should not rely on the

reputation of their previous lives but should study diligently, practice sincerely, and be humble in this life. If they do, they will be an honor to their predecessor's name. If they do not and merely use their social status to manipulate or deceive others, they are a disgrace, not only to their predecessor but also to the Buddhadharma.” (Tenzin Gyatso and Thubten Chodron 2018, 92)

Reflecting on these points, Hogendoorn notes that neither the democratic Tibetan Constitution in exile of 1963 nor the updated Charter of the Tibetans in Exile of 1991 provide stipulations regarding the recognition of tulku and regulating of incarnation lineages in exile. Conversely, the Charter does state that all Tibetans are guaranteed freedom of Religion (cf. Ch.2, Art. 10), and notes as well that the exile administration should “support and facilitate” (*rgyab skyor mthun rkyen bsgrub rgyu*) institutions and organizations that preserve Tibetan religion and culture/civilization (Ch.3, Art. 17, 15); should find ways to promote the “positive, non-sectarian *rimé* tradition of explicating the Buddha's teachings” (Ch. 3, Art. 17, 14, *phyogs 'dzin med pa'i rgyal bstan ris med kyi bzhed srol bzang po gong mthor spel thabs*); and should “find ways to improve the efficient organization and pure quality of Dharma institutions [focused on both] teaching and practice for monastic renunciators and white-robed, longhaired ngakpa and should ensure that these [practitioners] act properly [i.e. in ‘accordance with their rules/codes of conduct’, *tshul mthun*], without becoming tainted by ‘wrong livelihood’⁸⁸ and the misuse of the facilities [provided them]” (Ch.3, Art. 17, 10, *rab byung dang gos dkar ljang lo can gyi bzhad sgrub chos sde khag tshags tshud spus dag yong thabs dang/de dag gi mthun rkyen log 'tshos ma bslad pa'i tshul mthun yong thabs*)⁸⁹.

Hogendoorn links the Charter's silence about monitoring tulku lineages to the Dalai Lama's commitment to keeping matters of ‘Church and State’ separate under a new democratic dispensation in exile. He further suggests that since no regulatory measures have been put in place by the exile administration to check the authority of charismatic reincarnate lamas living as stateless refugees, these practitioners' religious activities should be subject, by default, to the legal stipulations of the countries where they are resident. Prior to the

implementing of the 1991 Charter, the 1963 Constitution for a future Tibet had called for a religious affairs committee or so-called ‘Ecclesiastical Council’ as it was translated into English (*chos don lhan tshogs*, cf, Ch.5, Art. 37). This Article stipulated that:

“1) There must be an Ecclesiastical Council which administers the affairs of all monasteries and religious institutions, which will be under the direct supervision and protection (*gzigs skyong*) of His Holiness the Dalai Lama 2) The Ecclesiastical Council must have no less than five members who will be appointed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama as he sees fit in the circumstances 3) The Ecclesiastical Council will carry the responsibility and power [to administer] all religious affairs, in connection with His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s approval.” (Bod mi mang spyi ‘thus lhan tshogs, “Btsan byol”)

As we saw above, such an explicit enshrining of the Dalai Lama’s absolute authority over sectarian affairs was not received well by certain factions in exile, and references to such a council or committee under the Dalai Lama’s oversight do not appear in the reformed 1991 exile Charter (indeed, as Sangay 2010 confirms, this council was never actually created in exile, and the Department of Religion and Culture was formed to replace it⁹⁰). When I asked Kalön Pema about how the various heads of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism were chosen and how the Office of Religion and Culture was involved in such procedures, he made it clear that each of the schools had their own very internal processes, and that, though things could admittedly become somewhat complicated and contentious (*rnyog dra tsha po*) at times, as in the case of the Kagyu school with its many squabbling sub-sects and lineages, he and his Department “could of course not interfere”. Talking with him, I got the impression that he saw his Office primarily as a sort of organizer or intermediary, one that tried to keep affairs running smoothly and on track, but which did not see fit or feel either equipped or entitled to directly intervene in internal, sectarian negotiations and controversies.

Pema la’s representation of his Department and its authority (“But of course, we cannot interfere!”) is a far cry from visions of an Ecclesiastical Council in a future, free Tibet with total regulatory power under the singular authority of the Dalai Lama, or from the

government translation councils of Tibet's bygone imperial age, for that matter. While Hogendoorn frames tulku proliferation as a distinctly contemporary problem, we find the precise concerns he highlights being discussed already in the seventeenth century by the Great Fifth Dalai Lama. As Jabb (2015) summarizes, the Great Fifth:

“...condemns the institution of succession by reincarnation as an instrument for amassing wealth and gaining social and political status. In characteristically sharp and forthright terms, he states that the coteries of a deceased Lama are more concerned with finding the replacement than with his immediate demise. This is because the demise brings to an end the stream of dubiously obtained material offerings (*dkor nag*) that have been flowing uninterruptedly into the Lama's coffers. As a result, asserts the Great Fifth, in their mad rush to install the next incarnation, coteries fall prey to the concocted tales of ambitious parents.” (68)

Like the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, the Great Fifth is “also acutely aware of the political manipulation of the reincarnation system and...caustically alludes to the sons of Mongol leaders being recognized as reincarnate lamas in his own day”. Further, the Great Fifth even casts doubt on his own status, presenting himself as “an impostor occupying “the seat of his predecessors like a donkey in a leopard's skin”” (Jabb 2015, 68)⁹¹

Clearly, reservations about the misuse of cross-life tantric kinning mechanisms are hardly new. Likewise, however much the current Dalai Lama might have spoken out against the abuse of such cultural institutions, past life connections and ‘emanative histories’ remain an essential component of his actions as a head of state, irrespective of his status as a *de jure* or *de facto* authority. The past life linkages and enduring legacies surveyed above do not involve locating child incarnations or inaugurating brand new reincarnation lineages (Wangchuk 2017). They are open-ended overtures, threads of relationships half-known, half-felt, that await elucidation, confirmation, refusal. They are powerful in that they are personal, but they remain tenuous, at risk of being overshadowed by other obligations, relationships and anxieties.

The ups-and-downs of Zilnön Kagyeling explored above offer useful insights into how distinctly Tibetan conceptions and ideals of authority are mobilized as part of statecraft and the forging of moral communities and historical continuities in exile today. The Dalai Lama comes to stand in for the state in the context of specific interactions and obligations. As current exile Prime Minister Lobsang Sangay notes (2010), in committing to new, largely top-down initiations promoting secularization, democratization and ecumenism in exile, Tibetans have conceived of their allegiance to the Dalai Lama in overwhelmingly “personal rather than institutional or political terms” (303).

As one example, Sangay discusses a crucial event that took place in 1960 as part of the formal inauguration of the CTA political structure. During religious teachings the Dalai Lama gave that year in Bodhgaya, India (the place of the Buddha’s enlightenment) thirty three Tibetan authorities representing the three provinces and Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, and Geluk schools of Tibetan Buddhism signed a document known as the “Great Magically Potent Oath” (*mna’ gan mthu bo che*). This document, a kind of memorandum of understanding between His Holiness and the Tibetan people, served as a public declaration of the Tibetan people’s remorse at having thus far “failed to unite and serve our nation with a sense of community responsibility” and enshrined Tibetans’ subsequent oath to “fulfill the deep wishes of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the All-seeing and Great Caring Being [i.e. Chenrezig]...[and] give up factional fighting and jealousy and the pursuit of personal fame...[and]... instead...be united like an iron ball...and...never waver from this decision” (Sangay 2010, 303). Sangay observes that this oath took the form of a symbolic, Buddhist pledge to a deity – no representatives of the Bön religion signed the document, for example, and rather than a popular declaration, a handful of elite oath-takers stood in ritually for the Tibetan populace at large. Reflecting on the legacy of this Great Oath and the future of Tibetan democracy Tsering Wangyal worried in a 1980 editorial that “as far as the average

Tibetan is concerned, the Dalai Lama *is* the Tibetan government. Individuals who staff the government, even those holding highest offices, are respected by the people only because they are there with the approval of the Dalai Lama” (cited in Sangay 2010, 303)⁹².

Despite provisions for the Dalai Lama’s hypothetical impeachment in the Constitution/Charter, as Thargyal (Kvaerne and Thargyal 1993) affirms, for an overwhelming majority of Tibetans in exile the Dalai Lama remains “unsurpassed”, incomparable (*bla na med pa*) in his status and authority. At the same time that the current Dalai Lama has pushed for the secularization and regulated democratization of political authority in exile, he has continued to draw on religious frameworks and modes of authority – such as his status as an emanation or ‘chamberlain/administrative manager’ of Chenrezig – in highly conscious ways, with the aim of unifying Tibetans under a shared, non-divisive mandate. While these frameworks may not seem immediately or intrinsically ‘political’ they nonetheless operate as their own distinctly Tibetan forms of biopower.

Given their traditional forms of social organization, ngakpa offer an especially revealing window into how decentralized forms of religious expertise are drawn into state building projects. Yet overall, the exile administration has a remarkably limited capacity to regulate the dissemination and mediation of esoteric texts and knowledge. Dreams of ‘Ecclesiastic Councils’ aside, there remains no organized body of authorities that can control the transmission, translation and circulation of Secret Mantra practitioners and texts. While individual ngakpa may get pulled into CTA affiliated projects and while the Exile Charter states that the CTA should ideally oversee the religious activities of different lamas, religious institutions and lineages to ensure that practitioners are on their best behavior and do not get mixed up in “wrong livelihood”, the fact remains that centralized oversight of tantric Buddhist teachers and practitioners’ activities is virtually non-existent.

In this chapter I have focused on questions of standardization and regulation and have offered reflections on how de-centralized, tantric Buddhist mechanisms for organizing and mediating relationships co-exist today alongside more self-consciously ‘democratic’ and ‘modern’ bureaucratic models of statecraft in exile. In *Seeing Like a State* anthropologist James Scott (1998) explains how his research into nation-states’ attempted to sedentarize mobile, marginalized populations alerted him to the centrality of legibility as a mechanism and problem of statecraft. The phenomenon of “selfish” tantric Buddhist yogis who won’t stay put explored in this chapter demonstrates the degree to which ngakpas’ decentralized, ambivalent, and unpredictable power and shifting, inconstant affiliations continue to look like problems through the eyes of the state. Insofar as it functions as a life-affirming (or life-after-life affirming), pastoral technique “for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the “control of populations” (Foucault 1978, 140), tantric kinning could be described as a discrete form of biopower in exile. Yet at the same time, the regulating of relatedness through reincarnation, time-space-and-subject imploding emanative processes, and clairvoyant memory thoroughly subvert the types of legibility that ‘modern’, ‘rational’ statecraft, at least as Scott describes it, presupposes.

While past life recall and recognition may illuminate previously murky affiliations and help to subject individuals to new systems of surveillance and authority, the kind of subjectification implied in tantric kinning is open-ended and proliferating. While the revelation of past life connections can clarify relationships and draw tantric practitioners into new regulatory frameworks, as anthropologist of post-colonial development and statecraft Akhil Gupta has pointed out, the notion of reincarnation itself muddies the clear distinction between people and things on which modern, “democratic Western capitalist” statecraft depends:

“The idea that persons can be re-born in a manner analogous to commodities appears deeply threatening in the West precisely because it attacks the entire ideological edifice of

capitalism. For if persons were not unique, individual, and singular in some primal sense, what would it mean for them to make promises, have wills, and enter contracts? The whole ideology of democratic capitalism, of participation in an economy and in a polity, is predicated upon the maintenance of this sharp and irrevocable distinction between persons and things.” (1992: 205)

Likewise, while the continuities between one life and another may be clear to some, they remain occluded for others, and participation in and assessment of processes of emanation continues to be the domain of esoteric tantric experts who possess a form of cultivated perception unavailable to all. As such, the dynamics of legibility involved in tantric kinning remain exclusive, are resistant to full-blown democratization, standardization or routinization.

Having explored the challenges of pinning down ngakpa and making them ‘legible’ to exile state structures in this chapter, I move in the next to consider how problems of legibility and transparency relate to ngakpas’ bodies on a more micro, inter-subjective level. If ngakpa are difficult to pin down in space and in fixed institutions in exile, they have proven just as if not more difficult to pin down in terms of clothing and appearance as well. It is to these considerations, and questions of publicly signaling tantric affiliations and commitments that I now turn.

CHAPTER FOUR:

NEITHER LAY NOR MONASTIC: TANTRIC TRANSPARENCY AND THE CHALLENGES OF IDENTIFYING AUTHENTIC RELIGIOUS PRACTITIONERS IN EXILE

“Calling *chang* [i.e. wine/beer] ‘a tsok offering’ and women ‘spiritual consorts’, [they] boast about being ngakpa while drinking wine and having sex with women. Like a little stream that makes a great thundering sound, the so-called ‘I’ reveals the signs of its foolishness with arrogant words” (*chang dang bud med tshogs dang las rgya zhes/ sngags pa brlom nas chang ‘thung mo la sbyor/ chu bo chung chung ‘ur sgra chen po bzhin/ nga zhes nga rgyal tshig gis glen rtags bstan*).⁹³

- Dr Nida Chenagtsang

As specialists in non-dual tantric traditions, ngakpa are authorized – and oath-bound – to engage in a highly disciplined, ritualized fashion with various substances and behaviors which under ‘ordinary’ circumstances or to the untrained eye, might appear sinful or impure. How can one be sure though, that when a tantric yogi has sex with women or consumes alcohol he is doing this for legitimately noble, altruistic, and ‘enlightened’ Buddhist purposes rather than merely self-serving, debased, and deluded heretical ones? As Dr Nida’s short poem suggests, it is entirely possible for tantric practitioners to label their external actions one way, to simply declare them to be ‘spiritual’ or high-minded, even as their true, inner motivations contradict such pronouncements. Dr Nida’s pithy lines thus point to the central problem of tantric semiosis. In a religious context where strategic engagement with impurity and ‘sin’ aims to liberate practitioners from these very things, what is seen or said very rarely possesses a transparent or linear relationship to what actually is or may be. Nida’s poem

highlights the challenges involved in assessing the exact relationship between material, conventional signifiers (words, substances, behaviors etc.) and the signification-subverting signified of ‘realization’, enlightened awareness which transcends all words and concepts.

Nida’s poem underscores the murkiness of signification and the ambiguous relationship between material signs and immaterial motivations in Secret Mantra. At the same time, it offers something like a warning or rule of thumb for navigating the quandary of signification. Nida stresses that when ngakpa talk too much or too loudly about being ngakpa, when they over-signal their legitimate tantric affiliations, this is itself a sign of inauthenticity. Tantric ritual practices are designed to lessen ego-attachment and self-importance; too much telling or displaying amounts to pretentiousness which betrays the inflation of self and self-importance rather than the sort of cutting through ego-clinging which tantric disciplines are all about. Nida’s poem underscores the far from transparent relationship that obtains between words, actions, and awareness in tantric Buddhist contexts. Although it is simple, it points to the cultural complexities that are involved in tantric disclosure and discretion, the fraught politics of transparency, modesty, revelation, and concealment that inform ngakpas’ social and religious worlds.

In this chapter I explore the performative dimensions of ngakpas’ tantric orientations and practices. By looking at how ngakpa in exile do and do not display their non-monastic, non-celibate tantric affiliations through specific bodily and social arrangements, I outline some of the tensions and ambiguities involved in calls for ngakpa to present themselves more consistently and legibly in exile and in what could be called ngakpa “pride”. As we shall see, the issue of ngakpa legibility and consistency figures strongly in anxieties and debates about diminishing moral standards in Buddhist communities and the securing of a stable national order in exile. At the same time, ngakpas’ own cultural logics of modesty and authenticity complicate drives for standardization of uniform and comportment, showing how ambiguity

remains an inescapable and irreducible component of ngakpas' subjectivities, power, and expertise.

In the last chapter I approached the question of ngakpas' legibility in terms of exile statecraft and the challenges of fixing ngakpa in physical and institutional space. In this chapter I stay with the issue of legibility but focus instead on ngakpas' embodied strategies of revelation and concealment and the contradictions involved in trying to pin ngakpa down visually and in terms of public perception. The salience of the issue of transparency or legibility in the anthropological study of ngakpa was brought home to me with gusto one afternoon when I met with a prominent exile Tibetan historian to ask his advice on what historical sources might be worth looking into as part of research on the development of ngakpa lineages in exile. This scholar, one of the most formidable archivists in the Tibetan diaspora, identified two glaring problems with my research. The first had to do with his rather dim view of anthropology as a discipline in general. "You anthropologists want to study Tibetan culture like we are some Native American or Australian Aborigine tribe! To talk to some people, do some interviews and leave!" he noted gruffly. "But we Tibetans have fourteen centuries of history *written* in Tibetan – we have historical texts, we are not some tribe!". He softened considerably when he discovered that I was literate in Tibetan and not under the illusion that Tibetans possessed a solely oral culture, when he realized I had come specifically to seek his expertise on written sources. Still, there was one more problem.

"You want to study ngakpa. But ngakpa, this is a very difficult subject. How will you even *see* ngakpa?" He looked at me pointedly from the half-out-the-door standing position he had adopted about three feet away from where I was sitting on a wooden bench in the corner of the murky waiting room to his office. "Great ngakpa can be anywhere, they can be right in front of you and you will not realize. They can look like anybody. How will you study them?" This reference to hidden yogis did not strike me as a merely contrary or facetious

position on this scholar's part. Rather, his objection derived from a genuine appreciation of the fact that true ngakpa need not, perhaps even *could* not, exhibit their status in too obvious a way. Historicizing ngakpa was thus elusive because ngakpa themselves, as stable or transparent bodies in space-and-time, were elusive. Somewhat mollified, the historian ended our meeting by suggesting that I read histories and biographies written by prominent Nyingma lineage holders to track down references to ngakpa. I thanked him and went on my way, blinking as I climbed the stairs back up into the bright and busy daylight of the street above his basement office.

Suspicious Specialists: Identifying (and Defending) Authentic Ngakpa

What specific cultural histories, logics, and contradictions make ngakpa so evasive, so dubious? How have ngakpa and their difficult to read practices been represented by outsiders, as well as ngakpa themselves? As mentioned in my introduction, it was rare that the topic of inauthentic or 'bad' ngakpa *did not* come up when I engaged in casual conversations about ngakpa during my fieldwork. Most Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhists I encountered were aware, of course, that there were also some Buddhist monks out there who, though they dressed the part, were in reality not upholding their vows or who were simply non-ordained laypeople wearing a costume seeking to scam the unwary. But the mere *mention* of monks in general by itself was rarely sufficient to incite commentary on how some (or even most) monks were fake (*rdzun ma*). If monks were innocent until proven guilty, however, ngakpa were often guilty until proven innocent. At times, the very word ngakpa seemed to evoke almost immediate suspicion, a reflexive narrowing of the gaze. Tellingly, this suspicious orientation and criticisms of overly showy ngakpa came as much from ngakpa themselves, from initiated insiders, as from non-ngakpa.

Ngakpas' shifty and shifting status is attested in ancient Tibetan legal codes: there ngakpa are exempt (or alternatively, forbidden) from giving legal testimony for fear that they

might delude their audiences with magic. Nevertheless, these very powers may be called upon as an extra-judicial measure to settle intractable disputes (French 2002, 104; 163). The influential seventeenth century *Gtsang* law code, which French (2002) calls the first modern, primarily secular administrative code in Tibet, quotes a list of metaphors taken from “ancient legal texts” (*khriims yig rnying pa rnams*) which describes the types of people who cannot or should not be called to make oaths. High-ranking lamas and monastics are described as “golden swans not to be trapped, ”i.e. made to swear oaths, since they are “perilous, awe-inspiring objects of reverence (*yul gnyan pa*)⁹⁴. “Magically powerful ngakpa” (*sngags pa nus pa can*) should also not be brought to court, but in this case it is because they are like a rather different sort of animal: “black, poisonous snakes that one must not run down [as quarry]” (*dug sbrul nag po thur du ma rgyug*). The *Gtsang* code states that this line is a reference to the fact that ngakpa “have the power to dissolve/counter a confession of wrongdoing by means of [the manipulation/alignment] of inter-dependent, auspicious links⁹⁵,” which is to say, through the same sort of engineered ‘auspicious correspondence’ or skillful coordination of attention, imagination, voice, breath, body, symbols, and material substances that Dr Nida taught us as part of mantra healing. In short, ngakpa are sorcerers and that makes them shifty. Since powerful ngakpa can undue any oath with their abilities they cannot be trusted.

Nus pa (magical power or efficacy) is thus at the heart of ngakpa stereotypes and subjectivities. Certainly, his commitment to defending and promoting ngakpa traditions notwithstanding, Dr Nida had no shortage of stories about famous ngakpa from Amdo who had engaged in extreme forms of magical combat or disastrous love magic (*mo/pho 'gugs*, or rites for “hooking/summoning women and men”). As highlighted in Chapter One in discussions about ngakpa lapsing into ‘bönpo-ism’, the fake or inauthentic ngakpa is not necessarily a ritually incapable or impotent one. Here authenticity hinges less on ngakpas’

efficacy or power per se, and more on the extent to which ngakpa maintain the proper philosophical orientations, ethical motivations, and doctrinal/lineage affiliations.

Ngakpas' reputation as powerful wizards is thus not the only reason that they have been mistrusted or have felt the need to defend themselves. In his essay on contemporary ngakpas' education and practices, Dr Nida lists a range of stereotypes of the 'garden variety' village ngakpa (*grong sngags*) held by both monastics and laypeople: namely, that village ngakpa are poorly educated people who merely rattle out a handful of memorized rituals to get money for selfish ends; that they use Secret Mantra as an excuse to consume alcohol and have sex with women merely for self-gratification; that they do not really have any experience in advanced practices of tantric meditation. Nida foregrounds these portrayals, which he considers unfair, at the very start of his piece. As he explains:

“Some foolish Buddhists and non-Buddhists ‘insiders and outsiders’] who pride themselves on being experts have identified ngakpa a category of religious practitioner who doesn't know the core texts of the Dharma, who hasn't practiced the Creation and Completion Stages, who [merely] likes women and drinking beer, or who runs around performing village rituals solely to make money. These people have debased and belittled ngakpa and those few articles which they have written for different magazines have been especially inappropriate. Therefore, it's really important that cultural research, ngakpas' education, and ngakpa culture be (properly) introduced to the broader public and that they be properly informed [i.e. ‘the ‘door of their minds be opened’]. Focusing on this genuinely vital need for proper and timely clarification about ngakpa, [I thus] offer this condensed commentary.” (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 91)

While on one level Nida acknowledges that ngakpas' overall status or position in society (*spyi tshogs kyi gnas bab*) is “not as high as that of monks in monastic institutions” (118), he maintains that ngakpas' religious commitments and vows frequently go beyond those of monastics. Throughout his article he chalks misunderstandings or denigrations of ngakpa and ngakma up to either detractors' ignorance about authentic Buddhist tradition or a sort of monastic or 'sutric' chauvinism. In doing so, he naturalizes a clear distinction between Sutric (*mdo'i*) and Tantric (*sngags kyi*) orientations:

“Despite the fact that the great mantra-holders of earlier generations practiced Secret Mantra practices properly, some monastics in the Sutric tradition who don’t find these masters’ practices appealing, say things like “the Secret Mantra is a confused, perverse or dissolute form of conduct (*‘chol bar spyod*),” or that these mantra-holders “performed the rites of union and liberation and of the five meats and five nectars literally.” They call Tibetan ngakpa ‘householders’ and accuse them of telling their cooks, “The day is long, so brew some beer and I will write religious treatises”! Listing disconnected justification after disconnected justification the monks criticize and refute (the activities) of ‘ngak gen’ (*sngags rgan*) or ‘rotten old ngakpas’ while working to end the ngakpa tradition at the same time. Not one bit of truth can be seen in any of these criticisms.” (117)

Here Nida paints a picture of occasional divisiveness between sutra-oriented monastic renunciators and non-monastic tantric ones. Nida’s imagined monk-chauvinist detractor levels three main charges against ngakpa: that they engage in ritualized sex and violence literally; that they consume impure substances⁹⁶ literally; and that they appear to engage in religious activities or to exhibit religious erudition while in truth being nothing more than lay reprobates. The first two of these ties into larger questions of doctrine and issues around materiality and embodiment in the practice of tantric ritual. The third complaint points to the notion that the stuff of lay, householder life and its apparent vices can have nothing to do with true Buddhist accomplishment or practice. Nida counters these charges as follows:

“To explain: literally using the five nectars is something done by qualified or authentic mantra-holders who are purified of conceptual thought which distinguishes between pure and impure. And as for thinking that we should burn every treatise on the Secret Mantra written by hidden mantra-holders who possess the ripening and liberating instructions – is it not taught that the majority of tantric scriptures of the Secret Mantra of the Old and New Translation schools are by great tantric yogis? And what ultimately are any of the mind-treasure texts or pure vision dharma cycles if not texts that were put into writing by [such] saints or holy beings? The vast majority of the scriptures of the classes of tantras were produced by mantra-holders or yogis from Oddiyana and India, so if Indian ngakpa can write tantric religious treatises then Tibetan ones most certainly can!”

Nida’s counter-arguments are both historical and doctrinal in emphasis. Shifting to the latter mode in another part of his piece, he reminds his readers that tantric practices cannot be adequately assessed through the lens of purely non-tantric, sutric standards:

In sum, to identify ngakpa having spouses and families as something fundamentally discordant with the Dharma merely comes from being overly attached to the sutric way of doing things and is not at all the enlightened perspective of the tantras.” (94)

The ‘enlightened perspective’ or point of view (*dgongs pa*) of the non-dual Highest Yoga Tantra scriptures ultimately trumps the dictates or norms of sutric modes of renunciation associated with conventionally ‘lower vehicles’ of Buddhist practice according to traditional schemes like the ‘nine vehicles’ (*theg pa dgu*) model prevalent in the Nyingma school (see Chapter Six and Appendix I for more details). Nida’s comments make it clear that while ngakpa may have proximity to lay householder or ‘village’ life and while they may appear to be engaging in ordinary lay im/morality they are in fact beholden to a higher moral and ritual code.

Lay Renouncers or Worldly Posers? Ngakpa as Laypeople and as More Than Laypeople

In Chapter One, I suggested that it is ngakpas’ closeness to worldly lay life, forces, and influences that contributes to their ambiguous charisma. Part of what makes Indian and Tibetan non-dual tantric traditions unique is their foregrounding of the possibility of experiencing full realization or liberation from suffering while working with rather than detaching from the human body and its passions. The non-dual tantric Buddhist practices which ngakpa practice call for direct, strategic engagement with the very sort of worldly activities and relationships which non-tantric monastic modes of Buddhist renunciation have understood to be compromising, polluting, dangerous, and distracting and which they have, at least ideally, worked to eschew. Looking at the list of supposed ngakpa offences that Nida enumerates above is revealing. Stripped down to their base, many of the charges leveled against householder ngakpas amount to saying that ngakpa are no better than the most ignorant layperson, that at heart they are just debauched laypeople masquerading as dedicated

Buddhist practitioners – people who, like in Nida’s opening poem, use religious language or the pretense of Dharma to justify indulging in unenlightened, sinful behavior.

While many commentators have referred to ngakpa as ‘lay’ practitioners to distinguish them from monastics when speaking or writing in English, this nomenclature can be misleading, given that the tantric vows which ngakpa observe represent a higher level of observances beyond standard lay precepts. Ngakpa are thus ‘lay’ in the sense of being non-monastic householders (*khyim pa*), but not necessarily so in terms of their ritual and ethical conduct. Strictly speaking, ngakpa are members of a community of professional or full-time religious vow-holders and are more than just laypeople. Still, given that they are not tied full-time to religious institutions and live, raise families, and engage in worldly work and activities such as agriculture and business alongside among lay villagers (unlike monks, at least ideally), it is fair to say that they are some of the ‘layest’ tantric Buddhist vow-holders imaginable. Simply put, as Sihlé has it, ngakpas’ “separation from the state of simple, practicing layperson is not always very evident” (2014, 15, my translation). Importantly though, while they may be quick to point out the *superficial* way in which they resemble laypeople, ngakpa themselves stress that the inner state of being and motivations of a ngakpa should in no way be like that of an ordinary, uncultivated person mired in Samsara.

Summarizing this pattern, Nida confirms that ngakpa “are looked down on because they have wives and [there is] the idea that this thus makes them no more distinguished or extraordinary than regular lay people” (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 94). He goes on to directly address the claim that ngakpas’ proximity to lay life taints their practices with a ‘worldliness’ that makes them inferior to monks:

“The white robed, dreadlocked community doesn’t actually have to live in monasteries like Individual Liberator monastic renouncers (*so thar rab byung*) so

most ngakpa preserve their culture (*rig gnas rgyun 'dzin*) while living in villages and staying at home. Since ngakpa are known to not only practice the Creation and Completion Stages or the Creation and Completion Stages and the Great Perfection but also to teach and study things like medicine, astrology, handicrafts, art, composition, and language while remaining at home or in the village (*khyim dang grong na*), they are called 'householders' (*khyim pa*) and 'village tantrists' (*grong sngags*). Ngakpas' domains of knowledge (*rig gnas*) surpasses what is known by monks and involve knowledge about lay people or lay life (*skya bo 'i rig gnas*) as well. This is because ngakpa are practitioners who have confidence in and train in the ripening and liberating [instructions] without positing any contradiction between Dharma and worldly phenomena. While there are people who hold the view that Dharma and worldly phenomena are [as different as] hot and cold, at present, given the times, we have no choice but to mix together Dharmic and worldly affairs. There are currently quite a few more villages/cities than there are monasteries so, investigating the issue, it seems to me that ngakpas' cultural tradition greatly agrees with our present time." (116)

Nida begins by assuring his readers that the ngakpa orientation is entirely capable of incorporating worldly lifestyles and knowledge into its ambit as a legitimate form of Buddhist practice and then goes one step further to suggest that ngakpas' 'in-the-world' domains of knowledge (*rig gnas*) in fact surpass the "things monks know". He then points out the practicality of householder styles of practice for a contemporary period in which fewer and fewer people worldwide have the means or desire to live celibate lives in monasteries. Having identified the value of the ngakpa orientation for preserving Buddhist practice in the present and future, he then turns to consider how ngakpa have contributed to the preservation of Dharma historically, suggesting that this fact alone should be sufficient to silence critics:

"Whatever the case, village ngakpa have been the preservers of cultural knowledge par excellence since ancient times. When the Tibetan king Lang Darma caused the Dharma to decline village ngakpa kept the Secret Mantra tradition intact and developed it without deterioration. Likewise, in India and Nepal while the sutric teachings were completely destroyed, the tantric teachings were not and these were held onto by ngakpa. The esteemed scholar Gendün Chöpel correctly states: "*While, from one perspective, Lang Darma caused the decline of the Dharma, householders ensured that the Secret Mantra did not deteriorate. The Secret Mantra teachings endured in India as well, and did not come to be utterly destroyed, so there were undoubtedly people who continued to practice most of the oral instructions from the earlier classes of tantras without being noticed.*" However many bad times and no matter what kind of circumstances they found themselves in, village ngakpas' secret practices were in no way destroyed. As such, I think that one crucial point that comes from this is that Dharma and culture don't deteriorate unless an ethnicity or group of people (*mi rigs*) does, that a people and its culture develop and endure together, that

Dharma and society are inseparable. Our current time is like a period of degeneration – since most practitioners of Buddhist teachings in Western countries take the form of village/city ngakpa and since future generations of practitioners will no doubt become ngakpa in the same way, as a community the gökar janglo de is both indispensable and unparalleled for the perpetuating and maintaining the teachings.” (117)

The Dream of Lay Life: On Dividing and Divided Attention and Pure Perception

While the foregoing comments makes it clear that ngakpas’ lay-leaning lifestyles have been objects of both celebration and censure by others, they don’t entirely capture how ngakpa have represented householder life as part of or an obstacle in their own practice. In a his song or poem he wrote for Rebkong ngakpa and ngakma about the Ati Yoga/Dzogchen View, Dr Nida advises ngakma to care for their family members and neighbors with love and compassion but to nonetheless look upon “domestic and farm work as a dream”. He further admonishes both ngakpa and ngakma to “maintain the essence of *rig pa* [pure, natural, non-conceptual awareness], without being attached to or fixating on politics or worldly Dharmas!” (*chab srid ‘jig rten chos la ma zhen par*, see Chenagtsang 2016). Likewise, in his own advice to the Rebkong ngakmang a generation prior, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche offers similar instructions about maintaining a particular view of reality in relation to one’s daily householder obligations:

“When you see your friends, your wife, your children, and grandchildren bring the *ḍākinī* s and protectors to mind. If you host tantric feasts and offer tormas then you are a ngakpa! Look upon all conduct of the three gates [i.e. of body, speech, and mind] as the [yidam] deity, its mantra, and the playful display of the Dharmakaya. If you don’t lose yourself in ordinary/vulgar activities (*las tha mal*), then you are a ngakpa! When spontaneous pure visions arise take the vital-point of these appearances onto the path and they will fully emerge (*gnad lam khyer de la tshang nas yong*). If you understand the meaning of these appearances in this way, then you are a ngakpa! It’s very important that you go through your whole life without being distracted by household duties and livelihood (*khyim gyi so tshis*) and by taking care of your children and wife and that - if you have the power to put into practice the [real] meaning of what this great term ‘ngakpa’ means, [you do so] and engage solely in Dharma. Let everyone keep this firmly in their minds. If you understand the profound vital-points of the Path of the Secret Mantra, then all adverse circumstances (*rkyen kun*) and all the behaviors of Samsara will be friends [to you] on the Path.” (Sngags mang, *Zhal gdams*)

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche stresses here that a true ngakpa, one who lives up to “the meaning of that great name” (*ming sngags pa zhes pa'i chen po de['i] don*) is someone entirely undistracted by family life, one whose own wife and children appear to him as deities within the yidam's mandala (or at least who remind him to perceive or know them as such). From this perspective then, it is not that samsaric lay, householder life is specifically valorized or deemed superior to monastic lifestyles by ngakpa but rather that ngakpas' modes of renunciation allow for the maintaining of pure and non-dual appearances even while living as a householder. As we saw in Chapter One in Rongzom's ngakpa charter, for ngakpa, good 'kin' relations involve maintaining the social integrity of tantric communities through the meditative discipline of cultivating 'pure appearance' itself (*dag snang*), of realizing the inherently enlightened nature of worldly phenomena in the midst of everyday life and activity.

Towards the end of his discourse to the Rebkong ngakmang, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche explains that his most essential piece of advice for ngakpa is that they should understand and strive to maintain “the View of the truth of the inseparability of Purity and Equivalence/Equalness” (*lta dag mnyam bden pa dbyer med*). This View – the most essential teaching of the Mahā Yoga class of tantras – refers to the realization that all phenomenal reality, the universe with all its apparent inhabitants, are primordially, inherently pure. All that appears to perception is equivalently the perfected mandala of the tantric Buddhas and Dākinīs, and the two truths (*bden gnyis*) of conventional and the ultimate reality are experienced as inseparable.

When I asked Ngakpa Dawa in 2015 what the quintessential definition of a ngakpa was he told me, in a similar fashion, that being a ngakpa ultimately had little to do with the specifics of how one dressed, acted, or lived. Rather, a ngakpa was someone “who could transform the five poisons [anger, desire, ignorance, arrogance, and jealousy] into the five

wisdoms”. Through the practice of tantric Buddhist yoga ordinary, everyday afflictive, and destabilizing mental-emotional states are transformed into or better, revealed as, non-dual gnosis, appear in their ultimate, primordially perfect forms. This sort of transformation is ultimately about ngakpas’ inner cultivation. As we saw before in his code of conduct, Dudjom Rinpoche observed that while ngakpa and monks may possess different clothing and may relate to pratimoksha ‘individual liberator’ vows differently as separate categories of renunciators both groups are “completely alike in how they...practice both Sutra and Tantra in an integrated way so as to develop the spiritual qualities of *inner* realization” (Lotsawa House, “The Mirror”, my emphasis)⁹⁷. Elsewhere in his *bca’ yig*, Dudjom Rinpoche makes it abundantly clear that a true ngakpa is in no way like an ordinary “mundane person”. He explains:

“In sum, from the point at which one initially enters into the holy Dharma and becomes a person who practices it, one’s inner attitude (*bsam pa*) and outer behavior should far surpass that of a worldly, ordinary person and should be that of a spiritually noble, exalted person instead (*gang yang ‘jig rten tha mal pa las ring du ‘phags pa zhig yin dgos*). As it is said: “*The sign of having heard [the teachings] is being peaceful and subdued/disciplined (zhi zhing ‘dul ba), the sign of having cultivated oneself through meditation is afflictive emotions lessening.*” When this is not so, in the event that one’s attitude and behavior do not go beyond and are no better than that of a worldly, ordinary person even slightly, [it might happen that] one obtains just some small, dry understanding of the words of religious texts and then thinks to oneself “I’m a scholar [now]!”. [Or] having forgone women for just a bit, one might think, “I’m a monk!” or knowing how to chant the least amount of tantric rituals one might think, “I’m a ngakpa!” The development of such obvious arrogance makes it clear that in relying on Dharma [one may nonetheless] take steps towards wrongdoing (*sdiḡ pa*). As the incomparable Dakpo Lharje said: “*If you don’t practice Dharma as Dharma [should be practiced], Dharma [itself] will be the cause for you to be propelled yet again into lower realms of rebirth.*” (Lotsawa House, “The Mirror”)

Whether monastic or non-monastic in orientation then, authentic Dharma practice requires inner transformation, a fundamental and transformative reorientation to everyday, worldly experience. No amount of outwardly manifest or demonstrable activities or skills can take precedent over genuine inner cultivation and transformation.

Dilgo Khyentse, Dudjom Rinpoche and Dr Nida all agree that while good ngakpa can live lay lives they should not be distracted or taken in by them. Indeed, Highest Yoga Tantra vows are strongly geared towards this ideal of non-distraction: in entering into tantric yogic practice one commits to cutting through attachments to ordinary dualistic appearances, to constantly remembering the true nature of worldly appearances as pure and divine and the inseparability of emptiness and appearances. No domain of life is exempt from the purview of this cultivation of pure perception. In addition to recommending that they should think of the protector deities and *dākinīs* of the mandala whenever they interact with their children and wives, Dilgo Khyentse suggests that when the Rebkong ngakpa tie up their deadlocks on top of their heads in the course of their day they should visualize their Guru above their heads (just like during formal ‘sitting’ *sādhana* practice) and “pray that they never forget the Refuge Guru”. If one does so, he tells us, one will “enter into the [empowering] blessing-current (*byin rlabs*) of the lineage” and will in this way rank as a real ngakpa. Likewise, when ngakpa take up their prayer beads or exorcistic three-bladed ritual stakes or daggers (*phur pa*) they should recite mantras and meditate on the yidam. By doing so they will obtain genuine siddhis and become real ngakpa.

Deity yoga *sādhana* texts are replete with such ritual mnemonics or ‘entextualizations’ of the ordinary human body (Flood 2005) and its comportment through daily life. They offer instructions on how practitioners can call the yidam and its mandala to mind while engaging in all manner of mundane activities: while walking, eating, sleeping, defecating, and so on. As such, maintaining pure vision is a full-time job. The idea that being a ngakpa involved total investment of time and attention was underscored with particular clarity by Tsultrim la, a Drukpa Kagyu monk whom I interviewed in McLeod Ganj in 2015. My introduction to

Tsultrim came about somewhat circuitously. I had visited Sonam la, the Department Head of Tibetan Books and Manuscripts at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives to pick his brain about possible resources to follow up on related to ngakpa and ngakpa lineages in exile. In the course of our conversation, Sonam la mentioned that the father of a CTA representative manning an Office of Tibet abroad had been a ngakpa Rinpoche. It turned out that the son of this representative, a man named Gonpo, was someone I knew from around town. I emailed Gonpo's mother Phuntsok who in turn suggested that I consult with her brother Tsultrim. Phuntsok explained that her father had established a small gompa to preserve his lineage in exile. Following her father's death in the late 1980s, Tsultrim had taken over management of the institution. After visiting the gompa once or twice when he Tsultrim was away, I was able to conduct an informal interview with him one day in his office during some free moments he had between reviewing paperwork connected with the institution.

Phuntsok had told me previously that her father's lineage was being held by her brothers but that they rarely did as many of the specific practices that her father had once done. She explained that, at least as far as she knew, her brothers were focused "on more general religious practices" and did not necessarily undertake many of the same rituals that her father had specialized in. When it came to her own knowledge about her father's "precious lineage" and religious legacy, Phuntsok was strongly apologetic and characterized herself as "unlucky and quite ignorant". She explained that because she had been in boarding school throughout her childhood and teenage years and had entered college after graduating high school, she had not spent enough time with her Dad to familiarize herself more with his activities. While she did have a chance to "live within the family" after college, this was as a working woman (and mother) and her time to familiarize herself with her ancestral lineage was thus limited.

When I first met Tsultrim, he too downplayed his knowledge. “I’m not a ngakpa, I’m a gelong!” (*dge slong*, i.e. fully ordained monk) he objected, warning me in advance that he really didn’t know everything, that he wasn’t omniscient (*thams cad mkhyen pa*) like someone like His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He also made it clear that not only his knowledge but his time was limited. Beret-like hat perched on his head, heavy spectacles sneaking down the bridge of his aquiline nose and a faint frown on his brow that looked quite at home there, he warned me that he knew about inji researchers’ penchant for asking endless, “totally pointless” or “meaningless” questions (*cho med rgyu*).

These opening protests aside, Tsultrim la warmed after a few minutes to the topic of ngakpa. The theme of livelihoods, life-paths, and finding time for religious education and practice proved as central for him as for his sister. Tsultrim spoke to me about the need to practice what one had learned to really be a Buddhist. Even if one were a geshe, he explained, a highly educated scholar, book learning alone meant nothing. Even if one knew all kinds of things, he stressed that one had to really practice (*nyams len byed*). He used an analogy to back up this point: sometimes one placed a stone or pebble into water and it absorbed nothing, remaining the same color as it was when dry. On other occasions, light stones placed in water would become “black” or dark (*nag po*) as a result of absorbing moisture. Humans were thick-skinned and had to work to absorb and internalize the teachings and therefore be transformed by what they had studied. This took time and practice.

He told me that he was disturbed by inji men who came to McLeod Ganj, developed an interest in Dharma and then became monks immediately, only to return to their home countries not long after and go out to bars and cheapen the whole exercise. Likewise, Tsultrim felt that would-be inji ngakpa failed to understand that being a real ngakpa was actually quite difficult, even more difficult and with even more commitments than being a

monk. To be a ngakpa was not merely a matter of putting on white robes, he explained. Being a ngakpa meant being a practitioner of Secret Mantra, it was not just about wanting to drink beer and get women. I brought up the fact that many young Tibetans did not seem particularly enthusiastic about becoming ngakpa or practicing today. Tsultrim agreed with the assessment, explaining that this had to do with the issue of interest and again, time. He explained that to really be a ngakpa meant that one's whole life had to be devoted to Dharma practice. If one was a real ngakpa one practiced Dharma from the moment one got up in the morning, throughout the afternoon and into evening. One could not waste one's time with other worldly pursuits.

Tsultrim listed examples of these sorts of pursuits in detail: going out to bars and walking around the bazaar with one's friends, eating at restaurants, only being interested in movies and actresses and thinking about how to be like them, going out drinking and dancing. Gesturing broadly towards the window and door and by extension the wider social world of McLeod Ganj, he described how young people would sit all morning and afternoon at restaurants and cafés idling with their friends until they would realize suddenly that they had to go to work and then “just quickly wash their faces and go.” Animating Tsultrim's speech was the idea that true religious practice involved dedicated effort and a proper and strategic use of time. His caricature of young secular-minded youth who after school go straight “to Delhi and college” (he repeated this phrase at least two or three times) seemed to hinge on the idea of a willy-nilly use of time, an unfocused or distracted going from one thing to another merely to “have fun” (*skyid po gtang*) with friends rather than as part of Buddhist practice that made human existence meaningful.

Gelong Tsultrim la's diatribe (inadvertently, I think) recalled his own sister's comments about how going straight to college robbed her of time to invest in family

vocations or histories. While Tsultrim's comments were focused on teenagers and young, unmarried adults his repeated references to his own busy schedule as a gompa administrator and stated regret at not having the time to practice as his father had made it clear that devoting one's life to Dharma was a challenge for more than just lay young people. Still, I couldn't help but think of Gonpo and his friends in particular as Tsultrim bemoaned the distracted lifestyles of young Tibetans in McLeod. To describe Gonpo as non-committal and lazy was entirely unfair. A talented, twenty-something year old dancer, he devoted several hours on a virtually daily basis to choreographing and practicing elaborate Hip Hop dance routines with a group of male and female friends who were part of a dance troupe he had helped form previously. The group offered more and less formal performances in various venues around town and regularly uploaded carefully produced music videos of their dancing on social media platforms. While his monk-uncle might not have much appreciated Gonpo's pursuits, Gonpo was clearly hardworking and dedicated to his craft and little resembled his uncle's broad-strokes "the kids today!" portrayals.

The extent to which ideas about ideal livelihoods and time and energy well-spent differed across generations struck me a little while after my discussion with Tsultrim, when I ran into Gonpo at a party for the reopening of local café under new ownership and mentioned to him that I'd met with his uncle as part of my research on ngakpa. Gonpo remarked that his uncle could be very stern, which he didn't like. Some time and beers later, as Gonpo and I were mounting the rain-slick stairs in the dark to get to the main road with a few other people, Gonpo returned unbidden to the theme of ngakpa. "I don't like those lamas and how they act," he declared. He told me he didn't think it was good that lamas got married. To his mind mixing lay life and Buddhism was not an appropriate way to practice. While Tsultrim was more willing to at least allow for the possibility that ngakpa could or should integrate Dharma into all their daily activities as householders, Gonpo appeared more skeptical, even

cynical about ngakpa orientations. Both he and his uncle seemed to agree that the mark of a genuine Dharma practitioner was that they focused single-pointedly on religious pursuits but Gonpo was less confident that lamas could be married and have families and actually achieve this. I found it striking that Tsultrim could have bemoaned the fact that lay, Tibetan youth in exile inured to secular life and vocations could not focus on religion enough to become ngakpa only for his own young lay nephew to express disapproval of ngakpa, whose non-celibacy apparently prevented them from focusing their attentions appropriately.

Ngakpa as Disgraced Monks: Dralok, Hierarchies of Purity, and the Confusion of Religious Categories in Exile

Gonpo wasn't the only unmarried exile-born, lay Tibetan friend of mine who had a rather dim view of non-celibate lamas. One day, while chatting with my writer friend Choezom before a poetry event at a local coffee shop, I asked her if she knew any details about accusations that were circulating through the Tibetan diaspora at the time that former speaker of the Tibetan parliament-in-exile and U.S. representative Penpa Tsering had committed murder. Penpa Tsering had supposedly become romantically involved with a woman who was formerly the partner of a ngakpa lama and this ngakpa, who was somewhat older than her, had subsequently become ill and died. Rumor had it that in some either direct or indirect fashion, depending on who you asked, the former speaker had contributed to the ngakpa's demise. After discussing the scandal and lama and tantric sex-related controversies more broadly for a little while, Choezom gave her verdict. "They should cut all these lamas' dicks off!" she announced, never one to mince words.

Both Gonpo and Choezom had heard many stories about monks breaking their vows of celibacy and about monastic and non-monastic lamas who had used their status and the idea of 'Tantra' to exploit women for sex. Each of them worried in their own ways about the ultimate viability of non-celibate forms of renunciation and the potentially deleterious effects

such lifestyles could have on Tibetan social and political life in exile. Monks who had secret sexual affairs in violation of their vows and ngakpa who did so more openly as part of their supposedly religious practices were vexing figures – both seemed to mix worldly and spiritual behaviors and interests in troubling ways. Yudrön told me how when she was younger many of her fellow exile-born schoolmates were not always familiar with ngakpa and with how ngakpa vows and lifestyles worked. As a result, they had often failed to understand that her father was not in fact a monk. They would ask her how it was that her father “could have long hair if he was a monk?”, would question her about how he and other ngakpa associated with him could have children or act the way they did.

Yudrön’s classmates’ assumptions were that such ngakpa lamas were in fact dralok (*grwa log*), monks who had disrobed dishonorably as a result of sexual indiscretions. Dralok is often glossed by Tibetans in English as ‘ex-monk’. While the term can be applied to any man who was once a monk but is now no longer, it tends in practice to connote a more specific category of person, namely, a man who has reneged on or has violated his vows of celibacy rather than merely returned them after some time. The quintessential dralok is thus an individual who has “fallen” from a previously noble, higher status to a subsequently ignoble one, someone who has been demoted from the rank of monastic to that of ordinary, worldly person. Given this, rather than pointing simply to an “ex-monk”, dralok could perhaps be better understood as a disgraced monk, a “turned-around (i.e. perverted or erroneous, *log pa*) monk,” in a similar fashion to how the term *lta log/lta wa log pa* signifies “wrong, perverted or heterodox” (i.e. non-Buddhist) philosophical views” in Tibetan⁹⁸.

Whereas it has become standard for boys in Thailand to engage in short-term ordination with the expectation of returning to lay life, monastic ordination in Tibetan and Himalayan societies has historically been conceived of as a life-long commitment. That said, it not uncommon for Tibetan men who were sent to monasteries as children or teenagers to

opt to return to lay life after a few years. Many sanjorpa or “new arrival” (*gsar ‘byor pa*) Tibetan men (i.e. later generation exiles, who had arrived in McLeod and other Tibetan diaspora communities mostly in the late 1990s and early 2000s as part of later waves of dispersion from occupied Tibet, where they had been born and raised⁹⁹) I knew had been monks as children or teenagers and were now living newly minted lay lives in exile. Many of these men had given their vows back to their lama/s according to more or less official, sanctioned procedures and had segued into lay life without any blatant violations of vows of celibacy taking place (at least as far as was publicly known at any rate). These sorts of individuals were also referred to as dralok.

Whatever the particular circumstances under which men might disrobe, the term dralok retains a certain pejorative, salacious flavor that is hard to shake.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Tibetan monks who disrobe after relocating to North America and Europe from Tibet or Tibetan diaspora communities in India and Nepal may keep up appearances and delay informing family members abroad of their change of status for extended periods of time, out of fear of gossip and bringing shame to one’s biological and spiritual family. During discussions I had with him in connection with our 2018 book on sexual yoga practice, Dr Nida told me that he knew many Tibetan men who had disrobed years ago but who would redon their monastic robes when they returned to Tibet to see family. These ex-monks weren’t bad, he explained, but they were “afraid of being judged by others” (cf. also Chenagtsang 2018, 90 - 91).

One former Nyingma monk turned ngakpa I met in the U.S. by the name of Lama Lhaksam, for example, apparently spent several years living as a lay teacher and securing his situation in America before he officially broke the news to family members in North India that he was no longer a monk. When I first met this Tibetan lama in 2010 he was unmarried (he now has a Tibetan wife). At that time, he made it clear to me that he was no longer a monk and identified instead as ngakpa. Following health complications shortly after his birth,

his parents had dedicated him to Padmasambhava in the hopes of securing his life, which was why, he explained, they had decided to send him to a monastery when he was a little older. Given that he had already studied in both Geluk and Nyingma institutions and had initiation and extensive training in tantric yoga by the time he disrobed, his transition from celibate monastic to married, tantric householder was on one level arguably quite straightforward. Still, he chose to keep his hair short much like a monk's and (in a common move for ngakpa in exile) rarely wore full ngakpa robes or regalia. As he admitted to me, his hairstyle, along with his penchant for wearing red and saffron monastic style religious robes on certain occasions and then dressing in lay, American-style civilian clothes on others, had caused confusion on several occasions. Concerned inji Buddhist converts in the town where he lived had contacted some of his students to notify them that "they had seen Rinpoche in lay clothing out at a bar (!)". Having assumed Lama Lhaksam was a monk, these informants had thought that some something untoward was happening when it in fact wasn't.

Tantra as a Cover for Immorality: Ngakpa Vows and Secret Sex Rinpoches

According to Nida, training as a monk for several years before transitioning into being a ngakpa with a family is not especially uncommon or scandalous in Rebkong, where cooperative arrangements between monastic-oriented Geluk and householder-oriented Nyingma institutions have existed for several centuries. Still, monks who become ngakpa, especially in exile communities where ngakpa may be less common or visible, run the risk of being recognized as dralok, of being seen as someone attempting to justify misconduct through the language of tantric Buddhism rather than as someone who has opted to (legitimately) reorient their mode of religious practice.

While it might be tempting to chalk up Gonpo and Choezom's cynicism about the quality or legitimacy of religious professionals in exile to them being cynical or secularized

youths, their concerns about lamas' sexual impropriety have been echoed by as authoritative and central a religious figure as the Dalai Lama. During a visit to the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (*dbus gzhung nang pa'i rig gnas gtsug lag slob gnyer khang*) in Leh, Ladakh on the 16th of July 2014, the Dalai Lama expressed his concerns about the degeneration of tantric Buddhist tradition in India in both the past and present and the double 'that's just tantra' standards that apply to high-ranking monastic lamas who break their vows of celibacy:

"In the past in India owing to members of the Buddhist sangha's desire for and attachment to material riches and their failure to preserve the Secret Mantra correctly the Buddhist teachings deteriorated. These causes and conditions are entirely and exactly the same (*tag tag tshang gi*) [as those that affect] us Tibetans. I've expressed to friends before how it's wrong that when lamas go back on/pervert (*log*) [their vows, people say that] they've taken a sangyum (*gsang yum*) or consort but when an ordinary monk (*grwa pa dkyus ma zhig*) perverts [his vows he's called a] 'dralok' and is expelled from the monastery. Both of these are equally dralok. Ultimately, taking a consort should be something special and particular, something out of the ordinary (*mi 'dra ba zhig dgos pa red*). If it is not and if it results in a situation where [one is just having baby after baby] like [a pig having] piglets then it completely loses its value or meaning (*cho rtsa ba nas med*). So, for us to use Secret Mantra as a pretext (*bsnyad 'dogs byas pa*) [for such behavior] and for [people in general] society to say "Oh, the lama has [just] taken a sangyum!" is not okay. For example: there's a nunnery in India and when some people asked, "What are some of the most amazing or wonderful accounts [you can tell me] about nuns here rendering service to the Buddhist teachings?" the nuns said, "We are extremely fortunate that many among us have become the sangyum of lamas." Unable to stay lamas and to preserve their vows, lamas became dralok through [these] nuns.

Thus, for no good reason at all and owing to blind faith/superstition (*rmongs dad*) these [practitioners] remain in error even as they say they "Go for Refuge" [to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, i.e. profess to be Buddhists]. I say this really honestly and frankly. Many of you here are nuns. And in any case, if the Secret Mantra turns into wanton or dissolute conduct (*'chal spyod la phyin*) there is the danger that the Secret Mantra will be called something shameful, will be discredited and called into disrepute (*shabs 'dren zhu rgyu*)..." (Ye shes chos bzang 2014, n.p.)

The Dalai Lama makes explicit here that Secret Mantra is not a sufficient excuse for high-status monk teachers to go around fathering multiple illegitimate children¹⁰¹. His analogy to pigs bearing piglets underscores the extent to which this kind of Secret Mantra in name only is little more than materialistic, greedy and thoroughly worldly conduct rather than

unique or sublime spirituality. His comments clarify the extent to which ‘tantric sex’ behind closed doors is a sort of public secret in Tibetan society, one which muddies the boundaries between sutric and tantric orientations and importantly, risks discrediting the legitimacy of actual Secret Mantra practices in the eyes of the world.

The Dalai Lama’s concern about illegitimate children was echoed in strongly worded posts which Nida made in 2019 through his Karmamudrā page on Facebook. On the afternoon of the 26th of May, Nida, Christiana and I were packing up our belongings and cleaning up the house in Boulder, Colorado which Christiana had booked through Airbnb and where the three of us had stayed while Nida was in town for three days to give a Yutok Nyingtik long life empowerment and teachings on tantric ritual healing at Lama Bob’s ngakkhang. Nida asked me if I would look over and edit a post he wanted to make on the page about lamas who father children as a result of secret consort relationships. After some discussion we finalized the statement below, which Nida posted to the page with a photo he had taken of a piece of framed art that happened to be hanging on a wall in our guesthouse. The picture, which had the punny title ‘In-sex’, showed a small boy squatting on his haunches and peering at a flower on which two anthropomorphic ladybugs were having sex in the missionary position. Editing his photo, Nida labeled the boy ‘Kid’ and wrote ‘Yab Yum!’ (*yab yum*, ‘Holy Father-Holy Mother pose’, the technical term for depictions of male and female Buddhas engaging in tantric sexual union) next to the insects. The post read as follows:

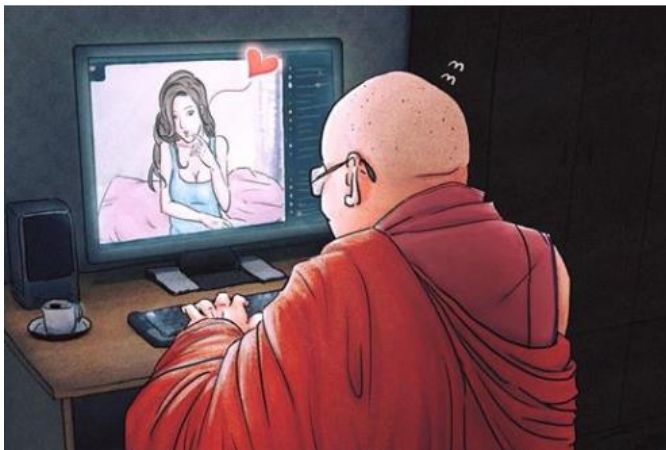
“It’s okay for lamas to have secret consorts (*sangyum*) but only if the relationship is consensual and no one is being exploited or harmed. But it is not okay if lamas have illegitimate children with their consorts and then these kids are forced to hide the truth about who their father is. Consorts’ rights are equally important to lamas’ rights and children’s rights are the most important of all. Listen to children before you talk about Dharma!”



With these words Nida leveled a parallel critique to the Dalai Lama's. As implied in the post, it is the children of high-ranking publicly celibate-appearing lamas who are under the most

pressure to conceal their true parentage. Nida returned to and elaborated on this point even more explicitly through the Karmamudrā page about a month later in another captioned picture he posted on June 21, 2019. The picture he included there showed a drawing of a bald-headed monk webcamming with a long-haired, big breasted woman in private:

“Fake parents have no love for their kids! High ranked Lamas or monks having secret relationships and then the lovers are paid and supported secretly by groups of monks or monasteries, whatever they call this kind of relationship is decided by them..... but the key point is, dharma “bastards” are born into this world, innocent babies who may never know who their father is, or if they do, they are not allowed to reveal publicly. To avoid criticism, the Lamas make sure their position appears faultless and clean, and as their lovers are satisfied with secret monetary support, the children are left to suffer quietly. An ordinary couple has much more compassion to their kids than these fakes Lamas and dākinīs.”



At the heart of both Dr Nida and the Dalai Lama's statements is a call for increased transparency, a desire to separate legitimate and beneficial non-celibate tantric Buddhist practices and lifestyles from illegitimate and harmful ones. Nida and the Dalai Lama

are each making an argument about how practices which are said to be “spiritually noble and exalted” and to “surpass the concerns of worldly, ordinary people” (to borrow Dudjom Rinpoche’s phrasing) fall short of this mark, are shown to be something far baser. Ordinary lay parents show greater compassion for children than so-called benevolent gurus, whose promiscuity is in turn no better than that of a confused animal. Yet again, we see that the boundaries between true renouncer and (ordinary, worldly) householder are brought into question.

Words of Praise for the White Robed, Long-haired Set: Legitimizing Communities of Vow-Holders and the Importance of Consistent Uniform and Heightened Visibility for Ngakpa

The Dalai Lama’s reflections on lecherous monastic lamas and secret consorts paint a picture of a corrupt status quo in need of renewal or reform. Yet while he takes high-ranking monks and ordinary Tibetan and Himalayan devotees who misconstrue and misrepresent Secret Mantra to task, his critique of non-celibate modes of tantric practice does not amount to a wholesale rejection of ngakpa or their lifestyles in general. Indeed, the Dalai Lama has strongly condoned (legitimate) ngakpa practice and recommended that Tibetan Buddhists consider it as a preferable alternative to monastic celibacy in the event that this does not work for them. As it happens, the Dalai Lama addressed this point and the need for proper demarcation between lay, monastic, and ngakpa orientations in Ladakh five years before his speech about dralok at the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies in 2014. During the latter part of August 2009, the Geluk hierarch visited a school for nomad children, bestowed tantric empowerments, and granted teachings on Buddhist vows, conduct, and morality¹⁰². During religious teachings offered in Tibetan on the 25th of August he spoke to a large gathering of nuns, monks, and laypeople about the need to maintain high standards of monastic conduct and to clarify boundaries between monastic and non-celibate tantric householder renunciators and regular Buddhist laypeople. In elaborating on these points, he identified another

regrettable contemporary figure in addition to that of the dralok, the “neither layperson nor monastic” (*skya min ser min*), a person who may have sexual partners and families but who continues to dress like a monastic or who fails to comport himself as proper ngakpa should:

“The community of monastic renouncers became the chief holders of the Buddha’s teachings [in Tibet]. Whether one is a male or female monastic it is extremely important that one maintains an excellent standard of practice. There wasn’t any tax collector at all who came and said, “You need to become a monk or nun!”. It was something that you took on individually, of your own accord¹⁰³. Since you took this up and you got into this, practicing with a high standard is really important. Still, many times becoming a monk can have no benefit. Sometimes one encounters individuals who are neither lay nor monastic (*skya min ser min*), who based on their clothes look like they are monks but based on the families that they have look like lay people. Not one nor the other, kyamin sermin like this are not good. Conversely, to practice in a pure fashion means to do so in accordance with the two religious communities that are said to have been established when the Abbot [Shantarakshita], the Tantric master [Padmasambhava] and the Dharma king [King Trisong Deutsen] came together long ago: namely, the so-called ‘white robed, willow leaf-haired community’ [of ngakpa] and the ‘saffron [robed] monastic renouncer community’ [of monks and nuns]. If you have a family and children it is best if you are a member of the white robed, dread-locked community [i.e. that you practice as a ngakpa] and if you desire to remain a member of the saffron-robed monastic renouncer community then once you have been ordained you must preserve monastic rules and discipline properly. Therefore, all of you need to think carefully about this. It’s really important that everyone, from the highest lamas to their communities of monastic disciples be very careful in this...”¹⁰⁴ (Bod kyi dus bab, “Ngur smrig grwa pa’i sde”)

Rather than criticizing ngakpa lifestyles, the Dalai Lama acknowledges their legitimacy and historical precedent. He suggests that if one wants to practice tantric practices and have sexual partners or bear children one should rather be a ngakpa than attempt to do so while remaining a monk or nun. This approval of ngakpa and recommendation of non-celibate lifestyles proved inspiring. Five days after the Dalai Lama’s speech a Tibetan writing under the name Serchö (*gser chos*), meaning ‘Golden Dharma’¹⁰⁵, was sufficiently moved by the leader’s words to post his own Nida-style defense of ngakpa and ngakpa lifestyles online¹⁰⁶.

Serchö’s defense comes in the form of twenty one “verses of praise to the white robed, willow-leaf shaped community” titled “Clouds of Music[al Offerings]” (*sngags pa gos*

dkar lcang lo can gyi sde la bsngags pa'i gtam sprin gyi rol mo) which he¹⁰⁷ shared on the Tibetan language blog Khabdha on August 30, 2009. Serchö explains that his composition was provoked in particular by the Dalai Lama's comments about the historical establishment of the two communities of vow-holders and about how if one wants to have a family it is best to practice as a ngakpa. Like Nida, Serchö frames his assessment of ngakpas' practices as being based on an understanding of authentic Buddhist doctrine as well as personal historical and ethnographic insights about Tibetan culture. More specifically, he characterizes his verses as "an investigation [intended] for groups of clear-minded people into whether or not there is any future for the conjoined system or tradition of [integrated Dharma-and-worldly activities]" (*lugs zung mdun lam 'di la yod med blo gsal tshogs la dpyad gzhi yin*).

Serchö suggests in his verses that the ngakpa orientation to Buddhist practice has not only allowed for the perpetuation of Buddhist teachings in the past but will ensure their flourishing in the future as well. After an opening verse of homage to Padmasambhava and various emanations of the Buddha, Serchö explains his motivations for writing his post in the next two stanzas. Crucially, he presents ngakpa styles of practice as responding to the pressing question of "the waxing and waning, the growth and decline" of the religious [i.e. Buddhist] tradition of Tibetans and their survival as a people:

"2) Today I reflect on the condition - the waxing and waning, the growth and decline – of the good Dharma tradition of our kind forefathers/ Here today I reflect on the karma of Tibetans as a people, the people of the Land of Snows/ Today I reflect on how to preserve the Divine Dharma of the pure and holy ones, which benefits beings both in this life and the next/ Today I reflect on the great danger [affecting] the flourishing of the Tibetan people (*bod kyi mi rigs spel thabs*).

3) There is an approach (*lam lugs*, "path and tradition") which one, does not contradict the teachings of the great saints of the past/ Which two, offers an innumerable array of 'methods' or spiritual strategies (*thabs lam*) for the great ethnicity/race of Tibetans (*mi rigs*), the people of the Land of Snows; a Dharma/religious tradition (*chos lugs*)¹⁰⁸/ Which three, is highly suitable for the minds of people worldwide, East and West/ This Dharma tradition which is suitable for our times is that of the gökar janglo de, of those with white robes and willow-leaf shaped locks."

For the Religion and for the Race: The Ngakpa Tradition as an Unfairly Denigrated System for Securing Cultural Continuity and National Security

Contemporary Tibetan anxieties about cultural/ethnic loss and genocide as a result of Tibet's colonization and oppression by the People's Republic of China and the precarious nature of life for Tibetans in exile loom large in Serchö's piece. Population statistics for Tibetans both inside and outside Tibet are a highly contested and politicized domain, and Chinese authorities continue to paint an official picture of a happy and flourishing Tibetan minority ethnicity population as a counter to Tibetans' testimonies about historical massacres, unmarked graves, forced sterilizations and ongoing state and structural violence. These realities, coupled with significantly smaller family sizes in exile, have meant that for the last few years the Dalai Lama has found himself in the peculiar position, as a lifelong monk-celibate, of encouraging Tibetans to have more children¹⁰⁹. Perhaps the most striking and contemporary aspect of Serchö's praises and defense of ngakpa then is his stress on the fact that the ngakpa orientation will not only preserve Tibetan culture but the Tibetan people as well. "The traditional approach (*lam lugs*) which does not denigrate ngakpas who have wives/women partners (*bud med*)" he tells us, "preserves the religion [*chos*] and civilization (*rig gzhung*) of Tibet and enables the proliferation of its people (*mi yi rigs brgyud spel bar byed*). Appealing to the current Dalai Lama's pro-natalist statements, he elaborates:

"13) Gyalwang Tenzin Gyatso, the extensively all-knowing one of the two system (*lugs gnyis*) [approach of integrated Dharma and worldly or secular rule, *chos srid zung 'brel*]/ has advised that, since Tibet's ethnic population is small (*bod ni grangs nyung mi rigs yin pas*), there is a great danger that if monks and nuns (*rab byung pho mo*) become too numerous this could harm the [biological] continuity of [our] people (*mi rigs 'phel*)/ Thus, for preserving both the race (*mi rigs*) and the religion (*chos lugs*), being a ngakpa is better.

14) Since the Buddha (*ston pa*, the historical Buddha Shakyamuni) knew everything, why shouldn't he have known about the method or 'Path of Means' for gaining Buddhahood while having a wife or female partner (*bud med yod bzhin*)? Just look at how other religious traditions (*chos lugs*) have furthered both their religious and biological lineages (*chos brgyud rigs brgyud gnyis ka*) and have become prime

movers in the world/ If you want to preserve our race and religion, then these words of mine have value.

15) Even though my own view is that being a monk is something necessary and desirable, today's Tibetan monks have encountered problems upholding their vows regarding women/ I have heard the warning/decreed (*bka' slob*) which was seen by the Buddhas far in advance and was spoken to the Karmapa/ That after two of our current generations most monastics will be gone ('run out', *rdzogs pa*).

16) Ngakpa who practice the good tradition of their ancestors of previous generations and have white robes and willow-leaf hair/ Have the means and wisdom (*thabs shes can*) to nurture the two system approach without discriminating between men and women/ [Ngakpa] possess an openminded-ness compatible with everyone in today's world, in East and West/ They possess traditional practices (*lugs srol*) for any beings whose respective karma does not bar them from practicing."

Serchö's assessment of the value of ngakpa and their traditions evinces a strong consciousness of a wider world of multiple contrasting religions, cultures, and patterns of national development even as it naturalizes the idea of a racially and religiously homogenous (namely, Buddhist) Tibetan nation or at least treats this as something to which Tibetans should aspire. Tibetans – "those who belong to [the Land/Realm of] Snows" (*gangs can*) – are described as being of "one human lineage" "ethnicity" or "race," subject to a shared karma (*bod pa'i mi rigs shig gi las dbang*). Here Tibetans are united by both hereditary descent (*rigs brgyud*) and a shared lineage of religious teachings and connections, specifically the Buddhadharma (*chos brgyud*). Whereas Nida and the Dalai Lama's assessments present illicit or erroneous tantric sex as contributing to a breakdown of family relations and Buddhism, the legitimate tradition of ngakpa householders here promises to secure the people of Tibet and their country.

In arguing that ngakpa can uphold Tibetans' religious and biological 'lineages' at the same time through their householder forms of Buddhist practice, Serchö consistently homologizes ngakpas' integration of religious and domestic life with the idea of the 'two [integrated] systems' (*lugs gnyis*), otherwise known as *chos srid zung 'brel* or "the unification of Dharma and temporal/worldly [orders]". He also suggests that for ngakpa, "protecting or

nurturing the two [integrated] systems approach” (*lugs gnyis skyong ba*) – i.e. not separating Buddhist religious and temporal domains in this way – goes along with not “discriminating or distinguishing between either men or women” (*pho mo gnyis ka dbyed 'byed med par*). It is noteworthy how much of Serchö’s defense of ngakpa amounts to a defense of the spiritual and cultural worth of women and a rebuttal of sutric-oriented scriptural justifications for female inferiority.

Like Drukmo in Chapter Two, Serchö mentions the Highest Yoga Tantra vow to never denigrate women and celebrates the spiritual accomplishments and examples of Yeshe Tsogyal. He also cites an unnamed sutric source to argue that the Buddha himself has stated that one must offer emanated offerings in the form of women to the Buddhas of the ten directions and emphasizes that many married householders have achieved Buddhahood (“If women are needed for making offerings to Buddhas then what reason is there to see women as defective?” he wonders, *sangs rgyas kyang mchod pa byed la bud med dgos na bud med skyon du ci 'i phyir blta*). On the one hand, ngakpas’ acceptance of or engagement with women as part of their practices has made them suspect vis-à-vis hegemonic monastic institutions. On the other, Serchö implies that ngakpas’ supposedly greater “openmindedness” towards women and men’s equality is part of what makes their practices more suitable in both “Eastern and Western” contexts.

Tantric Sex and the State: Sexual Revelation and Tibetan National Security

Serchö’s invocation of the “two systems approach,” of combined religious-and-secular authority in relation to ngakpas’ householder lifestyles, is not just about celebrating the worthiness or spiritual potential of women or householder activities. Neither is it merely about appreciating how ngakpa orientations might be more suited to the lifestyles and livelihoods of practitioners in today’s globally less monastically inclined world. Beyond these

points, Serchö's celebration of ngakpa suggests a specific vision of Tibetan national cohesion and strength, one that foregrounds the positive effects of various modes of sexual reproduction over and above celibacy. While Serchö concedes that if a man takes on monastic vows of celibacy in the proper fashion then "this is a beautifying ornament of the teachings" (*bstan pa mdzes pa 'i rgyan yin*), he remains decidedly pessimistic about contemporary men's capacity to uphold such high and demanding standards. Echoing the advice of the Dalai Lama which inspired his piece, he tells us that "it's doubtful whether there are any monastic renouncers like those described in the Vinaya texts [i.e. the texts of monastic discipline] today," and suggests that it is ultimately "better to be a ngakpa than to be a monk who criticizes others for 'having a woman' while not even knowing how to uphold one's own 365 [monastic] vows".

Later in his verses, Serchö goes a step further, however. He argues that an overemphasis on monasticism and celibacy and a failure to appreciate what we might call ngakpas' generative power may have in fact vitiated Tibet's standing as an autonomous country and prevented it from being able to protect itself against foreign, military incursion. Referencing Tibetan ngakpas' invincibility in the face of political upheaval and persecution and specific revealed prophecies, he proposes a clear link between ngakpas' non-celibacy and the integrity of a Tibetan Buddhist national order:

“17) It is elucidated in the Blue Annals of the scholar Phulchung Gö Lo[tsawa] Shönnu [Pel, 1392 – 1481] that when the teachings declined because of [the Tibetan] Emperor Lang Darma/ the King praised Nubchen for his magical power as a ngakpa and swore an oath [because of it] to not harm the precious and rare ngakpas/ For this reason the reading transmission and oral instruction lineages for the Kangyur and Tenggur did not degenerate in Tibet [this country of ours].

18) Even though Muslim armies damaged [tantric] teachings in India and brought them into decline/ Just look at how Hindu ngakpa have still upheld the lineages of their religious tradition/ When the Red Chinese armies conquered Tibet (*bod kham*s) it was said things could not be accomplished as Ngakpa [Jamyang Khyentse] Chokyi Lodrö [1893 – 1959] outlined in his prophecy and the Buddhas have despaired

continually (*sngags pa chos kyi blo gros kyi lung bstan ji bzhin sgrub ma thub ces rgyal bas thugs pham yang yang gnang*).

19) Some treasure revealers, because they practiced celibacy (*tshang spyod*, ‘pure conduct’), fell under the influence of other karmic conditions (*rten ’brel gzhan dbang gyur ba*)/ and did not extract profound treasures [and as a result] [ritual] methods that could have benefited all of Tibet in general (*bod khams spyi la*) were postponed/ These and other [facts] are made clear in many authentic, properly sourced histories (*lo rgyus khungs ldan du mar*) and the Great Fifth Dalai Lama/ scattered flower after flower of praise for ngakpas’ kindness in protecting Tibet.

20) Tibetan people (*bod pa ’i mi*) have a duty to preserve this positive [ngakpa] tradition/ Young people, please don’t shoot out taunting words like arrows and say [with derision] “He’s a wretched old ngakpa!” (*sngags rgan yin*)/ Tibetan ladies, when you see a ngakpa put on a happy face, smiling with joy! Monks, when you see a ngakpa think of him as a follower of the same teacher, the same Buddha [as you]!

Here, Serchö posits that the failure to practice sexual yoga and reveal allotted treasure objects or practices on the part of some treasure revealers postponed the emergence of *phan thabs* (i.e. *phan thogs pa ’i thabs [shes]*), powerful ritual methods or practices that could have ‘benefitted’ the entire land of Tibet. The specific ‘benefit’ Serchö is referring to is made clear in other lines: ngakpa have historically not only preserved Buddhist teachings during times of political chaos and the dissolution of central political and monastic authority but have also been able to directly protect Tibet ‘in general’ through their revelations and magical power.

Serchö reminds us that, at least according to traditional historiographies, it was precisely ngakpas’ magical efficacy that ensured that they survived through periods of Buddhist persecution or fragmentation. Serchö cites the mythic encounter between the great ngakpa Nubchen Sangye Yeshe and King Lang Darma who is remembered as a vicious anti-Buddhist reactionary. Serchö reminds us that it was Nubchen’s magical power which persuaded the King to leave the white robed, willow leaf-haired community alone.

Contemporary scholar-practitioner and white American ngakpa John Myrdhin Reynolds a.k.a. Vajranatha recounts the story as follows:

“When in the ninth century, King Langdarma and his hostile ministers set about to suppress the Indian Buddhist teachings and to close the Buddhist monasteries such as

Samye, he summoned the Tantric master Nubchen Sangye Yeshe and his disciples into his presence, although all of them were not Buddhist monks but rather Tantrikas (sngags-pa). The arrogant king challenged Nubchen, inquiring, “And what power do you have?” “Just observe the power I can manifest merely from the reciting of mantras!” Nubchen replied and raised his right hand in the threatening gesture of tarjini-mudra [sic]. Instantly, in the sky above the Tantric sorcerer, the king saw nine giant scorpions appear, each the size of a wild yak. The king was terrified at this vision. So he promptly promised not to harm the white-robed Buddhist Tantrikas and to refrain from disrobing and exiling them as he had done with the maroon-robed Buddhist monks. Then Nubchen pointed again into the sky with a threatening gesture, and lightning flashed from heaven, shattering into pieces a nearby boulder. Doubly terrified, the king vowed, “I will not in any way harm you or your white-robed followers!” and he ordered that his prisoners be released. because of the mighty magical powers of this Tantrika Nubchen, the anti-Buddhist king could not destroy the esoteric teachings of the Mahā yoga Tantras nor their white-robed practitioners, the Ngakpas (sngags-pa, one who uses mantras). Subsequently, this Tantric Order of Nyingmapa Buddhists has flourished among the Tibetans until this day...” (1996, 251)

Likewise, even the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, a monk and Geluk hierarch (albeit one, as we saw in the last chapter, who was receptive to Nyingma teachers and teachings) could celebrate ngakpas’ ‘kindness’ in protecting Tibet through tantric means. Serchö’s reference to Ngakpa Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro and his unfulfilled prophecy further cements the connection he makes between national integrity, non-celibacy, and ngakpas’ tantric power. It also offers a subtle nod to sectarian politics. The prophetic instructions which were not accomplished to which Serchö refers (*lung bstan ji bzhin ma thub*) have to do with a prophecy¹¹⁰ which Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro received shortly before the Chinese Communist invasion. Anthropologist of Tibet Cameron David Warner (2011) elaborates:

“Shortly before the Chinese Communist troops overtook Chamdo (Tib. Chab mdo) on October 19, 1950, Dzongsar Khyentsé Jamyang Chökyi Lodro (Rdzong gsar mkhyen brtse ’Jam dbyangs Chos kyi blo gros) (1893– 1959) prophesied that if a large Padmasambhava in the form called the “Teacher Who Outshines Appearance and Existence” (gu ru snang srid [zil gnon]) were erected, it would suppress the Seven Damsi Brothers and repel the invaders, saving Tibet and Buddhism from destruction. Dzongsar Khyentsé informed the Dalai Lama, and he gave the order for it to be built. But at the time of construction, some aristocrats (sku drag), who did not like the Nyingmapa and their patron saint Padmasambhava, decided it should not be built properly. Instead, they gave the order for a small Padmasambhava with a praying symbolic gesture to be built. But since this was not one of Padmasambhava’s proper iconographic forms, it was not a proper Padmasambhava and was therefore ritually

inefficacious. Predictably, the inefficacious Padmasambhava did not subdue the Seven Damsi Brothers, repel the Communist troops, or save Tibetan Buddhism.” (21-22)

The statue of this special form of the original ngakpa Padmasambhava was to be built in the central chapel of Tibet’s great ‘cathedral’ (*gtsug lag khang*) in Lhasa in which the statue of Jowo Shakyamuni, one of the earliest and most revered images of the historical Buddha in Tibet, is located. As Warner (2011) explains, a wide-spread consensus has existed for several centuries among non-Gelukpa Tibetan Buddhists that in ‘re-crowning’ the Jowo statue in 1409, Geluk founder Je Tsongkhapa blocked the light rays that were supposed to radiate from the protuberance atop the statue’s head and which were responsible for imprisoning seven oath-violating demon brothers (*dam sri [spun] bdun*) under the threshold stone of the chapel. According to his critics, when he covered the Jowo’s head he unleashed the demon brothers, who were able to undermine the future of Buddhism in the country by creating internal instability and making it vulnerable to attack by foreign, anti-Buddhist forces¹¹¹. Nyingma ngakpa Jamyang Khyentse’s Padmasambhava statue was intended to suppress these spirits and avert disaster. As Warner explains, the current Dalai Lama later commissioned a statue of the intended form of Padmasambhava, which is now housed in the Dalai Lama’s temple complex in McLeod Ganj, *theg chen chos gling gtsug lag khang*, which functions as a “pseudo-national cathedral” equivalent for Tibetan exile communities (2011, 22).



Photograph of the rebuilt demon-suppressing Padmasambhava statue in the Tsuglakhang in McLeod Ganj (“Tsuglakhang Complex, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, India,” Shunya, accessed October 19, 2019, <http://www.shunya.net/Pictures/Himalayas/DharamsalaMcLeodGanj/TsuglagkhangComplex.htm>)

As we have seen, non-celibate tantric sexual yoga practices with a physical partner are an important component of treasure revealers’ visionary, revelatory procedures. In his hagiographies, Padmasambhava regularly engages in advanced tantric Buddhist rites involving sexual union with yoginis in order to subjugate inimical forces and secure the flourishing of the Dharma. For Serchö, more contemporary ngakpa treasure revealers – Padmasambhava’s protégés – have done (and could have done) similarly. Not only do ngakpa lifestyles align with pro-natalist agendas and shifts away from monastic vocations for new generations in exile but ngakpas’ specifically non-celibate, non-monastic expertise offers unique means through which Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetans’ homeland can be protected.

The idea that non-celibate religious orientations might not solely be part of individual practitioners’ soteriological strategies but also wider agendas of ethno-national preservation has been acknowledged explicitly by the Dalai Lama. For example, in his conversations about Tibetan history with journalist Thomas Laird (2007), the Dalai Lama has suggested that

the infamous sexual dalliances and apparent breach of monastic celibacy on the part of the Sixth Dalai Lama (1683 – 1706) was perhaps neither a simple case of him being a dralok *nor* of him simply being a highly realized tantric sexual yogi, not bound by conventional codes of conduct (two of the commonest interpretations of the Sixth’s scandalous behavior).

According to the current Dalai Lama, his predecessor disrobed “for a reason”, as part of some higher order spiritual plan or unrealized prophecy. As he explained to Laird:

“If the Sixth had disrobed and still remained the Dalai Lama, and the popular support for the Dalai Lama remained, then he would have had a son who would have become king. That would have been better. The Dalai Lama’s position would have been very strong, from father to son. Then there would have been no need for help or protection from the Manchu emperors. Then the disturbances of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries (*several foreign invasions of Tibet*) may not have happened.” (184, original emphasis)

For the current Dalai Lama, the “common reason” that the Sixth disrobed – the “obvious” reason of exoteric, conventional or ordinary appearances – was simply “that he was fond of girls”. Still, he speculates, based on comments from the Fifth Dalai Lama and other clues, that the “deeper reason” the Sixth disrobed was because of a greater plan to reform the institution of the Dalai Lamas by transforming it into a lineage of “married Tibetan kings” (Laird 2007, 184). The Dalai Lama suggests that this thwarted plan came from Chenrezig himself, the Buddha of compassion whose strong links to Tibetan national history and the Dalai Lamas were mentioned in the previous chapter.

Ngakpa Pride without Pretension: On the Complexities and Contradictions of Signaling Tantric Affiliation and Authority

On paper at least, Serchö’s ngakpa-forward future sounds like a win-win situation for everybody: Tibetans get to preserve Tibetan culture, high level tantric Buddhist teachings, and are able to secure the future of their people. At the same time, non-Tibetans can benefit from the “open-minded” non-monastic approach of village ngakpa practice. Serchö presents his vision as both the culmination of an already foretold future and as a strategic response to

present contingencies. But as we've seen already, being a 'good' or 'authentic' ngakpa is difficult. To be a legitimate ngakpa takes more than just dressing or looking a certain way or using the title to describe oneself. It requires difficult, time-consuming religious training, social support systems, and constant spiritual cultivation or discipline.

As mentioned, there was a pervasive sense among Tibetans I interacted with that the more that individuals went out of their way to identify or dress as ngakpa, the more likely it was that they were charlatans, or at least had decidedly more selfish, materialistic desires than merely wanting to practice Dharma appropriately. The word *sngags pa* suggests someone who has actualized power, who has tantric ritual efficacy (*sngags kyi nus pa*) or at least has pretensions to it. My Tibetan interlocutors were well aware that to cultivate tantric power took time and effort. *Dngos grub*, 'actual or manifest accomplishment', spiritual capacities, were born of years of single-minded daily practice and retreat. Tibetans I met knew how much training and direct instruction from teachers it took to master complex ritual and contemplative repertoires. Dr Nida, discussing the situation in Rebkong, notes for example, that the "sequence of practices for an authentic ngakpa" is as follows:

"One carries out to completion and masters the hundred day Completion Stage *rtsa rlung* [subtle channel-and-winds practices] such as Tsaloong Tummo (inner-heat), and the 'Lower Gates' *thig le* or 'energy-drops' [i.e. sexual yoga] practices; then there are the three sections of Dzogchen or the Great Perfection of mind-section (*sems sde*), space-section (*klong sde*), and instructions-series [*man ngag sde*] and particularly, the two Ati yoga practices of 'cutting through hardness' (*khregs chod*) and of 'direct crossing/leaping across' (*thod rgal*) [*This description is in accordance with the Ancient Translation School or Nyingma tradition. Ngakpa of the New Translation schools cultivate mastery in the ultimate practice of Chagchen or the 'Great Seal' Mahāmudrā]. Beyond this though, most ngakpa will be able to make mantras work for them once they have got the gist of the Creation Stage practices and have trained emphatically in mantra recitation and tantric ritual procedures. To be a truly qualified or authentic ngakpa then, you will have to have studied both the tantric scriptures and practices for at least twelve to eighteen years." (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 108)

To self-identify as a ngakpa, especially when one was young and not known by one's community to have a great deal of experience under one's belt, thus struck many Tibetans I met as tantamount to self-aggrandizement or boasting. This sense was intensified when ngakpa claimants were non-Tibetan. Although I regularly observed Tibetans be polite and accommodating to self-identified white ngakpa in public, many Tibetans doubted that such inji ngakpa could have accumulated the requisite training and time in retreat to warrant the title, especially when they held similar doubts about Tibetan ngakpa whose religious resumes or reputations they weren't able to verify. Indeed, for many Tibetans I met the phrase "white foreigner ngakpa" (*dbyin ji sngags pa*) was almost oxymoronic, a kind of punchline that often enough precipitated wry chortles and raised brows¹¹².

Even Tibetans who were in fact ngakpa seemed hesitant to self-identify using the term. Whether because of its 'shady, poorly educated sorcerer' connotations or because of a concern about showboating, more than one ngakpa I met in passing who I asked "Are you a ngakpa?" disavowed the label initially and offered another term in its place: "No, I'm a yogi" (*rnal 'byor pa*); a "Chöd practitioner" (*gcod pa*); or simply a "[Dharma] practitioner" (*nyams len byed pa*). Dr Nida addresses this pattern directly in his essay:

"As a result of the low regard in which ngakpa are held, some people will say, "Oh, him – he's not a ngakpa, he's a Chöd practitioner!" or rather than call him a ngakpa they'll say "He's a yogi," or they'll go through the list of big titles like, "He's a tokden [a 'realized one', the name for a someone accomplished in the Six Yogas]," "He's a drubtob ['one who has obtained spiritual accomplishments,' i.e. a tantric adept or saint]," "He's a tertön [a treasure-revealer], all to avoid calling him by the name 'ngakpa' as much as possible, which seems to me like a really pointless way of talking. For example, it would be stupid to say that a person who cares for horses, cattle, and sheep on the wide, open nomadic grasslands of Northern (Tibet) and who survives solely off of 'nomadic pastoralism' or herding work (*'brog las*) is not a nomad (*'brog pa*) but then to exclaim instead, "Oh, he's a cattle-herder!" "He's a horse-herder!" "He's a chieftain!" when there's not even one ounce of difference between [these ideas]. If one were to say that if a nomad wore Chinese clothes on his back and lived in a [permanent] house he was no longer a nomad how could anyone, barring a few foolish people, possibly be inclined to think that whoever said this knew what they were talking about? (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgröl ma 2015, 95)

Drives for standardization and clear categorization of practitioners can sit uneasily with ngakpas' distinct styles of religious practice and with more general Tibetan social norms. In 2015, I asked Ngakpa Dawa what he thought about the Dalai Lama's comments about ngakpa needing to stay more consistently in their white robe, long hair 'uniform' in order to disambiguate and delineate categories of vow-holders and prevent the deterioration and repudiation of the Buddhadharmā. To my surprise, he was quickly dismissive of this suggestion. Despite his undeniably great devotion to the Dalai Lama, he explained that His Holiness probably said such things because he was a Geluk monk who perhaps did not know about the very real historical, regional, and lineage-based diversity of ngakpas' systems of hair, dress, and vows. Ngakpa in exile all held different lineages, with slightly different practices and vows, all came from different regions of Tibet with their own norms and idiosyncrasies when it came to tantric hair and dress. They thus conducted their work and embodied their tantric commitments in distinct ways.

Authoritative, traditional sources cite the “three [conditions] of naturalness/uncontrived-ness/unfabricated-ness” (*ma bcos ma gsum*) – ‘natural’ matted locks; simple, pure white, loose fitting clothing; and the maintaining of natural, unfabricated non-conceptual awareness, the recognition of the essential nature of the mind – as the sine qua non of authentic ngakpahood. These elements of ngakpas' dress or comportment (*sngags kyi chas lugs*) are described as indispensable “auspicious links or conditions” (*tendrel, rten 'brel*) for practice (Bogin 2008; Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015). Here *rten 'brel* – an abbreviation of *rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba*, the Tibetan translation for the Sanskrit *pratītyasamutpāda*, the key Buddhist concept of “interdependent arising or origination”¹¹³ – points to the way that ngakpas' special hair, clothing, accoutrements and so on are seen to function (at least ideally) as critical supports or facilitators for tantric cultivation. As Nida explains:

“The most essential point (*gnad*) of the Secret Mantra is the View of tendrel or ‘Interdependent Origination’. If one coordinates or arranges (*bsgrigs*) tendrel on one’s body realization will dawn in one’s mind. Thus, the fact of the matter is that through the tendrel of uncontrived clothing and hair one will perceive the essence of the original, basic state which is devoid of any fabrication or modification of conceptual thought (*rnam rtog gi bcas bcos med par gnyug ma’i ngo*) on the level of one’s mind as well” (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 96)

As a sort of ‘tantric drag’, the charged correspondences of ngakpas’ coiffure and sartorial stylings serve to align the practitioner with the yidam and its qualities. Such fashioning of the body is part of an iterative performance (Butler 1988), a remembering and re-instantiation of identification with the meditational deity.

Yet despite the extent to which ngakpa exegetes across the centuries have emphasized the non-negotiability of tendrel like the three (progressively intimate, dematerialized) uncontriveds” (i.e. hair growing from the body, clothing that can be taken on and off, inner states of awareness), Ngakpa Dawa explained that it was not uncommon for legitimate practitioners to prefer other styles or forego these tendrel entirely. He pointed to the fact that many ngakpa in exile (himself included) did not wear elaborate dreadlocks. These days, ngakpa tended to keep their hair long but wash and comb it, without leaving it ‘as is’ to form clumps in the more traditional “willow leaf” tantric yogic style. Nida highlights this practice of keeping long washed and combed tresses versus dreadlocks in his essay as well: “Provided carrying around long tresses won’t prove too difficult, a person should, after requesting the ‘hair empowerment’ from a vajra-master, renounce cutting off or trimming their hair and should keep it clean by washing and brushing it” (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 105)¹¹⁴. Nida identifies this concession as an “entirely correct/unconfused (*phyag len ‘khrul med*) [contemporary] practice” encouraged by the great ngakpa Dudjom Rinpoche¹¹⁵ who he notes also invented the “entirely okay” (*cis kyang ‘grig*) contemporary practice of ngakpa wearing their white, red-striped or shawls (*gzan dkar*) over an ordinary ‘grey’ layperson’s woolen robes or chupa (*phyu pa*) (101)¹¹⁶.

When I brought up the giant mass of dreadlocks sported by one of Ngakpa Dawa's older, ngakpa colleagues in town, whose uncut matted locks reached almost to his ankles when unbound, Ngakpa Dawa laughed and conceded that yes, this was more the style of yogis from Kham province in Tibet, who had a penchant for elaborate hair, jewelry, and overall flashy styles (Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche's own teacher had sported similar locks). Still,



Ngakpa Dawa cautioned me against

becoming fixated on

A lovely ngakpa doll sporting a white robe, red and white shawl, long tied-up locks, bone earrings and ritual dagger from the Loseling Doll Museum housed at the Norbulingka Institute not far from Dharamasala

specific tendrel. He told me how when

Yeshe Dorje's teacher in Tibet had practiced demon catching and suppressing rituals he and others had made use of ornately designed, beautiful ritual clothes and other intricately fashioned tools to bind the spirits.

But when Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche had done such rites in exile he had relied on a modest

piece of cloth that looked like little more than a dirty rag. And yet his rituals still worked extremely well. When it came to tantric rituals, Ngakpa Dawa explained, the immediately apparent materiality of things was not always the most important part. If you have a knife and you want to cut something physical with it then it needs to be sharp, he said, but with tantric

practice efficacy depended less on whether your ritual dagger was sharp and more on whether your *mind* was sharp¹¹⁷.

As far as Ngakpa Dawa was concerned, standard ngakpa uniforms could be useful in specific situations but had limited ultimate utility or viability. To acknowledge the usefulness of demarcating and signaling ngakpa affiliations he told me about how some decades prior ngakpa in McLeod Ganj had complained to the Department of Religion and Culture about having been passed over by community members when it came to receiving donations for ritual services they had performed on behalf of the administration and the public. While monks had received alms for their religious labors, these ngakpa, feeling that they ought to have received the promised compensation and recognition for their contributions, felt short-changed. Ngakpa Dawa (who had only heard the story secondhand, it being before his time), explained that the Department's response was apparently that ngakpa had not been dressing properly – having failed to consistently wear markers of their affiliation as members of the “white robed, willow-leaf hair” community people had not known who or what they were, and had thus mistaken them for lowly laypeople.

I later learned that Ngakpa Dawa's story was a retelling of an event which had involved the famous ngakpa and master yogi Kunzang Dorje Rinpoche (1930 -2010), which he explained in his own words¹¹⁸ as follows:

“Once, on a previous occasion in Dharamsala, India, the Tibetan government office of Dharma affairs organized a five-day event focusing on general and specific aspects of Tibetan religious and secular issues. The sangha of monks, nuns and ngakpas, came together in order to accumulate 100,000 tsog accumulations from Rigdzin Dungdrup of Rigdzin Godem's Northern Ter [i.e. the revealed Nyingma rites promoted by the Great Fifth and revived by the current Dalai Lama mentioned in the previous chapter]. On that occasion, initially, the ngakpas were belittled and called ‘phagen.’ Although a general order had been issued that the office of religious affairs would provide everyone with five rupees apiece each day, the ngakpas were not given any. The following day, myself and another ngakpa decided that we would go to the feast gathering attired in our white clothing and full ngakpa accouterments and that if we were not shown proper respect and given our money accordingly, we would report the

incident directly not only to the Dalai Lama, but to the media. The next morning, we went as planned. When we arrived at the door of the assembly hall, some officials from the religious affairs department were seated upon stools in the doorway collecting donations. As soon as they saw the two of us, one of them said, “Look! Some handsome looking ngakpas have arrived!” Another one replied, “They are Tso Pema ngakpas.” Subsequently, we received our five rupees without any argument.

It is our own fault that ngakpas are belittled. It is fine for a ngakpa to be a father, but when ngakpas enter the assembly hall and are afraid to sit in the assembly row, then they shave their heads or wear monastic clothing as well as shave their heads, when they wear ordinary chupas and do not dress in the various accouterments of ngakpa attire, this is what happens. In bordering countries such as Bhutan and Sikkim, there are ngakpas who don't keep their hair long or wear white skirts. They dress in monk's clothing but have wives and are family lineage holders. They are called ‘serkyim’ ngakpas. In Tibet, there are a few gomdes like this, one of them is called ‘Wonpo’ (bdon po). Again, in this place, ngakpas have bald heads and wear informal chupas. They pretend to be ngakpas but they spend their lives doing business and performing rituals for ordinary pursuits, so they are neither ngakpas nor monks. The ordinary chupa is the dress of worldly, lay people. On a previous occasion, the prince of Sikkim asked me to establish a three-year retreat center. When the appointed retreat master released the retreatants from the retreat boundaries, Chatral Rinpoche came and said that now that the retreat was complete, Sikkim was an extremely sacred practice place of Guru Rinpoche. From then on, if all of the retreatants left their hair uncut and wore ngakpa attire, it would be auspiciously beneficial to the country. He told the prince not to remain a bachelor and that he should find a kind-hearted consort. His instructions were very clear.” (Rangdrol's blog, “An Historic Description”)

As a consistent and proud wearer of white robes and long hair, Kunzang Dorje Rinpoche argues here that ngakpa who do not stay in uniform are ultimately letting shame about their status and fear of social opprobrium take precedent over their religious commitments. His reference to “neither monk nor lay” practitioners in Tibetan “border countries” recalls the Dalai Lama's comments in Ladakh (another Tibetan cultural border area!) and associates the degradation and disorganization of ngakpa practice with practitioners of nominally ‘Tibetan’ Buddhism who are nonetheless ethno-national outsiders or outliers. Moreover, Kunzang Dorje Rinpoche's story about Chatral Rinpoche (1913 – 2015), his own teacher and a fellow highly revered ngakpa, should alert us to the risk of overly psychologizing the ‘auspicious connections’ or conditions of ngakpa tendrel. Far from just serving as mnemonic aids for individuals' meditative practice, the condition and

arrangement of individual yogic bodies has a direct relationship to and influence on wider, collective realities, on the fate and fortune of whole countries or populations.

Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche who we met in the previous chapter offers another example of ngakpa tendrel which reveals the extent to which tendrel are more than just ‘symbols’, representations or psychological supports. Early in his autobiography (‘jam dbyangs don grub 2007) he explains that about a month after he was born his mother went to a natural hot-spring in Bathang, Kham to rejuvenate herself and cleanse her body. He explains that there were many other women in the spring who were both familiar and unfamiliar to his mother. They exclaimed how cute a baby Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche was and all grabbed at him and rushed to pull him into their respective laps (*tshang mas hab hob kyi pang kha blangs pa sogs mang po byas song*). He explains he contracted an eye infection as a result of their fondling, as well as a sort of rash or scattered skin eruptions (*lus la thor zhib mang po thon song*) which continue to this day and which he has been told were caused by this early encounter. Later as an adult, he tells us, the thought occurred to him that there was an auspicious connection (*rten ‘brel bzang*) between him taking a wife and becoming a ngakpa later in life after having trained as a monk in his youth, and this early encounter with many women fussing over him. “Women – who are female embodiments of wisdom,” he explains, “are the greatest friend/ally for generating Great Bliss in one’s mental-continuum. I’ve thought to myself before that [this tendrel must have been why] I became a heruka consort [i.e. a non-celibate ngakpa – literally, the name for wrathful, blood-drinking yidams with which tantric yogi/nis identify], capable of naturally/spontaneously drawing them (female consorts) to me” (33 – 34).

Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche’s reflections highlight the role of tendrel in the production of narrative continuity and biographical subjectivity. At the same time, tendrel confronts us with larger questions about materiality, ontology, and the relationship between signification and reality that are beyond the scope of the present discussion. The ‘magical’ efficacy of tendrel relies on the premise that inner and outer, more and less subtle realities and conditions correspond to one another, are mutually implicated in complex ways and ultimately inseparable. Once one understands the way in which the outer world of phenomenal appearances and the inner world of yogic cultivation are

continuous, it becomes easier to appreciate (as per Kunzang Dorje's account) how ngakpa committing to particular styles of hair or dress might have a bearing on the well-being of an entire region, its inhabitants, and the future of Buddhism (or how 'ordinary' women cooing over an infant near a hot spring could presage the later arising of boundary-dissolving gnostic bliss and heat in the context of partnered sexual yoga, for that matter).



Ngakpa Kunzang Dorje Rinpoche, in various forms of tantric dress (top left, hugging his ngakma partner Jomo Samphel in December 1998; top right, presiding over a tantric ceremony at his center in Yangleshö/Parphing, Nepal in 1995; bottom left, wearing an all-white robe/shawl as a sign of his mastery over advanced tantric yogic disciplines; top left and right photographs via aroencyclopedia.org, bottom left courtesy of https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Kunzang_Dorje_Rinpoche).

While he appreciated the spirit and merits of calls for ‘uniformity’ among ngakpa as expressed by eminent figures like Kunzang Dorje and the Dalai Lama, Ngakpa Dawa still felt that an over-emphasis on a white robe, long hair standard risked glossing over important differences across ngakpa lineages. He explained that his own father, a highly accomplished ngakpa and Dzogchen practitioner from Dingri on the Tibet-Nepal border had kept his hair shaved for most of his life, since he found this more comfortable and practical. Moreover, rather than wearing white regularly, he had worn a dark brown robe. Ngakpa Dawa described this as a “low” color, one he explained was an appropriate marker for his father’s great humility and extremely high practice of maintaining an ordinary, outer appearance while cultivating a lofty state of inner realization. Likewise, while Nida devotes considerable attention to the symbolism of white robes and dreadlocks in his essay, he too acknowledges regional and historical variations in the color and style of ngakpas’ robes (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015).

Resistance to ‘standard uniform’ is thus strongly linked to the ways that ngakpa understand the relationship between outer and inner forms of religious practice and to how they engage with larger tantric themes of revelation, concealment and the relativity of appearances. While ngakpas’ specific vows are reified and visually marked through the various tantric ornaments, clothing, hair-stylings and so on, associated in scripture with tantric vow-holders, ngakpas’ frequent foregoing of full or official regalia is tied up with important cultural understandings of self-presentation, modesty and secrecy. Wangchuk, the ngakpa spirit-medium I interviewed in McLeod in 2011 told me that although he would wear his white ngakpa robes and red-and-white shawl on special events such as teachings by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, he mostly preferred to wear more ordinary maroon lower robes with a maroon or yellow/ochre upper shirt. When he dressed in white robes and a yogi shawl people would wonder who he was, or rather, who he *thought* he was, where he had come

from and whether he was claiming to have some sort of special powers. The outfit drew attention and opened him and fellow ngakpa up to suspicion.

Likewise, Sherab, an ex-monk doctor friend of mine from Amdo who had relocated to McLeod, shared his concerns about a respected Tibetan Dzogchen master and married ngakpa from Eastern Tibet who now lived in India. This ngakpa was in the habit of wearing a pure white robe and shirt as his everyday clothing. Sherab had confidence in the lama's accomplishments and appreciated his "humble" (*nyam chung*) way of life (the ngakpa and his wife lived modestly in a small house, had no website, Dharma center for teachings, and so on). Sherab considered this lama to be a legitimate lineage-holder and an accomplished practitioner and had gone on several occasions with his wife to receive instructions on Ati Yoga from him at his home. Still, Sherab wondered whether wearing all white clothing on a daily basis – the traditional uniform of someone who has mastered extremely advanced tantric yogic practices – was appropriate for a lesser known lama like this ngakpa, was perhaps a bit beyond his social station. More than just an identifying uniform or support for practice, such clothing was a social statement, a kind of public or semi-public disclosure.

Sherab's comments point to a central paradox in the cultural politics of tantric display and disclosure: namely that ngakpas' *tendrel* – ideally meant to signal and facilitate ngakpas' profoundly unaffected, natural state of being – risk becoming their own type of fixation, their own source of decidedly unrealized, worldly pride, or at the very least an object of dualistic, worldly speculation for others. This paradox surfaced again in conversations with Dhondup, a Tibetan friend of mine in his mid-thirties who recently relocated from McLeod Ganj to New York. A lay student of Lama Wangdu, Dhondup has over the last few years become increasingly interested in Secret Mantra and regular Chöd practice. While visiting Dhondup and his wife at their house I chatted with him about his experiences attending wang given by Lama Wangdu in America, events at which *injis* typically predominated. We discussed how it

was not uncommon to see young “inji ngakpa” at these events dressed in full regalia: sporting dreadlocks, wearing human bone earrings, white robes and red and white shawls. On the one hand, Dhondup could appreciate that these white men were making an effort. He spoke approvingly of their dedication and acknowledged that they were doing what they could to dress and behave in ways they understood to be traditional for non-monastic practitioners of Secret Mantra.

Still, he noted that as a young Tibetan man with limited spiritual experience under his belt, he would never dress in full regalia like this at a public event. While he felt comfortable wrapping a ngakpa shawl over his lay clothing, to dress in more elaborate tantric finery seemed too gauche or grandiose. While he knew that the inji ngakpa who readily volunteered to present offerings and assist with ritual procedures at empowerments meant well, their behavior was nonetheless “strange”. Their keenness to present a perfect ngakpa image felt “immature” to him. These inji ngakpas’ solemn public displays of tantric orthopraxy and their more private pontificating about things like who could come to tsok gatherings and how people should behave in ritual spaces ultimately seemed a bit performative and self-serving to him (“like children playing a game”, he explained). Dhondup pointed out that as a Tibetan who had grown up with Buddhist ritual as part of his native culture his relationship with practice and cultural norms around modesty were simply different¹¹⁹. Thus, rather than conveying discipline or “naturalness”, staying in costume may signal untrustworthiness instead.

Dressing for Success in Exile: Tantric Concealment and Global Buddhist Economies

Clearly, there are several reasons why “ngakpa just dressing consistently as ngakpa” is more complicated in practice than it might at first appear. Still, resistance to dressing proudly in uniform may have just as much if not more to do with contemporary socio-

economic, cultural, and political factors as broadly ‘doctrinal’ ones. When I mentioned the hesitation that I had observed among ngakpa in exile about styling themselves or dressing in a certain way to Nida, he suggested that the ultimate reason for this was simple. Ngakpa were less numerous and familiar religious figures in many diaspora communities. Being more spread out and less well known they were thus shy about wearing ngakpa robes or hair in public or on an everyday basis, for fear that they would be misunderstood. Ngakpa in Rebkong, by contrast, had fewer reservations.

Ngakpa Tom suggested yet another reason for the disfavoring of clearly demarcated ngakpa clothing. His explanation had less to do with the cultural politics of revelation and display involved in tantric practice and more to do with shifting patterns of religious authority and patronage in Tibetan Buddhism on a global scale. As he explained via email:

“Ngakpa are a disappearing breed. In Tibet they made a good and highly respected living as Buddhist tantric shamans, performing rituals from exorcism and healings, to weather-making and wealth ceremonies, as well as divinations and much, much more. Unfortunately, in exile all the money and respect is in being a monk-like lama, with a monastery of 100 or more young monks to feed. They travel and teach, appealing for sponsorship for their young wards. This fits the mold of the modern Asian sponsorship mood, wherein most of the sponsors are Chinese from Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and of course America (and mainland China). Hence very often, rather than Ngakpas with long hair and white robes, we more often see tantrikas disguised as monks, with short hair and red robes (even if secretly married with kids). Almost all ngakpas today live in Ladakh or Bhutan, or in the remote mountain regions of Nepal, where Chinese money does not flow so freely.”¹²⁰

This angle underscores the important way in which now decidedly globalized representational (and material) economies continue to associate monasticism (or the appearance of monasticism) with purity and authority.

In this chapter, I have shown how, notwithstanding the widespread notion that the most authentic ngakpa is a somehow invisible or unheralded one, both ngakpa and non-ngakpa remain concerned about the appropriate way to embody or visually advertise non-celibate tantric orientations, and to distinguish ngakpa from other categories of person.

Ngakpa Tom's comments provide a useful segue into the subject of the next chapter, which deals with challenges surrounding the transmission of ngakpa-related knowledge in the contemporary diasporic context. If ngakpa are sometimes difficult to find because they are 'hidden', they are also difficult to see in exile today because there are simply not that many of them. In Chapter Five, I explore a different kind of 'vanishing' ngakpa. Why exactly are ngakpa "a disappearing breed"? How have changing patterns of social and biological reproduction in exile affected the transmission and continuity of esoteric knowledge? What challenges do new generations of Tibetans in exile face in seeking to gain expertise in tantric meditation? It is to these questions I now turn.

CHAPTER FIVE:
**TANTRIC PROFESSIONALISM, SECULAR SHIFTS, AND ENVISIONING LAY
FUTURES IN EXILE**

One morning in September of 2016, I was sitting in the mess hall at Sorig International College in Kathmandu having breakfast with Rabten, the soft-spoken middle-aged Tibetan doctor or amchi (*em chi*) who had recently arrived at the school to take over from his predecessor, who the school principals had had to fire not long before¹²¹. Scooping up portions of curried chickpeas with hunks of oily bread, the doctor and I got onto the subject of monastic vocations in exile. Amchi Rabten, who had lived and studied in various locations in India and Nepal, explained that across the diaspora becoming a monastic was far from a common or glamorous choice for young exile-born Tibetans. “Before people considered it good to give their son to the monastery”, he explained in English. “But these days, in the shijak (*gzhis chags*, i.e. exile Tibetan refugee settlements in India, Nepal, Bhutan etc.), when children are naughty parents say to them, “If you do not behave well, we will send you to the gompa!”. He chuckled.

Dr Rabten’s comments highlight the extent to which religious professionalization has become uncommon and undesirable among exile-born Tibetans. A Phuntsok highlighted in

the previous chapter, with the promotion and institutionalization of modern secular education in exile, Tibetans born in diaspora after the 1950s have come to increasingly prioritize secular careers and lifepaths. Dr Rabten's observations over breakfast point to the dramatic and sweeping changes to familial structures and priorities that have taken place over the last six decades or so in exile. Demographic patterns have shifted to such a great extent in diaspora that sending sons to the monastery – something that what was once culturally valued or of economic necessity (Childs 2004, 68) – has now become a parental ultimatum with which to threaten intractable children.

At the close of the last chapter, Ngakpa Tom suggested that as specific sorts of ritual specialists, Tibetan ngakpa were a “disappearing breed”. He proposed that ngakpa were no longer as capable of perpetuating their lineages or as in demand in exile as they might have once been prior to the emergence of newer transnational economies of merit and material resources. In the current chapter, I highlight the experiences and challenges of would-be ngakpa in exile and examine how changes in family size and structure as well as shifts in expectations about education and livelihood for exile Tibetans pose challenges to newer generations of Tibetans who might wish to train and live as householder tantrists. Moreover, I consider what opportunities are available for young lay Tibetans who wish to get more involved in tantric meditation and reflect on how new trends in secular and religious careers returns us to key tensions between lay ‘worldly’ and yogic renouncer dimensions of ngakpas’ subjectivities and modes of practice.

A Pointless Vocation: Secular Education, Changing Populations and Religious Careers among Tibetan Exiles

The rebuilding of Tibetan monasteries in exile has been a major priority since the 1960s onwards and the reconstitution and revitalization of Buddhist religious institutions continues to be strongly associated with the continued resilience of traditional Tibetan culture

in exile in the face of Chinese persecution. This being so, how then do we explain the striking lack of interest in religious vocations among exile-born Tibetans? A primary consideration here is demographic changes. Tibetans in Dharamsala and across refugee settlements in India, Nepal and Bhutan, as well as in Tibetan exile communities elsewhere in the world, all appear to have experienced a steady decline in average family size over the last three decades or so. Certainly, there is a pervasive sense among Tibetans that Tibetans in exile are, generally speaking, having fewer children and that they are prioritizing extended secular education and lifestyles for the children that they are having.

This sense is borne out by demographic data. A news report published in December 2010 on the online exile media site Phayul, which summarized the second 2009 ‘Demographic Survey of Tibetans in Exile’ (*btsan byol bod mi'i mi 'bor zhib bsher*) conducted by the CTA’s Tibetan Planning Commission (*bod gzhung 'char 'god lhan khang*) based in Dharamsala¹²², pointed out how the survey showed that:

“The total fertility rates, based on "own-child method", which for the period prior to 1998 was estimated to be as high as 4.9 during 1987-89, has gone down to 1.18 in 2009, thus showing a total decline in the fertility level of 3.65 in 2009. The survey said two major factors – growth in literacy rate among the young child bearing Tibetan women and rise in contraceptive prevalence - might have caused the fertility transition in Tibetan population. While more educated women take [a] longer time in building their careers that delay their age at marriage resulting in fewer children or forgoing having them altogether, the contraceptive prevalence has risen substantially from only 10 percent among the married women in 1980's to 95 percent in 2001, the survey found.” (Thinley 2010, n.p.)

The 2009 survey further notes that “much like the findings of TDS '98, the current Survey also shows that there is a change in the traditional household pattern, which is generally characterized by a large family...[Data collected shows that t]he average household size of the Tibetans living in the Indian subcontinent is only 4 members per household with the exception of Tibetan families living in Bhutan (5.2)... Altogether...[it seems] that two-thirds of the total number of normal Tibetan households living in the Indian subcontinent

have less than 4 family members with the remaining third having more than 5 members per household” (23 – 24)¹²³. Moreover, Dharamsala, ground zero for hegemonic CTA discourses and policies, is identified as having the smallest average family size of any exile Tibetan community in India (23).

Decrease in family size in exile has been concomitant with a movement away from religious professionalism. Over the last few decades, the CTA’s promotion of secular professionalism for Tibetans born in exile has given rise to new, hegemonic ‘desiring subjects’ linked with distinctly Tibetan notions of entrepreneurial self-making and leadership (Lokyitsang 2014). Exile born Tibetans are expected to use their secular education and professional skills training to both “politicize Tibet and to serve an already disenfranchised community of Tibetans in exile following Chinese invasion in 1959” (Lokyitsang 2014, n.p)¹²⁴. While the CTA neither actively discourages nor promotes religious vocations as part of this vision, Lokyitsang notes that religious careers chafe against pervasive sensibilities among exile Tibetans in their twenties and thirties. Lokyitsang describes fellow exile-born Tibetan friends registering strong opposition to their peers becoming monastics, noting how one female friend justified her resistance to young Tibetan women in exile becoming nuns in terms of plummeting Tibetan birth rates and fears around population decrease. Other friends wondered loudly how attractive, successful, professional Tibetan women with college degrees and who had been raised in the United State could *choose* to become nuns.

Lokyitsang notes that in her experience such critics were typically able to recognize that the choice to become a nun might be good and provide some “spiritual gratification” for individual women but failed to see what “tangible outcome” such decisions, which challenge ‘modern’ neo-liberal capitalist ideologies of “empowerment through consumption,” might offer for the Tibetan cause more generally. Lokyitsang concludes that “subjectivities associated with secular education, professionalism, and leadership are conceived of as

‘modern’, while alternative subjectivities “homemakers, spiritual cave dwellers, and...storytelling grandmothers who also contribute to the sustenance of the Tibetan community and culture in Tibet and across the diaspora take a back seat to the desire for Tibetan leaders that lead community and politicize Tibet” (Lokyitsang 2014).

Lokyitsang’s portrayal of her peers’ attitudes is echoed by anthropologist and demographer of Tibetan and Himalayan societies Geoff Childs. He quotes one young Tibetan man as stating that today among young Tibetans “becoming a monk is only considered an option for those children who fail at school, are not adept enough to learn a vocation, or cannot start their own business.” (2008, 144). Childs also reports that smaller overall family size in exile has contributed to younger exile-born Tibetans feeling pressure to pursue secular careers in order to be more capable of taking care of parents and grandparents. This has also led some exile-born Tibetans (and especially Tibetan women) to delay or avoid marriage entirely so they can stay at home as care-givers (Childs 2008). Tsepak Rigzen explains that the two primary objectives of the Tibetan exile education system are “to impart modern education to Tibetan children so that they are fully equipped to face the challenges of the modern world and to reconstruct Tibet’s future”, and “to enable Tibetan children to preserve Tibet’s rich cultural heritage, religion and identity” (Tsepak Rigzen 2003, 269). As Lokyitsang notes these objectives are explicitly linked with the fostering of nationalism and nationalist patriotism in exile.

The low number of exile-born enrollees in reconstituted monasteries in exile has been widely acknowledged as a cause for concern by exile Tibetan religious and political authorities. Discussing this trend, socio-linguistic anthropologist Michael Lempert (2012) highlights comments made by the Dalai Lama in 1999 at Rabgyeling Tibetan settlement in Hunsur, Mysuru, India, in which the leader acknowledged that the overwhelming majority of new recruits into the large exile monasteries in South India were new arrivals from Tibet

(*gsar 'byor*) and that there were only very few from “the generation [of Tibetans] born and raised in our shijak” (*nga rang tsho'i gzhis chags nang la skyes te 'tshar longs byed mkhan gyi mi rabs*). The Dalai Lama explained that if exile-born children were not encouraged to develop the desires or inclinations they might have to study and practice Dharma then, regardless of whether monasteries currently existed, without such new recruits there was risk that these monasteries “would become like pools [of learning/practice etc.] cut off from their source waters” (*ltag chu chad pa'i rdzing bu lta bur 'gyur nyen yod*, 161). He added that Tibetans “had failed in their duties by not knowing how to properly support and connect with” exile-born children and that for their part the monasteries had no norms in place for specially looking after new (exile-born) enrollees” (*nga tshos mthud ka rgyag stangs dang/ mtshams sbyor byed stangs yag po ma shes pa' 'thus shor phyin 'dug/ dgon khag nas gsar zhugs pa tshor dmigs bsal gyi lta rtogs byed srol med pa*). This had led him to suspect that lay households and secular schoolteachers were becoming remiss in their duties to offer explanation and guidance to exile-born children in whatever way they could (*khyim tshang khag dang/ slob grwa'i dge mkhan tshos 'grel bshad lam ston byed rgyu gang ci nas 'thus shor 'gro gi med dam bsam gyi 'dug*, Lempert 2012, 161).

During monsoon season in McLeod in 2015, while having lunch and studying Tibetan by myself in a café I struck up a conversation with a khenpo (*mkhan po*) from Golok, Tibet who was then based at Dzongsar gompa in Chauntra, Himachal Pradesh, about three hours' drive from McLeod. The topic of monk demographics came up and, affirming the striking paucity of exile-born monks, the khenpo estimated that there were probably more *dbyin ji'i grwa pa* (white, foreigner monks) than exile-born Tibetan ones out of the thousand or so enrollees at the institution. Lempert reports that monk teachers at reconstituted South Indian monasteries recognized and shared the Dalai Lama's concerns but from their side placed as much blame on exile-born youth themselves. One geshe at Sera monastery that Lempert

spoke with explained that the reason why new-arrivals from Tibet made up ninety or more percent of enrollees and exile-born Tibetans made up ten percent or even less was because most Tibetan youth born in India stayed with their parents and took more of an interest in “visiting home, doing business, wearing [fancy] clothes, and just strolling around” (see Lempert 2012, 162 - 163). Incidentally, this representation of exile-born youth is strikingly similar to the portrait of distracted young Tibetans in McLeod uninterested in Dharma that Tsultrim la presented in the previous chapter¹²⁵.

Lempert affirms that as a result of “the opening of the Tibet – Nepal border in 1980, coupled with liberalization in Tibet, [which] made it possible for Tibetans to get visas to visit relatives in India” (2012, 159) large South Indian monasteries like Sera Mey and Jey experienced a boom in enrolment from new arrivals from Tibet. This stream of *gsar 'byor* enrollees appears to have been fairly steady until crackdowns following major political unrest across Tibet in 2008 led to a massive decrease in the number of Tibetans coming into exile from occupied Tibet. In the last few years, concerns about the prevalence of Himalayan peoples in exile monasteries as the new majority recruit appear to have increased. For example, on March 25, 2016, an article appeared on the Tibetan language news site ‘The Tibetan Times’ (*bod kyi dus bab*) with the headline ‘Percentage of Himalayan region people in Tibetan monastic communities has reached 55-58%’ (*bod pa'i dgon sde khag nang hi ma la ya'i ri rgyud brgya cha 55-58 chags 'dug*). The article explained how during the meeting of elected representatives of that afternoon, in connection with fixing the budget for the Department of Religion and Culture, Kagyu school representative Tenpa Yarphel (*bstan pa yar 'phel*) had asked the Department minister Pema Chinnjor (*pad+ma chos 'byor*) who we met in Chapter Three, a series of questions.

The Kagyu representative noted how when the high lamas of the various Tibetan schools and lineages had recently convened in Dharamsala they had stated unanimously that

the greatest concern they were currently facing was the problem of fewer and fewer ethnic Tibetans staying on as monks in Tibetan monasteries in exile. Accordingly, he was keen to hear from the Religion and Culture minister whether his department had conducted any actual research into this issue and how it was proposing to resolve it. Kalön Pema la's response is recorded in the article as follows:

“We have done research on the various monastic communities and exile monasteries. Right now, altogether there are more than 40 000 monks and nuns. When we did research to find out how many of these were of Tibetan and how many of these were of Himalayan descent, [we discovered that] the Himalayan monastics were already at around 55-58%. Of this proportion, Geluk are only somewhat [represented] and monastics of Himalayan descent are even greater in other lineages. Everyone is troubled by this...Previously, after 1979, after Deng Xi Ping's policy of opening up [i.e. liberalization] more than 80% of monks and nuns in exile monastic communities had come from Tibet. Now, the Chinese government has blocked things, and Tibetans coming from Tibet have really dwindled. Within Tibetan exile communities it's very rare to send one's own children to become monks. The chief lamas from the different Dharma lineages have discussed this problem at length and have ultimately said that we must work hard to find a way to keep learned sangha members (*dpe cha yag po yod pa'i dge 'dun pa tsho*) in the monastic communities without losing them to foreign countries, but little else has been said beyond this and that it needs to be done.” (Don 'grub bkra shis 2016)

The article closes by mentioning how the Dalai Lama has repeatedly expressed his gratitude towards Himalayan people for their crucial preservation of Tibetan Buddhism¹²⁶ but offers little in the way of a resolution.

Stalled Transmissions: Secular Schools as Replacement Households

The above overview makes it clear that a major shift towards secularization has taken place in exile. According to the 1998 Planning Commission Demographic Survey, 97% of Tibetans in exile aged 8 – 13 years attended school, with about 70% of these enrolled in CTA affiliated secular educational institutions (Childs 2008, 140). As a result of reforms instituted by the Dalai Lama, monks and nuns enrolled in monastic institutions in exile must also complete eight years of primary, secular schooling “in common with lay children” either prior to admission into exile monastery colleges (*grwa tshang* or *bshad grwa*, the more

common term in Kagyu/Nyingma monastic contexts) or must study to an equivalent level in tandem with their introductory/foundational classes in Buddhist philosophy at the monastery (Tsenzhab Serkyong Rinpoche n.d., this will depend in part on whether monastic institutions have schooling available nearby or on-site). The Dalai Lama has also helped develop additional educational programs in exile monastic institutions which aim to foster scientific literacy among monks and nuns (Lempert 2012; Samuel 2014).

Not a few exile-born Tibetans have come to see religious vocations (albeit not Buddhism per se) as largely unappealing and counter-productive options when it comes to the goal of fostering of a particular sort of Tibetan polity and particular kinds of futures in exile. When it comes to professionalization as ngakpa in exile, a stress on secular education and a strong preference for boarding schools over day schools (Childs 2008, 143 -144) has likewise complicated the hereditary transmission of ngakpa-related training and expertise¹²⁷. Discussing the continuation of Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche's own practices in exile, Ngakpa Tom noted that the weather-controller had often spent more time teaching – and had had more opportunity to teach – white, foreign ngakpa apprentices than his own children. As he explained:

“A strength and also a weakness of the ngakpa tradition is that it often was family lineage. The eldest son would often inherit the property. This was not often a problem, because the son would be trained from birth for this responsibility, much like the eldest son of the alternate Sakya Trizin lama is trained. But it has become a problem in India, where children are often put in boarding schools rather than stay at home and apprentice under the father.”¹²⁸

Tom mentioned too that he had heard some years prior from another inji former student of Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje that even Yeshe Dorje's *yang srid* or reincarnation, who Tom had lost track of, had been placed in a secular boarding school in Dehradun, Himachal Pradesh, something that this former student was quite displeased about.

As discussed in Chapter Two, ngakpa professionalization is strongly associated with patrilineal inheritance and descent. Describing the situation among village ngakpa in Chongkor village, Baragoan, Nepal, Nicolas Sihlé observes that “in recent generations, only in a few, very exceptional cases has a young Chongkor man started religious training when neither his father nor his paternal grandfather were themselves tantrists” (2010, 42). Childs (2004) reports a similar, enduring stress on patrilineal descent and inheritance for ngakpa in Sama village in Nubri valley to the southeast of Chongkor. Ngakpa in Sama come from noble families and like in Chongkor, most often inherit their father’s role and ritual texts along with his estate through primogeniture. Indeed, the connection between ngakpa vocations and patrilineal primogeniture is so strong in Tibetan and Himalayan societies that in the earlier 2003 version of his essay on ngakpa training and practices Nida felt the need to emphasize that it *was* in fact possible to become a ngakpa *without* such pedigree:

“Most ngakpa are [from] family lineages (*khyim rgyud*) and many qualified, authentic scholar-practitioners (*mkhas grub tshad ldan gyi skyes bu*) have been born in [hereditary] tantric lineages (*sngags rgyud du*). Even so, the claim made by some people that only someone from a family lineage is a ngakpa and that other people without such a hereditary tantric lineage are unable to become a ngakpa is highly mistaken. Many famous Tibetan *sngags* ‘*chang* of previous generations like Nubchen Sangye Yeshe, Duddul Dorje, and Venerable Marpa were not ngakpa who came from family lineages. Thus, whether or not one can become a ngakpa depends solely on the extent of one’s individual faith and desire (*rang nyid kyi dad dang ‘dod mos ltar*) and not on whether or not one is from a hereditary ngakpa lineage, high class [i.e. from a ‘pure’ or noble family, *rigs gtsang*], how old or young one is, or any other such external factors (*phyi ‘i cha rkyen*).” (Nyi zla he ru ka 2003, 90)

Notwithstanding this disclaimer, Nida goes on to note that today, most ngakpa from Amdo are from family lineages and explains that in Rebkong the children of ngakpa take their first steps towards ngakpa professionalization by learning from their parents and close relatives how to read and write Tibetan in order to engage with scripture. Children then go on to learn about Tibetan “spelling, grammar, poetry, and composition and so on from whatever teacher is available” and request whatever empowerments and reading transmissions they can

get from gurus “whenever time and circumstance allow”. With proficiency in literary Tibetan under their belts, relying on instructions from their initiating guru(s), they then begin to undertake the preliminary practices (*sngon 'gro*) (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 107 - 108) ¹²⁹. Nida’s comments, although specific to the Rebkong context, make clear the broader point that the primary sites for ngakpas’ education are the domestic space, the ngakkhang, and sites of intensive retreat-based practice.

In 2015, I asked Ngakpa Dawa whether his then high school-aged son who went to the TCV day school in McLeod and lived at home with him had any interest in ngakpa practices or if Ngakpa Dawa had any plans to train him. Ngakpa Dawa explained it was important to him that his children got secular educations and that it was not a question of forcing them into any sort of livelihood. It would of course be good if they took an interest in religious practice but this had to come from their own motivation. This relatively hands-off approach to dictating the extent of children’s involvement with religious training was one I heard and observed from many exile Tibetan parents throughout my fieldwork¹³⁰. Yet while a hands-off approach might foreground children’s “individual faith and desire”, it can also prove vexing for younger Tibetans keen to learn about more esoteric or specialist practices. Many Tibetans in their twenties and thirties who I knew in McLeod remarked on how their parents, grandparents, and lamas were forever scolding them for not knowing about *nang chos* (Buddhism) but then when they would ask relatives or religious authorities to explain certain Dharma practices they would offer little help or tell them that they should ask someone more knowledgeable. Exile-born Tibetan youth thus found themselves in a bind: parents and other authority figures constantly impressed on them the importance of devoting themselves to secular education and professionalization but bemoaned their lack of knowledge or interest in religion at the same time.

While chatting with her about her Ngakpa Rinpoche father, Yudrön explained how, notwithstanding her extensive, university level secular education, she retained a deep interest in Buddhist practice. While, as we saw in Chapter Two, she had been subjected to a great deal of mixed messages about accepting or refusing the status of khandro, she was keen to engage more deeply with the esoteric practices in which her father was so thoroughly versed. Indeed, one part of why she had been interested in having coffee with me in the first place was because of my research on such things as an anthropologist. Still, she had often found her father's hands-off approach and not uncommon claim that he was "too busy" to answer her questions about religious matters frustrating. On one occasion, while in Europe, Yudrön had gone with some Tibetan girlfriends to attend teachings given by a famous Tibetan lama with many inji students. Her and her friends were some of only a small handful of Tibetans in a venue otherwise dominated by non-Tibetan attendees. During the teaching the lama remarked that Western students were exemplary because they showed great interest in wanting to learn about Dharma, whereas today most exile-born Tibetan did not care about Buddhism. Stung somewhat by this comment, Yudrön made a point of going up to pay her respects to the lama after the teachings, to show face, as it were.

Yangchen, another exile-born Tibetan acquaintance of mine in McLeod in her early twenties who had been involved professionally with various Tibetan activist and social welfare organizations in exile since leaving high school shared with me a similar frustration about access to information about Buddhist Tantra and other resources for young Tibetans in exile who wanted to learn more about Dharma. I had known Yangchen from around town for a while and in April of 2016 she reached out to me privately on Facebook to ask if I could direct her to any lamas who gave transmissions for Chöd. Yangchen knew a little about the practice already but was hoping to learn more. She knew that it was a powerful practice that had been developed by Machik Labdrön, a great Tibetan yogini, and while she felt that she

was maybe “over-reaching” in seeking out instruction in order to practice, her American Tibetan Buddhist convert boyfriend at the time had encouraged her to pursue her interests further. Yangchen explained that it was difficult to know who to talk to about matters relating to esoteric practices. She had been “a wannabe witch” during middle school (i.e. in her early teens) and had “read up on Wicca and stuff for a period of time” but nothing had come of it because she “started rationalizing too much”. Yangchen had also read a fair bit about Vajrayāna in English, and as mentioned had been encouraged in her pursuits by non-Tibetan practitioners. I reached out to Ngakpa Dawa to try to arrange a meeting with Yangchen. Unfortunately, Ngakpa Dawa was traveling abroad at the time, and Yangchen did not ultimately end up meeting with him.

Accounts such as these suggest that there might be something to the Dalai Lama’s musings in Hunsur in 1999 about parents, teachers, and lamas having done a far from perfect job of encouraging exile-born Tibetan youths’ interest in Buddhist training. They highlight too the way that lamas can often feel inaccessible to exile-born Tibetans who have a genuine interest in learning more about Buddhism in general or tantric ritual practices in particular¹³¹. Since foreign students often double-up as wealthy patrons, high-ranking exile Tibetan lamas and lineage-holders may end up prioritizing their constituencies and projects abroad. Although foreign disciples may provide significant resources that are funneled back into lamas’ home communities, Tibetans in exile may still sometimes be left feeling somewhat abandoned. Despite popular rhetoric, there were at least a few young, lay, exile-born Tibetans in McLeod who *were* keen to extend their knowledge of Buddhism but who were not always sure about how best to go about this. If even Yudrön, the daughter of a prominent Ngakpa Rinpoche, found it difficult to secure learning opportunities then what were other less resource-rich and well-connected Tibetan exile youth to do?

Abandoning their Children: Opportunities for Religious Education in Exile and Absentee Tibetan Lamas

Some institutions do exist in exile through which young lay Tibetans can receive more advanced or specialized formal training in Buddhism. Chief among these are the College for Higher Tibetan Studies (CHTS, *bod kyi mtho rim slob gnyer khang*) at Sarah village near McLeod known colloquially as ‘Sarah College’ (*sa ra slob grwa*), Sarah’s parent organization, the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics (IBD, *rigs lam slob gnyer khang*, called most often by its acronym) in McLeod Ganj, the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (*dbus bod kyi gtsug lag slob gnyer khang*, often called by its older name CUTS, i.e. Central University of Tibetan Studies) located in Sarnath, Varanasi, and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA, often simply called ‘the Library,’ *dpe mdzod khang*) adjacent to the CTA’s offices in Gangkyil in McLeod. IBD was founded in 1973 by the Dalai Lama who appointed Lobsang Gyatso, a close Geluk geshe friend to serve as its director. This “self-consciously modernized” institution as Lempert (2012) describes it, was developed to cater to monks who had already received or who wished to receive a more secular education alongside monastic training. The school offers equivalent training to more traditional, reconstituted exile monasteries albeit with a somewhat more ecumenical curriculum, significantly reformed disciplinary procedures, and classes in Tibetan grammar, literature, and history (Lempert 2012).

Sarah College, founded in 1992, was developed to accommodate the spill-over of enrollees at IBD who were interested in receiving training as Tibetan language teachers. While Sarah, which currently offers classes in Tibetan language, history, and Buddhism, caters far more to lay students, there are some monastics there, just as lay students occasionally enroll today in IBD classes. After two or three years of “Fundamental Buddhist Philosophy” training, students at Sarah may move on to enroll at IBD for further education.

CUTS and the Library offer extensive training in Tibetan language and Buddhist philosophy, and CUTS also offers courses in Tibetan medicine and astrology. Since 2007, the Dalai Lama has also offered a series of public, webcast lectures on Buddhist philosophy and history (called the ‘Introduction to Buddhism’, *nang chos ngo sprod*) as part of a special ‘Summer school’ program aimed specifically at Tibetan schoolchildren and college students¹³².

Tushita Meditation Center in Dharamkot in the hills above McLeod also offers courses in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and meditation and provides facilities for extended retreat as well. The Center, which was founded in 1972 by Geluk teachers Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahāyāna Tradition (FPMT), was initially established to cater to non-Tibetan practitioners and largely continues to do so, offering programs for both existing non-native Buddhists as well as new potential converts from India and abroad. The Center’s reputation as an institution for foreigners has meant that very few Tibetans ever attend courses there as students. Yangchen told me a story of when she did attend a teaching given at Tushita by an internationally known Tibetan Rinpoche who was visiting from Nepal and being hosted there once, however. She related how, like Yudrön she saw only a handful of Tibetan faces among the approximately two hundred strong audience.

After the teaching, Yangchen made a point of requesting of this lama that he pay more attention to Tibetan youth because, as she explained to him, she felt betrayed and abandoned by “Tibetan lamas’ lack of innovation and creativity when it came to teaching young Tibetans,” something they did not seem to lack when teaching foreign students. Yangchen told me how, when speaking with the Rinpoche, she had compared Tibetan lamas’ behavior to parents who had abandoning their own children to look after others’, noting too that to her embarrassment she had “managed to cry her way” through the entire exchange¹³³. She explained that it was shortly after this period that she had drifted very far away from her

spiritual practice and had began channeling her spiritual impulses and Buddhist principles into her social work with Tibetan exile communities instead.

Who Studies Tantra, When? On Tantric Time-lines and Plans of Study

Beyond being born into a ngakpa family, enrollment in a monastic institution remains the primary trajectory through which individuals can achieve tantric professionalization. That said, historically and into the present, the official curricula of monastic institutions have primarily focused on the teaching of *mtshan nyid*, a catch-all term for (sutric) Buddhist philosophy, which includes epistemology, cosmology, dialectics and debate, rather than Secret Mantra. Simply put, training in tantric ritual practice or meditation, especially that involving deity yoga, is extremely limited in monastic institutions. As Tibetan Studies scholar, ex-Geluk monk and inaugural IBD graduate Georges Dreyfus (2003) notes, “in all Tibetan Buddhist traditions, tantras are the supplement that is supposed to remain secret, and the method of their study varies from school to school” (131). Dreyfus outlines the general approach taken to the study of Tantra in the monastic traditions of the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism:

“In the Ge-luk tradition tantras are studied in separate institutions, the tantric monasteries [i.e. *sngags pa grwa tshang*, ngakpa dratsang]; but among the Sa-gya-bas, tantras are usually studied within the confines of a guru-disciple relationship. In the Kar-ma Ka-gyu tradition, tantras constitute a separate course of study. At least in Rum-tek, the main seat of this tradition in exile, tantras are not included in the nine-year program of the commentarial school. After the study of the five texts is completed, the student enters a supplemental three-year course devoted to obtaining the title of Ngak-ram-ba (*sngags rams pa*; lit., “tantric scholarly spiritual friend,” the same title sought by Ge-luk monks in their tantric studies). The Ka-gyu curriculum focuses here on the Hevajra tantra, studied in the light of Rang-jung Dorjay’s Internal Profundity. This esoteric study is introduced by Maitreya’s Mahayanottaratantra, which provides a bridge between sutras and tantras as the student completes the eight great texts of the sutra and tantra of the Ka-gyu tradition. Unfortunately, this part of the curriculum has yet to be implemented in exile, and students have been studying tantras mostly in private.” (2003, 132)¹³⁴

Dreyfus explains that the often strict separation between exoteric and esoteric domains and training in monastic institutions does not mean that the study and practice of tantric texts is not valued or pursued by monks. Rather, tantric training is kept “private and segregated”: it is reserved for later, ‘post-graduate’ training in *sngags pa grwa tshang* (where experienced monks study the practice of rituals, the construction of ritual implements (including offerings and mandala making), and...the philosophy of tantra”) or for extra-mural, private, personal instruction by one’s own guru(s) (Dreyfus 2003, 118 – 119). Dreyfus notes that in Tibet, Geluk monks would train at *sngags pa grwa tshang* for up to three years and undergo examinations in order to become *sngags rams pa*, but today “in exile, the time required has shrunk to a single year” (118)¹³⁵. As Dreyfus notes, one year is hardly sufficient to render monks experts in “a tradition more vast and complex than the exoteric tradition they study for so much longer”, a fact which makes clear the extent to which monks are expected to receive tantric training off-site.

There are thus clearly different idealized timelines for the development of tantric and sutric expertise in Tibetan contexts. Dreyfus notes that monk enrollees at Drepung monastery, one of the three great Geluk educational centers in Lhasa, were historically “not even allowed to keep tantric recitation texts. It is only when they started to mature into scholars –...after four to six years of hard work— that this restriction would be lifted. Then, having already gained a solid grounding in the exoteric aspects of the tradition, students were allowed to take empowerments and study tantra on their own, within the context of the private relation they had with their teacher” (2003, 119). The extent to which individual monks or nuns will be able to pursue training in advanced tantric yoga and rituals either in their own time or later in their monastic careers is highly variable, contingent on a range of factors. Young reincarnate monks or *sprul sku* tend to have assigned tutors and are typically expected to engage in one or more extended retreats as part of their preparation to fill the shoes (or robes) of their

predecessor(s). Monks with higher status and more support and resources may begin training in tantric meditation quite early – the current Dalai Lama notes in his autobiography, for example, that he began practicing annual retreats to gain proficiency in meditation from the age of eight (Tenzin Gyatso 2008). Still, not every monk has such opportunities.

Whether one is a monk, nun, or non-celibate tantric yogi or yogini, however, gaining expertise in tantric meditative disciplines requires a close relationship with gurus, and the time and resources to engage in extensive retreat. Meditation is thus not taken lightly or treated like a hobby in Tibetan contexts. In his ethnography of Western Buddhist converts in and around Boudhanath in Kathmandu, anthropologist Peter Moran notes that:

“Regardless of exact interpretations, meditation was seen by many Tibetans as something best left to virtuosi. Not only is it difficult; it might be dangerous. Further, there is the equation of meditative practice with renunciation; one does not live in town, or perhaps even in a monastery, and meditate. For example, when I spoke with monks about meditation, many of them immediately began talking about undertaking retreat (*mtsham-rgyab-pa* [sic]). Meditation for them meant a special series of practices marked off from the everyday world, carried out in relative solitude – unlike the hive of activity that characterized monastic life in Bodhanath” (2003, 163)

Moran observes that few lay Tibetans he encountered performed anything that they understood to be ‘meditation’ on a daily basis, or at all. Unlike lay Westerner converts who took a regular meditation practice to be central to what it meant to “really” be a Buddhist, lay Tibetans’ measured the extent of their commitment to Buddhism and their internalization of its principles through alternative criteria. Given that terms ‘meditation’ (*sgom*) and ‘yoga’ (*rnal 'byor*) are largely synonymous in Tibetan and Himalayan contexts with Secret Mantra, ‘to meditate’ suggests initiation, close supervision by a guru, and at least a measure of religious professionalism. Meditation is thus rarely understood as a casual, entry-level, or popular activity. Indeed, Tibetans in Bodhanath who Moran spoke with for his research pointed to the dangers of forms of madness – sicknesses or disturbances of the *rlung* or vital energies or ‘winds’ - which could arise through practicing tantric meditation incorrectly and

without support from a qualified teacher, a problem to which they understood confused and over-eager injis to be especially prone (Moran 2003, 163).

As Dilgo Khyentse reminded us in Chapter One, to become a competent ngakpa requires familiarity with the Creation and Completion Stages of deity yoga practices for one or more yidam. To begin to undertake these requires that one complete one or more rounds of ngöndro (*sngon 'gro*) preliminaries. While ngöndro can be practiced at home, it is frequently practiced in the context of intensive closed retreat. Historically, the sooner a prospective yogi/ni could complete tantric preliminaries, the sooner they could engage in more intensive subtle body-focused yogic cultivation. Starting such cultivation as early as possible was not only about capitalizing on the endowment or luxury (*dal 'byor, rang 'byor*) of one's precious and rare human rebirth and body so as to attain Buddhahood in general but had to do with the particularities of tantric anatomy as well. Ngakpa/yogi training was traditionally begun at a fairly early age in Tibet. Dr Nida explained that in Rebkong, boys who have completed ngöndro historically entered intensive tsaloong (*rtsa rlung*) and Tummo (*gtum mo*) yoga training programs (more on these in the next chapter) from a very young age. Prepubescent children are more physically supple which makes strenuous physical yoga practices easier to accomplish and results in fewer injuries and other complications. Children's subtle channels (*rtsa*) and winds (*rlung*) are also understood to be more workable and vital.

Nida explained that the white *thig le* or essential energy 'drop' which is inherited from the father at conception builds up from the age of eight to sixteen, while the red *thig le* from the mother develops and proliferates between the age of sixteen and thirty two. After thirty two, one's channels become knotted, bent, feeble, degraded, and altogether less serviceable. This leads to a decline in overall levels of vitality and to a depletion of *thig le*. Attempting to work with and amplify one's channels and winds later in life is thus difficult and less effective. Suffering and grief wear one down and one's mind, body, and energies

become weak and brittle with time. As such, the period between the ages of eight and sixteen is said to be the optimum time to engage in tsaloong tantric subtle body training.

This sense of not wasting any time to dive right into intensive tantric yogic practice was conveyed in an interaction I had with a young ngakpa who I met by chance while having coffee with a friend from South Africa who was visiting me in McLeod towards the close of 2015. Sitting chatting in a café that doubled up as a laundromat, I spied a tall Tibetan man who looked to be in his twenties or thirties, wearing a plain maroon robe, small round bone earrings (*a long*), and a sizeable heap of dreadlocks. I called him over to where we were on the balcony and asked him if he was a ngakpa. He answered in the affirmative and we spent a few minutes chatting, during which I established that he was an exile-born Tibetan who belonged to the Nyingma lineage. He told me who his root guru was and clarified that he was a practitioner of Chöd. He asked me if I was a Buddhist and I gave him my usual answer at the time about how I was very interested in Buddhadharma and figured I might practice more deeply in the future provided I found a lama I trusted. “If you are interested, you should find a lama and get empowerment right away!” he said with some emphasis, his eyes widening dramatically. “You should do ngöndro as soon as possible and then you can practice Secret Mantra!”

Popularizing Self-Cutting: Chöd as a Gateway Drug to Secret Mantra

Like the ngakpa I met at the laundromat-coffee shop, most of the exile-born and raised ngakpa and ngakma who I met in India and Nepal during my fieldwork had, unsurprisingly given the foregoing, completed secular schooling before they had become involved in intensive tantric yogic practice. Most had also deepened their religious professionalization through the practice of Chöd. As we saw with Yangchen, to a large extent Chöd can be said to function as a sort of gateway to more intensive ngakpa

professionalization. Chöd has a strongly non-monastic flavor. It was systematized and promulgated in Tibet primarily by Machik Labdrön and her Indian guru Dampa Sangye, both of whom were non-celibate, non-monastic tantrists who eschewed centralized religious institutions and authority (Davidson 2008). Likewise, while monks and nuns frequently learn and practice Chöd, it is not taught as part of standard monastic curricula – indeed, the regular, ‘out loud’ performance of Chöd is rarely tolerated within monastic spaces, even in private quarters, and monks and nuns learn and apply it for the most part outside of such environments¹³⁶. Chöd is thus powerfully associated (if not virtually synonymous) with ngakpa orientations and it is rare to find a Tibetan ngakpa/ma who is not at least conversant with its practice.

The term Chöd (*gcod*, ‘cutting’) refers to a specific Tibetan tantric yogic rite or contemplative discipline in which practitioners sever their attachment to the illusory convention of a self (*bdag ‘dzin*). Yogis and yoginis do this by first projecting their consciousness from their body, which they perceive as an inanimate corpse. Their consciousness then takes on the form of a ferocious naked Ḍākinī (either the red ‘female’ Buddha Dorje Naljorma/Vajrayoginī – *rdo rje rnal ‘byor ma* – or the black one Tröma/Khrodakali, *khros ma nag mo*) who decapitates the lifeless corpse of the body, makes a cauldron out of its skull and methodically slices it up with a curved blade and then places it in its entirety into the cauldron to be boiled and transformed into an inexhaustible nectar-soup that is offered to and fulfils the wishes of a range of benevolent and malevolent ‘guests’ (*mgron po*) or invoked beings who include Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, protector deities, sentient beings from the six realms, demons, and so on.

This practice of body offering (*lus sbyin*) serves the dual function of one, ‘cutting’ through attachment to the illusion of an individual ‘I’, which is the ultimate root of delusion and suffering in Buddhism, and two, of reimbursing karmic debts to ostensibly ‘demonic’ or

obstructive beings who one has wronged in past lives. Thus, while hostile spirits exist as much as individual humans appear to on the everyday conventional level of perception, as the original Tibetan expounder of Chöd ngakma Machik Labdrön (*ma gcig lab sgron*, 1055 – 1149) explained, the mother of all apparent demons is the demon of ego-grasping. When attachment to self is severed, all conventional demons are pacified. At the close of the Chöd meditation-rite, the invited guests are collectively dissolved, and practitioners rest in a state of non-duality beyond self or other and conceptuality. In its most elaborated outer forms, Chöd requires practitioners to seek out isolated, haunted, and dangerous locations (*gnyan sa*) in which to practice – terrifying places teeming with restless, hungry spirits and various sources of danger and provocation to one’s sense of self and boundaries. Chöd is thus both a powerful means of accumulating merit through extreme generosity¹³⁷ and a sort of tantric yoga of terror, which works with the fear of self-annihilation and practitioner’s habituated self-preservation instincts to realize the ‘fearlessness’ of the ultimately non-dual, limitless nature of pure awareness.



A 2015 painting by Russian artist Sergey Noskov, depicting the Chöd yidams Thröma Nagmo and Dorje Naljorma as visualized in ngakpa Dudjom Lingpa's lineage of Thröma Chöd, along with a detail of a scene showing a yogi practicing Chöd. Courtesy of Noskov's public Facebook page.

To practice Chöd, one requires wang, loong, and tri. Learning to coordinate the chanting of texts with the ringing of the ritual bell (*dril bu*), beating of the double-headed tantric drum (*Da ma ru*), blowing of the human thigh-bone trumpet (*rkang gling*), and the complex cycles of visualizations involved in Chöd takes time and requires a considerable degree of instruction and training. Successful execution of the rite presupposes proficiency in Powa (*'pho ba*), the yoga of consciousness projection/direction, and in self-transformation via deity yoga. The practice is also popularly perceived to be dangerous and potentially even deadly as well¹³⁸. This being so, how exactly is Chöd a gateway or entry-level practice, then?

New Treasures, New Practitioners: Making Sense of the Popular Appeal of Tibetan Chöd

In the last decade or so, researchers have begun to pay increasingly sustained and ethnographic attention to the ritual and meditative practices of Buddhist laity across a diverse range of countries and contexts (Cassaniti 2015; Cook 2010; McDaniel 2013; Scott 2009; Soucy 2012), in a way that resists earlier Buddhist Studies dismissals of popular ‘folk Buddhism’ as less than the real article (Lopez 1995). While largescale, transnational new religious movements with standardized programs of study which have promoted meditation practices for young Buddhist laypeople have emerged in the Theravada context in the form of Goenka’s Vipassana, the Dhammakaya meditation movement and even the popularizing of Weizza sorcery among young Burmese, and in the Mahāyāna Pure Land context in organizations like Soka Gakkai, the popularizing and democratizing of meditation techniques has, unsurprisingly, been much more limited in Tibetan esoteric Buddhist contexts.

Chöd offers one interesting example of a relatively popular esoteric Buddhist practice, however. Chöd’s strong link with the practice of Powa Yoga may also have something to do with its relative amenability to popularization. *'Pho ba* or ‘transference’ “involves forcibly ejecting consciousness through the crown of the head and directing it towards a desired ‘pure

land” at the time of death (Baker 2019, 203)¹³⁹. Both Powa and Chöd, with its ritual simulation of death and dismemberment, enable practitioners to conquer death and their fear of mortality. Significantly, as Baker (2019, 204) notes, unlike other specialized tantric yogas like Dream Yoga, Inner Heat (*gtum mo*), Sexual Yoga and so on, Powa meditation procedures have been and are regularly transmitted in extensive detail as part of large-scale public initiations and group training events, in which individuals who have not completed ngöndro preliminaries may still participate¹⁴⁰.

Chöd can be practiced indoors or outdoors, in group settings or as part of solitary retreat. It also forms a key part of several different lineage-traditions of ngöndro. As such, it is both a virtuoso ascetic practice performed in the wild on retreat and a procedure that can be trained in gradually at home/indoors, either alone or in the company of other trainees¹⁴¹. Despite featuring Powa and yidam self-generation, it does not require the extensive channel-winds subtle body training associated with other advanced Highest Yoga Tantra contemplative disciplines to accomplish. While perfecting Chöd liturgies, visualizations and deepening one’s realization of transference from the body can take time to master, performing the rite does not require especially extensive or costly ritual paraphernalia and the internal dynamics of the procedure can be performed with nothing but one’s body-and-mind. As far as ngöndro practices go, Chöd is also unusually apotropaic – while it accumulates merit and ultimately facilitates liberation, its exorcistic utility, its capacity to appease spirits, cure sickness, and avert misfortune on a more immediate or relative level, has everyday, worldly value and aligns with ‘socially engaged yogi/ni’ orientations. Moreover, despite being strongly associated with Nyingma ngakpa, lineages of Chöd practice also exist in all four of the major Tibetan Buddhist schools, and in Bön (Chaoul 2009).

Significantly, over the last two decades or so, Chöd practice has become increasing popular among lay, and especially lay women practitioners, across Tibetan Buddhist

communities worldwide. Interestingly, this popularization of the practice for younger lay householders appears to have been promoted by several different lineage-holding lamas from across the Tibetan diaspora and Tibetan Buddhist global community, simultaneously. One of the most widespread Chöd traditions today are those associated with the so-called ‘New Treasures’ or Tersar of the Dudjom lineage (*bdud ‘joms gter gsar*), which have experienced a significant boom in popularity over the last two decades. The New Treasures were first revealed and codified by the Nyingma ngakpa treasure revealer Dudjom Lingpa (*bdud ‘joms gling pa*, 1835 – 1904). Chöd practices involving the ferocious female Buddha-form Black Tröma (*khros ma nag mo*) appear in two cycles of Dudjom Lingpa’s extensive revelations and form a prominent component of the Dudjom Tersar ngöndro. Jidrel Yeshe Dorje Dudjom Rinpoche (1904 – 1987), Dudjom Lingpa’s reincarnation¹⁴² who we have already met, helped consolidate and add to his predecessor’s visionary teachings with edits and revelatory additions of his own. Dudjom Rinpoche’s great prominence among Nyingma adherents in exile and the spread of his various lama students and the founding of Dudjom Tersar focused practice groups and Dharma centers around the globe has ensured the popularization of the Tersar ngöndro system and its associated practices of Black Tröma Chöd.

Since about 2000, Dungse Garab Dorje Rinpoche, Dudjom Rinpoche’s ngakpa grandson, the son of Dudjom Rinpoche’s son Thinley Norbu Rinpoche (*gdung sras ‘phrin las nor bu*, 1931 – 2011), has strongly promoted the practice of Black Tröma Chöd among lay practitioners in his native country of Bhutan. Several lay practitioner groups now exist throughout the country and Chöd empowerments, teachings, and communal practice events organized by Garab Rinpoche and his transnational organization draw tens of thousands of practitioners, would-be practitioners, and devotees (Pommaret 2015). Garab Rinpoche has also specifically emphasized female practitioners’ viability, if not superior capacity, for Black Throema Chöd practice (Pommaret 2015)¹⁴³. Active support for women’s inclusion from

Garab Rinpoche and other Dudjom Tersar lineage-holders has resulted in a noticeable efflorescence of the practice among female and especially lay female practitioners both in Bhutan and beyond¹⁴⁴.

Garab Dorje Rinpoche and other lamas' popularizing of Black Tröma has also increasingly focused on younger practitioners. For example, the Dudjoma Krodikali Association (*bdud 'joms khros ma tshogs pa*) recently organized a remarkable 'Summer school' program in Paro for what looked like middle and high school age students to train in Black Tröma practice¹⁴⁵. As can be seen in a short video summary of the program¹⁴⁶, for eleven days between the 7th and 16th of July 2019 about thirty students, a roughly equal distribution of boys and girls, enrolled in a Summer camp/retreat at the Dewathang Dudjom Dharma House to learn the fundamentals of the practice from trained monk and ngakpa teachers (specifically Lama Dawa Zangpo). During this time students memorized liturgies and melodies by practicing together under teachers' supervision and through group games and exercises. This striking program offers an example of what tantric yogic education could look like for lay Tibetan/Himalayan youth otherwise enrolled in secular educational institutions.

In another YouTube video uploaded by the Association which documents Black Tröma empowerments and teachings given by Dungse Garab Rinpoche and a three day retreat that took place in Paro, Bhutan in early May 2019 the democratization and popularization of the practice is made clear. At the close of the video, which features a musical montage of footage from the empowerment and retreat with its hundreds upon hundreds of white and red ngakpa shawl-clad participants, the following admonition appears in English in bold, white letters across a black background: "Human Life is Precious/ Life is Impermanent/ Good Opportunity is Rare/ Join us Before Too Late".



Practicing the Four Feast Offering every evening



in a dance form.



2:56 / 4:09



Going Steady with a Guru: Getting into Renunciation and Getting Out of McLeod

During my fieldwork, I encountered a few exile-born Tibetan men and women who had completed high schooling in Tibetan exile schools and who had, post-graduation, gone on to become dedicated Chöd yogis and yoginis. Reorienting one's life from that of an 'ordinary' layperson in exile to that of a lay yogi or yogini took time and happened gradually. Take the case of my friend Dhondup, for example, who I mentioned in the last chapter in relation to inji ngakpa pretentiousness. Having been born in Lhasa, Dhondup was sent by his parents at a young age to India to attend a TCV boarding school. Having relocated to New York City a few years ago, Dhondup had become more involved in Chöd practice slowly but surely.

Dhondup had been interested in Buddhist practice for a long time. He had an uncle in Dharamsala who was a monk who he respected greatly – the old man lived alone in an extremely modest dwelling in town with next to no belongings or money. Dhondup was routinely impressed by his generosity, and by the way that he continued to offer pocket money and food to Dhondup and his brother despite having so little. This uncle served as an early role model for Dhondup, a close, living example of the possibility of walking the talk of a renouncer's lifestyle. Still, it took a while for Dhondup to really devote himself to religious practice. While the thought of becoming a monk and following in his uncle's footsteps had occasionally crossed his mind, feeling somewhat directionless after high school, he had struggled with substance use, anxiety, and general ennui. Having begun training as a thangka painter he later shifted from that profession to open a small store in McLeod which doubled up as a hang-out space for socializing with friends, playing music, smoking, drinking, and watching TV.

In 2015 Dhondup began seriously dating a Tibetan American woman who he met in McLeod. This woman, Lhamo, had been born and raised in Dharamsala but had relocated around the age of ten to the United States as part of the initial ‘pioneer’ group of immigrants to the U.S. in the early 1990s. Lhamo and Dhondup ultimately got married and Lhamo arranged for Dhondup to migrate to the U.S. with her on a spousal visa. Around the time that Lhamo began securing Dhondup’s paperwork and making plans for his migration, he reconnected with a Tibetan Chöd practitioner and teacher who had been a little above him at the TCV school where he completed high school. After graduating, this exile-born lama had become a dedicated student of Lama Wangdu in Kathmandu, the same lama who gave the Chöd transmissions I attended in Kathmandu in 2016 and at the Yutok Ling temple at Pure Land Farms in Topanga, California in 2019. Dhondup’s lama acquaintance had undertaken extensive wandering Chöd retreats after graduating and had since become one of Lama Wangdu’s most important and trusted disciples. He now travels on a regular basis to the United States, Canada, India, Nepal, Russia, and a range of other locations worldwide to offer teachings and to assist with the activities of Chöd practice communities connected with Lama Wangdu and the Longchen Nyingtik Chöd and Zhije (*zhi byed*) practice lineages he holds¹⁴⁷.

Dhondup began getting more involved in Chöd and Secret Mantra practices and started deepening his relationship with this lama as a potential Guru around the time he was preparing to leave McLeod. In his own time, he had started reading and studying Patrul Rinpoche’s (1808 – 1887) celebrated commentary on the Longchen Nyingtik ngöndro practices, *kun bzang bla ma’i zhal lung* or ‘Words of my Perfect Teacher’ as its widely known in English. Dhondup later reconnected with his lama friend in his new home of New York City, when the latter came to teach and visit students in the city. Lhamo described her husband’s interactions with the Chöd lama to me over this period as a kind of courtship, with the slightly older yogi wooing Dhondup as a student and Dhondup in turn weighing up

carefully whether he was ready to take on such a commitment. The two men shared portentous dreams they had each had which seemed connected with their relationship and the lama pointed out further auspicious links (*rten 'brel*) he had noticed which suggested the rightness of the two becoming connected and of Dhondup getting more involved in Chöd practice. This lama reached out to some of his American students in the city as well and encouraged them to get to know Dhondup and assist him. Dhondup's deepening involvement in tantric ritual practice thus ironically coincided with his departure from McLeod Ganj and a majority Tibetan and Tibetan Buddhist environment. With time, Dhondup found himself practicing Chöd in group settings for the first time with a large number of non-Tibetans. Dhondup's developing sense of himself as a yogi was thus also linked with a certain alienation he had come to experience only after arriving in the United States, with a new, evolving subjectivity as an Asian immigrant, one whose limited proficiency in English and alternative habitus and expectations regarding interactions with other men were suddenly racialized in white supremacist U.S.A. in unfamiliar ways.

Lapsed Householders and Rock Star Yogis: Worrying Over Futures in Exile

As we saw in the previous Chapter, yogi/nis have to tow a fine line in navigating the politics of tantric display, transparency, and respectability. The issue of tantric display came up one night when I had dinner and drinks with a Tibetan artist acquaintance of mine in McLeod in 2015, who brought up Dhondup's lama without me mentioning him when I explained my research. This artist had known Dhondup's lama from school days, before the latter became a yogi and a lama, and he had watched his increasingly cosmopolitan activities, advertised on his Facebook page, with interest. "I call him 'rock star yogi'!" he told me merrily over post-dinner drinks, gesturing with the reference to the young lama's adoring inji students and impressive social media presence – one which included regular photo and video

documentation of the Chöd yogi riding motorbikes, visiting international landmarks and holy sites, and practicing meditation in strikingly diverse locations around the world.

The idea that the life of a sleeping-rough-with-spirits Chöd ascetic so committed to renunciation that they sacrifice their own body and self again and again, could be somehow glamorous may seem a little counter-intuitive. Still, the potential attractiveness or romanticism of yogic lifestyles was not lost on some Tibetans, least of all Dhondup's parents, who had noticed their son's growing interest and involvement in ngakpa orientations and Chöd. Recounting a visit she and Dhondup had made to Kathmandu to see Dhondup's parents in 2016 (Dhondup's mother and father had moved from Lhasa to Kathmandu several years prior), Lhamo told me about a conversation she had had with her in-laws which highlighted the degree to which tantric yogi lifestyles could be seen as 'trendy' and to which they could evince complicated reactions in contemporary Tibetan exile communities. While Dhondup's mother did not discredit the legitimacy or power of tantric yoga or Chöd, she had mixed feelings about their apparently growing popularity among exile youth.

This ambiguity was neatly captured by a half-joking comment Dhondup's mother made to Lhamo while the two discussed Dhondup's deepening relationship with the 'rock star yogi'. "More and more young Tibetan men are growing their hair long, becoming yogis and wandering around these days," Dhondup's mother observed. To underscore her reservations about this trend she then added that people had started calling these young men 'kyimlok' (*khyim log*). This satirical neologism, modelled on the term 'dralok' (*grwa log*) explored in the last chapter, confirms and confronts all at once the changing demographic patterns I have addressed here. Dhondup's mother's comment suggests that while Tibetan parents once worried that the sons they sent to be trained in the monastery might fail to uphold their vows and become shameful dralok, parents in exile today had cause for concern

instead that their sons might instead run off to become yogis and in so doing ‘turn back’ or renege on (*log pa*) their commitments as lay householders (*khyim pa*).

One could hardly imagine a better, more concise summation of the broad shifts in family structure, aspirations, and subjectivities across the Tibetan diaspora surveyed in this chapter than Dhondup’s mother’s portmanteau. With her commentary, Dhondup’s mother was able to put a name to one portion of various nebulous structures of feeling (Williams 2017) still unfolding and in-flux in exile today. Lay Tibetans seeking to pursue lives as renunciators and professional meditators have long faced opposition and resistance from their parents (Childs 2004; Jacoby 2014). As a neologism, however, *khyim log* points to distinctly contemporary anxieties and priorities emerging across generations in exile. Concern about a new generation of *kyimlok* reveals just how much being a *ngakpa* is not as straightforward as being a lay householder who also just happens to practice tantric yoga on the side. Rather, as explored in Chapter Four, *ngakpa* tendencies complicate simple binaries between transcendent renunciators and samsaric laypeople altogether.

Still, while *ngakpa* orientations may collapse neat distinctions between householder and renouncer, there remain tensions within the category of *ngakpa/ma* and *yogi/ni*. As we have seen, *ngakpa/ma* themselves regularly struggle to negotiate the tensions that exist between the renouncer and householder aspects of their activities and identities. Attempts to clearly demarcate, to standardize or formalize, distinctions between *ngakpa* renunciators and ordinary lay householders remain fraught, for lay Tibetan parents concerned about their own and their children’s futures and for practitioners. This chapter has sought to answer (or begin to answer) several key questions. When and how can *ngakpa* expertise be pursued? What insights and tensions emerge in light of idealized timelines for pursuing *ngakpa* professionalization? How ought we to understand these in terms of long-attested and new patterns of domestic organization, child-rearing and formal and informal education?

Having introduced the notion of the popularization of Tibetan Buddhist tantric yogic practices in this chapter, I move now to the second section of this thesis, in which I zoom in on a series of ethnographic case-studies that explore the contemporary popularization and circulation of tantric yogic practices in more detail and draw more directly on some of my own experiences as an anthropologist-translator and scholar-practitioner of Vajrayāna. Before diving into this material, however, it will be necessary to offer some wider context for the Tibetan sexual yoga practices with which the concluding chapters of this work are principally concerned.

In the bridging or segue chapter which follows, I outline the place and purpose of various sorts of tantric sex rituals in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and provide some preliminary remarks on how Tibetan exegetes have compared and contrasted worldly (*jig rten gyi*) sex and passion, or the sexual-sensual behavior of ordinary, uninitiated (*tha mal gyi*) individuals, with the special, ‘non-ordinary’ (*thun mong ma yin pa’i*), initiated forms of sexual-sensual engagement known as “the Path of Means” (*thabs lam*), “secret conduct” (*gsang spyod*) or “the Path of Great Bliss of the Lower Gates” (*’og sgo bde chen lam*), which is to say, tantric Buddhist sex. I survey some of the training and technicalities involved in sexual yoga practices, discuss the role of ejaculatory versus non-ejaculatory sex in such procedures, and outline historical debates concerning the relative importance of tantric sex with a physical partner both for initiation and for the attaining of Buddhahood in one human lifetime and body.

SECTION TWO:

**THE YOGA OF SEX AND THE
DHARMA OF MEDICINE**

CHAPTER SIX:

THE WAY OF BLISS: TIBETAN BUDDHIST SEXUAL YOGA AND THE PROBLEM OF DESIRE

“Wow, how amazing! From the vagina whose nature is Emptiness
And the penis which is the playful display of Unceasing Appearances
The child of unified Samsara-Nirvana is brought miraculously forth. If you understand this
then the nature of everything [in existence] is fucking and you will need no other method for
obtaining the ultimate accomplishment of Vajradhara, the so-called ‘Vajra Wielder,’ than this
most excellent means.”

- ‘A Cure for Horniness – Eliminating the Anguished Longing of People who Want to Fuck’
(*rgyo ‘dod skyes bu’i gdung sel*) by Lelung Zhepai Dorje Rinpoche (1731)

So states the Fifth Lelung Jedrung Rinpoche (1697 – 1740), the controversial Geluk monk turned ngakpa treasure revealer whose efforts to promote the practice of tantric sexual yoga more widely in Tibet induced some controversy during and after his lifetime. Lelung Rinpoche’s pithy summary of the practice of Karmamudrā, or partnered tantric sexual yoga¹⁴⁸, which appears towards the end of his remarkably direct and accessible instructional text on the subject for young, neophyte ngakpa and ngakma, offers a taste of how Tibetan teachings on tantric yoga and tantric sexual yoga in particular play with and collapse binaries of pure/impure, worldly/transcendent, Samsara/Nirvana, profanity/sacredness. Having explained at length the necessary qualifications, philosophical and ethical orientations, and physical procedures for correctly implementing partnered practice, Lelung Rinpoche boils

down his instructions in the lines above. He reminds his readers that the ultimate purpose of sexual yoga practice is to realize the nature of mind and reality, to discover, through meditative engagement with sensory stimulation and sexual arousal, the pristine, unfabricated, original awareness that is beyond all duality and conceptual elaboration.

In this way, the literal physical heterosexual sex act and the uniting of the sexual organs are shown in the final analysis to be mere conventions that point to and instantiate the basic ontological truth of the perpetual interpenetration of ‘unstoppable’, ever-arising mental appearances (*snang ba ma ‘gags pa*) with their fundamental emptiness or void-ness (*stong ba*), their lack of any intrinsic, enduring self or ‘thing-ness’. It is this interpenetration of Emptiness-and-Apearances, of form and void-ness that gives rise to the experience of both Samsara and Nirvana, of both bondage and liberation, which are likewise united inseparably. For the realized tantrist, all phenomena arise as blissful, empty displays – if the vagina’s ultimate nature is emptiness and the penis’ ultimate nature is manifest form or display, then everything conceivable amounts to a form of congress, is revealed to have “the nature of fucking” (*rgyo yi rang bzhin*)¹⁴⁹. In this non-dual tantric milieu, any distinction between colloquial profanities and sublime spiritual truths, between literal and symbolic, body and mind, and representation and reality collapse into blissful irrelevancy. Here the most ultimate Buddha Vajradhara (*rdo rje ‘chang*), is at once ‘the one who holds (‘*chang*) the *rdo rje* (of indestructible, primordial non-dual awareness) and the one who wields (‘*chang*) a potent, erect penis (the other meaning of *rdo rje*).

Lelung Rinpoche dictated his remarkable ‘Cure for Horniness’ as an expanded commentary on a pure vision treasure teaching on a Karmamudrā ‘elixir extraction’ practice (*bcud len*) which he had received from the goddess Nyima Zhönnu (*nyi ma gzhon nu*, ‘Youthful Sun’), his patron treasure ḍākinī, who had guided the ex-monk step-by-step through the practice during a ‘wet’ lucid dream vision¹⁵⁰. It was this *bcud len* revelation

which inaugurated my own deeper involvement with Tibetan sexual yoga practices as a researcher. In May 2016, while I was living in McLeod Ganj and while we were busy working on other projects, Dr Nida contacted me to ask if I could produce a full and thorough translation of Lelung Rinpoche's pure vision text. Nida had enlisted the help of another Tibetan Studies graduate student to translate the text previously, but this student had produced only a very rough, partial and somewhat inaccurate English rendering.

I had not read any primary sources on Tibetan sexual yoga practices before and Lelung Rinpoche's text was quite unlike anything I had seen at that point. Delving into the manuscript folios, I was immediately struck by the extremely down-to-earth way in which Nyima Zhönnu addressed the technicalities of sexual yoga practice. Far from positioning Karmamudrā practice as something remote or fantastic, as an elite or prohibitive set of ritual procedures, the goddess' approach was strikingly accessible and pragmatic. She offered recipes for dampened libidos composed of common, real-world ingredients and her instructions acknowledged that some practitioners reading her teachings might not yet possess perfect or comprehensive mastery of methods of ejaculation and orgasm control typically associated with advanced forms of partnered sexual yoga.

While Nyima Zhönnu's subject matter and language were rich, sublime, and evocative, her instructions were hardly the stuff of idealized hagiography. Here was pragmatic and autobiographically informed advice, meant to be applied by properly prepared readers for their and other beings' benefit. I was fascinated and awed. Finishing my preliminary translation, I was left with a number of questions and Dr Nida encouraged me to do my own investigations into Lelung Rinpoche's remarkable career and to write down some of my subsequent reflections for the public. I quickly prepared a post discussing Lelung's life and text and published it on my research blog (Joffe 2016d). In addition, the English translation I prepared for Nida of Nyima Zhönnu and Lelung's practice would subsequently

be published as an appendix in the introductory text on Tibetan Karmamudrā practices that Nida, Christiana and I put out into the world in 2018 (Chenagtsang 2018).

In addition to transmitting novel teachings, Nyima Zhönnu came to be embodied by



Lelung Rinpoche’s various sexual yoga partners through both outright possession and deity yoga procedures and became one of the primary deities of his cycles of teachings¹⁵¹.

A statue of Dākinī Nyima Zhönnu, housed in the temple of the Nechung state protector in Lhasa, taken by Dr Nida Chenagtsang, 2016

Following her visionary commands, the ex-monk set about promoting the practice of partnered sexual yoga more widely, to the considerable consternation of certain religious authorities of his day and beyond (Joffe 2016; Melnick 2014). Some two and a half centuries later, Dr Nida’s main Karmamudrā guru, a nomad ngakpa-scholar in Rebkong called Lhanyön Rolpa Tsal (*lha smyon rol pa tsal*, 1933 -) would grant Nida transmissions relating to Lelung’s teachings, and Lelung and Nyima Zhönnu’s unusually ecumenical, accessible, and medically oriented sexual yoga instructions would prove to be deeply inspirational and significant for Nida and his own attempts to disseminate information about Karmamudrā practice more widely. In order to more fully appreciate Nida’s activities and their

implications, however, it will be necessary to provide some wider context here for tantric yoga and tantric Buddhist sexual yoga practices more specifically.



Dr Nida and one of his Karmamudrā gurus, Akhu Lhamo, or Lhanyön Rölpa Tsal, in Amdo, Tibet, date unknown, photo courtesy of Dr Nida Chenagtsang.

Tibetan tantric Buddhist sexual practices have come up frequently in the preceding sections of this dissertation. Known as the ‘Path of Means’ or ‘Expedience’ (*thabs lam*) and as ‘The Path of the Great Bliss of the Lower Gates’ (i.e. the lower chakras or energy centers, ‘*og sgo bde chen lam*), such practices make use of a suite of yogic techniques to work with and transform human desire. Sexual yogis and yoginis cultivate and refine sensual pleasure in a non-dualistic way –using the bliss generated from sexual arousal and union as a means or basis for realizing the ultimately empty and blissful nature of reality. ‘Tantra’ in the popular Western imagination remains firmly synonymous with sex, and with exotic and outré forms of sexual intercourse in particular (Urban 2012; White 2006). This association has endured and evolved since at least the early 19th century, despite the fact that ritual practices involving literal sexual intercourse make up only a tiny fraction of the total practices of Indo-Tibetan tantric traditions. By now a considerable body of scholarship exists that aims to correct

popular (mistaken, New Age tantric) portrayals that represent Asian tantric traditions as being predominantly about the enhancement of pleasure or the ‘spiritualizing’ of sex, as neo-tantric teachers have occasionally proposed¹⁵². Notwithstanding these correctives, however, ritual or meditative practices involving literal sexual intercourse *do* exist in Tibetan tantric Buddhism and continue to be practiced and debated by Tibetans today. While sexual yogas might be only one small, not widely implemented part of tantric Buddhism, they remain an important, if significantly understudied component of Tibetan religions.

I have alluded to tantric Buddhist sexual rites in several different guises in the foregoing chapters: as a component of early tantric Buddhist initiation procedures developed in India; as a part of yogic practices aimed at extending longevity, curing sickness, and improving overall vitality and health; as a mechanism for revealing new-not-new tantric scriptures or ‘treasures’ and for maintaining an open scriptural canon in Tibetan Buddhist/Bönpo contexts; and as soteriological practices, ‘means or methods’ (*thabs*) for actualizing complete Buddhahood (or the state of Vajradhara as Lelung Rinpoche phrases it above). It is clear then that there are many forms and applications of Tibetan sexual yoga. In what follows I outline some varieties of Tibetan tantric sex practices and introduce key social, doctrinal, and technical features – and controversies – associated with them.

In the preceding chapters I have made use of the terms ‘Tantra’ and ‘tantric’ without extensive explication. In order to fully appreciate the position and significance of sexual yoga practices within the broader milieu of Tibetan Buddhism, however, it will help to say a few more words about how Tibetan Buddhist tantric practices are classified and organized. This chapter thus serves as a Buddhist/Tantra Studies focused bridge, aimed at providing background necessary for making sense of the more ethnographic discussions of the yogic cultivation of sexuality contained in the concluding chapters of this dissertation.

Tantric Buddhism or Buddhist Tantra? Tantra as a trans-Cultural, trans-Historical, and trans-Religious Phenomenon

Any investigation of tantric sexual yogic practices requires us to have at least a working definition of 'Tantra'. Yet coming up with a single, general definition of Tantra has proven challenging. To date no universally agreed upon definition of Tantra has been developed by scholars (Gray 2016; Wallis 2013). Phenomena that scholars have identified as 'tantric' span across multiple centuries, religious groups, and forms of social organization. Tantric practices, philosophies, texts, cosmologies, and art are historically attested in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Muslim contexts throughout South, South East, East, and Central Asia, and have come more recently to exist – and evolve – well beyond Asia as well. As Gray (2016) notes, while various attempts have been made to trace Tantra's origins to the time of the Buddha and ancient Indian rishis or sages, scholars generally agree that tantric texts and orientations proper do not predate the 5th century C.E., where they emerged from "Vedic ritual traditions as well as from the yogic and meditative traditions that developed both within ancient Hinduism as well as in rival Buddhist and Jain traditions" (n.p.). While many of the constituent elements of tantric traditions have no doubt existed as part of the Indian religious landscape for millennia, the tantras or divinely revealed, mostly Sanskrit language scriptures of Buddhist and Hindu tantric traditions begin to appear in earnest from around the sixth century C.E., with texts of this genre continuing to emerge in India for about another thousand years from that point on.

In the past, Tantra has been portrayed by both academic and non-academic commentators as its own distinct, often underground and subversive, religion. Earlier generations of scholars promoted the existence of an overarching phenomenon they called 'Tantrism,' a strain of religious orientations, knowledge and practices that because they appeared to remain consistent across space and time and distinct religious communities,

deserved their own abstract noun designation. Scholars today, however, recognize that Tantrism is a Western academic invention (Padoux 1981), one that does not “reflect the self-understanding of any particular tantric tradition” (Gray 2016, n.p.). Hindu tantric traditions are not exclusive to any particular devotional or philosophical school. Over the centuries distinct Shakta, Śaiva, and Vaishnava iterations of Hindu tantric practice have emerged and flourished. Today, scholarly attempts to define Tantra are thus “rooted in the understanding that [Tantra] was a spiritual phenomenon that affected all the Indian religions to some degree. It was a new way of doing spiritual practice that was deeply influential; for all that, it was undertaken by a small percentage of the total population” (Wallis 2013, n.p.). As such, Tantra can perhaps be best understood as the esoteric and ritual-oriented or ‘technical’ wing of Śaivism, Buddhism, Vaishnavism, and so on¹⁵³.

So, what then counts as tantric knowledge or practice? How possible or useful is it to even speak of ‘Tantra’ or ‘tantric religion’ as a general category? One way to define Tantra is to simply call whatever is taught in the so-called tantras, the texts of various tantric traditions, ‘Tantra’. This approach is complicated, however, by the fact that many undeniably tantric texts do not call themselves tantras, and some texts which do, contain virtually none of the elements typically associated with Tantra proper. Although scholars have failed to come up with a single definition of Tantra that is applicable across traditions, they have conversely been quite successful in formulating a number of very useful polythetic definitions or lists of common features. Scholar of Hindu Tantra Teun Goudriaan who provided one of the first general definitions of (Hindu) ‘Tantrism’ as “the systematic quest for salvation or for spiritual excellence by realizing and fostering the bipolar, bisexual divinity within one’s own body,” suggested the following list of ‘tantric elements’ found in most (although not necessarily all) tantric traditions:

“[Tantra’s ultimate] result is methodically striven after by specific means (kinds of *sādhana*): the recitation of mantras or bijas; the construction of geometrical cosmic symbols (*mandala*); the making of appropriate gestures (*mudra*); the assignment or “laying down” (*nyasa*) of powerful sounds or syllables on the body; the meditation on the deity’s concrete manifestation (*dhyana*); the application of these and other elements in special ritual procedures, to wit Tantric worship (*puja*), initiation (*diksa*) etc.; besides, the performance of Kundaliniyoga by means of which the microcosmic form of the Sakti (female divine power) present in the body in the form of a fiery tube or serpent is conducted upwards along the yogic nerves towards Siva’s mystic residence at some distance above the head.” (1981, 1)

Barring slight differences in terminology, all of these elements can be found in tantric Buddhism and have Tibetan language equivalents. As Gray (2016) notes, Goudriaan’s list is useful for how it emphasizes the scope of different ritual and contemplative techniques that tantric practitioners typically employ to gain both ‘magical’ powers’ and ultimate liberation (*dnegos grub* and *thar pa* in Tibet, respectively).

The closeness of especially Śaiva Hindu tantric traditions and tantric Buddhism is significant. As Wallis observes, the distinctive innovations of Tantra emerged primarily from within Śaivism and Buddhism and were subsequently transmitted from there to Vaishnavism, Jainism, and (Indian) Islam¹⁵⁴. Śaivism nonetheless takes “historical priority” here and can be considered the “Tantrik religion par excellence,” in light of the extent to which tantric Buddhist texts composed in India borrowed both directly and indirectly from tantric Śaiva ones (Wallis 2013)¹⁵⁵. Still, considering that Buddhism had become “thoroughly Tantrified” by the time it arrived in Tibet and given that Tibetan Buddhism “is almost completely Tantrik,” Wallis argues that any general definition of Tantra ought to be able to equally encompass (Indian) Śaiva Tantra and (Tibetan) Buddhist Tantra in equal measure. Wallis thus offers something like a master-list that combines polythetic features of Hindu and Buddhist tantric traditions listed by several scholars. As one of the few integrated lists of this kind, it is thus extremely useful for getting a bird’s eye view of what elements characterize

tantric traditions more broadly. Wallis' list, which cites features that characterize Tantra as a general "spiritual movement" in no particular order, runs as follows¹⁵⁶:

- [Self-characterization as an] alternative path / new revelation / more rapid path
- centrality of ritual, esp. evocation and worship of deities
- proliferation in the number and types of deities (compared to the antecedent tradition)
- visualization and self-identification with the deity
- centrality of mantras
- installation of mantras on specific points of the body
- ontological identity of mantras and deities
- necessity of initiation and importance of esotericism/secretcy
- yoga (usually referring to meditation and visualization practices)
- ritual use of maṇḍalas, especially in initiation
- spiritual physiology (i.e. subtle body and cakras) and kuṇḍalinī [i.e. inner dormant or 'coiled' 'psychic heat']
- mapping deities and pilgrimage sites onto the practitioner's body
- linguistic mysticism
- importance of the teacher (guru, ācārya)
- addition of worldly aims, achieved through largely magical means
- lay/householder practitioners
- bipolar symbology of god/goddess
- non-dualism
- revaluation of the body
- revaluation of 'negative' mental states
- importance of śakti (power, energy, goddess)
- revaluation of the status and role of women
- transgressive/antinomian acts
- utilization of 'sexual yoga'
- the cultivation of bliss
- spontaneity (sahaja, a technical term)
- special types of meditation that aim to transform the individual into an embodiment of the divine after a short span of time (Wallis 2013, n.p.)

Wallis argues that six of these features are most prominent in classical as opposed to New Age or neo-tantric traditions: yogic meditation, mantras, mandalas, gurus, initiation, and ritual worship of the divine through fire, water, flowers, perfumed unguents, and so on. All of these elements, barring mandalas, are present to a greater or less extent in non-tantric Indian religions, however, and so these characteristics alone cannot define Tantra. Wallis suggests that these characteristics become truly tantric when they are organized variously as part of the practice of deity yoga, introduced in Chapter One. Central to tantric traditions in general then, is the idea of working and identifying with the power of particular expressions of the divine (or enlightened awareness) to which one has been introduced and linked through initiation by a guru (Wallis 2013, n.p.).

Accordingly, ‘tantric texts’ proper could be said to be those texts which contain information – typically understood to be divinely revealed¹⁵⁷ - about deity yoga initiation and practice, about mantras, mandalas, and contemplative, ritual disciplines used to purify and sacralize human body, speech, and mind. In short, “what distinguishes a practice as indisputably Tantrik is that it involves deities and their mantras that are revealed in explicitly Tantrik scriptures” (Wallis 2013, n.p.). Since key technical elements of Buddhist and Hindu tantric practices derive from wider developments in Indian religions (i.e. Vedic ritualism and the soteriological ascetism of the Śramana movement) that long predate the emergence of tantric traditions as self-conscious, religious phenomena, and since these elements exist as well in decidedly non-tantric forms, we can thus think of tantric practices as being primarily centered around specific *texts and textual genres* as well as specific, recognizable *patterns and combinations* of the sort of features outlined above.

Renunciation Versus Transmutation: On Sutric and Tantric Orientations

Tibetan Buddhists have developed a number of different schemes for making sense of how tantric (*sngags kyi*) texts, methods, vows, and orientations relate to non-tantric or sutric (*mdo'i/mdo yi*) ones. As we saw in Chapter Three, when Buddhism first arrived in Tibet and thoroughly entrenched itself there via Indian missionaries in the eighth century, it came in both sutric and tantric forms, in the form of monastic celibacy and centralized monastic institutions and curricula, and in the form of ngakpa householders and their de-centralized, loosely organized spiritual communities. In contrast to exoteric sutric approaches which tend to emphasize scholasticism and celibate monasticism, the esoteric path of Tantra emphasizes direct, gnostic realization through meditative practice and leaves room for careful engagement with sexuality and other ostensibly polluting, distracting or compromising elements of worldly life which sutric orientated monastics are oath-bound to avoid.

Broadly speaking, Tantra is conceived of as the 'Path of Transformation/Transmutation' (*sgyur lam*) to Sutra's 'Path of Renunciation/Rejection/Reversal' (*ldog lam*). One common way in which the Path of Tantra is contrasted with the Path of Sutra by Tibetan teachers is through the analogy of a poisonous weed. When a poisonous weed of afflictive emotion – anger, hatred, lust, pride, ignorance etc. – sprouts from the soil of one's mind, the sutric approach instructs one to uproot it thoroughly and swiftly, to pull it out, disown, and destroy it completely. Once eradicated in this way, the seed of a different kind of plant should be planted in its place. Having eliminated distracting, harmful emotions, one should cultivate mental stability, peace, clarity, virtue, and compassion instead.

Tantra also acknowledges that poisonous plants are potentially deadly and is concerned as well with producing stability, clarity, compassion and virtue. Yet whereas the

sutric orientation sees in poisonous weeds only disruption, pollution and a problem, the tantric approach sees opportunity. Just as a chemist can carefully and strategically cultivate toxic herbs to process them into powerful medicines, provided they are smart, careful, and possess a laboratory and the requisite technical know-how to do so, tantric yogis and yoginis can make beneficial use of the ‘active ingredients’ of their human mental poisons. By chemically refining their desire, anger, ignorance, pride, and envy they can distil something positive and beneficial out of what might otherwise plague or endanger them. It is for this reason that the Tantric Path is an alchemical one, which eschews ‘rejection’ in favor of expedient ‘exploitation’ and transmutation.

Since it offers the possibility of full Buddhahood in one human lifetime and one human body (*tshe gcig lus gcig*), Tantra is also called the ‘Swift Path’ or ‘short-cut’ (*myur lam*), to distinguish it from more world-denying sutric texts and practices which focus on slow and steady mental purification through ascetic contemplation, philosophical study, and the accumulation of wisdom and merit through virtuous conduct. While popular, especially English language sources have often represented Vajrayāna or Mantrayāna (*sngags kyi theg pa*) as an entirely separate vehicle of Buddhist teachings from Mahāyāna Buddhism, Tibetan scholars present Vajrayāna as one of two avenues for the actualization of the Bodhisattva ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism, (i.e. the aspiration to become enlightened in order to likewise free all other beings in existence from suffering).

In this context, the sutric approach is more specifically called Pāramitāyāna (*phar phyin gyi theg pa*) or the ‘Vehicle of Transcendence/Perfection’. The Pāramitāyāna focuses on the cultivation of the six pāramitās or as they are often translated ‘perfections’ (i.e. generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, mental stability/meditative concentration, and wisdom). Unlike Vajrayāna, Pāramitāyāna is said to require several eons’ worth of successive rebirths and cultivation before Buddhahood is obtained. Tantrayāna, in contrast, is said to

possess many “means” or “methods” and to be comparatively easy or expedient, since it tailors its alchemical transformation of experience to a myriad individual capacities and proclivities (Chenagtsang 2018, 115).

Clear Light and Inner Heat: The Six Yogas and Karmamudrā Practice

If Tantra is about transmutation, then Karmamudrā, or partnered tantric sexual yoga is the quintessential Buddhist alchemy for transforming desire. As I mentioned in the introduction, Karmamudrā practice is classified as a ‘Completion/Perfection Stage’ (*rdzogs rim*) meditative practice. The *phyi dar* or ‘later dissemination’ of Vajrayāna teachings from India in the eleventh century brought new formalizations and elaborations of tantric meditative techniques to Tibet. Chief among these was the so-called ‘six Dharmas’ or ‘yogas’ framework associated with Indian tantric saints like Tilopa, Naropa, and Niguma, which became one of the most prevalent arrangements of Completion Stage subtle body practices in Tibet (for further context on Completion Stage practices, please see Appendix I). Although most strongly associated with the Kagyu and Geluk New Translation schools, this classificatory system has become an important component of both Old and New School contemplative disciplines¹⁵⁸.

The six yoga disciplines make good on tantric Buddhism’s promise of providing multiple methods for engaging ‘along-the-grain’ of individual experience and tendencies. Offering targeted methods for yogi/nis to dramatically amplify and reorient their relationship to the ‘four states’ of waking, sleeping, dreaming, dying, and orgasming (*gnas skabs bzhi*), these doctrines are aimed at facilitating the realization of the subtlest, most ultimate nature of mind. As contemplative systems they are performed as part of deity yoga practices for specific Highest Yoga Tantra yidams. All of the six provide methods through which practitioners can recognize and abide in the limitless, luminous, non-dual enlightened nature

of being but each uses various avenues and different embodied, human propensities as springboards into the ultimate. All offer pathways to expedited Buddhahood.

Six Yoga frameworks outline specific contemplative disciplines for all aspects of daytime and night-time human experience. In the most common scheme, there are two daytime yogas of ‘inner heat’ (*gtum mo*, more literally ‘Fierce Goddess’) and ‘illusory body’ (*sgyu lus*), two night-time yogas of ‘clear light’ or deep, dreamless sleep (*‘od gsal*) and (lucid) dreaming (*rmi lam/gnyid lam*); and two yogas of dying: the yoga of the intermediary state (i.e. between death and rebirth, *bar do*) and the yoga of consciousness transference (*‘pho ba*) at the point of death to a favorable rebirth in a Buddhist pure-land, discussed in the previous chapter. In some systems, *‘pho ba* yoga has a second sub- or parallel, stand-alone category, that of *‘pho ba grong ‘jug* (‘the Transference of entering into the city’), a type of consciousness projection through which the yogi/ni extends their life by relocating their consciousness from their own body into that of a fresh corpse or some other viable material form.

Generally speaking, Karmamudrā practice is either categorized as a distinct but allied Completion Stage yoga of its own or is represented as an extension of the practice of Inner Heat or Tummo (*gtum mo*). Tummo Yoga’s procedures for working with the channels, winds, and drops of the subtle body and for generating ‘blissful-heat’ (*bde drod*) are foundational to Completion Stage practices and can be understood as a form of solo sexual yoga that uses the practitioner’s own body as a “means” or basis of practice (*rang lus thabs ldan*). Having gained mastery in inner heat, yogis and yoginis can go on to practice the other yogas without engaging in partnered sexual yoga or can move on to training in Tummo with ‘another’s body’ (*gzhan lus thabs ldan*), which is to say, to practice sexual yoga with a Karmamudrā or physical, human partner.

The practice of Tummo centers around a yogic or inner alchemical process known as *'bar 'dzag*, or 'blazing and dripping'. Conceiving that their body is empty, free of any ordinary organs, bones, blood or other perishable components and made up instead of the indestructible channels, chakras, winds and energy-drops, practitioners imagine that an inconceivably powerful inner fire is kindled just below their navel from a tiny portion of a red *A* mantric syllable. This solar fire intensifies and blazes upwards (*'bar ba*) and its heat melts the cool lunar 'drop' or essential nucleus (*thig le*) located at the crown in the form of a white *HAM* syllable, which then begins to drip downwards (*'dzag pa*). This melting and dripping process gives rise to intense bliss and further increases practitioners' experiences of inner heat. Drops of the melted *thig le* collect in the throat chakra and give rise to a more rarified, amplified bliss on which the practitioner then meditates, experiencing this ecstasy inseparably from emptiness.

As the fire blazes, the white *thig le* and bliss continues to drip, saturating the throat chakra and then spilling out down to the heart, navel, and genital chakras. With each rapturous station the practitioner cultivates increasingly rarefied experiences of bliss-and-emptiness. Although the movement of heat and bliss to the genitals may trigger a desire to ejaculate and experience ordinary orgasm, practitioners use physical exercises and breath manipulation to avoid climax and send the molten *thig le* back upwards through the chakras in a reverse sequence. This (re)circulation of the *thig le* further enhances practitioners' experiences (the *thig le* may also be dripped down again through the chakras a further time). Such circulation gives rise to a sequence of what are known as the Four, Eight, and Sixteen 'Joys' or 'Blisses' (*dga' ba, bde ba*), which each have their own names and associated levels of experiencing Emptiness or void-ness (*stong ba*).

In order to prepare their physical and subtle bodies for Tummo, practitioners engage in a range of preliminary Haṭha Yoga style physical exercises known as troolkor (*'khrul*

'khor) in Tibetan. These repetitive sequences of exercises are typically executed while applying intensive breath retention procedures associated with so-called 'Great Vase' (*bum pa chen*) breathing. Such body-and-breath manipulations are designed to help expel stale vital energies or winds, release blockages and 'knots' in the channels (*rtsa mdud*), balance the subtle winds, facilitate their free circulation, bring them under the yogi/ni's control and generally prepare practitioners for generating – and sustaining – intensive levels of blissful heat. Striking as the production of physical heat in connection with Tummo is, it is only a sign of progress in or a by-product of the practice, which is ultimately intended to facilitate the experience of non-dual awareness. At the same time, mastery of yogic heat is traditionally acknowledged to grant a host of more immediate, supplementary benefits such as increased vitality, improved health and longevity, and the development of various psychic powers and supramundane faculties.

The Great Mystery: Karmamudrā and Vajrayāna Initiation

The centrality of Karmamudrā practice to higher levels of Vajrayāna teaching is immediately obvious when one considers the once fundamental role of literal tantric sex in Highest Yoga Tantra initiation or empowerment (*dbang*). Initiation into Highest Yoga Tantra teachings once depended directly on the practice of partnered sexual yoga yet with time this crucial dimension of empowerment became significantly obscured. Why and how did this happen? By the latter part of the ninth or early part of the tenth century or so, a four-fold scheme of initiation into Highest Yoga Tantra *sādhana* practice had become fairly standardized and widespread in Indian esoteric Buddhism. These four empowerments which remain the back-bone of Tibetan *dbang* today are: 1) the 'vase empowerment' (*bum pa'i dbang*) 2) the 'secret empowerment' (*gsang ba'i dbang*) 3) the 'primordial gnosis of the wisdom[-consort] empowerment' (*shes rab ye shes kyi dbang*) and 4) the 'fourth/word empowerment' (*bzhi pa'i/tshig gi dbang*).

In the opening ‘vase’ empowerment, initiands’ bodies were purified and the initiating guru touched them on the head with a ritual vase. This empowerment authorized initiands to visualize themselves as the relevant yidam and served to purify all bodily karma and to clarify and ‘open’ the crown chakra which corresponds to the level of the Body. Initiands were invested with the regalia and attributes of the yidam and installed in the mandala as sovereign Buddha kings and queens¹⁵⁹. In the second, ‘secret’ empowerment, the initiating guru and a partner engaged in sexual yoga practice. Establishing themselves as deities in union and controlling the flow of vital forces in their subtle or vajra bodies, the pair were supposed to experience the inseparable union of bliss-and-emptiness and to produce a sacrament out of their conjoined sexual emissions, which was then fed to initiands. These consecrated fluids which were placed on disciples’ tongues were code-named ‘bodhicitta’ (*byang chub kyi sems*, the mind that aspires to Buddhahood for the sake of others) and served to mediate and to transmit the gurus’ own experience of realization. In the third ‘wisdom’ or consort empowerment, initiands then engaged in Karmamudrā practice themselves as their teachers had done, either with the same or a different partner, so as to instantiate the experience of bliss-emptiness via their own bodies. The fourth and final initiation then shifted to another mode of mediation for non-conceptual experience: the guru relays Buddha-nature through words or metaphor, explaining to initiands directly what the ultimate nature of reality and mind is like¹⁶⁰.

Eminent Sanskritist and scholar of Śaivism Alexis Sanderson (2009) has demonstrated convincingly that this Highest Yoga Tantra scheme of initiation was in large part borrowed wholesale from earlier models for the *nirvāṇadīkṣā* initiation rite found in explicitly non-Buddhist Śaiva sources. The Karmamudrā based procedures of the second and third empowerments in the Buddhist system are significant exceptions, however. Sacramental sex and the emission and consumption of sacramental sexual fluids did form a part of some of

the more extremely antinomian or ‘left-hand/oriented’ forms of Kaula Śaiva tantric initiation and it is probable that the inspiration for the Vajrayāna procedures outlined above come from these corners of the Śaiva ritual universe¹⁶¹. Assessing Indian Vajrayānists’ incorporation of Karmamudrā practice as a crucial dimension of initiation, Wallis suggests that “in adopting rites from the Śaiva Tantras, the Buddhists, conscious of the need to prove their own versions superior, increased the transgressive element by including it in the initiation rite, thus creating a greater empowerment—for in this ritual world greater transgression, successfully negotiated, yielded greater power” (Wallis 2016b, n.p.).

The fact that Highest Yoga Tantra initiation required willful stimulation of sexual desire and ejaculation of sexual fluids posed a considerable problem to later monastic exegetes (and participants) in these procedures. Polemical texts by Indian Vajrayānists defending such practices reveal that by the tenth century tantric sex with a physical consort had become a key component of tantric Buddhist initiation. Péter-Dániel Szántó, in an article titled ‘The Case of the Vajra-Wielding Monk’ (which incidentally plays on the same pun of ‘vajra wielder’ as ‘penis user/tantric ritualist/realizer of non-duality’ as used by Lelung Rinpoche above), presents a strong argument for the fact that sexual initiation was initially developed and practiced by non-monastic householder tantrists in India. Non-celibate focused practices became more monk-oriented and inclusive as Highest Yoga Tantra approaches became increasingly popular across religious demographics in India, and Buddhist monk elites became increasingly interested in appropriating and regulating these methods and the soteriological opportunities they provided for themselves. As Szántó shows, Buddhist monks had to engage in quite elaborate hermeneutic gymnastics to find scriptural justification for celibate monastic involvement in the second and third empowerments¹⁶².

Debates in Vajrayāna circles about the status of monks vis-à-vis tantric antinomianism and non-duality continued for several centuries. In general, apologists argued

for the possibility of monks engaging in tantric sexual initiation without breaking vows of celibacy. One of the ways Indian commentators did this was by pointing out that any monk who truly understood the central Buddhist tenet of emptiness would likewise see the ‘wisdom-woman’ consort as ‘dream-like’ and empty of intrinsic existence, like everything else. The fact that the Vinaya or monks’ code of sutric conduct did not categorize wet dreams with dream-partners as a violation of monastic celibacy helped to further the argument that monks could be involved in very un-monastic activities as part of advanced religious practice¹⁶³.

bae: come over

me: I can't, I'm leading a chaste and
contemplative life

bae: but I don't have any permanent self

me:



A meme encountered by chance on the Facebook group “Esoteric Philosophy Memes of East and West” in 2018 by the anthropologist

With time, however, the use of physical sex partners and actual sexual fluids in initiation rites became de-emphasized. The late eleventh century Indian Buddhist abbot Abhayākaragupta (1085–1125) explained, for example, that in settings where initiands were

liable to be subjected to disapproving scrutiny by non-Buddhists, empowerment should be conferred via a Jnanamudrā (*ye shes phyag rgya* in Tibetan) or imagined tantric sex consort only. Monks who had cultivated bodhicitta and firmly understood emptiness could engage in practice with a Karmamudrā without fault, yet for a monk “no matter how faithful, whose realisation of the truth is feeble, taking the consecrations with an external [i.e. flesh and blood] consort [was] forbidden” and constituted a violation of monastic celibacy. Further, Abhayākaragupta states that if the initiating guru’s powers of visualization are strong then conferral of the second and third empowerments via a Jnanamudrā is sufficient and “there is no question about transgressing celibacy, for there is no corporeal action involved” (Szántó 2010, 295 -296).

This position became standard in Tibet. By the time of the Buddhist renaissance of the late tenth and eleventh century, monks had become the primary purveyors and preservers of Vajrayāna in Tibet. As more and more monks came to receive and to transmit Highest Yoga Tantra initiations, the literal, sexual dimensions of empowerment became progressively de-emphasized and symbolic, with procedures becoming increasingly interiorized to accommodate monastic participation and vows. As a result of these shifts, if one attends Tibetan wang today, whether one is a monastic or a householder, one is initiated into Highest Yoga Tantra practices without anyone having to engage in actual physical sex or consume freshly produced sex fluids. At the same time, the initiation ceremony and its associated sādhanā invariably contain instructions on sexual yoga practices, irrespective of whether attendees realize it or intend to implement these directives or not.

Dr Nida made use of a simple public demonstration to highlight just how much and how often many participants at wang today don’t seem to understand exactly what it is that is being transmitted to them, including those attendees who consider themselves dedicated practitioners of Vajrayāna. During introductory teachings on Yutok’s Karmamudrā which he

gave in Amsterdam in 2016, prior to performing the condensed empowerment (*don dbang*) from the cycle, Dr Nida asked the small group of attendees in the room how many of them had received Highest Yoga Tantra empowerments for specific yidams. Several people in the room raised their hands, and Nida quizzed them about what wang they had received. The students listed off various yidam. “Ah, okay. Good!” Nida said. “And which of you have received empowerment for Karmamudrā?” No one put up their hand. Nida then laughed and explained how this made plain the confusion many people have today about both wang and Karmamudrā. By definition, any and all Highest Yoga Tantra wang include instructions on Karmamudrā practice. Transmissions related to tantric Buddhist sexual yoga with a partner are not only integrated into the larger structure of tantric empowerment but make up its core mystery. Nida’s trick question thus served to reveal the extent to which this central component of initiation has become invisible, has been overlooked or forgotten by recipients in the face of routinized ritual, and has consequently turned into a sort of public secret hiding in plain sight¹⁶⁴

The popularizing and mainstreaming of wang in Tibetan and Himalayan societies has resulted in a certain diminishing of wang’s status as a transformative “pointing out” procedure, a “guided meditation” that ideally introduces students to the nature of their mind and facilitates gnosis or some sort of profound “inner click” (Chenagtsang 2018). Scholars of Secret Mantra have typically understood the evolution of esoteric Buddhist initiation within Tibet in terms of Weberian routinization, where religious antinomianism or transgression that was once a more ‘live’, literal component of ritual performance – the use of impure substances and sexual yoga to facilitate self-empowerment and realization, for example – became progressively conventionalized and sublimated. As Tibetologist Holly Gayley summarizes, “Over time the antinomian dimensions of tantra [became] routinized, thereby eroding its transgressive qualities and allowing it to enter the public domain and become a

mainstream part of Tibetan culture.” (2018, 5). This trajectory helps explain why Tibetan wang are frequently mass, public events today, as explained in the introduction, where not all participants may realize that the blessed alcohol and other sacraments they are consuming as part of the ritual are stand-ins for sexual fluids, and so on.

Edging Toward Enlightenment: On the Role of Non-Ejaculatory Sex in Buddhist Tantra

The four-fold initiation procedure outlined above assumes that emission of sexual fluids will take place as part of the sexual rite. Since the matter of ejaculatory versus non-ejaculatory sexual intercourse and various forms of yogic and quasi-yogic cultivation associated with mastery of the male ejaculation reflex form an important part of the discussions in the following two chapters, it will behoove us to consider the role of seminal continence in Tibetan sexual yoga practices a bit further here. Seminal retention and the cultivation of (male) ejaculation control for the purposes of enhancing and prolonging lovemaking and orgasm play a significant role in many ‘New Age’ or neo-tantric sacred sexuality practices. Neo-tantric teachings are considerably hybridized – they draw on as wide a range of influences as Karezza, Reichian therapy, and various forms of Western sex magic(k), although it seems that a lot of neo-tantric teachings on seminal retention are particularly indebted to Taoist inner alchemy practices, especially as represented by popular contemporary teachers like Mantak Chia (Chia and Winn 1984).

Notably, none of the above-mentioned influences have much if any connection with classical Indo-Tibetan Tantra. In his study of medieval Kaula Śaiva tantric sex practices, scholar of Indian tantric traditions David Gordon White rails against the colonization, commodification, and Disneyfication of Indo-Tibetan religions by New Age neo-Tantra, contending that the “appropriation and distortion of its very use of the term “Tantra,” is not only deceptive; it also runs roughshod over the sensibilities of authentic modern-day Asian practitioners of Tantra, the silent Tantric majority” (2006, *xiv*). White stresses that New Age

so-called “Tantric Sex” practices break with traditional tantric criteria for authenticity: they do not derive from unbroken Indian or Tibetan lineages of instruction, they are not grounded or legitimized in authentic Indo-Tibetan root-scriptures. Instead, “New Age “Tantric sex” is a Western fabrication,” one “whose greatest promise, if one is to take its Internet advertising at face value, is longer sexual staying power for men and more sustained and frequent orgasms for women”. “None of this,” White tells us “has ever been the subject matter of any authentic Tantric teaching” (2006, *xiv*). White points to the centrality of sexual emission as part of Highest Yoga Tantra initiation to express his exasperation with New Age neo-tantric claims that non-ejaculatory sex is a key component of traditional Buddhist Tantra:

“Taken together, these [scriptural citations] constitute clear proof that, as in the Hindu case, Buddhist “Tantric sex” originally involved the shedding and consumption of sexual fluids in initiation and other ritual contexts. In New Age Tantra, it is a male’s ability to bring his female partner to sustained, abundant orgasm, without himself shedding his seed, that is stressed, with reference to an erroneous paradigm that Buddhist “Tantric sex” always remained unconsummated, that is, that it ended in coitus interruptus¹⁶⁵ and an ecstatic mystical experience for both partners. While such does become the rule in later conformist Buddhist Tantric sources, it was not the original practice and, once again, the New Age paradigms are shown to be without historical foundation.” (2006, 109)

It is not clear to me what White means here by “later conformist Buddhist Tantric sources” but the fact remains that notwithstanding the centrality of the emission and ingestion of sexual fluids in early iterations of Highest Yoga Tantra initiation, seminal continence and delayed ejaculation have also been unambiguously central components of the mechanisms of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist sexual yoga practices for well over a thousand years. Many different types of Buddhist tantric sex *sādhana* have been preserved and developed as part of Tibetan lineages, which all evince a variety of historical influences. The complexity of these influences challenges White’s glib pronouncements about “original practices” and what Buddhist tantric sex supposedly was (or is) really about.

While I strongly sympathize with White’s desire to provide a corrective to neo-tantric appropriations and distortions of Asian religious traditions – to “deconstruct the “product” that these modern-day entrepreneurs of ecstasy are selling to a benighted Western public” through delineating what tantric sex was historically about in its native, medieval South Asian contexts (White 2006, xv) – it seems that he has unfortunately overstated his case and misrepresented traditional lineage-based Tibetan Buddhist tantric practices in the process. Let us dig a little deeper then to see how this is so.

Methods for engaging in sex without ejaculation have been a key part of Tibetan Completion Stage practices for several centuries. In an article exploring the ‘intermediary period’ (roughly 750 – 850 C.E.) of sexualized Completion Stage practices, between the earlier Yoga tantras and later Highest Yoga Tantras which were formalized at the turn of the tenth century and have remained fairly stable since, Dalton (2004) notes that although early Tibetan language Mahā Yoga texts describing sexual yoga practice do enjoin practitioners to emit sexual fluids and present and consume these as a supreme offering to the Buddhas at the close of the rite, they nonetheless instruct ritualists “to enter an excited state of *coitus reservatus*, avoiding [sic, presumably ‘ejaculation’] and thereby prolonging [their] orgasmic pleasure,” before they make these offerings.

The texts Dalton surveys represent an earlier phase of sexual practice that predates the highly formalized and developed Four/Eight/Sixteen ‘Joys’, chakras, and *thig le* melting type procedures mentioned above. Rather, they describe the energies involved in the sexual rite in simpler terms, with “the descriptions limited to the energies associated with sexual pleasure which rushes through the practitioner’s torso” (11). Dalton argues that with the formalization of the later Highest Yoga Tantra initiatory and *sādhana* procedures, the concluding ejaculatory offering and practitioners’ consumption of their own comingled sexual fluids as part of sexual *sādhana* was forgotten¹⁶⁶. Whatever the case, in later standardized Highest

Yoga Tantra formalizations of Karmamudrā practice as outlined above in the four-fold empowerment scheme above, engaging in sex without ejaculation for extended periods in order to expand sexual bliss becomes a crucial component of the practice.

Indeed, male initiates into Highest Yoga Tantra who engage in Completion Stage sexual yoga practices take an oath not to ejaculate save during exceptional circumstances. The twelfth century Yutok Nyingtik, which offers unusually comprehensive and accessible instructions on Karmamudrā practice for practitioners across a wide range of aptitudes, exemplifies this trend. It states explicitly that “except for when [one gives] empowerments, extends one’s lineage [i.e. conceives a child], [has to] resolve obstacles during practice [i.e. pain, physical and energetic health problems resulting from extended seminal continence], and [has to make] nectar-pills it is very important that one not does not lose even a mustard seed’s [worth] of semen at any other time” (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 311)¹⁶⁷.

Quite remarkably as mentioned before, the section on Karmamudrā practice in the Yutok Nynthik presents sexual yoga training methods for yogi/nis with and without proficiency in Tummo tsaloong or channel-winds subtle body practices. Notably, seminal retention is highly emphasized in both the with tsaloong and without tsaloong systems. More advanced practitioners who have already trained their channels and winds through Tummo related practices prepare for partnered tantric sex through special catheter or Haṭha Yoga vajrolīmudra type practices. The trainee sexual yogi inserts tubes made of various substances (depending on aptitude) into their urethra and engages in various visualizations and special breathing, muscle contraction, and gazing techniques designed to enable them to forcibly control the flow of their downward and upward flowing winds in order to unite them. The yogi trains to eventually suck milk up through the tube in their penis and to cause this milk to gush from their nostrils as a result of their control over the winds. While the text explains that

“at this point they will have the power to take up the red portion or *thig le* from another’s body [i.e. a female partner]” (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 378), it is clear that this procedure has a lot to do with mastery over the ejaculation reflex.

In his recent ground-breaking article on Indian Haṭha Yoga vajrolīmudra procedures which are supposed to allow yogi/nis to reabsorb comingled male and female sexual emissions back into the body through their genitals, scholar-practitioner of Indian yoga traditions James Mallinson (2018) demonstrates that, given the physiological impossibility of sucking milk through one’s urethra and excreting it through one’s nostrils and in light of the documented urological effects of this sort of urethral catheter training, the primary purpose of these ‘sucking’ practices was to deaden the ejaculatory reflex in men to allow them to engage in prolonged intercourse. As he explains:

“The physical practices which distinguish Haṭha Yoga from other forms of yoga developed within ancient ascetic traditions for which the preservation of semen was paramount. Texts composed from the beginning of the second millennium show how these practices were, firstly, opened up to an audience beyond their ascetic originators and, secondly, appropriated by Śaiva tantric traditions. Thus vajrolīmudrā was refashioned from a technique aimed at ensuring that an ascetic did not shed his semen into one that allowed a householder to enjoy the pleasures of sex and also be a yogi. It was then further remodelled in the light of two tantric concepts: an early notion of sexual fluids being the ultimate offering in ritual, and – as an interiorisation of the former – the visualisation of the combined products of sex being drawn up the central channel. As a result, certain tantric traditions made the fanciful but catchy claim that vajrolī allows one to absorb one’s partner’s sexual fluids during intercourse. Ethnography shows that among [Indian] Haṭha Yoga-practising ascetics vajrolī remains one of a set of techniques used to prevent ejaculation, while tantric practitioners of ritual sex use vajrolī both to prevent ejaculation and, they believe, to absorb their partners’ sexual fluids.” (2018, 205).

Mallinson’s statements apply equally to the Tibetan Buddhist context and his argument that catheter sucking practices are primarily about ejaculation control is confirmed when we look at the alternate Karmamudrā training ‘for Dummies’ offered in the Yutok Nyingtik for ngakpa who lack proficiency in channels-winds practices and for whom such catheter ‘sucking’ training will prove too demanding. In place of Tummo and then catheter

training to control the winds, a more gradual set of procedures is outlined. In the first stage of training, practitioners learn how to focus, intensify and combine hot and cool blissful sensations in the lower and upper parts of their bodies respectively, solely through the use of gentle breathing and visualization. Practitioners are said to have gained some proficiency in the practice when, by inhaling and concentrating on the red, hot, solar or ‘cinnabar’ *thig le* visualized at their perineum, they can generate such an overwhelming feeling of bliss and heat in the lower parts of their body that they feel as if they are about to ejaculate and then can instantly evaporate this lower sensation and transfer their blissful feeling to the upper part of their body by exhaling and refocusing on the white, cool, lunar, ‘mercurial’ *thig le* at their crown.

Having gained some skill in using the mind and breath alone to expand orgasmic sensations, control arousal, and delay ejaculation, non-tsaloong trained yogis are then instructed to practice a forty day unbroken retreat with a Jnanamudrā partner. Practitioners visualize themselves as the yidam and then engage in the four stages of Karmamudrā practice – looking; laughing/talking/kissing; touching and embracing; and uniting – in their imagination, while masturbating. Using the inner heat and bliss generated from their auto-erotic imaginings rather than more formalized Tummo inner fire procedures, yogis melt their crown *thig le* and let it drip progressively into the lower chakras, generating the Four Joys. Practitioners are required to devote ten days at a time to cultivating ever-deepening sensations of ‘molten’ limitless, empty bliss at each chakra – ten days at the throat, then at the heart, the navel and the genital centers – while visualizing one’s imagined, divine partner and masturbating all the while. Retreatants engage in multiple sessions of such cultivation per day. Importantly, they are *not allowed to ejaculate once during this entire forty day period*.

When at any point they feel the urge to ejaculate or that their bliss is “subsiding with difficulty or they are unable to pacify their vajra” they are to perform special

physical/breathing troolkor/ *'khrul 'khor* exercises to “pull up and spread out” (*'dren 'grem*) their *thig le* or seminal essence. After focusing the *thig le* at the tip of their urethra without losing hold of it and while abiding as before in meditation on the ‘Great Seal’ or Mahāmudrā (*phyag chen*) of the mind’s ultimate nature during the final ten days of retreat, practitioners then test their control over the *thig le* by placing their “water” (*chu*, i.e. urine) into a clean dish the following (i.e. forty first) morning. If a “fine silk thread” or “mustard seed” like amount of *byang sems* (semen) is visible, or even if no visible substance appears but when one dips a stick into the urine and lifts it up strings of clear fluid “in the shape of spiders’ webs” appear (this presumably implies pre-ejaculate), this is an indication that the yogi has not “bound” (*'chings pa*) the *thig le*. In this case, yogis have to start the retreat all over again from the throat chakra (the same goes for if the yogi ejaculates at any point during the forty day retreat). The text notes that if the practitioner has good channels forty days will be sufficient for mastering the practice and binding the *thig le* but if the yogi’s channels are bad they will have to keep starting over again until they manage to maintain intense arousal for the full period without losing control (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 382).

Yogis without Tummo and catheter training then move on to practicing with a physical or Karmamudrā partner. They are instructed to practice an initial extended retreat focusing on blazing and dripping and the Four Joys as before, but to first do so with “an elderly wisdom-woman partner (*rig ma*) or one who has already given birth to many children” (i.e. with a woman who cannot get pregnant in the event of ejaculation). Yogis are to practice in stages and rely on regular applications of pulling up-and-spreading troolkor as before, checking at the end of their sequence through the chakras whether any semen appears in their morning urine. Having made progress with a post-menopausal *rig ma*, they may then move onto practicing with a “qualified [karma]mudra who is young and beautiful”. Again, they “perform the great [sexual] sādhanā without break”. If the yogi still leaks semen in his

urine, if his penis proves “un-serviceable” (*las su mi rung*) after having engaged in tantric union several times and he cannot generate experiences of bliss, this means that his channels are ‘bad’ or defective (*rtsa ngan*) and that he should begin practicing over again, starting with “own body” (*rang lus*) or auto-erotic methods (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 383).

The Yutok Nyingtik thus strongly emphasizes the cultivation of ejaculation control through the yogic entrainment of body-breath-and-mind as a part of Karmamudrā training for practitioners at every level of proficiency in Completion Stage practices. Ejaculation control is taken as a given not requiring explanation in the text, a sine qua non of sexual yoga practice. Towards the end of Yutok’s Karmamudrā section, for example, “yogis whose training is weak” (*rnal ‘byor pa sbyangs stobs zhan dag gis*) are provided with a range of substance or chemical-based (*rdzas kyi sgo nas*) remedies for “preserving the *thig le*” (*thig le bsrung ba*, i.e. preventing *thig le* loss through emission). Likewise, should yogis wish to conceive a child, the text provides instructions on “expelling the impure dregs of the serous fluid [i.e. *chu ser*, resulting] from having engaged for a long time in not deteriorating one’s own semen and not ejaculating in the evenings,” factoring in matter-of-factly the potential physiological consequences of extended continence. The text goes on to explain how yogis should inseminate a choice partner “with a fully roused and virtuous Bodhicitta intention” as part of a deity yoga practice involving specific visualizations of tantric syllables, light rays, celestial palaces, deities, Buddhas and so on, to ensure the birth of an extraordinary child and guarantee conception (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 383 - 384)¹⁶⁸.

Tibetan tantric yogis’ explicit vows to avoid ejaculation in all but a few circumstances and the extraordinary lengths practitioners go to cultivate ejaculatory control and heightened bliss as part of sexual yoga practice, complicate David Gordon White’s acerbic comments about New Age neo-tantric practitioners over-emphasizing non-ejaculatory tantric Buddhist

sex and his peculiar claim that that injunctions in Buddhist tantric sources to engage in sex without emission for extended periods of time are ‘later conformist’ positions that are somehow less original or authentic. If White is suggesting with ‘conformist’ here that the emphasis in Buddhist tantric sources on coitus reservatus in sexual yoga is an attempt to square Buddhist sexual yoga with celibate monastic imperatives, we can dismiss this immediately. The teachings of the Yutok Nyintik are pitched explicitly at non-celibate tantric householder physicians yet the textual cycle presents some of the most extensive and emphatic directives on the role of ejaculation/orgasm control as part of the enhancement of sexual bliss aimed at inducing “ecstatic, mystical experience for both partners” – or what we could call Buddhist orientated ‘edging’ practices¹⁶⁹ - that I have yet encountered. Following White, Mallinson notes that:

“The absence of quintessential haṭhayogic techniques such as vajrolī...from the tantric corpus is symptomatic of the absence also of teachings on the preservation of semen. Despite popular notions of “tantric sex” as forsaking orgasm, a key purpose of tantric sexual rites is the production of fluids to be used as offerings to deities. Some texts, particularly Buddhist tantric works, do teach that sexual bliss is to be prolonged, but orgasm is still required to produce the substances necessary in ritual” (2018, 201)¹⁷⁰.

The ‘ritual’ to which Mallinson refers here is the conferral of the second empowerment, and other Buddhist tantric rites involving the consumption of the “nectar” of mingled sexual fluids. It is undeniable that the second empowerment requires emission but also clear from early sources that engaging in the second and third empowerment presupposed prolonged love-making and intensification of bliss (Dalton 2010, 27). While explaining how yogis and yoginis who have trained in Tummo and catheter practice should bring down the *thig le* and focus it at different chakra points in retreat, the Yutok Nyintik explicitly links extended pleasure to what was shown in the empowerments:

“When bliss lessens, churn [i.e. engage in penetrative sex]. If it is [too] great, rest. Settle in a state that recognizes the essential nature of [sexual] bliss. Recognize the primordial wisdom, the gnosis of the Four Joys as explained in the context of the

empowerments. If it feels like you are going to lose control [of your *thig le*, i.e. ejaculate], perform the previously explained ‘holding and spreading’ ‘*khrol ‘khor* exercises” (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 380)

In Yutok’s system, practitioners with Tummo and catheter proficiency strive to recognize the essentially empty nature of bliss through extensive retentive love-making, increasing their proficiency in holding and spreading their *thig le* as they deepen their experience of the Four Joys pointed out during empowerment. Once they have gained some proficiency in this, they are then said to be able to finally “consummate their bliss” (*bde ba rdzogs pa*) and then pull and spread the *thig le* even *after* ejaculation. Very advanced yogis practice pulling and spreading post-ejaculation after which they then train in pulling up and spreading the yogini’s “red portion” (*dmar cha*) or menstrual secretions. Doing this in the proper way is said to without a doubt allow the yogi to gain immortality, achieve the Rainbow Body (*‘ja’ lus*), and achieve the realization of Master Yutok [i.e. complete Buddhahood] and to guarantee rebirth like him in the Pure Land of the *Ḍākinīs* (*mkha’ spyod du*, HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 380 - 381). The methods for yogis practicing without vajrolī training mention only retentive, internal pulling up and spreading methods and do not include these more advanced post-emission *thig le* mixing procedures¹⁷¹.

Highly systematized methods of ‘sexual edging’, seminal retention and post-emission reabsorption such as these developed in Buddhist contexts as part of conversations and cross-fertilizations between celibacy-focused, transcendentalist Haṭha Yoga traditions and more non-dual, householder focused tantric Buddhist ones (Mallinson and Singleton 2017). Different practices involving the ‘consumption’ and incorporation of the products of orgasm in Buddhist Tantra are thus informed by a range of rationales (Garrett 2010). For the most part, the consumption of the sacrament in the context of the second empowerment can be understood in terms of tantric ideas about the mere conventionality of categories of pure and impure.

By everyday Indian social convention, sexual emissions were (and are) polluting waste products. In both Kaula Śaiva and Vajrayāna contexts, through tantric worship and meditative cultivation these substances become an embodiment of non-dualistic bliss, the sort of bliss that surpasses ordinary conceptual categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘dirty’ or ‘clean’, ‘delightful’ or ‘disgusting’, ‘wanting’ or ‘not wanting’, ‘accepting’ or ‘rejecting’. Initiates imbibe a conventionally repulsive substance and know it to be ambrosia. For all their strikingly diversity, early Tibetan systematizations of Mahā Yoga tantric vows equally emphasize that initiates into Mahā Yoga practices are oath-bound to consume the ‘five nectars’ (the transformed literal or imagined offering of piss, shit, human flesh, cum and period blood) without hesitation or preference, as part of regular tsok gatherings (Van Schaik 2010). Initiates are also unanimously oath-bound to engage with the five afflictive mental-emotional states or ‘poisons’ (animosity, desire, ignorance, pride, envy) in an alchemical fashion and to likewise transform them into non-dual gnosis. In Karmamudrā practices, the basis of desire, the psycho-physiological substance of the refined red and white *thig le*, either in the practitioner’s own body or taken up from another, are refined and recirculated, enabling the transmutation of desire and other afflictive emotions. In their various forms then, Indo-Tibetan Buddhist sexual rites align directly with tantric injunctions to ‘consume,’ to engage with – rather than reject – and ultimately transform, poisonous desire.

No Mahāmudrā Without Karmamudrā: Sexual Bliss as a Mediator or Bridge to Ultimate Truth

Karmamudrā practice may legitimately involve a supposedly more neo-tantric style of ejaculation control than scholars of classical Indian tantric traditions have acknowledged, but despite such similarities it is nonetheless true that neo-tantric sacred sexuality and sexual self-help practices tend to be informed by vastly different priorities, worldviews, histories, and assumptions to traditional Vajrayāna procedures. In 1988, Tantra scholar Georg Feuerstein

observed that the most common and egregious distortion of neo-Tantra was to present Indo-Tibetan tantric yoga as “a mere discipline of ritualized or sacred sex”. Neo-tantrists’ primary mistake was “to confuse Tantric bliss with ordinary orgasmic pleasure,” and by doing so they tended to “foster narcissism, self-delusion, and false hopes” in place of “awakening a person’s impulse to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings” (i.e. bodhicitta), as traditional, legitimate lineage-based practices intended (*xiv*). Authoritative Tibetan Buddhist sources are unambiguous that true Karmamudrā practice is not about sexual indulgence for its own sake – rather, it is a Buddhist practice geared towards Buddhist orientations and goals. Yutok’s ‘without tsaloong’ level of training explains, for example, that while it may be pitched at practitioners with limited proficiency in subtle body practices, it is still intended for “yogis who have received the empowerments and hold the vows, who have completed the required repetitions of the *bsnyen sgrub* practices [of the yidam], who are the [type of] people who have realized the essence of mind by clearly visualizing themselves as the deity and have given up [preoccupation/fixation with] the [the things of] this life, who accomplish whatever the guru says, and who apply themselves with bodhicitta” (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 381).

Rather than merely seeking to improve their sex lives or gratify their partners then, Karmamudrā practitioners work with and transform ordinary sensory desire, arousal and pleasure as part of a unique *sādhana* or meditation practice. Heightened desire is used as a means to experience and sustain increasingly subtle states of consciousness and to ultimately recognize and stabilize realization of the nature of mind, of Buddha-nature. The fourth Panchen Lama, the great monastic Geluk scholar Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltzen (1570 – 1662) offers a clear explanation of how inseparable Bliss-Emptiness can be born from ordinary desire. To make his case, the Panchen Lama draws on a fascinating analogy involving a ‘wood-born insect’ or grub (*shing las skyes pa’i srin (‘)bu*). This animal was understood to be

produced via ‘spontaneous generation’, to have been born from the wood of the very tree in which it is encased and which it devours in order to grow and ultimately free itself:

“For example, just as a wood-borne insect totally consumes all of the wood [around it] even though it [itself] is born from wood, so it is that Great Bliss (*bde ba chen po*) is born from lust (*‘dod chags*), the desire and passion [produced through the four tantric stages of] laughing, looking, touching or hugging, and the union of the two sexual organs which are undertaken with an initial [Buddhist] motivation (*rgyu dus kyi kun slong*). When a mind which realizes emptiness is generated simultaneously and inseparably with [such bliss] the primordial wisdom/gnosis (*ye shes*) of inseparable Bliss-Emptiness is born and through this the non-awareness and afflictive mental-emotional states of [ordinary] desire/attachment and other [poisons, *‘dod chags la sogs pa*] are likewise totally consumed.” (Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan 1973, 40 – 41)

Human beings, being born from desire and other afflictive emotions (*nyon mongs*), are like this hypothetical grub. The karmic effects of their non-awareness and afflictive mental-emotional states across infinite lifetimes have trapped them in Samsara, bugs born of attachment, aversion, and ignorance, encased in a prison of attachment, aversion, and ignorance. To escape, the grub must eat and ‘digest’ its way out until all the wood, the wood from which its current body was formed, is exhausted. So it is with the sexual yogi or yogini too, who makes use of or ‘feeds’ on desire to ultimately exhaust (*zad par byed*) desire.

Ejaculation and orgasm control and a more meditative approach to sexual arousal enable the production of intense enough levels of bliss to utterly enrapture the senses, to focus and stabilize the body-mind to allow for profound meditation on their ultimate emptiness. In his description on the non-Tummo/tsaloong based forty day masturbation retreat with an imagined partner, Yutok instructs the yogi: “when the *thig le* descends to the heart center, let your mind go – relaxing it in an expanded sky-like state without any conceptuality whatsoever, rest it as it is. [When your] experience of [sexual] bliss fades away meditate [on your Jnanamudrā partner] as before” (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 382). Unlike in Haṭha Yoga or Taoist practices, where seminal retention is pursued in order to gain immortality, increased vitality, and to transcend ordinary embodiment (Chia and

Winn 1984; Mallinson and Singleton 2017), in Buddhist sexual yoga practices seminal continence and orgasm control are focused instead on fostering a meditative space in which to realize Bliss-Emptiness.

In ‘A Cure for Horniness,’ Lelung Rinpoche addresses this View (*lta ba*) of non-ordinary Buddhist sex explicitly. He explains that even if contemporary yoginis and yogis can’t follow traditional instructions or implement ancient procedures perfectly “even just understanding a little, in a general way, that the essential point [of the practice] has to do with not falling or lapsing into ordinary, vulgar fornication makes a big difference” (*de lta ma byung yang rgyo tha mal par ma song ba’i gnad ‘gag gi phyogs mgo cung zad kyang shes pas khyad chen po yod*). Indeed, Lelung Rinpoche provides a remarkably thorough break-down of what the Buddhist view of expedient desire is and how it should be implemented. He opens his text by outlining how “sensory desires or pleasures must be brought onto the path” (*dod yon lam du ‘khyer dgos*), explaining how students should first do this outside of the context of lovemaking and sexual meditation. Then, stressing that “there is no way at all to achieve Buddhahood in one [human] lifetime other than through relying on the primary practice of ‘bringing sensual desire onto the path’ found in Secret Mantra, the most forceful means of the sexual rite,” he goes on to provide precise instructions on how the View of the emptiness of sensory arisings can be cultivated during sexual activity.

Yutok and Lelung’s descriptions drive home the point that in Vajrayāna “a cultivated experience like tantric bliss is something that is interpreted or mediated” (Gyatso 1999b, 122). As Janet Gyatso summarizes, “in order for the realization of the empty nature of one’s bliss to take place, one needs to have some bliss, and have it in focus” (1999b, 122). To do so requires the careful and extensive cultivation of sexual arousal. Knowing this, we can understand the dictum attributed to the great eighth century Indian tantric saint Saraha, “no Mahāmudrā (i.e. realization of the ultimate nature of reality) without Karmamudrā”. In this

arrangement, the elaborate, potentially dangerous manipulations of the subtle body pursued as part of ‘the Path of Means’ (*thabs lam*, sexual yoga) pave the way to the ‘Path of Liberation’ (*grol lam*, Mahāmudrā or maintaining the natural, already realized, unfabricated nature of being). This standard is how Karmamudrā practice is presented in the Yutok Nyingtik: after offering extensive instructions on Karmamudrā, the text concludes with just barely a page of instructions on how to practice the unelaborated, non-conceptual path of Mahāmudrā by itself, without the adjunct of tantric sex. This approach is recommended specifically for “elderly people [i.e. with low libidos, erectile dysfunction etc.], *ma ning* [intersex individuals¹⁷²], and those with extremely bad channels” (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 385).

The eleventh century Bengali tantric Buddhist saint Tilopa whose teachings on Completion Stage practices and Mahāmudrā were hugely influential on New Translation Tibetan lineages, offers a clarification for why Karmamudrā was traditionally practiced as part of Mahāmudrā in his pith instruction (*man ngag*) on Mahāmudrā known as the ‘Ganges Mahāmudrā Instruction’. At the very end of his exposition of Mahāmudrā, Tilopa notes that, if practitioners’ non-conceptual Mahāmudrā meditation practice lacks vital energy, they may make use of a Karmamudrā to stabilize or empower their practice if they know how:

“If you practice with a Karmamudrā the primordial wisdom or gnosis of bliss-emptiness will shine forth. With Means and Wisdom consecrated [i.e. the yogi and yogini consorts] let them enter into Union¹⁷³. Let it [i.e. the *thig le*] drop down slowly and gently, hold it¹⁷⁴, reverse its flow pulling it upwards, then let it pervade throughout the body. Do that without any desirous fixation or grasping and the primordial wisdom of bliss-emptiness will shine forth. Your lifespan will lengthen, you will not have grey hair and your life force will increase like the moon. Your complexion and inner radiance will be clear and strong like a lion’s. You will quickly obtain the ordinary siddhis or accomplishments and should then apply yourself to the supreme goal [of complete Buddhahood]” (Ti lo pa 1994, 1624)

In a few, short lines, Tilopa provides a complete overview of the subtle body inner alchemical steps involved in common forms of Buddhist sexual yoga practices and identifies

some of their more immediate, ‘this-worldly’ benefits. The subtext here is that some students may find that their success with more direct, unelaborated approaches like Mahāmudrā is limited either due to their lack of energetic vitality or compromised health and longevity. Practicing with a Karmamudrā can resolve this issue.

Missing the Point: ‘Post-Tantric’ Dzogchen Oriented Perspectives on Sexual Yoga and Seminal Retention:

While Mahāmudrā might need a boost from Karmamudrā, Karmamudrā without Mahāmudrā is barely Buddhism at all, amounting solely to hedonism or mere worldly, self-focused magic – the sort of ‘mistake’ Feuerstein associates with neo-tantric distortions and superficiality. The probably late eighth, early ninth century Indian tantric Buddhist master Saraha is explicit in his satirical songs of instruction that Karmamudrā practice was pointless without recognizing and sustaining the non-dual, non-conceptual nature of awareness. In his 'Realized Song of Conduct, called the 'Treasury of Dohas' (*do ha mdzod ces bya ba spyod pa'i glu*) he warns against the fetishizing of sexual bliss and the mistaking of this for ultimate reality:

"[People] are completely attached to the bliss of sexual union, the bliss that comes from uniting mouth-to-mouth,
Fools even say, "this itself is the ultimate truth!"
[But this is just like] someone coming out of their house, [standing] at the threshold and asking [passers-by to tell them] pornographic stories (*Ka ma Ru pa 'i gtam*, Sa ra ha 1994, 1015)

As the contemporary Tibetan lama Khenchen Trangu Rinpoche notes in his commentary on this verse, here Saraha is “not saying that the path of means...is not useful. Rather, he is demonstrating its validity by showing that it must be combined with the realization of Mahāmudrā." (Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche 2006, 85). Still, Saraha sets an early precedent for exegetes from within Vajrayāna looking somewhat askance at Karmamudrā practice, with all of its elaborate, demanding, and easily corrupted procedures.

With the flourishing in Tibet from the ninth century on or so of Dzogchen or the ‘Great Perfection/Completion’ tradition as a fully-fledged stand-alone vehicle distinct from the Completion Stage practices of Mahā and Anu Yoga, a trend develops where scholar-practitioners begin to deride tantric sexual yogis for their fixation on what, from the perspective of Ati Yoga, come to be seen as ultimately ‘lower vehicles’ or methods of realization. For example, in his ‘Sun of Awareness’ (*rig pa'i nyi ma*) a commentary on a Dzogchen scripture, the ninth century Nyingma Dzogchen exegete, Nubchen Sangye Yeshe (844? –), the influential ninth century Tibetan ngakpa who requested Padmasambhava’s parting counsel to Tibetan ngakpa in Chapter One and allegedly terrified King Lang Darma with his magical displays in Chapter Four, tell us:

“In this context, Samantabhadra [i.e. the unelaborated, primordial Buddha of Dzogchen] does not teach that all forms of sexual desire and intercourse shine forth spontaneously as the conduct or activity of the great being or essence-nature, that there is any distinction between male and female, or that things like churning [away at] a bhaga [i.e. vagina] is how one realizes bliss. These are distinctive methods of the tantras [but not of Dzogchen]” (Gnubs chen sangs rgyas ye shes 1999, 92 - 93)

In a similar vein, much later in the nineteenth century, the non-sectarian Nyingma master Ju Mipam (1846 -1912) made his own comments about the distinction between the Dzogchen approach and tantric sex as found in other Vehicles of practice or groups of texts. In a short satirical text called ‘[Some Advice] Put Down in the Form of Jokes Drawn from Conversations with a Friend’ (*grogs dang gtam gleng ba'i rkyen las mtshar gtam du byas pa*), which Ju Mipam explains was written in jest for an unnamed friend, the great scholar caricatures stereotypical adherents of all the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Nyingma, Sakya, Kargyu, Geluk) and then goes on to offer praise and advice for all of them equally. In one passage he satirizes ngakpa in the Nyingma school, calling into question what their motivations for practicing partnered tantric sex really are:

“Nyingma lamas, while accepting that there is the Path of Clear Light Great Perfection or Dzogchen in which one may attain [the level of] Vajradhara Buddha without relying on things like an external Karmamudrā or tantric sex partner, nonetheless say that lamas should make use of women to increase their lifespans, improve their eyesight, be free of sickness, and reveal beneficial treasure teachings for the sake of sentient beings. Yet they DON'T say they need to teach and practice for the sake of the teachings [themselves]!? It seems really amazing, really incredible to me, that [partnered tantric sexual yoga] could fulfil the function of benefitting the teachings and sentient beings, of [furthering] both instruction and practice AND of improving one's own eyesight [all at the same time]! How wonderful!”¹⁷⁵

Here we see Mipam acknowledging both that the methods of Dzogchen surpass the requirements of Mahā and Anu Yoga Completion Stage practices and that many practitioners or would-be practitioners of Karmamudrā may have skewed motives or priorities. As we will see, Ju Mipam himself wrote extensive instructions on Karmamudrā practice for his disciples during his lifetime - he is hardly opposed to the possibility of practicing tantric sex in a beneficial way. Rather than a wholesale dismissal, he like many tantric exegetes before him, is gently reminding his readers of how easy it is to kid oneself when it comes to even legitimate, lineage-based tantric yoga practices, to get caught up and fixated on supporting tantric methods at the expense of the main point(s) of the spiritual path.

This dismissal of sexual yogic procedures for other methods that can grant realization without them, should remind us of Ḍākinī Mīngyur Paldrön (1699 – 1769) in the eighteenth century as well, who rejected Lelung Rinpoche's proposal to “reveal beneficial treasure teachings for the sake of sentient beings” on the grounds that as a practitioner of Dzogchen she could remain celibate and did not need to practice with a Karmamudrā to achieve Buddhahood¹⁷⁶. This de-emphasizing of Karmamudrā practice received further support via the promotion in Tibet of doctrinal systems which allowed for the practice of Mahāmudrā outside the bounds of subtle body tantric yogic training. Gampopa Sonam Rinchen (1079 – 1153), a disciple of the great yogi Milarepa and a chief synthesizer of Kagyu school teachings, was one of the earliest and most influential teachers to disambiguate Karmamudrā

and Mahāmudrā. Unlike his guru Milarepa, Gampopa taught Karmamudrā and Mahāmudrā separately, promoting a sort of non-tantric ‘sutric Mahāmudrā’ and reserving instruction on sexual yoga for select, advanced students who he taught in private (Scheuermann 2015). This separation of the two Mudrās continues to be prevalent today, where it has become quite common for Tibetan lamas to offer teachings and publish books on Mahāmudrā without discussing or requiring Karmamudrā practice at all¹⁷⁷.

This unmooring of Mahāmudrā instructions from the context of advanced tsalung tantric yogic methods parallels Dzogchen’s progressive independence from procedures of the lower tantric vehicles, its self-understanding as a superior, distinct path (see Appendix I). Accordingly, Dzogchen scriptures and commentaries, with their emphasis on spontaneity and effortlessness, clarify that oaths to preserve the *thig le* and arduous procedures of seminal retention and subtle energy manipulation, are not necessary as part of their practices. Broadly speaking, from the Dzogchen perspective, what really matters is recognizing and nurturing *rig pa*, pristine, natural awareness. If one has a partner and wants to practice Dzogchen methods to recognize and maintain *rig pa* with them in the context of sex this is possible, but it is also just as possible to recognize *rig pa* outside of this context. With time, combined Anu-and-Ati sexual yoga sādhanās emerge in Tibetan contexts, sexual yoga techniques which take a Dzogchen orientation or View. While such sādhanās still recommend sexual intercourse, meditation on intensifying bliss and so on, they tend to de-emphasize many of the complex, Haṭha Yoga seminal retention and subtle body practices found in Mahā/Anu Yoga focused texts. It is this type of sādhanā which Dr Nida has emphasized in his teaching and publications and which I will assess in more detail in Chapter Nine.

The text on which Lelung Rinpoche’s ‘A Cure for Horniness’ is a commentary is a form of sexual yoga with ejaculation, in which the mixed sexual emissions are ultimately consumed as a life-and-realization granting elixir. In his commentary, Lelung Rinpoche

strikes a kind of middle ground between an emphasis on channel-winds type training and Mahāmudrā/*rig pa*. He explains that while complicated methods for ejaculation control are certainly relevant to Buddhist sexual yoga practices, they are not essential:

“While various [channel and] winds and bodily disciplines (*sgyu tsal*) like back and front [i.e. anal and urethral vajrolīmudra] catheter practices (*rgyab thur mdun thur*), ‘*bebs*¹⁷⁸, ‘*khrol ‘khor* exercises [to delay ejaculation and so on], are [ultimately] trifling practices meant to be performed for only a short time (*nyi tshe ba’i*), they still look really impressive [from the outside], in the eyes of others. I myself don’t know how to [show off like this, how to impress others with beautiful, outer expressions of yogic expertise and so on]. What I do know however, is what the most essential point of [tantric] sex (*rgyo yi gnad ‘gags yin lugs*) actually is”

The most essential point that Lelung Rinpoche is referring to here is using sex or ‘fucking/fornication’ (*rgyo ba*) to realize the ultimate non-dual nature of reality. He goes on to explain that he understands the basis for great (*rig pa* maintaining, *rig ‘dzin*) ngakpa/ma of the past who studied both the sutras and the tantras “restricting or forbidding [certain practices]” (*bkag dang ‘gog pa*) but emphasizes that even so he “also knows that all young people can understand the essential point even just a little and can gain an experience or taste of it through personal practice” (*gnad dang gzhon pa’i tshad kyang cung zad rig/ lag tu blangs pa’i myong ba dag kyang mchis*), which is why he has put down his instructions.

Eating Shit and Making Love: The Conundrum of Sex Without Desire

In December of 2017 during my trip to Los Angeles to attend Dr Nida’s transmission of the full cycle of Yutok Nyingtik empowerments a second time, Dr Nida and I visited the home of Maeve, a white American practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism who was attending the empowerments. During our brief stop-over at the house to kill time between engagements, Nida gifted me a photocopy of a Tibetan text he fortuitously had with him, a ‘treatise on desire’ or kāmāsāstra text (*‘dod pa’i bstan bcos* in Tibetan) that had been written by the celebrated nineteenth century Nyingma, ecumenical monk-scholar Ju Mipam, mentioned above. Titled “The Treasure Loved by all the World’ (*‘jig rten kun tu dga’ ba’i gter*), this text

offers extensive verse-form instructions on how to enhance sexual desire and lovemaking and was intended by its monastic author to serve as a resource for ngakpa and ngakma who wished to practice sexual yoga. As I sat with him in Maeve's living room, Nida marked out lines from Mipam Rinpoche's treatise which he wanted me to translate and include in our book on Karmamudrā, lines which explained why it was necessary for sexual yogi/nis to first have proficiency in 'worldly' methods of sex before they engaged in tantric sexual meditations. He also pointed out recipes for aphrodisiacs that Mipam had included in his work for yogis and yoginis with low libidos who needed chemical assistance to increase their desire and bodily heat in order to implement sexual yoga more effectively.

As we gathered up our things to head to our next appointment, Nida handed me the photocopied text to put in my bag. "Don't show this to Maeve, okay?" he said in a low voice, matter-of-factly, with a look that seemed to say, 'She won't get or appreciate it'. I nodded and wondered at his comment. I had a vague sense that Maeve did not entirely support free and open discussion of sexual yoga, a suspicion which was confirmed upon riding as a passenger with her in her car (sans Nida) on the way to the next event in Nida's itinerary. Although Maeve was not privy to Nida's and my conversation about Mipam's text, she was nonetheless aware that I was working on putting together an introductory book on Karmamudrā on Nida's behalf, and she knew that Nida offered introductory classes on Yutok's Karmamudrā practices around the world. Karmamudrā, and Nida's attempts to disseminate information about it, came up during the car ride. "Westerners don't understand – Karmamudrā is very advanced!" Maeve yelled with exasperation to me from the front of the car. "You can't feel any desire at all as part of the practice. If you do you will go straight to the Vajra Hells!" (The worst, most excruciating of hell realms, where those who violate their tantric vows are reborn).

I ‘mmm’ed my agreement and didn’t engage her further. I could appreciate where Maeve was coming from. As we have seen, the practice of Karmamudrā requires full-fledged renunciation of samsaric fixations and a Bodhisattva’s intention. As mentioned, authoritative sources make it quite clear that sexual yoga is absolutely *not* about pleasure for pleasure’s sake. Yet I could not help but be struck by the extent to which Maeve’s appeals to Karmamudrā practice as wholly ‘desireless sex’ contrasted with Ju Mipam’s ‘better sex’ guide, filled as it was with sundry suggestions on how to increase pleasure and desire. Nida seemed to anticipate this contrast or gulf of perspectives when he suggested casually that I shouldn’t show Mipam’s text to Maeve.

Maeve’s comments embodied a pattern that became familiar, almost predictable, to me during my fieldwork. Tibetan Buddhists, and especially non-Tibetan converts, many of whom often had monk lama teachers, would object as soon as the topic of Karmamudrā practice was raised that sexual yoga had nothing whatsoever to do with orgasm or desire as commonly understood. Karmamudrā was for beings who were wholly beyond dualistic fixations. To mix it with everyday orgasm, lust or attachment was to transform a sacred, liberating practice into a one-way-ticket to damnation. This position seemed to be saying that the only people qualified to undertake the practice of sexual yoga were those who were already so developed in meditation that they had accomplished the goal of Karmamudrā before they had even started the practice.

Maeve’s comments were certainly understandable given statements about Karmamudrā practice from authorities like the fourteenth Dalai Lama. When asked about what kind of practitioner one would have to be to be able to properly practice Karmamudrā the monk stated in an interview in 1993, for example, that:

“Truthfully, you can only do such practice if there is no sexual desire whatsoever. The kind of realization that is required is like this: If someone gives you a goblet of wine and a glass of urine, or a plate of wonderful food and a piece of excrement, you must be in such a state that you can eat and drink from all four and it makes no difference

to you what they are. Then maybe you can do this practice.” (cited in Powers 2007, 290)

The perspective the Dalai Lama refers to is known as *ro gcig* or ‘one taste’ in Tibetan, and is the second last of four progressive stages of attainment in Mahāmudrā, as part of which great tantric adepts so thoroughly perceive emptiness that they go beyond all conventional imputations of pure and impure, good and evil and experience all phenomena as uniformly liberated and blissful. The Dalai Lama’s comments position partnered sexual yoga as an extremely elite practice, beyond the qualifications and capacities of all but an incredibly tiny percentage of quasi-mythic religious virtuosi. As Daniel, a convert to Tibetan Buddhism living in California and online acquaintance of mine summed it up during a Facebook discussion in August 2019, contemporary converts hear that “there is technically something called tantric sex, but [the sense is that] it’s so high-level and so separate from anything that you could imagine being sexuality that it shouldn’t even be considered”.

Maeve and the Dalai Lama’s disclaimers recall tales of legendary sexual yogis like Padmasambhava and the ‘crazy’ antinomian anti-establishmentarian saint (*smyon pa*) Drukpa Kunleg (1455 – 1529), whose hagiographies describe him as relying on sexual union to ‘tame’ and transform the poisons of young women, old women, ugly women, exquisitely beautiful women, terrifying demonesses, and even his own mother as part of his missionizing and studied observance of tantric eccentricism (Di Valerio 2015; Dowman 2000). Likewise, the Indian siddha Kukkuripa is said to have remained so loyal to a lowly stray dog who he nursed back to health and who became his retreat cave guardian and companion, despite being granted sundry sensual delights by deities in higher realms, that the mutt transformed into a beautiful *ḍākinī* with whom he practiced sexual yoga and achieved realization (Dowman 2010, 200). Such stories speak to accomplished sexual yogis’ absolute lack of

preference and imply that the execution of Karmamudrā practice is beyond the reach of anyone still subject to ordinary categories and distinctions¹⁷⁹.

Before meeting Nida, having heard accounts like these, I had assumed that only almost-already Buddhas, fantastically gifted adepts of mythic proportion, could ever practice sexual yoga. The relationship between everyday ‘ordinary, problematic desire, preferences, and attachments and the actual practice of sexual yoga remained opaque to me until further research and conversations with Nida. The way in which ordinary desire could progressively be made use of in practice to give way a more stable, pervasive non-dual ‘pure vision’ was clarified for me upon studying Lelung Rinpoche’s ‘A Cure for Horniness’ as well.

Quite remarkably, given the overwhelming androcentricism of Tibetan texts on sexual yoga, Lelung specifically composed his instructions “for the benefit of women who want to fuck” (*rgyo ‘dod bu mo rnams kyi don du bkod*) and with the encouragement of one of his main partners, the Ḍākinī Dorje Kyabche (*rdo rje skyabs byed Da kki ma*). Speaking directly to yoginis training in Karmamudrā practice, he exhorts them as follows:

“Ladies, meditate [and cultivate the perception] that all your partners are beautiful and attractive dakas or tantric heroes (*dpa’ bo*), regardless of whether their faces are handsome or ugly or they are old or young! Rely for a time on attractive, nubile guys whose youthful beauty has matured in order to bring desire (*chags pa*) onto the path. By gradually moving on to other [kinds of partners], your [pure vision] meditation will get easier/more comfortable. Speaking of this, you should gaze at the bodies of beautiful guys, touch them, talk dirty (*kha btsog lab pa*) to them and so on, all without holding back or censoring yourself, doing whatever you want in the moment as fully as you can, all while merging [your activities] with the View and meditating. Perceive the man with your eyes, arouse your desire in stages and maintain mindfulness”

Here Lelung Rinpoche frames conventional attractiveness as a necessary first step for young sexual yoginis; as Ḍākinīs become more proficient in Karmamudrā practice and in cultivating pure vision, in perceiving the ecstatic empty bliss of all phenomena, who or what they practice with becomes increasingly less important¹⁸⁰.

During a joint, informal Q and A conducted with Dr Nida in Boulder in 2017 to flesh out some of the portions of the Karmamudrā book manuscript, Christiana and I quizzed Dr Nida directly about claims like Maeve’s that legitimate Karmamudrā practice could not involve any sexual desire whatsoever. I paraphrased the abovementioned statement from the Dalai Lama and the conversation unfolded as follows:

Nida: It’s the same thing [i.e. when it comes to having no ordinary desire] if it’s true Dzogchen, Mahāmudrā, if it’s true *bskyed rim* [Creation Stage], Six yogas – You have to be free from samsara, samsaric attachments, you cannot mix that kind of meditation experience with samsara, it’s the same issue.

Ben: But at the same time, we also have to use our ordinary body, right? We have to start somewhere – this is the part that confuses me sometimes, because if we’re watching a porno [as Nida had previously discussed as being a legitimate method for generating arousal for sexual yoga practice] –

Nida: The difference is like this. If you say you practice Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen, you more try to use your mind, you more use your mind part, but with Karmamudrā it’s [about] not ignoring the body, but [the] goal is the same.

Christiana: But if you’re free from Samsara [when you do these yogas etc] then why do you have to practice?

Nida: Oh, that’s good too, put that as the answer [to the question, in the book]. And...say this answer is from Christiana! (laughter)

Christiana: But no, I don’t understand – if you’re on that level of realization...then why do you even have the practice?

Ben: Yea, everyone says, you can’t do Karmamudrā until you have no desire! [Christiana interjects, “Yea, ‘one taste!’”]

Nida: Once you have realization then you do the practice, you don’t do the practice, then it’s all the same, no? But the thing is Karmamudrā is not only about sexual desire, it’s all kinds of desires. And some monks they are so good for meditation and this and that [but then] they want to eat only good food and [have] desire for clothes, for experiences. There are so many levels of desire but Karmamudrā, sexual desire is one of the root desires, so if we’re able to transform that one it’s like we’re, how do you say, removing the root, the root of all other desires. But still, when we are eating, when we are drinking, sleeping, [living] a normal ordinary life, we are living with desire. How do you live without desire?

Ben: But so, this is Vajrayāna – when we visualize ourselves as Medicine Buddha, Samantabhadra [i.e. different yidam], part of the reason why we do that is to take it from ordinary desire, so we experience it differently right?

Nida: The thing is like this: let’s say somebody says, “Oh, I’m practicing Mahāmudrā, I’m practicing Dzogchen. I’m not ready for Karmamudrā!” This is simply a misunderstanding of Karmamudrā. And let’s say you’re a layperson and you’re

having sex with your partner, so what do you do? Do you still keep your *rig pa*? No, don't tell me "This is samsara, I forget my *rig pa*!" (Ben, as a simultaneous aside, "Yea, Dzogchen incorporates everything...")

Nida: Yea, yea, yea. If you have sex with *rig pa*, then Great Bliss is a part of *rig pa*. I think it's kind of because Karmamudrā involves sex and partners that's why people are freaking out, but if you look inside the practice it's like that... [Today you hear people] saying 'mindful eating', walking, sleeping – how about 'mindful sex'? "Oh no, no, no, sex is not mindful!" [imitating a scandalized Buddhist]

Ben: [simultaneously, also ventriloquizing hypothetical objector] "Oh no, no, it's Samsara!"

Nida: You can say like that. But in reality, walking is also Samsara, eating is Samsara too, right? As a practitioner what part of your life is beyond Samsara? [If parts of your life are] then why do you need other methods? That's why I think the basis of these things [i.e. objections], the root cause of all these paranoias is because [Karmamudrā practice] is something connected with sex –

Ben: Cultural sensitivity, awkwardness around talking about sex [Nida interjecting, "Exactly!"]...we have double standards –

Nida: [continuing]...But the problem is when you try to repress and deny these things, it doesn't work"

Here Nida explains that objections like Maeve's derive from confusion about how ordinary, samsaric desire is incorporated and transformed through Vajrayāna practice. In Nida's estimation, a sort of culturally motivated sexual exceptionalism is to blame for the such reactions, where Buddhist practitioners are happy to acknowledge that quotidian, 'samsaric' desire-ridden activities like walking or eating activities can be engaged in mindfully (with a Buddhist view and motivation), but balk at the possibility that sexual activity (another everyday reality) could likewise be incorporated as part of practice¹⁸¹.

While Lelung Rinpoche makes it clear that understanding that tantric sex is not "ordinary fucking" is key to proper Karmamudrā practice and that to lapse or fall into ordinariness [i.e. vulgar attachments or desire etc.] is a great sin/fault" (*tha mal du shor ba nyes pa che*), 'worldly' methods of love-making and pleasure enhancement are nonetheless closely connected with Karmamudrā training. Lelung himself offers extended commentary on a series of love-making positions and styles – each named after an emblematic animal –

which the goddess Nyima Zhönnu transmitted to him in his pure vision. Indeed, the whole reason why Nida wanted me to study and translate Ju Mipam Rinpoche's *kāmasāstra* was because it explained with unusual clarity how successful Karmamudrā practice depends on a thorough education in 'ordinary desire' and samsaric love-making. The above comments and exchanges make it clear that the actual relationship in practice between ordinary afflictive emotions and the extraordinary tantric practices that are supposed to transform and provide liberation from these continues to be a source of confusion and contention for practitioners.

Staying with these tensions, I move to Chapters Seven and Eight, which together offer a fuller investigation of the social life of Tibetan *kāmasāstra* or 'worldly' sexological texts (*'dod pa'i bstan bcos*, *döbay tenchö*) and the role that these ambiguously tantric works play in debates about the relative worth of Tibetan indigenous knowledge in relation to other forms of expertise. The Tibetan sexual treatises I examine in the following pages emphasize the refining and enhancement of pleasure and frame better orgasms as a socially constructive force. Moreover, they position the orgasmic potential of Tibetan bodies and especially male Tibetan bodies as a key – if hitherto little considered – component of pro-natalist, nationalist agendas in exile, ones concerned with strengthening and increasing Tibetan populations in the face of precarity.

In Chapter Seven, I examine narratives circulating in exile which have positioned Tibetan men as sexually inferior and 'under-developed' in relation to foreigners, and in dire need of sexual education. Looking at how a range of Tibetan experts have framed foreign sexological expertise in relation to Tibetan knowledge-systems and cultural tendencies, I discuss monastic-scholastic perspectives on lay Tibetan sexual ethics and consider the extent to which these could be said to have currency for sexually active lay Tibetans in McLeod Ganj. In Chapter Eight, I go on to consider medical and tantric approaches to lay sexual ethics, exploring how various Tibetan *döbay tenchö* have managed to popularize tantric yogic

approaches to sexuality and sexual ethics under an ostensibly non-tantric rubric. Even more than their Indian counterparts and prototypes, the Tibetan kāmaśāstra texts I discuss in the following two chapters blur boundaries between Western science and ‘traditional’ knowledge, religious and medical categories and transcendent ‘tantric’ and ordinary, worldly sex. A hybrid genre, in keeping with the trends of preceding chapters, they provide yet another context through which to explore how esoteric Tibetan Buddhist expertise is being mediated and circulated in exile and is playing a part in key debates about cultural preservation and reform and the vitality of a Tibetan nation-in-exile.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

NO GOOD SEX IN TIBET: LAY SEXUAL ETHICS AND SEXOLOGICAL EXPERTISE IN TIBETAN EXILE

“In 2013 in Delhi, India, I met two doctors who were from Nangchen [in Tibet] who had come to India on pilgrimage. The two of them filled me in about how they had experienced great difficulties when they had practiced medicine in their home region. They explained that the difficulty was that the male channels of most of the patients in the majority of hospitals in Nangchen had deteriorated and so they ejaculated very quickly. When I asked what the extent of the problem was, they told me that not only had they encountered surprisingly severe problems with some male patients who ejaculated as soon as they even came close to a woman or touched her leg but they had also come across couples who had divorced or who weren’t getting along as a result of this. Even though these men had used medicines and acupuncture treatments found within the Gyushi or Four Medical Tantras that are the main textbooks of Tibetan traditional medicine and had tried to come up with ways to treat themselves as best they could, they hadn’t been able to make any progress. After that didn’t work they went to several big Chinese hospitals and had treatments and took Western biomedicine and yartsa gumbu but this didn’t help at all. The [two Nanchen] doctors said to me “We heard that you people in the West have [a system of] body training or physical exercises (*lus sbyong*) that help with this problem and so we think that this might be beneficial”. So, encouraged by them, I translated this book.”¹⁸²

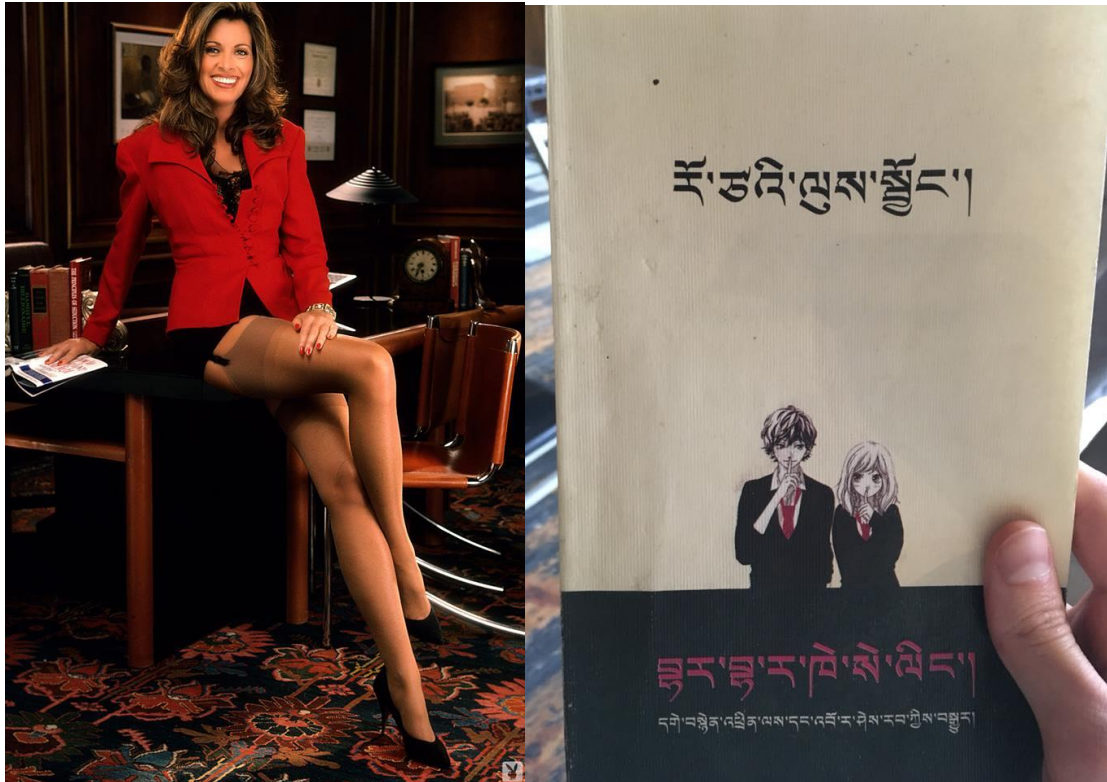
Tibetan translator and ex-monk Ngawang Trinlay at the launch event for his new book *ro tsa’i lus sbyong*, ‘[Yogic] Body Training/Physical Exercises for Virility’ (‘phrin las and shes rab 2015), 24 August 2015, McLeod Ganj.

In the last chapter, I spent some time discussing the significance and function of ejaculatory and non-ejaculatory forms of sexual intercourse in different varieties of Tibetan Buddhist sexual yoga. In doing so, I aimed to clarify the role of sexuality and ejaculation/orgasm control in Tibetan tantric yoga and show how various commentators have distinguished ordinary, thoughtless ‘fucking’ and everyday sexual behavior from ritually efficacious and liberatory ‘cultivated’ sex or sexual meditation. In the following chapter I

return to the key distinction between ‘ordinary’ and ‘cultivated’ sex, only here rather than dealing with specialized procedures undertaken by dedicated religious virtuosi practicing in isolated retreat, I focus instead on the role of yogic or quasi-yogic sexual cultivation among ‘ordinary’ Tibetan lay people (and Tibetan men in particular) living in exile.

Just prior to my becoming involved with Dr Nida on Karmamudrā-related projects, I had learned that friends of mine in McLeod Ganj were involved with their own somewhat different ‘sexual yoga’ project. Rather than involving the translation of esoteric Buddhist knowledge about sexual meditation from Tibetan into English, however, my friends’ work involved the translating of more publicly available – albeit still somewhat esoteric – American or ‘Western’ sexological knowledge about sexual cultivation into Tibetan. These friends were concerned with a different environment too: rather than yogis and yoginis meditating in caves, they were concerned with the everyday bedrooms and precarious, fractured social and erotic worlds of displaced lay Tibetans.

In what follows I take as my central case-study the publication of a Tibetan book that was produced by two ex-monk acquaintances of mine in McLeod Ganj, Ngawang Trinlay (or NT as he is widely known), a French Belgian native whose Tibetan Buddhist convert parents had sent him from Europe to study as a monk in reconstituted Tibetan monasteries in India as a teenager, and his ethnic Tibetan colleague and collaborator from Amdo, Bora Sherab¹⁸³. This book, titled *ro tsa'i lus sbyong* (‘Body Training/Physical Exercises for Virility’) represented the two men’s Tibetan translation and reworking of a 1994 sexual self-help manual ‘How to Make Love All Night (and Drive a Woman Wild): Male Multiple Orgasm and other Secrets for Prolonged Lovemaking,’ written by American professional sexologist and sexual surrogate Barbara Keesling (Keesling 1994).



Barbara Keesling holding her book, from a shoot she did for Playboy magazine alongside the cover of NT and Bora Sherab's translation of her 1994 book (left image by Amy Freytag, published March 31, 1995, see <https://www.playboyplus.com/gallery/classics-the-doctor-is-in>).

Drawing on insights gleaned from her training as a sexual surrogate and from her work with patients experiencing premature ejaculation, Keesling's book offers step-by-step instructions on how male-bodied readers can train their muscles, mind, breath, and gaze in order to develop control over ejaculation, last longer in bed, and experienced multiple, expanded orgasms. More specifically, the core of Keesling's method revolves around the gradual development of control over the so-called PC (pubococcygeal) muscles as part of ejaculation control. As he explains in the opening citation, NT decided to translate and reorganize Keesling's text for Tibetan audiences due to what Tibetan medical experts had described to him as an apparent public health crisis of sexual dysfunction among Tibetan men both inside and outside Tibet. In this context, traditional Tibetan knowledge related to sexuality is positioned as inadequate for addressing this crisis. Rather, it is 'modern,'

‘Western’ knowledge that can supply what Tibetans are lacking, that can prevent the breakdown of vital bodily functions and the equally vital social relations which these enable.

To contextualize NT and Bora Sherab’s project and the apparent crisis that inspired it, I begin this chapter with an assessment of discourses from inside and outside of Tibet that promote the idea that Tibetans do not know how to have ‘good sex’. Reviewing narratives about sexually benighted Tibetans, I reflect on what exactly counts as ‘good sex’ in these representations and discuss the question of Tibetan lay sexuality and sexual ethics more broadly. Who has been responsible for producing authoritative expertise and rules about lay sexuality in Tibetan and Himalayan societies? Who exactly is producing expertise on lay sexuality today and to what ends? I show how three categories of expert have been primarily concerned with producing knowledge about lay sexuality in Tibetan Buddhist societies: monk and ex-monk scholars; ngakpa/ma; and doctors.

Throughout the pages that follow, I reflect on the extent to which these sources of knowledge about lay sexuality have relevance for lay Tibetans today and why this is so, in order to better understand how it might be that Tibetans could be positioned as needing foreign expertise and assistance to solve their sexual problems. In analyzing the complex recasting of an American sexual self-help book in a Tibetanized medical and yogic register, I reflect in particular on how this Tibetan translation adds to a longstanding body of commentary on the traditional Tibetan medical concept of *ro tsa*, a word which has been used to describe both disorders of the libido and sexual virility in distinctly gendered ways.

Retaining a focus on *ro tsa*, I then move on to examine public health initiatives around Tibetan lay sexuality currently being developed by Dr Nida. In basing his teaching and public outreach activities firmly on Tibetan traditional medical and tantric Buddhist sources, in advocating for the integration of worldly and transcendent perspectives, and in

positioning traditional Tibetan knowledge as something from which sexually troubled *non-Tibetans* might benefit, Dr Nida offers a significant counter-point to narratives about the inadequacy of indigenous Tibetan models for responding to contemporary problems and concerns.

At the end of the previous chapter I introduced the genre of Tibetan *kāmaśāstra* – *döbay tenchö* or ‘treatises on desire’ – and highlighted the way in which Tibetan tantric authorities have understood ‘worldly’ sexological expertise to be a crucial adjunct to teachings on Tibetan Buddhist sexual meditation. In this chapter I return to Tibetan *döbay tenchö* through NT and Bora Sherab’s translation project. I describe how their publication was immediately framed as the most recent example of a Tibetan language ‘treatise on desire’, a move which irresistibly invited comparison with other historical instantiations of the genre and called into question claims about the originality and necessity of Keesling’s ‘Western’ teachings. As translations and reworkings of Indian treatises on the *ars erotica*, Tibetan *kāmaśāstra* texts point to a longer and more complex history of Tibetan reworking and indigenizing of foreign expertise about lay sexuality in order to meet Tibetan needs and priorities than discourses about Tibetan sexological inadequacies would suggest.

Highlighting the very different contexts in which *kāmaśāstra* texts have circulated in Tibet compared to India, I position NT and Bora Sherab’s and Nida’s sexological treatises within a particular lineage or intellectual genealogy of sexual experts in Tibet. I discuss my own work to translate Nida’s *döbay tenchö* verses which offer instruction on sexual intercourse from the perspective of Tibetan traditional medicine, tantric Buddhism, and biomedicine into English and explore how categories of ordinary and non-ordinary sex and desire are being reframed and negotiated as part of contemporary cultural revitalization and social upliftment projects for Tibetans in diaspora.

If public health implies a move towards transparency, towards shared knowledge and shared improvements, in what sense can the restricted, initiated knowledge and expertise of Tibetan ngakpa/ma play a role in public health initiatives in Tibetan diaspora? In what follows, I investigate how tantric yogic expertise faded in and out of view in the context of expert knowledge production around sexuality – and especially lay sexuality – during my fieldwork in McLeod in 2015 and 2016. With this distinction between secret, restricted expertise and public knowledge and collective problems in mind, I reflect on what these presences and absences imply about how vital Tibetan communities and vital Tibetan futures are being imagined in exile. Through my analysis I will make clear the importance of sex and orgasm as objects of cultural, medical and moral concern in contemporary Tibetan exile contexts, and highlight the centrality of a specific type of disciplined, ‘desiring’ body for the forging of particular kinds of ‘modern’ Tibetan subjectivities and for the imagining of a stable and vital Tibetan nation-in-exile.

How To Make Love All Night and Heal A Fractured Community: An Epidemic of Sexual Dysfunction in Exile

On the morning of the 24th of August 2015, I attended the launch of *ro tsa'i lus sbyong* in an event space above a small hotel in McLeod. I had first heard about Bora Sherab and NT’s efforts to translate Barbara Keesling’s manual from English into Tibetan a few months before this launch event from two inji American friends who worked at Esukhia, the Tibetan language school and translation house where I attended a month or two of lessons in colloquial Tibetan at the start of my fieldwork in 2015. These two friends, Leif and Katherine, each assisted with the book’s publication in their own ways: Leif brainstormed with the translators and other Esukhia staff about strategies for translating technical terms relating to sexuality into Tibetan and Katherine helped design and produce the various

illustrations, diagrams and charts which appeared in the text, as well as one version of the book's cover (see above).

Early chats with Leif and Katherine about the book made it clear that the translation was a kind of passion project (pun intended) for the two ex-monks and that the two were preparing their translation with considerable dedication and care. That said, these initial mentions came with a fair deal of wink-wink nudge nudging, and from all the coy, conspiratorial smiles and arched brows Katherine and Leif would treat me to when the topic came up I was left with the impression that the translation was almost a kind of dare, NT and Sherab's attempt to see if they could pull off something a little silly and outrageous and actually get people to go along with it.

My take on things shifted somewhat when I attended the book's launch. While the odd chuckle and coy smile certainly made an appearance, the event had a tone of solemnity and formality I was not prepared for by my earlier discussions. Aside from NT and Sherab la, invited speakers for the event included Yeshe Gelek, junior *slob spyi* (principal or general instructor) from the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute or Mentseekhang, Ju Tenkyong a researcher from the Monlam Tibetan Information Technology Institute, and French professor of Tibetan Studies Françoise Robin a.k.a Chönyi Wangmo at INALCO, the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations in Paris. Rather than just being a gag or personally motivated project, each one of the speakers at the event affirmed that NT and Sherab's translation was a laudable response in the face of a real public health crisis.

As mentioned, the translators identified an apparent epidemic of premature ejaculation and sexual dysfunction broadly affecting Tibetan men both inside and outside Tibet as their primary motivation for producing their book. During his speech, NT identified several socio-political, structural factors as the ultimate causes and conditions of the current

epidemic of Tibetan sexual dysfunction, namely, experiences of loss, displacement, and trauma which had emerged in the wake of Chinese occupation and natural disasters, and had taken their toll on Tibetans' minds, bodies, and relationships. Indeed, NT and Bora Sherab are explicit about their public health motivations in the book's preface, where they note that they undertook their translation "on the basis that one's personal, individual health constitutes the health of one's entire family and society" (Trinley and Sherab, 2015, vii).

Up until attending the launch, I had been entirely unaware that there existed a perception that Tibetan men were suffering from premature ejaculation and sexual dysfunction on an epidemic scale. To my knowledge, no significant, quantitative research has been done on Tibetan men's sexual health either inside Tibet or across the Tibetan diaspora. There was certainly no way for me to easily confirm such perceptions with statistics. Still, no one at the launch event (or for that matter really anyone that I mentioned the idea to afterwards) actively countered or discounted the claim (or possibility) that Tibetan men and women were experiencing sexual problems to a degree worth being concerned about.

This discourse of widespread especially male Tibetan sexual dysfunction was echoed resoundingly by online materials I chanced upon several months after the launch, however. While scrolling through my Facebook feed one day in McLeod, I came across a remarkable opinion piece written by a Tibetan man from Amdo, which a well-known Tibetan scholar had shared on his wall. Published on the 4th of April 2016, this Tibetan language article had been doing the rounds on social media platforms like Wechat. The title of the piece caught my attention: "Here are the reasons there's no good sex in Tibet" (*bod la 'khrig spyod yag po med pa'i rgyu rkyen 'di red*)¹⁸⁴. The author of the piece, who uses the handle Charnak ('black rain', *char nag*), identifies himself as an ex-monk or *grwa log*. In his article, he reflects critically on the sexual habits of his lay Tibetan peers in Amdo, northeastern Tibet, and gives

his opinions on why the quality of sex in Tibet is, at least as far as he is concerned, extremely poor.

The ex-monk starts off his essay by talking about his own general lack of sexual experience: “It’s only been two years since I returned my monk’s vows. Before now, I haven’t had a lot of sex, so it’s quite possible that I am wrong about a lot of things when it comes to talking about intercourse”, he explains. Yet rather than continuing to bemoan his lack of competitive edge in sex as a latterly non-celibate male, Black Rain goes on to mount a strong critique of what could be called contemporary hook-up culture in Amdo, and contemporary Tibetan society more generally. He explains how his male peers are willing to go to any length to score with girls. Even if they don't know a girl at all they'll use any stratagem they can think of to "ejaculate within five to ten minutes, or a short time" just to add a new conquest to their lists and boost the running scores they keep of their conquests.

Charnak describes the kind of sex these men have in some detail: as soon as a guy and a girl go to bed together, he says, after only having spoken very little, the moment the man’s penis gets hard and he feels the least desire, he gets on top of and directs himself inside of the girl’s vagina. As soon as he penetrates her, he just flops up and down a lot and tries to ejaculate, without giving any thought at all to the woman’s feelings or whether or not she’s aroused. Once it is over, the guy gets off the girl and immediately puts on his underwear. As if the two have “woken up from being asleep” they then start talking about all sorts of everyday, familiar topics like nothing has happened.

Charnak provides his readers with a whole list of problems and factual statements (*bod kyi 'khrig spyod thad kyi dngos yod brjod pa*) relating to sex in Tibet. As alluded to above, men are selfish and lazy lovers, young male and female sexual partners barely know each other, they go around shrouded in secrecy and shame, and do not communicate

effectively to ensure each other's mutual pleasure. Locations for engaging in unbridled passion are limited: for fear of waking up family members and neighbors during sex, couples may keep quiet, and therefore stifle their pleasure. Men and women are also unfamiliar with and afraid of their own bodies and sexual reactions. “[Guys and girls] are really afraid of touching each other’s genitals at any point during sex. If the guy’s hand should be so unfortunate as to happen to make contact with the girl’s genitals, it’s said that the girl will actually recite a full Vajrasattva mantra”¹⁸⁵ Driving home this point, Charnak asserts that some Tibetan women can go for forty years of their life without even seeing much in the way of a penis beyond those of male children.

Likewise, quite a lot of Tibetan men try to keep their eyes shut as much as possible during sex, and it is quite possible that many men may also go through their whole lives without ever getting anything like a real, informative look at adult women’s vaginas. In addition to these facts, Charnak mentions discussions he has had with Tibetan women which serve as evidence that the “Tibetan sex” he’s describing is incapable of satisfying Tibetan women’s desires. A conversation with a woman from his region who tells him she often doesn’t get wet during sex and is not able to enjoy it even though the man does, exemplifies this problem. Finally, in his closing paragraph, Charnak summarizes his points and gives what he considers to be the three principle reasons why there's no good sex in Tibet:

"Thus, there need to be some sort of rules or regulations, an organized system for experiencing orgasms/sexual pleasure (*de ltar bde ba myong bar sgrig gzhi zhig dgos*). Not only does Tibet not have this, but it is hard for Tibetans to take on other frameworks (*sgrig gzhi gzhan pa*) as well. There are three reasons for this:

The first is that men and woman fumble about in the dark like thieves at night - let alone even feeling love for each other they aren't even really acquainted. If you're embarrassed about whatever feelings might arise or about what you might say you really won't be able to feel any kind of pleasure or happiness at all with such big restrictions. It's common for Chinese people and other ethnicities to not get married until they've fostered a lot of love and affection for each other, and physical intercourse takes place after that. If this were to also become common-sense practice for us Tibetans, we'd have every cause at our disposal to be able to have good sex

lives following on from that. Secondly: no matter who you are, male or female, if you don't have good physical hygiene - and in particular, if you haven't washed your genitals in a long time, it's a safe bet that no one's going to want to even look at or smell your privates, let alone suck or lick them. As such, to have good sex, you really need genuinely good personal hygiene. Foreign men and women clean themselves regularly and there's said to exist the notion that keeping one's genitals clean in particular is a way of respecting one's spouse or lover. Were we to take on this notion as well, we'd have every cause and condition at our disposal to be able to have good sex lives. Thirdly: There exists a superstitious view (*lta ba'i rnam rtog cig*) that one's own genitals are dirty. There's the superstitious view that if a boy even so much as lies under a girl his loong-ta (*rlung rta*, or store of good fortune) will diminish. This is one of the principle obstacles to experiencing full pleasure during love-making. Were we to adopt the attitude that anything we might do during sex is appropriate, or that anything we might think of we can say, we'd have every means at our disposal to be able to have good sex. Whoever lacks any of these conditions will never have the circumstances for being able to have truly excellent or satisfying sex (*'khrig spyod phun sum tshogs pa*)."

Coming to the end of Charnak's piece at least one thing is clear: as far as this Tibetan dralok is concerned ordinary, lay Tibetans lack any endemic knowledge about sexuality worth celebrating or perpetuating. Charnak's liberal use of vernacular terms specific enough to require a glossary serves to emphasize his broader claim about the limited utility of Tibetan customs writ large. While the ex-monk's quaint linguistic euphemisms and indirections – the 'little worms' (*'bu lu*, i.e. penises) and 'shacking up' (*g.yab*)¹⁸⁶ of the grasslands of Amdo and its hook-up cultures – add local color and a certain ethnographic flavor and authority to Charnak's report, they help to impress on his readers that Tibetan's sexual knowledge is woefully provincial. Challenging the triumphant tone of his male interlocutors boasting at the start of his article about their sexual prowess, Charnak portrays Tibetan laypeople as primarily defined by lack and *deficiency* when it comes to sexuality. More than this, Tibetans' sexual shortcomings are ultimately to be remedied through outside intervention: being sexually backward, Tibetans must emulate the habits of better, more developed outsiders for societal and self-improvement.

Tibetan men in need of instruction from more sexually experienced or evolved foreigners reappears as a theme in a rather bizarre 2011 Tibetan language interview

(“Interview Conducted with a European Woman about Sexual Desire”, *yo rob kyi bu mo zhig la 'khrig sred kyi skor nas bcar 'dri byas pa*) conducted by Amdowa writer Maduk Je (*rma dug lce*) with an unnamed inji Frenchwoman (Lce 2011)¹⁸⁷. In quizzing his anonymous informant about how she became involved with Tibetans and came to have many Tibetan boyfriends, Maduk Je positions her as a sort of generic Western sexual expert, despite the fact that she consistently denies having any especially definitive or authoritative positions to offer on sex and relationships.

Maduk Je asks her a range of explicit questions: about the differences between casual and loving sex, about different cultural norms around sexual development and courtship, about her preferences regarding penis type, her attitudes on and experiences with lesbian sex, thoughts on the ideal duration of love-making, whether Tibetan men make good lovers and so on. Even when his Jane Doe/Madame DuPont does not necessarily confirm his representations of relative Tibetan sexual inferiority, Maduk Je’s comparative project and assumptions are clear. At one point he questions his informant as follows:

“Question: One thing I know clearly is that compared with Westerners (*mgo ser*, ‘yellow heads,’ a common Amdowa moniker for fair-skinned, white passing foreigners), Tibetans very much lag behind (*ches rjes lus yin pa de red*) in terms of their sexual skills (“methods for inciting arousal and giving pleasure”, *dod pa bde ster thabs steng nas*). Yet you want to have Tibetan boyfriends or lovers rather than Western ones (*bod pa 'i bu la dga' po byed dgos*). Why is this?

Answer: For me, Tibetan guys don’t lag behind in the art of sexual intercourse or in their skills or methods (*'khrig spyod kyi sgyu rtsal lam thams lam*) compared to *mgo ser* at all. I’ve been with many Tibetan guys that have given me the sort of pleasure that’s made my body [feel] like it was burning [with desire]. Still, in general, most Tibetan guys’ penises aren’t that big.”

Question: Generally, if you compare them to Westerners (*nub phyogs pa*) and black men (*mi nag*), Tibetan [guys’] penises are really small. Not only that, I’ve heard it said that compared to black and white guys (*mgo ser*), Tibetan guys ejaculate faster (*bod pa 'i bu tshor khu ba myur bar*) too. Is that true?

Answer: I’ve heard what you say above before. Tibetan guys’ penises aren’t that big but for me that’s okay. There’re probably some white women who prefer big penises. Generally, the size and depth, of each woman’s vagina is different so there is

definitely an individual preference, a favorite size, according to [each woman's] proportions (*spyir bu mo re re'i mo mtshan che chung dang gting zab tshad mi 'dra bas de la dpag pa'i rang nyid kyi dga' phyogs shig yod nges red*). I think ejaculating quickly or not is something that depends on whether one has sex for a long time or not. For example, when you have sex for the first time you might ejaculate quickly (*khu ba myur du 'chor srid*) but then the second and third time it will naturally take longer to ejaculate”

Despite his informant's resistance to speaking for 'Westerners' as a whole and her unwillingness to treat premature ejaculation as an intrinsic feature of Tibetan men and their bodies, Maduk Je nonetheless pursues a line of questioning that naturalizes differences between national and ethnic groups and which reaffirms his fellow Amdowa Charnak's take on Tibetan sex lives. Both writers seem fairly convinced that Tibetans are developmentally challenged when it comes to sex, compared to other demographics. Both seem sure that Tibetan men do not know how or are at least unsure of how to have the kind of sex that would satisfy foreigners.

Further examples of such inter-ethnic comparison and concerns about contemporary Tibetan men's level of sexual education appear in an interesting, small volume called 'Naked/Raw Sex Stories' (*'khrig gtam dmar rjen ma*), which appears to have been self-published in Dharamsala in 2010 by Amdowa newcomer Arik Gyurme (*a rig 'gyur med*, also known as *'gyur med don 'grub* and by his pen-name *a gangs rtsen*; 'gyur med don 'grub 2010). A writer and journalist living in McLeod, Arik Gyurme, like Charnak, was a monk in his native region of Amdo from the age of nine until seventeen. He explains in the preface to this his second book that he had little aptitude for either monastic studies in Tibet or for learning English in exile. Given his lack of facility in religious or political knowledge, he decided to put his talent for writing to good use by composing real-life accounts of ordinary lay Tibetans' lives and relationships, which young, lay readers would find accessible and interesting. He explains that while he could not include information relevant to every class of reader in his book, he nonetheless composed it with the hope that it might help diversify and

supplement the already mountainous body of existing Tibetan literature just a little and appeal to a new generation of young Tibetans. As he puts it:

“Our current Tibetan language publications can’t provide any additional mental nourishment for [young, contemporary-minded Tibetans’ already] eclectic opinions (*nga tsho’i da lta’i bod skad yig steng gi brtsams chos khag gis khong tshor sna ‘dzoms rang bzhin gi bsam blo’i rgyags phye zhig snon thub kyi med*). What publications exist are about the inner science of Buddhism, politics, [the formal] study of literature, the arts, and so on. There are few publications which truly offer a living representation of actual social life and which truly embody the things that lay householder men and women like and are interested in (*khyim pa pho mo’i tsho’i dga’ kha ‘khyer phyogs*).” (‘gyur med don ‘grub 2010, v)

Arik Gyurme notes further that he intends his personal observations and anecdotal material about the “way that worldly householder men and women indulge in their existence and live their lives, about actual social life and what [they] recognize as [part of] living a happy life” to not only entertain readers but to serve a didactic function as well. He notes that in writing his book, he wanted to not only exemplify model householder behavior himself but also encourage his (implicitly male) readers to “love their wives, be kind to their children and express the true essence of a properly behaved, moral householder” (‘gyur med don ‘grub 2010, iv).

The ex-monk appeals to various sources of information in making claims about what it means to be a good or bad husband or wife and about what counts as good or bad sex. Discussing adultery, sexual techniques, pornography, women’s pleasure and rights, Buddhist versus ‘foreigner’ theories and representations of transgenderism and sundry other topics, he references his own experiences, stories from friends and things he has seen in pornographic movies (he also cites ex-monk Gendun Chöpel’s celebrated nineteenth century *döbay tenchö*, discussed further below, more than once). Moreover, like both Charnak and Maduk Je, he frequently contrasts Tibetan sexual practices with those of foreigners and, like his fellow Amdowa critics, he more often than not finds Tibetan sexual behaviors and capacities wanting. For example, in a short section in his book titled “Please Learn some General

Knowledge/Common Sense about Sex!” (*‘khrig pa’i skor gyi rgyun shes sbyong rogs*), Arik Gyurme reprises Charnak and Maduk Je’s theme in a striking fashion:

“Further, if you take foreigners (*phyi gling ba*) for example, [their] women are capable of making a lot of comments to their husbands about what’s really in their hearts, about the gist of what’s on their minds (*sems gnad*). When they have sex they are bold enough to explain how forcefully, how quickly or slowly, for how long and so on they themselves want [to do things]. On the other hand, [foreign] men are also totally acquainted with miscellaneous common-sense or general knowledge about sex (*skyes pa tsho yang ‘khrig pa’i skor gyi rgyun shes sna tshogs la byang chub pa rkyang ste*). When it comes to sexual activity, they don’t really encounter problems to any very great extent and were they to do so, they would receive guidance/take up recommendations from sex educators (*‘khrig sred slob ston pa’i sar nas slob ston len pa*), they would take it upon themselves to read books and to watch movies. [Foreign] couples speak to each other in a frank, heart-felt way (*kha bsang bo’i sems gtam bshad*) and find solutions. These sorts of contemporary customs haven’t been popularized in Tibet, however. We Tibetans hear over and over about some [Tibetan] women who despite remaining their whole lives with their husbands never experience any pleasure from sex [alternatively, never orgasm from sex, *‘khrig pa’i bde ba ma myong ba*]. Thus, we [Tibetan men] need to pay attention to whether or not our own wives are able to experience orgasm during sex, as a general or standard [part of our] of moral behavior as [husbands, *des na nga tshos rang rang gi chung ma tsho ‘khrig pa’i skabs mthar thug gib de ba myong thub kyi yod med la spyir btang ba’i gzhis spyod ‘ga’i thad du mnyam ‘jog dgos*]. It’s okay for us to ask questions about and investigate the matter, and so on. For example, some women complain and argue with their husbands for no reason. When their husbands respond to this, they may answer back willfully (*rkang btsugs nas*). It might happen that [he] says one word to her and she answers two back. Women might argue about all sorts of random, petty things (*don dag tsag tsig gi steng nas*) as well. But in reality, the real reason (*gzhi ngo ma ni*) they are fighting isn’t the matter at hand, immediately in view (*mig snga’i don dag de*), it’s because they are holding onto suffering psychologically (*sems steng gi sdug bsngal zhig gis bslangs pa yin*). This mental pain they are experiencing is [due to the fact that] no matter how many times they have sex with their husbands they don’t ultimately get any sexual pleasure” (2010, 76 -77).

What are we to make of these claims of supposed sexual inadequacy? Charnak identifies many social and cultural factors which are to blame for this state of affairs but chief among them is that Tibetans do not possess an organized ‘system’ or set of regulations, what might be thought of as ‘best practices’ (*sgrig gzhi*) for achieving orgasms or experiencing sexual pleasure. In Charnak’s view, superior quality sex thus depends on something like discipline, control or mastery. Compared to the haphazard encounters and random fumbings of his peers, organized sex provides the necessary conditions for mutual pleasure and respect

between partners, which in turn is what helps make sex ‘good’. While ordered or regulated sex structures passion constructively, ‘superstition’ appears in Charnak’s account as something like a parody of this sort of order: rather than deepening communication and facilitating mutual trust and desire between men and women, superstition constrains these, leading to inhibition, anxiety and the impossibility of openness.

Outside Interventions: On Foreign Sexual Aid and the Worth of Tradition

The idea that Tibetan men were in dire need of an outside system of sexual cultivation unknown in Tibet was central to the *ro tsa’i lus sbyong* book launch. NT’s story of the Nangchen doctors echoed Charnak’s vision of an impoverished Tibetan sexual knowledge economy, only in this case NT, as an inji endowed with Tibetan cultural and linguistic fluency, was himself well positioned to bridge worlds and enable the sort of outsourcing of expertise that Charnak diagnoses as necessary. NT’s colleague Bora Sherab highlights NT’s significance as a foreign expert and cultural mediator explicitly in his foreword to the pair’s book, where he explains his relationship to NT and how he came to work on the project. Sherab notes that prior to becoming involved in the project with NT he had never dared to read anything in English other than a handful of children’s books and did not possess a level of English comprehension sufficient for a book such as Keesling’s. “However,” he goes on, “my esteemed colleague, Frenchman Ngawang Trinley, who not only knows English but is broadly knowledgeable in both Buddhism and *nag rtsi* [Chinese style astrology], encouraged me again and again, saying ‘Both information about preventing sexually transmitted diseases (*reg dug*) and bodily training or exercises like this are really important and needed for the well-being (*phan bde*, ‘benefit and happiness’) of lay society, so if the two of us translate this together, how does that sound to you?’ Since he is someone who is decent and upright, and has more interest in, love for, and essential understanding of the full scope of Tibetan culture than the average Tibetan, I happily responded to his request of me.” (Trinley and Sherab,

2105, viii-ix). Once again, the average or ordinary Tibetan (*bod mi phal pa*) comes up short, as lacking in vital knowledge or fundamental understanding.

Françoise Robin's closing comments reprised the theme of Tibetan deficiencies, even as they acknowledged the breadth and richness of Tibetan language, knowledge, and literature. Robin was in McLeod Ganj consulting with staff at Esukhia as part of plans to incorporate some of the organization's teaching-Tibetan-as-a-second-language pedagogical materials into INALCO's Tibetan language curriculum and had agreed at the last minute to be a speaker at the book launch. Last to speak on the schedule, Robin addressed the audience in Amdo-accented Tibetan and introduced herself and her history of scholarship on contemporary Tibetan literature. She congratulated the translators on their efforts and expressed how important she felt the translation of valuable information composed in other languages and in other cultural contexts into Tibetan was for the continued vitality of Tibetans' own communities:

“Up until now, I've observed that most Tibetan translators have translated traditional scriptures and Buddhist philosophy into several other languages. I've got the feeling that famous texts in these other languages haven't been translated into Tibetan, however. I think that if one wants to fight to maintain the richness of one's language and people and really wants to prevent its essence from being destroyed and make sure that it is preserved and endures, it is very important that Tibetan people import outside(r) information (*phyi phyogs kyi shes bya dag nang 'dren bya thub pa*) as much as they can.” (Don grub, “‘dod pa'i bstan bcos”)

Robin emphasized that such an approach would help to foster a more cosmopolitan mindset among Tibetans. Rather than decreasing appreciation for traditional knowledge, importing foreign expertise could in fact help preserve indigenous culture.

Robin and others' claims about the importance of foreign expertise for solving Tibetan problems and securing the vitality of Tibetan communities and traditions were complicated somewhat by independent Tibetan historian Ju Tenkyong, however, who spoke

just prior to Robin. Offering a brief history of Tibetan *kāmasāstra*/ *döbay tenchö* texts, Tenkyong challenged overly simple narratives of Tibetan inadequacy or inferiority. Like the other speakers, he automatically and unproblematically positioned NT and Bora Sherab’s translation as an example of the pre-existing genre of Tibetan *döten* (*‘dod [pa’i] bstan [bcos]*). In doing so, Tenkyong name-checked key, ‘original’ *döten* texts composed by celebrated Tibetan authors in Tibet, those of Ju Mipam who we met at the end of the previous chapter, and his immediate successor the controversial ex-Geluk monk Gendun Chöpel. While Tenkyong acknowledged that the genre of Tibetan *döbay tenchö* originally derived from Indian models, he also made it clear that the Tibetan treatises on desire he was highlighting were hardly just direct imports or translations of foreign knowledge. Instead, he emphasized the richness, if not outright superiority, of Tibetan *kāmasāstra* texts and traditional knowledge, and framed these as indigenous resources with qualities unmatched by foreign equivalents. As he explained:

“I should say that I think it’s become imperative that we read our own traditional Tibetan *döbay tenchö* texts. I think that our treatises on desire are the best texts there are. Treatises on desire from various Indian kingdoms only have two kinds of *nyams ‘gyur* while our Tibetan treatises have four kinds, and I haven’t seen these aforementioned *nyams ‘gyur*, which go along with the path of ultimate liberation (*mthar thug thar pa’i lam la ‘gro rgyu*), spoken of even indirectly [in non-Tibetan texts].” (Don grub, “‘dod pa’i bstan bcos”)

Tenkyong’s comments struck a somewhat awkward, uneven note at the event. Rather than focus on the importance or novelty of NT and Sherab’s translation, Tenkyong emphasized an existing history of specifically Tibetan forms of knowledge about sex and desire. His call to re-evaluate “our traditional texts” and his emphasis on the richness of traditional, existing Tibetan sexology ended up downplaying the overall significance of NT and Sherab’s contribution and threatened to render the foreign cures and expertise it purported to contain somewhat redundant. Specifically, Tenkyong argued that what made Tibetan sexology unique, superior, and worth celebrating was that it incorporated a

soteriological dimension, was that, in a word, it was tantric. Yet, somewhat ironically, one could argue that it has been precisely Tibetan döten's close association with Secret Mantra which has prevented it from enjoying wider currency in Tibetan society and from contributing to public health initiatives.

The anthropologist (end right) attends a book launch



From left to right: Françoise Robin, Bora Sherab, Yeshe Gelek, Ju Tenkyong, and NT pose for a photo at the ro tsa'i lus sbyong launch (photos from Don grub 2015)

Tantric Secrets of the East or Worldly, Western Science? On Siting Ejaculation Control Expertise

As suggested in the last chapter, ‘worldly’ kāmāśāstra knowledge came to be associated with religious practices and practitioners to a much greater degree in Tibet than in India. While some Indian kāmāśāstra did with time come to adopt concepts and terminology from tantric sources (channels, seed-syllables, mantras, ‘twilight language’ etc., see Ali 2011), the goals and content of Indian kāmāśāstra literature had very little to do with tantric yoga. Simply put, while tantric yogic practices are concerned with liberation and the transmutation of desire, kāmāśāstra is taken up with the pursuit of sensual pleasure purely for its own sake. Still, with the prioritizing of sexual yoga practices in Vajrayāna, tantric Buddhists came to repurpose Indian kāmāśāstra literature as means to tantric ends. Dr Nida summarizes this relationship in the introductory essay to his three-part dōbay tenchö written in 2012, as follows:

“There are differences between the worldly system of sexual union and the tantric one. The worldly system refers to dōbay tenchö, ‘treatises on desire/sexology’ or Kāmāśāstra and the tantric system is known as *las rgya* or Karmamudrā [in Sanskrit]. The basic or foundational methods of union [i.e. penetrative sex] and so on [in each of these] are the same but they differ insofar as they involve visualization and meditation or not. The ultimate goal for Kamashastrists is worldly or samsaric pleasure, whereas ngakpa use Kāmāśāstra to seek ultimate, innately arising Great Bliss, which is trans-worldly. Ju Mipam, in his treatise on desire, after schooling his readers in the benefits of worldly sexual intercourse then teaches a little on the tantric system of sexual union and its method of meditation: *‘Through the many forms of inciting desire/the body is made extremely supple/ one comes to experience the highest pleasure or joy/ the channels are ‘tamed’ or subjugated, the winds conquered/one discovers the primordial wisdom or gnosis of bliss/for those who possess the pith instructions on these methods/their individual channel knots will be released/[Yet,] if one engages in [tantric] union without knowing these one will stir up sicknesses through disturbances of the three humors of rlung, mkhris pa and bad kan/ For this reason, make use of the gnostic or tantric method of union [only] after having gained expertise in the worldly method’*. This teaching on the Path of Great Bliss in which one ‘[undertakes] the tantric or gnostic method of sexual union once one has learned the worldly method’ is an extremely good one.”

While the primary audience for kāmāśāstra literature in India was educated, lay courtly elites, prior to the latter part of the twentieth century and the period of exile, dōten texts in Tibet were never really popularized for lay audiences but remained instead the domain of elite monastic scholars of Sanskrit *belle lettres* and monastic and non-monastic tantric yogi/nis (Jacoby 2017). I am currently aware of five different Tibetan language kāmāśāstra texts: 1) the earliest known Tibetan language kāmāśāstra is a translation of a short Indian text which is simply titled *'dod pa'i bstan bcos* and is attributed to an Indian expert by the name of Surupa (*gzugs bzang* in Tibetan). Despite dealing with exoteric, worldly sexual cultivation, the text appears in Tantra section of the *bstan 'gyur* or canonical Tibetan Buddhist collection of translated treatises, and as Jacoby (2017, 331-332) demonstrates, must be at least as old as the early 14th century 2) Ju Mipam's already discussed dōten composed in 1886 3) ex-monk Gendun Chöpel's dōten and self-conscious sequel to Mipam's text written in 1939 but only published and widely disseminated from 1969 onwards 4) Dr Nida's three-part dōten written in 2012 and published later online and 5) NT and Bora Sherab's reworking of Keesling's text published in 2015¹⁸⁸.

The tension between Tenkyong's celebration of the richness and incomparability of Tibetan sexology and Charnak, Maduk Je, NT and others' claims that indigenous Tibetan cultural resources were insufficient to solve lay Tibetans' contemporary sexual problems obliges us to consider more closely what the relationships between elite, specialist expertise and various Tibetan publics have been and why. In the rest of this chapter and in Chapter Eight, I reflect on the different traditional authorities that have been involved in generating expert knowledge about lay sexuality and consider the extent to which this knowledge has been relevant or meaningful for Tibetan laypeople. In surveying monastic, tantric yogic, and medical knowledge production about sexuality in Tibet, I show how NT and Bora Sherab's – as well as Dr Nida's own earlier – treatise on desire both draw on indigenous Tibetan

knowledge systems in ways that complicate attempts to label *döbay tenchö* as either foreign or Tibetan, ‘traditional’ or modern, or as embodying practices or ethics that are ‘esoteric’ or for all and sundry.

The *ro tsa’i lus sbyong* launch event pointed to significant ambiguities or tensions related to the currency and commensurability of different systems of knowledge or expertise for Tibetans today; currency both in the sense of the circulation or reach and of the value of native ‘traditions’ versus ‘Western’ science. The contradictions and ironies that emerged in the clashes and spaces between the different knowledge economies and ethnoscapings (Appadurai 1996) which informed the launch event are perhaps no better captured by how Dr Barbara Keesling herself describes the ultimate origin of the techniques taught in her book. In what is perhaps one of the greatest ironies involved in NT and Sherab’s whole translation project, Keesling herself does not identify the knowledge in her book as proprietary Western scientific expertise at all but characterizes it instead as a set of largely self-taught, experimental, and only loosely or latterly systematized techniques¹⁸⁹, whose ultimate progenitors were in fact ‘Oriental’ tantric yogis (!). Providing a rough historiography for male multi-orgasm-icity, Keesling proclaims:

“[You might be saying to yourself] I Want to Believe This, But...

I sense that you are very close to becoming a believer. Once you know the secret formula for male multiple orgasms, it all begins to make perfect sense, doesn't it? But I wouldn't be surprised if you're wondering right now how something so extraordinary and so simple could go unnoticed for so long. After all, the sexual revolution ended years ago. How could we have missed a phenomenon like male multiple orgasm? If such a thing is as easy for any man to achieve as I say it is, why isn't every guy in America doing it? And why aren't you doing it right now? These are really important questions. And I have some surprising answers: FACT: Male multiple orgasm is nothing new. Eastern cultures, for example, have been aware of male multiple orgasm and nonejaculatory orgasm (NEO) for many years, and it is not difficult to find references to it in their tantric literature and historical literature. High up on mountaintops in faraway lands, both men and women have been having a good old time for a long, long time.” (1994, 61)

Here Keesling cashes in on a longstanding archive of the imagination that links remote and nebulous “Eastern cultures” with ancient, esoteric expertise pertaining to extraordinary bodily and mental cultivation. Although she does not explicitly associate the knowledge of cultivated, non-ordinary orgasm with Tibet in particular, the picture she paints of generation after generation of both men and women “having a good old time high up on mountain tops in faraway land” calls irresistibly to mind the floating signifier of “mystical Shangri-La” or “dreamland Tibet” despite and perhaps because of its generality (Brauen 2004; Lopez 1998). Given Charnak’s and the Nangchen doctors’ claims that it is Tibetans who severely lack organized systems for sexual cultivation, it is somewhat incredible that the very book that NT and Sherab decided embodied that missing (Western) expertise itself traces the knowledge about ejaculation/orgasm training it contains to an implicitly Tibetan source. Keesling’s text thus reveals itself to be gently neo-tantric. For Keesling, it is “Eastern masters” on their mountain tops who invented the formal art of ‘organized’ or disciplined orgasm, and Westerners who have been fumbling more or less successfully in the dark on their own. Perhaps unsurprisingly, none of Keesling’s comments about Oriental masters appear in NT and Sherab’s Tibetan reworking.

Disordered Systems of Sex: On the Un-systematic ways Some Tibetans – and one anthropologist – Learned about Sex

Knowledge about sex and desire inevitably comes in multiple forms, from many different sources. Sexual education and the shaping of desire can be idiosyncratic, haphazard, unpredictable. My exposure to information about Tibetans’ everyday sex lives during fieldwork was just as haphazard and unpredictable. Male Tibetan friends of mine in their twenties and early thirties reminisced about their exposure to commercially produced pornography before they had smartphones or access to the internet - about how they would quietly enter the back of a building where an Indian street-vendor they knew would project

pornographic films after working hours and how they would watch along with him, wordlessly. Kathrine told me a story she had heard from an ex-monk colleague at Esukhia: he recounted how, when he was a child living in a Tibetan nomad community in Amdo, his older brother would wake him up late at night and get him to ride along with him on horseback to the tent of a girl in a neighboring encampment. The ex-monk was charged with watching the horses while his brother snuck into his hook-up's tent, as well as with readying the animals should his brother need to beat a hasty escape. One night, while watching the latest Game of Thrones episode on a projector at Leif's house, Katherine's Tibetan boyfriend Nyima told me how an old man from Tibet who had worked as a cook at the TCV school he attended in Dharamsala, a man Nyima credited as a real 'expert' in such matters, had imparted folk wisdom about selecting sexual partners to him and his friends. Specifically, the old cook explained to the boys that all women's genitals can be organized into three types, based on the angle of their respective vaginal canals: *sa stu* or 'earth vaginas' have mouths and canals that face downwards, *bar stu* or 'firmament vaginas' are straight or perpendicular and *gnam (mkha') stu* or 'heaven/sky vaginas' face upwards. For each type of vagina there also exists a corresponding curvature of the penis, although it was not clear to Nyima if male organs (*rliḡ pa*) were explicitly labelled in an equivalent way. The old cook had taught Nyima and his peers that they should seek out female sex partners with vaginas whose orientations matched that of their own penises for guaranteeing maximum pleasure and compatibility.¹⁹⁰

Unbidden, non-Tibetan residents in McLeod shared accounts of their sexual exploits with single and married Tibetan men and women with me, in often quite explicit detail¹⁹¹. Tashi, a Tibetan woman in her early twenties I came to know who worked as a clerk in my friend's second-hand clothing store in McLeod, recounted stories to me that she had heard from female relatives about how male yetis who lived near her family's home village in Tibet would abduct human women and have sex with them, and used 'did the dirty' or 'befouled'

(*rtsog pa byas pa*) as her go-to colloquial euphemism for signaling sexual intercourse. A Tibetan semi-orphan¹⁹² writer friend told me, a little sheepishly, how after reading Gendun Chöpel's accounts of his visits with sex workers in India during the early twentieth century, he was encouraged to seek out Indian sex workers himself, during his own time as a refugee in the country. During my one month visit to Amdo, during our field-trip to identify and collect traditional medicinal herbs growing wild in nomadic pasture-lands I shared drinks with local Tibetan men in our 'boy's tent', who wanted to know from me and other foreigners whether men in Western countries went up to women and spoke with them at length before initiating sex with them. They admitted that growing up they had not enjoyed many opportunities to socialize casually with young women who weren't family, and often felt stumped when it came to interacting with girls they liked, which had led them to wonder whether it might be easier to initiate sex through force (I let them know that I did not think that rape was ever acceptable and a lengthy conversation about consent ensued). The men reminisced about times that they had had sexual flings with white, tourist women while working as drivers and guides, and compared these encounters to ones they had had with Tibetan women.

In India and Nepal, I communicated via popular gay hookup apps with self-identified gay Tibetans, who shared their experiences of being gay either on the Down Low or openly. I met up with one openly gay Tibetan man and his Canadian boyfriend in McLeod Ganj who told me about his efforts over several years to contact other gay Tibetan men who had grown up in India and Nepal through a blog about his experiences he had made. Through mutual friends, I was introduced in 2016 to another gay Tibetan man who was living in Delhi. He took me with him one night and gave me a crash course in Delhi's public park gay cruising culture and shared insights with me about what it was like being known as and living as a gay/bisexual Tibetan in both Dharamsala and Delhi¹⁹³.

Overwhelmingly, in the last few decades, mass-produced print and digital pornography (especially accessed through smartphone technology) has also been a major avenue for the spread of information about sex among young Tibetans. Young lay Tibetans I met in McLeod and Kathamandu thus learned about sex and what counted as good sex in a variety of ways: through advice and stories shared from friends, classmates, similar-age relatives and strangers; through movies, books, and pornography; and only occasionally through parents and teachers. While many of my Tibetan exile-school educated friends could recall attending one or two school programs on sexual health and reproduction, these were sporadic and tended to focus on contraception and STIs rather than advice about dating, relationships, marriage, and sexual pleasure. One Tibetan acquaintance of mine, Sonam, who had worked for several years in Dharamsala as a teacher and curriculum developer in the TCV school system told me when I quizzed her in 2017 about the status of formal sexual education in Tibetan schools, that as far as she was aware, there "wasn't any well-organized sexual education program in TCV" or other Tibetan schools in India. She elaborated:

"When I was in TCV (up to 2015), there were some sporadic events or programs related to sexual education. All TCV schools have something called 'Health Committee', comprising of school nurse, guidance counselor, a science teacher or a teacher's representative, and a number of student volunteers. This committee organizes several programs in a year like talk/presentation (to all students collectively or sometimes boys/girls separately) on various topics including sexual/health education issues, observes various health-related international days like health day, organizes poster display and writing tasks, etc. Then there are few programs hosted by [the CTA's] Department of Health or some NGOs occasionally."

Sonam acknowledged that this situation may have changed in the last few years since she had left TCV, but her overall conclusion was that there was not, to her knowledge, "any curriculum and regular teaching time for sexual education" in TCV. This apparent lacuna notwithstanding, several organizations offered and continue to offer sex education resources in Dharamsala. During my time volunteering as an English teacher at the LHA NGO in

McLeod, a handful of presentations about HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C were offered to students during the school term. On one occasion, I also helped edit a proposal being prepared by a friend of a LHA staff member who was requesting money from the CTA to fund a short Tibetan-medium educational animation about HIV/AIDS and other STIs (the project ultimately received funding)¹⁹⁴.

Occasionally, more literary-minded/literate Tibetan friends had read Gendun Chöpel's *döten*, but this was hardly widely or consistently consulted among young people for sex advice. No *Teen Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan Magazine* exists in Tibetan through which young exile Tibetans can casually read sex and relationship advice written by Tibetans in Tibetan language; if Tibetans in exile do read this sort of popular sex and lifestyle advice it is more often than not in English, Hindi, Nepali and other foreign language publications. These then are some of the sources through which young Tibetans (and anthropologists) might learn about good (and bad) sex. But what about more formal, unambiguously Tibetan expertise on sexuality? While Charnak may doubt that any such expertise exists, Tibetan monk-scholars, *ngakpa/ma* and physicians have produced expert knowledge on sexuality for centuries. What reach or currency does such knowledge have for exile Tibetans? To begin to answer this question, I turn first to monastic-scholastic sources on lay sexuality and the bearing these do (and do not) have on lay Tibetans' sexual lives and choices.

You Don't Need to Do It to Know How to Do It, or Monastic Sexologists in Tibet

The various critics of Tibetan sex we met above are almost all *dralok* or ex-monks. Given their monastic education and late entry into householder life, it is perhaps not so surprising that these men should have taken an interest in lay sexuality and its formal study. At the same time, monastic perspectives on lay sexuality are strikingly absent from these ex-monks' discussions about how to organize sex. Charnak's insistence that Tibetan society

lacks any 'regulated' form of lay sex and that Tibetans must look to foreigners for requisite sexual discipline stands in awkward contrast to Tibetan Studies scholar and fellow ex-monk José Cabézon's claim that the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition is not only decidedly concerned with regulating lay sexuality but is obsessively and unreasonably preoccupied with doing so. Cabézon develops this claim in response to the surprise and outrage with which non-Tibetan Buddhist converts greeted statements made by the Dalai Lama in 1997 during an audience he had with a group of gay and lesbian practitioners in San Francisco. During the meeting, converts had asked the leader about what counts as sexual misconduct for laypeople according to Tibetan Buddhist textual tradition. The Dalai Lama began by expressing his support of and commitment to complete human rights for LGBT individuals, but when asked in more detail about what constituted inappropriate sexual conduct according to traditional sources, he went on to cite typical proscriptions around lay sexuality as enumerated by authorities like Je Tsongkhapa, the founder of his own Geluk school. Cabézon summarizes these regulations as follows:

“Among other things, Tsongkhapa's formulation prohibits sex between men, solitary masturbation, oral or anal intercourse, and even sex during daylight. On the other hand, it does not prohibit sex between women, or men employing the services of prostitutes, and it permits heterosexual men up to five orgasms per night. Lest it be thought that this delineation of the boundaries between permissible and illicit sex is idiosyncratic to Tsongkhapa, I should point out that similar formulations are found in important Tibetan texts written before and after him, including works by Gampopa and Dza Patrul. More important, every element in Tsongkhapa's formulation has a basis in the Indian Buddhist sources.” (Cabézon 2017a, n.p.)

Cabézon argues that while early Buddhist prescriptions connected with the basic lay Buddhist precept of refraining from 'sensuous/sexual misconduct' were relatively simple and focused merely on prohibitions of adultery, by roughly the third century C.E. monastic experts had begun to read lay sexuality through a monastic-scholastic lens, basing their evaluations and regulations of lay sexuality on categories drawn from the monastic rule-books and commentaries with which they were already preoccupied and familiar. As celibate

scholars read monastic norms about "where penises can and cannot be inserted" into lay behavior, regulations around lay sexuality became "increasingly more restrictive and monastic-like" (2017a, n.p.). Cabézon argues that in their "exuberance to elaborate", these monastic scholars went overboard: "on the one hand [they left] behind the earlier, more elegant, and simpler formulation of sexual misconduct, and on the other they inappropriately [read] lay sexual ethics through the filter of monastic discipline" (2017a, n.p.).

No Blowjob in the Newspaper: On Getting Sex Advice from the Dalai Lama and the Currency of Monastic Morality in Exile

The monastic take on lay sexuality that Cabezón represents the Dalai Lama as embodying (albeit with some qualifications or disclaimers) in California in 1997 does not appear to be a once-off or idiosyncratic response on the part of the religious leader. As it happens, the Dalai Lama gave a very similar answer to a gay American during a different audience held in Dharamsala in the same year. Details of this audience, and the Dalai Lama's comments, were brought to my attention by Simon, an American IT specialist acquaintance of mine, who shared a video of the audience in early 2018 via Facebook. Simon had been part of a small group of IT specialists that helped to first bring internet access to McLeod Ganj in the mid-90s. He and his team were granted a private audience with the Dalai Lama in 1997 in the wake of their work. After more than two decades, one of Simon's colleagues had uploaded the recording of the meeting to YouTube¹⁹⁵.

During the men's Q and A session with the Dalai Lama, another of Simon's teammates, Tim, asks the leader about the "stance of Buddhism on homosexuality," about how "men and men and women and women...having sex together...[is]...treated by Tibetan Buddhism?" The question prompts the Dalai Lama to offer some eight minutes of exposition and general reflections on lay sexuality. He notes initially that for celibate practitioners of Buddhism, "any form of sex, including [the] use of one's own hand...any sort of method or

way to...[ejaculate] or to increase sexual desire, is prohibited" and explains that since monastics have voluntarily accepted and made a vow to remain celibate, committing any sexual act "is of course [a] sin." He then notes that while for lay practitioners (using the Sanskrit terms *upasaka/upasika*) sex is permitted, non-procreative homosexual intercourse, and even oral or anal sex between husbands and wives "would be considered sexual misconduct on both sides." He then addresses the category of non-Buddhists or non-believers and concludes that since "basically...the purpose of sex is procreation" and this cannot be accomplished through homosexual intercourse, homosexuality could be thought of as something "a little unnatural". Still, echoing his concessions during the San Francisco meeting, the Dalai Lama goes on to acknowledge that there are nonetheless sometimes just "that type of people," i.e. homosexuals, and emphasizes for Simon, Tim and the other men in the room that ultimately sexual desire is something related to the physical body. As a result, if one stops or tries to stop one's sexual impulses "it may create more violent...consequences" and result in "different kinds of Buddhist sexual misconduct." Tim then confirms with the Dalai Lama that he is suggesting that then, "even as a Tibetan Buddhist lay person, not a monk, it's better to avoid these things?" (i.e. the sorts of sexual acts the Dalai Lama listed), which the leader confirms.

The Dalai Lama then offers an aside in Tibetan to his translator about how he like many Tibetans was shocked or surprised (*ha las pa*) to learn that people in other societies practiced oral sex, since this was really not something common among Tibetans. "But I don't know!" he quickly admits, to laughter all round. He adds that of course, some Tibetans may well engage in oral sex but that even if this takes place there are no newspapers reporting on it and it was for him at least very surprising when he heard stories of these sorts of things taking place in private. He concludes his reflections by reiterating that as human beings with physical bodies we have more or less naturally arising sexual impulses or desire for sexual

intercourse, which we have to accept. Still, if we deliberately enhance or promote these desires as "some part[s] of Western...or modern culture" tend to do, then such desires can become "extreme." He notes how love and violence are said to closely follow on from one another and proposes that a "more gentle or natural" way to approach sexual desire is simply to lessen it – to follow a more celibacy-oriented approach – lest by increasing it "the result [is] more violence."

These comments neatly capture the ease and willingness with which the Dalai Lama shifts between scriptural, monastically-oriented ethical injunctions and more universalistic interpretations of sexuality grounded in general notions of human psychology and biology, even as he nonetheless ultimately defers to and recommends more monastic-than-not orientations to sex as a strategy for lay people navigating their desire. Such suggestions accord with the Buddhist understanding of what it means to be an observant lay (sutric) vow-holder or Buddhist adherent (*dge bsnyen/ma*, 'those who serve/draw near to the virtuous', i.e. ordained monastics), a mode of lay religiosity which in many ways directly emulates monastic asceticism, and functions as a sort of 'renunciation lite' for the lay Buddhist devotees¹⁹⁶.

The Dalai Lama has repeated this 'no penetration save for penile-vaginal procreative sex', followed by 'homosexuality per se isn't inherently wrong' position on several occasions. In 1994, for example, the leader explained to an interviewer from OUT magazine that masturbation, oral sex, and anal sex were all wrong even within heterosexual Buddhist marriage, but added that "if someone comes to me and asks whether [homosexuality] is okay or not, I will ask... 'What is your companion's opinion?' If you both agree, then I think I would say, if two males or two females voluntarily agree to have mutual satisfaction without further implication of harming others, then it is okay" (Hunt 1994, 102). In his 1996 publication *Beyond Dogma: Dialogues and Discourses* too, he notes too that "a sexual act is

deemed proper when the couples use the organs intended for sexual intercourse [penis and vagina] and nothing else... Homosexuality, whether it is between men or between women, is not improper in itself. What is improper is the use of organs already defined as inappropriate [mouth, hand, anus] for sexual contact" (His Holiness the Dalai Lama 1996, 46 -47).

These reactions and comments from the Dalai Lama flesh out Cabezón's statements and offer a picture of what a system for regulating lay sexual desire and orgasms grounded primarily in scholastic-monastic Buddhist orientations might look like. While the piety and religious practices of lay, householder Buddhists have been valorized and are understood in authoritative, scriptural sources to serve a vital function in Buddhist societies, outside of the narrow scope of tantric antinomianism and elite practices of sexual yoga, "Indian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions have generally advocated celibate monasticism as being most conducive to spiritual development" (Cabezón 2017b, 84). Broadly speaking, the sexual activities of Buddhist householders, far from being celebrated, have been understood as necessary evils, evils requiring considerable harm reduction. Unlike non-Buddhist Indian *kāmasāstra* literature, Buddhist scholasticism, tantric or otherwise, is thus hardly sex or desire-positive (cf. Cabezón 2017b, 83 -87)¹⁹⁷.

How much do these ordered, celibate monasticism-aligned approaches to lay sex percolate through broader Tibetan society, though? Despite Charnak, NT, and Sherab being ex-monks, none of them make any mention at all of expert monastic proscriptions around lay sexuality. I have no idea about the extent to which scholastic, quasi-monastic injunctions around lay sex might have currency or traction among men in occupied Tibet. That said, these rules did come to bear on the sex lives of three close, lay female friends in McLeod Ganj, one Tibetan American and two non-Tibetan American women, who were all in long-term relationships with Tibetan men who had been born in Tibet and were subsequently residing in McLeod. These women each separately shared with me when we were hanging

out how their partners would sometimes invoke the sorts of rules Cabézon outlines above as a reason for refraining from sex or turning down sexual advances. Each of these women explained that they felt that these injunctions had constrained the spontaneity and quality of their sex lives in some way. One friend, Lauren, who was studying Tibetan Buddhist philosophy in Dharamsala, shared with me her disappointment that she could no longer enjoy morning sex, a long-time favorite activity of hers, in the context of her current relationship. Her boyfriend Lhakpa, a tall, skinny, retiring man in his twenties who had been born and raised in Kham and who was familiar with Patrul Rinpoche's *kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, had repeatedly resisted her efforts to initiate sex in the morning hours, explaining to her that such sex wasn't recommended and he preferred not to have it. Lhamo also told me how Dhondup would sometimes similarly shut her down when she tried to act on spontaneous moments of intimacy and initiate sex. As another avid reader of Patrul Rinpoche's text, Dhondup would cite its admonitions from time to time as part of negotiations around intercourse. Another American friend with an ex-monk partner from Amdo also explained that her husband was familiar with these rules via Patrul Rinpoche. Familiarity with Patrul Rinpoche's famous text was certainly not the sole reason for these men's reactions, or even necessarily a primary factor for making sense of their preferences, but these examples demonstrate that traditional textual stipulations regarding lay sexuality do have an influence on at least some Tibetan men's sexual behavior, some of the time.

Nonetheless, during my time in McLeod it became clear to me through the reports of friends that many Tibetan men were not only okay with the idea of engaging in sanctioned forms of intercourse like masturbation and oral and anal sex but did so on a regular basis. While some friends did mention their Tibetan partners' hesitation or discomfort around forms of sex that brought hands or mouths into contact with genitals, they tended to attribute this to more general Tibetan cultural notions that genitals were 'dirty', rather than specific Buddhist

prohibitions. In addition, several of my female friends joked about the frequency with which Tibetan men they had casual sex with in McLeod would encourage them to engage in unprotected anal intercourse as a form of condom-less contraception. Such anecdotes make it clear that monastic or quasi-monastic takes on lay sexuality both do and don't influence contemporary Tibetans' sex lives. It is hard to believe that, as an ex-monk, Charnak would be unaware of the existence of monastic-oriented recommendations around lay sexuality and I am confident that Sherab and NT were familiar with these, so the obvious conclusion would seem to be that these former monastics did not feel that these rules were relevant enough to most lay Tibetans' lives or experiences to warrant comment. While these injunctions certainly inform some Buddhist Tibetan men's sexual decisions, it would not appear that these rules enjoy widespread or consistent adherence in practice¹⁹⁸.

Although monastic takes on lay sexuality are not irrelevant to lay lives in exile, their proscriptions represent an alternative, contrary approach to the sorts of sexual morality found in both Indian and Tibetan *kāmaśāstra*. In the next chapter, I explore the contents of the various Tibetan *döten* introduced here in more detail. Highlighting the medical and tantric dimensions of these texts, I show how these offer an alternative sexual ethics for lay Tibetans and complicate neat boundaries between categories of expertise.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

REFINING DESIRE AND REFORMING SOCIETY: SEXUAL CULTIVATION AS A SOCIAL, MEDICAL, AND RELIGIOUS PROBLEM IN THE TIBETAN DIASPORA

While traditional monastic dictates regarding lay sexuality may not have featured at all in any of Charnak's commentary or the discussion around Bora Sherab and NT's book, traditional Tibetan medical orientations to sexuality are key to their translation project. In this chapter, I move from monastic-scholastic takes on lay sexuality to consider more medical and tantric approaches, assessing how different Tibetan sexological treatises demarcate and engage with these areas of expertise, and with what consequences.

Male Prowess or Men's Medicine? Rotsa as Public Health and Private Pleasure

The salience of traditional Tibetan medical ideas to NT and Sherab's work is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the ex-monks' choice to render Keesling's instruction manual as *ro tsa'i lus sbyong* in Tibetan: *ro tsa*, which suggests both 'virility,' and 'fertility' in English, is a technical term specific to Tibetan traditional medicine. NT and Sherab's decision to rework Keesling's material under the heading of *ro tsa* thus immediately medicalizes her work, situating it within a specific domain of traditional, indigenous knowledge about health, sexuality, fertility, and gender. While the precise etymology of *ro tsa* is uncertain (Gyatso 2008), the term is defined in the *rgyud bzhi* or Four [Medical] Tantras, the foundational roughly twelfth century textbook of Tibetan medicine, as "the capacity to perform/indulge in

one's desire and multiply one's line of (male) descendants” (*ro tsa zhes pa ‘dod pa spyod nus zhing/ rigs brgyud bu tsha spel bar byed pa ste*, cf. Gyatso 2008, 82). *Ro tsa* is thus primarily concerned with what could roughly be called libido. More specifically, however, *ro tsa* directly links the capacity to induce and maintain sexual arousal with the ability to bear children, and especially sons. Comprising one of the eight major 'limbs' of Tibetan traditional medicine, *ro tsa* unites erotic appetite, fertility, and androcentric, patrilineal modes of reproduction under a common rubric¹⁹⁹.

Part of NT and Sherab’s medicalizing of Keesling's text is stylistic as well. The ex-monks excise all of Keesling’s introductory comments, chatty asides and patient anecdotes from their rendering. There is no preamble or scene-setting in their Tibetanization of her work: following their three-page foreword, the translators dive immediately into Keesling’s graded exercises involving PC muscle training/Kegel exercises and ejaculation control. These are presented in purely descriptive and technical language – the first-person constructions and biographical and autobiographical tangents which thread through Keesling’s English language instructions are left untranslated, and Tibetan readers are treated to terse, matter-of-fact prose that mutes and genericizes Keesling’s authorial voice and transforms her arch, conversational material into a much more stripped-down manual²⁰⁰.

The information Keesling provides in her book is certainly medical - her instructions on how to delay male ejaculation and to separate orgasm from ejaculation come out of her interventions into the treatment of premature ejaculation as a certified medical professional. That said, her book is hardly clinical in tone, and is only partially aligned with *ro tsa*-related concerns mentioned above. Keesling says nothing about (in)fertility or expanding families in her text, and aside from premature ejaculation, no male sexual or urological disorders are mentioned. Indeed, for Keesling, children and family do not feature at all and pregnancy is

never mentioned. The primary unit in Keesling's book is the sexually active and sexually satisfied, "committed, monogamous" heterosexual couple²⁰¹. The exercises presented in her text are pitched at the average, healthy, cis-gender, heterosexual man who wishes to extend and expand his lovemaking and sexual stamina. While the methods taught are especially germane for readers with a history of the medical problem of premature ejaculation, they are presented as interventions that can and should be applied by all and any straight male readers who wish to 'make love all night and drive women wild'. In Keesling's text, the point of men learning to become multi--orgasmic is to increase men's sexual satisfaction and even more importantly, as the title of her book makes clear, to increase the pleasure of the women they have sex with. That more extended, expansive, fulfilling, and mutual sexual pleasure and orgasms are things worth pursuing, and that these correlate with better relationships, marriages and deepened intimacy is taken as a largely unspoken given, and this correlation is not really elaborated upon or explained.

By contrast, in NT and Sherab's translation, the medical and societal benefits of improved love-making are made explicit. Strikingly, the ex-monks ascribe medical benefits to Keesling's exercises which she herself does not acknowledge:

"There were a great many [sources] that we needed [to consult] from among the range of research findings on sexual intercourse. Out of all these, these [i.e. Keesling's] physical exercises for virility [*ro tsa*] were described as not only [providing] training for the penis but also as being extremely helpful for [treating/preventing] diseases like urinary incontinence regularly experienced during old age." (Trinley and Sherab, 2015, *vii*)

This linking of Keesling's exercises with urological benefits appears again in NT and Sherab's afterword, where the translators explain how NT was repeatedly requested by "some Nangchen doctors" to translate foreign information about "methods for tightening/toning the genitals and anus" (*mtshan ma dang gzhang sgo sdom pa'i thabs lam*) to counter the "societal problem of those type of diseases or disorders where urine doesn't drain or filter properly,

which have become and are becoming a regular problem for many old people" (*rgas 'khogs mang por byung dang 'byung bzhin pa'i rgyun ldan lta bur gyur ba'i rtsa chu mi tshags pa'i nad rigs*, 115). From NT's statements at the launch and in the book it appears that the Nangchen doctors had heard of Western-style PC or Kegel muscle exercises and their usefulness for tonifying the urogenital system and pelvic floor and requested that he translate material about this into Tibetan.

At first sight this focus on geriatric medicine and urology seems a little confusing. After all, the 'societal problems' that the Tibetan commentators in this chapter have so far been worried about are premature ejaculation and 'bad' (quick, selfish, dissatisfying etc.) sex more broadly, and not specifically 'old people' conditions like urinary incontinence or dysuria (or whatever conditions the authors might be implying with "urine not filtering"). Given that Keesling says nothing about urological disorders associated with old age in her book, the slippage between ejaculation delay, orgasm enhancement, and restorative geriatric medicine in the ex-monks' translation of her work is even more significant. What are we to make of this?

The *ro tsa*-fication of Keesling's work highlights the way in which medical concerns about 'treating the aged' (*rgas pa gso ba*), the seventh limb of Tibetan medicine, frequently overlap with the aphrodisiacal concerns of the eighth *ro tsa* branch of medicine (Gerke 2012). During his speech at the book launch, *em chi* Yeshe Gelek, junior principal at the Mentseekhang or Tibetan Medical & Astrological Institute in Dharamsala, stressed the extent to which in Tibetan medicine the treatment of libido was related to the management of bodily, energetic, and mental vitality more generally. The doctor began his presentation by explaining how patients' *ro tsa* was connected with nutritive essences and extractions (*dwangs ma*) in the body according to Tibetan medical theory. Such theories help clarify how men and women's reproductive fluids are implicated in bodily vitality and overall health.

A waste product once ejaculated, while produced and stored in the body, however, reproductive fluids (*khu ba*) comprises one of the *lus zungs bdun* or seven vital bodily constituents. These seven are 1) *dangs ma*, or the nutritive essence distilled or digested from food and drink 2) *khrag*, blood 3) *sha*, flesh 4) *tshil*, fat 5) *rus pa*, bone 6) *rkang mar*, bone marrow and 7) *khu ba*, reproductive fluids. In Indo-Tibetan medicine each of these constituents is progressively digested or distilled through a process of ‘elixir extraction’ (*bcud len pa*) in the body to produce the next in the list, which makes reproductive fluid, the seventh distilled body essence, the most refined in the group. An even subtler distillation then takes place, in part from the reproductive fluids, to give rise to *mdangs*, a very refined physical, bodily substance which is understood to be strongly connected with overall health and vitality. It is due to this progressive ‘digestive physiology’ that both Indian and Tibetan medicine suggests that over-ejaculation can result in depleted vitality and nutrients. At the same time, Tibetan physicians warn against excessive seminal continence as equally dangerous for health and recommend that men ejaculate more or less frequently in line with their particular constitutions and seasonal diets²⁰².

Alluding to such ideas, Dr Yeshe Gelek pointed out how in Tibetan medicine more medically-oriented *bcud len*, ‘elixir extraction’ or fasting/supplement treatments are recommended for “restoring the aged” (*rgas pa gso ba*) or rejuvenation, while *ro tsa* has to do with “restoring the semen/reproductive fluid” (*khu ba gso ba*) and with “finding a [fertile] woman/finding [a solution] for son-less-ness” (*bu[d] med btsal ba*, i.e. fertility)²⁰³. He reminded the audience that according to the *ro tsa* section of the Four Medical Tantras, men’s bodies and reproductive organs are the primary subjects of *ro tsa* medicine²⁰⁴. Seemingly unaware of NT and Sherab’s comments about the geriatric, urological benefits of Keesling’s exercises, he noted that while it looked like Keesling’s regimen might adequately address

“restoring semen” type *ro tsa* problems, it was lacking in that it did not offer any rejuvenating effects for men who might have no libido at all.

He explained that men who could already experience arousal could “increase their desire” through Keesling’s exercises but for men who were already depleted they needed some sort of rejuvenation first, before such training could be of any use for enhancing the execution of desire. He noted that the traditional category of “restoring the aged” did not just relate to the elderly – those who had got old and deteriorated naturally, “having reached their time”, *tshod la bslebs gnas* – but to a second class of patients as well, young men who had lost vitality and aged before their time due to the deterioration of their bodies. He observed that men who enjoyed “inner mental peace and happiness and security” (*sems nang zhi bde lhing ‘jags*) were able to avoid penile defects but the current changes which affected men and caused erectile dysfunction were firstly, work stress (*las ka’i gnon shugs*) and secondly, all their bodily constituents deteriorating as a result of not consuming unadulterated, quality foods and nutrients (Don grub, “ ‘dod pa’i bstan bcos”).

A Yogic Education: Heightened Male Libidos and Social Harmony and Continuity in Exile

In contemporary biomedically informed sexology, ejaculation control, male multi-orgasmicity, and extended love-making are not typically associated with increased fertility or presented as a public health interventions for vitiated populations. As we have seen, Keesling herself brands her techniques as neo-tantric ‘secrets’ – less as social medicine and more as erotic life hacks or self-help. While Charnak and Arik Gyurme present contemporary Tibetan men as lacking in sexual education and knowledge, the Nangchen doctors and NT and Sherab present them as lacking in sexual health and vitality as well. It is Tibetan men’s bodies, their “male channels” (*pho rtsa*) and organs, which have deteriorated and which are in need of revitalization. NT and Sherab present this deterioration as arising from a complex

configuration of interconnected historical, socio-political, environmental, moral, and cultural factors:

"In this time of greater freedom of movement and being and equality between men and women, many people are getting divorced. At its base, this has to do with an impoverishment in positive moral qualities (*rtsa ba'i cha nas bzang po'i yon tan gyis phongs te*): [people today lack] patience or forbearance [in relationships], they are greedy/materialistic/covetous (*rgyu la rngams*), they seek [other/extra-marital] partners on the side – these and a range of other miscellaneous causes for [the divorce rate] exist but no single clarification has emerged in [our] society [for this phenomenon]. The single explanation is that [all this] emerges from a lack of general knowledge or education around sexual intercourse - from things like one person satisfying their desire during sex and one person not, one person needing sex when one person doesn't, and so on. For this reason, if you the reader can practice these physical *ro tsa* exercises for virility you will resolve this one type of problem quickly and easily - there will without a doubt be inexpressibly profound love and passion between you and your wife or girlfriend (*bza' zla dang dga' rogs*) and she will welcome you with smiles in your own household. This having happened, husbands and wives (*khyo shug*) will be as inseparable from another as one's shadow is from one's body, and with this being so, they are naturally going to fulfil each other's sexual desires. And as a side [benefit, these exercises] will also firmly block harm to oneself, others, and one's lineage (*bu rabs tsha rgyud*) by preventing [the transmission] of 'incurable epidemic/contagious diseases' to others as well" ('phrin las and shes rab 2015, 115)

Thus, much like Charnak and Arik Gyurme, NT and Sherab correlate a distinctly modern type of moral and conjugal deterioration with a lack of 'general knowledge' and impoverished education connected with sex (*'khrig spyod dang 'brel ba'i rgyun shes*). The education needed here is not simply a matter of information, however. Rather, it is a distinctly embodied type of schooling – a *yogic* education – one involving both a visceral reorienting and reconfiguring (a training/purification of the male body, *lus sbyong ba*) and an education in intimacy and affect in general and the proper terms of their execution.

Echoing classic definitions of *ro tsa*, NT and Sherab associate sexual expertise and a refined capacity to 'indulge in desire' with societal and familial stability and harmony. Cultivating one's ability to experience pleasure is a direct cause for the flourishing of mutual love and respect between heterosexual couples, married or other otherwise, and these things

in turn strengthen bonds between partners and (by implication) reduce promiscuity and adultery. By this logic, learning to cultivate intimacy and to refine sexual pleasure can protect against disease and increase fertility as well. Through this concise break-down, NT and Sherab thus offer their own gloss on *ro tsa* and its underlying cultural logics, explaining how it is possible that knowing how to 'fulfill each other's sexual desires' can so thoroughly guarantee moral social and biological reproduction. Their exegesis helps makes sense of how a book that makes no mention of fertility and childbirth written to teach men how to ejaculate less quickly and less often could have been so easily re-interpreted by Tibetans as containing crucial knowledge relating to the nationalistic objective of “multiplying” and “protecting one's lineage”.

Dr Yeshe Gelek's evaluation of Keesling's exercises against pre-existing, apparently more comprehensive Tibetan medical systems sits somewhat uneasily alongside other claims that Tibetan knowledge systems are inadequate for treating Tibetan men's sexual maladies. On one level, we can see the recasting of Keesling's exercises as “*ro tsa* medicine” as a kind of domestication of her foreign expertise and interventions, a way to render them intelligible in terms of immediately available equivalences. Still, translation is also transformative here. In NT and Sherab's Tibetan reworking of Keesling's exercises, the pubococcygeal or “PC muscle” fundamental to Keesling's ejaculation control method, become the *ro tsa'i sha gnad* or “*ro tsa* muscle”. No longer named simply for its anatomical co-ordinates, this group of muscles that run from the pubic to tailbone and which are instrumental in the control of urination becomes aligned instead with an entire field of indigenous medical, cultural, and moral concerns. Rather than being directed to locate and gain mental control over just a generic group of muscles found in the standard, human body then, NT and Sherab's Tibetan readers, however subtly, are being urged to find and train the *ro tsa* part of themselves, the part that allows them to “perform their desire [as men]” and “multiply their [patri]line”.

Here, the bodies of desirous, ‘lustful’ Tibetan men (*chags ldan*) and charismatic male celibate bodies have more in common than it might first seem: both have controlled and channeled their passions, albeit in their own fashion, towards more collective ends, both are implicated in wider narratives about the wellbeing and survival of a nation-in-exile. As Gendun Chöpel says in his treatise in a line that Tenkyong cited at the book launch: “To experience bliss is of no small significance, to create a family is no small matter – if one can maintain the path of passion from within bliss-and-emptiness, how can this possibly be a matter of small significance?” (*bde ba myong ba de yang don chung min/rigs brgyud bskyed pa de yang don chung min/ bde stong ngang nas chags lam skyong nus na/ de las kyang ni don chung ga la min*). Here Gechoe parallels the sexual cultivation of the procreative, lay householder with that of the cultivated, ‘barren’ erotic asceticism of the tantric yogi/ni. Both types of cultivation are a ‘big deal’ and neither can be ranked in importance when viewed from the perspective of non-duality

As mentioned, NT and Sherab note in their preface that they “entered into the work of translating this English text with [the view that] one's individual or personal health is the basis of the health of one's entire family and society”. Rather than a generic appeal to social medicine, the ex-monks’ explanations present a very specific type of ‘cultivated’, revitalized, erotically-potent, male heterosexual Tibetan body as one of the foundational components, if not *the* foundational component, of a morally rich as opposed to impoverished, thriving Tibetan polity-in-exile. When properly trained and “ordered” this individual male body and its expanded yet controlled desire has radiating positive effects on the larger social order.

This is a remarkably different articulation of lay sexuality and lay sexual ethics to the monastic-scholastic one exemplified by the Dalai Lama above. In that context, ‘good’, ‘natural’ lay Buddhist sex is primarily about procreation via penile-vaginal penetrative sex and about reducing the harm of the three poisons of desire, anger, and ignorance. Heightened

desire, sexual stimulation, and romantic love and attachment are not ‘good’ here – rather, they are dangerous, regrettable, and morally fraught. The vision of Tibetan lay sexuality expressed in Tibetan critics’ essays and in NT and Sherab’s *döbay tenchö* is entirely different, however. Here ‘good’ sex is specifically associated with mutual pleasure, openness and respect between partners and with the careful cultivation, refinement and fulfilment of desire for all involved, rather than merely its minimization or hedging. Good sex here demands a Tibetan subjectivity which is invested in traditional morality but which is positioned at same time as ‘modern’ and cosmopolitan –one which is committed to sensual equality and genuine intimacy and which is liberated from ‘superstition’ and inferior, traditional standards of hygiene, sexual engagement, and sexual education.

This articulation of lay Tibetan sexuality directly parallels that found in earlier Tibetan *döten* like Gendun Chöpel’s and Dr Nida’s. As medical anthropologist and Tibetan Studies scholar Vincanne Adams (2005) observes:

“Unlike the views found in conventional Buddhist texts and translations or interpretations of them [Gendun] Chopel advocates the benefits of having sex with many partners as a boon both to procreation (without which, he notes, there would be no practitioners of the *dharma*) and to one’s personal effort to achieve enlightenment...[E]ven in Chopel[’s *döten*] we get a sense that “sex” among Tibetans was viewed ambivalently in ways that were formulated largely within Buddhist frameworks: that is, virtuous and unvirtuous. The fact that Chopel feels the need to educate his compatriots about how to make what many consider “unvirtuous sex” virtuous suggests that “ordinary sex” must have been viewed by Tibetans as filled with moral risks—the risk of attachment, of increasing the poison of desire, and of forgoing fortuitous rebirths. The only truly virtuous sex was that associated with religious celibacy, and the opposite of this was endless selfish desire for sexual pleasure. However, we find in Chopel’s work the possibility of an “ordinary sex” that can be made into something morally tolerable within the contours of a Buddhist universe. This kind of sexual union was referred to in terms of its social responsibilities and obligations, and its intimacies were ideally seen as driven by compassionate motives because of these social obligations. Sex in the terms that mean “conjugal union,” “intimate pairings,” or “going together” is not a morally neutral, biological, or physical “sex” as we know it but rather a set of terms defining relationships between persons who are morally bound to one another. This is why many of the terms that are today glossed as “sex” [i.e. in Lhasa, and by Tibetans more broadly] are synonyms for marriage itself. Sexual union that made virtue out of potentially unvirtuous acts by way of marriage turned the pursuit of pleasure into a set

of social obligations and outward concern for others. In fact, this was precisely Chopel's strategy: his goal was to bridge the gap between esoteric representations of the most virtuous sexual acts (in tantrism) and the everyday sexual behaviors that tended to be viewed as inherently unvirtuous (221-222)

This specifically Tibetan rather than specifically Buddhist conflation of 'good sex' with heterosexual marital bliss and mutual spousal gratification is distinct both from Indo-Tibetan Buddhist positions on 'sexual misconduct' and from Indian *kāmaśāstra* texts with their Machiavellian, courtly love-games (Kumar 2011). The genre of Tibetan *döbay tenchö* foregrounds a male body which is pre-eminently desirous, desiring, horny yet which in its own way is also a cultivated, even ascetic body, one distinguished from the average 'untamed' willy-nilly lay sexualized body that Charnak sketches so vividly in his essay. The common Tibetan circumlocution for sexual intercourse *grong pa'i chos*, the "villager's Dharma" points, not without some sarcasm, to longstanding (monastic-centric) caricatures of lay householders as devoutly samsaric beings committed to attachments, afflictive emotions and sin. The lay householder envisioned in Tibetan *döbay tenchö* is by contrast a careful and informed subject, one who knows that, whatever the dangers of sex and desire might be, to experience sexual bliss in an educated way and thereby stabilize one's household and extend one's lineage may form part of a virtuous, wholesome life.

Just Something People Do: Tibetan Medical Approaches to Lay Sexuality

If it is true, as per Cabezón's suggestion, that Indian scholastic monastic regulations of lay Buddhist men's sex lives – which Tibetans inherited and continue to invoke today – emerged in part as a reaction to the perceived permissiveness of contemporaneous Indian *kamasāstra* texts, then the fact that the genre of *kāmaśāstra* nonetheless survived in hegemonically Buddhist, hegemonically monastic Tibet and that *kāmaśāstra* texts have been composed and promoted by Tibetan Buddhist authors requires explanation. Put simply, the

emphasis on desire and its cultivation in Indian, non-religious, non-Buddhist sexological treatises fits with the concerns of both Tibetan doctors and Tibetan ngakpa/ma.

In her book on Tibetan medical knowledge and intellectual history, Janet Gyatso (2015) details how for centuries in Tibet the domain of medicine has provided a space for the development of authoritative and empirical forms of knowledge about the world and humanity which while at times complementary to hegemonic Buddhist knowledge and ethics, were nonetheless distinct from these, operating according to different priorities and standards. Although Tibet may have never experienced its own full-fledged scientific revolution, Gyatso argues that the home-grown “medical mentality” fleshed out by Tibetan doctors long before major encounters with Chinese or European imperial modernities, was itself distinctly modern and echoed developments elsewhere in the world, without being derivative or identical to them.

Gyatso notes how as part of their humanistic, empirical orientations Tibetan doctors’ ‘traditional’ depictions of sex are a “far cry from the widespread negative characterization of sex in Buddhist teachings due to the ignorance and craving that bring us to it and leave us entangled” (33). Analyzing depictions of sexual activity in the famous medical paintings commissioned by the fifth Dalai Lama’s regent Sangye Gyatso (1653 – 1705), Gyatso observes that there “sex is just something that people do,” is “simply a part of life, just like the plethora of other quotidian activities pictured, of people fighting, talking, farming, doing religious rituals, urinating, being born, and, of course, being sick. This focus upon everyday realities alone constitutes a major facet of the distinctively medical orientation toward knowledge and its representation” (34).

Gyatso emphasizes that Tibetan doctors are still concerned with evaluating and regulating sexual activity – with ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex. “In medical terms,” she reminds us,

“excessive sex is often seen to be a problem, as is implied in...[depictions of newlywed couples]...Too much sex can cause exhaustion as well as more serious physical conditions...[At the same time,] the medical texts often characterize sex in moderation as good for health, especially for males” (33). Overall, however, she demonstrates how Tibetan doctors have consistently taken a remarkably realistic, pragmatic and morally neutral stance in describing everyday sexual practices and orientations, including activities (like masturbation and monastic homosexuality, for example) deemed unambiguously sinful from a monastic-scholastic perspective²⁰⁵.

While elite Tibetan medical theorists have almost invariably been Buddhist exegetes as well, and so have naturally been heavily influenced by Buddhism in their thinking and practices, Gyatso proposes that when writing and working as physicians, these theorists have had to prioritize clinical experience and their mandate to respond concretely and without undue judgement to the needs of patients. While medical *science* requires repeatability and standardization, the embodied practice of healing obliges physicians to keep the specificities and everyday unpredictability of human bodies and behavior firmly in mind as well. As such, Gyatso proposes that Tibetan doctors’ modern, medical mentality has been especially attuned to idiosyncrasies, to the particularities of individual patients and their bodies and minds.

One Medicine for One Hundred Diseases: Dr Nida’s Treatise on Desire in Three Parts

This focus on the needs of particular bodies, above and beyond standardized medical or religious directives, is abundantly clear in Dr Nida’s 2012 *döbay tenchö*. Finalized on the 13th of June 2012, Dr Nida’s ‘Triune Treatise on Desire’ (*‘dod pa’i bstan bcos ‘dod chags sum sbyor ma*) is a collection of over three hundred four-line verses which addresses sexual cultivation and well-being in three sections, from three angles. The first section is a *döten* for laypeople (*mi skya*) and provides advice on maximizing sexual pleasure and comfort for sexually active lay people. Section two elaborates on sex and sexual health from the

perspective of both biomedicine and Tibetan Sowa Rigpa. Concerned primarily with *ro tsa*, it discusses psychology and relationships, low libido, erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, aphrodisiacs, puberty, menopause, menstruation, pregnancy, homosexuality, masturbation, sex toys, contraception, abortion, and STIs. The third section, a 'tantric treatise on desire' (*sngags kyi 'dod bstan*) deals with Karmamudrā and summarizes key points regarding tantric sex partners, the nature of the subtle tantric anatomy, preparations and prerequisite training needed to engage in sexual yoga, different types of sexual yoga practice, the four classic stages of tantric sexual activity, and various sex positions and yogic techniques involving the careful cultivation of breathing, imagination, body, and subtle energy necessary for prolonging and refining sexual bliss as means for spiritual realization.

Nida explained to me that he chose to write his treatise in verse, like his predecessors Ju Mipam and Gendun Chöpel, because "Tibetans love poems" and he thought that if he presented information about sexuality in this form more Tibetans would read it or (if they were illiterate) would listen to it being read, and would thus be interested in it and remember it²⁰⁶. Unlike Mipam and Gechö, however, Nida disseminated his poem online shortly after its completion²⁰⁷.

Part One of Nida's treatise is divided into four sections: introductory comments on the importance of sexual education and cultivation; advice on eight divisions of sexual activity (i.e. touching and embracing; kissing; scratching; biting; sexual union or forms of [vaginal/penile] penetration; crying/moaning; playing with the genitals; and sexual positions); advice on opportune and inopportune times and places to have sex; and information on the benefits of lovemaking. Nida's eightfold scheme broadly mirrors categories found in Indian *kāmasāstra* and reproduced in Gendun Chöpel and Ju Mipam's treatises but here Nida goes even further than either of his predecessors in stressing the importance of personal experience and experimentation over traditional categories or standards. Treating the eight traditional

divisions of erotic arts more loosely, he exhorts readers to discover their own most erogenous zones - to experiment with whatever approaches to touching, kissing, scratching, biting and so on give them the most pleasure. In the first part of Section One of his poem, he notes:

If you don't know *döbay tenchö*,
However much you indulge your passion nothing great will come of it.
So, I am very pleased to explain the arts of passion
to [all you] lustful men and women! (*chags ldan pho mo tshor*).

The naturally-arisen arts of passion are [traditionally] taught in eight divisions.
But for the sake of convenience and ease-of-understanding
I have written about them from my own experience,
rather than [just] copy [information] from other texts²⁰⁸.

A pragmatic orientation that privileges personal needs, preferences and circumstances over traditional standards or formal injunctions saturates Nida's entire work. For example, like his two forebears, he discusses appropriate and inappropriate times and places to engage in sex. Rather than focusing on (in)opportune astrological configurations during which to engage in sex or scholastic-monastic rules about not having sex before sundown or more than a certain number of times in one day like Ju Mipam does (Jacoby 2017), Nida's advice is strikingly practical, almost grandmotherly:

"If your neighbors or the villagers hear the noises [you're making]
Decrease your cries and moans.
Hold the bedsheets/your clothes to your mouths, go under the covers
And go on kissing passionately.

If [having sex in] a hotel or guest-house is comfortable for you [do it]
It is important to choose whatever place makes you [both] happy.
Every once in a while, have sex in a car
Having sex on one's back or from behind is good.

Young people do it quickly
In places like bars, night-clubs and [public] bathrooms
It is barely pleasurable at all
When you aren't relaxed and you're furiously horny.

Have sex in a relaxed and leisurely way
In flower-filled gardens, near forests and in green, grassy meadows,

without [worrying about] other people noticing.
Rushing things isn't pleasurable for her²⁰⁹"

Nida's warnings about where and when to have sex say nothing about not having intercourse in or near monasteries or shrines, in front of one's religious teacher, or when one's partner might be observing lay *dge bsnyen/ma* vows of celibacy. Nida offers no specific proscriptions about frequency of sex per day based on monastic-scholastic principles. His advice about how and how often to have sex is based on bodily and seasonal considerations and is overwhelmingly medical in flavor – more naturalistic than moralistic.

His admonitions also take into account the geographic, atmospheric conditions of life on the Tibetan Plateau in a specific and pragmatic fashion. "Altitude sickness is great among rocky and snowy mountains," Nida tells us, acknowledging health concerns specific to Tibet's landscape. "If you have sex [there you may have] heart palpitations and your blood-pressure may increase. Unite with each other slowly and gently - avoid having sex too strenuously"²¹⁰. He warns that having penetrative sex near bodies of water in cold, wet environments can be bad for women since it can damage their wombs but that kissing and cuddling near rivers, lakes, or the ocean is fine, and further notes that while having sex outside at night is the "best [outdoor] moon-lit theatre [there is]" (*zla 'od 'og gi bzlos gar mchog*) couples should avoid getting cold, since, after all, "if one catches a cold it's difficult to have sex".

Dr Nida also offers seasonal prescriptions regarding sex drawn directly from Sowa Rigpa: couples should stay warm and have sex at home indoors during winter and autumn and should make love in parks or gardens in the spring. During summer, sex outdoors is best. He notes that in general, during autumn and spring, couples should have sex twice a week, while during winter they can have intercourse as often as they want. If men and women have strong constitutions and high libidos, however, "there is no specific number of times they

ought to have sex"²¹¹. He goes on to offer the following advice for those of weaker constitutions:

“If your bodily ‘supports’ or essences (*lus zungs*) are weak
Have sex once a month or alternatively one time per week.
If you have restored your body with the ‘four nutritive essences’ (*bcud bzhi*)²¹²
though

However much you lose your regenerative/reproductive fluids [khu ba, i.e. however much you ejaculate], it is no problem²¹³.

Nida's final line in this stanza is noteworthy. While I have translated *nyes pa med* in a purposefully neutral and colloquial fashion as 'it is no problem', *nyes pa* has both moral and medical connotations worth considering. *Nyes pa* is regularly used (not least of which in the monastic-scholastic literature on sexual misconduct we have touched on above) to refer to 'faults,' 'crimes' or 'defects' in the ethical sense. Alternatively, *nyes pa gsum* or the 'three faults' is one of the most common designations in Tibetan medicine for the three primary humors of *rlung*, *mkhrid pa*, and *bad kan*²¹⁴.

Nida's closing phrase subtly suggests that ejaculating regularly when one's constitution is strong and healthy is not only 'not a problem' medically but is also not a fault morally either. Altogether then, his stanza points to the trumping of moral considerations by medical ones, to the fact that when it comes to assessing best-practices for love-making and even what constitutes 'good sex' more generally medical concerns about individual bodily health and balance may well be more salient than Buddhist moral ones.

Elsewhere, Nida recommends avoiding abortion whenever possible, a practice widely condemned on religious grounds among Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist communities (Childs and Barkin 2006; Craig, Childs, Beall 2016; Gutschow 2010). While Nida's designation of the unborn child as “an extremely precious human-body” (*rin chen mi lus*)

directly recalls Buddhist valorizations of human rebirth, Nida nonetheless condemns abortion on primarily medical grounds:

“After [unplanned] conception,
[Women might turn to] abortions through [drugs or aggressive] surgery but these are very dangerous.
So, [expectant] parents should keep and nurture this most precious human child,
While getting along harmoniously with each other”²¹⁵

Towards the end of the first part of his *döten*, Nida also explicitly extols the medical importance and value of sex as a free, public good as follows:

"Although the sufferings of this world are great in number
When one has sex the happiness that arises is unquantifiable
When you are young and your body is strong
Revel in the bliss of sexual union constantly!

It clarifies awareness, makes the body light/flexible,
And is good for the flow of blood and *rlung* or vital-energy ‘wind’
It increases internal heat and makes the digestion of food easier –
Sex is an excellent medicine, free of charge!

It pacifies *rlung*
Clarifies *mkhris pa*, generates heat,
And purifies *bad kan* –
Sexual intercourse is the single medicine which cures one hundred illnesses (*nad brgya sman gcig*)!”²¹⁶

Nida echoes Gendun Chöpel most strongly in his representation of sexual intercourse as a positive, therapeutic resource, available to all. His comments on the medicinal virtues of sex move it from the realm of Buddhist moral prescription and regulation to the domain of naturalistic science. Rather than strip sex of morality, however, this medical re-orientation re-centers moral prescription from the world of monk-scholars to that of non-celibate clinicians.

Forbidden Fornication: Exceptional and Unexceptional Deviance and the Question of Lay Buddhist Subjectivity

While the primacy of medical over religious and moral concerns is a theme that runs throughout the first two sections of Nida's *döten*, Buddhist moral considerations are not entirely absent here - injunctions parallel to those found in the scholastic-monastic material Cabezón discusses do peek through Nida's stanzas in various places. In Part One, Nida admonishes readers about non-consensual sex both in the context of relationships and as part of transactional sex work²¹⁷ and encourages heterosexual men who visit female sex workers to treat these women with respect:

"A khandro or tantric goddess who sold beer and her lower parts alike
Liberated [the Indian tantric Buddhist master] Tilopa.
It is clarified in the tantras that 'many [female Buddhas or] khandros work on behalf
of [transmigrating] beings in the guise of prostitutes'²¹⁸.

Even though they merely give it to you for money,
You must honor and respect female sex-workers
Who grant you their blissful lotuses,
And must refrain from doing anything unwanted or harmful to them.

Some sex-workers enjoy their trade,
And it is indispensable work.
Some are slaves under others' control
So, don't disdain them and be friendly towards them!"²¹⁹

Indo-Tibetan monastic commentaries on lay sexual (mis)conduct condemn sexual violence and sex under coercion. They also condone men having sex with sex workers and do not label this behavior as sexual misconduct²²⁰. Still, it is noteworthy that when Nida does refer to religious authority to criticize mistreatment of female sex workers, it is not to monastic tradition that he turns, but tantric sources and orientations instead. Moreover, as much as Nida's points about non-coercion may align with scholastic sources on lay Buddhist sexual ethics in a very broad sense, his recommendations concerning lay Tibetan sexuality are in other respects hugely divergent from monastic-scholastic ethical norms.

While Nida extols the virtue of lasting, monogamous partnership with a destined ‘karmic partner’ or ‘soul-mate’ (*las grogs*), whose libido, physical and mental constitution, and interests match and agree with one’s own and with whom one has healthy communication, he does not assume that the audience of his poem is married, and offers no comments at all on that paradigmatic expression of lay Buddhist sexual misconduct, adultery.

Nida also casually promotes, without comment or qualifications, forms of sexual stimulation like oral and anal sex which are prohibited in Buddhist scriptural sources, and are either omitted or treated as special, problematic categories in Mipam and Gendun Chöpel's treatises on desire. Neither Mipam nor Gecho mention anal penetration or direct anal stimulation of any kind. Nida, by contrast, mentions these things on several occasions in his layperson's *döten*. For example, at one point he suggests that if the man loses his erection the woman should insert a finger into his rectum and stimulate his prostate, as well as play with his penis and massage his rectum periodically²²¹; elsewhere he states that the man should hit his erect penis against the women's vagina and anus to stimulate her, and in a subsequent stanza he mentions in an off-hand way that when the time comes, the man may ejaculate inside the woman's vagina, externally, in her mouth, or in her anus as it suits both partners. Nida also recommends oral sex for both men and women, and in his section on the art of kissing, he describes heterosexual 69-ing as being "greatest or preeminent among [forms] of kissing"²²².

In contrast, oral sex is omitted entirely from Mipam's treatise. While the Indian *kāmasāstra* materials on which Mipam drew treat oral sex as an entire division of the erotic arts worthy of elaboration, Mipam opts to pass over this category of sexual activity completely. Gendun Chöpel, for his part, does mention oral sex, but with significant qualifications. Rather than delineate oral sex as a separate category of practices as is typical in Indian *Kāmasāstra* texts (Vatsyayana, Doniger and Kakar 2009), he discusses it under the

category of 'uncertain [sexual] conduct or behaviors' (*ma nges pa'i spyod pa*) instead. Like the Dalai Lama above, he acknowledges that oral sex may repel or induce anxiety in his Tibetan readers - indeed, oral sex is an uncertain or ambiguous act precisely because it may incite exceeding pleasure in some lovers and put off others. Specifically, Gechö notes that oral sex – especially the simultaneous, mutual kind also cited by Nida - is extremely effective at inciting intense pleasure but warns that inexperienced people who are embarrassed by these sorts of things ought to avoid such 'excessive methods'. He identifies Western women as being very experienced in this regard and observes that temple art indicates that the practice of oral sex was widespread in ancient India.

Ultimately, he enjoins his readers to make use of oral sex if appropriate and to fully enjoy it when they do, casting aside all concern for (im)purity or impropriety. He reminds them that “whatever comes from a woman’s body during sex is wholly pure,” citing a “scripture from earlier times” to justify this claim²²³. Significantly, he also links oral sex and other uncertain forms of sexual stimulation with tantric yogis and yoginis, pointing out that:

“It is explained in the [tantric] *Dākinī* treatises that these [uncertain sexual] behaviors [i.e. sixty-nine style oral sex, as well as having sex in front of a mirror, kissing, sucking, and licking with abandon, biting each other’s nipples, consuming one another’s sexual fluids, licking honey off each other’s bodies, showing off one’s private parts to each other, raunchy discourse, inflaming each other’s imaginations, and so on] serve to satisfy exceedingly passionate, horny men and women who have the ability to retain the essence of the [white and red] elements in their own bodies without emission.”²²⁴ (Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel and mi pham rgya mtsho 1969, 82)

Jacoby (2017, 326) speculates that one reason Mipam may have chosen not to translate and include Indian material on oral sex²²⁵ in his *döbay tenchö* was because a considerable number of the oral sex methods described in classic Indian *kāmaśāstra* involve sex between heterosexual men and various 'third category' or queer men. Because, as we have seen, Tibetan Buddhist monastic authorities, following Indian precedent, forbid sex with queer men, masturbation, as well as oral and anal sex, it is reasonable to assume that Mipam

excluded information on oral and/or queer sexual stimulation found in Indian sources from his treatise because of his own monastic, moral orientations²²⁶.

No mention is made of queer sex acts in either Mipam or Gendun Chöpel's treatise but Nida does mention homosexuality one time in his *döbay tenchö*. In his second, medical section, immediately following a stanza describing condoms' value as protection against sexually transmitted diseases and not just conception and how "diseases which come from the vagina and penis are the root of fighting and regret", Nida notes:

Same-sex intercourse

In many cases [takes place] in the anus or the mouth -
[These places] are also sources of disease and spread [sickness] widely
So it is important to be very careful with this!²²⁷

Rather than use the traditional, Buddhist scriptural term for broadly queer, sex-gender deviants, that is, *ma ning*, the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit *pandaka*²²⁸, or a term like 'polo molo/poli moli', a colloquial designation fairly popular among Tibetans today to refer to homosexual and transgender individuals²²⁹, here Nida opts for a more technical, morally-neutral circumlocution: *rtags gcig phan tshun sbyor ba*, "[people of the] same sex having sex with each other". By emphasizing sex/genitals (*rtags*) of the same type (*gcig*) coming together during sex (*sbyor ba*), Nida focuses here on the act of intercourse itself, rather than individuals or their perceived desires, orientations, or subjectivities. Moreover, he frames homosexual intercourse primarily in terms of public health concerns, which, while inevitably morally inflected, have little to do with classical Buddhist notions of sexual normalcy and deviance²³⁰.

In yet other places in his poem Nida is even more explicit about how Tibetan medical tradition or a broader medical mentality takes a different – and typically more inclusive and flexible – approach to what counts as appropriate sexual behavior. For example, following his comments about single men visiting sex workers mentioned above, Nida directly condones

the use of sex toys and masturbation, which are both proscribed by the Vinaya and later monastic-orientated commentators, by specifically invoking the ‘system,’ ‘tradition,’ or ‘approach’ of medicine (*smān gyi lugs*):

“Relying on your own fingers
To arouse yourself and to feel pleasure
And using male and female sex toys [lit. ‘artificial/fabricated vaginas and penises]
Isn’t against the medical tradition.”²³¹

Later, in his section on *ro tsa* disorders, after discussing how men can stimulate women’s clitorises to increase their arousal, Nida returns to the topic of masturbation, and reworking Gendun Chöpel’s own metaphor of the “mere silk veil of shame” that covers or overshadows “this passion that arises [utterly] naturally and spontaneously” (*rang bzhin ngang gis ‘byung ba’i chags pa ‘di/ngo tsha’i dar kha tsam gyis bsgrib pa ste*), he declares the total naturalness of masturbation in no uncertain terms :

“If women - young [lay] girls, nuns, and old [lay] ladies -
Massage their own [bliss-]channel/nerve [i.e. clitoris], their pleasure will multiple
This, along with boys masturbating [lit. ‘emitting semen by themselves’]
Is in accordance with the worldly or natural, everyday life approach [to sex].

When the flames of passion blaze
They burn up the clothes of shame completely
So, in short, do and enjoy whatever gives you pleasure,
In accordance with your own heart and mind!”²³²

Later, in his tantric *döten*, Nida again condones masturbation, this time as a required part of Jnanamudrā or tantric sexual yoga practices undertaken with an imagined or visualized consort, which as we saw in Chapter Six, celibate monastics in particular may rely upon in place of tantric sex with a physical partner²³³.

In some instances, Nida even avowedly goes beyond what is recommended in both textual and folk medical tradition to condone, with qualifications, certain forms of sexual behavior about which his readers may have anxiety. When it comes to discussing sex during pregnancy, Nida first defers to textual medical tradition before concluding that individual

desire, sexual skill, and health are the ultimate arbiters in assessing what one ought or ought not to do in the bedroom:

“[If you’re not skillful sexually, having sex] during pregnancy may cause pain, pressure, or [physical] trauma
So, therefore, it is taught in the Four Medical Tantras that one ‘should refrain from sexual intercourse [during pregnancy].’
However, if [expectant] parents are horny, they should have sex if they know the right physical positions for it.²³⁴

In another striking example, Dr Nida assures his readers/listeners that if they wish and are properly prepared, they can disregard medical contraindications and cultural taboos relating to sex during menstruation:

“When a woman gets her period (*zla mtshan*)
She loses blood and her bodily elements/constituents weaken
Her channels are disturbed and she feels mental discomfort as well
So, it says in the Four Medical Tantras, ‘avoid copulating during this time.’

[Even so,] boys new to sex should not fear infection or ‘pollution’
From [menstruating] women who want to have sex, who are disease-free and are in good physical health
Indulging in sex [during menstruation] is totally fine and fitting,
And more specifically, pregnancy doesn’t occur during this time.

If you have sex too strongly or too much there will be a lot of bleeding
So, cover the bed with a soft-fibred towel
After having sex, both the man and the woman
Should take care to wash their sexual organs and [be aware of proper] hygiene²³⁵.

Here, yet again individual proclivities and health concerns outweigh any moral or cultural taboos which might make sex during menstruation unconscionable for Tibetan audiences. Given how widespread and significant anxieties are in Tibetan and Himalayan societies about the polluting effects of menstrual blood and the substance’s potential vitiating effects on holy objects and masculine pursuits (Huber 1999; McGranahan 2010b), these verses are a remarkable testament to the primacy of consensual desire and medical orientations in Nida’s *döten*. At the same time, they recall even if indirectly specifically

tantric orientations in which practitioners are encouraged to engage with conventionally ‘impure’ bodily substances. Likewise, as we saw in Chapter Six, sexual intercourse during menstruation forms the culmination of tantric sexual yoga with Tummo and catheter practice in Yutok’s system.

Tantric or Modern Libertinism? The Presence of Tantric Expertise in Tibetan Döten

In the Tibetan sexological material surveyed above, especially permissive sexual practices which exceed the confines of heterosexual penile-vaginal penetrative sex such as masturbation and oral sex have been linked in several instances either to ‘foreign customs’ or to the perspectives of tantric scriptures. On one level, it is possible to attribute Secret Mantra experts’ like Nida or Gendun Chöpel’s promotion of ‘out there’ practices like 69-ning or ejaculating in lovers’ mouths to their more ‘modern’ consciousness, their awareness of the looser (or alternatively, more ‘developed’) sexual mores of other lands. Still, to do this arguably ignores the extent to which such recommendations are also aligned with traditional tantric sensibilities. Yet how much connection, beyond an incidental, superficial resemblance, do sexual practices recommended for ordinary, uninitiated laypeople in Tibetan döten have with tantric sex practices proper? To what extent can we see these recommendations as a popularization of elite, esoteric orientations and knowledge?

The first two Tibetan döten in our genealogy, the largely unexplained Sanskrit translation included in the Tengyur as a tantric commentary and Ju Mipam’s ‘Treasure Loved by All the World’ are not exactly popular texts meant for commoner, lay consumption. As we have seen, Mipam’s döten is pitched at vow-holding sexual yogi/ni initiates, while the placement of Surupa’s text in the Tengyur at least broadly suggests that it was intended for a mostly Tantra-literate audience. This latter text claims to be a distillation of essential instructions from a more extensive kāmāśāstra supposedly composed by the master

Nagarjuna (*slob dpon klu sgrub*). Despite including some tantric elements like mantra recitation and citing very broad Buddhist motivations of benefiting beings and preventing suffering, however, it does not offer any instructions on sexual yoga²³⁶.

As we've seen, Ju Mipam on the other hand, firmly synthesizes tantric and non-tantric sexual expertise, but maintains a categorical distinction between these two forms of knowledge. In his 'Cure for Horniness' Lelung Rinpoche also makes it clear that a strong division exists between the everyday sexual ethics of lay Buddhists and the uncommon sexual ethics of vow-holding ngakpa and ngakma. In stressing just how different initiated tantric sexual indulgence is from the sexual activity of uninitiated laypeople who "just fuck naturally or as they like" (*rang bzhin rgyo ba tsam*), Lelung affirms that nothing will come of this sort of sex save negative rebirth in lower realms. He then despairs that people like this who don't know the essential points of Secret Mantra (*gsang sngags kyi gnad rnams ma shes pa*) engage in all sorts of 'standard' sexual misconduct: they have sex with partners owned by other people, have sex with both illegitimate and legitimate partners during the day, in public, in shrine-rooms and other important places, during holy days, while a woman is menstruating or pregnant.

All these types of fucking, as well as having sex with one's legitimate partner at other inopportune times or more than five times in one day are "very heavy sins" (*sdig pa shin tu lce*). Driving home his point about the sinfulness of the sex of householders who have not renounced samsara, he notes that "even just intermittently looking at [someone or something] and having desire arise vividly is negative conduct/a fault and nothing more" (*nyes pa 'ba' zhig yin*). For this reason, to save themselves, lay men and women should "touch their heads to the feet of an authentic, qualified guru," make sure they truly realize the tantric preliminary practices, obtain Highest Yoga Tantra empowerments, uphold their samaya, and find a qualified consort to practice tantric sex with as soon as possible.

By ngakpa Lelung's account then, there is simply no ultimately 'good' sex apart from properly executed tantric or esoteric, soteriological sex. Tantric yogis and yoginis are not afforded the luxury of engaging in sex randomly, as is. As Sparham (2018) notes in his summary of specifically tantric Buddhist ethics, Buddhist tantric morality "is premised on the need for a person to refashion him or herself continually in the service of an ever-higher conduct: a noblesse oblige of the spiritual elite. What is forgiven in the masses is the proper objective contempt in the ruler or the spiritual elite" (n.p.).

Yet while the vows and *morality* of tantric initiates are more exacting than those of thoughtless lay householders, perhaps paradoxically, their sexual *conduct* is 'loose' to the point of libertinism. Describing the ideal yogini partner, Lelung explains that:

"To her acquaintances (*'dris pa rnams la*) [she should display] great bashfulness or shame [as befits] good moral character (*gzhung bzang ba'i ngo tsha che ba*) yet in terms of her desire itself (*'dod chags rang gi ngos nas*) [she should have] little shame and be relaxed and easygoing (*bag yangs pa*)... While maintaining the conduct of Secret Mantra, she will delight in dirty talk and [sexual] jokes/games (*gsang sngags kyi spyod pa skyong dus kha btsog dang rtsed mor dga' ba*)"

Elsewhere, he notes that, while engaging in sexual preliminaries (*sngon 'gro*) or foreplay, "wisdom-woman" consorts (*rig ma*) "should intensely generate desire without succumbing to shame. Whatever moans, cries, or dirty talk and so on arise in her mind she should express them" (*kha btsog sogs sems la gang shar 'don pa*). You should both repeatedly look at each other's faces and private parts and so on and allow your desire to get stronger".

For ngakpa and ngakma who are "greatly [skilled] in tantric yogic disciplined conduct" (*brtul zhugs che ba*), there can be no shame or restrictions when it comes to tantric sex. As Lelung explains, shame (*ngo tsha*) is one key expression of "heightened conceptuality/discursive thought" (*rnam rtog che ba*), which the practice of sexual meditation is itself designed to eradicate. In describing the conduct of exemplary tantric yogis and

yoginis, Lelung articulates a sort of public/private morality, a model “daytime/nighttime” (or better, a public/retreat-time) moral divide. While interacting with ordinary acquaintances and broader society, tantric yogis and yoginis should appear to abide by conventional morality or cultural mores. When nurturing the elite, ‘secret’ discipline of *brtul zhugs* or antinomian tantric behavior, however, anything goes, everything must be entertained, to experience the non-conceptual, empty essence of mind and its arisings. In short, tantric morality requires that the elite practitioner be “a lady/gentleman in the streets and a (divine) freak in sheets”.

Dr Nida reiterated this notion of tantric permissiveness to Christiana and me during our interviews, where he emphasized that Karmamudrā practice does not – indeed, cannot – forbid the use of masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, sex toys, massage, role-play, pornography, aphrodisiacs and other sorts of “supporting practices or tools” for amplifying desire²³⁷. All these interventions were simply more or less amenable methods for “stimulating oneself and making the energy or fire of *bde drod* (blissful yogic heat) come up,” so whatever worked for specific individuals and supported their meditation practice was okay. He explained that, by this same logic, there could be no real justification for claiming that homosexual lovers could not also practice sexual yoga²³⁸.

The Fool’s Science: Ordinary Sex, Open Access Gnosis, and the Popularizing of Secret Mantra Orientations

Exhortations to pursue totally shameless, unbridled passion, to indulge in whatever forms of sexual activity give one pleasure without regard for propriety or inhibitions, form part of highly elite articulations of sexual morality. Here, tantric yogic ‘observance’ (*brtul zhugs*) is a type of ascetic self-cultivation, a highly disciplined kind of freedom aimed at the realization of selflessness for the sake of others²³⁹. Yet as we saw above with his comments on the ‘uncertain’ practices of oral sex, ex-monk Gendun Chöpel, perhaps the most famous

Tibetan dōten writer of all, invokes this elite tantric morality to justify sex-positivity among ordinary, uninitiated lay Tibetans.

In composing his original dōten, Gechö reworked the Indian genre of *kāmaśāstra*, expanding a type of text traditionally associated with courtly, cosmopolitan elites to make room for not only lowly commoners and everyday folk, but even the eroticism of ants and earthworms. Gechö represents sexual desire and erotic capacity as a “wondrous fool’s science”, an area of learning in which even ignorant beings are instinctively wise despite having had no prior training (*ngo mtshar rig gnas blun po thams cad kyis ma bslab ngang gis shes pa*). For him, sex is a kind of intuitive, embodied knowing, one whose ‘naive’, spontaneously accomplished quality is nothing short of miraculous.

While the ex-monk’s treatise is equally informed by an elite, classical education as his predecessor Mipam’s text, the ex-monk contrasts his own dōten with Mipam’s by pointing out that as a globe-trotting dralok he engaged in his own sexual experiments and wandered the earth as a beggar and fraternized with people at every level of society. As such, he based his text on everyday, lived experience rather than the idealized book-learning typical of monastic scholastic elites like Mipam, who saw fit to write about how to have sex despite (at least apparently) being celibate²⁴⁰. While Lopez and Jinpa point to a certain contemporary “Marxist, sexological” voice and agenda that could be said to inform Gendun Chöpel’s “populist poetics of sexual pleasure” (Chopel, Lopez and Jinpa 2018 [Kindle edition], n.p.)²⁴¹, like Hopkins, they acknowledge the considerable extent to which the ex-monk draws on multiple registers of traditional, elite “tantric rhetoric” to justify his populist, inclusive take on sexual cultivation.

Gendun Chöpel is crystal clear that sexual cultivation is something that can be pursued by anyone. “Only the wealthy obtain gold, silver, horses, and cattle,” he tells us, “but

the supreme riches/enjoyment of sex are gained by all, high and low alike. Whatever things are [truly] precious, like sunlight, air, land, and water, are shared in common by all” (Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel and mi pham rgya mtsho 1969, 17). Still, his particular vision of sexual cultivation is more than the purely worldly one found in Indian kāmaśāstra sources. In explaining why it is pointless to repress sexual desire and pleasure he appeals directly to tantric concepts. Since sexual bliss “abides in the naturally or spontaneously existing basis or ground” (*rang bzhin gshis kyi gnas pa’i bde ba*) of the subtle tantric anatomy of channels and chakras, what reason is there to “claim that it is a defect and [try] to block it?” (*skyon du bzung nas dgag pa ci la ‘thad*, 18). He suggests that sexual bliss is the only resource available to ordinary people which allows them to stop conceptual thought without having trained in meditation (*bsgom pa med par rnam rtog dgag nus pa tha mal mi la ‘khrig pa’i bde ba tsam*, 52).

Gendun Chöpel’s text does not provide instructions on sexual yoga and he is at pains to distinguish his text, meant for ordinary, uninitiated readers, from a tantric manual proper. Still, he cites the Kalachakra tantra at one point and refers to tantric anatomy and concepts from Dzogchen throughout his work. Despite not focusing on tantric yoga directly, he also provides a kind of laymen's version of Vajrayāna teachings on the inseparability of bliss and emptiness and the ultimate nature of mind, albeit with the qualification that his “easy to understand description of how bliss and emptiness are united in the mode of object and subject” is “very different from the enlightened perspective/view given in the tantric scriptures” (Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel and mi pham rgya mtsho 1969, 94)²⁴².

Training or Purifying the Body? Ejaculation Control as a Religious Versus a Medical Problem

Despite his disclaimers about how his treatise has not divulged profound esoteric tantric practices and concepts or violated conventions of secrecy in any way (Dge ‘dun chos

‘phel and mi pham rgya mtsho 1969, 95), it is significant that the one explicitly tantric yogic practice which Gendun Chöpel does include in his *döten* is a physical yogic exercise (*lus kyi 'khrul 'khor*) for delaying ejaculation. While Indian *kāmasāstra* treatises discuss male sexual stamina and its role in the gendered politics of pleasure at length, it is only in expressly tantric texts on sexual yoga that we find the sorts of “holding, pulling up, and spreading” yogic exercises described in Chapter Six. Alluding to the tantric subtle anatomy ‘fluid dynamics’ introduced in Chapter Six, Gechö affirms that “if you don’t know how to perform the [tantric] methods of ‘holding and spreading’ (*'dzin dang bkram pa'i thabs tshul mi shes na*), the bliss that [comes from] the arrival [of the *thig le*] at the jewel-tip [i.e. the penis] is like a snowflake taken up in one’s hand, disappearing the second one sees it” (Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel and mi pham rgya mtsho 1969, 91).

He thus recommends that men experiment with several strategies for increasing their staying power. Lovers are encouraged to take breaks, wipe down the genitals with a cool cloth, and change positions and styles of lovemaking. He suggests that during love-making the man should direct his gaze and mind at the point in the middle of the woman's forehead while forcibly expressing words of passion back-and-forth, that he should "focus his mind into [the expanse of] space" and forcibly pull up his trunk when "the semen reaches the root of the penis and all the lower parts of the body become heavy and stiff"; or alternatively, that he should occupy his attention with complex arithmetic - multiplication and division - to increase his staying power. He then describes his physical *troolkor* in detail:

"Squeeze the lower gate(s) [i.e. the anus, urethra] shut, roll your eyes and tongue upwards
 Contract the joints of your arms and legs and firmly clench your fists
 Pull your abdomen in towards your spine and inhale -
 This is the body *'khrul 'khor* that you should do [to delay ejaculation]." (Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel and mi pham rgya mtsho 1969, 92)

Gechö outlines the mental and physical factors which he understands to be at the root of premature ejaculation or men's inability to enjoy more extended, expansive orgasms. He explains that if a man is able to feel sexual pleasure above the waist and throughout his body, and if he avoids focusing his sensations and attention solely in his groin and lower body, then he will be able to indulge in sexual pleasure for as long as he likes without fear of ejaculation (92). These conclusions are identical to the ones Keesling offers in her book, especially when promoting the value of so-called 'sensate focus' techniques: exploratory, open-ended, non-goal based, self and partnered touch procedures for cultivating deeper, more expansive sexual sensitivity and for learning to recognize and control the stages of one's arousal. Moreover, Gechö's 'body troolkor' technique reads like a more condensed version of Keesling's graded ejaculation control exercises which involve intentional, repeated contraction of the PC muscle or 'brake', along with yogic-style entrainment of men's breath, concentration and gaze.

Tellingly, Nida does not prescribe troolkor for ejaculation control in his *döten* for uninitiated lay people. Still, he notes that "so many [men] struggle [to find] ways to prevent the *ro tsa* problem of premature ejaculation" and notes that while some women experience pleasure and climax very quickly, most require a considerable amount of time to become turned on and really enjoy themselves. As such, men learning how to extend love-making and delay ejaculation is key to guaranteeing women's sexual gratification in a hetero-sexual economy. Nida's primary advice for ordinary laymen who experience premature ejaculation is twofold: one, they should slow down and focus on more drawn-out, sensual stimulation before rushing to penetration; and two, once penetrative intercourse has begun, they should go slowly, take breaks when they feel close to ejaculating, and make use of sex positions that make it easier to last longer²⁴³.

When it comes to his last section, his *döten* for *ngakpa* and *ngakma* training in sexual yoga, Nida does provide several yogic techniques for delaying ejaculation and extending

bliss, including a physical troolkor exercise that directly parallels both Gendun Chöpel's and Keesling's instructions²⁴⁴. In contrast with Keesling and her secular sexology, Nida situates his ejaculation control and orgasm expansion methods within an explicitly religious, tantric Buddhist context involving mantras, visualization and Guru Yoga. Still, the strikingly similar technical procedures involved in Nida and Gendun Chöpel's secret tantric troolkor and Keesling's own "secrets of prolonged lovemaking" makes Keesling's proposed, orientalist genealogy for her practices seem a little less fanciful.

Indeed, the extent to which Keesling's exercises read like traditional esoteric tantric yogic pith instructions (*man ngag*) is captured in NT and Sherab's use of the term *lus sbyong* to talk about her methods. While *lus sbyong* is sometimes glossed rather broadly as "exercises", "gymnastics" or "physical/body training", the term has historically had much more specific and much more religious associations and is strongly synonymous with Completion Stage tsaloong troolkor yogic practices in which "training" (*sbyong ba*) the physical body works to purify (*sbyong ba*) the subtle vajra body and vice versa. In the preface to his concise overview of Tibetan 'khrul 'khor lineage-systems *bod kyi lus sbyong rig pa sman gyi ljon pa* ("A Tree of Medicine: The Science of Tibetan Body Training/Purification") Buddhist scholar Minyak Gonpo makes the link between 'Tibetans' science of body *lus sbyong*' and tantric yoga clear, and shows how the double meaning of *sbyong ba* ('to train' and 'to purify') is crucial for making sense of how *lus sbyong* is both about the 'ordinary' cultivation of the physical body and 'extraordinary' goals and transformations involving more subtle bodies as well. Explicitly identifying the science of *lus sbyong* with great *grub thob* or tantric yogic adepts (and especially Kagyu lineage masters) from eleventh century Tibet, Minyak Gonpo explains that these great saints:

"...applied themselves to channel-and-winds 'khrul 'khor training and trained/purified both their bodies and minds inseparably, in a thoroughly integrated fashion (*lus sbyong dang sems sbyong zung 'brel mdzad*), so that this [human] body [of theirs]

could continue to endure and they could increase their life-spans and be free from sickness. Since they were saintly beings accomplished in Dharma, their ultimate aim was an uncommon [i.e. transcendent, non-quotidian, trans-temporal] one. Namely, to transform [lit. 'purify/train/refine/cultivate,' *sbyangs*) all their impure bodies - the impure [physical, human] body of their current, karmically ripened incarnation, the impure 'karmic imprint' body of habitual, latent inclination of the dream-state, and the impure mental body of the *bar do* or interim state between rebirths - into their pure, primordial gnosis [state] and ultimately directly actualize the 'dharma body' of ultimate reality, which is to say, attain full Buddhahood (*da lta'i rnam smin gyi lus 'di dang/ rmi lam skabs kyi bag chags kyi lus/ bar do'i skabs*) By acting with this aim, [their activities] were unlike the worldly ones of ordinary people, and we ought not to ever forget their achievements and legacy in having practiced this Tibetan *lus sbyong* science of ours in a systematic and comprehensive way." (Mi nyag mgon po 2002, 1-2)

While Keesling's exercises are not presented as 'yogic' in a Tibetan sense – they do not require initiation and have 'worldly' and 'ordinary' aims – their emphasis on the reorientation of awareness and the entrainment of breath, gaze, and body to direct libidinous forces is arguably inherently 'yogic' already, a fact which makes NT and Sherab's rendering of them as *lus sbyong* (as opposed to merely *lus rtsal byed pa*, or physical exercises proper) appropriate, even inevitable. Translated into terse Tibetan and stripped of their Californian haphazardly discovered, reverse-engineered back-story, they read in NT and Sherab's dōten like almost identical procedures to Nida and Gechoe's tantric troolkor. While Gechö popularizes and secularizes esoteric, lineage-based tantric yoga 'secrets' in his book for a wider lay audience, Keesling likewise reveals 'secrets' known to traditional tantric gurus, only in her case these secrets were never transmitted to her by any such gurus directly at all. As she explains:

“The ability to control one's penis - to literally stay up all night - is not the exclusive domain of Eastern masters. There are plenty of men who have already learned to control their erections in ways you would find hard to imagine. These men can have multiple orgasms without losing their erections (two orgasms, three orgasms, or even more if they choose). They drive their women wild hour after hour, night after night. They're doing it right now - and they'll still be doing it long after you've gone to sleep. These men are not sexual supermen. They are normal, average guys. Some are young, some are old, some are tall, some are small, some are thin, some are overweight, some are bashful, and some are bold. Some have large penises, some

have small penises, some have thick penises, and some have slender penises. Some have sex once a week, and some have sex almost every day. The only thing these men all have in common is the desire to please themselves and pleasure their partners, and the discipline to master a simple technique.” (Keesling, 1994, 4)

Here Keesling uses the idea of a generic traditional Orient characterized by exotic, esoteric sexual expertise to drive home the point that the cultivation of non-ordinary orgasms is ultimately not so exotic or esoteric after all. Having made the above points, Keesling ventriloquizes the concerns of an imaginary sceptic, yet unconvinced: If multiple male orgasms were possible, this sceptic objects, wouldn't everybody know about them, wouldn't everyone do sex that way? The reason everyone doesn't, Keesling explains, is not simply because knowledge about tantric-style sex is esoteric, uncommon, and initiated knowledge, but because the bodily capacity to have multiple orgasms is itself secret or hidden – although anyone can learn it and it is a capacity that is innate in all men's bodies, it requires special knowledge and training to recognize and actualize this latent potential in the body²⁴⁵.

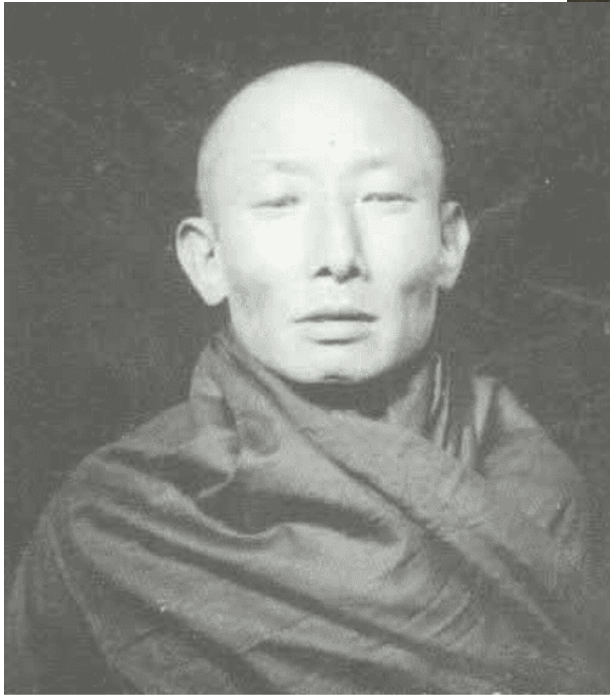
While some men in the West have always naturally possessed this ability or have discovered the secret of multiple orgasms naively, through trial-and-error or happenstance, Eastern adepts have spent centuries refining such occult bodily capacities as an art, as a systemic and valued form of cultural heritage or tradition. Yet, deeply ironically, it is precisely because Keesling ejaculation control exercises *do not* come from Tibetan Secret Mantra sources, it is precisely because they were not 'lineage' or 'culture-bound' in the same way as actual tantric secrets, that they could be freely translated and shared back with lay Tibetans as a type of foreign expertise that ordinary supposedly Tibetans lack.

Sex Secrets for the Masses and the Trouble with a Singular Modernity:

In this chapter I have explored how elite, esoteric expertise associated with ngakpa has been incorporated into – as well as disregarded – in twentieth and twenty first century discussions about Tibetan public health. Focusing on the genre of Tibetan language *'dod pa'i bstan bcos*, I have examined some of the conditions under which elite tantric yogic ethical orientations and practices have been popularized as part of the promotion of a lay Tibetan sexual ethics which challenge and de-center hegemonic monastic frameworks. Such processes are complex and layered. Both Gendun Chöpel's and NT and Sherab's Tibetan *kāmasāstra* repurpose historically exclusive tantric yogic knowledge about bodily cultivation and ejaculation control in their own distinct ways. In each of these texts, ostensibly religious secrets of sexuality are re-linguaged and remediated as self-help and social medicine, even as their authors deny that any inappropriate breach of tantric secrecy or exclusivity has taken place. By contrast, we saw how dōten like Mipam's and Nida's kept the boundaries between initiated, tantric and uninitiated lay orientations and practices more distinct, even as they acknowledged the possibility of integrating worldly and gnostic approaches and expertise.

As the author of the first popular, 'modern' Tibetan treatise on desire, Gendun Chöpel sought to “wrest the erotic from the elite and give it to the people, of all genders” (Chopel, Lopez and Jinpa 2018 [Kindle edition], n.p.) in an unprecedented way. The influences and sources of authority on which he draws to do this are complicated, even contradictory. Gechö's translators Lopez and Jinpa underscore his Marxist influences and sympathies, noting how with his treatise “he calls for the means of production, and of the production of pleasure, to be taken from the elite and distributed freely among the people” (2018, n.p.). Gechö's populist politics did not quite translate into widespread circulation of his text during his lifetime, however. His dōten circulated solely in manuscript form for almost three decades until a manuscript copy of the text owned by Dudjom Rinpoche was published by Dhongthog

Rinpoche in 1967 in India. Dhongthog Rinpoche then published a second edition, based on a manuscript that apparently belonged to Gechö himself, two years later. Both of these publications appended Mipam's treatise to the end of Gendun Chöpel's, which helped to make the former text more accessible and widely known to a broader readership as well²⁴⁶.



A picture of ex-monk and Tibetan dōten writer Gendun Chöpel (1903 – 1951, via alchetron.com), with some photos the anthropologist took during a visit to the ex-monk's familial home in Amdo, Tibet, which relatives have preserved in its original style as a museum dedicated to his life and work.



In her pioneering 2005 diachronic study of constructions of sex and sexuality during pre-occupation, Maoist, and post-Maoist periods in Tibet, anthropologist Vincanne Adams (2005) recounts conversations she had about Gechö's treatise while conducting fieldwork with Tibetan doctors in Lhasa in the 1990s. These doctors noted that while copies of Gechö's book were available from Beijing, the volume had been banned in the TAR due to its perceived religious content. These doctors considered this unfortunate as the book was 'educational' and in the words of one physician, "should be taught in schools here" and circulated more widely since it offered an education about sex that rural Tibetans needed and could rarely imagine (232). In line with the larger pattern that Adams documents of Tibetans in post-Maoist Tibet lamenting the emptiness of "sex for sex's sake", these doctors also recommended Gendun Chöpel's *döten* for its admirable emphasis on loving connection and mutual respect between men and women as a crucial ingredient in good sex.

Adams characterizes sex and sexual desire in pre-occupation Tibet as a morally ambiguous objects, at once denounced by Buddhism and vital to lay Tibetan socio-economic reproduction. She explains how for some four decades, the Chinese colonial state sought to "both eliminate traces of the old [Tibetan] culture" and simultaneously target fertility" through state control of biological and social reproduction in order to modernize and civilize Tibetans. These efforts in turn produced considerable tensions for Lhasa Tibetans in the late 1990s over what constituted good, proper sex and reproductive strategies. Adams notes how appealing to pre-occupation traditions was "politically risky," yet provided some Lhasa Tibetans she came to know a means to construct an ideal of respectable sexual behavior apparently based on pre-CCP norms. This ideal contrasted with more contemporary patterns of what was perceived to be specifically *female* profligacy and blitheness in relation to sex and abortion, behaviors which were widely perceived to be 'Chinese' in form and origin by Tibetan critics. While these critics perceived such patterns as having potentially "devastating

effects on...[Tibetan] society - psychologically, socially, and morally" (2005, 236), Tibetan women who embodied these putatively 'Chinese' orientations to sexuality conversely understood their behavior to be inherently moral, since it aligned with what they perceived to be state-approved models of modernity.

Adams' research echoes Charnak's comments at the start of the last chapter about the supposedly more modern style of sex enjoyed by foreigners. Like Adams' informants, virtually all the Tibetan commentators surveyed in the last two chapters identify mutual pleasure, respect, and intimacy between heterosexual partners as primary ingredients in the making of 'good sex', but while Charnak associates these qualities with Han Chinese and inji lovers, Adams' nostalgic Lhasans look to earlier "traditional" forms of Tibetan knowledge and social organization as a source for these same sexual desiderata. Both Adams' research and my own analysis in this chapter and the preceding one demonstrate how contemporary Tibetans' discussions about appropriate sexual conduct and what constitutes 'good' sex are tied up with anxieties surrounding the relative value and moral import of "modern" versus "traditional" knowledge and subjectivities in efforts to secure ethnic and cultural survival.

Circulating Sexology: On Audiences and the Luxury of Arousal

The history of the circulation of Gendun Chöpel's text raises questions about the dissemination of Nida's and NT and Sherab's texts as well. I decided to translate Nida's dōten into English in early 2017 of my own accord, after he mentioned in passing one day that he had written his own treatise after having been inspired by Mipam and Gechö²⁴⁷. Knowing how few original Tibetan dōten existed, I was amazed at how modestly and dismissively Nida had referred to his work. After letting him know that I was translating it, Nida and I had several extended conversations over Skype during which the two of us went through my provisional translations together and he provided suggestions. It was during one of these

sessions that Nida paused and confessed to me that until this moment of our collaborative translation efforts, he had not really thought much of his poem. He had put a lot of work into it and had hoped that it would be of benefit, of course. But he admitted that, after he had finished it and his ngakpa brother in Tibet had published it on the (now defunct) Tibetan language Sorig International website, that he had mostly forgotten about it (his brother had tried to get him to republish it in Tibetan in a physical form for years, but he had resisted).

Truth be told, he felt like his *döten* and the information about sexual health it contained was quite basic – Westerners already knew all these things, he explained. He had mostly written his poem for Tibetan nomads who lacked the sort of elementary knowledge about sex and sexual wellbeing which he understood to be common-place in the West. I was surprised by Nida's self-deprecating tone, how bashful and almost sheepish he seemed about what struck me as an incredible contribution. I told him that I thought his poem was amazing and really unique and explained that I for one had never received a sexual education anything like the one offered in his treatise as part of my required high school 'Life Skills' reproductive health curriculum in South Africa. Schools in the U.S. certainly didn't predicate their sex-ed. curricula (if they even had these!) on the idea that sex was primarily about *pleasure* and intimate connection, rather than solely procreation or disease, I added. In any case, I had certainly never heard of schools where instructions for ejaculation delay and how to have sex during menstruation were a regular part of classroom discussion.

While from my side, I bemoaned the fact that my English translations were far less pithy and elegant than Nida's original poetry, for his part Nida told me that listening to his words rendered into English had made him re-evaluate his *döten*. The whole thing suddenly seemed much more impressive and authoritative-sounding in translation, he observed. Even Nida then, with his constant appeals to the value of Tibetan tradition and to distinctly Tibetan religious heroes like Drukpa Kunley to bless his poem, ended up highly rating (and perhaps

even over-rating) Western sexual expertise. He also recognized the ultimate cachet and authority of the English language and encouraged me to expand his largely jargon-free, colloquial Tibetan with more formal sounding English medical vocabulary as part of my translation.

When translating his verse describing precautions relating to sex after childbirth, for example, we changed "when the baby is surgically removed or is born through cutting the mouth of the womb" to "when the baby is surgically removed *through a C-section*, or is born *with an episiotomy*"²⁴⁸ and in another stanza "womb-blocking ring" (*mngal 'gog a long*) became "intra-uterine device". In the end, we included my translations of sections of the medical and tantric portions of Nida's poem in our English-language book on Karmamudrā (Chenagtsang 2018). So it was that a poem originally intended for Tibetan audiences took on a new life and significance through translation into English, just as Keesling's book did when translated into Tibetan by NT and Sherab²⁴⁹.

The social life and circulation of NT and Sherab's translation was equally replete with ironies and contradictions. Several copies of the paperback book were sold at the book launch and copies were subsequently available for purchase both at Esukhia and in various McLeod Ganj cafés for the affordable price of Rs150 (about \$2,27 at the time). A considerable number of copies thus circulated through town and the book launch was advertised online. That said, questions quickly arose about the text's value. One of my first thoughts while reading through NT and Sherab's translation of Keesling's "sensate focus" touch exercises was about their feasibility for the Tibetan men I knew. As part of this training, men are encouraged to experimentally touch their own bodies or have their partners caress their bodies and especially their genitals in an open-ended, experimental fashion for at least 30 minutes at a time. The idea here is to focus on giving and experiencing sensual pleasure without striving to achieve sexual arousal or climax in any specific way or at all. Keesling considers this type

of leisurely self or partnered erotic exploration and the quasi-meditative mental training it entails to be crucial to mastery of all the other techniques which follow it in her book. But Katherine, Leif and I were all left wondering how many Tibetan men living in McLeod would actually be able to meet these requirements.

The majority of young, single Tibetan guys I knew in McLeod did not have their own houses or bedrooms. The 2009 Exile Demographic Survey records that more than two thirds of Tibetans living in India have households of less than four members and that well over half of this population live in houses with two rooms or less. This suggests that privacy for engaging in extended sexual cultivation exercises either alone or with a partner comes at a premium (cf. Planning Commission CTA 2009, 23 – 25). While a minority of wealthier Tibetan refugees could afford houses with private bedrooms, most unmarried Tibetan men I knew in McLeod shared beds or floorspace in rooms with friends. Many did not pay rent directly at all and were granted accommodation on a regular or semi-regular basis by friends and acquaintances in exchange for helping to purchase and prepare shared meals, for contributing to household chores or to the provision of luxury items like alcohol, tobacco or hashish. Moreover, it remains common even for married Tibetan couples in dispersed communities and in refugee settlements to share rooms and living spaces with multiple generations of kin.

The prospects of being able to do all exercises "in a quiet room that is free from distractions" as recommended seem rather slim when the socio-economic context of Tibetan refugee life is taken into account²⁵⁰. Moreover, there was some indication that *ro tsa'i lus sbyong* might not be finding its intended audience. A few weeks after the launch I was having lunch with Katherine at a café in McLeod and I noticed a copy of *ro tsa'i lus sbyong* behind the counter. I asked her how the book was selling. She laughed and told me that they had been selling a fair amount of copies but that she had heard that the demographic most

interested in buying and reading the book was in fact monks. Katherine speculated that the framing of NT and Sherab's translation project as a specifically scientific, medical intervention may have contributed to its positive reception among this group, who could use the fact that they were reading a work of 'medical theory' as a convenient excuse for reading a genre of text historically forbidden in monasteries²⁵¹. In short, NT and Sherab's book appeared to be on the verge of becoming academic porn.

Members of the Nation: Masculine Anxieties and Economies of Knowledge

Notwithstanding Gendun Chöpel and Nida's attempts to highlight female sexuality more strongly than in traditional sources, the Tibetan dōten surveyed in this chapter are distinctly androcentric. In these texts, it is first and foremost Tibetan men who must sexually educate and train themselves. Doing so grants them the power to satisfy previously disaffected Tibetan women, which in turn helps secure a harmonious social order. Here men's bodies are uneducated and women's bodies are unsatisfied as a result. We hear next to nothing about women pleasuring or satisfying themselves in the absence of men in this material, however, and almost nothing about queer orgasms. Contemporary Tibetan dōten, like the Indian kāmāsāstra and traditional writing on *ro tsa* from which they draw inspiration, take the male (heterosexual) body as their principle subject.

Heterosexual Tibetan men's voices have thus dominated in this chapter and the one that preceded it. In these chapters, I have sought to uncover the heteronormative cultural visions that underlie narratives around Tibetan sexual inadequacy, to demonstrate how the cultivated 'yogic' body of the sexually educated Tibetan man can be seen as a microcosm for the staging of wider concerns about Tibetan self-governance and stability. The reconfiguration of the body and its vital capacities is a key component in both the making and unmaking of history and the crystalizing of specific national subjectivities (Connerton 1989)

and the sexed, gendered, and sexualized body in particular has been a primary site for debates over tradition, national identity and belonging in Tibetan contexts specifically.

In other contexts, Tibetan women's bodies have been foregrounded as bearers of tradition and exemplifiers and enablers of the nation, whether as representatives of the Tibet in beauty pageants (McGranahan 1996), as 'stay-at-home' mothers and traditionalists in contrast to hyper-mobile and cosmopolitan Tibetan migrant workers (Makley 2002), or as victims of colonial violence exacted through forced sterilization (Goldstein and Beall 1991; Ward 2013). Likewise, Tibetan Studies scholar Robbie Barnett notes how in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), as a result of Chinese restrictions, women's bodies – be they those of anti-state protestors or Communist Party members, have become primary sites for the performance of political ritual and resistance, functioning as “symbols of [Tibetan women's] cultural distinctiveness, of their identity as a group or nation” (2010, 362).

The ideal, sexually educated Tibetan man of the material explored in these last two chapters offers a different window into similar cultural processes by which the vital, affective dimensions of individual, historically and socially-situated bodies become grounds for the imagined, collective body of the nation. Contemporary Tibetan *döten* form part of a Tibetan “reproductive imaginary” in exile, a “constellation of ideas, shaped by multiple forces, including media and institutions, that mediate among individuals' ideals, experiences and identities” (Jordanova cited in Ward 2013, 176). As medical anthropologist Shannon Ward notes in her study of reproductive strategies and discourses evident among Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala, for Tibetans, reproductive and national imaginations are uniquely intertwined. Anxieties surrounding reproduction figure in national imaginaries in three competing capacities: “firstly, as a form of resistance against Chinese domination; secondly, as a means through which Tibetans differentiate themselves from their Indian hosts; and thirdly, as a channel for expressing political sentiments about the exile government and about the social

and political systems that Tibetans refer to as “the West”” (Ward 2013, 176). Contemporary Tibetan language *döten* offer their own examples of the interpenetration of national and reproductive orders. They operate as mediums through which contemporary Tibetan men can not only express particular visions of national flourishing but think through the relative value and commensurability, the ‘exchange rate’ of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ knowledge, masculinities and sexualities as well.

Disempowered Readers: ‘Tantra’ as a Hybrid and Ambiguous Genre

Contemporary Tibetan *döbay tenchö* are remarkably hybrid texts. They draw on multiple and often competing registers and domains of knowledge. In them, the secrets of Tibetan *ngakpa* appear in the guise of foreign science, are reframed as medicine in one moment, only to reappear as weekly magazine sex advice fodder the next. These different forms of knowledge are enmeshed in complicated and often fraught cultural politics for Tibetans. After the publication of our book on *Karmamudrā* in 2018, I tried to get Dhondup, my *Chöd* practicing friend from Chapters Four and Five, to read it. I had given a copy of the book to his wife Lhamo when I had seen her in New York and had encouraged her to give it to him to look at. Nonetheless, he demurred.

I asked Lhamo a little later why her husband was so hesitant to read a book that was intended for general audiences. She explained that Dhondup felt that *Karmamudrā* was simply too advanced. He was not qualified to practice it and it was a secret practice, one he felt unauthorized to engage with. His guru had not taught him about the subject or given him permission to read texts about it, so to maintain his tantric vows he felt he should avoid reading Nida’s book. I explained to Lhamo that Nida’s text was intended for broad educational purposes only and in no way encouraged the idea that *Karmamudrā* practice could be taught or mastered through a book, or without *wang, loong, and tri* from a qualified

guru. I added that the book offered a lot of general advice and insights about Buddhist practice, relationships, sexuality, and desire which I thought were of great value, stressing again that although it provided instruction on some entry-level meditation procedures from the Yutok Nyintik, it was not intended to be a stand-alone text for practice. Still, even with these disclaimers, Dhondup felt it was better that he forgo the text entirely.

Over time, I heard about similar reservations from potential Tibetan readers, who felt disqualified from reading a book about so esoteric and advanced a practice as sexual yoga. When I next saw Nida in California at Pure Land Farms, I told him about my friend's reaction as we sat and had a private meeting about future publication projects in a small Mongolian yurt that Christiana had erected on the land. "Because of the name," he agreed. "If we [had] used the name 'Döpay tenchö in the Style of Drukpa Kunley' then many Tibetans would read it!" he laughed. Drukpa Kunley, the fifteenth century wandering, antinomian Karmamudrā yogi and 'crazy wisdom' saint who brought Vajrayāna teachings from Tibet to Bhutan in their most explicitly sexual guise, was the figure to whom Dr Nida had dedicated both his earlier dōten and our later book. In addition, Nida had dictated his foreword to the Karmamudrā book to Christiana while standing in Chimi Lhakhang, a gumpa in Bhutan which was directly blessed by the tantric adept, who previously erected a stupa at the site after subduing a demon there.

With his comment, Nida confirmed the extent to which the genre of *'dod bstan* was more accessible to less elite and initiated readers, was a less fraught rubric under which not only 'worldly' sexological knowledge but tantric yogic knowledge as well could be popularized for wider audiences. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I explore Dr Nida's attempts to circulate educational information and practical instructions relating to tantric sexual yoga. I examine the frameworks through which Nida and others have understood the possibility or impossibility of sharing such knowledge, analyzing in particular how Nida has

understood his teaching of Secret Mantra practices to align with his activities and commitments as a doctor.

CHAPTER NINE:

DHARMA AS MEDICINE AND MEDICINE AS DHARMA: TIBETAN YOGI-DOCTORS AND HYBRID TANTRIC PRACTICES

“If your compassion is great, whatever you do will be Dharma”

(*snying rje che na gang byas chos su 'gro*)

- Yutok Yonten Gonpo the younger (1126 – 1202), ngakpa, doctor, and founding figure of Sowa Rigpa as quoted by his heart-disciple Sumton Yeshe Zung (*sum ston ye shes gzungs*) in his history of the Yutok Nyingtik, *g.yu thog snying thig las byin rlabs bla ma sgrub pa'i chos skor sdug bsngal mun sel thugs rje'i nyi 'od ces pa'i thog mar lo rgyus dge ba'i lcags kyu*, “The Iron Hook of Virtue: A History chronically the Origin of “The Sunlight of Compassion which Dispels the Darkness of Suffering”, the Dharma-cycle of [practices for] Accomplishing the Blessings of the Guru found in the Yutok Nyingtik, HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005).

When I first met Dr Nida in 2016 in Bengaluru, India during the Nejang tantric yoga and mantra healing level 1 course I attended, I was initially surprised at his willingness to transmit tantric Buddhist practices to a group of students made up predominantly of non-Buddhist Hindus. How could he be teaching methods that had historically been the domain of Tibetan ngakpa and ngakma to a room of uninitiated, non-Buddhists, I had wondered. Later, after I found out more about Nida and his teaching of tantric yogic practices derived from the Yutok Nyingtik, I initially found it surprising – disturbing even – that he was teaching classes on advanced Completion Stage yogic practices from the Dharma-cycle, as part of two to three day workshops that anyone with the wherewithal and resources could attend. While I knew that Nida wasn't the only Tibetan lama and lineage-holder who taught certain meditative techniques drawn from the Six Yogas – from Tummo, Powa, or Dream Yoga, for example –

as part of shorter, more inclusive classes, I was nonetheless surprised by his openness in teaching sexual yoga and the extent to which he presented tantric yogic methods as things that could and should be disseminating and mastered more widely to benefit students. Weren't Completion Stage practices well beyond the average student's capacities and training, though? Weren't ngöndro preliminary practices a prerequisite for engaging with methods connected with this level of practice? Why was Nida, someone who knew very well the traditionally esoteric status of these practices, teaching them in this way?

As my relationship with Nida developed and deepened over the months, I came to realize that there were significant historical precedents for his approaches. As it happened, many of the behaviors and perspectives which I had initially taken for innovations or idiosyncrasies on his part had much longer, richer pedigrees than I had assumed, something I could only fully appreciate after I learned more about the Yutok Nyingtik and the ways in which medicine and Tantra had been both synthesized and separated in Tibet. As I continued to explore the Yutok Nyingtik and to work with Nida on translations, my confidence in his motivations and approach to teaching Dharma grew. In August of 2016 I accepted Christiana's offer to tag along on Dr Nida's tour to Amdo and got to spend more quality time with him in person following our first meeting in India earlier in the year.

As part of the trip, I traveled with Nida, Christiana and a small group of other students from all over the world to Nida's home region in Tibet. Our roughly three and a half week tour involved various lessons in Tibetan medical theory and practice from Nida and some of his colleagues and friends, interactions with patients and doctors in local hospitals, collecting and identifying endemic medicinal plants in nomadic grasslands, as well as visits to various sacred sites. One evening, after having dinner at the home of one of Nida's doctor colleagues to celebrate the wrapping up of the students' one-week informal 'residency' at a local, county hospital, Nida suggested he, Christiana and I capitalize on a lull that presented itself and look

over some of my work-in-progress translations of Nida's commentaries on Yutok's Ati Yoga teachings.

At one point, while looking over some passages, I asked Nida why it was that Yutok had provided so many different levels of instruction for advanced Vajrayāna practices in his textual cycle, why his teachings were so accommodating of less-trained practitioners. "When lamas teach Dharma as religion, how they usually do it," he said, "they will talk about the *skal ldan pa*, the 'worthy' or 'fortunate' student". "But Yutok taught Dharma as medicine," Nida explained. With doctors, no one is turned away for want of a cure – medicine is dispensed in the proper form and dosage for all and any who suffer. While lamas may minister to supplicants based on sectarian affiliations or qualifications, doctors can make no such distinctions. When Dharma practices are taught like medicine then, they must necessarily be more inclusive and flexible.

In this chapter I explore this idea of teaching Dharma as medicine – and medicine as Dharma – as well as Dr Nida's teaching activities and popularizing of practices derived from the Yutok Nyintik more closely. I reflect on how he understood the work that he and I did together to make information about tantric practices more accessible and discuss negative reactions to his projects and what they reveal about contemporary Tibetan anxieties about the translation and transformation of elite, cultural knowledge.

Tibetan Yogi-Doctors and the Secularizing of Contemporary Tibetan Medicine

Nida's integration of medical and religious orientations in part reflects his own upbringing and education. Nida grew up in a nomad community in Mahlo county, Amdo, northeastern Tibet during the latter part of the Cultural Revolution. Although his formal schooling took place within the ambits of PRC state mandated secular education institutions, he was nonetheless exposed to tantric Buddhist teachings and ngakpa practices from a young

age. Following a brief stint working as a teacher at the middle-school for “ethnic minorities” (Ch. *xiaoshu minzu*) in Mahlo, Nida went on to apprentice as a medical student with doctors and lamas in the area. He was subsequently accepted into the Lhasa Mentseekhang (*lha sa sman rtsis khang*), the University of traditional Tibetan medicine and astrology in Lhasa, where he studied from 1991 until 1997. During this period, the official curriculum focused exclusively on exoteric, ostensibly ‘secular’ healing. Even so, some of Nida’s professors at the Mentseekhang were also highly educated lamas (albeit somewhat covertly and unofficially) and these mentors granted Nida and a few other students “who had faith in Buddhism” initiation and instruction in more esoteric, tantric methods of healing on the side, during school vacations²⁵². While studying in Lhasa, Nida also sought out extensive tantric Buddhist teachings and initiations from several Buddhist masters living in and around Central Tibet²⁵³. He explained to me how, during whatever free time he could spare in between his medical studies, he engaged in several short, intensive meditation retreats. Through these retreats he had a variety of transformative experiences and gained greater confidence in the profundity of tantric Buddhism and its compatibility with medicine and psychology.

It was during this period that Nida became deeply committed to the practices of the Yutok Nyingtik. Although he had studied a range of sutric and tantric teachings and had done several short retreats already under the guidance of teachers from many different lineages, Nida explained that after completing the ngöndro and guru yoga practices from the cycle, he had some special experiences which made everything he had studied before suddenly click into place and which enriched his understanding of Dharma profoundly. This made him a firm believer in the claim that Yutok’s lineage grants remarkably strong and “swift blessings” (*byin rlabs myur ba*) and convinced him that Yutok’s system was a karmically destined practice (*chos skal*) for him. From then on, he took up Yutok’s Vajrayāna teachings as his core personal practice (Joffe 2017).

Nida's integration of Buddhism and medicine developed and deepened over time. During our classes in Bengaluru, Nida explained to us how he came to realize gradually through his own experimentation with patients that mantra healing procedures were often efficacious for treating and curing a range of maladies. He related how he himself had been skeptical of mantric or tantric healing's efficacy in this regard until he began quietly incorporating tantric ritual methods into his more exoteric medical treatments for patients, to impressive effect. Nida repeated these points during a later free, public talk on mantra healing he gave one evening in May 2019 in Boulder, Colorado. He suggested that mantra healing was especially useful as a complementary treatment for chronic conditions which were difficult to eradicate entirely with biomedical drugs or surgery, and as a recourse of last resort for non-responsive conditions. On one level, he argued that the tried-and-tested "authentic ancient wisdom" of mantra healing could be thought of as an effective, traditional form of "psycho-somatic healing", a phenomenon that biomedical doctors tended to discount even as they, paradoxically, readily allowed for its obverse – psychosomatic disease.

Nonetheless, he emphasized that this did not mean that mantra healing was merely wishful thinking. To substantiate this claim he pointed to the efficacy of blessed mantra water, butter, oil, salt and so on when given to babies and pets who had no idea that they had been supplied with special consecrated substances intended to heal. Indeed, Nida's own clinical experience had shown that mantra healing in fact worked *better* - faster and more reliably - for animals than for humans. He explained that he had discovered this after his human patients in Rome kept asking him for Tibetan herbal medicines for their ailing pets and, not being trained in veterinary medicine, he had decided to make use of the safer, complementary option of mantra healing instead.

Nida's experiments with reintegrating methods of spiritual or tantric healing into a forcibly secularized Sowa Rigpa education ultimately led him to the conclusion that mantra

healing should be recognized as an “indispensable ‘branch of’ or ‘supplement to’ (*yan lag*) Tibetan traditional medicine”, a point he argued at length in an essay he wrote toward the end of the 1990s on the topic (cf. Nyi zla he ru ka and Ye shes sgrol ma 2015 and Joffe 2019b). In this and later work, Nida argued strongly that mantra healing ought to be reappraised more fairly and researched and implemented more widely in the contemporary period. This position was not always well-received. Nida described on several occasions how he struggled to get his early essay on the history and value of mantra healing published and taken seriously. When he was studying at the Lhasa Mentseekhang, his mostly secular-minded Tibetan peers regarded his claims about mantras’ efficacy and his interest in reviving mantra healing as a complementary therapy with incredulity and suspicion. Likewise, when he tried to get his essay published in a literary journal run by his non-religious brother in order to garner a measure of respectability for his ideas and encourage his colleagues to read them, his brother was equally wary about publishing the article since it dealt with controversial “folk superstition”.

As a compromise, Nida assured his brother he could edit out as much of the essay as his brother liked and encouraged him to write a short introduction/disclaimer as editor explaining that although the article dealt with old superstitions it had been included on the grounds that it might nonetheless be of some small intellectual or cultural interest. Nida’s book-length treatment of mantra healing from this period would later be published as part of his 2015 “The Science of Inter-dependent Mantra Healing” (*rten ‘brel sngags bcos rig pa*; cf. Nyi zla he ru ka and Ye shes sgrol ma 2015). Nida admitted to me that, much like with his sexological treatise explore in the last chapter, he had mostly forgotten about his mantra healing manuscript after being discouraged by the responses he got from other Tibetan doctors. Somewhat ironically, it was another of his brothers Hungchen Heruka, a practicing

ngakpa and the head of the Rebkong ngakmang research center, who rediscovered the text, emphasized its value, and insisted that Nida publish it.

On one level, religious and medical professionalization have been closely parallel if not synonymous in Tibetan and Himalayan societies for centuries. On the other hand, as we saw in the previous chapter, Tibetan medicine, with its emphasis on human idiosyncrasy and fallibility and the empirical and pragmatic, has consistently carved out domains of knowledge and authority distinct from Buddhist moral absolutes and ideals, even as Tibetan medical practices, theories and practitioners have remained highly indebted to Buddhist categories of thought (Gyatso 2015). Extensive Communist Chinese state support for Tibetan medicine since 1950 has moreover required Tibetan medical practitioners to publicly distance themselves from overtly religious institutions and affiliations (Adams 2001; Craig 2011). Ongoing efforts by Tibetan physicians both inside and outside of Tibet to reframe Tibetan traditional medicine in conformity with global standards of pharmaceutical production and clinical research have ensured as well, that boundaries between religion, culture, and science remain both ambiguous and fraught in Tibetan medical contexts²⁵⁴. As part of these trends, the religious dimensions of the Tibetan medical tradition and the Yutok Nyingtik in particular, as the explicitly spiritual, esoteric or tantric complement to the Four Medical Tantras or *rgyud bzhi*, has “become less important within Tibetan medical education in recent years” (Samuel 2016).

The twelfth century ‘Four Tantras’ are the preeminent, basic textbook of Tibetan healing and continue to serve to this day as the backbone of curricula in Tibetan medical institutions inside and outside of Tibet. Widely believed to have been compiled by Yutok the Younger himself (although see Gyatso 2015 for a detailed discussions of centuries worth of debates about the *rgyud bzhi*’s provenance and authorship), despite the name of this collection of texts and its self-presentation as a revealed scripture, it is concerned primarily

with exoteric medicine rather than what anthropologists have often dubbed ‘ritual’ methods of healing. The Four Tantras are complex, cosmopolitan texts. They combine medical principles and techniques from Indian, Greco-Persian, Chinese, Tibetan and Himalayan sources. The influence of Buddhist philosophy, ethics, and ritual practice is resoundingly clear throughout the medical textbook ‘scriptures’, which acknowledge the category of ‘spiritual’ or spirit-provoked sickness (*dgon nad*) in addition to those of humoral and inherited diseases²⁵⁵. The Tantras’ innovative identification of the three medical humors (*nyes pa gsum*) with the three Buddhist poisons has also been widely remarked upon (Donden 2003; Garrett 2008; Samuel 2016). That said, as Nida himself notes, Sowa Rigpa is emphatically not ‘Buddhist’ or religious medicine. In a short article he wrote in 2010 and published online²⁵⁶, in which he offered some of his thoughts on the need for further research into the historical precedents and future possibilities of integrating tantric meditation and healing with both Sowa Rigpa and biomedicine, Nida noted that:

"Sowa Rigpa is one of the five major traditional sciences [in Tibet] but is not a Buddhist medical system. In the Root Tantras [i.e. the *rgyud bzhi*] the Sowa Rigpa system is clearly described as ‘the system of the Rishis or Sages’ (*drang song gi lugs*). What this primarily means is that, as the teachings say, Sowa Rigpa is a medical science that aims to benefit all beings and all patients and which transcends any restrictions based on religion or ethnicity/race (*mi rigs*). Nonetheless, close and deep connections have developed between the ‘inner science’ of Buddhism (*nang don rig pa*) and the ‘healing science’ of Sowa Rigpa (*gso ba rig pa*). Many Buddhist views and practices are taught in Sowa Rigpa texts and that has made Tibetan traditional medicine into an uncommon and distinctive science. Historically, Tibetan Sowa Rigpa has been the primary form of medicine in many Buddhist countries – Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, Sikkim – and the tendency for Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan traditional medicine to be connected and to develop together has existed from ancient times. Both the healing science of Sowa Rigpa and the inner science of Buddhism are included among the five major traditional sciences, and research into the integration of these two is of great benefit to both. Just as the inner significance of Sowa Rigpa has benefited research into the connections and integration between Buddhism and science, which continues to grow and is becoming more pervasive and established, understanding the inner science of Buddhism as part of research on the profound significance of Sowa Rigpa is very important [as well]. The integration of medicine and Dharma or medicine and tantra has been around for a long time...”²⁵⁷

Thus, despite Sowa Rigpa's strong historical connection to Buddhism, as a result of a complex configuration of internal and external factors, Sowa Rigpa education, if not always also practice, has come (especially in recent decades) to considerably deprioritize training in spiritual healing methods. While many Tibetan doctors and medical students today are familiar with the Yutok Nyingtik and occasionally make use of some of the ritual texts it contains (those pertaining to rites for the ritual blessing or consecration of medicine, i.e. *sman sgrub* and propitiation prayers to the medical protectors in particular, Garrett 2010), it would seem that very few doctors either inside Tibet or across the diaspora make use of the full scope of Yutok's Vajrayāna teachings or rely on these as their primary form of Buddhist practice, like Nida.

Although empowerment (*dbang*) for the Yutok Nyingtik is often granted to medical students in diaspora at various points during their medical training (including as a sort of 'graduation ceremony' at the end of their studies), it is rare to find newer generations of doctors who have practiced Yutok's preliminaries, various Creation Stage guru yoga *sādhana*s, and who have spent time in retreat perfecting the various tantric yogic disciplines and Ati Yoga instructions taught in his compendium. During my time in McLeod, I befriended Amchi Jamyang, a Tibetan teacher and researcher at the Dharamsala Men-Tsee-Khang, who I assisted as an English language editor on one of his publication projects related to Tibetan materia medica. I asked Jamyang, a highly qualified doctor who had a great personal interest in tantric yogis, whether he had ever studied or practiced the Yutok Nyingtik. He explained that he had received empowerment for the textual-cycle but had never had the opportunity to practice it or receive further oral instructions from lamas to do so.

He confirmed that neither the Yutok Nyingtik – nor any in-depth instruction in Secret Mantra practices, for that matter – were included in the formal curriculum at the Men-Tsee-Khang²⁵⁸. That said, he explained that since Yutok “wore the clothes of a *ngakpa*” and was

depicted as such in traditional representations, students were expected to participate in tenth day tsok and to recite Yutok's prayers, despite not studying his ngakpa teachings formally. Given that the Yutok Nyingtik formed part of the curriculum at the original Chakpori (*lcags po ri*) Mentseekhang in Lhasa and was a personal practice of the Fifth Dalai Lama, as Samuel (2016) notes, the sidelining of the Yutok Nyingtik more recently "might have puzzled many Tibetan doctors of the past, if they had to witness [it]". Nida has expressed his puzzlement and dismay at this state of affairs as well. He has advocated for a return to the older, once normative model of the 'ngakpa- yogi-doctor' (*sngags sman*) exemplified by figures like Yutok himself and other historical, medical luminaries who practiced Tibetan tantric ritual healing and exoteric medicine side-by-side, in thoroughly integrated ways. In early November 2018, Nida circulated the following message for Tibetan doctors inside and outside of Tibet, via various social media platforms, which neatly captured his revivalist vision:

"During earlier generations if one was a doctor of Sowa Rigpa one would practice medicine and Buddhadharma or medicine and tantra inseparably, in a completely integrated way (*sman chos sam sman sngags zung 'jug gis*). Doctors were doctors of faith who would most certainly devote themselves to chanting prayers, performing merit producing activities, practicing meditation and all sorts of other Buddhist activities. Since the time of the Cultural Revolution however, medicine and Dharma have been separated and split off from each other (*kha kha so sor phye nas*). Doctors with faith [in Buddhism] have been identified as backward/underdeveloped and blindly devoted, superstitious people (*rmongs dad can dang rjes lus par ngos bzung nas*) and disparaging them has become the new and widespread norm. Yet, when contemporary scientists come up with findings that show that meditation is extremely beneficial for the body, mind, brain and nervous system, critics who dare to bark like dogs[against Buddhism] in the name of or influenced by science/reason (*rig gsar gyi shugs rkyen thebs pa'i kha phod can de dag*) have had no choice but to stop their yapping (have been forced to shut up, *kha dbang med du btsun dgos byung*). So, new doctors out there, do not credit or be swayed by newly sprung up evil weeds without strong roots growing on a wall – plant yourself firmly in your own principles and identity, stand on your own two feet! (*rang tshugs dang rtsa ba med pa'i gyang steng gi rtsa ngan de dag la yid rton ma byar rang rkang 'dzin par bya'o*)".

The Sunlight of Compassion: Introducing Yutok's Dharma-Cycle

If Tibetan physicians have neglected to train as *ngakpa* as well as doctors like their predecessors did, and if they have sidelined the lineage of Vajrayāna practices that was specifically developed for this purpose by the grandfather of medicine himself, then it will behoove us to explore the Yutok Nyingtik's contents and characteristics in a little more detail²⁵⁹. The so-called 'Heart-Essence of Yutok' (*g.yu thog snying thig*), whose full name is 'The Sunlight of Compassion which Dispels the Darkness of Suffering', the Dharma-cycle of [Sādhanā practices for] Accomplishing the Blessings of the Guru [that are] the *snying thig* or Heart-Essence of Yutok [The Turquoise-Roof Master]", is made up of a series of essential instructions on all levels of Vajrayāna practice which are said to have been received through visions by Yutok the Younger in the 12th century²⁶⁰. In his history of the corpus, Yutok's 'heart son-disciple' (*thugs sras*) Sumtön Yeshe Zung explains that his master, who was a hereditary *ngakpa* and physician, made several trips to India during his lifetime. It was while in India that Yutok is said to have received instructions in Secret Mantra practices via visions from the tantric goddesses Dākinī Tsomo Palden Treng[wa/ma] (*gtso mo dpal ldan 'phreng [ba/ma]*, 'The Supreme Goddess Glorious Garland/Rosary) and Dutsima (*bdud rtsi ma*), the 'divine nectar' goddess. As Nida explains, Yutok then transmitted these teachings to Sumtön Yeshe Zung, "who made notes based on Yutok's direct oral instruction which Yutok then edited himself" (Joffe 2016b, n.p.). In this way Yutok's revelations came to comprise a complete "pure vision Dharma-cycle" (*dag snang chos skor*).



Yutok Yonten Gonpo the Younger, painting by Russian artist Anna Artemyeva.

The Yutok Nyingtik exemplifies the so-called *snying thig* genre of revealed Secret Mantra collections that began to emerge as a particular stage in the development of the Dzogchen/Ati Yoga tradition from around the mid-eleventh century in Tibet (Germano 1994). Its contents are understood to represent the sum-total of Yutok's expertise as a virtuoso physician and ngakpa, who through the practices outlined in his text, attained the so-called 'rainbow body' (*ja' lus*) and dissolved into pure light and complete Buddhahood upon his death. Yutok's Nyingtik contains instructions on everything from the tantric preliminaries, Creation Stage guru yoga practices, Completion Stage channels-winds practices, and Mahāmudrā and Ati Yoga meditation. It includes associated empowerment ceremonies, medicine empowerment rites, rites for propitiating the medical protector deities, and a range of other supplementary ritual methods useful to physicians. The cycle is also fairly remarkable for the extent to which it has been edited and expanded with new content and commentaries over several centuries by various lineage-holders and practitioners (including by so great a figure as the Fifth Dalai Lama), a fact which makes the exact

authorship and date of specific portions of the text difficult to determine in many instances (Garrett 2010)²⁶¹.

Sumtön Yeshe Zung transmitted the Yutok Nyingtik's teachings to his own disciples, and the text became an important part of the practices of doctors from the Zur (*zur*) medical lineage in particular. In the nineteenth century, the great ecumenical master Jamgön Kongtrul Rinpoche included the Yutok Nyingtik in the Mahā Yoga section of his Rinchen Terdzö (*rin chen gter mdzod*) or massive compilation of revealed Tibetan teachings. The cycle had existed in multiple block-print versions for several centuries. Having received the blessings of his teachers Gojo Wangdu and Troru Tsenam, Dr Nida, with the help of his brother Hungchen, was able to copy and edit the complete block-prints that had been housed in Chagpori Mentseekhang in Lhasa, and subsequently produce a cheap, comprehensive paperback version of the Nyingtik under the auspices of the Rebkong ngakmang Research Center in 2005. This move made the full cycle with all its various commentaries and additions increasingly accessible.

Secret Mantra, the Doctors' Way: The Medical Orientations and Special Features of the Yutok Nyingtik

In many ways, the Yutok Nyingtik is fairly typical of its genre. It contains a comprehensive, fairly standard set of Vajrayāna teachings. While by Sumtön Yeshe Zung's own admission these teachings are most like those found in the Nyingma context, they are to a large extent non-sectarian, and show some Kagyu influence as well, especially in their organizing of tantric yogic disciplines in accordance with the Six Dharmas or Yogas system developed by Kagyu exegetes (Samuel 2016)²⁶². Nonetheless, Yutok's Dharma-cycle possesses several special features which align it in particular with medical orientations and help to clarify why Dr Nida believes it is especially useful for contemporary Vajrayāna

practitioners around the world. What are some of these features? To what extent could the Yutok Nyingtik be said to teach Dharma as medicine or alternatively, medicine as Dharma?

First and foremost, the Yutok Nyingtik assumes busy, professional (male) physicians who are also householder *ngakpa* to be its primary or normative audience, a fact strongly evident in its unusually extensive and multi-level instructions on both Karmamudrā practice and tantric conception offered from a male perspective²⁶³. As noted in Chapter Six, when Yutok enumerates those practitioners who should skip Karmamudrā and practice Mahāmudrā by itself, he does not mention monks in his list but rather refers only to non-monastic individuals who are ill-equipped to practice standard heterosexual sexual yoga for *biological* reasons.

The Yutok Nyingtik is also unique for its use of the Medicine Buddha (*sangs rgyas sman bla*) as a tantric meditational deity or yidam. While many sādhanās exist which involve visualization of the Medicine Buddha, the Yutok Nyingtik is remarkable for being a cycle of Highest Yoga Tantra teachings in which the Medicine Buddha functions regularly as a central figure for ‘self-generation’ or advanced Creation and Completion Stage deity yoga practice²⁶⁴. The attached cycles of empowerments for Yutok’s system also involve explicitly medical elements, including the invocation of medical deities and sages from within and beyond Buddhism to grant their blessings upon initiates, as well as special empowerments in which standard medical instruments are reframed and consecrated as weapons of the yidam. This ‘tantrafication’ of medical tools and procedures is reiterated in the description of the tantric vows (*dam tshig*) understood to be conferred upon initiates by these empowerment ceremonies. The tantric vows for “yogis who have obtained the empowerments and direct instructions [which enable entry] into the Mandala of the Guru who is the Buddha who condenses all the Buddha Families [into a single source of Refuge], the King of Medicine [Yutok]”²⁶⁵ are categorized in the Nyingtik as operating on three levels, outer, inner, and

secret (*phyi nang gsang*). While the inner and secret commitments are fairly standard and commonly found across diverse Secret Mantra empowerment ceremonies and lineages, the outer commitments evince a uniquely medical orientation:

“First, the outer tantric vows, [which comprise] the ‘Six Settlings/Settings of the Mind’ (*blo gzhang drug*), the ‘Two Things to Hold to’ (*gzung bya gnyis*), and the ‘Three Things to Be Realized’ (*shes bya gsum*).

The Six Settlings/Settings of the Mind refer to: 1) Setting one’s mind [on the conception of] the *rdo rje slob dpon* [i.e. the initiating tantric preceptor or guru] as a Buddha 2) [Maintaining the conception that] their speech is the Speech of the [medical] Rishi Sages (*drang srong*) 3) [Maintaining the conception that] one’s medical treatments (*gso dpyad*) are Holy Dharma 4) [Maintaining the conception that] one’s associates (*mched grogs*) are one’s [own] relatives/spiritual siblings (*spun*) 5) [Maintaining the conception that] one’s patients are one’s [own] children/grandchildren (*bu tsha*) and 6) [Maintaining the same indifference towards patients’] blood and pus as a dog or pig might.

The Two Things to Hold Without Ever Letting Go of are: 1) Upholding the commands of the medical lineage masters or *rig ‘dzin* [tantric yogi ‘awareness-holders’] and medical protectors by making prayers and offerings to them and relying on them and 2) Holding the various medical implements [*cha dpyad rnams*, i.e. bloodletting, cupping, surgical tools and so on] as [if they were] the implements or weapons of the yidam (*yi dam gyi phyag mtshan*)

The Three Things to Realize or Understand: You should understand that your medicines are [or should see your medicines as]: 1) Wish-fulfilling jewels 2) Sacred offerings to the awareness-holders and 3) Nectar which cures all diseases” (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 310)

As alluded to above, Yutok’s compilation contains specific offering and invocation practices for the designated medical protector spirits. Its *las tshogs* or ‘collected ritual practices’ (its practical applications for those who have mastered its Creation Stage *sādhana*s, see Chapter One) are notably medical in flavor as well. Rather than just giving visualization instructions for healing in general, the *las tshogs* provides tailored instructions for ailments of specific parts of the body. Visualizations for increasing intelligence, wealth, clientele, longevity, authority, controlling others, protection on a journey and instructions for making blessing water and protective knot charms, while less explicitly medical, easily align with medical professional interests. In addition to this ‘four activities’ (*las bzhi*) style *las tshogs*,

the textual cycle also includes more extensive stand-alone *sādhana*s for accomplishing special spiritual powers (*dn̄gos grub*) that would be of specific use to working physicians. Chief examples of these include retreats to invoke various medical sages, goddesses, and familiar, divinatory spirits with whom ngakpa-doctors develop relationships in order to enhance their diagnostic capacities through clairvoyance²⁶⁶.

Nida has further suggested that the unique and pithy Ati Yoga instructions found in the collection describe the relation of the five elements and five components of the ordinary physical body to the ‘five lights’ (*‘od lnga*) of ultimate being in a uniquely medical fashion. In an even more explicitly medical turn, in addition to the usual common and uncommon *sngon ‘gro* preliminaries, Yutok’s system explicitly foregrounds an additional category of ‘everyday’ or ‘routine’ preliminaries (*rgyun khyer gyi sngon ‘gro*) for doctors as well. In line with Yutok’s statement that “whatever one does with great compassion becomes a Dharma practice” mentioned at the start of this chapter, rather than comprising specific, formal meditative or ritual practices, the routine preliminaries amount to what could be thought of as “engaged Buddhism” or medical social justice activities²⁶⁷

More broadly, but perhaps even more importantly, another key ‘medical’ characteristic of the cycle is its tendency towards ecumenism and flexibility. Although the cycle possesses its own specific set of ‘three roots’ (Yutok as lama, Medicine Buddha/Hayagrīva as yidam, and Vajravārāhī/Vajrayoginī as *ḍākinī*), practitioners are repeatedly assured that in performing various yogas or rituals they can visualize themselves as the yidam from any other lineage they are familiar with, “as they like” (*gang mos pa*). This gentle ecumenism (evident too in the cycle’s blending of Old and New Translation School frameworks) suggests a certain recognition on the part of the cycle’s compilers that practitioners of its teachings are likely to come to the text having been exposed to many other potential lineages and practices already.

This commitment to inclusivity and flexibility is further apparent in the striking way in which the cycle makes allowances for practitioners of different aptitudes and means. Indeed, perhaps the best-known and most-touted feature of Yutok’s teachings and lineage is their extraordinary promise of ‘swift blessings’. Yutok’s instructions on various tantric yogic disciplines are extremely condensed and concise. Overwhelmingly, these instructions assume that the practitioner will engage in intensive, relatively short retreats of mostly only a few weeks at a time. The central claim of the cycle is that, provided practitioners are properly prepared and committed, even very brief periods of intense practice can yield profound results.

This position is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in Yutok’s ‘seven day *sngon ‘gro* or tantric preliminaries. While Sumtön Yeshe Zung makes it clear that practitioners should ideally accumulate many tens of thousands of repetitions of the preliminary practices as is customary, he also clarifies that Yutok himself promised that considerable spiritual gains can be made from these practices in a remarkably short time. In his Tibetan language essay on the special characteristics of the Yutok Nyingtik written in 2015, Dr Nida explains what he calls the Yutok Nyingtik’s characteristic of ‘timeliness’ or ‘accordance with the times’ (*dus dang mthun pa*) as follows:

“Through his clairvoyant perception of the future (*ma ‘ong mngon gzigs kyis*), Venerable Yutok stated the following, which is his vajra-oath (*rdo rje’i tha tshig*) –

“For beings in this degenerate age who don’t have the blessing that accomplishes simultaneously even as one practices, who are impatient and have little follow-through (‘dod thag nye zhing snying rus chung), and who cannot engage in drawn-out practices – if individuals with faith practice this sādhanā which is my own life-force without distraction for seven days, I promise that I will hold to these instructions and will properly reveal myself, will truly rightly show my fact to them (zhal legs par bstan): for the greater practitioner in actuality (dngos), for the average one through meditative visions (nyams), and for the lesser one through dreams (rmi lam)”. Given that most of its Six Yoga practices are also done during seven-day long retreats, the Yutok Nyingtik’s practices are in accordance with the psychology of today’s super-stressed and busy individual (brel ‘tshub ha cang che ba’i deng dus kyi mi’i sems

*kham*s), and even those doctors that are mostly focused on somewhat more superficial activities (*las tshogs che ba*) can put its teachings into practice” (cf. Joffe 2016c)²⁶⁸.

In this regard, Nida also cites Jamgön Kongtrul Rinpoche, who in his commentary on Yutok’s preliminary practices cites Yutok himself as stating that:

“There’s greater merit in praying to me for one year than in praying to other gurus for a whole lifetime; there’s more merit in praying to me for a month than in praying to others for a whole year. Rather than praying to others for a whole month, by praying to me for just a day, one minute, or a mere instant, blessings will come quickly. If this isn’t true, for having deceived sentient beings, may all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the ten directions smash my skull into pieces like shattered plaster” (Joffe 2016c)²⁶⁹

Nida thus makes it clear that through the power of his prayers of aspiration (*smon lam*) and extraordinary compassion and blessings, Yutok has made a special commitment to assisting beings in these degenerate times as quickly as possible. In line with Yutok’s prophecy and promise, Nida’s position today is that any student who wishes to begin undertaking Completion Stage practices from Yutok’s cycle should, at the very minimum: have received empowerment, reading transmission, and oral instructions for the Dharma-cycle; should have completed at least one one-week *sngon ‘gro* retreat; and should have completed at least one one-week retreat of one, several, or all of the various Creation Stage Guru Yoga *sādhana*s. There are four Guru Yoga *sādhana*s in Yutok’s system: the outer, inner, secret, and condensed or essential *sādhana* (*phyi sgrub, nang sgrub, gsang sgrub, dril sgrub* – these are best performed sequentially but if not, Nida typically recommends that students at least try to start with the outer *sādhana* first).

As should be clear, there is nothing unusual about these requirements per se; rather, it is the time in which it is possible to complete them in Yutok’s system that is unusual. As we saw in Chapter One, any *ngakpa* who wishes to begin practicing Completion Stage yogas or to effectively apply various *yidam*-related *las tshogs*, should have first received empowerment from a qualified guru and have accomplished the ‘approach and

accomplishment' Creation Stage practices of one or more yidam. Nida expects the same of his students – the only difference is that in his particular lineage it is theoretically possible for individuals to receive an empowerment from him or another lineage-holder and to complete those requirements in as little as two weeks' time.

Such brevity is quite unusual when it comes to the practice of tantric preliminaries. Completing hundreds of thousands of recitations of ngöndro prayers usually takes at least several months of practice, if not years. Spending extended periods of time in closed retreat can allow practitioners to complete requisite accumulations faster but today many practitioners with day jobs and families accumulate the preliminary practices in their spare time, in the midst of other responsibilities, which ends up extending the amount of time it takes to complete these considerably. Yutok's system thus appears to make higher level Vajrayāna practices considerably more accessible to individuals who lack the time or resources to spend years in retreat.

The Path of Swift Blessings: Cutting Corners versus Fulfilling Prophecy

When I first learned about Nida's international teaching activities, before meeting him, I was quite surprised and skeptical. I had never heard of anything like a seven-day ngöndro or 'Karmamudrā without tsaloong for Dummies' and I immediately assumed that these things were Nida's own inventions – concessions he himself had chosen to make to appeal to lazy, entitled injis who wanted the highest tantric secrets without having to work hard or wait for them. Granted, at that time I had also never heard of the Yutok Nyingtik, let alone read it or any other texts about it. As it turned out, Nida was accustomed to such reservations. In his various introductory teachings on Karmamudrā and during private conversations with me he emphasized that he was in no way cutting corners for Westerners who lacked the requisite dedication. During a Q and A session that took place during

teachings on Karmamudrā that Nida gave in Amsterdam in May 2016, he was quick to correct an inji student who spoke as if Yutok’s special teachings were intended only for ‘modern’ Westerners. The exchange was prompted by another student’s question about how Yutok’s qualities as a guru or Buddha could best be encapsulated. Nida answered without hesitation, barking his response hastily for emphasis:

“Fast blessing! Swift blessing. You understand? That’s why Yutok said [that] his teachings [were] for lazy, busy, and poor people [chuckling]. We need something fast. To get something, how do you say, to get something immediately. You understand? That’s why normally I use this word, “fast blessings”. That is actually one of his expressions. He said, “Don’t get lost in the teachings”. Because once you get lost in the teachings, it’s another kind of illusion, you understand? You get lost and you struggle and struggle and you don’t get anything. He said, “Be essential!” Very, very essential. Do it, and you’ll get it. You understand? So, that’s why he always talk[ed] about “All Buddhas in One”. If all Buddhas are in one, then you do one and you get all. Okay? Jinlab nyurwa in Tibetan...[explains about his article about the twelve characteristics of the Yutok Nyingtik which I translated and he shared on Facebook]...But if you want to really know something [most important about Yutok]... Yutok’s really [key] characteristic is ‘Fast!’ [claps hands, pause]. We are in the fast society. That’s all what we need. And he [Yutok] says: “*sgrub dang ‘grub dus mnyam pa*”, simultaneously practicing and achieving results together. You understand? That’s one, another of his main powers.

[Another student raises his hand]

Nida: Yes?

Student: So, there are two ways [to practice Karmamudrā in Yutok’s system]. There’s the tsaloong and then the non-tsaloong, there’s like the fast one, right? Why isn’t everyone then follow[ing] the fast blessing, so to speak?

Nida: [Slight pause] You should ask others [another student chuckles]. Not me. I’m following the fast path! I’m *giving* you the fast path [chuckling student exclaims quietly off to the side, “We like it!...].

Same student: Then, I was wondering too, ‘cause you say, okay, this is for people who are uh, from the West, who are modern people who want to do it in a faster way –

Nida: [Interjecting pointedly, raising his voice] I didn’t say only modern, you know, Western people. Even Asians. Like my friends – you know, the doctors, no one has time today. They are so busy! [faint chuckle]. And they come home, you know, working, so many patients and this and they come home, they are so lazy, right? So, yeah, it’s the same thing. You should not think I’m saying this things only for ‘Westerners’ [affected tone]. For ‘Dutch’ people! [Light guffawing]. I told you it’s the same for Tibetans. You read, Tibetan doctors or other practitioners, this is the reason I think about 2001? We have published this Yutok Nyingtik, you know, in a normal

book, you know. It was this Tibetan *dpe cha*, the big classical book, very heavy to carry, very, not so comfortable, but then I published and yeah –

Student: But to feel this bliss don't we have to have some kind of discipline, and not just be lazy, right?

Nida: [Pause, clinking a cup, pouring liquid] What do you mean?

Student: Well, I was wondering, uh...doesn't it require quite some devotion, dedication to uh, feel blissful? [i.e. to practice sexual yoga]

Nida: You can go with devotion, if you have devotion. But I don't think you have good devotion. You are more analytic. So that's why you use this technical [approach], you understand? So, the meditation [referring to the *thig le* breathing meditation Nida just guided the group in, the first component of training in Yutok's 'without tsaloong' Karmamudrā method of practice] is kind of technical, you do this technical [thing], you get it, and then your devotion comes. If you have [true] *devotion*, I think you're already enlightened! [laughs]. That's why I'm saying, in the past, you know, people they had no doubt – trust, devotion. You understand? And non-conceptual or non-intellectual teachings worked in the past perfectly. But not so much today, right? Iphone says they are very fast, Samsung says they are very fast, you experience which one is faster. That's today's world, right?"

Here Nida makes it clear that he understands Yutok's prophecies to apply to all contemporary people equally. The obstacles faced by would-be ngakpa/ma today are identical for Tibetans and Dutch people. Here Nida understands himself to be fulfilling Yutok's mandate, to be transmitting teachings with a special capacity to be efficacious, relevant, and beneficial for contemporary students. Likewise, he highlights the way that the Yutok Nyingtik positions the enlightened ngakpa-doctor Yutok as 'All-Buddhas in one', or as the prayer of Refuge to Yutok with which the cycle's preliminary practices begin puts it, "the transcendent Vajra-holder [who is] the condensed embodiment of the Buddha-families, the essence of [the Buddhas] of all space and time, of all three Jewels [of Refuge, *rigs 'dus bde gshegs rdo rje changs/ chogs dus dkon mchog gsum gyi dngos*]"

Purifying the Abodes: Teaching Nejang as Tantric Yoga and as Medicine

One major component of Nida's work as both a physician and a lama has been the promotion of the medical value of traditional tantric yogic practices. Body-and-breath

exercises used in Completion Stage practices to train and transform the vital energies and channels of one's subtle body in order to fast-track realization have long been recognized to provide more immediate, 'worldly' medical benefits as well. Accordingly, Nida now regularly teaches a variety of *lus sbyong* style tantric yogic procedures to students all over the world as exercises for health and healing, without requiring that these students first receive empowerment or complete Creation Stage *bsnyen bsgrub* practices for a yidam, and so on.

One such set of procedures which Nida has played a significant role in popularizing is so-called 'Nejang Yoga'. Nejang (*gnas sbyangs*, 'purifying/training the locations/abodes') is one aspect of sequential, physical yoga training or *'khrul 'khor* found in the six-limbed yoga system (*sbyor ba yan lag drug*, Skt. *ṣaḍaṅgayoga*) of the Kalachakra Tantra cycle of practices. Nejang is made up of twenty four different physical, breathing, and self-massage exercises, each one of which focuses on specific areas of the body, which are said in turn to correspond to the twenty-four "supreme abodes" (*gnas mchog nyer bzhi*, Skt. *pīṭha*), holy sites found in both Śaiva and Buddhist tantric traditions that exist as both geographical and cosmological locations²⁷⁰.

Although these *'khrul 'khor* yogic exercises appear in the Kalachakra system as preliminary training exercises meant to prepare yogi/nis' gross and subtle bodies for subsequent highly advanced Completion Stage deity yoga practices, the 14th century Tibetan Buddhist monk-adept Butön Rinchen Drup (1290-1364) makes it clear in his concise summary of these practices that they also have more everyday, medical benefits. As he states in the colophon to his short text "The *'phrul 'khor* of the Six-Limbed Yoga" (*sbyor ba yan lag drug gi 'khrul 'khor*):

"The fully ordained monastic Rinchen Drup compiled these vital-point *'khrul 'khor* exercises for body purification/training (i.e. *lus sbyong*). Through the virtue of doing so, may the disturbed elements and sicknesses of all beings without exception be pacified! Several of the previous lineages [of these practices] from India were

somewhat hidden and dispersed [i.e. scattered across various sources etc.] so [I], the scholar Butön copied them out [and compiled them] properly and thoroughly. These eighty three or so *'khrul 'khor* exercises [that I have written down] are profound *gegs sel* [procedures] for resolving spiritual obstacles..." (Bu ston rin chen grub 1991, 202)

When describing the twenty four Nejang exercises, Butön notes explicitly how each exercise can be used to help with specific diseases or health problems. Thus, while it is true that Butön's Lujong and Nejang exercises are primarily intended as an intensive form of physical and subtle body training for initiates of the Kalachakra tantra cycle who intend to go on to engage in more advanced and prohibitive deity yoga practices, Butön's comments suggest at the same time that as early as the fourteenth century, elite, initiated yogic practitioners and ngakpa-doctors were prescribing *lus sbyong* type exercises for use in self-healing by patients. Rather than this just being medicine for yogi/nis when they became ill, Nida confirmed that doctors in Tibet with tantric yogic training have transmitted simple yogic or meditative procedures as therapies for their uninitiated, untrained patients for centuries. Tibetan yogi-doctors recognized these methods' more immediate medical value for ordinary individuals and applied them accordingly. Far from representing a dilution, degradation or cannibalizing of esoteric techniques then, such reorientations testify instead to yogi-doctors' compassion and deftness in mobilizing their tantric expertise to benefit others²⁷¹.

Reviving Yookchö Stick Therapy and the Slipperiness of Categories

In yet another example of a (probably) originally tantric yogic procedure applied to medical ends, Dr Nida has also invested considerable energy into revitalizing the practice of Yookchö (*dbyug bcos*) or 'stick therapy'. This involves lightly and repeatedly tapping in different rhythms on key points of the body with rods with small knobs attached at the striking end. This mode of treatment is not taught in the Four Medical Tantras and knowledge of its use was preserved in Tibet for the most part through direct oral transmission between masters and disciples or apprentices. In his essay on the subject titled "Some Miscellaneous

Observations on [my] Research done to Revive Yookchö Stick Therapy” (*dbyug bcos la skyar gso'i zhib 'jug byas pa'i snyan zhu thor bu*), Nida notes that knowledge about stick therapy was disseminated and preserved through two channels: via tantric virtuosi who promulgated it as a “combined Dharma and medical practice” (*chos sman zung 'brel gyis 'phel rgyas phyin pa zhig*) and who developed it as a means to “cure bodily obstacles” that arose in retreat (*lus gegs sel phyir gyi sman bcos bya tshul zhig yin*) and by individuals who practiced Sowa Rigpa alone and disseminated it through clinical practice and research (Nyi zla lce nag tshang 1999, 214).

Nida suggests that the innovation of using a stick for striking the body developed out of yogis' and ngakpas' use of more established tantric implements like three-edged *phur bu/ba* daggers, ritual wands/staffs (*sba mkhar*), femur bones, and vajras to bless patients and speculates that stick therapy, broadly conceived, may ultimately date back to ancient pre-tool making people's use of their fists and elbows to strike the body and relieve pain. He suggests that with the coming of the Stage Age people might have realized they could use sticks and stones in place of their own appendages and from there, over time, the practice was refined into its current form as a “complete Sowa Rigpa practice” (*cha tshang ba'i gso rig lag lan zhig tu gyur pa red*, 215).

Nida explains that unlike other Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist healing practices, Yookchö has no definitive history (*dmigs bsal gyi lo rgyus rgyab ljongs*) or foundational scripture (*gzhung*). It is a uniquely indigenous Tibetan practice that did not spread to other places. He explains that Yookchö and other external therapies which require repeated applications over time have fallen into decline in favor of other less esoteric external therapies like moxibustion and hot cupping which produce more immediate results, and because of the average Tibetan patient and doctor's preference for chemical medicines, which they perceive to be more effective than gentle external therapies.

In addition, the transmission of stick therapy through one-to-one secret, oral lineage transmission has likewise contributed to the tradition's deterioration. Still, Nida notes that those few oral lineage-holders who did opt to write down their instructions made it clear that, just like Butön, they had done so in order to benefit their students and patients – in this way, committing esoteric oral instructions into writing to assist with memorization can be seen as a “way of enabling one-to-one or oath-bound lineages’ proliferation” (*rna brgyud blo 'dzin byas pa ni cig rgyud dam bka' dam pa'i gdams pa spel stangs shig yin*, 216; for a full translation of Nida's article see Joffe 2019a). In the interests of preserving and revitalizing the practice then, over the last few years Nida has collected together several pith esoteric instruction texts (*man ngag*) relating to the practice and has written and taught on the topic to both Tibetan and non-Tibetan audiences.

In 2016 I attended a lecture he gave on Yookchö at a Tibetan medicine training hospital in Amdo to a group of about forty doctors and medical students. Standing at the front of the lecture room wearing a white lab coat over lay clothes, Nida began by addressing the importance of focusing on preventative and not just curative medicine in the current period and the value of making use of cheap, easy, and safe-to-apply external therapies. He then briefly discussed the history and practice of Yookchö and his efforts to resuscitate and promote its practice worldwide, after which he offered a live demonstration of some techniques. To conclude his presentation, he then gave the reading transmission for a set of Yookchö instructions contained in a treasure text that was revealed by the ngakpa-treasure revealer Ratna Lingpa in the fifteenth century, and which Nida had included in an appendix of his 2015 book on mantra healing.

Nida's deft negotiation of multiple modes of authority during his presentation was striking. At one point while conducting his live demonstration, he mentioned that in order to get the best results from the practice doctors should ideally self-generate as Hayagrīva or

some related wrathful yidam while tapping patients and imagine that the stick they are holding is in actuality the vajra scepter of the deity. If doctors practiced without self-generation as the deity however, treatment could still have some benefit. Watching Nida tap members of our tour group and local Tibetan doctors with an assortment of different Yookchö rods talking about healthy diet in one breath and tantric deity yoga in the next, I was struck by how Nida effected, in his very body or person, a rapprochement between officially dissonant domains of power and knowledge. Here, wearing the white coat of medical authority rather than the white robe of tantric yogic expertise, was a reincarnate ngakpa-lama in a Chinese state-funded, ostensibly secular teaching hospital in which religious education was forbidden, advising ostensibly secular physicians to covertly make use of tantric meditation procedures while treating patients in nominally non-religious contexts or capacities. Here was Nida, himself a graduate of such an institution, acting as vajra-preceptor or initiating lama without a throne, ritually reading the contents of a revealed scripture of so-called ‘terma medicine’ in order to grant Tibetan and foreign students authorization to study it as part of an unbroken, esoteric oral lineage, while wearing lay clothes and sitting behind a plain table at the front of a hospital lecture room.

Just what kind of knowledge was Nida transmitting then, precisely what kind of teacher was he when he gave this presentation? Throughout our week or so of shadowing doctors and meeting with patients in county hospitals in Amdo, I observed Nida doff and don a range of ‘hats’ quite seamlessly as part of his clinical practice. A stooped nomad grandmother came into Nida’s consulting room one afternoon, for example, seeking medication for various chronic ailments²⁷². Dr Nida, seated behind a desk in his white lab coat with a surgical mask covering his face, checked the woman’s pulse and interviewed her briefly, before settling on a combination of Tibetan medical formulae in the form of pills for her to take daily for several months. I watched as the old lady then leaned in closer to ask if

Lama Nida could give her any mantras or other Buddhist practices for her to do to help with her issues. He repeated a specific mantra for her without hesitation, after which she bowed her head and clasped her palms together. The prescription of pills was written on an official doctor's pad, through which the woman could receive state subsidized medicines, the mantra was not²⁷³.



Dr Nida applying Yookchö stick therapy on a patient (photo courtesy of Sorig Khang Hungary's Facebook page, Nida's shirt reads bsku mnye, '[Tibetan traditional] massage')

This hybridity of Tibetan healing practices is not just the product of doctors' and patients' willingness to blend religious and secular forms of medicine, however, but is itself a consequence of the undeniable polyvalence of tantric therapies themselves. In his essay on Yookchö, immediately after explaining that Yookchö has been preserved distinctly as both Tantra and as medicine, Nida underscores the blurriness of these categories. The pith

instruction text on “vajra-stick practice” (*rdo rje dbyug pa'i man ngag*) composed by the fourteenth century stick-therapy practitioner Gyaltzen Palzang (*rgyal mtshan dpal bzang*, 1310 – 1391), for example, teaches a sequence of tantric visualizations to do despite being a medical text. At the same time, these instructions are found only in medical textbooks and not repeated in Dharma sources (Nyi zla Lce nag tshang 1999, 214; Joffe 2019a).

From Sensual Massage to Clinical Medicine: The Case of La Massage

The extent to which tantric practices defy neat categorization can be seen even more clearly in another therapeutic procedure Nida has helped to popularize in the last decade or so, a practice he typically short-hands as “La massage” in English. By “La Massage” Nida means gentle massage which one does on oneself or on others to revive and amplify the so-called *la (bla)* or ambulatory, lunar “soul” or soul-force described across a broad range of traditional knowledge systems in Tibetan contexts. An indigenous Tibetan concept, *la*’s capacity to cross and connect genres of Tibetan knowledge seems almost limitless. *La* shows up in texts on tantric healing, exorcism, and funerary rites; divination; astrology; human and veterinary medicine. Just as it meanders across categories, the *la* itself is also given to wandering (*bla 'khyams pa*) and it ebbs and flows for various reasons and under various conditions.

La moves through various inner 'stations' or points (*bla gnas*) in the body in accordance with the period of the day, day of the week, and monthly lunar cycle, and Tibetan physicians recommend against inserting acupuncture needles or performing surgical procedures on points of the body where the *la* is concentrated at particular times, lest it becomes displaced or injured. *La* can become depleted through stress, get displaced, fragmented or frightened away by shock, trauma and accidents, and can be captured by malicious spirits or sorcerers. Individuals as well as family lineages possess their own *la* and as a partible force it can be concentrated in ostensibly external locations (*phyi'i bla gnas*) like

precious stones and jewelry as well as in trees and other features of the natural landscape (the Dalai Lamas have a “soul lake” or *bla mtsho* in Tibet connected with the state protector Goddess Palden Lhamo, *dpal ldan lha mo*, who helps protect their lineage, for example). As a concept, *la* is strongly connected with overall personal integrity and vitality, with mental, physical and sexual well-being, vigor and resilience.

In Tibetan medical and astrological tradition, the *nam shes* or consciousness is supported by the *srog* and *tshe* life-forces, which are in turn stabilized and held in place by the *la*. The *la* is understood to be the most refined essence of the *dwangs ma*, which is itself the distilled essence of the substances we eat and drink, and is said to also have the nature of the *byang sems thig le* or essential 'drops'. Several texts describe the *la* as the "nurse-maid of the *srog* life-force" (*srog gi ma ma*) and a special pulse and junction point for the *la* exists at the lower end of the wrist. These observations help clarify why erratic fluctuation, displacement or deterioration of *la* can lead to death. Because of its close relationship to the *srog* the *la* is also said to take on the image or reflection of the deceased person. This *la* image can sometimes be seen hanging around the grave or cremation site following death and can also be stolen and worn as a disguise by demons. Pre-Buddhist Tibetan ritual specialists would perform ceremonies to "call or hook back" the wandering or stolen *la* of ailing patients (i.e. *bla 'gugs pa*) and such rituals are still performed today by Buddhist and Bönpo lamas as part of Buddhist and Bönpo frameworks (Karmay 1998, Ramble 2010, Wangyal 2015)²⁷⁴.

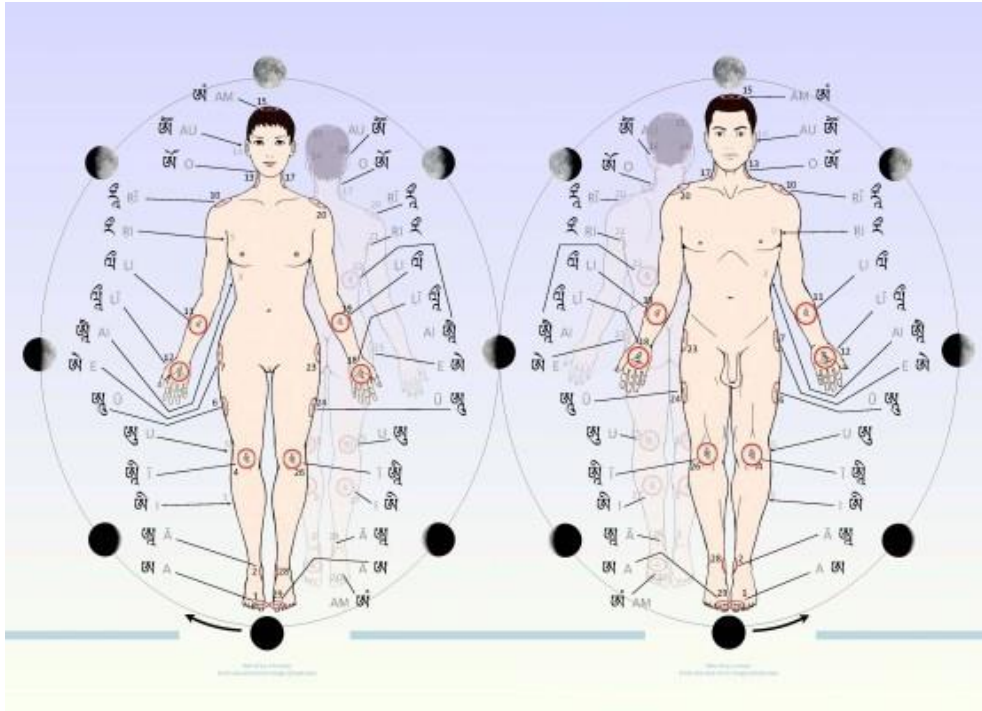
In May 2019, Nida gave teachings at Lama Bob's ngakhang in Colorado on the practice of *la* hooking as described in the Yutok Nyingtik. This procedure appears as an addendum to the *tshe dbang* or “long life empowerment” of the textual cycle²⁷⁵ and explains how to call back the *la* of a ritual sponsor (*yon bdag*, i.e. patient) using deity yoga, complex visualizations, and a ceremonial “long-life arrow” wrapped with multi-colored ribbons (*tshe mda*). Having granted the *tshe dbang* from the Yutok Nyingtik the previous evening, Nida

explained the concept of la to about thirty of us the next day and suggested a range of exoteric medical interventions we could use to stabilize and increase this subtle energy. He then guided us through the stages of the Yutok Nyingtik sādhanā, through which, by using a longevity arrow or our minds' alone, we could hook back our own or others' scattered la which had been lost to the various elements and directions.

Before describing this more extensive procedure, however, Nida explained that we could also use la massage to stimulate, strengthen, and re-magnetize our dispersed la energy. The notion that la moves up one side of the human body²⁷⁶ and circulates back around to the other side over the course of the lunar month, resting and accumulating at specific points along the way, is a basic premise in Tibetan medicine and astrology (Gerke 2011)²⁷⁷. What Nida refers to as la massage rests on this broad principle but adds to this notion the idea that the stations of the la are associated with specific, long and short-voweled Sanskrit syllables. These syllables play no role in doctors' clinical deliberations about whether or not to apply acupuncture, blood-letting, moxibustion and so on, on particular points on particular days. Rather, such phonemic cartographies appear in Highest Yoga Tantra scriptures like the Kalachakra Tantra as a mechanism through which the individual microcosm of the yogi/ni's body is correlated with wider astrological forces and flows.

The practice of la massage that Nida taught us entailed tracing gentle clockwise and counter-clockwise circles with our fingertips and tickling and massaging around the point on the body where the la was residing on a given day, as well as where it had just been and was about to travel to. While physically stimulating each point, we were to visualize the assigned syllable resting there within a small, glowing *thig le* sphere and imagine that this mantric syllable radiated light as we repeatedly intoned, either mentally or aloud, its corresponding sound²⁷⁸.

There exist several somewhat conflicting lists of mantric syllable correspondences for the la locations. Perhaps the best-known of these comes from the Kalachakra cycle but as Nida explained that day, an alternative map is also found in Ju Mipam's döbay tenchö text, which is one of the few Tibetan sources in which the practice of specifically *massaging* the stations of la to restore and amplify this energy is found. Tibetan Studies scholars who have conducted research into medical and astrological practices of calculating the stations of *bla* (*bla gnas brtsis pa*) to avoid doing it injury via invasive treatments have expressed significant confusion about how or why mantric syllable schemes relate to these undertakings. As anthropologist Barbara Gerke notes, two great authorities on the medical calculation of *bla gnas*, Zurkhawa Lodrö Gyalpo (1509 – ?) and Desi Sangye Gyatso (1653 – 1705) both stress that the medical system of *bla gnas* is in total accord with that described in the Kalachakra Tantra, but do explain how exactly this is so. While the Kalachakra tantra lists various Sanskrit syllables which divide up the flow of time and correspond to different parts of the human body, it does not mention the circulation or stations of la explicitly. Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (2008) suggests that the idea of la's circulation through the body in accordance with the phases of the moon may reflect "a very early Tibetan adoption of the Chinese notion of the movement of the vital force [specifically the Chinese *renshen*] through the body", one which was "later synthesised with the Kālacakra idea of the syllables ascribed to the different parts of the body in each day, so as to form the concepts as described by Zur [m]khar in the fifteenth century and Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho in the seventeenth century" (231). A closer examination of Mipam's döten, helps to elucidate a further connection, however, which neither Yoeli-Tlalim nor Gerke seem to have explored in any significant depth.



A diagram indicating the bla gnas or stations of the la according to the lunar cycle, in male and female bodies, with their corresponding Sanskrit syllables, as used in Sorig Khang International teaching materials (see also Joffe 2017c for more comments from Dr Nida on the circulation of bla in relation to mantra healing)

Mipam does not directly refer to his massage technique as *bla* massage but calls it instead “the pith instructions for increasing supreme bliss” (*bde ba mchog tu spel ba’i man ngag*). That said, his instructions to imagine the appropriate mantric syllable residing in a combined red and white *thig le* of Great Bliss²⁷⁹, to visualize it as being composed of the most refined essence of food and drink (i.e. *dwangs ma*), and to imagine that brilliantly blazing chains of syllables radiate out of it which then collect and condense the purest essence of *dwangs ma* from all animate and inanimate existence (*brtan g.yo’i dwangs bcud bsdus nas*) and then gather this back into the specific *gnas* or syllable location, align strongly with medical and astrological description of *la* remediation as described above.

While the idea of *la* as a wandering, capturable force capable of being mediated through external objects assuredly pre-dates Buddhism and the systemization of Sowa Rigpa in Tibet (Stein 1972), we find a clear precedent for Mipam’s erotic massage in the notion of

Chandrakala or ‘The Lunar Art’ as found in later Indian kāmāśāstra literature as well. This practice, which is not mentioned in Vatsyayana’s earlier Kamasutra, is explained at length in the Nāgarasarasva, a late 10th early 11th century kāmāśāstra written by an apparently Nepali Buddhist author called Padmaśri. This art then becomes a staple of kāmāśāstra works for the next several centuries. As Daud Ali (2011) explains:

“[This] doctrine, which Kokkoka attributes to the teachings of Gonīputraka and Nandikeśvara, was widely accepted by later kamasutra writers, and came to be known as the doctrine of candrakalā, because of its association of parts of the female body (as loci of excitement) with the phases of the monthly cycle of the moon. Kāmadeva [the Indian God of desire] was thought to ‘dwell’ or ‘arise’ in different parts of the body in accordance with increments of the moon’s phases. The lover was to stimulate the region of the woman’s body made especially susceptible by Kāma’s presence there by using his hands, mouth, or by contact with similar parts of his own body...The crucial feature of this scheme, however, was that physical stimulation could also be accompanied by a mantric visualization of efficacious syllables on the relevant parts of the woman’s body. The Ratirahasya briefly recommends that the lover ‘direct,’ with his eyes, various vowels (mātra) onto the woman’s body like ‘sparks’ from a fire. The Nāgarasarasva elaborates in more detail. It would seem that a different vocalic syllable, understood ‘as a seed of Madana’, resided on the part of the body visited by Kāma during each phase of the lunar cycle. A man was to ‘stimulate’ the relevant syllable by visualizing it on his lover’s body and adding a candrabindu ‘white like the autumn moon and shining like the sun’. Such a visualization caused sexual arousal and even complete satisfaction in a woman...” (47 -48)

Ali (2011) observes that this “theory of the ‘stations of kāma...was undergirded by a physiology of pleasure entirely absent in the Kāmasūtra” and notes that Padmaśri’s repeated reference to channels (nadī) and their stimulation through physical and meditative means linked Indian kāmāśāstra literature with theories of the body and subtle anatomy which were widespread and en vogue at the turn of the second millennium in South Asia and which “cut across a variety of literatures with specific physiological and meditational meanings, including yogic, tantric and medical” in hugely complex ways (48). To emphasize the extent to which these quasi-medical, quasi-tantric practices which made their way into Indian worldly sexological texts elude singular categorization, Ali labels them “para-technologies”. What kind of knowledge then is embodied in Mipam’s instructions on “proliferating bliss”,

which Nida has more latterly relabeled as ‘La Massage?’ Is this esoteric tantric knowledge, medical know-how, both these, or neither?

The Four Medical Tantras mention the term *bla gnas* only once when describing bodily locations to be avoided for blood-letting. The calculation of the la’s monthly flow then enters clinical practice through commentarial traditions like Zurkharwa’s and Sangye Gyatso’s. These authors aver that their medical *bla gnas* prescriptions are ultimately in line with the “intended meanings” or general sense (*dgongs don*) of the Kalachakra tantra. That said, this scripture does not teach *bla gnas* medical practices itself but rather elucidates a broader, soteriological vision in which the human body and phonemes of Sanskrit grammar are cosmologically equivalent. It further states that would-be practitioners of its Completion Stage tantric yogic practices should be versed in *kāmasāstra* (Jacoby 2017, 335), but whether or not its teachings on the body as text and text as body (Wallace 2009) derive from kamashastric Chandrakala or these were both inspired by a common source or milieu is unclear. Dr Nida then teaches a class in Lafayette, Colorado on the Yutok Nyintik’s instructions on “shamanic style” *bla* soul retrieval for Vajrayāna initiates, but also prescribes a supplementary la enhancing technique, a ‘para-tantric’ method of sensual touch and erotic massage with Indian antecedents but which appears in Mipam’s Tibetan *döten*, an ostensibly exoteric, worldly sexological text, but which was written to be used by tantric yogis and yoginis for Karmamudrā practice.

While Indian Chandrakala instructions are framed as a method men use on women to increase women’s sexual arousal, secretions, and even fidelity²⁸⁰, Mipam’s *man ngag* is described as both a couple’s practice and a form of self-healing²⁸¹, a means of not only heightening arousal but of “obtaining the supreme spiritual power of longevity and powerful radiant vitality as well (*tshe mdangs stobs ldan dngos grub mchog kyang thob*, Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel and mi pham rgya mtsho 1969, 119). Going a step further, Dr Nida then takes this

quasi-tantric massage technique originally presented primarily as a form of arousal enhancement and reframes it as more general method for restoring compromised subtle energy. Today, Nida has incorporated Mipam's instructions, under the rubric of 'La Massage', into Sorig Khang International's more general courses on Tibetan traditional massage or *bsku mnye*, and several of Nida's students around the world now offer restorative 'La Massage' in therapeutic contexts that involve no sexual or romantic elements whatsoever.

The phenomenon of La Massage points us again to the remarkable overlaps between medical, religious, magical, astrological, and sexological categories of knowledge and practice in tantric and para-tantric texts. While the la hooking rite which Nida taught and whose *sādhana* text I rendered into English is a type of *las tshogs*, a tantric application intended to be employed by initiates of Yutok's cycle who have practiced its preliminaries and Creation Stage meditations, Mipam's *man ngag* has a more ambiguous status. It does not involve deity yoga with an initiatic yidam, yet it includes characteristically tantric features like the practice of mantra syllable 'imposition' or 'installation' (*nyasa* in Sanskrit²⁸²) as well as the radiating out and condensing back in of light to manipulate the subtle anatomy. In highlighting and elaborating the medical uses of Mipam's erotic massage technique Nida has popularized it, moving it from the confines of Tibetan *ngakpa* and *ngakma*'s esoteric sexological expertise to the realm of clinical practice, much like his forebears Zurkharwa and Sangye Gyatso appear to have done in systematizing medical *bla gnas* calculation by drawing on broad, soteriological principles found in the Kalachakra tantric system.

Dropping Tantric Bombs: Teaching Dampa Sangye's Batshima Mantra

The day after our class dealing with la restoration Nida taught his single day training on Mantra Healing Level 1, the same class I had attended in 2016 in Bengaluru when I first met Nida in person. If La Massage is ambiguously tantric, the mantra healing procedures

Nida taught as part of this class were explicitly the domain of tantric ritual specialists. The collection of one hundred healing mantras which Nida transmitted as part of his class were all derived from tantric ritual manuals, whether from *gter ma* treasure sources or from pre-existing mantra compilations or ‘tantric grimoires’ (*sngags kyi be’u bum*). As part of his official course materials Nida has organized these mantras into several overlapping categories based on their use for curing specific disorders, their connection with specific deities or powers, and their respective types of action²⁸³.

Rather than mantras which embody a particular deity, almost all of the mantras Nida transmits as part of his introductory mantra healing course are verbal formulae which exist to counteract specific problems. Whereas by accumulating mantras of the three roots as part of deity yoga *sādhana* practices, initiated *ngakpa* and *ngakma* can actualize the power of such mantras and subsequently apply them to a broad range of concerns, these collected mantras are narrower in their application. Whereas one is initiated into the mantra, mandala and iconography of the *yidam* through empowerment (*dbang*) and then goes on to practice deity yoga to actualize their power, to begin making use of the sorts of mantras Nida has collected together one requires only loong or reading transmission (*lung*). For the most part, mantras are understood to be inert when simply read from a book and there is said to be a distinct difference between hearing a mantra spoken by someone who has not actualized its power and being conferred the same mantra by someone for whom its power has been actualized or has come to life.

A number of the mantras that Nida transmitted to us came from Ju Mipam’s famous mantra compilations, which he composed towards the end of his life (Cuevas 2010; Lin 2005). Exemplifying a wider ecumenical and preservationist *zeitgeist* in nineteenth century Tibet, Mipam went to remarkable efforts to collect together and explain a variety of “rites of efficacy” from across Tibetan oral folk traditions and textual sources. As Nida explained, in

many cases, Mipam included Bönpo practices procedures without an Indian Buddhist scriptural pedigree in his collections, since even non-Buddhist rites performed within a Buddhist philosophical-ethical framework could, as per Yutok, become Dharma to benefit beings²⁸⁴. Nida described Mipam as conducting a sort of salvage ethnography with Tibetan nomads and commoners, explaining how the monk-scholar went around asking ordinary people what mantras and efficacious rites they knew to include in his collection.

As Van Schaik has observed, it is important to understand that “magic is not specific to the Vajrayāna, or even Mahāyāna Buddhism”²⁸⁵. Notwithstanding the tendencies of earlier scholars and the very real integration of worldly, apotropaic or magical and soteriological ends in tantric contexts, ‘tantric Buddhist ritual’ is not synonymous with ‘Buddhist magic’. There is nothing inherently ‘tantric’ about reciting, imagining, or writing mantras to effect healing or other magical goals. Indeed, such practices can be found in the earliest Buddhist communities which predate the systematization of non-dual tantric traditions by thousands of years (de Caroli 2004) and the use of mantra healing and magic abounds in Theravada Buddhist contexts as much as in Vajrayāna ones²⁸⁶. The mantric healing practices that Nida taught us did not require soteriological tantric Buddhist initiation or practice with an initiatic deity but they derived nonetheless from a Vajrayāna milieu and were themselves techniques associated with ngakpa and their written works.

As Nida told us, paraphrasing the words of the Indian tantric saint Naropa, all that was truly required if we wanted to see the effects of these healing mantras for ourselves was to “shut up and say the mantras!” over and over and over, in the proper fashion²⁸⁷. To begin to awaken our mantric power (*sngags kyi nus pa*, *sngags nus*) and ensure that any other mantras we recited would be efficacious however, Nida instructed us to accumulate several thousand recitations of three core mantras in his mantra “pharmacy”: 50 000 recitations of the five syllable Daka mantra of the five elements in their tantric form as wrathful, masculine

deities; 100 000 recitations of the five syllable *Ḍākinī* mantra of the five elements in tantric goddess form; and 6000 recitations of the longer Batshima or ‘Four *rbad*’ (*rbad bzhi ma*) mantra of the Indian tantric exorcist-saint Dampa Sangye, which “cures one hundred diseases”. We were to accumulate recitations of the first two mantras continually over the course of one or more days, preferably while doing or saying nothing else. The six thousand recitations of the Batshima mantra were to be performed in a single night’s vigil from sunset to sunrise on the night of the new moon, either in an actual cemetery or charnel ground or in one in our imagination.

The issue of esoteric or ‘secret’ transmission emerged pointedly during our class in Lafayette in relation to this last Batshima mantra practice. The particular pith instructions Nida conveyed to us for this mantra which is found across several sources were composed by Ju Mipam and appear as a stand-alone section in his text “A Rain of Nectar: Mantras for Curing Diverse Diseases” (*nad sna tshogs zhi ba’i sngags bdud rtsi’i char pa*). The Batshima mantra is so-named for the repeated *rbad* mantric syllables which appear as magical punctuation points at the close of each of its four lines. *Rbad* means something like “Boom!” in Tibetan and the expression is used as an exorcistic mantric exclamation in ritual contexts²⁸⁸. Accordingly, Nida explained that this mantra wielded the power of four “tantric bombs” which could completely and suddenly blow up and obliterate sickness and demonic, obstructive forces and conditions.

The Batshima mantra is described as having unparalleled exorcistic and curative power when activated, and being linked to Dampa Sangye, it is said to be especially effective for spirit-caused sicknesses, especially for what biomedical practitioners might refer to as intractable chronic inflammatory conditions and non-responsive infections and psychological disorders. That said, the Batshima is “one mantra for one hundred diseases” (*nad brgya sngags gcig*) and Mipam provides an extensive list of practical applications for the anti-

demon mantra, involving everything from healing infections, wounds, bones, and tumors, to protecting one's self from infection while butchering corpses, to averting hail, capturing runaways, preventing shoes from wearing out, to repelling curses and preventing fermenting beer and yoghurt from spoiling.

Unlike the other healing mantras in his collection, the activation and use of this mantra required something like deity yoga. In his instructions, Mipam explains that in order to make the mantra work for them, practitioners should first arouse Bodhicitta and then go for Refuge to the Guru, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, as well as to the “siddhas of every *ḍākinī* - dwelling” and “the supreme being Dampa Sangye” (HUM chen and nyi zla he ru ka 2006, 257). Then in order to accumulate and activate the mantra Mipam explains that you should imagine that:

“...your ultimate essence is [the Buddha] Chenrezig²⁸⁹ and your [outer] form is that of Lord Shiva Maheshvara. Imagine that your body is smoky [brown] or else ash grey colored, that you have a single face, two arms, and three eyes [i.e. a blazing, open vertically positioned ‘third eye’] and that your matted dreadlocks extend out and down to the ground. You hold a trikula trident in your right hand and a blood-filled kapala skull-cup in your left. You possess the six [human] bone ornaments. Meditate that there is fire at your upper lip and wind at your lower one, and that sparks of fire radiate out from your tongue. Conceive that an ocean of evil mantras (*ngan sngags*) swirls in your belly” (HUM chen and nyi zla he ru ka 2006, 257)

Maintaining this visualization practitioners then go ahead with their one-night mantra accumulation vigil²⁹⁰. Having done this, to preserve the power of the activated mantra, practitioners should recite the mantra at least twenty one times every day as a specific tantric vow (*dam tshig*) connected with the practice. This set of instructions is remarkable for the way in which it captures in imaginal, visual form the general premise that ostensibly non-Buddhist practices can become Dharma if one maintains an essentially Buddhist understanding and motivation while doing them. Here (quite literally!), ngakpa and ngakma make use of the trappings of non-Buddhist Śaiva ritual, taking on the form of a worldly deity

from a rival pantheon, albeit from an unimpeachably enlightened, Buddhist perspective, in order to accomplish benefit for beings²⁹¹.

In the past, when Nida has taught his level 1 Mantra Healing class, he has simply transmitted the Batshima mantra along with a few written notes about how to perform the accumulation visualization and some anecdotal material about how students of his from around the world have applied the mantra in different ways and achieved impressive results. As it happened, however, I had composed a draft translation of Mipam’s Batshima instructions for my own purposes prior to our class in Lafayette, and so on this occasion, Nida was able to provide students with Mipam’s full instructions after transmitting the mantra to them.

In the colophon to his text Mipam notes that one should “only transmit this mantra through a one-to-one lineage transmission (*chig brgyud*) – if you spread it widely/many times (*mang du spel na*) you will incur the punishment of the *Ḍākinīs*” (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2006, 259). The night before our class I was staying with Nida and Christiana at their Airbnb house in Boulder. Before turning in for the night, Nida and I sat on the floor of the living room and went over my draft translation. When we came to the line about single-transmission and retribution from the *Ḍākinīs*, Nida said wryly, “Oh, well now you see it is useless” before laughing and moving on to other topics. I did not have time to finalize my English translation before our class, so the next day as Nida sat on the teaching throne in Lama Bob’s ngakkhang he translated and paraphrased select portions from Mipam’s Tibetan text while offering commentary on the practice. He came to the line about one-to-one transmission and translated it. Lama Bob, a stickler for proper tantric protocol, gasped from his cushion to the right of the throne on the floor. “But, Rinpoche! You have, you’ve already shared it with more than one of us...?!”

Nida explained that while it was indeed true that the practice had historically been transmitted from a single master to a single disciple, this was no longer always the case. In fact, when he received reading transmission for the practice in Tibet, his teacher Troru Tsenam conferred it in a similar fashion as he had to us, to a group of several students at one time. Troru Tsenam had justified this choice by explaining how important it was that mantras with great power to help beings be spread more widely today, lest their continued use fade entirely²⁹². Moreover, Tibetan language publications featuring Mipam's *Batshima man ngag* and other instructions on practical mantra magic have been published widely in Tibet, in affordable, paperback form (Cuevas 2010). As it happened, the book from which Nida had read Mipam's lines about single-transmission was the paperback tantric grimoire anthology that he himself along with his brother Hungchen had published over a decade prior (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2006).²⁹³

Split Signs and Deferred Revelations: Making Sense of the Publishing of Tantric Secrets

Tantric *man ngag* texts have historically been pitched at readers who already possess sufficient general knowledge and training to put their bullet point-style instructions into practice. Generally speaking, it was assumed that gaps in the text would be filled by oral instruction from qualified teachers. As such, the apparent oxymoron of the widely accessible or mass-published 'secret' text or translation is, upon closer inspection, a key component in one of secrecy's most central and seemingly paradoxical qualities, namely, its dependence on potential and actual disclosure for its significance. As Michael Taussig famously observed in developing his theory of the 'public secret', "to the extent that the secret can be and is revealed, I would like to suggest that revelation is precisely what the secret intends; in other words part of secrecy is secretion" (Taussig 1999, 297).

The ‘secretion’ of secrets in the context of published *man ngag* texts alerts us further to how secrecy often involves the so-called “revelation of concealment” (Jones 2014) as well. Written and translated *man ngag* that seem to lay tantric lineage teachings bare on the page arguably function as what Museum Studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) has called “a split sign” in the context of her assessment of curators’ strategies for exhibiting religious objects associated with African initiatic religions at the Museum for African Art. As she explains, secrecy operates as a split sign when it reveals through “half a sign”, whereby signifiers – mediations or secretions – of secret knowledge are exposed but what they *ultimately* signify is deferred (254). The material cultural artefact of the written/published/translated *man ngag* is thus part of specific revelation-management strategies, a sort of deferral of truths or insights which await elucidation through other means, at other times and in other places.

The public ‘leaking’ or secretion of tantric secrets can thus be understood as a strategy of skilled concealment, of revelation-as-deferral. Such ideas relate to the Tibetan tantric Buddhist notion of *rang gsang* or ‘self[-secured]’ or ‘inherent secrecy’. David B. Gray elaborates on this notion, as it relates to mediations of secret knowledge and the relationship between texts of esoteric instruction and the bodies of tantric yogic practitioners:

“While tantric texts and traditions are seemingly focused on the disclosure of secrets, this disclosure — when mediated by texts — is always imperfect and incomplete since these texts and traditions are focused on practices that are not readily or entirely communicable via written text. The tantras in general tend to focus primarily on practice; tantric literature — by which I mean the tantras themselves as well as the commentaries, ritual manuals...and meditation manuals [i.e. *sādhana*] — tends to share this focus. They are thus “self-secret” (*rang gsang*), incapable of complete disclosure via words alone. For when reading about ritual, yogic, or meditation practices that one has never personally experienced, it is arguably impossible to fully understand these practices simply by reading the text, even if one’s ability to read and understand the words of the text is perfect.” (Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa and Gray 2019 [Kindle Edition], n.p.)²⁹⁴

Examining Tibetan texts from the eighth and ninth centuries from the Dunhuang corpus which describe the spread of Vajrayāna teachings and maintaining of tantric vows in that period, Van Schaik (2008b) observes that already well over a thousand years ago, Tibetan authors noted that the three types of people who would “deeply degenerate the tantric commitments” if the secret teachings were released to them were one, imposter lamas keen to bestow empowerments and transmissions for which they themselves did not hold vows [i.e. have proper empowerment]; two, those who would put tantric teachings into practice by relying on what they have encountered in *written texts* alone (*yi ge tsam rnyed pa la rten*); and three, those who would practice tantric methods without also practicing Holy Dharma (n.p.). Thus, we can see that “self-secrecy” and revelation-as-deferral/concealment notwithstanding, even very early Tibetan commentators warned that the unregulated circulation of tantric literature could facilitate “the profound deterioration of tantric commitments” (*dam tshig gting ngas nyams par gyur*) by making it easier for charlatans to pose as gurus, and ‘independent’ students to claim that they were practicing tantric methods solely via book-based self-study or merely as technologies, separate from Buddhist philosophical and moral frameworks.

There is strong evidence that these ancient concerns *are* in fact a regular side-effect of the increasing globalization and accessibility of Tibetan tantric Buddhist knowledge today. Throughout my fieldwork, I have recorded instances in which attendees at Tibetan lamas’ empowerment ceremonies subsequently claimed to have been authorized to teach to others the methods transmitted to them, or where practitioners reworked traditional lineage-based teachings that they had either received directly from lamas or indirectly via books into their own highly idiosyncratic and hybridized practices, often entirely without lamas’ knowledge or approval. My many years of close involvement with Western occultist, neo-Pagan, and ritual magic communities both in the flesh and virtually has alerted me to the great extent to

which individual practitioners are cannibalizing Vajrayāna practices and hybridizing them with other practices and frameworks as well.

These developments, about which many Tibetan lineage-holders seem quite unaware, beg for further ethnographic investigation (my impression is that many Tibetan lamas have a very limited sense of the “social after-life” of the practices which they transmit during empowerments and other teachings). While some of these non-Tibetan bricoleurs have only minimal ties with living Tibetan teachers and cobble together personal systems through secondary sources and individual inspiration alone, others are highly knowledgeable and initiated practitioners of Vajrayāna who while maintaining more traditional relationships with lamas, engage in a variety of other esoteric practices, whether ‘traditional’ or of their own invention. Preliminary research shows that within certain corners of global ‘occulture’ (Partridge 2006; 2014), Tibetan esoteric Buddhist expertise is increasingly framed as spiritual or magical ‘tech’, a set of methods which can and should be divorced from Tibetan culture, religion, and authority and be made use of by non-Buddhists (for more on these developments see Joffe 2015d; 2017d).

Already decades before the Chinese invasion and the reconstitution of a Tibetan centralized government apparatus in India, Secret Mantra texts and practices were finding their way into wider, global circulation through complex interactions between native Tibetan/Himalayan experts and various foreign converts, scholars, colonial officials, and explorers (Hackett 2012, Samdup 2008, Thévoz 2016). Copies and translations of Tibetan Buddhist texts connected with advanced tantric yogic practices move today within complicated material and semiotic economies that are increasingly transnational in scope. As Secret Mantra knowledge is mediated in novel ways for novel audiences, Tibetan tantric yogic practices, orientations, terminologies, and associated material culture are being taken up and reworked by ever expanding circles of practitioners, individuals whose activities are

not always fully contained or containable within the parameters of traditional tantric guru-disciple relationships or Tibetan community structures.

Nida himself expresses concerns about such developments in a Tibetan language interview conducted in 2004. Here, the interviewer asks Nida if a person who “practices Tummo [Yoga] without [having received] the Dharma-lineage [for the practice] and just from having read books (*gtum mo 'i chos rgyun med par dpe cha tsam la bstas nas*) will [still] be able to [experience] heat blazing in their body?” Nida’s response is that since Tummo is a Highest Yoga Tantra Secret mantra practice having empowerment, reading transmission and in particular, good oral instruction for practice is essential. He explains that Tummo *'phrul 'khor* tantric yogic exercises are not things that one can simply do “willy-nilly or randomly” (*gang byung bya thub pa zhig ma red*) and points out that Tummo practice has outer, inner, and secret dimensions. While it is possible to induce the physical heat of “outer Tummo” with recourse to special substances, purely physical exercise or the use of ‘Vase Breathing’ breath retention as supplementary aids, inner and secret level Tummo entails the blazing up of bliss-heat which burns up afflictive emotions and conceptual thought which in turn gives rise to the primordial gnosis of Great [Empty] Bliss. Nida explains that if one practices Tummo separate from Guru Yoga there is no way this can happen and notes that today there are several fake tulku who teach Tummo simply as bodily exercise (*lus sbyong tsam gyi gtum mo khrid*), without holding the instruction-lineage (*khrid rgyud med par*), behavior which, in his opinion, is a “blight or wound on the Buddhist teachings” (*nang bstan gyi rma*, cf. Joffe 2017a).

Nida made it quite clear during several teachings I attended with him that simply receiving transmissions from him did not authorize attendees to go on to immediately teach these methods to others or to repackage them as they saw fit. For example, Nida clarified during our Nejang class in Bengaluru that while we could transmit the outer dimensions of

individual Nejang exercises to others as methods that these individuals could use for self-healing, we should not rush to teach Bumbachen (*bum pa can*) – the ‘vase breath’ retention and churning procedures – he had taught to us as the inner component of Nejang to others. Nida’s root-guru in Tibet, Yogini Ani Ngawang Gyaltzen who instructed him in Nejang, the Six Yogas, Ati Yoga and many other practices, made him wait two years before she gave him instructions in *bum pa can*. Later, she authorized him to teach the practice to others more openly for its medicinal value, and he now transmits it to patients he thinks will benefit from its use. Some of Nida’s teachings on *bum pa can* have been recorded on video and uploaded to YouTube, and at the time of writing, Nida, Christiana and I are also preparing to publish a basic written description of the practice in a forthcoming book on Nejang (Chenagtsang 2020, forthcoming). Even so, Nida feels strongly that written explanations on this foundational albeit potentially dangerous yogic breathing practice should be supplemented by in-person instruction, transmitted by a qualified and experienced teacher in a reverential, controlled environment.



Dr Nida and his root-guru the yogini Ani (nun) Ngawang Gyaltzen of Shugseb nunnery, in Lhasa 1993, photo courtesy Dr Nida Chenagtsang.

Informative Secrets: Education versus Training in Secret Mantra and Karmamudrā for Dummies

Notwithstanding the fact that one of the primary transgressions of tantric commitments in both the Old and New schools of Tibetan Buddhism is to broadcast esoteric instructions too widely, to disclose them to “unfit vessels” (*snod ma yin*) incapable of properly understanding or executing them, mass circulation of esoteric Buddhist expertise and its related material culture and mediations, continues apace. Today, respected lamas like His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Garchen Rinpoche, and until recently, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, have offered webcast and replayable online empowerments, and more pith instructions have been published and translated than ever before. As discussed, mass circulation of esoteric knowledge risks increasing the possibility of misunderstanding, distortion, and appropriation. Yet at the same time, at least some lamas perceive these developments to serve a greater, more positive purpose. The foregoing survey of cultural politics surrounding the contemporary transmission and circulation of tantric ritual practices should make it clear that the sharing of such knowledge with less initiated or qualified audiences is not necessarily new. What *is* different now, however, are the socio-political and institutional contexts, the interpretive frameworks and mechanisms through which Tibetan esoteric expertise circulates and is understood²⁹⁵.

Perhaps the most common reaction I heard in the wake of the publishing of our 2018 Karmamudrā book, particularly from online commentators who had not yet read the book, was that “Karmamudrā is an advanced, secret practice that isn’t for most people – you can’t just learn Karmamudrā from a book”. As should be clear by now, Dr Nida was in no way intending to “teach Karmamudrā through a book” with his publication. Rather, his book’s primary purpose was, as he put it, “educational”. Through it, he wished to set the record straight on what traditional Karmamudrā practices did and did not entail, so as to empower

students against the possibility of being duped by teachers who sought to prey on their ignorance in order to abuse them. Even so, his book does contain *some* practical instructions on sexual yoga. As a split sign, both describing secrets and deferring them, what work then did Dr Nida understand his book to be performing in mediating esoteric and specialist expertise?

Nida explained to me that his primary decision to publish English-language explanatory material relating to Karmamudrā was due to the evidence of widespread sexual abuse in the name of Tantra which he had seen among female patients and students across Asia, America and Europe. Women who felt they could not say no to powerful Tibetan gurus had been coerced into sex for such teachers' gratification under the cover of spirituality – Nida hoped that our book would help to prevent further abuse of this sort in the future. At same time, as a ngakpa lineage-holder, he was keen to counter reductive portrayals of Karmamudrā practice as nothing more than a patriarchal cultural institution which existed solely to exploit women for the benefit of male elites. As such, a key emphasis of his text was reorienting sexual yoga practices for a wider spectrum of potential practitioners than just older, powerful, heterosexual, cis-gendered men.

Nida noted that Karmamudrā instructional texts in Tibet had been written almost entirely by heterosexual men, for heterosexual men. As he stated during his Karmamudrā teachings in Romania in April 2014, traditionally Karmamudrā was designed almost exclusively for men and pitched at men's needs and agendas. Quite remarkably, however, he declared that as far as he was concerned if it is “only designed for men then Karmamudrā practice is not yet perfect”. In this way, Nida was able to make a powerful contrast between the inherent potential of sexual yoga practices as perfect spiritual practices elucidated by enlightened beings and the effects of historical precedent and cultural tradition, which in his view has limited and delayed the development of these teachings in the world.

In his efforts to promote sexual yoga as a practice that can empower women and other historically marginalized practitioners in their own terms, Nida has taken considerable inspiration from the Fifth Lelung Rinpoche and his expositions on Karmamudrā²⁹⁶. Lelung’s “A Cure for Horniness” commentary was composed at the behest of one of Lelung’s primary consorts. While the original shorter, visionary text on which the commentary is based is Lelung’s record of the Goddess’ instructions to him – “[you, yogi] find a suitable consort, she should visualize herself as me, I will not teach you this if you do not know it...” etc., where terms like ‘I’ and ‘me’ appear in the reported speech of the Goddess as written down by Lelung – the subsequent commentary sees Lelung further explaining the procedures the Goddess outlined for him to a female audience. The multiplicity of audiences or addressees in the text (Lelung also dictates his instructions to a male scribe, who he makes fun of in the text’s colophon for being keen on sexual yoga but being unable to practice it because he is impotent, *mos kyang rdo rje las su mi rung ba*, for example) makes for a complex piece of literature. Lelung’s strong (albeit inconsistent) emphasis on female practitioners is unusual in a context where male-authored texts – and even some texts authored by women – describe sexual yoga practice primarily from men’s perspectives²⁹⁷.

Both Lelung and Yutok transmitted Karmamudrā methods aimed at practitioners who were not necessarily highly skilled in catheter sucking practices, *rtsa rlung ‘khrul ‘khor* or other elements of Tummo Yoga²⁹⁸. Lelung Rinpoche’s instructions in his “A Cure for Horniness” do not discuss “blazing and dripping” practices or the various Joys experienced in the chakras. While he acknowledges the importance of deity yoga as a crucial factor distinguishing “ordinary fucking” from authentic tantric sex, he recognizes that some ngakma and ngakpa reading his text may not be very developed in such processes and offers advice accordingly²⁹⁹. Likewise, while he stresses the importance of seminal retention for sexual yogis in no uncertain terms, he again allows for the possibility that his readers may not yet be

highly practiced in ejaculation control *'khrul 'khor*, explaining how if yogis don't know the requisite *'khrul 'khor* they can ejaculate if they wish ("If you don't know the *'khrul 'khor* then, when you do finally release your *thig le* inside your partner's lotus, do so while imagining that Sangwa Yeshe and all hosts of deities reside inside her and that you offer [your *thig le* to them] as an offering. Experience the afterglow of your bliss and meditate on the View without pulling out your vajra for some time")³⁰⁰. Having done so, the yogi then licks or sucks the mixed male and female *thig le* from the yogini's vagina – both the yogi and yogini then taste these fluids, imagining that this "supreme obscuration dissolving extracted essence" (*grib sel dang bcud len gyi mchog tu 'gyur*) delights all the tantric deities that reside in their divinized bodies.

Nida explained that he wanted to include a translation of Lelung's *bcud len* practice in the appendix of the Karmamudrā book to educate readers about the possibility of still practicing sexual meditation without highly developed ejaculation control or Tummo Yoga proficiency. In a similar vein, he decided that we should include a translation of a short Karmamudrā sādhanā from the great Tibetan ngakpa Shakya Shri (1853 – 1919)³⁰¹ as an appendix as well. This text, which outlines a highly unelaborated "Ati Yoga" style sexual yoga practice, like Lelung's text, dispenses with complex details of *rtsa rlung* and catheter training to focus instead on the maintaining of *rig pa* or pure awareness during the experience of sexual bliss. Both Lelung's and Shakya Shri's sexual sādhanās describe themselves as more 'essential' practices, ones which cut through the arduous physical and subtle body manipulations of more elaborated modes of Karmamudrā practice to get to the heart of sexual meditation³⁰².

As further appendices, we also included a translation of the tantric section of Nida's dōten and a translation of a short teaching song composed by treasure revealer yogini Sera Khandro which outlines the way that the thirteen 'levels of attainment' on the path to

Buddhahood (*sa bcu gsum*) correlate with the stages of Karmamudrā practice. This latter text is unique for describing, even if fairly obliquely, the practice of ‘mixing and sucking up the red and white *thig le*’ from the vantage point of female anatomy (Jacoby 2014, 203 - 204). Nida is hugely inspired by Sera Khandro and has a strong connection with her and her teachings. He felt that it was important that we include Karmamudrā teachings from a female adept in our book, although he despaired at the limited availability of texts that addressed the practice from women’s perspectives. These supplementary practice materials were included for their academic or educational value only, and because Nida feels a kind of spiritual kinship with the texts’ authors and orientations. By including these texts along with translations, Nida did not intend that readers would simply pick up the book and start practicing. Rather, he aimed to outline something of the diversity of Karmamudrā practices, to show that Yutok’s early claim that there was a way to train in sexual yoga without first having years of proficiency in highly demanding tsaloong and catheter practices was not a purely idiosyncratic one.

Apart from the appendices, to a large extent the contents of the Karmamudrā book mirror the kind of material that Nida usually transmits during his two to three-day introductory teachings on Karmamudrā practice³⁰³, which in turn follow the model he has developed for teaching Yutok’s Six Yoga practices more generally. As part of these classes, Nida provides general explanations of Vajrayāna and the Yutok Nyingtik, and offers an introduction to the particular yogic discipline – Dream Yoga, Tummo, Powa, Karmamudrā etc. – he is specifically teaching, explaining its features, history, applications, his own experiences learning it from his teachers and practicing it, and so on. He then transmits the “essentialized empowerment” (*don dbang*) from Yutok’s cycle.

While the complete set of empowerments for the Yutok Nyingtik requires several hours and a great deal of ritual paraphernalia and substances to impart (pausing for

commentary, Nida typically takes two full days back-to-back to transmit all of these), the essential empowerment by contrast takes between one to two hours to transmit and requires fewer ceremonial trappings. This condensed initiation provides bare-minimum entry into Yutok's mandala and authorization to practice the teachings of his cycle. In his unusually didactic way, Nida typically spends a fair amount of time guiding students through the requisite visualizations and utterances required of them as part of the empowerment, explaining their deeper significance and the manner in which they relate to meditation practices students may engage in after the initiation. Having transmitted the empowerment, he then typically guides students through some form of meditation practice connected with the Yoga he is teaching. In most cases, this comprises one of the preliminary trainings connected with the contemplative discipline in question, as outlined in the Yutok Nyingthik's chapter on Completion Stage yogas.

In the case of Karmamudrā, the practice Nida spends the most time instructing students in is what he calls “Yutok's *thig le* breathing meditation” or “Karmamudrā *śamatha*” (i.e. peaceful, mindful breathing), that is, the first preliminary training exercise outlined in the Yutok Nyingtik as step one of basic Karmamudrā training for practitioners without familiarity or proficiency in classic tsaloong/Tummo procedures, which I described briefly in Chapter Six. As mentioned, this simple breathing-and-visualization exercise (which resembles certain Powa meditations, only retooled to working with sexual energy) teaches practitioners how to connect with inner blissful sensations and direct the focus of these from their genital region to the upper part of their bodies through breath, visualization, and concentration alone. This solo practice does not involve masturbation, aggressive breath control or retention, or any strenuous physical processes involving muscle contraction. Nida typically spends a good deal of time guiding students in this preliminary step, explaining that through it they can begin to experience sexual arousal in a different, less afflictive way.

Proficiency in this meditation begins to allow practitioners to experience more subtle, profound, and pervasive orgasmic sensations and awareness, a kind of bliss, joy, or happiness less contingent on external factors. As explained earlier, the practice trains meditators to experience sexual bliss as a product of the interaction between a red, hot, ‘cinnabar’ *thig le* at the base of the central channel and a white, cool, ‘mercury’ *thig le* at the channel’s apex in the crown. As part of a kind of inner alchemy, practitioners mix together the light or energy of these two essential substances in synch with their breathing, blending internal heat and pleasure to experience limitless Bliss, a practice which, as an additional benefit, teaches them how to move intense feelings of arousal, heat and energetic congestion from their groin to other areas on command, thereby expanding arousal and staving off the urge to ejaculate.



Dr Nida teaching Yutok’s ‘Karmamudrā for Dummies’ preliminary training exercise of ‘thig le breathing’ from our recently published Karmamudrā book in the half-finished Yutok Temple at Pure Land Farms in Topanga, Los Angeles in September 2018 (photo courtesy of Christiana Polites)

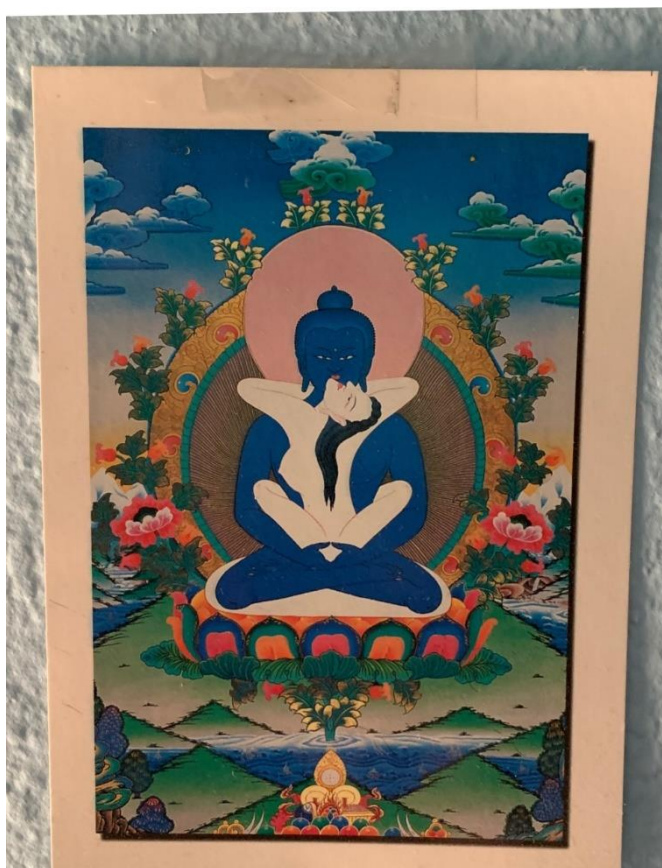
After thoroughly explaining this preliminary exercise, Nida then runs through the second stage of practice with a Jnanamudrā. As a ‘blazing and dripping’ practice for

generating the Four/Eight/Sixteen Joys and Emptinesses in the chakras, this procedure mirrors similar practices found in Tummo Yoga training but here less trained practitioners make use of sexual fantasy and manual arousal alone to generate heat to melt the white *thig le* at the crown, rather than the more complicated visualization, breathing, and physical procedures used to stimulate the ‘inner fire’ as found in Tummo Yoga proper. Nida typically briefly discusses sexual fantasy, visualizing and interacting with the Jnanamudrā yidam partner, and the four stages of Looking, Talking/Laughing, Touching, and Uniting with students and then leads them through the process of visualizing a Jnanamudrā and dripping down the melted *thig le* through the chakras, albeit without any actual masturbation. He also explains a little about how intensive retreat-based Karmamudrā practice with a partner works in Yutok’s non-tsaloong training system and answers various questions.

Some students at such classes have already completed retreats for Yutok’s ngöndro and Guru Yoga practices, others have not. To accommodate attendees at his classes who are not yet initiated into Yutok’s or any other Highest Yoga Tantra lineage, when Nida guides students through Yutok’s practices he explains that students who do not have their own yidam/s already can self-generate as Samantabhadra/Samantabhadri, the most ultimate, primordial, ‘unadorned’, ‘unelaborated’, and ‘naked’ male and female Buddha forms who are associated with Ati Yoga.

The ‘unelaborated’ Dzogchen Buddhas Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri (kun tu bzang po/mo) in union, as seen in an icon on the anthropologist’s bedroom wall.

Nida believes that Yutok’s non-tsaloong training *thig le* breathing meditation is appropriate and safe for all students to use as a way to learn to engage more mindfully with sexual desire. As such, he recommends that students practice it either alone or meditate with their partners.



Paradoxically, the practice both intensifies arousal while also satiating sexual frustration, so Nida recommends it as something that couples can practice together before sleeping or in the morning in cases where one partner wants to have sex but another doesn’t, or couples are two tired or strapped for time to engage in extended foreplay and sexual intercourse³⁰⁴.

In putting together the book, Nida decided that Yutok’s *thig le* breathing was one procedure that we could teach in the book that general readers could practice from the text alone. We thus included extensive instructions and commentary on the meditation. While we also included some more general information about the next step of blazing and dripping practice involving masturbation and a Jnanamudrā as well as a few notes on couple’s retreat practice, these details were offered merely to highlight the stages involved in Yutok’s system of Karmamudrā ‘for Dummies’ more generally and were not intended to function as a usable practice instructions³⁰⁵. To promote the book after it was published, Nida, Christiana, and I

all gave talks and answered questions about the publication at various locations in the United States, and Nida recommended that as part of these events we guide attendees in Yutok's *thig le* breathing meditation. In this way, Nida opened up the first stage of Yutok's already inclusive practice and made it accessible to the non-initiated. As with novices who attend his two-to-three day teachings, Nida recommends in the book and during promotional talks that readers not initiated into Yutok's lineage or Vajrayāna visualize themselves as Samantabhadra or Samantabhadri while performing the *thig le* meditation, or that they simply maintain an awareness of their 'vajra-body' being hollow and made of light, free of all contents save the requisite subtle anatomy. This is both a doctrinal and a practical concession. Not only are these Dzogchen Buddhas the most 'unelaborated' and non-conceptual of Buddha figures, but their simple iconography is easy to visualize for those with limited training in deity yoga.

Despite these innovations and Nida's attempts to make some level of 'mindful sex' more accessible to students, it is important to understand that he still expects students to fulfil typical Vajrayāna requirements before engaging in the intensive practice of any of Yutok's Completion Stage practices. While some non-Tibetan and Tibetan practitioners have criticized Nida for teaching Karmamudrā so widely and openly, it is somewhat ironic that Nida's book contains less detailed instructions on *rtsa rlung 'khrul 'khor* practices connected with Tummo inner heat and ejaculation control than both Keesling's sexological manual and the 2014 manual on 'Western' sex magic practices that was published by Jason Miller, a white, American occultist friend of mine who teaches sorcery for a living and has trained in Vajrayāna practices under Tibetan and inji lamas since his teens³⁰⁶.

Nida himself was highly aware of the 'split sign' nature of his work, and in no way intended his text to serve as a self-sufficient practical guide. I asked Nida if he was not concerned that certain self-serving readers would take up the translated primary source

material which we had included and cannibalize it, twisting it into their own hybrid systems. He responded that people were *already* doing this with existing resources, and so it was all the more important that we offer sufficiently clear and contextualized information for readers so they could understand what was authentic and what was not, what was allowable and what was not, and so on. Overall, Nida wanted his book to provide a useful introduction to sexual yoga practices, one which would provide enough information for readers to have some means of differentiating between traditional lineage-based Buddhist practices and modern inventions, and of distinguishing authentic, altruistically motivated practice from abuse and exploitation masquerading in the guise of Tantra. This informative approach aligned with Nida's broader sense that contemporary, and especially non-native Vajrayāna Buddhist students, require more "explanation and theory" before meditations can fully work for them and before they can develop real confidence in both themselves and the teachings³⁰⁷.

Outer Faces, Inner Cores and Tantric 'Superstition': the Dalai Lama Criticizes Tibetan Doctors

While Nida may have felt he that his teaching of Yutok's practices more widely and openly was in accordance with prophecy and contemporary conditions, not all Tibetan lamas and doctors agreed. On the 23rd of March 2016 the Dalai Lama gave a speech in McLeod Ganj to mark the centenary of the founding of the Medical and Astrological Institute or Mentseekhang in Lhasa and the fifty-fifth anniversary of the same institution's reconstitution in exile. The leader began his just under thirty minute public address by discussing the development of Sowa Rigpa (*gso ba rig pa*) or Tibetan traditional medicine and its value in the world today. In a similar fashion to how he has consistently described Tibetan Buddhism, he framed Tibetan traditional medical knowledge as both an indigenous resource of which Tibetans should be proud, and a global good that has the potential to bring benefit to people all over the world³⁰⁸.

After speaking approvingly for some minutes about research that had been conducted into the efficacy of Tibetan medicines, as he neared the end of his speech, the Dalai Lama struck a quite different note. Having described the Dharamsala Men-Tsee-Khang's various successes, the Dalai Lama then identified key areas where it and other institutions had been remiss in their duties (*'thus shor phyin pa*). He noted that when he had visited various Tibetan refugee settlements in India he had seen that there were a great number of sick people there. He identified this as a clear sign that preventative measures in health-care had somehow been neglected. He remarked that this was further an indication of hypocrisy on the part of Men-Tsee-Khang and other exile authorities, who looked impressive on the outside but were inwardly empty. Not only had exile authorities and institutions apparently failed to protect the neediest in the Tibetan diaspora, but moral standards also seemed to be declining more generally. Reminding his audience that he had made this observation about a lack of attention to preventative measures on many separate occasions, he explained that he had charged various lamas with the task of researching how these moral declines had occurred and with working out whether there was a way to fix it³⁰⁹.

This was a surprisingly emphatic and direct criticism for the Dalai Lama to make and it transformed the mood of what initially felt like a celebratory, self-congratulatory event into something more somber and pensive. McLeod Ganj was abuzz with the news of the Dalai Lama's criticisms immediately following the event. Just two days after the centenary festivities, Tibetan prime minister in exile Lobsang Sangay convened a press conference to announce that, as a result of the Dalai Lama's words and in keeping with his campaign promises, he would be creating two new official committees devoted to improving preventative medicine and poverty alleviation efforts, and to addressing declining moral values in Tibetan exile. But while the Dalai Lama's forceful parting words garnered the most attention, a different warning he gave during the same speech was equally noteworthy. Along

with his critiques of Tibetan medical and religious authorities who shirk their responsibilities to the people, the Dalai Lama brought up another concern about the condition of the broader Tibetan public. Reprising a theme he has repeated consistently since the early 1960s, the Dalai Lama spoke about the need for Tibetans and Himalayan Buddhists to practice Buddhism in an informed way, one which eschews blind faith and rote ritualism. What he said was:

"The broad majority of Tibetans are Buddhists (*nang chos pa*). Yet if they had to explain what Buddhism is they wouldn't be able to say [or do] anything beyond just sitting there and pointing at themselves ['at their own faces/mouths, *kha la mdzub mo btsugs*], wouldn't they? People of Himalayan descent [who practice Buddhism] are like this as well. In Yutok Yonten Gonpo's scriptures it is said that if one prays to him for [just] one week very [many things] will happen. I don't believe this (*nga yid ches med*). Even if one persists in praying to Shakyamuni Buddha for months and months and years and years, if one doesn't train or purify oneself on an individual level (*so sos ma sbyang*) nothing will come of it, will it? (Pad+ma rgyal "Mgon lkog")

While this reference may have been over some of the audience's head, the Dalai Lama was here referring directly to Yutok's seven-day preliminaries and promise. The Dalai Lama frames his doubts about Yutok's promises and revealed teachings in terms of his repeated advice to Tibetan laypeople that authentic Buddhism does not entail the rote performance of traditional rites but is rather about individual self-development and rational inquiry into the nature of mind and reality, that no matter how devoutly one performs ritual actions if one does not have a personal and deeply internalized understanding of core Buddhist ethics and philosophy these actions will ultimately be in vain. The most common way in which the Dalai Lama has articulated this position over the decades is through a discourse of 'superstition' or 'blind faith' (*rmongs dad*, Lempert 2012). 'Blind', 'confused', 'obscured' or 'deluded' (*rmongs pa'i*) faith (*dad pa*) stands as a foil against which genuine, or what the Dalai Lama regularly dubs "twenty first century Buddhism," can be judged³¹⁰. In his

centenary speech the leader thus warned his listeners not to place undue stock in external interventions at the expense of self-cultivation.

The Dalai Lama's off-hand critique of Yutok's claims is noteworthy, if a little peculiar. After all, Yutok's seven-day preliminaries are about nothing if not reflecting on and internalizing key tenets of Buddhist doctrine and "training oneself". Still, they point to the contentiousness of Yutok's promise: if seven days of retreat really can yield the same results as seven months or seven years, then what reason is there for anyone to invest in longer practices at all? Or alternatively, as Nida's student in Amsterdam put it, "why isn't everyone following the 'Swift Path'?" Nida was certainly not the only Tibetan doctor I met during my fieldwork who credited Yutok's claims and ranked his teachings highly. Yet whereas Nida felt these methods ought to be shared more widely, other Tibetan doctors believed that the Yutok Nyingtik's secrets should not be shared widely at all, and least of all with non-Tibetans.

Amchi Dargye, a ngakpa-doctor from Central Tibet who was hired to serve as head teacher at Sorig International College in Kathmandu where I stayed between May and October of 2016, was stunned to discover that Nida was teaching the Yutok Nyingtik to foreigners at all. The college is one of the first Tibetan traditional medicine schools in exile to offer state-accredited certification for enrollees. In an equally unprecedented fashion, the College does not strictly require that students be proficient in Tibetan before they are allowed to enroll in its five to six year program³¹¹. The College aims to provide Nepali-state recognized certification to students who complete their training, which requires that official testing at the institution takes place in a state-recognized language. Faced with the option of providing testing in English or Nepali, the College opted for the former language, in keeping with the school's international pretensions. Considerably knowledgeable but very not fluent in English Dr Dargye arrived at the college and was scandalized to learn that the school

expected him to teach traditional Tibetan knowledge in translation, something he told me he thought was not only impossible but dangerous, a guaranteed path to the dilution and debasement of precious, native traditions.

Not up to speed on Dr Nida's profile either, Dargye was also appalled to learn that Nida was teaching practices from the Yutok Nyingtik to foreigners, in English. For him, the Dharma-cycle was the special domain of an elite group of doctors who practiced Tantra 'properly' like himself – a source of magical power not meant for all and sundry. In the end, Dargye became increasingly defensive, hostile and erratic as his opposition to the College's vision and Nida's activities grew over the course of the College's inaugural semester. He criticized foreigners who he said only wished to consume Tibetan knowledge for their own benefit on public Tibetan-language social media groups while representing the school, appeared drunk on campus, may have used astral projection to spy on and intimidate students, denigrated Nida and his students, and confided to me (who he appreciated somewhat more as a foreigner who knew Tibetan) that he wished he could beef up his existing tantric power (*nus pa*) so that he could duel with and ultimately murder Dr Nida through black magic for the good of the Dharma (Dargye ended up getting fired).

Rather than framing the Yutok Nyingtik as an inclusive practice uniquely suited to busy physicians today, Tibetan doctors like Dargye seemed to view it more as a kind of subsequent, optional specialization, an advanced degree in tantric yoga and sorcery for already highly-trained and dedicated doctors seeking to develop clairvoyance and other abilities to empower their exoteric medical practice. Unlike the Dalai Lama, he was strongly convinced of the efficacy of Yutok's practices but did not believe that they should be shared with anyone outside of a very select circle of doctor-initiates.

Swift Blessings, but not for Everyone? The Challenges of Regulating Access to Tantric Healing Training

Today, many if not most of the students to whom Nida transmits Yutok's ritual practices as well as certain traditional external medical therapies are not full-time or dedicated *amchi*, or traditionally trained physicians of Tibetan medicine at all. Many of Nida's students also practice a range of other healing modalities alongside the assorted traditional Tibetan methods they have learned from him and other Tibetan doctors. There is a pervasive concern among some Tibetan doctors I have met – especially those associated with the Dharamsala Men-Tsee-Khang – that if Sowa Rigpa therapies are taught, studied, or applied piecemeal rather than as part of single, coherent, centrally regulated system, Sowa Rigpa knowledge and practices will deteriorate. These anxieties are undoubtedly linked with the degree to which, for exile Tibetans “the recognition of Tibetan medicine as a [coherent] medical system doubles as a recognition of Tibet as a nation” (Kloos 2013, 384). A Vajrayāna teaching cycle once known primarily to practitioners of Tibetan medicine (and even then primarily to practitioners within a single medical lineage³¹²) has, through Nida's efforts over the last two decades perhaps more than any other single person's, become exponentially more popular, or at the very least Google-able.

For most of its history, the practice of the Yutok Nyingtik appears to have been a predominantly private, individual matter among doctors with an interest in tantric healing³¹³. In his comprehensive set of guidelines for the seventh century Tsarong medical school, the Great Fifth Dalai Lama makes no specific provisions regarding how the Cycle is to be practiced or incorporated into the public life of the college (Van Fleet 2016). Matters were much the same at Sorig International College in Kathmandu centuries later. In the inaugural incoming class, *all* of the inji students enrolled (all three of whom were women who were roughly double the age of the Tibetan and Nepali students who were all in their teens and

early twenties) had been exposed to the Yutok Nyingtik and its practices by Nida, whereas none of the incoming Tibetan and Nepali students had. Today, while exile Tibetan Sowa Rigpa training institutions regularly arrange for their students to receive empowerments for Yutok's cycle, there is no obligation on the part of students at such institutions to practice it, and direct instruction in the Cycle's procedures is not offered as part of increasingly standardized and mandatory medical curricula both in exile and occupied Tibet.

The practice of Yutok's Vajrayāna teachings has never been exclusively connected with a single lineage of either Tibetan Buddhism or medicine. Unlike its 'exoteric' counterpart the Four Tantras, no complete translation of the Yutok Nyingtik into any language yet exists. Largely as a result of Dr Nida's direct and indirect influence, however, portions of the collection have now been translated into several languages, including by translators not currently affiliated with or approved of by Nida. Nida's activities, his and Christiana's development of Pure Land Farms and the Yutok Ling temple there, have begun to provide him and Sorig Khang International a permanent, physical institutional basis for Sorig Khang educational, spiritual, and commercial activities in the United States. Yet while Nida may be one of the Yutok Nyingtik's greatest contemporary promoters and exegetes, other Tibetan doctors and Dharma practitioners do not necessarily agree with his orientations or approaches.

When sharing calls to reunite medicine and Dharma on social media, Nida often cites prophetic utterances from Yutok as recorded in Sumtön's history to support his claims that Sowa Rigpa has degenerated as a result of excessive secularization. Sumtön notes how Yutok declared that in the increasingly degenerate future, fake doctors interested only in fame and money would proliferate and pervert Sowa Rigpa, for example. As Yutok explains: "Every [manner of] evil conduct, behavior that will be degenerate even [by the standards] of the degenerate times, will froth up like fermented beer. More specifically, [people] will not

consider medical treatments as Holy Dharma and an evil time in which neither medical teachers nor students preserve their tantric commitments will arise. In this way, a time in which the teachings of Sowa Rigpa will remain in name only will emerge and the bodies [of beings] will be tormented by intense and violent illnesses”. Having shared his vision of the future, Yutok then announces his wish that “through the magical power of his prayers of aspiration, the teachings of Sowa Rigpa will spread everywhere like the rays of the sun and will bring benefits as limitless as space to beings as limitless as space” in the future (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 280).

Nida’s invocation of such statements from the ngakpa-doctor founder of Sowa Rigpa clarifies his own activities and positions them in direct alignment with Yutok’s prophecies and aspirations. Yet, conversely, Dr Dargye was equally assured that, despite having never met Nida or spoken with him, *Nida* was in fact one of those prophesized evil doctors who had transgressed their tantric vows and needed to be piously done away with as an enemy of Medicine and the Dharma.

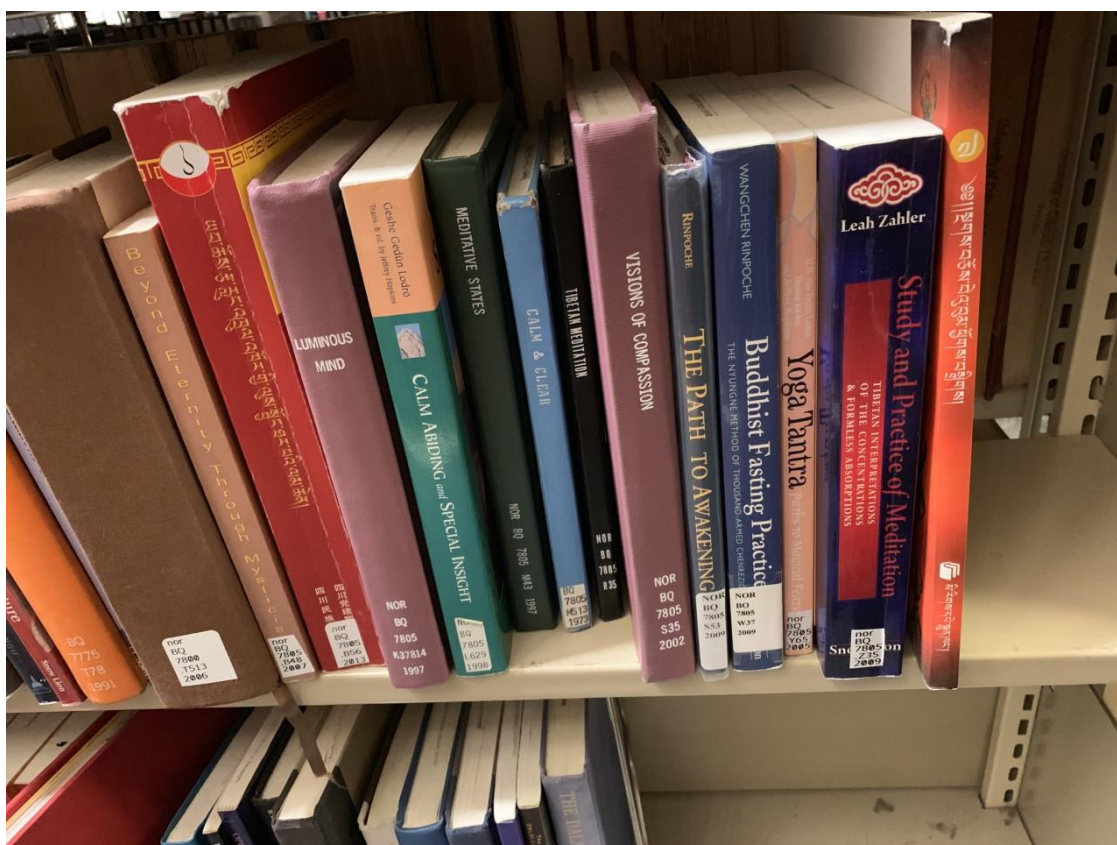
Today, although efforts to create centralized regulatory institutions to govern and standardize the study and practice of Sowa Rigpa in Tibetan diaspora are underway, such institutions have very little concrete or reliable power to control or police the activities of private doctors (Kloos 2013). There is no “head of the lineage” or governing body that dictates what constitutes right practice when it comes to the Yutok Nyingtik, just as there is no single, centralized institution that can dictate who can access Secret Mantra texts and study, practice, translate, and disseminate the instructions they contain. During my three or more weeks away in Tibet over August 2016 with Christiana and Dr Nida, Nida instructed me to visit his brother Hungchen at the Ngakmang Research Center in Xining to buy two full sets of the Center’s publications dealing with ngakpa histories and practices for the Kathamandu Sorig College library.

While Nida knew that tantric practices were not being taught as part of the school's curriculum, he nonetheless felt it would be good to have complete sets of these historical and Dharma texts in the College library (he also wanted to do his brother the favor of buying some books). Christiana and I had already bought a number of medical texts for the College and so when I returned to Kathmandu my bags were bulging with publications to stock the new library. I added the Ngakmang Research Center texts along with the Tibetan language medical books we had bought to the piles of volumes laid out haphazardly in the library room awaiting cataloguing and shelving. A few days after my return, Dr Tendor, one of the school's two principals, informed me that Dr Dargye had gone into the library of his own accord and confiscated several of the "Secret Mantra books" I had bought and locked them in his room. Dargye had told the students that these books were forbidden and should not be in the library. Principal Tendor had thus come to me to ask for my help with finding a compromise.

Discussing the issue with Nida and Principal Tendor, we decided that the best solution was to simply place the books on a high, top shelf, behind glass, with a label on the glass' surface that said "restricted" in English and Tibetan (*bkag sdom byas*). A settlement reached, Gyatso, a tall, affable *sar 'byor pa* or newcomer student who had grown up in Eastern Tibet was charged – partly because of his height but also because of his strong Tibetan literacy – with helping to move these and other books into their proper locations. At one point, I was working on an English translation of the school's anthology of daily medical lineage prayers in my room, when Gyatso knocked on my door and explained that he needed my help. Gyatso needed to move the Secret Mantra books that had been rescued after their brief seclusion in Dr Dargye's room (most of them anyway, Dargye still kept one or two for himself even after the Principals instructed him to return them) but Gyatso had eaten meat for lunch that day and

so did not want to touch the scriptures with ‘impure’ hands. Knowing I was a vegetarian, he felt more confident that I could handle them respectfully³¹⁴.

When I returned to Colorado at the beginning of 2017, I heard from a colleague that the University of Boulder had recently acquired a set of the Ngakmang Research Center’s publications, which were available for loan from the library, without similar proscriptions to the one’s that had been set up at the College³¹⁵. I could not help but marvel at the surreal ironies involved in the global circulation, mediation, and regulation of esoteric Tibetan Buddhist knowledge. Only a few months ago, this same set of texts had ignited a delicate hostage negotiation with Tibetan ngakpa and doctors, a clash of positions on the desirability and feasibility of translating and sharing specialist, esoteric Tibetan knowledge with the wider world. Meanwhile, a state university library in the United States simply ordered these books, jammed with pith instructions on mantra magic, Ati Yoga, and various Completion Stage practices, and received them in the mail to subsequently include as part of their collection of reference texts on Tibetan Buddhism, no problem. These contrasting social biographies of the same texts felt like a sort of exclamation point rounding off my fieldwork in Kathmandu – a reminder of the highly unequal institutional and social environments in which materializations of esoteric Tibetan Buddhist expertise circulate and are understood.



Dr Nida and his brother Hungchen's tantric grimoire or mantra healing anthology (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2006), restricted both in the Sorig College in Kathmandu and in the Buddhist Digital Resource Center's online archives, here seen hanging out all casual-like at the end of the top shelf in Norlin Library at CU Boulder in October 2019.

CONCLUSION:

This has been a dissertation about secrets and secret knowledge. In it, I have attempted to describe what Tibetan Buddhist esoteric knowledge, practices, and orientations – especially those associated with non-monasticism and non-celibacy – entail. More than this, however, I have aimed to demonstrate in an ethnographically informed way how such expertise has been materialized, regulated, contested, and popularized both in the past and by Tibetans living in exile today. What does it mean though, to describe secrets as an ethnographer? In the introduction to this work, I explained how at the start of my fieldwork I, the “profane ethnographer”, avoided focusing on highly confidential and restricted tantric practices, secret subjects which, somewhat ironically, ended up becoming a major component of my research. Further, although I’d hardly planned to, I ended up becoming initiated into Yutok’s lineage and became the student of a Tibetan guru. This change in status granted me certain kinds of access to esoteric knowledge and practices, and facilitated a range of interactions, relationships, and experiences, many of which have been described in these pages and few of which I anticipated. But becoming an ‘insider’ was hardly just some means to an academic end. I did not become initiated into Yutok’s lineage or take on Nida as my teacher simply so that I could write a thesis about it as a PhD student. I did so because I had faith in Nida and I wished to become a practitioner, for my own and others’ benefit.

As we have seen, one of the most important tantric commitments or binding pledges (*dam tshig*) is that one keeps Secret Mantra practices secret, that one preserves them from the vulgar and uninitiated. In his text, “The Indestructible Vajra-Knot: The Tantric Commitments of the Guru Sādhana of the Yutok Nyingtik” (*g.yu thog snying thig gi bla sgrub kyi dam tshig rdo rje’i rgya mdud*) text, Sumtön Yeshe Zung explains, for example, that to preserve the root inner tantric commitment of mind, one must remember that:

“All the *sādhana* substances and implements are secret for the uninitiated (*dam tshig ma 'dres pa la*), the practices of union and liberation are secret, and in particular all the above-mentioned offering substances like medicine, tormas and rakta are secret. The essential mantras of the [three] roots are secret, the illustrations of the mudras are secret, the [tantric] workings and conduct is secret, the pith instructions for the *sādhana*s are secret. In sum, the guru and all of one's co-initiate siblings, one's Dharmic conduct and every such thing that merits being kept hidden, are extremely secret. For the sake of one's guru(s) and co-initiates take care of the pith esoteric instructions [with which you've been entrusted], keep them secret until the end of time, even until every last eon is destroyed. If you do not preserve these root tantric commitments then, as all the tantric scriptures say, you will be reborn in the Vajra Hell realms for five eons” (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 310 -311)

As a student and collaborator of Nida's preparing books for broad circulation and as a cultural anthropology PhD student writing a doctoral thesis for likely more limited audiences, I have come to reveal secrets. I have done so, however, in consultation with my guru and at his request. I have been able to read and translate and share information about particular tantric yogic practices because Nida has made specific texts available to me, because he and others have worked to publish esoteric materials in more accessible formats, and because today resources like the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC) exist which allow pretty much anyone who can read and understand Tibetan and who has an internet connection to look up and download textual cycles like the *Yutok Nyingtik* almost instantly, provided they believe that ought to or are entitled to do so.



The recently built retreat cabin adjoining the ngakkhang in Rebgong where I did a seven-day Yutok Nyingtik ngöndro retreat in August 2016.

Knowing and Revealing: Researching Esoteric Religions and the Double Bind of Secrecy

Secrecy and the trope of ‘initiation’ have long been especially salient as part of anthropology’s own disciplinary identity. Indeed, anthropology itself can be seen as a medium of secrecy (Jones 2014). Classic Geertzian thick description with its framing of culture as a text whose implicit meaning requires careful excavation and interpretation by a participating-and-observing anthropologist “casts the narrative into a mould that privileges gradual revelation...[in which]...a cultural core is only accessible through a series of revelations” (de Jong 2004, 189). As Jones (2014, 60) puts it, anthropology has a “claim to secrecy” (through the longstanding and thorough attention it has paid to social practices of secrecy and secret societies), even as secrecy has “a claim to anthropology”. He explains:

“As a hermeneutic social science, anthropology and its regime of “revelatory publicity” (Boyer 2013, p. 3) demand secrecy...as a condition for interpretative activity. Secrecy—often reinforced by the sheer remoteness of field sites—serves as a warrant for anthropological investigation, for if social realities were not hidden and furtive, they would be immediately legible. Secrecy remains such a vital and

generative object of investigation precisely because it mirrors and amplifies core concerns of anthropology itself (Taussig 1999), while perpetuating a gendered, “masculine preoccupation with penetration, domination, and objectification” (Moore 2010, p. 31).”

Ethnographic fieldwork, and especially doctoral dissertation fieldwork in the U.S. graduate school context is regularly positioned as its own sort of initiation: a transformative, embodied experience, a disciplinary rite of passage immune to pure instrumentalization or reproducibility. Ethnographic authority is in part predicated on a presumed transition from outsider-to-quasi-insider status, on an evolving and deepening familiarity, intimacy and access which the experience of fieldwork and developing relationships of care and trust in the field are meant to ideally enable. At the same time, as an abiding metaphor in the construction of ethnographic authority, secrecy has supported a “paradigmatic assumption that cultures are bounded” (de Jong 2004, 189). Importantly, de Jong argues that tropes of secrecy and revelation found in ethnographic monographs posit boundaries which they in actuality help to produce in the first place. By explicitly and implicitly supporting spatial metaphors of ‘cultural cores’ to be penetrated, ethnographers also risk localizing culture and knowledge. As de Jong reminds us, the idea that alterity is spatially distributed and that culture is “territorialized”, has at least in a post-globalization studies and multi-sited ethnography era, been thoroughly discredited (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Reminding us that it is “no longer productive to posit impermeable cultural boundaries” and drawing on insights from his research on secret rituals and initiations in Casamance, Senegal, de Jong argues that secrecy by its nature renders the categorical distinction between anthropological subject and object problematic. Secrecy is, at base, “an intersubjective performance meshed in historically contingent power relations” (2004, 258), ones which today, more often than not, are thoroughly global in scope.

As described in the introduction, my ability to read, translate, and comment on Tibetan Buddhist esoteric texts, enabled by my training as an anthropologist, is what allowed

me to engage with and be of interest and use to Tibetan specialists like Dr Nida, for whom facility with Tibetan texts was a basic condition of being taken seriously as someone claiming to study Buddhism. This fact points to the complex relationships between observation, participation, understanding, and trust that prevail in the ethnographic study of esoteric religious practices. The study of secrets and secrecy necessarily implicates fieldworkers in what they study, drawing them into “competing demands of concealment and revelation” (Jones 2014, 61), into cross-currents of intrigue, power, inclusion, exclusion, and danger. Scholars have repeatedly called attention to the paradoxes and dilemmas that surround the issue of privileged access in the study of esoteric religions. Discussing research on esoteric tantric and para-tantric traditions in Bengal, Urban points to a so-called “double bind of secrecy” with which researchers of ostensibly secret religious traditions are faced. He outlines this double bind as follows:

“First, how can one study or say anything intelligent at all about a religious tradition that practices *active dissimulation* [original emphasis], that is, a religious tradition that deliberately obfuscates its teachings and intentionally conceals itself from outsiders? And second, if one does learn something about an esoteric tradition – above all, if one goes so far as to become an insider, receiving initiation into secret teachings – how can one then say anything about this tradition to an uninitiated audience of outsiders? In short, if one “knows”, one cannot speak; and if one speaks, one must not really “know”.” (Urban 1998, 209-210)

Researchers have responded in a variety of ways to this dilemma. Ethnographer of Bengali Indian and Bangladeshi esoteric religions Carola Erika Lorea (2018) usefully summarizes three primary approaches or positions that scholars of esoteric traditions have taken up in the face of Urban’s apparent “methodological blind alley” (6). One approach is resignation and defeat. Scholars invoke the double bind and despair at every truly being able to resolve or navigate it in a satisfactory or ethical manner. Edward Conze, for example, writing of esoteric Buddhism, maintains that, because it is fundamentally secret, esoteric Buddhist knowledge “can under no circumstances be transmitted to an indiscriminate multitude”. For Conze, the

relationship between secrecy and silence and authoritative knowledge and ethical legitimacy is clear and absolute:

“...These doctrines are essentially esoteric, or secret [...] This means what it says. Esoteric knowledge can—and this is a quite impassable barrier—under no circumstances be transmitted to an indiscriminate multitude. An interminable literature is addressed to a credulous public which expects to buy these secrets for a few shillings in a bookshop. A plumber from Plymouth who posed as a Tibetan doctor wrote a positive best-seller³¹⁶, and an aura of fraudulence and deceit vitiates the works of everyone who pretends to speak from the inside. In this field certainly those who know do not say and those who say do not know. There are two, and only two alternatives. Either the author of a book of this kind has not been initiated into a Tantra; then what he says is not first-hand knowledge. Or he has been initiated. Then, if he were to divulge the secrets to all and sundry just to make a little profit or to increase his reputation, he has broken the trust placed in him and is morally so depraved as not to be worth listening to.” (Conze 1962, 271-272)

Lorea cites Stewart as well, who, speaking of Vaishnava Tantra in Bengal, paraphrases Urban’s double bind as “a lose-lose proposition”: “If you are not a believer, your speculation is and can only be just that; if you are a believer [and you choose to speak publicly, to the vulgar masses etc.] your statements cannot be trusted” (Stewart in Lorea 2018, 6). Notwithstanding these categorical disclaimers, both Conze and Stewart went on to produce significant scholarship on Buddhist and Hindu tantric traditions. Scholars of the disillusioned, despairing camp are thus, strictly speaking and a little counterintuitively, not non or ex-scholars but rather researchers who conduct their work under the aegis of a pervasive pessimism, suspicion, and deprecation which they level at their own and others’ scholarly output.

The second approach that Lorea outlines also involves suspicion and dismay. Here, however, critiques are levelled at scholars’ work by others, and by initiated insiders in particular. Lorea calls this approach the ‘espionage’ or ‘betrayal’ position. She uses it to describe the work of researchers who have been initiated into and have developed relationships of trust within esoteric religious communities, who then go on to publish details

about esoteric religious practices “with no concern for the consequences that this action will have on the local community of practitioners/informants” (Lorea 2018, 5), and in a way that their co-initiates find deeply disrespectful, inappropriate, or harmful. Lorea represents such betrayal as taking the form described by Conze above, where researchers ‘go native’ or undercover in order to learn about esoteric practices and communities otherwise inaccessible to them but then violate the promises involved in this transition by sharing secrets publicly, primarily to “advance knowledge/science” and their academic careers³¹⁷. A weaker, but perhaps even more widespread pattern of betrayal not mentioned by Lorea can be seen in cases where initiated ethnographers publish interpretations of esoteric religious practices which are at odds with the interpretations or conventions of other practitioners, or which co-initiates find alienating, misrepresentative, or inaccurate. Here the betrayal is less the sting of “How could you tell others what we know?” and more “We thought you knew along with us but it turns out you didn’t ever really at all.’ This second type of betrayal – which hinges on tensions between emic and etic perspectives – is complicated by the fact that what could be thought of as fieldworkers’ other ‘esoteric community’, i.e. the field of professional academia/researchers’ particular disciplines etc., may be governed by their own complex expectations surrounding the disclosure of intimate and ‘secret’ information relating to research³¹⁸.

Lorea’s third approach, which she identifies as the one most commonly relied upon in the study of Indian esoteric religions – and which has been common in research on Tibetan esoteric Buddhism as well – is the purely or predominately ‘textual’ or textual-historical approach. This strategy “extracts and insulates the [esoteric] text, detaching it from any practice of a living lineage. In this way, the researcher is saved from the ethical concern of preserving or revealing what the adepts say” (Lorea 2018, 172). This approach is complicated by emic perspectives which treat the study of esoteric texts sans explication and guidance

from a living, lineage-holding guru as something of an oxymoron. As Lorea notes, several textually-oriented scholars of Indian and Tibetan tantric traditions have in fact argued strongly for the essential role of oral exegesis and direct assistance from living initiated adepts in research on esoteric traditions. Nonetheless, textualist oriented research remains a mainstay in both Indology and Tibetan Studies and tends to privilege different agendas and base itself on different assumptions than translations and analyses of texts that foreground living practitioners' perspectives and priorities. In addition, while this text-centric approach has produced exemplary scholarship, its side-stepping of the lived-and-living, experiential dimensions of esoteric traditions, its rendering of them as in turns irrelevant, extraneous or secondary to its purposes, has normalized and deepened a split between ethnographic research on contemporary tantric traditions and practitioners on the one hand and historical and philological scholarship on tantric texts on the other. This is a regrettable outcome, especially in the Tibetan Studies context, where, as we have seen, texts which might be studied for their purely intellectual, historical value frequently have complex socio-political lives that involve contemporary practitioners in a variety of ways.

Knowing and Negotiating Secrets: Rethinking Insider and Outsider Statuses in the Study of Esotericism

Having assessed these strategies, Lorea argues for a more ethnographically informed approach to the study of esoteric practices and texts. As a part solution to the double bind he identifies, Urban (1998) proposes an analytic move away from the *content* of esoteric religions to the *form* of secrets instead. Rather than agonizing over precisely how to handle and discuss secrets themselves, academics ought to redirect their attention to the socio-political contexts and cultural conventions that shape how secret knowledge is represented, talked about, regulated, transmitted and so on. Lorea (2018) acknowledges the sense of this

compromise. To a large degree, it is one I have adopted in the preceding chapters. At the same time, Lorea questions the feasibility of talking about talking about secrets without knowing for sure what those secrets consist of. Further, while Urban's suggestion may help remedy scholarly resignation and malpractice in the face of sacred secrecy, it remains a mere work-around and it in no way challenges or re-evaluates underlying assumptions about the nature of knowledge and secrecy themselves, implicit in the idea of the double bind in the first place. Urban's proposal still takes the impossibility of knowing and (legitimately) speaking esoteric religious secrets in a public forum or to multiple audiences as a given, a point with which Lorea takes issue, and which the investigations in this thesis have clearly complicated.

Drawing on data gleaned from extensive ethnographic fieldwork with initiates of the Kartabhaja esoteric community in West Bengal, India and Bangladesh, Lorea argues that "complete secrecy is more of a legend than a historical reality" (16). She suggests that the absolutism of the double bind risks promoting Orientalist stereotypes that conflate exotic Others with irresolvable difference and mystification and proposes that it ends up misrepresenting the actual realities of initiates' lived negotiation of secrecy and disclosure. Rather than treat secrecy as an abstract, monolithic concept, an ethnographic perspective obliges researchers to contextualize it historically and socially. As she explains:

"...[T]he relation between 'secrecy' and 'publicity', or between 'secrecy' and 'revelation', is not always one of striking polarisation [...]. In living religious traditions secret knowledge is flexible and negotiable; it can be more or less concealed according to the eyes from which it has to be hidden, and its parameters change according to time and history. Once the myth of secrecy is challenged, new analytical questions arise and contribute to a more holistic understanding of secret knowledge: has it always been secret? Are there multiple stages of secrecy, rather than a monolithic secret capital that is either stored or publicly displayed?" (2018, 16)

The sense of Lorea's approach can be seen in the case of Tibetan empowerments or *wang (dbang)*. If some Tibetan commentators are to be believed at least, Highest Yoga Tantra

empowerment in its ‘original’ medieval Indian context involved relatively small groups of properly prepared initiands meeting face-to-face with gurus in secluded locations, often under cover of darkness. As we saw in Chapter One and Six, as part of these earlier types of esoteric transmissions, the initiating guru would also actually engage in tantric sex rites with a physical sexual yoga partner in the presence of his or her disciples as part of the transmission, initiands would consume the comingled and consecrated sexual secretions of the guru and consort as a sacrament, and would then go on to practice equivalent sexual yoga practices with either the same or a different partner.

After Indian esoteric Buddhism established itself and spread throughout Tibet, however, and high-level non-celibate tantric practices were recast and reconciled with monastic discipline and institutional structures, wang took on a different flavor. The literal execution of tantric sexual yoga became increasingly interiorized and symbolic, and sexual fluid sacraments were replaced with symbolic substitutes. Over the centuries, with the re-establishment of institutional centers of monastic authority after the post-imperial period of Fragmentation, the performance of wang for mass audiences by monastic authorities became an important way for monasteries and their associated reincarnate lama lineages to demonstrate and consolidate their religious, economic, political and territorial power (Dalton 2016; Davidson 2008). Public initiations (‘mass/crowd/marketplace empowerments’ *khrom dbang*) became normative³¹⁹.

Today, empowerments like those for the Kalachakra tantric scripture cycle, regularly transmitted by the Dalai Lama, are massive undertakings, requiring enormous overheads and whole casts of support staff to achieve. This publicizing and upscaling of wang has resulted in a situation where, historically and into the present, many devotees may come to attend wang without any intention – or capacity – to commit to daily practice of the *sādhana* in question or to uphold the binding pledges conferred as part of the procedure. This fact can be

readily seen by the common enough presence of children and infants sleeping and playing at wang in Tibetan and Himalayan communities. Of the tens of thousands of devotees from around the world that are attracted to such events, some attendees may be dedicated and experienced practitioners of Vajrayāna, or would-be practitioners, but many others may come to receive blessings (*byin rlabs*), accrue merit (*bsod nams*) foster good karmic imprints (*bag chags yag po*), to exploit business or social opportunities, visit family, and so on.

Tibetan tantric initiation thus presents us with a complex picture of insider and outsider knowledge, one comprising multiple overlapping and contradictory modes of engagement. As we saw with Nida's 'trick question' about the third empowerment related to Karmamudrā practice as well, even practitioners who have received initiation which is ideally meant to introduce them to such mysteries, may not realize that these have been pointed out at all. In the end, sacred, secret knowledge is not merely about facts known or unknown, where privileged information is neatly allocated between initiates and non-initiates, between those who know and those who simply do not, locked within some sort of zero-sum 'knowledge economy'.

As we saw in the last chapter, the documenting and disseminating of secrets may in fact secure their integrity in various ways, with the split-sign of the text pointing to other or deeper secrets truths which can never be written. As a result of the proliferation of esoteric material through Tibetan societies, the content of initiatic secrets may frequently be partially or even fully known by non-initiates, who may also play a vital role as 'non-knowers' in shoring up the deeper cultural meanings of secrecy and its social effects (de Jong 2007). As we have seen, this fact is part of the logic of the public secret, "something that is known by everyone, but not easily articulable" (Taussig 1999, 216).

In the context of esoteric traditions like Tibetan Secret Mantra, this difficulty of articulation has to do with both authority and experience. While non-initiates may know something about initiatic secrets, they may not possess the authority or training to speak of them without misrepresenting either themselves or these mysteries. Indeed, the authority to speak of esoteric secrets often derives from transformative participation and experience: from having become something different through knowing. In Indo-Tibetan esoteric Buddhism, this transformative knowing is predicated on a special kind of insight or gnosis (*ye shes*), one which dissolves any distinction between subject and object, between knower-known-and-knowing and which is therefore by definition ineffable. In Tibetan tantric traditions the ‘most exceedingly secret’ and ‘most profound’ (*yang gsang, yang zab*) teachings may in fact be the most simple or unelaborated (*spros med*). Still, the sublimity of the ineffably basic, the simple secret of the ultimate nature of one’s being and reality, nonetheless produces a curious prolixity. As Hanegraaff and Kripal (2008) note, the gnosis associated with esoteric traditions is rarely linear or rational:

“It is typically more immediate, direct, intuitive—it thus displays a certain “all at once” quality that is claimed to be complete or perfect in itself but will take years, maybe an entire life, to explicate and unfold into a textual corpus (often of literally thousands of pages)[...] That which cannot be said gets said, and said, and said.”
(*xviii*)

Taking these factors into consideration, it becomes clear that researchers and initiates are faced with similar conundrums, anxieties and doubts about how to negotiate “the problematic balance” between knowing and telling in different contexts (Lorea 2018, 20). Looking at tantric texts themselves and their contexts of use by living practitioners Lorea notes that “a certain dose of ambiguity, hesitation and contradictory attitudes can be observed: composers and teachers [of esoteric texts] oscillate between loquacity and reticence, between sharing and silencing. For insiders too, the problem of how to ‘outwardly’

teach the results of an ‘inward’ and embodied experience brings them to a controversial clash of knowledges” (original emphasis, 20).

The Ethnographic as the Collegial: Disciplinary Jurisdictions and ‘More Open’, Collaborative Approaches to the Study of Esoteric Religions

As a fellow ethnographer and translator of tantric religious practices and texts, my own findings and experiences mesh neatly with Lorea’s observations. Like her, I believe that paying closer, ethnographic attention to what comes to be regarded as secret knowledge in different times, places, and interactions can open up space for more complex modes of engagement between researchers and initiates than concepts like Urban’s double bind. Through the ethnographic insights I have shared in this thesis I have attempted to contribute to Lorea’s vision of a more inter-disciplinary and anthropologically oriented Tantric Studies, one in which textual and fieldwork-based research can support each other beneficially. I concur with Lorea’s sentiment that “more open interaction” based around shared concerns between researchers and practitioners and “a dialectic integration between textual studies and empirical [ethnographic] research” offers a promising way forward for enriching our understanding of Indo-Tibetan tantric traditions as lived (Lorea 2018, 20).

The absolutism of Urban’s double bind naturalizes a neat and easy divide between esotericists and “esoterologists”. Focused as it is on the personhood, agonies, and responsibilities of the academic researcher it also risks promoting its own subtle chauvinism. In line with Lorea’s recommendations, I have attempted to shift the focus away from outsider researcher navel gazing to consider a broader range of subject positions implicated in the circulation, interpretation, and contestation of esoteric knowledge. Rather than merely debating the relative (de)merits or validity of researcher representations of initiated knowledge, such an approach redirects our attention to how secrecy and esoteric knowledge are produced as part of socially, historically contingent and collaborative inter-subjective

performances that involve both initiates and non-initiates (de Jong 2007). Such performances involve both words and things, span bodies, texts, and institutions caught up in a range of moral and semiotic economies (Keane 2007)³²⁰.

Today, a considerable amount of Tibetan esoteric Buddhist material has been translated and commented upon by academics collaborating to various degrees with Tibetan experts and lineage-holders. Discussing academic expositions of Vajrayāna, American scholar-practitioner and translator of Tibetan Buddhism Alexander Berzin notes that, while specific details about Creation and Completion Stage practices for actualizing Blissful Emptiness and Clear Light mind are to be kept secret from the uninitiated as part of tantric vows, one exception is “when there is a great need for explicit explanation, for example to help dispel misinformation and distorted, antagonistic views about tantra. Explaining general tantra theory in a scholarly manner, not sufficient for practice, is likewise not a root downfall”³²¹. This sort of scenario is precisely the one Nida claimed to be addressing with the publication of our *Karmamudrā* book. Nonetheless, it has been a peculiar experience writing about the circulation of information related to advanced Tibetan tantric yogic practices as an anthropologist while working with Nida to facilitate such circulation at the same time.

The dividing line between being an ‘esotericist’ or initiate and an ‘esoterologist’ or anthropologist has often been murky, for both Nida and I. Nida asked me several times what it is that anthropologists do exactly, what sort of knowledge they produce and why it matters. On more than one occasion I tried to give him a brief run-down, although I am not exactly sure my explanations were very good or that they impressed him very much. Nonetheless, one of the first things that struck me about Nida’s Tibetan language writing about ngakpa for more general audiences was how anthropological it felt. In surveying ngakpas’ histories, practices, social organization and training, Nida draws on his own familiarity with ngakpa as a native practitioner and as a scholar who has spent years observing and reading about

historical tantric luminaries from various centuries and lineages. His writing conveys a sense of Tibetan ngakpas' ways of living and of making meaning in the world as a specific group and he works to define ngakpas' particularities and orientations in opposition to critics who have failed to properly appreciate or understand them. Likewise, Nida grew up in Tibet confronted by multiple, competing worldviews or epistemological frameworks. This has honed his sense of the complicated economies of knowledge in which ngakpa and ngakpa-doctor practices circulate and are evaluated today. In a word, his work is marked by a distinct "ethnographic sensibility" (McGranahan 2018a).

Nida's reliance on an ethnographic mode in describing ngakpa practices – his and other teachers' talk of "The Ngakpa Tradition" and so on, along with my own sharing of information about ngakpa/ma on my personal research blog has led interested outsiders to reach out to me and ask how they can become a part of this 'Tradition', as if there were a single 'ngakpa/ma' lineage or one ngakpa/ma 'club' or religious system into which petitioners could seek entry. As we have seen, there is no one ngakpa/ma lineage, no single ngakpa/ma style of dress, nor even one single Tibetan Buddhist practice that could be said to be the province of ngakpa/ma and ngakpa/ma alone. Rather, as this dissertation has stressed, there are ngakpa/ma orientations, ngakpa/ma sensibilities, ngakpa/ma logics and preferences that are championed and challenged at key moments as Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhists negotiate moral sexuality and struggle to evaluate the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the status of tantric householder.

Tantric Ritual as 'Generic' Knowledge: Ethnographic Comparison and the Re-imagining of Esoteric Expertise

Historically, Tibetan tantric yogic subtle body practices of the channels-winds-and-drops have existed first and foremost as lineage-based – and bound – knowledge. Tibetan tantric exegetes rarely spoke about 'Karmamudrā practice' or Tibetan tsaloong practices in

general. What texts existed on these topics, described instead how sexual yoga or other subtle body practices were to be performed or understood within a specific lineage. One lineage's *sādhana* may require the practitioner to work with five chakras, another three, one *sādhana* may require that one visualize the channels in this color or that fashion, and so on. Such esoteric practice instructions were thus prescriptive rather than descriptive, laying out how initiates within a particular of texts and practices were expected to conceive of the subtle body within the ambit and authority of a particular lineage (Chenagtsang 2018, 154; Wallis 2016a). Things have unfolded somewhat differently in the context of medicine, and as I have attempted to show in this thesis, Tibetan sexology and mantra healing or 'magic' as well.

Here, Tibetan practitioners had more cause and opportunity to assemble knowledge and practices from a range of sources, to compare and contrast contradictory material but house it together nonetheless under a common rubric. Medical and magical manuals containing procedures intended to generate reliable results have been chief contexts in which authoritative, specialist Tibetan knowledge has been both relativized and genericized with significant social consequences. As Van Fleet (2016) has shown, the Great Fifth's patronage of medical practices and institutions connected with different physician-lineages served to un-moor medical expertise from specific sectarian environments and affiliations, rendering it increasingly impartial knowledge. Such moves have proven especially important in drives to nationalize and standardize Tibetan knowledge systems. Beyond impartiality and standardization, however, Dr Nida's comparative, ethnographic sensibility has, more specifically, facilitated a certain genericization of tantric expertise.

While mantra compilations or tantric grimoires (*sngags 'bum*, *sngags kyi be'u bum*) are well represented as genres within Tibetan Buddhism, few books have been written in Tibetan *about* mantras. Dr Nida's 339 page mantra healing volume (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015) is thus ground-breaking, both for how it brings Buddhist scriptural

material about tantric practice into conversation with the regional, oral traditions of Tibetan ngakpa, and for how it develops the mantra compilation by evaluating tantric Buddhist ritual healing procedures against alternative and competing epistemologies (see Joffe 2019b). In opening the ninth chapter of his book called “A Few Miscellaneous Mantra Healing Practices” (*sngags bcos kyi lag len phran bu sna tshogs*), for example, Nida notes that:

“Although, in general, very many different methods (*thabs shes*) for actualizing mantra practices are disclosed in the old scriptures (*dpe rnying khag tu...bstan pa*), for the most part, performing the recitation-and-visualization procedures (*bsnyen pa gtong*) for these is difficult, getting all the ritual ingredients is difficult, doing the rituals is difficult, and so on. As a result of this, in today’s society it is generally quite difficult to be a ngakpa or mantra-user (*sngags mkhan*). Because of this, I will explain a few kinds of mantra healing methods here which do not contradict the Tibetan tradition of medicine (*bod lugs so rig dang mi ‘gal ba*) and which, being in accordance with the times (*dus dang mthun pa*), are easy to do, require little effort, are swiftly efficacious, and have great benefits” (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2005, 121)

Nida then goes on to describe a variety of small mantra healing procedures, or what I have referred to elsewhere as ‘tantric short-hands’ (Joffe 2016g). As Nida acknowledges, all of these procedures are sourced from more elaborate, lineage-specific *sādhana*, but here he has extracted them from their wider, original contexts and curated them together as a set of more accessible tantric visualizations or ‘mini-rites’ for modern mantra-users. Nida organizes these miscellaneous little practices into five categories: 1) Healing through the sorts of visualizations of deities, mantric syllables, light rays etc. found in Creation Stage deity yoga practices; 2) The use of mantric syllables to “clarify the senses” (*dbang po gsal byed*), i.e. *nyasa*-style letter installation in particular organs or points of the body; 3) Healing through the inhalation and exhalation of breath (especially breathing synched with mental mantra recitation, etc.); 4) Healing with the palm of the hands, fingers and through the use of mudras (*phyag rgya*) or ritual hand gestures and 5) Healing through the recitation of the long mantra of Amitayus/Tsepakmay (*tshe dpag med*), the Buddha of Longevity/Immortality . All of these

sorts of procedures are mainstays of tantric ritual; here, in a thoroughly ethnographic mode, Nida has highlighted them and brought them together under a single roof to reveal a general logic or underlying set of principles, the broader spiritual technologies through which efficacious Vajrayāna ritual operates.

Over the last two decades, a number of prominent theorists of magic, witchcraft, and the occult in anthropology have argued for the absolute modernity of such phenomena, proposing that the ongoing salience of these in the present reveals the ways in which key features of modernity, late stage/neo-liberal capitalism and so on are themselves magical, occult, and sinister (Ashforth 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Geschiere 1997; Moore and Sanders 2003; Ong 1987; Taussig 1980, 1991; West and Sanders 2003). As anthropologist of contemporary Iranian esotericism Alireza Doostdar elaborated in an interview (Doostdar 2017), this anthropological scholarship on magic has argued “for the modernity of occult knowledge and practice by essentially showing how modernity itself is racked by murkiness, conspiracy, and mystification (think Marxian commodity fetishism and Kafkaesque readings of bureaucracy). In these studies, the occult becomes a means through which ordinary people and subalterns make sense of the dark forces that control their lives” (n.p.).

Doostdar argues, however, that while such work may have been “very successful in rehabilitating the occult as something to be taken seriously as a key constituent of modern experience”, this success has come at the expense of “writing rationality out of the occult” altogether. With this move the “old and style dichotomy is once again restaged (but usually only implicitly) between science/rationality and magic/irrationality” (Doostar 2017, n.p.). In his recent ethnography of Iranian esotericists or ‘metaphysicians’, Doostar (2018) demonstrates that the occult is a key component of modern experience “*not only* because it is irrational in the same way that modernity is plagued by irrationality, but *also* because the

occult is rational in some the same ways that modernity is defined by rationality” (Doostar 2017, n.d., original emphasis).

While the phenomenological experience of magic and sorcery may indeed go beyond ordinary rationality or exist in a liminal space of unreason, I believe that framing rationality solely as an imposed, Western concern or an anthropological disciplinary “problem” projected onto non-Western cosmologies (Kapferer 2002) ignores the ways that ritual specialists and esoteric philosophers have understood magic and contemplative disciplines as experimental “sciences” (*rig pa*), as probative fields of knowledge in which notes and methods can be shared, compared, contrasted, tried out, and debated. As Doostdar (2017) observes, this is not a question of assessing native sorcerers’ beliefs and practices through an external, etic yardstick to see how truly rational, scientific, falsifiable etc. they really are. Rather it is about paying attention to how “practitioners themselves justify their pursuits in relation to some socially and historically-embedded conception of reason” (n.p.). Opting for the term “metaphysical” over “occult” to describe his subjects’ involvements and investigations, Doostdar (2018) explains that the domain of the metaphysical “allows people to think comparatively (even scientifically) about the nature of the uncanny, strange, and extraordinary without being bound to the terms of specific theological or ethnical arguments” (10).

Ignoring the empiricist, experimental, and rational pretensions of magical experts risks flattening the complexities of Tibetan Buddhist esoteric philosophers’ long commentarial traditions and rich intellectual histories, conversations which firmly pre-date encounters with European (or Chinese) modernity. In his writing on the value of Tibetan mantra healing, Dr Nida has stressed the practice’s alignment with Buddhist principles and the activities of great Buddhist saints, while refusing to relegate it to the category of either folk superstition or religion alone. While on one hand Nida admits that the ultimate extent of

mantras' magical efficacy in the hands of realized adepts is "inconceivable", "unimaginable", beyond the capacities of the conceptual mind (*bsam gyis mi khyab pa, bsam yul las 'das pa*), he nonetheless frames mantra healing as something more immediate, as something amenable to empirical, scientific investigation. In so doing, he manages to strike a compromise between viewing mantra practice as difficult-to-quantify magic ultimately linked with the transformation and transcendence of conventional reality on the one hand, and as a form of clinical practice connected with more predictable psycho-somatic processes and worldly and medical domains and problems on the other (see Joffe 2016b; Joffe 2016f; Joffe 2019b).

Between the Library and the Field: Unfolding Trends in the Anthropology of Buddhism

In this dissertation I have aimed to track the fluid, polysemous qualities of tantric expertise, to highlight the capacity of Tibetan yogis' and yoginis' textual and embodied knowing to move across, undermine, and remake categories of knowledge. For centuries, the procedures of 'mantra magic' and subtle cartographies of tantric yoga have engendered vigorous debate among Tibetan intellectuals over just how to demarcate religious, medical and scientific domains of knowledge. In offering some paltry ethnographic portraits dealing with the translation and popularizing of Tibetan esoteric Buddhist knowledge in contemporary Tibetan exile, I hope that future researchers will see the utility of paying ethnographic attention to the place of esoteric knowledge in everyday Tibetan cultural life.

As we have seen, ngakpas' ambiguous charisma and shifty orientations regularly confound attempts to draw neat, stable or wholly transparent boundaries between monastic and lay orientations and lifestyles. Ngakpa thus offer a powerful lens through which to explore articulations of both monastic and lay householder morality and social institutions. As Sihlé and Ladwig (2017) note in their survey of trends in the anthropology of Buddhism/s, anthropologists researching Buddhist communities have only quite recently begun to address

how “Buddhist, or in various ways Buddhist-inspired, forms that lie outside of mainstream/state-supported (and state-controlled) monastic Buddhism” have operated in “conversation and tension” with it (115). In paying closer attention to the social power and roles played by ritual specialists who live and ply their trade both within and beyond monastic centers and hegemonies, this study has, in line with recent developments in the field, sought to “complexify the simplistic picture of a twofold sociology of Buddhism: a sangha (or monastic order) aiming at otherworldly ends versus a worldly laity that supports the sangha” (115). I have aimed to make my own small contribution to this growing area of inquiry with my work.

Rather than study ngakpa through a close analysis of one or more specific rituals they perform on a regular basis as specialists within particular communities as previous anthropologists have done (Calkowski 1985; Sihlé 2010; 2018a) I have opted for a somewhat wider focus here, one which has emphasized ngakpa ‘orientations’ and sensibilities instead, and the manner in which these have been interpreted, expressed, and reworked across a range of contexts. Throughout the preceding chapters, I have highlighted in particular the ways that ngakpa-related expertise has played a part in the imagining and securing of a Tibetan nation-in-exile, in envisioning moral forms of governance, lay sexuality, and political organization. By attending to the social circulation of ngakpas’ knowledge and practices and the ways that these were mediated in specific times and places, I have highlighted how esoteric expertise moves across and between audiences and genres of knowledge, how it exists at different moments within, between, and beyond specific texts, bodies, and socio-political institutions.

Throughout the preceding chapters, we have seen the way that orally transmitted, viscerally embodied knowledge exists in a complementary, if tense, relationship to the written word, to knowledge enshrined in texts. I have attempted to balance textualist interests

with anthropological ones in my analysis of Buddhist history and practice. In the introduction to his pioneering 1966 edited volume on the anthropology of Theravada Buddhism, anthropologist of Burmese Buddhism Manning Nash emphasized that textualist scholars and anthropologists of Buddhism ought to cooperate with one another more often. In making this point, he noted that anthropologists who did fieldwork were often caricatured as “seeing everything and reading nothing”, while textualist historians were in turn accused of “reading everything and understanding nothing” (Nash 1966, *ix*). In a similar vein, Melvyn Spiro, another anthropologist of Burmese Buddhism writing not long after his colleague Nash, underscored the then common sentiment that the anthropologist of Buddhism “takes off where the textual and historical scholar ends” (Spiro 1970, 3). The idea that textualist/historic and ethnographic research on Buddhist traditions are fundamentally and irreconcilably opposed is now considerably passé. As José Cabezón (2010) has observed:

“A few decades ago Tibetan rituals were, more often than not, the concern of anthropologists who mostly studied the ritual lives of Himalayan peoples in remote village settings. Detailed studies of elite ritual traditions were rare. Most anthropologists could not read classical Tibetan, and therefore had to rely on informants’ accounts for their interpretations of these rites. Many of the anthropologists who work on Tibetan ritual today, by contrast, have been trained in the classical texts. Some are even interested [...] in how even moderately literate traditions [...] understand, appropriate, and transmit written ritual texts — not only as physical objects, as verbal and somatic liturgies, as emblems of status and lineage, but also as doctrinally and philosophically laden works” (25).

In the present work, as one such Tibetan-literate anthropologist of Tibet, I have indeed attempted to capture the extent to which esoteric ritual texts written by tantric Buddhist specialists function on all of these levels at once. At times, in doing so, I have caught myself speaking, like many of my interlocutors in the field were wont to do, about what Buddhadharma ‘is’ or ‘says’ or ‘teaches’, as if Buddhism were some sort of trans-temporal, uncontentious, and self-evident object, one that somehow exists apart from the various individuals and social, political and historical conditions and contexts through which

it is invoked, interpreted, debated, and lived. For Buddhist Studies scholars primarily focused on textual and historical research, I hope that the discussions offered in this thesis have conveyed the extent to which translation is not merely a matter of correctly ferrying the sense and intentions of authoritative texts from one language into another to further academic understanding, but is also about wider patterns of cultural translation, transformation, and mediation, about the socio-political processes and consequences involved in the reimagining of knowledge across time, space, and other boundaries. The dialogic exchanges that unfold between academic translators and native ‘informants’ are products of interaction, are neither natural nor neutral. Rather, they originate dependently from conflicting agendas and relationships of unequal power and privilege, which themselves require critical acknowledgement and interpretation.

In working to find a productive rapprochement between textualist Buddhology and the anthropology of Buddhism I have highlighted the ways in which elite, textually enshrined expertise matters – or doesn’t – for particular audiences. Rather than work to distinguish ‘folk’ versus ‘high/classical’ culture or Great or Small Traditions (Redfield 1963), I have endeavored to make clear just how much restricted, occult expertise of tantric yogic specialists is nonetheless implicated in matters of broader, public concern in exile. As such, my work agrees with that of psychological anthropologist Julia Cassaniti, who, in assessing everyday Buddhist practices and embodied emotion among Northern Thai Buddhists, notes that metaphysical ideas of Buddhism are not always a part of the everyday conversations of Buddhists in Northern Thailand but they “are very much a part of everyday lives” (2015, 31).

The anthropology of contemporary tantric traditions is a fledgling field. Much existing research on the social life of Tibetan tantric specialists and expertise has been confined to the often insular field of Tibetan Studies. It is my belief that there is much to be gained from inter-disciplinary research that brings together Tibetan Studies scholarship with

new developments in the study of Indian tantric traditions, and which brings Tibetan Studies research into conversation with broader trends in anthropology and the social sciences. The role of ethnographer and of initiate/practitioner are not identical with or collapsible into one another, yet, in contrast to Urban and others' 'double bind', they need not disqualify one another entirely either. In my role as translator of texts, charged by my guru to help make knowledge he wishes to share more understandable and available, I have preferred to think of myself less as an authoritative interpreter and more as a sort of mediator.

I am of the mind that ethnography can serve as a useful space, a clearing in a dense, dark forest, for bringing together a range of voices and perspectives, for teasing out cultural ambiguities, contradictions, and contentions without reducing these or rushing to resolve them. Rather than imagining that I could offer some sort of definitive outside verdict on Tibetan knowledge systems writ large, I have tried consistently to demonstrate the extent to which Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhists of all stripes are already engaged in historically deep, theoretical conversations of their own making. My work as an ethnographer has been to develop a series of open-ended narratives, frame stories of a sort, that cast into relief the interpretive and political processes involved in these conversations and the trajectories and transformations of Tibetan tantric knowledge taking place today.

Both researchers and practitioners of Vajrayāna now operate in an 'age of dissemination', a context in which Tibetan literacy rates and publishing efforts have never been greater, and the stakes of standardizing, preserving, and reforming indigenous knowledge are high and contentious indeed. It is my wish that whatever merit may exist in these pages will serve to advance the work of more talented researchers of esoteric religions and Secret Mantra in the future, and that any mistakes, misrepresentations, or omissions

contained here will act as useful provocations for anthropological work on Tibetan diaspora and Vajrayāna to come. དག་ལེགས་འཕེལ། བཀ་ཤིས་ཤོག།

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APPENDIX I:

Vehicles and Stages: Organizing Buddhist Tantric Yoga Texts and Practices in Tibet

Tantric textual typologies and classifications of technical, procedures are key to defining tantric knowledge. It will thus help to say a few words about how different levels of practice are organized by Tibetan Buddhists. By the ninth century, important figures in what would later be identified as the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism had begun to promote frameworks for synthesizing the various methods and paths of Buddhism that had been imported and translated from Indian sources. Drawing on a scheme developed in an important Nyingma tantric scripture called the ‘Gathering of Intentions’ (*dgongs pa ‘dus pa’i mdo*), adherents of the Ancient School or Nyingma school propagated a system of nine vehicles (*theg pa dgu*) that sought to integrate Sutric and Tantric approaches into a single framework (Dalton 2016). In this scheme, the first three vehicles (*theg pa*) make up what is thought of as the broader Sutric or non-tantric Vehicle, focused on worldly renunciation and celibate asceticism. The first two of these three vehicles encompass the views, vows, conduct and practices of the so-called ‘Lesser Vehicle’ (*theg dman*), which equates very roughly with Theravada Buddhism, while the third encompasses the entirety of Mahāyāna Buddhist views, vows, practices, and orientations.

The remaining six vehicles together constitute the overarching Tantric Vehicle of worldly inclusion, engagement and transformation, organizing Vajrayāna’s multiple meditative and ritual methods for discovering the essential nature of mind into different paths or levels of practice. The first three of these six tantric vehicles comprise what are sometimes called the three classes of ‘outer tantras’ (*phyi rgyud sde gsum*). Outer tantra texts remain relatively dualistic and focus to a large extent on ascetic purity, external ritual supports and objects of worshipful contemplation. Texts of the fourth vehicle, of the so-called Kriya or ‘Action’ Tantras (*bya rgyud*), emphasize in particular ‘Vedic-like’ purity, prioritizing the cleanliness and orderliness of the ritual operant as well as the sacred objects, altar spaces, and offering materials they deploy. Scriptures of the two subsequent tantric vehicles of ritual purity and purification – the Conduct/Observance and Yoga Tantras (*spyod rgyud* and *rnal ‘byor rgyud* respectively) – while still focused on external objects of contemplation are, in contrast to the Action Tantras, progressively more concerned with inner cultivation and self-identification with worshipped Buddhas. Collectively, scriptural teachings from these first three vehicles of the tantric wing of the teachings make up the so-called ‘Path of Purification’.

The progression from dualistic, externally-oriented ritual orientations to progressively internal, non-dual ones found in the three outer tantra vehicles parallels the chronological development of tantric Buddhist texts in India. The earliest Kriya Tantra texts hail from the third century C.E., and significantly, contain only a few of the elements in Wallis’ abovementioned master list, include no philosophical exposition or doctrine at all (Isaacson 1998; Granoff 2000), do not require initiation and, do not in fact refer to themselves as tantras. The earliest iterations of this category of text might thus be better understood as “sutras with tantric elements” (Hodge 2003, 6). Amounting essentially to ‘mantra manuals’ for the accomplishing of worldly and supernatural (but not really soteriological) goals, these

texts fail to meet the criteria that both Davidson (2002) and Isaacson (1998) identify as key for identifying scriptures as properly tantric (i.e. they are not soteriologically-oriented and do not self-identify as tantric in an explicit way). With the appearance of scriptures of the Conduct Tantra class from the late sixth century, however, requisite features of Tantra ‘proper’ become commonplace¹. The later Yoga Tantras of the sixth vehicle which emerge in the early eighth century thus represent a somewhat hybrid category, positioned somewhere between the more dualistic practices of the Kriya and Charya Tantras and the more full-blown non-dualism and subtle interiorization of the final three vehicles known as the ‘Inner Yogas’, which together constitute the most quintessential expression of the tantric Buddhist Path of Transformation or Transmutation, as highlighted above.

It is in texts appearing in early eighth century India, texts that with time would come to be classified as ‘Yoga Tantras’ (the sixth vehicle) by esoteric Buddhists, that we see the first full-fledged, systematic presentation of soteriological tantric Buddhist transgression – more specifically, of practices of ritualized, enlightened violence. These texts include elaborate cosmological narratives detailing the ritual subjugation and incorporation of Śaiva tantric deities by superior wrathful, tantric Buddhas or herukas (*khrag ‘thung*, ‘blood-drinkers’ in Tibetan). Whereas texts of the Kriya class instruct practitioners to make offerings to externalized physical or visualized Buddhas on an outer altar, in Yoga Tantra texts ritualists visualize and consecrate themselves as the Buddha to be worshipped and make prayers and oblations to themselves-as-a-Buddha via visualized offering goddesses. As such, these texts represented the “first ritual systems to thrust the Buddhist practitioner onto center-stage” (Dalton 2004, 3). Between roughly 750 – 850 C.E., a further category of tantric text was formalized, the so-called Mahā yoga tantras of the eighth vehicle, which were first mentioned in Chapter One. These texts were the first texts to introduce more fully developed practices of ritualized sex or sexual yoga.

The Mahā yoga tantras also described and formalized two categories of meditation which became fundamental organizing devices for Tibetan tantric Buddhist contemplative-ritual disciplines, the so called ‘Development/Generation/Creation’ and ‘Perfection/Completion Stages’ (*bskyed rim* and *rdzog rim* respectively). The Creation or Generation Stage, in which the ritualist dissolves their own sense of self into emptiness and re-emerges in the form of a perfect, victorious Buddha seated in the middle of an elaborate mandala, a spiritual fortress or kingdom in which all conventional, apparent phenomena and beings are transformed into divine, pure appearance, embodies many of the ritual procedures associated with the initiation and subjugation narratives and ceremonies linked with the Yoga Tantras. Despite the fact that Mahā yoga texts have come to be primarily associated with Creation Stage procedures and orientations as per Nyingma convention, historically speaking the bulk of technical innovations that appear in the earliest texts to be classified as Mahā yoga have to do with the formalization of *rdzogs rim* or the Completion Stage. This Stage came to focus on “the body’s interior, on the anatomical details of the male and female sexual organs and the pleasure generated through sexual union.” (Dalton 2004, 3). The Completion Stage emphasized partnered meditation involving sexual intercourse, in which the sensation of sexual arousal and bliss generated through prolonged love-making (and delayed ejaculation for male practitioners) was used as a basis for meditation.

In focusing on subtle inner sensations of the body-and-mind the Perfection Stage represented a further phase of Buddhist ritual interiorization, whereby the offering of external

fluids into sacrificial fires – so prominent in Vedic and later Buddhist ritual – was homologized with the inner heat of arousal and the flow of sexual fluids and vital energies through subtle channels in the body. Of primary importance in these procedures is the manipulation of the inner winds (*rlung*) which flow within the channels (*rtsa*), so as to direct these winds into the central channel and dissolve them in the heart-center, which in turn facilitates the realization of non-dual awareness (Such processes of absorption, dissolution etc. mirror the mental and physical dynamics that take place during death). Completion Stage practices are thus strongly connected with what are known as *rtsa rlung* or ‘channels-winds’ procedures. While manipulations of the channels and winds also take place as part of Creation Stage practice, the Completion Stage is specifically associated with methods aimed at collecting and dissolving the winds in the central channel.

Earlier iterations of Mahā yoga texts tended to include Creation and Completion Stage contemplative routines within the same practice session and text. As these Stages of practice became more elaborated and specialized however, texts devoted more exclusively to each Stage appeared. Towards the end of the ninth and beginning of the tenth century the internal dynamics of the Completion Stage became far more extensively elaborated, with complex cartographies of the inner self – the now widely familiar yogic anatomy of channels (*rtsa*), chakras (*‘khor lo*, energy ‘wheels’ or concentrations/nexuses of channels), winds (*rlung*), energy ‘drops’ or nuclei (*thig le*) and so on – becoming central to sexual yoga meditative procedures. In the Nyingma tradition, this evolution of technique coincided with the development of a separate category and vehicle of tantric text and practice, ‘Anu Yoga’, the second of the ‘Inner’ or most subtle Yoga vehicles. This process of elaboration and specialization of technique helps explain the final and most ultimate vehicle in the Nyingma school’s nine vehicle scheme as well, the vehicle of Ati Yoga, which includes the full range of Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) or ‘Great Perfection’ meditation practices.

Evidence suggests that ‘the Great Perfection’ may have originally been a technical term which referred to a third and final stage of tantric meditation practice that represented a culmination of the procedures of the Creation and Completion Stages (Dalton 2016; Karmay 2007; Van Schaik 2013). This third phase likely focused on the state of transcendent non-conceptuality which was ideally supposed to occur when initiands at empowerment ceremonies tasted on their tongue the eucharistic drop of comingled male and female sexual fluids produced by the initiating guru and Karmamudrā partner at the climax of the sexual rite of the Completion Stage. With time, this phase developed its own distinctive orientations and meditation techniques and eventually became its own stand-alone system or tradition of practice, one which even presented its techniques as superior to those found in both Maha and Anu Yoga categories. In practice, however, all Inner Yoga practices incorporate aspects of *bskyed rim*, *rdzogs rim*, and *rdzogs chen* in combination, albeit with slightly different emphasis.

In later tantric Buddhist traditions from India which would become of central importance to the New School or Sarma (*gsar ma*) lineages in Tibet, which emerged from the eleventh century onwards, Buddhist texts were categorized slightly differently than in the Nyingma system. Broadly speaking, New Translation adherents subscribed to a similar framework in their organization of Hinayana, Mahāyāna, and Outer Tantra texts and practices, only here Kriya, Charya and Yoga tantras were labelled ‘Lower’ as opposed to ‘Outer Tantras’. When it came to the most advanced and ‘transgressive’ tantric texts and disciplines, however, the Sarma schools categorized all tantras and commentaries involving

full-fledged initiation procedures and Creation and Completion Stages as ‘Highest Yoga Tantra’ (*bla na med pa'i rgyud*). Texts within this category emphasize Creation and Completion Stages in equal measure and are further subdivided into their own categories.

Highest Yoga Tantra practices are said to provide complete instructions for the accomplishment of Buddhahood in one human lifetime and body that are functionally equivalent to those found in the Nyingma Inner Yoga classes. Ati Yoga or Dzogchen as a stand-alone category among the Nyingma is distinct, however, in that rather than presenting itself as a gradual path to enlightenment it is uniquely ‘sudden’ or spontaneous. In the Nyingma context, Dzogchen is conceived of as both the result (*bras*) of the particular methods of Maha and Anu Yoga practices, and as the basis (*gzhi*) of Ati Yoga, which operates as an independent path or vehicle with its own distinct meditation methods, vows, and modes of transmission. Ati Yoga is the supreme, highest vehicle in the Nyingma, whereas the highest, most ultimate teaching in Sarma lineages is Mahāmudrā (*phyag rgya chen po*). While different Sarma schools debate the extent to which it is possible or desirable to teach Mahāmudrā as something separable from Highest Yoga Tantra methods, all recognize Mahāmudrā as the highest level of a gradualist path of tantric realization. The various meditative practices of Highest Yoga Tantra culminate in the realization of Mahāmudrā. Mahāmudrā teachings are cognate in many key ways with certain aspects of Ati Yoga practice but the Ati Yoga vehicle possesses other practices (such as the light and vision/darkness retreat based practices of *thod rgal*) not found in the Sarma school systems. In any case, Karmamudrā practice holds a central place in Completion Stage practices of both the Inner Yogas of the Nyingma school and Sarma Highest Yoga Tantra traditions.

ENDNOTES:

¹ His real name. I have used real names for all of the individuals with whom I have personally collaborated and put out publications publicly. I have also used real names when citing academics, lamas, and politicians who made statements in a public capacity during events or in public social media posts. Everyone else I reference in this dissertation has been anonymized.

² The Nejang class numbered twelve people: me, seven Indian locals (six men, one woman), an American man who had lived in South India on and off and had been a student of Dr Nida's for some time, a German woman, a Russian woman, and a Japanese woman. The Japanese woman did not attend the next two days of 'mantra healing level 1' training. Otherwise the make-up of the class remained the same.

³ In 2011, after long expressing his intention to do so in the interests of promoting the democratization of socio-political institutions in exile, the Dalai Lama fully devolved formal political authority to an elected Tibetan prime minister or sikyong (*srid skyong*). See Brox (2016); McConnell (2016).

⁴ Fieldwork which took place in India and Nepal between January 2015 and October 2016 was funded by a dissertation fieldwork grant from the Wenner Gren Foundation and a Frederick Williamson Memorial Grant via the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge.

⁵ See Appendix I for more on some of these historical and sectarian patterns.

⁶ Inji, which literally means 'English' or 'English person', is today used to describe any and all white-passing non-Tibetans. It is only rarely used for non-white, non-Tibetans, however

⁷ Attendees at tantric wang (*dbang*) or initiation/empowerment ceremonies are typically granted a new tantric name to mark their initiation into that particular esoteric practice and to signify the initiate's new identity as a holder of the tantric vows that the ceremony ideally confers. In some cases, all men and all women attending the *wang* receive the same root male or female name, which may be further personalized or qualified via the results of divination. Such initiatory names are by definition secret, however, and are not intended for public use or disclosure. The Tibetan names that non-Tibetan converts use when introducing themselves to Tibetans or as aliases on Facebook profiles are typically either ones that they received during formal, lay 'Refuge ceremonies' in a kind of model of monastic ordination or which they were given by Tibetan friends or teachers in more informal, spontaneous ways.

⁸ Yidam may take peaceful or 'forceful' forms (*zhi khro*). The latter, whose iconography represents the transmutation of conventionally impure, destructive mental and emotional states (*nyan mongs*) into enlightened gnosis, are especially connected with higher 'non-dual' levels of tantric practice.

⁹ The primacy of aural transmission over cognitive understanding means that lamas may sometimes fire off loong with startling alacrity. While some lamas do take their time in enunciating when granting loong, rapid delivery is far from uncommon. I experienced this one night in Amdo, Tibet in 2016 when I was walking back to our hotel in Mahlo with Dr Nida and a group of students. It was suggested that we do concise group offering practices for Shanglön Dorje Duddul, the special spirit-protector of the Tibetan medical tradition, upon our return. I sidled up to Nida and let him know that I wanted to join the group in saying prayers and making offerings to the deity of alcohol, tea, grains, and meat but I had not received the loong for the liturgy (a prayer, which Nida had himself composed, incidentally). Seemingly before I had even finished speaking, Nida shot out his fingers and gently tugged on my earlobe, reciting the loong for the liturgy and associated mantras with stunning speed. "What do you mean? You already have it!" he said with a laugh, releasing my ear from his grasp.

¹⁰ In the past, in both India and Tibet, it was customary to offer considerable quantities of gold, as well as extensive personal service to initiating gurus before receiving initiation. Initiands at wang may still offer gold, albeit often in smaller, symbolic forms.

¹¹ As a *gter ma* text, the Pema Kathang is understood to have been recorded by Padmasambhava's spiritual partner, the tantric yogini Yeshe Tsogyal and first Tibetan in the Tibetan hagiographical record to have achieved

Buddhahood through tantric practice. *Gter ma* or ‘treasures’ are texts of teachings and blessed objects which are said to have been hidden, buried in the earth, underwater, in the sky, and in the mind-streams of disciples, to be revealed by designated *gter ston* or ‘treasure revealers’ in later periods when these teachings would be most needed. For more on the *gter ma* tradition, *gter ston*, and the development of the historiography of Padmasambhava see Hirshberg 2016. For more on the Tibetan Treasure Tradition in general, see Doctor (2005); Gayley (2007); Gyatso (1993; 1996); Mayer (2015); and Tulku Thondup (1986).

¹² For the Tibetan of this text, see “The Mirror – Tibetan,” Lotsawa House, accessed October 15 2019, <https://www.lotsawahouse.org/bo/tibetan-masters/dudjom-rinpoche/mirror>.

¹³ Khampagar/Tashi Jong monastery was re-established in exile by the eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche (1931 - 1980) with the vision of becoming a center for the preservation of Drukpa Kagyu lineage practices and institutions, among them the yogic training community (*sgrub sde*) or retreat center first established as a subsidiary institution by the founder of Khampagar Monastery, the fourth Khamtul Rinpoche Tenzin Choekyi Nyima in Chamdo county, Kham, in the late eighteenth century. For more information about the re-establishing of the Khampagar togden community in Himachal Pradesh, India, see “A Brief History of the Khampagar Retreat Center,” Togden Sponsorship at Khampagar Yogi Center, India, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://togdens.org/information/history/>.

¹⁴ See Appendix I for more on these stages and their significance within tantric Buddhism more broadly.

¹⁵ See “*dil mgo mkhyen brtse rin po ches reb kong sngags mang la gnang ba'i zhal gdams*”, Sngags mang, accessed October 15, 2019, <http://www.ngakmang.net/research/308.html>.

¹⁶ Ngakpas’ specific association with mundane, village life and thaumaturgical power is neatly captured in the Great Dungkar Dictionary (*dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo*), one of the most authoritative, contemporary Tibetan-Tibetan dictionaries. The entry for *sngags pa* states: “This means both 1) a village ritualist who makes a living [literally ‘seeks out their food and clothing’] through [performing] tantric/mantric rituals and 2) [a person] who has the clothing of a householder and makes it rain, stops rain, and so on” (*sngags kyi cho ga'i sgo nas rang gi lto gos 'tshol ba'i grong chog pa dang 2) char 'bebs dang tshar gcod sogs byed cing rten khyim pa'i chalu gs can gnyis kar go rgyu yod* (Tibetan Dictionary app 2019).

¹⁷ Bön is often misidentified in popular sources as pre-Buddhist indigenous ‘shamanism’. See Bjerken (2004) for a thorough rebuttal of this characterization but also Ermakov (2008), Reynolds (1996), and Tenzing Wangyal (2002), for examples of contemporary Bönpo practitioners who apply the label ‘shamanism’ and ‘shamanic’ to their practices in various ways. The term Bönpo is also used among Himalayan groups like the Hyolmo to mean non-Buddhist ‘shaman’/ritual specialist as opposed to Buddhist lama (Prude 2016). Although Bön has undoubtedly preserved significant indigenous, non-Indic cultural features (Mayer 2015; Ramble 2014) Tibetan Buddhism has absorbed and reworked indigenous features as well and it is important to bear in mind that Bön identities and terminologies at least as far as our earliest technical record of these is concerned have developed in direct relation and reference to Buddhism (Van Schaik 2013). See Sihlé (2010) for an analysis of overlapping categories of apotropaic ritual specialist and interactions between Bön and tantric Buddhist practitioners in Nyemo, Tibet.

¹⁸ Interestingly, in his 2005 translation of the *bca' yig*, Pearcey translates *bon du gyur ba* euphemistically as “Secret Mantra straying into occultism,” without acknowledging Dudjom Rinpoche’s direct citation here of Padmasambhava in the Kathang Zanglingma. It is also possible, based on his chosen rendering, that Pearcey misread the original Tibetan as *bon du gyur ba*, ‘becoming/changing into/sinking into Bön [practice]’ instead of *bon du gyur ba* ‘chanting as or like a Bön [practitioner]’.

¹⁹ This book has been translated into English under the title ‘Tibetan Journey’, see David-Néel (1936).

²⁰ While the term *geshe*, a contraction of the term *dge ba'i bshes gnyen* (“virtuous friend”), can mean any upstanding spiritual guide, it is most often used to refer to high-level monastic, scholastic degrees, in the Geluk context in particular (Geshe degrees are also awarded in the Sakya and Bön contexts as well, however). Today,

as per the standard Geluk curriculum in monasteries in India and Nepal, to graduate as a geshe typically takes at least seventeen years of continuous study of sutric material (cf. Tsenzhab Serkong Rinpoche, “The Geluk Monastic Education System,” [translated by Alexander Berzin], Study Buddhism, accessed October 19, 2019, <https://studybuddhism.com/en/advanced-studies/history-culture/monasteries-in-tibet/the-geluk-monastic-education-system>).

²¹ In the Tibetan exile context, the mandatory minimum period for geshe to study at ngakpa dratsang has now shrunk to one year, see Tsenzhab Serkong Rinpoche, “The Geluk Monastic” (n.d.) and Dreyfus (2003, 118).

²² Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche and Jeff Cox, “The Ngakpa Tradition: An Interview with Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche,” Shambhala Publications, accessed October 16, 2019, https://www.shambhala.com/snowlion_articles/the-ngakpa-tradition-an-interview-with-khetsun-sangpo-rinpoche/.

²³ Individuals who operate as both ngakpa and spirit-mediums are quite rare. This is sociologically revealing: ngakpa are generally those who have control over powerful, unenlightened worldly spirits through identification with the trans-worldly enlightened tantric deity. In contrast, spirit mediums’ bodies are overtaken through amnesic possession by worldly spirits who use them as *sku rten* (‘bodily supports’ or ‘mediums’). The role of ngakpa and the roles of spirit mediums require different sets of expertise and ritual training and upkeep. Wangchuk explained that having both roles simultaneously was difficult, because of the great number of different practices involved for each.

²⁴ Wangchuk made a further, if slightly different comparison between Tibetan spirit-mediums and ngakpa when he observed in the same conversation that he thought that Tibetan specialists like himself strongly resembled – physically and in terms of lifestyle – Native Americans and Native American medicine men he had seen on TV.

²⁵ More specifically, *lha pas*’ initiatory sickness and powers cannot be resolved and ratified until the *lha pa* has undergone ritual testing, legitimation, activation and consecration by a lama (although in some cases a senior *lha pa* may fill this role). See Berglie (1976; 1978).

²⁶ This is especially noteworthy in light of the *bca’ yig* genre’s common association with monastic institutional organization and discipline today, see Jansen (2018).

²⁷ Dr Nida’s ngakpa brother in Tibet Hungchen uploaded a copy of Rongzom’s charter onto the Ngakmang Research Center website in 2017, for example. See “Rong zom chos bzang gis rang slob dam tshig pa nam la gsungs pa’i rwa ba bryad pa’i bca’ yig,” Sngags mang, April 25, 2019, <http://www.ngakmang.net/education/1327.html>.

²⁸ Tsepa chu or tsechu (*tshes pa bcu*; *tshes bcu*) is directly connected with Padmasambhava and his biography. In texts like the Kathang Zanglingma, Padmasambhava explains before he departs from Tibet and dissolves his conventional corporeal form that he will return and be especially present every tenth day of the lunar calendar in order to benefit beings. As Nida puts it “*tshes bcu* is the most important time for assembling for ngakpas’ tsok, a practice which was invented by Guru Padmasambhava” (Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma 2015, 110). Each tsechu in the year is linked with different accomplishments of Padmasambhava described in his various *nam thar* or hagiographies.

²⁹ There was a further layer to Ngakpa Dawa’s joke too, since as we shall see, ngakpa are expected to nurture the perception as much as possible that their everyday wives and children are inseparable from, no different in ultimate nature, from the Dakinis or enlightened tantric goddesses and Protector spirits.

³⁰ When I attended tsok at Ngakpa Dawa’s ngakkhang in 2015, two young inji women from the U.S. and Australia also attended for the first few hours of the full-day proceedings upon Ngakpa Dawa’s invitation. These women were encouraged to sit on the platform alongside chanting ngakpa and did not help in the kitchen with ngakpas’ wives (I was also invited to sit on the platform and stayed for the full duration. With the encouragement of the ngakpa I sat next to, I attempted to read the liturgies over his shoulder in a quieter voice in time with the group’s loud, well-honed chanting.

³¹ The feminization ngakmo (*sngags mo*) was even more inscrutable than *sngags ma* for Tibetan interlocutors. While many Tibetans could at least parse the later as a feminized version of ngakpa, more than once when I tried out the term ngakmo, Tibetans understood me to be saying *sngags (kyi) mo*, or ‘tantric divination’ rather than ‘female householder tantrist’.

³² Incidentally, Dr Nida’s own root-guru, the nun and tantric yoga adept Yogini Ngawang Gyaltzen, was also a close student of Shugseb Rinpoche Lochon Chonyi Zangmo. For more on Chönyi Zangmo’s life see Havnevik (1997; 1999).

³³ Ngakchang (*sngags ‘chang*, ‘mantra-holder/bearer), although most often used as an alternative title for ngakpa, can have a somewhat more gender-neutral flavor to Tibetan ears. Rinchen, a white American woman and teacher of Nyingma Buddhism in California shared an anecdote with me in July 2019 which illustrated this nicely. She explained how several years before when she had asked Pema Dorje Rinpoche, one of her Tibetan ngakpa teachers, to provide a name for the ngakhang she had established in her home, after a few days of thinking, without her having requested a gender-neutral name, he suggested that she use the term *sngags ‘chang* in the ngakhang’s title, since this word, unlike *sngags pa* and *sngags ma*, encompassed both men and women practitioners and was thus a better term. That said, Rinchen explained that she did not recall ever hearing Pema Dorje Rinpoche or her other main teacher, Lama Tharchin, a ngakpa from the Rebkong ngakmang who relocated to California, ever use the term ‘ngakma’ to refer to non-celibate yoginis. In fact, until meeting Nida, she confessed that she had assumed it was an exclusively Western Buddhist invention.

³⁴ See Hatley (2016a), Serbaeva-Saraogi (2013); and White (2013) for further details on the roles of yoginis and dakinis in earlier Indian Śaiva tantra and their ancient prototype in specific forms of fearsome, possessing, flesh-eating charnel-ground demonesses with whom (male) yogic practitioners engaged ritually in order to gain power and realization. For comprehensive surveys of the role of both human and non-human dakinis in Vajrayāna, see Shaw (1994) and Young (2004).

³⁵ Notwithstanding tantric Buddhism’s allowance for enlightenment in a female human body, rebirth as a woman still retains an ambiguous cultural value for Tibetans, as is strikingly evident in the colloquial Tibetan term for ‘woman’ or ‘wife’, *skye(s) dman* or “lower/inferior rebirth” and consistent everyday associations between women’s bodies and pain, pollution, and impurity. See Gyatso and Havnevik (2005); Gutschow (2004, 212 – 214); Martin (2005, 78).

³⁶ See Gutschow (2004) for a thorough ethnographic investigation of the extent to which Tibetan Buddhist nuns in Zangskar, Ladakh are limited in their opportunities to devote themselves entirely to religious ordination, education and practice in an equivalent way to monks.

³⁷ Yudrön spoke these words in English. I back-translated them questioningly for her into Tibetan as *myal ba’i lag ‘khyer*, which she said sounded about right.

³⁸ Sera Khandro’s writings give the impression that high-ranking monks seeking out sexual relations with khandro in semi-secrecy was fairly commonplace in early twentieth century Eastern Tibet. Her autobiography offers glimpses into the ways in which such behavior on the part of monks could be interpreted by others as both legitimate and necessary or as morally corrupt and suspect (Jacoby 2010; 2014). I address doctrinal and social controversies surrounding the possibility of monastics engaging in sexual yoga and initiation further in Chapter Six.

³⁹ It has also contributed to a widespread perception, especially in Western scholarship, that Tibetan Buddhist partnered sexual yoga practices amount to little more than a patriarchal institution, inherently designed to enable men to exploit women and their bodies as objects for selfish and one-directional gain. I return to this representation and Dr Nida responses to it in Chapter Nine.

⁴⁰ For another fascinating case-study of a non-celibate ‘autonomous’ Tibetan khandro – in this case, a female spirit-medium from Tibet who has managed to achieve considerable success as an unmarried, independently operating ritual healer, diviner, and teacher in exile, albeit through powerful support from the Dalai Lama and other prominent Geluk monk authorities, see Schneider (2015).

⁴¹ See “Interview with JETSUN KUSHAB,” Vajrasana, accessed October 16, 2019, <http://vajrasana.org/chime1.htm> and “Special Religious Training for a Young Nun – interview with Jetsun Kushok Chimey Luding,” YouTube video, 4:14, Tibet Oral History Project, August 1, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YO41EQmMFp0>.

⁴² Fully ordained nuns with extensive training in tantric yoga can experience difficulties trying to teach in monasteries as well. Dr Nida noted that his root-guru Ani Ngawang Gyaltzen (see pg. 416 of the current work), a highly accomplished nun-yogini, struggled to teach in monastic institutions, despite her expertise, since few monks in Central Tibet could accept the possibility of being taught high-level teachings by a lama on a throne who was a nun.

⁴³ Vajrasana, “Interview with Jetsun”.

⁴⁴ At the same time, several Vajrayana practitioners, Tibetan and otherwise, have indicated to me in private that they are unsure of the quality or authenticity of his revelations. Ngak’chang Rinpoche received some teachings from Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche in the 1980s and counted him as an important guru and indigenous validator until their friendship apparently broke down following the Tibetan ngakpa’s separation from his first wife and consort Khandro Tendzin Drolkar. Ngak’chang Rinpoche maintained contact with Khandro Tendzin Drolkar after her breakup with Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche and he has continued to send his students to make connections with her. He also received teachings from prominent Nyingma ngakpa like Dudjom Rinpoche, Chimé Rigdzin Rinpoche (1922 – 2002) and Kunzang Dorje Rinpoche (1930 – 2010), and his students still regularly travel to Kathmandu to visit with the latter’s consort, Khandro Jomo Samphel.

⁴⁵ Recently Ngak’chang Rinpoche has publicized that he has located an old colored photograph of his previous incarnation in Bhutan, an image of the treasure-revealer which apparently matches how Aro Yeshe has appeared to him in his visions. Ngak’chang Rinpoche asserts that his predecessor was an albino, a fact which arguably makes the lack of an independent historical for his existence even more striking. Ngak’chang Rinpoche also claims that reproductions of this photograph have been spotted on shrines in Eastern Bhutan, which has fueled hopes among Aro gTér adherents that a pocket of Aro initiates will eventually be found in Bhutan.

⁴⁶ I have not personally observed or heard about Tibetan lamas introducing their partners in precisely this fashion.

⁴⁷ One white, American woman who has practiced in Nyingma lineages for several decades told me that she had initially felt “betrayed” to discover that the Aro gTér’s historiography was more “alternative” and less substantiated than she’d first assumed. She explained that for a long time Ngak’chang Rinpoche’s “website was the only place to find out about this topic”, i.e. non-monastic, non-celibate tantric Buddhist householder practices, in English and early exposure to the lineage had encouraged her immensely in feeling like there was a place for her in Vajrayāna. “It was so woman-positive, and that was good”, she explained, “even though it was fictitious, well most of it.” For a defense of the Aro gTér lineage from an adherent, see David Chapman, “Aro “Controversy” F.A.Q.,” November 19, 2008, Approaching the Aro gTér, <https://approachingaro.org/aro-controversy-faq>. For reflections on how excommunication of supposedly contentious or heretical groups like Aro gTér on online Buddhist forums has contributed to the maintenance of orthodox virtual communities see Busch (2011).

⁴⁸ Estimates for the exact population of the Rebkong ngakmang vary widely, with ngakpa/mas’ close involvement in lay village life and tendency to not live full-time in religious institutions no doubt a complicating factor in the production of any reliable census. Sihlé (2013, 168) suggests that the ngakmang comprises around 2000 members and Stoddard (2013, 109) that its closer to 4000. Drukmo for her part has suggested that “1 in 9 people in Rebkong is a yogi or yogini”. For an overview of religious institutions in Amdo and the number of different religious practitioners supposedly living there, Smith (2017).

⁴⁹ “Female in Buddhism | Drukmo Gyal Dakini | TEDxTartu,” YouTube video, 16:28, TEDx Talks, December 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z19zwCKyQQk>.

⁵⁰ Nida has offered a similar monk-specific ‘mind training’ explanation for the widespread monastic Buddhist practice of perceiving women and their bodies as polluting and dangerous (see Chenagtsang 2018, 91). For an extensive treatment of how decaying women’s bodies were used in first millennium Indian Buddhist hagiographies as primary objects for meditation for monks to inspire sexual abstinence and disgust in worldly life, see Wilson (1996).

⁵¹ Later in her presentation (12:12), Drukmo contrasts this enlightened and balanced ‘Buddhist feminism’ critically with more secular and presumably Western varieties: “When one doesn’t practice compassion and wisdom any external appearances and material values can easily carry away the mind and it’s very difficult to focus on the topic. I’m not against feminists, I’m not against feminism when they promote equality due to female potential but when anger and hatred are involved then it’s going very far from the initial goal.” (Drukmo Gyal, “Female in Buddhism”).

⁵² In a teaching song on Dzogchen which he wrote to encourage Rebkong ngakpa and ngakma in their practice, for example, Nida stresses that “there is no difference between the bodies of yogis or yoginis – whosoever sees *rig pa*, natural, primordial awareness, will be liberated”. Referencing the red and white essential ‘drops’ or ‘nuclei’ (*thig le*) that come from one’s mother and father at conception and exist as fundamental components in the subtle yogic anatomies of both yogis and yoginis, he concludes that “the white and red drops blaze of their own accord with bliss-and-heat – o ngakma, women are especially noble!” (cf. Chenagtsang 2016) The blazing of ‘bliss-heat’ refers to the technical procedures of Inner Heat and sexual yoga discussed further in Chapter Six.

⁵³ See “Yoginis of Bhutan TEASER,” YouTube video, 7:02, [Unlisted], June 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0w9rLEUfYpK&fbclid=IwAR0TrUL6c1zbN9yGDOCdOCluDqISIdj1r-4W2BVUNZ5k3f2S6bP1T21cisw>. Echoing statements made by the Dalai Lama, Nida also suggests here that a women-centric society would be a more peaceful one. “If you have a car I think the man says ‘my car’, but the wife says, ‘our car’...[The] most important [Buddhist] philosophy is...interdependence, interconnectivity, so that’s why I think...Buddhist philosophy...works better with more women – kindness, love, compassion, and friendship – maybe in the next twenty, thirty years, women will take over this society and we will have a more peaceful society too.”

⁵⁴ The Sanskrit *mudrā* (Tib. *phyag rga*) is a complex, polyvalent term in Tibetan Buddhism. Here, it points to two crucial aspects of ritual expertise strongly associated with non-celibate tantric yogis: their knowledge of powerful ‘threatening’ and ‘subduing’ ritual gestures and their greater capacity to engage in practice with a consort, that is, the practice of tantric sexual yoga with a physical partner.

⁵⁵ Padmasambhava is also cited as the author of two texts in the Nyingma canon, the first a commentary on the thirteenth chapter of the Guhyagarbhatantra which is regarded as the root-tantra of the Mahā yoga class and Mayajala tantra cycle, and the second a commentary on a tantric text of the Mahā yoga class called the Upayapasapadmamala (Cantwell and Mayer 2013). If nothing else, we can be sure of Master Padma’s strong connection to texts of the Mahā yoga class of tantric scriptures.

⁵⁶ This testament, which purports to be a record of royal edicts (*bka’ mchid/bka’ gtsigs*) or political history of the Tibetan state written by a minister in King Trisong Deutsen’s court called Ba Salnang (*sba/dba/rba gsal snang*) has no single, definitive published edition and exists in multiple manuscript fragments and recensions from different periods. While the *dba’ bzhad* version is datable to the 12th or 13th century, fragments of the text found in the British Museum by Van Schaik and Kazushi help strengthen the case for a 9th or 10th century origin. See Van Schaik and Kazushi (2008) for more on these early fragments and Wangdu and Diemberger (2000) for a full translation of a later version of the Testament.

⁵⁷ Master Padma is said to have awed the king with a show of power that aimed to demonstrate his disinterest in worldly attainments or authority. When the king offered him sacks of gold for his demon-taming work, the ngakpa is supposed to have scooped up a handful of sand and transformed this into gold before the king’s eyes, astonishing him and filling him with fear (Cantwell and Meyer 2013)

⁵⁸ *gsang sngags kyi rgyud rnam gzhung gis gsang bar bya ba yin te/snod du ma gyur pa rnam la bshad cing bstan du yang mi rung la/ bar du bsgyur zhing spyod du gnang gis kyang ldem po dag tu bshad pa ma khrol nas sgra ji bzhin du 'dzin cing log par spyod pa dag kyang byung/sngags kyi rgyud kyi nang nas thu zhing bod skad du bsgyur ba dag kyang byung zhes gdags kyi phyin chad gzungs sngags dang rgyud bla nas bka' stsal te/sgyur*

du bcug pa ma gtogs pa/ sngags kyi rgyud dang sngags kyi tshig thu zhing bsgyur du mi gnang ngo. See “Mahāvīyutpatti with sGra sbyor bam po gñis pa,” University of Oslo, accessed October 15, 2019 <https://www2.hf.uio.no/polyglotta/index.php?page=volume&vid=263>.

⁵⁹ The Era of Fragmentation is said to have been triggered by the assassination of Lang Darma by a Buddhist monk by the name of Lhalung Pelgyi Dorje, who took it upon himself to murder the anti-Buddhist king to protect the well-being of his fellow Buddhists and the future of the religion in Tibet. Lang Darma’s assassination triggered the collapse of the empire and a period of civil war. While Lang Darma’s reputation as a pro-Bön anti-Buddhist ruler is well established, Yamaguchi (1996) has challenged the idea that the historical Lang Darma was opposed to Buddhism.

⁶¹ See Karmay (1979) for a translation and commentary on Yeshe Ö’s edict. Relinquishing lay life later in his career, Yeshe Ö became one of the first monastic-kings of Tibet, setting an important precedent for later institutionalized monastic lama kings – i.e. the embodiment of religious and political authority in a single person - in Tibet.

⁶² “Evolution of TPiE,” Tibetan Parliament in Exile, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://tibetanparliament.org/about-tpie/evolution-of-tpie/>.

⁶³ Departmental ministers in exile are nominated by the Prime Minister, who heads the Kashag or Tibetan ‘Executive’/cabinet (*bka’ shag*) and are then submitted for approval to members of the Parliament. The staging of elections among Tibetan communities worldwide in 2001 marked the first time that the Tibetan prime minister was appointed through democratic procedures. Prior to the Dalai Lama’s political retirement in 2011, the Kalon Tripa was officially subject to the authority of the Dalai Lama (in September 2012 the office of Prime Minister or *bka’ blon khri pa* was re-designated as Sikyong, *srid skyong*). Today, as a result of the Dalai Lama’s devolution of political power, the Sikyong’s authority is supposed to operate independently from that of the Dalai Lama, although given the Dalai Lama’s extraordinary status and global influence, his impact on political decision-making, even if an indirect or unofficial capacity, remains considerable.

⁶⁴ There have been seven other official heads since Dudjom Rinpoche’s passing, some of whom have been ngakpa other monks. Many (but not all) of these figures have been reincarnate lama heads of the six “mother monasteries” of the Nyingma tradition in exile.

⁶⁵ “Green Book (Chatrel),” Central Tibetan Administration, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://tibet.net/support-tibet/pay-green-book/>.

⁶⁶ Significantly, even exiled Tibetans who hold passports and citizenship in other, politically recognized countries possess green books, contribute to the CTA and participate in exile elections in this way. Such processes are key dimensions of what McGranahan (2018b) has identified as Tibetan ‘refugee citizenship’.

⁶⁷ The *bka’ brgyad* or ‘eight ordinances’ refers to eight classes of Mahā yoga wrathful deity yoga sādhanās practiced in the Nyingma school. The Kagye system has a central yidam in union, surrounded by eight other wrathful Buddhas and their retinues in the eight cardinal and inter-cardinal directions. Padmasambhava is said to have transmitted all eight of these classes of teachings in Tibet; many of the sādhanās for these deities were revealed as pure vision and treasure texts. For more on the history and characteristics of the Kagye practices see Dudjom Rinpoche (2002).

⁶⁸ Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche reports that he worked hard to fulfil Yeshe Dorje’s request by writing down requirements relating to the day-to-day affairs of the retreat center and providing support and assistance for the first batch of retreatants. He also took on the responsibility of organizing the Dalai Lama’s visit to open the temple and inspect the retreat center (‘jam dbyangs don grub 2007, 299).

⁶⁹ Ngakpa Tom, personal communication, 3rd of December 2015.

⁷⁰ Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche would ultimately die in New Mexico in 1993 due to complications from cancer. Portions of his cremated remains are currently housed in two *mchod rten* or Buddhist reliquary shrines in Santa Fe, New Mexico and Poolesville, Maryland, USA.

⁷¹ Ngakpa Tom, personal communication, 5th December 2015.

⁷² After separating from Tendzin Dolkar, Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche got involved with a Chinese American woman who became his sangyum and sponsored his and other Nyingma lamas' trips to the US.

⁷³ I was aware that the CTA kept records of the Nechung state oracle's predictions and advice (see Nair 2010), so I was curious if records had been kept of ritual services performed by ngakpa for the CTA as well.

⁷⁴ He said yes to both queries and gave me his phone number, but somehow this did not save in my phone and I was unable to contact him and meet with him again.

⁷⁵ Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche explains in his memoirs that Ösel Dorje Rinpoche's father, who was also a treasure revealer, had revealed a special *gter ma* practice in Tibet connected with the Dalai Lama. Osel Dorje Rinpoche explained before he died that if his son properly constructed images associated with the revealed practice, these would help ensure that Buddhism in Tibet and the CTA's political activities in exile would be stabilized and that the Dalai Lama's lineage would flourish and he would complete all his wishes without obstacle ('jam dbyangs don grub 2007).

⁷⁶ I am aware of only three texts by socio-cultural anthropologists devoted specifically to the topic of rebirth/reincarnation: Obeyesekere's (2002) comparative study of historical and ethnographic literature on Amerindian, Buddhist and Greek rebirth; Mills and Slobodin's (1994) edited volume of essays about reincarnation beliefs among North American Indians and Inuit, and Zivkovic's (2013) ethnographic monograph about death and reincarnation among Tibetan Buddhist communities in Darjeeling (Bernstein's 2013 ethnographic study of developments in Buddhism and sovereignty in post-Soviet Buryatia also devotes significant attention to reincarnation politics and kin-formation through rebirth but not exclusively). The extraordinary neglect of reincarnation by anthropologists has been explained both in terms of outsider fieldworkers' difficulty in even noticing its implicit salience as part of everyday life in non-Western, small-scale societies (Harkin 1994; Mills and Slobodin 1994) and in terms of the considerable challenge that it poses to "Cartesian Euro-rationality" and hegemonic (Western) understandings of the human life-cycle, temporality, and the child, and the "whole ideological edifice" of democratic capitalist societies (Gupta 1992).

⁷⁷ Biographer of the Great Fifth Samten Karmay (1988) notes how the Great Fifth's interest in Nyingma teachings and his relationship with the Nyingma master Zurchen Choying Rangdrol (1604 – 1669) deepened and "became somewhat conspicuous" in 1638, after the Great Fifth's full ordination at the age of twenty two (counting in the Tibetan fashion). The Dalai Lama was blocked, at least temporarily, from pursuing further education in Nyingma 'magic' by his strongly sectarian (Gelukpa-centric) treasurer/regent Sonam Chöpel (1595-1657), but Karmay observes that by this point, even with opposition, the Great Fifth saw such rites as "indispensable" (8). Ironically, Sonam Chöpel would later in 1640 insist that the Dalai Lama perform powerful aggressive rites (*drag las, las sbyor*) which he had learned from his Nyingma mentors in order to ensure the victory of his Mongol patron Gushri Khan's forces who were fighting on his/Sonam Chöpel's behalf against the army of the Kagyu supporting Tibetan King of Tsang. The hypocrisy of this request was not lost on the Dalai Lama, who protested that he knew no such rites and that his regent disapproved of them anyway. The Dalai Lama would eventually perform an elaborate version of such rites after consulting with ngakpa Choying Rangdrol.

⁷⁸ See Dreyfus (1998) who studied as a Geluk monk in McLeod Ganj in the 1970s, for a description of how many Geluk adherents resisted these ritual reforms. The Dalai Lama's advice against the spirit and reactions to it have precipitated considerable controversy and divisiveness in Tibetan communities both inside and outside of Tibet. For further details on the development of Shugden worship, see Dreyfus (1998). Anthropologist Martin Mills (2009) discusses how the blacklisting of the spirit has affected Geluk institutions in Ladakh; see Barnett (2014), Joffe (2015a), Kay (2007) and Mills (2003) for insights on reactions to the moratorium on the protector from predominantly non-Tibetan pro-Shugden converts to Tibetan Buddhism based predominantly in developed countries outside of Asia.

⁷⁹ Van der Kuijp (argues that the earliest written record of a Tibetan political ruler being recognized as an emanation or embodiment of a specific Bodhisattva or Buddhist deity is the mid-eleventh century 'Pillar Testament' (*bka' chems ka khol ma*), which purports to be a record of the activities of the seventh century King

Songtsen Gampo and which is supposed to have been revealed as a treasure text when the Indian master Atisha extracted it from a hole in a pillar in the Jowo Chapel in Lhasa. While van der Kuijp acknowledges that “equating Bodhisattvas with rulers was not new, neither in the Subcontinent nor in early Tibet,” he emphasizes that the idea that specific, identifiable Bodhisattvas could take on human form as political authorities was only firmly established and popularized in Tibet from the eleventh century onwards (Van der Kuijp 2005, 28).

⁸⁰ The Mani Kabum is an anthology of histories and practices connected with Chenrezig, portions of which were revealed by several different Tibetan treasure revealers across the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The text is said to have originally been written by King Songtsen Gampo, who is himself identified in the anthology as an emanation of the Bodhisattva. For more on the Mani Kabum’s composition, contents, and influence in Tibet see Alison Melnick and Christopher Bell, “The Mani Kabum,” University of Virginia Tibetan Renaissance Seminar, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://collab.its.virginia.edu/wiki/renaissanceold/Ma%E1%B9%87i%20Kambum.html> and Kapstein (1992).

⁸¹ For example, after being instructed by Buddha Shakyamuni on his death-bed in India to travel to “the snowy realm of Tibet in the North,” a forsaken place which has not yet even given rise to human beings, to “tame/discipline/civilize/train” beings there, Chenrezig emanates in the form of a mild-mannered monkey and comes to Tibet and ‘tames’ a ferocious, autochthonous flesh-eating “non-human crag demoness” (*mi ma yin pa’i brag srin mo*) by engaging in sexual intercourse with her. The hybrid children of the monkey-monster couple would later develop, with their parents’ help, into the first fully human and civilized Tibetans. As Melnick and Bell note, by presenting Tibet as Chenrezig’s “own field of Buddhist activity” and portraying Chenrezig as “the father of all Tibetans...and...Tibet’s patron deity, this myth engenders a powerful narrative of cultural unification in the wake of political decentralization” (see Melnick and Bell, “Mani Kabum”). See Joffe (2015c) for reflections on the ‘naturalization’ or ‘scientizing’ of this origin myth in secular educational materials for Tibetan school children in exile.

⁸² By referring to himself as Chenrezig’s *mgron gnyer* the Dalai Lama gently pushes back against total identification with Chenrezig and the ‘God-King’ status this might afford him, a move which aligns with the strategic devolution of political authority he himself has orchestrated in exile and which was formalized in 2011. Still, by using vocabulary associated with his own former religious-political administration (i.e. *mgron gnyer chen mo*, grand chamberlain to the Dalai Lama) to describe his own relationship to Lord Chenrezig, he nods at the same time to the ways in which religious authority and politics continue to intersect and overlap in diaspora.

⁸³ Untitled video excerpt uploaded as a public post by Sherab Dhargye on Facebook, March 27, 2019.

⁸⁴ Namkhai Norbu was himself recognized as the reincarnation of two of his own uncles’ guru. For more on these complexities, see *My Reincarnation* (Fox 2011), a documentary that explores Yeshe Silvano Namkhai’s complex relationship with his father and status as a tulku over the course of two decades.

⁸⁵ More literally, “string/chain of [incarnated] bodies”. In this metaphoric expression, each incarnation of a lama in a series of rebirths is likened to an individual bead strung on a *phreng ba* or rosary.

⁸⁶ There are said to be two primary spirit protectors of the Dalai Lama lineage. The ferocious tantric goddess Palden Lhamo (*dpal ldan lha mo*) is widely accepted as the “black protector” (*srung ma nag po*), whereas the identity of the red spirit-protector (*srung ma dmar po*) has been subject to some debate for several centuries. The Nechung oracle, i.e. the deity Dorje Drakden/Pehar (*rdo rje grags ldan/pe har*), the guardian of Tibet’s first monastery Samye who was placed in his position by Padmasambhava, came to be identified with the ‘red protector’ role during the time of the Great Fifth, following the establishment of his Ganden Potrang government. See Heller (1992) for more details on debates regarding the history and iconography of these deities.

⁸⁷ Tellingly, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche’s “nemesis”, a regional governor in Kham who was the father of the reincarnation of Tulku Urgyen’s guru Samten Gyatso, criticized Tulku Urgyen’s yogic proclivities in familiar terms. Feeling that Tulku Urgyen should take charge of managerial and income generating duties at his son’s monastery, he berated the ngakpa for his selfishness in wanting to focus on retreat. See Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche (2005, 287)

⁸⁸ ‘Wrong livelihood’ (*log tsho*) is a technical Buddhist term referring to ways of making a living not in accordance with Buddhist ethics. Its inverse, ‘right livelihood’, is one of the eight practices of the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path to liberation. In the Sutras, right livelihood for monastics generally means only living off of (appropriate types of) alms and maintaining a materially minimalist, ascetic lifestyle. The Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist master Nagarjuna lists five wrong approaches to livelihood for monastics: getting donations by pretending [i.e. to possess spiritual virtues one does not, *tshul chos*]; making a living off of buttering up or praising others (*kha gsag*); by indirectly soliciting the largesse of others (*gzhogs slong*); through blackmail or extortion (*thob kyi jal ba*); or through bribery, giving in order to receive (*nyed pas nyed pa dod pa*, Tibetan dictionary app 2019). The Anguttara Nikaya lists five types of wrong livelihood for lay Buddhists (trading in weapons, human trafficking, trading in intoxicating substances, trading in poisons and handling of animal flesh or killing of animals, trading in meat etc.). Legendary tantric Buddhist saints in Indian, however, are said to have engaged in many such sinful occupations, as a testament to their realization of non-duality.

⁸⁹ Bod mi mang spyi ‘thus lhan tshogs. “Btsan byol bod mi’i bca’ khirms.” Accessed October 22, 2019, <http://chithu.org/> བློ་མཁོ་ལྷན་པུ་ལྷན་གྱི་འཕེལ་བའི་བཅའ་.

⁹⁰ Earlier titles for the department testify to this connection, for e.g., in the 1970s the Department was known as *chos don las khung*, “the office of religious affairs”. More ‘secular’, cultural affairs once managed by the Department of Education (*shes rig las khung*) were later incorporated into the Department of Religion to produce the current Office/Department of Religion and Culture, *chos rig las khung*. Given that early iterations of the CTA administration and Department of Religion did not provide representation for Bönpo Tibetans, it might be more accurate to translate early iterations of the Department as the ‘Office of Dharma/Buddhism’ rather than ‘Religion’, as well. For more on Bönpo representation in the exile administration, see Kvaerne and Thargyal (1993)

⁹¹ Moreover, the Great Fifth also admits to having failed to identify the belongings of his predecessor when he was a child undergoing tulku testing, a fact his tutor would apparently remind him of in order to encourage him to study harder, see Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (2014).

⁹² The Great Oath was invoked again by Sikyong Lobsang Sangay during public celebrations held in McLeod Ganj at the Tsuglakhang on the 2nd of September 2018, during the 58th anniversary of the founding of the CTA/‘democracy in exile’ (*bod mi’i mang gso*). The Prime Minister admonished Tibetans around the world to remember the Great Oath and how His Holiness the Dalai Lama had enjoined them towards democracy and unity and noted that recent sad examples of regional and sectarian divisiveness or contentious ‘back-and-forths’ (*chol kha dang chos lugs kyi then khyer*) were not only harming internal Tibetan harmony and unity but also went completely against the Great Oath offered up to the Dalai Lama. See Nor wa’i bod kyi rlung ‘phrin khang, “Gong sa mchog gi dbu ‘og du phul ba’i mna’ gan mthu mo che’i dam bca’ bskyar dran byed dgos” [“We must Remember and Renew the Great Magical Oath that was Sworn to the Dalai Lama”]. September 2, 2018, <https://www.vot.org/> ལྷན་པུ་ལྷན་གྱི་འཕེལ་བའི་བཅའ་.

⁹³ Nida included this small poem as a sort of ‘palate cleanser’ between sections in a remote interview he participated in. See Joffe 2017a as well as Chapter Nine.

⁹⁴ The translators of the second book of Jigme Lingpa’s ‘Treasury of Precious Qualities’ explain that the initiating tantric lama (in this case whether a monk or a ngakpa) is described as a ‘perilous object [of reverence]’ “because any action, positive or negative, performed in respect of such a master, produces extreme results for good or ill” (Jigme Lingpa, 2013 [Kindle Edition], n.p.). The charismatic guru or upstanding monk is thus too exalted and imposing a figure to be imposed upon himself and to be made to stand as a juror.

⁹⁵ *Dug sbrul nag po sngags pa nus pa can gyi thabs rten ’brel gyi sgo nas mna’i nyes pa sel nus pas mna’ mir mi bsdu*, The other individuals who cannot give testimony are poor, hungry, destitute and greedy people – i.e. “black crows at which one shouldn’t throw stones” who will deny wrongdoing and ‘eat their oaths’ just to get their needs met; women – “bitches with litters not to be beaten with a stick,” who will ‘eat their oaths’ to protect their husband and children, see Cüppers (2013, 80).

⁹⁶ The five nectars (*bdud rtsi lnga*) refer to consecrated impure substances or sacraments (human urine, feces, brains/flesh, semen, and menstrual blood) which the scriptures of the non-dual Highest Yoga Tantra state vow-holders are required to consume in the context of tantric gatherings to testify to the fact that they can maintain a

state of blissful awareness free from dualistic conceptual categorizations or imputations of ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘pure’ or ‘impure’, ‘repulsive’ or ‘delightful’, and so on.

⁹⁷ An extensive genre of literature exists in Tibetan Buddhism that outlines how different types of practitioner, monastic and non-monastic, can uphold all three vows (*sdom pa gsum*) – i.e. Individual Liberator (so-called Hinayana or ‘lower vehicle’); Mahāyāna Bodhisattva vows, and Secret Mantra samaya vows – simultaneously. See Ngari Panchen Pema Wangyi Gyalpo and Dudjom Rinpoche (2015); Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltzen (2002); Sparham (2018).

⁹⁸ Indeed, Makley (2007, 244) translates *grwa log* and its synonym *ban log* (*ban de log pa*) as “fallen monk” to capture this parallelism, while Cabezón (2004) notes too that the *grwa log* ex-monk “has not only turned away from monasticism, he has also committed an error”. Likewise, discussing changing attitudes about monastic livelihoods and disrobing in Amdo, Caple (2011) cites a common Amdowa proverb that states that (just as) “a banlok is the lowest of all humans/A cow is the lowest of all animals”.

⁹⁹ Few comprehensive, good-quality ethnographic studies of sanjorpa and sanjorpa-exile-born Tibetan relations exist, but for more on this topic see Swank (2014) and Yeh (2007).

¹⁰⁰ In 2015, for example, as part of an intermediate English class I was teaching as a volunteer at an NGO in McLeod, I prepared some reading comprehension exercises based on a review of the documentary film “Tashi and the Monk” (Burke and Hinton 2014). The film details the charitable activities of an ex-monk named Lobsang Phuntsok from Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, India, who was born out of wedlock to a single mother and founded an orphanage after he (legitimately) returned his vows after studying and teaching Buddhism in India and abroad for several years. When I first translated “ex-monk/former monk” into Tibetan as *grwa log*, a significant portion of the room of about twenty five to thirty Tibetan and Bhutanese students gasped then chuckled audibly. As we all then discussed at some length, the word *grwa log* clearly had much less neutral charge than English terms like ‘ex’ or ‘former monk’. See Childs (2008, 165 - 167), however, for a discussion of evidence that the status of *grwa log* is becoming somewhat less controversial in exile.

¹⁰¹ As we shall see later, in the context of tantric Buddhist sexual yoga practices, the lines between celibate and non-celibate behaviors and subjectivities are somewhat blurry. Men and women who live as monks or nuns may subsequently enter into sexual relations with partners in order to develop certain capacities, extend their lifespan, discover *gter ma* treasures, and to realize the ‘empty bliss’ of Buddha-nature through the means of sensory desire, and so on. The extent to which it is possible for vow-holding monastics to engage in expedient, religiously sanctioned forms of sexual intercourse without contravening their vows of celibacy continues to be contentious and debated. Both Nida and the Dalai Lama suggest that monks practicing tantric sex while still living as monks constitutes a violation of their vows, but historically ostensible monastics have indeed engaged in high-level sexual yoga practices while publicly living as monks, see Jacoby (2010) and Note 38.

¹⁰² For some reflections on the historical, cultural, and political significance of the Dalai Lama’s visits to Tibetan Buddhist areas of Ladakh/Jammu-Kashmir, see the overview by Deboos (2015).

¹⁰³ As it happens, there did in fact exist a so called ‘monk-tax’ in Tibet (*grwa/btsun/ban khral*). This tax required tax-paying peasant households with three or more sons to send their second-oldest son to the monastic institution under whose authority they lived when the number of recruits there fell below a certain threshold. Despite the fact that this tax has often been cited as evidence of the far reach of monastic institutions into lay communities or the “despotic power” supposedly wielded by a ‘theocratic regime’ in pre-1950 Tibet, in a forthcoming article, Jansen demonstrates that this monk-tax was not always levied, nor levied uniformly across Tibet (Jansen, forthcoming). One wonders whether the Dalai Lama had historical practices of *grwa khral* in mind when making this statement. At any rate, his statements here frame contemporary, authentic monastic enrolment and commitment as being about individual choice and discipline, an emphasis that Childs (2008, 165 - 167) identifies as being increasingly characteristic of discourses surrounding monastic vocations in exile.

¹⁰⁴ *Skya min ser min* suggests the related Tibetan Buddhist category of the *ser kyim* (*pa*), or ‘yellow [clad, i.e. monastic] householder’. This is someone who “despite being adorned with monk’s clothes on the outside and having the appearance of having monastic vows, has a wife and children.” (Tibetan dictionary app, 2019). These individuals, who are also known as *khyim btsun* (householder monks) and *dbon po* (a term that also means the non-celibate nephew of a lama or chieftain, and is sometimes synonymous with ngakpa-astrologers in places

like Ladakh) have occasionally assembled in *ser khyim pa* ‘monasteries’ and have offered ritual services to communities which lack fully celibate, ordained monks (see one account in Dreyfus 2003, 83 -84, for example). Citing a thirteenth century monastic code of conduct that enjoins fully ordained monks to induce *ser khyim pa* in the vicinity of the monastery to retake their vows or be expelled from the monastic estate, Jansen (2018, 189) suggests that such practitioners were “in their earliest guise, a type of wayward or runaway monk”, i.e. *grwa log*. Nida points out that *ser khyim pa* are quite common today in post-Soviet countries and are a recognized and accepted class of practitioner that has emerged in the wake of Soviet suppression of institutionalized monasticism (cf. Chenagsang 2018, 90). *Ser khyim pa* should also be disambiguated from the similar sounding term *gser skyems pa* or ‘one who makes golden libation offerings [i.e. to protector spirits]’. This term refers to a specific class of tantric ritualist who specializes in making offerings to worldly, tutelary spirits in particular. As such, they are frequently ngakpa.

¹⁰⁵ According to the Great Dungkar dictionary *gser chos* can refer to “Buddhist texts written on dark blue paper with [ink made of] melted gold” (Tibetan dictionary app 2019).

¹⁰⁶ See Ser chos, “Sngags pa gos dkar lchang lo can gyi sde la bsngags pa’i gnam sprin gyi rol mo,” Kha brda, August 30 2009, <http://www.khabdha.org/?p=4178>.

¹⁰⁷ I am assuming here without confirmation that Serchö is a male writer. While he does not explicitly identify himself as male/a man in his post, his writing adopts an androcentric perspective typical of discussions of ngakpa and in no way suggests that he is writing from a women’s perspective.

¹⁰⁸ It is not uncommon for Tibetans to use the term *chos lugs* to mean ‘religion’ or ‘religious tradition, system’ in general, when describing Buddhadharma or the teachings of the Buddhas as one religious tradition among many others in the world. When asked in everyday conversation in Tibetan, “What is your *chos lugs*?” however, Tibetans may very well respond more specifically by describing which particular lineage or system of Tibetan Buddhist practice they follow. Nida himself advised me that when translating his Tibetan writings about the relationship between Buddhism and medicine I should translate *chos lugs* as “Buddhadharma” or “Buddhist tradition” etc. rather than in a more generic way as “religious tradition”.

¹⁰⁹ In a related vein, the Dalai Lama has also found himself occasionally playing the role of a relationship or marriage counsellor for young refugee Tibetans. For example, in a video that did the rounds on Facebook in May 2019, the Dalai Lama can be seen offering advice about marriage and relationships to a group of Tibetan adolescent school children in a settlement in India. He tells these schoolchildren not to rush into relationships or marriage based solely on “a pretty face” but advises them to take their time in getting to know potential partners. Getting married too quickly based merely on the sudden arising of desire is not advisable, he explains. Human lives are long, and potential partners should get to know each other over several years to develop stable, loving and harmonious relationships. Failure to do so results in divorce, he observes. He notes that if Tibetans marry foreigners it is also better that they marry ones with an interest or significant investment in Tibetan culture and describes his conversations with a female Christian priest/pastor (*ye shu’i bla ma*) and marriage counselor about the importance of taking one’s time with marriage. See <https://www.facebook.com/jigme.chokdrup/videos/2321154037936773/>, accessed October 22, 2019, my thanks to Dawa Lokyitsang for alerting me to this video.

¹¹⁰ This prophecy is entitled “The Prophecy which Illuminates the Future’ (*ma ’ongs lung bstan gsal byed*) and exists in several published and unpublished editions. Because of the ambiguity involved in Tibetan *rab byung* or sixty year calendrical cycles, some individuals seem to believe that events referred to in this text have not yet happened (see Cassidy 2015, for example).

¹¹¹ *Dmag zlog* and similar exorcistic tantric rites designed to repel ‘enemies of the faith’ (*bstan dgra*) hinge upon a crucial equivalence or even conflation between demonic and foreign occupation, see Gentry (2010).

¹¹² In 2015, while walking in the street early one evening in McLeod, I ran into Tashi, the former secretary of the Tibet Office in South Africa where I’d interned in 2009 as part of my Masters fieldwork. We caught up and I filled her in about my current research. When I told her that I was investigating ngakpa lineages in exile, her eyes widened. She glanced queasily at my hairstyle at the time. My hair was closely shaved on the back and sides, with over twenty inches of uncut top-of-the-head hair rolled into a ridiculous bun which I positioned at the

front of my head and which friends and I had with time come to call my “magical hair croissant” or cinnabon (I later started referring to it as *ting mo'i skra*, or “round Tibetan steamed bun hair” with Tibetan friends). I had developed the signature look well before becoming interested in ngakpa and while the hair croissant had nothing to do with being a ngakpa, it was vaguely reminiscent of Tibetan tantric yogic top knots (*thor cog*). I opted to keep my hair this way while in the field as a provocation and it did indeed succeed in inciting interesting conversations about hair, appearance, interpretive frameworks, and religious affiliations. I always explained to those who asked that it was a personal style, however, and had no special religious meaning. “Please, don’t become an inji ngakpa!” Tashi blurted out with alarm. “That’s not good – it’s something very special, for very special yogis!” she explained. I assured her I was there to do research and not become a Tibetan ngakpa and she then took me to dinner.

¹¹³ Very simply, the overarching Buddhist ontological principle which posits that all things arise in dependence on other things, which are themselves ultimately devoid of any independently existing, enduring essence. All apparent phenomena are compounded and conditioned and arise in dependence on yet other compounded, and conditioned phenomena. Interdependent origination points to the fact that whatever exists is the result of multiple causes, factors, and conditions which conspire together to produce particular results. As a basic fact of existence, *rten 'brel* serves to explain how all and any conditioned phenomena work or function in general. That said, in Tibetan contexts *rten 'brel* has come to be associated in particular with auspicious or supportive “karmic conditions or connections”, joyous arisings (to “convey/report *rten 'brel*, *rten 'brel zhu ba*, means “to congratulate”), and fated or ominous alignments. It is also a key concept in Tibetan theories of ritual efficacy and magic, see Joffe (2016f) and Note 118 below.

¹¹⁴ “Hair empowerment” (*skra dbang*) or *ral dbang* (dreadlocks empowerment) refers to specific empowerment procedures which often appear as part of cycles of empowerments for particular yidam (the handful of inji ngakpa who claimed to have received it who I quizzed about it had mostly received it as part of empowerments for *khros ma nag mo*/Krodhikālī yidam practices). Different *skra dbang* include different stipulations but in general such empowerments point out the divine nature of practitioners’ hair and its status as a kind of tendrel and typically require that practitioners pledge to never cut their hair after the empowerment is granted. Hair that falls out of its own accord is treated as a sacred substance endowed with blessings – since it is understood to be the actual abode of Dakinis it is not to be disposed of carelessly or disrespectfully. Very little research of any kind has been conducted on Tibetan *skra/ral dbang* Nicholas Sihlé’s excellent anthropological analysis of ngakpa hair culture in Rebkong (Sihlé 2018b) represents a notable exception. Drawing on textual and ethnographic evidence, Sihlé observes that *ral dbang* as conducted in Rebkong are connected with multiple yidam and empowerment cycles. He notes that Rebkong ngakpa did not always understand having merely received *ral dbang* as obliging them to immediately begin cultivating dreadlocks. Sihlé also makes it clear that on-the-ground interpretations of the nature of the ceremony (which he prefers to gloss as a “hair consecration” rather than hair empowerment or initiation) and its concomitant ritual obligations were varied and sometimes contradictory. I observed Nida, who never cuts his hair but does regularly wash and brush it, collect the hair from his brush and give it to Christiana to place in a statue or on a shrine for Yutok, and a married Aro gTér lama couple I befriended in Kathmandu who live in England told me that they typically collect fallen hair and use it to stuff pillows. For more on the ontology of hair as materially powerful among Tibetan and South Asian ascetics, see Hausner (2007); Obeyesekere (1984); Ramberg (2009); and Sihlé (2018b).

¹¹⁵ Nyingma monk Lama Sonam Tashi, the current president of the Nyingma gumpa Dundul Raptenling (*bdud 'dul rab brtan gling*) in Odisha, India (a prominent center for Nyingma ngakpa and monastics) notes that “during the exodus of Tibetan Refugees into India in the 1960’s, HH Dudjom Rinpoche (the head of the Nyingma lineage at that time), ordered all the yogis and Ngakpa’s to take out their dreadlocks and keep their hair combed and tied back. This was due to the fact that they were having trouble adjusting to India’s humidity and sanitation and epidemics of head lice were rampant.” He goes on to note that some ngakpa from Tibet refused this concession and opted to maintain their vows which prohibited that they cut their hair for the rest of their lives (see, “Dundun Raptenling,” Dudjom Tersar Odisha, accessed October 15, 2019, <http://duddulraptenling.blogspot.com/>).

¹¹⁶ Nida also offers a historical defense for this practice, see Nyi zla he ru ka and ye shes sgrol ma (2015, 101).

¹¹⁷ See Ngakpa Chögyam (2012 [Kindle edition]) for the Aro gTér founder's recollections about crafting make-shift, less than glamorous tantric ritual implements out of old flattened tin cans cut with scissors (n.p.).

¹¹⁸ Ngakpa Kunzang Dorje Rinpoche made these statements as part of an oral discourse about ngakpa practice and history which he gave in 1999 in Yangleshö (*yang le shod*, i.e. Parphing) in Nepal upon the request of some disciples. It was translated into English (although I'm not sure exactly by whom) with the assistance of ngakpa/lopön Ogyan Tandzin in 2004 and has circulated around the internet since then. Enrico Kosmus, who hosts a full English translation on his blog ("An Historic Description of Awareness Holders of the Great Secret Mantra who are Resplendent in White Clothes and Long Hair," Rangdrol's blog, June 13 2012, <https://enricokosmus.com/2012/06/13/an-historic-description-of-awareness-holders-of-the-great-secret-mantra-who-are-resplendent-in-white-clothes-and-long-hair/>) was not sure where the original Tibetan transcription could be found (Enrico Kosmus, personal communication, 26th July 2019).

¹¹⁹ Mirroring Dhondup's comments, I noticed that while several non-Tibetan men at Lama Wangdu's Chöd wang in Topanga in 2019 sported full ngakpa robes and dreadlocks, none of the Tibetan attendees did.

¹²⁰ Ngakpa Tom, personal communication, 3rd December 2015.

¹²¹ See details in Chapter Nine.

¹²² The first survey came out in 1998 a decade after the initial establishment of the Planning Commission. A third survey was conducted in 2018, but findings do not appear to have been published yet.

¹²³ The survey defines a household in terms of commensality: "a household is a group of persons who regularly live together and take their meals from a common kitchen unless exigencies of work prevent any one of them from doing so". It also makes a distinction between "normal households" and "institutional households". The former is comprised of "persons related or unrelated by blood or combinations thereof" whereas the latter is defined as being "formed exclusively of unrelated individuals for example, school homes/dormitories; monasteries, etc." This distinction highlights the extent to which both secular and religious educational institutions are understood through idioms of kinship in Tibetan, and especially Tibetan exile contexts (cf. Lokyitsang 2014; Nowak 1984; Mills 2000).

¹²⁴ In a related vein, those comprising the initial population of sponsored exile Tibetan refugee immigrants to the United States were expected to serve as pioneer 'cultural ambassadors', to "raise the voice of Tibetan freedom and independence, be a force to make the [world] aware of what is happening to the Tibetan people in Tibet' and develop communities that represent authentic expression[s] of Tibetan Culture" (CTA publication, 1992, as cited by Yeh and Lama, 2006, 813; see also Hess 2009).

¹²⁵ While broadly speaking the colloquial term *'khyams 'khyams 'gro ba* simply means to 'go on a stroll, to wander around,' it has much more specific and charged cultural connotations in the context of inter-generational and gender relations in exile. Swank (2014) relates how older Tibetans in McLeod Ganj repeatedly warned her and young Tibetans she knew (especially young Tibetan women) about the dangers of *'khyams 'khyams*. She notes how advice about curtailing roaming about away from home to pass time with friends dispensed by older authority figures "suggests alternate activities, most often staying at home or engaging in pursuits that serve the Tibetan community in some way". Moreover, such discourses "create expectations of what actions are appropriate for Tibetans, leaving youth with the tricky task of balancing the desire to *kyamkyam* (and thus hang out with friends) and to meet the expectations of their elders and community" (11).

¹²⁶ While killing time in a coffee shop in Majnu ka Tilla, the Tibetan settlement in Old Delhi, waiting for a bus in November 2015, I started chatting with and ended up sharing lunch with some monks who came in. These monks, some of whom were Tibetan and some of whom were from Spiti and Lahaul district in India, helped me understand the usefulness of having Himalayan recruits in high or at least administrative positions in monasteries. The monks explained that they were traveling to Nepal as part of an important, large scale scriptural publication project for their monastery. Himalayan monks were often selected for this sort of work because they possessed Indian passports, whereas exile born and *gsar 'byor pa* Tibetan refugees often only had RC or annually renewed Refugee Certificates, which made border crossing difficult.

¹²⁷ Boarding schools as surrogate child-care institutions originally developed in the early years of exile when Tibetan parents were forced to eke out an existence working on grueling road-building projects and had no way of providing adequate care for children themselves. While the continued preference for boarding school education into the present can be partly explained by the prevalence of migrant livelihoods (seasonal sweater-selling etc.) in exile and the need to free up parents' time for economic pursuits (Childs 2008), this does not account for why even parents with sedentary occupations who live only a short distance from exile Tibetan schools still regularly opt to send their children away as boarders, despite finding concomitant restrictions on contact with children emotionally taxing and distressing. It would thus seem that parents believe that boarding school education can provide crucial forms of moral and intellectual discipline needed by their children which are in short or unreliable supply at home.

¹²⁸ Ngakpa Tom, personal communication, 5th of December 2015.

¹²⁹ This is of course an idealized representation. Young Tibetans in Rebkong face their own pressures to pursue secular professionalization in the very different context of occupied Tibet, via state-recognized and mandated Chinese-medium education. Attending both local Tibetan medium and Chinese medium schools further afield can mean more time away from home and fewer opportunities for religious training and mentoring. In August 2016 while in Rebkong to visit Nida's temple – the ngakkhang developed by Rigdzin Palden Tashi, the founder of the Rebkong ngakmang who Nida was recognized as a reincarnation of as a child – I sat with Nida and a few of his other students on the roof of the temple, besides the locked room that served as the temple's *mgon khang* or protector chapel. Several other more physically able, intrepid students on our medical/pilgrimage tour had left the ngakpa village on a small hike to a set of ancient and holy retreat caves atop a neighboring hill/small mountain, hauling oxygen tanks with them. I had decided to stay behind on the roof with Nida and a few others. As I sat on the ground at the foot of the white plastic chair on which he was sitting, Nida shared with us how some of the senior ngakpa in the ngakmang had recently expressed their disapproval of ngakpas' children attending the large, now mostly annual collective tantric rituals during which ngakpa from various ngakkhang in the region gathered (see Halkias 2018 and Sihlé 2013). These older lamas had said that the children should not be there since they were not properly trained and incapable of chanting and were thus a nuisance and distraction. Nida disagreed. These "baby ngakpa" didn't know how to chant because no one had given them the opportunity to learn, he said. It did not make sense that older ngakpa simultaneously complained about young men from the community going off to Chinese cities to seek jobs and forsaking hereditary vocations as ngakpa while also wanting to ban children from group rituals. Nida explained that from his side, he welcomed kids at these events, trained or not, and felt that this was a positive step towards ensuring cultural-religious preservation. Watching how Nida also encouraged slightly older lay Tibetans, doctors and students in their twenties and thirties who we interacted with during our trip, giving them copies of his Tibetan language mantra healing book and encouraging them to take a greater personal interest in tantric Buddhism and yogic practice, I got the impression that Nida was quite broadly committed to promoting ngakpa orientations among younger people. Since then, Nida has also encouraged Daya, an Iranian-American acupuncturist and student of his, to develop an official 'Sorig Kids' space and program where she currently lives in Washington State. This kids program aims to introduce pre-teens to the practice of Tibetan yoga, medicine and medicine in fun and accessible ways.

¹³⁰ Over the years, however, through the many photographs that Ngakpa Dawa regularly shares on his Facebook page, I have noticed Ngakpa Dawa's son assisting him on a regular basis with the making of special *gtor ma* or sacrificial offering cakes and effigies which his father and his ngakpa colleagues use in routine and more once-off commissioned ceremonies. His son has also occasionally joined him on his international teaching trips and pilgrimage tours. Thus, even if his son is not training intensively as a ngakpa or doing extended retreat practice at present, father-to-son transmission is far from non-existent or negligible in Ngakpa Dawa's case.

¹³¹ At one point in 2016, Choezom asked if I could do a Tarot card reading for her to find out whether the source of a bout of depression and complete lack of motivation she was then experiencing – the feeling that her mind and spirit was "all clogged" – was linked to her having possibly been cursed by a former friend or former friend's relative, or something else. Chatting with her about her concerns before I did the reading, I asked Choezom if she seen a psychologist, psychiatrist, or possibly any Tibetan lamas about her problems. She explained that she had no money for a psychiatrist and did not want to consult with any lamas. Notwithstanding the fact that they were diviners from her own community and cultural context, she told me (in English) that she

did not “really connect with them well” and could not “speak the language they speak”. She had not really known who was best to approach about her situation, so she had reached out to me.

¹³² See “lesson one,” YouTube Video, 15:56, Esukhia Dralam, March 27 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfDIF6QB4dY&list=PLE4Qp1yJgMV3VyumMv84JPJmHTkJTscAT&index=18>, for subtitled recordings of the 2007 teachings held at the Upper TCV school in Dharamsala.

¹³³ One example of a Tibetan lama who has recently begun producing innovative, engaging (and often quite hilarious!) Tibetan-medium introductory educational resources on Buddhism explicitly pitched at Tibetan and other Himalayan ‘heritage Buddhists’ is Avikrita Vajra Rinpoche (1993 –), a hereditary lineage-holder in the Sakya school. For one example, see “What is Refuge? – Avikrita Vajra Rinpoche,” YouTube video, 14:39, Sakya Manjushri, June 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24mqE3f865A>. Avikrita Vajra Rinpoche has also organized in-person workshops for Buddhist teens in the United States (cf. “H.E. Avikrita Vajra Sakya Rinpoche,” Sakya Heritage Society, accessed October 15, 2019, <http://www.sakyaheritage.org/AboutUs/avi.html>).

¹³⁴ Dreyfus notes that Nyingma practitioners and curricula are less concerned with the separation of Tantra and Sutra but observes notes that while commentaries on key tantric scriptures are studied in the final years of exile Nyingma *bshad grwa* programs, in-depth study of tantric scriptures remains something that is done privately. Dreyfus argues that for the Geluk and Sakya “tantric practices should ideally be restricted to preserve their esoteric and secret character, whereas the Nyingma tradition is more concerned with integrating these two domains and understands the restriction on tantras as concerning mainly the more secret practices of the Great Perfection” (2003, 119).

¹³⁵ See Tsenzhab Serkong Rinpoche “The Geluk Monastic” for further information about tantric training in the Geluk context. IBD currently offers a two year post-graduate tantric training program as part of its curriculum, see “Educational Programs,” Institute of Buddhist Dialectics Dharamsala, accessed October 19, 2019, <http://ibd.instituteofbuddhistdialectics.org/educational-programs/>.

¹³⁶ Havnevik, Byambaa, and Bareja-Starzynska (2007) note that the practice of Chöd is prohibited inside Geluk monasteries in Mongolia as well, although individual monks practice it in their own time away from the monastic institutions. Bernstein’s Buryat Geluk monk informant reported to her that he and other monks at Drepung monastery in South India would occasionally practice ‘bed chöd’, “a semi-silent recitation while lying in bed (Tib. *nyal gcod*)” as a workaround, however (2013, 161).

¹³⁷ Chöd is also known as the ‘accumulating practice of the Kusali/Kusulu beggar’, i.e. the method for accumulating merit and wisdom suited to wandering, naked ascetics who forsake all possessions and thus have no access to the ornate stacked metal mandala dishes, precious stones, rice grains and so on, usually given as part of mandala offering practices in Tibetan Buddhism. To give up one’s entire body and being is nonetheless conceived of as an especially rarified offering, a more supreme or sublime one than any outer material donation. Kusali Chöd is thus understood to be a sort of ‘inner mandala offering’ (Dahl 2010). See Bernstein (2013) for an interesting discussion of Buryat women’s practice of Chöd ‘body offering’ in light of anthropological theories of gift-exchange.

¹³⁸ See David-Néel (1971) and Joffe (2015b) for a sense of popular Tibetan fears and fascinations regarding the potentially deadly consequences of Chöd practice.

¹³⁹ One major sign of success in this practice is the reopening of the fontanelle point in the skull such that a stalk of grass can be inserted into the hole. For an account of such processes in pre-1950s Tibet see David-Néel (1971); such effects continue to be reported among contemporary practitioners as well (Kapstein 1998).

¹⁴⁰ In the comment thread of a public Facebook post about his book on Tibetan tantric yoga that he shared on the 6th of June 2019, in response to a question about which of the Six Yogas of Naropa practitioners may best train in first, Baker cites the view of the Bhutanese lama Tulku Tenzing, according to which “Powa is the most “open” of all of the Six Yogas, and thus should be taught first...[since] successful completion of Powa, i.e. opening the central channel, makes the subsequent practice of Tsaloong and Tummo more effective”. For a first-hand account of the revival of a Drikung Kagyu public Powa transmission tradition in Tibet in 1992, see Kapstein (1998); for more on ‘common’ Powa procedures aimed at practitioners with little to no prior

experience in tantric meditation, see Bayer (2013). The relative ‘openness’ of Powa no doubt has to do with the exceedingly democratic nature of death and fear of death – it hardly seems coincidental that across the Buddhist world, practices aimed at securing rebirth in various so-called ‘pure lands’ (*dag pa’i zhing khams*, *dag zhing* in Tibetan) – prime locations for spiritual practice in order to attain Buddhahood in future rebirths – have consistently become tied up with popular mass movements among the laity. Kapstein (1998) suggests that the historical transmission of the Drikung Kagyu ‘penetrating with the stalk’ (*pho ba ’jag zug ma*) to broader Tibetan publics and demonstration/conferral of tantric expertise allowed the masses to directly participate in the charisma of the Drikung Kagyu lineage, thereby shoring up the lineage’s authority during a time of intense hostilities between the central Geluk government and various Kagyu lineages. For an ethnographic account of the popularization of Powa practices among lay exile Tibetans in Switzerland in the 1980s, see Brauen-Dolma (1985); see also Bayer (2013) for a refutation of Brauen-Dolma’s interpretation of the ecstatic dimensions of these practices as betokening a kind of ‘millennialist crisis cult’.

¹⁴¹ Bernstein (2013) notes that lay, female Buryat *gcod pa* training in McLeod Ganj trained for several years indoors, in group settings before seeking their guru’s blessing to practice an extended wandering, ‘terrifying places’ retreat alone. That said, many Tibetan and non-Tibetan Chöd trainees I know will still regularly practice outside in isolated natural spaces, cemeteries, holy places and so on, despite not yet being stable enough in the practice to undertake an extensive, long-term solitary retreat.

¹⁴² In her analysis of lay Bhutanese women’s participation in Black Throema Chöd practice, Pommaret (2015) incorrectly identifies Dudjom Rinpoche as Dudjom Lingpa’s biological son.

¹⁴³ Pommaret (2015) quotes Keith Dowman’s translation of a revealed auto-hagiography of Yeshe Tsogyal (cf. Dowman 1984) to affirm Garab Dorje’s contemporary position that while male and female practitioners are equally capable of practicing tantric yoga yoginis with strong aspiration have “higher potential”. She does this without clarifying how Garab Dorje Rinpoche’s statements are related to this citation, however. Bernstein (2013) notes that explanations from Buryat practitioners as to why Chöd is so popular among women range from the historical (it was developed by a yogini); the sociological (it is more accessible, attractive to women because it is non-monastic etc.); to the ontological (women are inherently or naturally more giving/compassionate, it is easier for women to visualize themselves as a female Buddha etc.).

¹⁴⁴ Besides Dunge Garab Rinpoche, many other students (mostly ngakpa disciples) of Dudjom Rinpoche have set up their own centers and have done much to disseminate and promote the practice of the Dudjom Tersar. In the U.S. Chagdud Tulku, Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, Shenphen Dawa Rinpoche, Namgay Dawa Rinpoche and their students have established various formalized programs for Tersar study and practice.

¹⁴⁵ The association’s YouTube channel shows members performed the Black Throema tsok practice as a group to bless a newly built house and engaging in Dharma center building and development projects in various locations in Bhutan. For a practitioner-produced magazine with practitioner testimonies, words of praise for Garab Dorje Rinpoche, and reports on community-building activities performed by the association, see Dorji Khandu, “Dudjom Krodikali Association Magazine,” online Issuu magazine, 78 pp., November 16, 2017, https://issuu.com/dorjikhandu/docs/final_print_2816th_20november_29.

¹⁴⁶ “Students learning Throema,” YouTube video, 2:17, Krodikali Association Bhutan, August 9 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQ_O2WzO2Q0&feature=share.

¹⁴⁷ For Lama Wangdu’s memoirs and more on the lineages he holds, see Tsering Wangdu (2008). The Longchen Nyingtik (*klong chen snying thig*) terma cycle was revealed to the treasure revealer Jigme Lingpa (1729 – 1798) between 1757 and 1759 and was made public and transmitted to students in 1764 (Tulku Thondup 1999). It includes a Chöd practice as part of its *sngon* ‘gro preliminaries. While Lama Wangdu’s primary personal Chöd practices are from Jigme Lingpa’s terma tradition and from the transmitted oral (*bka’ ma*) teachings from Machik Labrön as preserved in the *tshogs las rin chen ’phreng ba*, he is also recognized as a major living lineage holder of Dampa Sangye’s *zhi byed* lineage. Sarah Harding claim that “there do not seem to be actual practitioners [of *zhi byed*] at this point” (see Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye 2009, 255) although Dhondup assured me when I confronted him with this claim that Lama Wangdu not only holds but also practice *zhi byed* lineage practices and that various texts exist. Still, there seems to be considerable uncertainty among Tibetan and non-Tibetan Chöd practitioners as to what *zhi byed* practices actually consist of and what their exact historical relationship to Machik’s Chöd may be.

¹⁴⁸ In what follows I use ‘Karmamudrā’/Karmamudrā practice’ as a shorthand for tantric Buddhist sexual yoga practice(s) more generally. In doing so, I follow Dr Nida’s own tendencies when speaking and writing in English. Although the Sanskrit term karmamudrā and its Tibetan translation *las kyi phyag rgya* refer more properly to the physical (*las kyi*, i.e. ‘karmic’, ‘worldly’) partner with whom one engages in sexual yoga and not the practice of sexual yoga itself, Nida and other practitioners communicating in languages other than Tibetan have taken to using the term to refer to sexual yoga more broadly.

¹⁴⁹ *Rgyo ba*, a colloquial term for having sexual intercourse, is a close equivalent to ‘to fuck’ in English. Adams (2005) situates it at “the far extreme” of everyday Central Tibetan sexual lexicons, explaining that she was told during her field research in Lhasa in the 1990s that *rgyo ba* was “a common term for sex [meaning] to ravish, implying an act that is morally bereft, vulgar, or obscene, derived from the phrase *rgyo brgyab*, which means literally “to throw” or “fling” or “beat” when put together with *rgyo*, which perhaps is best glossed as the English term “fuck.” (218). Di Valerio (2011) translates *rgyo ba* as ‘screw’ in the context of the mad saint of Tsang, Tsangnyön Heruka’s tantric yogic displays of social impropriety towards a queen, 162). Lelung’s use of the term throughout his text in place of more common technical terms or euphemisms for sexual intercourse is meant to be striking, provocative. It also fits with Lelung’s stated intention of providing instructions “in free prose and using vernacular language” that “will be easy for our [Vajra] brothers and sisters who have entered onto the path of Secret Mantra but who lack wisdom and have little experience to understand”. When I discussed the term and its possible translations with Dr Nida he acknowledged *rgyo ba*’s coarse connotations and Lelung’s overall informality and levity. Still, he felt that ‘fucking’ had a somewhat harsher feel in English compared to *gyo ba* in Tibetan and felt that English readers would be too scandalized and the text’s profound teachings would lose too much credibility if we reproduced the original register too closely. He thus suggested that in any translation we might produce for practitioners, I simply translate the term as ‘to have sex’. In my translations here I alternate between glossing *rgyo ba* as ‘to fuck’ and ‘to have sex’ to encourage readers to stay with and remain mindful of these tensions.

¹⁵⁰ ‘The Elixir Extraction of the Sun and Moon Path of Means [i.e. Karmamudrā Practice] and Lineage Supplication Prayer Bestowed as a Pure Vision by the Sole Goddess Youthful Sun’ (*lha gcig nyi ma gzhon nus dag snang du stsal ba’i thabs lam nyi zla’i bcud len dang brgyud ‘debs*, see Bzhad pa’i rdo rje 1983). See Chenagtsang (2018, 286 – 293) for an English translation.

¹⁵¹ See Bailey (2017) for a fuller discussion of Nyima Zhönnu’s history and her promotion from a minor, local protector deity to a major figure in Lelung Rinpoche’s ritual corpus.

¹⁵² See Wallis (2013) and White (2006), two Sanskritists and professional textualist scholars of classical Non-dual Śaiva Tantra who have pushed back against strongly against sexualized, neo-tantric misrepresentations of classical Indian Tantra. For an excellent analysis of the politics of Tantra’s multifarious discursive meanings over time and space, and the role of Orientalism and colonialism in shaping popular ideas about Tantra, see Phil Hine, “Tantra’s Metahistory III – The Left-Hand Path I”, *Enfolding*, June 17, 2010, <http://enfolding.org/tantras-metahistory-iii-the-left-hand-path-i/>) and Urban (2003).

¹⁵³ This characterization has the benefit of being an emic one in the context of Tibetan Buddhism. A number of schemes exist in Tibetan Buddhist contexts for understanding Tantra’s place in the overall scheme of Mahāyāna Buddhism. That said, I have yet to encounter any native practitioner of Vajrayāna who thinks of the methods and commitments of Vajrayāna as separate from the wider ambit of Mahāyāna Buddhism. See below for further discussion of how Tibetans have understood the relationship between tantric and non-tantric expressions of Buddhism.

¹⁵⁴ These are listed in descending order of importance or influence of Tantric innovations on each religion.

¹⁵⁵ For a thorough assessment of tantric Buddhists’ borrowing of elements from Śaiva Tantra in the context of the distinctly non-dual, antinomian Vajrayāna Yoginitantras which developed in the eighth century, see Sanderson (2009). For a more general survey of historical interactions between Śaiva and Buddhist tantric practitioners and texts see Wallis (2016b). While Śaiva tantric practitioners did borrow from Buddhist sources, the flow of influence during the tantric Buddhism’s heyday in India was overwhelmingly unidirectional. That said, Mallinson and Singleton’s recent research demonstrating that Haṭha Yoga practices in India were possibly

first formalized in a Vajrayāna milieu (Mallinson and Singleton 2017) makes it clear that cross-fertilizations between Buddhist and non-Buddhist Tantra are nonetheless quite complex.

¹⁵⁶ Wallis opts for Sanskrit terminology in line with his specialization, but all terms mentioned in his list have exact or close Tibetan equivalents.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Root tantra’ texts (*rtsa rgyud* in Tibetan) – ‘primary tantric scriptures – in particular are understood to be the utterances of various Buddhas, but given that high-levels of spiritual realization or attainment, i.e. complete or near Buddhahood, are a commonly stated prerequisite for tantric scriptural exegesis in Vajrayāna, commentarial materials are not infrequently associated with ‘divine revelation’ as well. For more on the complexities of tantric “commentarial authority” as navigated in the life and writings of the celebrated fourteenth century tantric scriptural exegete Je Tsongkhapa, see Gray (2009).

¹⁵⁸ Key procedures of these different yogas were already present in various major Vajrayāna scriptures composed prior to the eleventh century. The six Dharmas or doctrines practices represent a codification and synthesis of Completion Stage subtle body practices from a range of scriptural sources. Initially transmitted orally by masters in India, these instructions were subsequently organized into written form by Tibetan scholar-practitioners who inherited them.

¹⁵⁹ This ‘royal investiture’ type of empowerment is one of the earliest attested in tantric texts featuring initiation. This stage or level of initiation captures the martial, imperial qualities of the feudal context in which Indian esoteric texts were composed, see Davidson (2002).

¹⁶⁰ This four-fold model of initiation is associated with the Sarma schools and their particular scriptures and typologies of Highest Yoga Tantra. In the Nyingma context, older tantric scriptures and commentaries present a diverse range of initiatory systems, number and sequence of empowerments, and so on. Major tantras of the Nyingma school like the Guhyagarbha Tantra and *dgongs pa'i 'dus pa'i mdo*, include versions of the first and second empowerments as found in the Sarma framework. The earliest explicit textual articulation of the four empowerments appears to be in the Uttarantra, which was appended to the Guhyasamaja Tantra probably sometime in the ninth century. Dalton (2004) argues that the need for the third empowerment where initiates practiced the sexual rite their guru had just performed themselves may “reflect the growing complexity of the ritual technologies associated with the practice” (23). He suggests that “the complexity of these new bodily technologies [i.e. involving formalized subtle body systems of channels, chakras, winds, and drops etc.] may have made it necessary for the student to perform the sexual practice under the teacher’s supervision before being sent out to practice alone”. Over the centuries, there has been some debate among scriptural exegetes about what the so-called ‘fourth empowerment’ was originally intended to involve. While today this empowerment has come to entail the guru verbally explaining or symbolically demonstrating the ultimate nature, Dalton (2004) makes a further case that this fourth stage may have previously involved initiates consuming their own sexual fluids after the conclusion of the third empowerment.

¹⁶¹ It is clear that prominent Indian tantric Buddhist exegetes were aware of the fact that Kaula Śaiva non-Buddhists also engaged in soteriological consumption of sexual fluids. In his commentary on the Chakrasamvara Tantra, for example, the tenth century Indian monk-abbot Bhavyakirti justifies ritual engagement in transgressive behaviors as part of initiation and *sādhana* practice provided ritualists deploy such behavior “skillfully” (*thabs dang bcas*) with an intention to liberate all beings and with a thorough understanding that all phenomena are empty, i.e. lack an intrinsic essence. His hypothetical opponent responds that if this were so, then even *rigs ldan* (i.e. Kaula) heretics – who do equivalent practices – would also obtain liberation. The abbot takes the ritual parallels between Śaiva tantrists and Vajrayanist practices as a given but donning his doxographical polemicist hat, clarifies that Kaula practitioners cannot gain liberation through these methods since as non-Buddhists they “do not see the ultimate lack of essence in phenomena [i.e. emptiness] and...commit antinomian acts with the perverse view of ‘I’ and ‘mine’” thereby guaranteeing rebirth in the hell realms (cf. Szanto 2010, 290 -291).

¹⁶² Davidson (2002) represents transgressive sexual initiation innovations in Indian esoteric Buddhism as originating in communities that formed around disorganized, charismatic siddha saints who operated primarily outside of monastic institutional structures. These practices were then incorporated and ‘domesticated’ by monastic elites. Arguing against this position, Wedemeyer (2014) contends that the most non-dual transgressive

practices of what Tibetans would later label Highest Yoga Tantra scriptures were developed and practiced primarily by monastic elites from within the ambit of monastic institutions. This argument emerges as part of Wedemeyer's larger critique of the way in which tantric transgression has consistently been rhetorically positioned by Western commentators as erupting from outside of mainstream Buddhist philosophy and praxis and socio-educational institutions.

¹⁶³ Szanto (2010) also shows that by tenth century there was a consistent argument in place among monastic Vajrayāna exegetes for the superiority of monk preceptors as initiating tantric gurus over and above ngakpa ones.

¹⁶⁴ I heard Nida ask this trick question while listening to and transcribing audio recordings of the teachings he gave in Amsterdam as part of my work putting together, translating and rewriting material for Nida's English language Karmamudrā book. I reworked this demonstration into the final text (see Chenagtsang 2018, 176 - 177). Nida's point about how frequently even people who have apparently received wang do not understand what has been given to them, especially when it comes to the third wisdom empowerment that lays out the sexual yoga practice of how to drip down the subtle energy 'drops' (*thig le*) into the chakras to give way to ever-increasing non-dual bliss-emptiness (*bde stong dbyer med*), was driven home for me during a podcast interview I did for the Imperfect Buddha Podcast in 2018 to discuss my work on the Karmamudrā book. When I explained that Tibetan wang originally included literal tantric sex and the consumption of sexual fluids and that sexual yoga was a central component of empowerment transmissions, the host was surprised and exclaimed that he thought this would be "shocking or surprising" to most of the show's listeners (cf. Ben Joffe, "Sex, Desire and Karmamudrā with Ben Joffe," interview with Matthew O'Connell, The Imperfect Buddha Podcast, podcast audio, June 2 2018, <https://player.fm/series/post-traditional-buddhism-podcast/ep-161-imperfect-buddha-sex-desire-karmamudrā-with-ben-joffe>).

¹⁶⁵ I assume White means coitus reservatus here. Coitus interruptus, also known as "the pull-out method," indicates neither seminal retention nor extended lovemaking. It implies simply that the penetrating partner pulls out and ejaculates outside of their partner's body. This need not have anything to do with abundant, extended, or ecstatic mystical orgasms.

¹⁶⁶ The pure vision *bcud len* teaching on which Lelung Rinpoche bases his 'A Cure for Horniness' commentary arguably challenges this view, since it concludes with the consumption by both the yogi and yogini of their mixed sexual fluids as an elixir.

¹⁶⁷ Tantric vows (*dam tshig*) enjoining seminal continence in the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism are often expressed in terms of 'relinquishing bodhicitta' (*byang sems*). Such vows can simultaneously refer to yogi/nis not emitting sexual fluids and of practitioners not relinquishing their intention to achieve Buddhahood in order to liberate beings. As Wangchuk (2007, 220) notes in his survey of the concept of Bodhicitta in different Buddhist vehicles, in the context of the higher, antinomian tantras, bodhicitta is "consciously employed as a double entendre, denoting simultaneously both ethico-spiritual bodhicitta (i.e. the second sense above) and psycho-physiological bodhicitta (i.e. bodhicitta as male and female 'fluids of virility and fertility' which become a basis in sexual yogic practices for generating realization). The tantric pledge to practice seminal continence is described with slightly less ambiguity in the Yutok Nyintik's presentation of vows as "the binding pledge of bliss" which initiates preserve by "cherishing their *thig le* even more than their own life, never allowing even a mustard seed sized amount of it to be deteriorated," *bde ba'i dam tshig tu thig le srog las gces pa yungs 'bru tsam yang ma nyams par bsrung* (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 418).

¹⁶⁸ The relationship between commitments to practices of seminal retention and conceiving children can be esoteric in other ways. While living in McLeod in 2015, I taught English to Yeshe, a Tibetan monk who was soon to graduate as a geshe. Yeshe was born and raised in Amdo but had studied for several years in reconstituted monasteries in India. Yeshe had been introduced to me because his father in Tibet was a ngakpa. During a lesson one day Yeshe mentioned how qualified ngakpa could retain their *thig le* in their bodies and have sex without ejaculating. He explained with a confused frown and then a chuckle that he didn't really understand how this worked with his father though, since the ngakpa had fathered *several* children!

¹⁶⁹ A term used by professional sexologists as well as colloquially, edging refers to a form of solo or partnered orgasm control in which high levels of arousal are maintained for an extended period of time without climax/ejaculation, in order to intensify sexual pleasure and orgasm.

¹⁷⁰ Mallinson goes on to note that “the only tantric sexual rite not to end in orgasm is the asidharavrata” – this so-called “observance of the razor or sword’s edge” is one of the earliest textually attested Śaiva tantric/quasi-tantric sexual rites and requires a male practitioner to lie with beautiful, arousing women and possibly even penetrate them without reaching ordinary sexual release. The observance began as a celibate, ascetic Śaiva “Atimarga ascetic observance for the cultivation of sensory restraint” (Mallinson 2018, 196) and ultimately transformed into a Śaiva tantric method for gaining magical powers that came to have prominence in the visionary ritual world of the transgressive Bhairavatantras (Hatley 2016b). Mallinson notes that while vajrolīmudrā and asidharavrata were never taught together, the two processes parallel one another in interesting ways: vajrolī, which in its earliest non-tantric Haṭha Yoga textual descriptions is also a celibate, ascetic technique for preventing semen loss later morphs “(in texts if not in reality) into a means of both absorbing the combined products of sexual intercourse, the siddhi-bestowing guhyamrita or secret nectar of earlier tantric rites, and enabling the yogi to enjoy as much sex as he wants” (Mallinson 2018, 196). Mallinson adds as an aside that vajrolī catheter sucking practices would, hypothetically “nicely complement the asidharavrata as a method of mastering it,” an interesting statement given that we see vajrolī techniques being promoted in Tibetan Buddhist sources precisely as methods for enabling extended periods of coitus reservatus in order to achieve realization and siddhis.

¹⁷¹ These instructions contradict Mallinson’s (2018) claims that while “Buddhist tantric works...teach visualizations of the union of the products of sex and their rise up the body’s central column...despite assertions in secondary literature...none of these Buddhist visualisations is accompanied by vajrolī-like physical techniques” (198 - 199). In an interview, Dr Nida described this heteronormative “sun and moon *thig le* exchanging” practice as being “like an alchemical reaction...a kind of transmutation” that produces the rainbow body (*ja’ lus*), in Yutok’s system. White (1998) argues that the claims in Haṭha Yoga sources that vajrolī can be practiced equally by female practitioners “appear to be redundant when viewed from the erotico-mystical perspective of a number of [Śaiva tantric] Kaula traditions [since] it is a basic assumption among these traditions that the fluid lineage or clan nectar, the subtle fluid essence of liberating consciousness, is naturally present in women, and it is precisely for this reason that the male tantric practitioner engages in sexual intercourse with her”. This ‘power fluid’, the purest found in the human body, White explains, is in Kaula traditions “unique to women in their multiple roles as sexual consorts, practitioners of yoga, and biological mothers” (200). While the Yutok Nyingtik describes sexual yoga inner alchemy practices from an entirely androcentric point of view, we know from Jacoby’s research on Sera Khandro’s life for example, that pulling up and spreading out the conjoined *thig le* was also something yoginis could implement (at least in the Tibetan tantric Buddhist context) to enjoy a myriad of benefits (cf. Jacoby 2014, 203 -2 04). Moreover, it is clear that Tibetan yoginis engage in catheter training as well. The eighteenth century New Bön treasure of Kundrol Drakpa called the “Dakinis’ Secret Treasure of the Channels-and-Winds” (*rtsa rlung mkha’ ‘gro gsang mdzod*) includes information on catheter sucking practice that is pitched at both yogis and yoginis, for example (see Achard 2005). It also offers yogini-specific instructions on how to ‘expel [impure] winds from the lotus [i.e. vagina]’ (*pad+ma rlung ‘byin*) as part of training for sexual yoga. These entail ‘*khrol ‘khor* exercises involving relaxation and contraction of the vagina, muscle locking, special postures and movements, breath control, and insertion of vulture and human bone devices into the vagina (see Achard 2005, 22). Other Karmamudrā training texts, the Yutok Nyingtik included, describe inserting special plugs into the yogini’s anus, which are held in place during lovemaking in order to encourage the opening up of the yogini’s ‘bliss channel’ (*bde ba’i rtsa*), which is connected with the clitoris and its extension. Dr Nida explained during teachings in Topanga in September 2018, however, that the special female channel (or as he called it jokingly ‘the little potato’, much to the bemusement of some students) is a latent one which emerges more manifestly in the course of sexual yoga, and which could, hypothetically appear in the anus for a yogini whose clitoris had been excised as a result of female genital cutting, for example.

¹⁷² *Ma ning*, the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit paṇḍaka, has an enormous semantic range across time and contexts. Scripturally, the term various types of men understood to be sexually impotent or ‘deviant’ in Buddhist contexts: intersexual individuals, certain types of transsexuals, eunuchs, men who are aroused by swallowing other men’s semen, and voyeur fetishists (see Cabezón 2017). Words translating paṇḍaka in Buddhist countries have often been used to label homosexual men and transgender individuals, not without some controversy (see Jackson 1996, 1998; Likhitpreechakul 2012). When translating this passage as part of our publications, Dr Nida suggested that ‘intersex’ was the best translation given the context. All of the types of practitioner included in

Yutok's list are people who in some way or other cannot successfully or comfortably engage in penetrative heterosexual sexual intercourse, either due to the state of their channels, libidos, or sexual organs. This is a technical rather than a moral disqualification. For detailed investigations of paṇḍaka and what they imply about Buddhist notions of homosexuality and/or queer sexuality and desire see Cabezón (2017) and Zwellig (1992).

¹⁷³ This is a classic tantric double entendre. The line *thabs dang shes rab byin brlabs snyoms par zhugs* can be read more abstractly as “enter into the equanimity/equivalence of the blessing of means and wisdom” but can also be read as “the means (yogi) and wisdom (yogi) blessed, enter into union”. I have chosen to read *byin rlabs* as referring to the initial blessing or consecration of the yogi and yogini's sexual organs as vajra and lotus which takes place before penetration here.

¹⁷⁴ Some versions of the Tibetan translation of Tilopa's Sanskrit text found in different editions of Tibetan Buddhism's canonical collection of translated commentaries, the *bstan 'gyur*, have this line as *dkyil 'khor bzlog drang ba dang* and *dkyil 'khor drang ba dang*, “reverse the mandala pulling [up]”, “pull [up] the mandala”. Since *bskyil ba* is analogous to *'dzin*, and the fourfold sequence of ‘dropping down/descending; ‘holding/retaining’]; reversing; and ‘spreading out’ is fairly standard as part of the inner subtle energy procedures involved in many tantric Buddhist sexual yoga practices, I have stuck with the interpretation of ‘holding’.

¹⁷⁵ Lotsawa House, “Satirical Advice for the Four Schools – Tibetan,” Lotsawa House, accessed October 20, 2019, <https://www.lotsawahouse.org/bo/tibetan-masters/Mipam/satirical-advice-four-schools>.

¹⁷⁶ Mingyur Paldrön was the daughter of the ngakpa treasure revealer Terdak Lingpa, who was one of Lelung's teachers and visionary collaborators. While passing by Lelung's gompa, Mingyur Paldrön had earlier expressed her disapproval of the “incredible spectacle” (*gzigs mo ngo mtshar can phul ba*) of the ex-monk's raucous, decidedly non-celibate tsok celebrations when she passed by the latter's gompa while on pilgrimage. Contrary to the then (and now) typically muted, de-sexualized sorts of tsok gatherings practiced in Tibet, Lelung, his consorts and several monastics and laypeople had all sang and danced together loudly and drunkenly in such a way that it was not clear who was a monastic and who wasn't. The Khandro had refused to drink the alcoholic ‘nectar’ and offered tea in its place to others to rectify what she saw as a fault of tantric procedure (Khyung po ras pa ‘gyur med ‘od gsal 1984, 120 – 122) Five years later, at the urging of Pholhané – the de facto ruler of Tibet in that tumultuous period and one of Mingyur Paldrön's benefactors – Mingyur Paldrön invites Lelung to Mindroling, her father's now extremely influential center of Nyingma activity. Lelung Rinpoche arrives at the monastery and receives instructions and transmissions relating to Terdak Lingpa's practices from the Khandro. Once this ‘Dharma connection’ (*chos 'brel zhig*) has been made Lelung makes his proposition. He explains to her that he has received a prophecy from Nyima Zhönnu which indicates that the two of them should practice tantric sex together, since if they do so, much like with Serchö's take in Chapter Four, no invading army will be able to conquer Tibet for another five hundred years. Mingyur Paldrön biographer and heart-disciple, the monk Gyurme Ösel, represents Mingyur Paldrön as refusing Lelung fairly curtly: “*Then Jedrung [Lelung Rinpoche] said: “There is a confirmed prophecy about the Venerable Lady of Mindroling and I aligning the tendrel (rten 'brel, the auspicious, interdependent connections) through tantric sex practice (thabs shes zung 'jug, ‘the uniting of Means and Wisdom’) in this lifetime [in order to create] the conditions for averting armies of [invading] border peoples for as long as five hundred years.” That Great Lady of Refuge, the pure and holy Guru Dechen Daki Tsomo, replied: “It shall not come to pass like that for me. The Great Treasure Revealer [i.e. Terdak Lingpa] himself [said], ‘None other [than this] will come to pass for you. Protect the integrity of your body [lus gzungs thub pa gyis, i.e. remain celibate] and hold the practices of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection, in the depths of your heart. By cultivating these meditation practices your wish to lead male and female faithful beings to the Sacred Dharma will come perfectly to pass.” She then stood up abruptly, at which point Jedrung said, “Well then, I have to go to visit Dechen Ling.”* (Khyung po ras pa ‘gyur med ‘od gsal 1983, 127 – 128; Melnick 2014 appears to miss/misconstrue some key details in this passage). The two lamas part ways after this exchange. For Nida's take on Mingyur Paldrön refusal of Lelung, see Chenagtsang (2018, 61 – 62).

¹⁷⁷ Nida notes that today many more lamas teach Mahamudrā and Dzogchen and publish accessible books on these “very advanced and secret” teachings as well, yet they do not publish or teach as freely or frequently on Karmamudrā (Chenagtsang 2018, 47).

¹⁷⁸ Forceful yogic ‘falls’ used in *rtsa rlung* training where yogi/nis jump into the air from a seated position and then strike the lower parts of their body back down hard onto the ground, see Baker (2019).

¹⁷⁹ Cabezón (2017) argues that there are limits or cultural parameters for this sort of transcendent, transgressive impartiality, since there are as yet no known records of Buddhist tantric saints engaging in homosexual intercourse as part of their no-holds barred antinomianism.

¹⁸⁰ This is, incidentally, an interesting inversion of how the celebrated Kashmiri master of non-dual Śaiva Tantra traditions Abhinavagupta’s (950 -1016) description of the kulayaga or Kaula secret sexual meditation. As Wallis elaborates in an interview (Christopher Wallis and Ilya Zhuravlev, “Tantric roots of haṭha yoga. Interview with Hareesh (Christopher Wallis)”, Wild Yogi, accessed October 16, 2019, <https://wildyogi.info/en/issue/tantric-roots-hatha-yoga-interview-hareesh-christopher-wallis>), Abhinavagupta states that “you must not practice this with somebody that you desire, because if you have desire you will objectify the act, you will objectify the person and if anything becomes objectified, he says, this will not work. See how different this is from neo-tantra? In fact, he says that only the advanced practitioner could do this with his wife, that he is attracted to, because you have to know how to completely drop that kind of physical desire, because the purpose is full awareness and liberation”.

¹⁸¹ For reflections on how tantric yogic practice is focused on humans’ problems and needs, rather than already realized Buddhas’, see Chenagsang (2018, 62 – 64).

¹⁸² My translation here is based on the transcript of NT’s speech provided in Don grub, “‘dod pa’i bstan bcos kyi deb dbu ‘byed,” Bod kyi dus bab, August 24, 2015, <http://tibettimes.net/2015/08/24/139360/>. I have relied on my own notes from the event and Don grub’s transcripts for translating other speakers’ comments as well.

¹⁸³ Sherab’s first name ‘*bo ra*, refers to his *pha yul* or home region in Tibet. Interesting, Ngawang Trinlay chose to title himself *dge bsnyen ‘phrin las* or “lay Buddhist vow-holder Trinlay” on the cover of the book, rather than use the more ambiguous label of dralok or ex-monk. The fact that NT would make a point of signaling himself as a virtuous Buddhist lay-holder is significant in light of the arguments made later in this chapter.

¹⁸⁴ Char nag, “Bod la ‘khrig spyod yag po med pa’i rgyu rkyen ‘di red,” April 6, 2016, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5Njc0NDcwMQ%3D%3D&mid=408928409&idx=1&sn=e5d37df7e09c78d2e17380772eb21139&scene=0#wechat_redirect.

¹⁸⁵ The hundred-syllable mantra of the Buddha or Bodhisattva of purification. Reciting the mantra while visualizing Vajrasattva is a key component of *sngon ‘gro* or tantric preliminaries. For an example of a short Vajrasattva liturgy in English see Joffe (2016g).

¹⁸⁶ *G.yab* is associated both with the idea of a small, potentially rudimentary roofed shelter, awning or covered verandah, and with the idea of small or quick back-and-forth movements, as seen in terms for a beckoning or signalling hand gesture (*g.yab mo*), or waving or fluttering (*g.yab g.yob*). How a term associated with a roof over one’s head and regular back-and-forth movements could also serve as a term for sexual intercourse should be obvious.

¹⁸⁷ Rma dug lce, “Yo rob kyi bu mo zhig la ‘khrig sred kyi skor nas bcar ‘dri byas pa, Bod kyi rtsom rig dra ba December 21, 2011, <http://www.tibetcm.com/contemporary/interview/2014-12-11/3967.html>.

¹⁸⁸ We know that both Mipam and Gendun Chöpel, who were both proficient Sanskritists and consulted a variety of Indian kāmāsāstra in composing their own works, some of which may have already been translated into Tibetan.

¹⁸⁹ Keesling (1994) explains that she first learned about the possibility of male multiple orgasm from her sex therapist mentor Dr Michael Riskin when she trained with him in 1980 and learned to work as a professional sex surrogate at the psychotherapy center that he and his wife had developed in Tuskin, California. Two of Keesling’s male sex surrogate trainee classmates happened to possess the skill of male multiple orgasm, and through discussions with these colleagues and other men who had learned this capacity, Keesling and Riskin were able to reverse-engineer a series of graduated exercises that proved consistently effective at transforming

male patients who experienced ordinary, lackluster single orgasms into extended, multiple orgasms. Neither Keesling nor her mentors and colleagues profess to any knowledge of or training in Indo-Tibetan sexual yoga traditions. Even so, Keesling is not alone in tipping her hat to Eastern masters as the originators of orgasm/ejaculatory control. In their book on male multiple orgasm *Any Man Can* husband and wife American sex therapist team Hartman and Fithian (1986) likewise locate the ultimate origins of techniques for orgasm control in the ancient Orient, for example.

¹⁹⁰ This description by the cook is reminiscent of various typologies of female and male sex partners found in Indo-Tibetan *kāmasāstra* literature, which classify men and women typically according to four or five-fold animal types based on the shape and size of their genitalia and their bodily, sexual and psychological constitutions. Ju Mipam and Gendun Chöpel both reproduce the scheme of rabbit, stag, stallion, and bull for men and the lotus, conch, doe, and painting types for women. Jacoby (2017) notes that Mipam derives this scheme from the later Medieval *kāmasāstra* by Kokkoka called the *Ratirahasya*. In his *döbay tenchö* Gendun Chöpel presents an alternate three-fold classification of vaginas ('water, mud, and dry earth-born lotuses') based on their outer and inner proportions, respective clitorises, levels of lubrication, and so on, but this does not match the cook's three-fold typology, which interestingly, seems to mirror the pre-Buddhist Tibetan cosmology comprised of the *lha* or god-realm of upper heavens, the middle firmament inhabited by hosts of *gnyan* spirits, and the underworld of chthonic water spirits or *klu*. I have yet to find a source other than Nyima's cook for this arrangement.

¹⁹¹ I did not have any sexual or romantic relationships with Tibetans myself during my fieldwork. I had just one romantic-sexual partner during the main period of my 2015-2016 fieldwork, a gay, European tourist who I met and spent time with for about three weeks in June and July 2016. The rest of my fieldwork I was celibate and did not pursue any romantic connections. I am a very openly homosexual, gender-queer man 'at home' whose social life out of the field revolves almost exclusively around queer spaces and other queer people. Since coming out to friends and family at the age of 17/18, living in South Africa and the United States I have grown accustomed to never having to explain to anyone that I am gay – strangers routinely read my queerness off my body and movements and I am happy for them to do so, regardless of the consequences. Conducting fieldwork in India and Nepal, I did not change or 'tone down' my sartorial choices or mannerisms in any way, but for the most part these did not communicate as gay in my new settings. Barring a few Indians, Nepalis and Tibetans with more familiarity with 'Western' gender norms and a few closer friends to whom I divulged my sexual orientations, most people I interacted with during fieldwork tended to assume I was a heterosexual, cis-gendered man and I rarely corrected them. While I knew a handful of openly and semi-openly homosexual, bisexual, and transgender Tibetans and Indians and met a few briefly visiting gay tourists in McLeod, fieldwork felt like the 'straightest' period of my life since the end of high school and like its own sort of passive re-closeting. For reflections on queer anthropologists' positionality in the field, see Lewin and Leap (1996) and Blackwood (2003); for essays on sex and eroticism in the field, see Kulick and Wilson (2003).

¹⁹² This term is used by the CTA and Tibetans in exile to refer to Tibetan children who, although they may have one or more parents (typically inside Tibet), are sent unaccompanied into exile in order to receive Tibetan language schooling and other opportunities unavailable in exile. See Lokyitsang (2016).

¹⁹³ In Delhi, this friend would often present himself as Chinese to Indian men he met to sidestep the stigma he felt was associated with being a stateless Tibetan refugee in India.

¹⁹⁴ Kunphen, the first and only Tibetan-run NGO currently registered in India focusing on the care and treatment of Tibetans dealing with substance abuse problems, also disseminates information to the public about HIV/AIDS (for details of Kunphen's founding, failure to secure support from CTA's Department of Health, continuing activities and struggles to maintain operations, see "The Kunphen Center – Dharamsala," Kunphen Recovery Center – Dharamsala, accessed October 16, 2019, <http://kunphen.center/about-kunphen-center-dharamsala/>). For a short survey of developments relating to HIV/AIDS education, prevention, and treatment in Tibetan diaspora from the late 1990s until the early 2010s, see Yeshe (2013). More recently, Drokmo, an NGO based in exile founded by two Tibetan women, has begun developing educational programs aimed at Tibetan schoolchildren, primarily focusing on gender-based violence and women's sexual and reproductive health (see <https://www.facebook.com/drokmo/>).

¹⁹⁵ "DalaiLama1997CyborganicCrew," YouTube video, 39: 05. (Unlisted). February 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFW2YT2ZK4M>.

¹⁹⁶ *Dge bsnyen/ma* (or *upasaka/upasika* as the Dalai Lama described them in Sanskrit during his audience with Simon and his friends) are individuals who have formally taken Refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and who have committed themselves to observing the five basic ethical precepts of Buddhism (to not kill; to not steal; to not practice sexual misconduct; to not lie; and to not consume intoxicants). On important days in the ritual calendar they may also temporarily intensify their observance of the basic precepts (by foregoing meat entirely on holidays, for example) and on new and full moon days they may take on an additional three vows (to not eat after noon; to avoid singing, dancing, self-adornment with makeup and jewelry; and to not sleep on high beds). On these days of the lunar calendar avoiding ‘sexual misconduct’ is also often enacted through complete celibacy. These further observances are all modelled on monastic vows (see Cabezón 2017).

¹⁹⁷ Indeed, Cabezón proposes that fourth century texts which first promoted the monastic-scholastic regulations outlined above may have been “intent on restricting the sexual activity of Buddhist men as a response to the greater sexual freedoms being advocated by the Indian erotic treatises” enjoying currency at the time and that, furthermore, Buddhist monk-scholar elites may have been “attempting to create rhetorical distance between Buddhist and non-Buddhist men by suggesting that the former were more disciplined and the latter more licentious” (2017 [Kindle edition], see Chapter Eight in Cabezón’s book for a fuller account of possible ‘external and internal’ explanations for monastic scholars’ increasing elaboration of lay sexual misconduct)

¹⁹⁸ Tellingly, aside from NT’s use of the title on his book cover, the word *dge bsnyen/ma* is virtually absent from the non-monastic sexological sources described in this chapter. In place of monk-like lay disciples, authors’ address their concerns overwhelmingly to “householders” (*khyim pa*), to “grey [robed] lay people/non-vow-holders (*mi skya*) or simply “men and women”, “guys and girls”, “husbands and wives,” “couples” and so on.

¹⁹⁹ The *rgyud bzhi* divides *ro tsa* medicine into ‘primary’ (*gtso bo*) and ‘supplementary’/‘branch’ (*yan lag*) sections or subjects. Simply put, men’s fertility/libido are traditionally the primary focus of *ro tsa*, while women’s are the supplementary one. For more on the “gendered politics” at work in the Four Tantras’ prioritizing of male fertility treatment, see Gyatso (2008, 95).

²⁰⁰ For the ex-monks’ explanation of this move, see Trinley and Sherab (2015, vii)

²⁰¹ In fact, the closest Keesling (1994 [E-book]) gets to talking about child-rearing and fertility is during a general warning about condom use and safe sex. It is also in this context that she spells out her ideal intended readers as “committed, monogamous couples who know each other to be safe from sexual risk”.

²⁰² For more on the *lus zungs* and their connection to various kinds of elixir extraction or *bcud len* processes in Tibetan medicine, see Gerke (2012). For an extensive investigation of how notions of gastronomic incorporation and digestion cut across medical and religious domains in Tibetan contexts, see Garrett (2010). Traditionally, Tibetan doctors say that men can ejaculate up to five times a day without a problem during the winter months, since when it is cold people ideally tend to eat richer, more oily, nutritious and thus *mdangs*-enhancing foods. Conversely, ejaculation should be minimized during summer to avoid loss of *mdangs*. Still, these are broad, flexible guidelines and as Dr Nida explained to me every individual and constitution will necessarily be different. Importantly, semen loss is also not the only, or even the most effective way to deplete *mdangs*. Mental stress and anxiety, poor diet and bad sleep patterns can all have an even greater impact on overall vitality and the state of one’s constitutive body ‘essences’ than excessive ejaculation.

²⁰³ See note 199 above.

²⁰⁴ Like NT and Sherab, Nida classifies premature ejaculation as a *ro tsa* problem. In discussing *ro tsa* in his *döten*, however, Nida offers more commentary on the gendered nature of *ro tsa*, emphasizing from the very beginning of his *ro tsa* section that *ro tsa* should be understood to mean “illnesses/disorder where there is difficulty having children that comes from [both] men and women’s desire being weak” (*ro tsa pho mo’i ‘dod chags zhan nas/ rigs rgyud spel dka’i nad la go*). Observing that “the fault of *ro tsa* is for the most part perceived as being about men having erectile dysfunction and women’s failure to experience sexual pleasure or orgasm is explained as *ro tsa* much less frequently” he tells his readers that women’s *ro tsa* disorders are also very important to consider (*pho yid bang po mi ldang ba/ phal cher skyon du mthong ba las/ bud med bde chen mi myong ba/ ro tsar bshad pa ha cang nyung*). Later, Nida notes further that “if the wife does not conceive, it may well also be the fault of the husband, so clearly identify whether there is any illness at play by having tests

done at the hospital.” (*chung mar phru gu ma 'khor na/ khyo ga'i skyon ni yin yang srid/ des na sman khang bntag dpyad kyis/ nad gzhi ngos 'dzin gsal po bya*).

²⁰⁵ Both monastic homosexuality and male masturbation are depicted matter-of-factly in Sangye Gyatso's medical paintings as examples of activities which lead to the “depletion of vital fluids” and which should be avoided the day before one gives a doctor urine for urinalysis, for example, see Gyatso (2015, 33 – 34).

²⁰⁶ Dr Nida Chenagsang, personal communication, December 16, 2017, Los Angeles. See also Chenagsang (2018, 277).

²⁰⁷ Nida's *döbay tenchö* used to be accessible from Sorig's official Tibetan language site, but unfortunately the website's domain has not been updated. I have thus been forced to cite from personal, saved copies of Nida's document.

²⁰⁸ *'dod pa'i bstan bcos ma shes na/ chags pa spyad kyang don mi che/ de'i phyir chags ldan pho mo tshor/ 'dod chags sgyu rtsal bshad la spro// 'dod chags rang byung sgyu rtsal ni/ dbye ba brgyad du bstan pa yang/ rang gi nyams myong go bde bar/ bris las gzhan dpe bshus pa min*.

²⁰⁹ *Khyim mtshes grong pas sgra go na/ ngu skad sgra chung ba bya/ kha la gos 'dzin gos 'og 'dzul/ 'o ni drag tu skyal bar bya// mgron khang yin na gang bde dang/ gang skyid pa zhig 'dems pa gal/ skabs su rlang 'khor du 'ang sbyor/ gan rkyal rgyab sbyor bzang pa yin// chang khang bro khang gsang spyod sogs/ na chung gzhon nus mgyogs por spyod/ de la bde ba tsam du zad/ lhod la mi 'bab rngam drag che// me tog ldum rwa skyed tshal dang/ shing nags can dang rtsa rtsi'i gseb/ gzhan gyis mi tshor dal gyis sbyor/ brel byas bde ba med*.

²¹⁰ *Rdza ri gangs rir rdza dug che/ khrig na snying gyugs khrag shad 'phar/ dal gyis phan tshun sbyor ba dang/ shugs chen shugs drag spang par bya*.

²¹¹ *Stobs can chags ldan pho mo la/ dus ni nges med yod ma yin*.

²¹² The ‘four essences’ substances or *bcud bzhi* are meat/bone broth, butter, molasses, and alcohol. These are classified as ‘the [digested] essence that comes from [a sentient being's] bodily constituents or *lus zungs*; ‘the essence from grass/plants’; ‘the essence from trees’; and ‘the essence from grain’ (here butter is the essence of grass since yaks and other animals eat it as food and its nutrients appear digested and distilled in the form of milk and then later butter. Molasses is likewise a refined essence produced from sugar cane branches, just as *chang*, i.e. alcohol or beer comes from fermenting or digesting grains and extracting their essence, see Cantwell (2017).

²¹³ The whole stanza reads: *lus zungs zhan na zla re dang/ yang bdun gcig thengs gcig sbyor/ bcud bzhis lus po gsos byas na/ khu ba ci shor nyes pa med*.

²¹⁴ The characterization of the constitutive ‘fluids’ or humors of the human body as ‘defects’ or ‘sins’ is typically explained with recourse to Buddhist cosmology, where each humor corresponds to one of the classic ‘three poisons’ (*dug gsum*) of desire, anger/animosity, and ignorance/confusion, which together serve as the primary engine of samsaric rebirth. The three poisons are what drive rebirth and incarnation, and subsequently give rise to the humoral constitution of the individual. The humors are defects insofar as they are out of balance and control - an imbalance of humors leads to both disease and the sorts of afflictive emotional/mental states which produce negative karma and suffering. A key part of the job of the Tibetan physician is thus to manage disordered – excessive, depleted, and agitated – humors.

²¹⁵ *Phru gu 'khor rjes mngal 'ded dang/ gshag bcos la sogs nyen che bas/ pha ma zhe mthun gros mthun gyis/ rin chen mi lus bskyang bar bya*). The parenthetical additions in the English translation are based on Nida's suggestions.

²¹⁶ *'jig rten sdug bsngal grangs mang yang/ khrig dus bde ba grangs med 'byung/ gzhon la lus stobs rgyas pa'i dus/ gnyi sbyor bde ba rtag tu rol// rig pa gsal zhing lus yang zhing/ rlung khrag rgyu ba bzang pa dang/ me drod rgyas shing zas 'ju sla/ 'khrig spyod rin med sman bzang yin// rlung ni zhi bar byed pa dang/ mkhris pa gsal zhing drod dkye la/ bad kan dag ni sel byed pa'i nad brgya sman gcig gnyis sbyor yin*.

²¹⁷ Aside from his comments on sex work, Nida urges readers to refrain from non-consensual sex in two other places: while discussing sensual scratching and sex positions. At the close of his section on scratching, Nida advises lover to “search for the sensitive, erogenous spots as with the section on kissing” but notes that “if [you or your partner] don’t want to scratch/ then it is better to refrain from doing so and to not force it” (*de yang ‘o yi le ‘u ltar/ gya’ ba’i gnas rnams ‘tshol bar bya/ gal te sen ‘debs mi ‘dod na/ u tshugs mi bya spang bar legs*). Later on, he observes that “if a [sex] position isn’t comfortable it can cause pain, don’t force it, change positions. In particular, [have sex] without violence or coercion, and be careful of falling off the bed or whichever raised place [you might be having sex].” (*sdod stangs mi bden na zug ‘byung/ u tshugs mi bya brje bar byed/ khyad par btsan shed med pa dang/ stegs bu sogs las lung par gzab*).

²¹⁸ *Smad dang chang gnyis btsong pa yi/ mkha ‘gros te lo grol par mdzad/ mkha’ ‘gro mang pos gzhang btsong tshul ‘gro don mdzad ces sngags su gsal*. The common term for (female) sex worker Nida uses here, *gzhang bstong[ma]*, is rather more crass and picturesque, meaning literally ‘those women who sell their asses/assholes’. Nida alludes to a parallel term for sex-worker in his preceding lines about the tantric goddess who enlightened Tilopa, i.e. *smad btsong [ma]*. I have opted for the more morally-laden and pejorative English ‘prostitute’ here rather than the more neutral ‘[female] sex-worker’ to capture a little more of the mood of Nida’s Tibetan term.

²¹⁹ *Dngul lo tsam gyis ‘phrad du’ang/ bde ba’i pad ma ster byed pa’i/ smad btsong ma rnams gus par bya/ mi ‘dod gnod pa’i rigs byed spang// smad btsong ‘ga’ zhig tshong la dga’/ ci bya med pa’i las kyang yin/ kha shas gzhan dbang gyog ma yin/ khyad gsod ma byed mthun pa byos*.

²²⁰ See Cabezón (2017) for further discussion of classical South Asian Buddhist attitudes towards sex workers and their clients, and the gender norms and inequalities these presuppose. While traditional Tibetan Buddhist codes of lay sexual conduct condone men visiting sex workers (and are silent about women doing so, much like their Indian prototypes), newer re-imaginings of lay Buddhist ethics like the reworked ten Buddhist virtues and concomitant vows currently popular in occupied Tibet, class visiting prostitutes as one of various non-virtuous behaviors deleterious to present well-being and future flourishing of the Tibetan people. As Gayley (2013; 2016) shows, lamas like Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok and his student-successor Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö who have served as chief promoters and promulgators of Buddhist ethical reform and these new lay vows in Tibet have sanctioned Tibetans’ participation in the sex trade primarily on account of prostitutes’ perceived role in spreading sexually transmitted diseases. Nida, for his part, suggests that single men whose “passion, when the ‘white element’ [Nida suggested I gloss this as ‘male sexual energy’ in English in our conversations] increases in their bodies, overtakes them like a sweeping fire, may also rely on prostitutes” but warns that such men “should be wary of STIs (*khams dkar lus la rgyas pa’i dus/ pho yi ‘dod chags me ltar mched/ grogs med smad btsong ma yang bsten/ nad rims rigs la dogs zon byos*). For a discussion of Lhasa Tibetans’ anxieties regarding the increase in sex work in the city since Chinese occupation, see Adams (2005) and Barnett (2006).

²²¹ “When [the man’s] vajra gets small and his feelings [of arousal] weaken/ place your finger into his rectum and press downwards/ If you’re able to touch his vajra [he’ll feel] pleasure and be happy/ alternatively, stimulate his anus from time to time (*rdo rje chung dus tshor zhan na/ gzhang khar mdzub bcug mar du gnon/ rdo rjer reg thub bde zhing skyid/ yang na skabs su gzhang la bya*).

²²² *‘o yi nang nas mchog tu gyur*. Nida’s specific 69-ing’ instructions that precede this characterization read as follows: “the woman lies down on her back/ the man [lies] inverted, with his head facing her feet/ and they lick/suck each other’s genitals” (*mo ni gan rgyal nyal ba dang/ pho ni kha sbubs mgo ‘jug ldog/ phan tshun mtshan ma ldag pa ni*).

²²³ *‘khrig dus bud med lus las gang ‘byung ba/ thams cad gtsang bar*. He cites the lines of this scripture directly interlineally in the Dhongthog edition: “clean/pure in the same way that a bird is while flying, a dog is while hunting, and a calf is while being milked.” cf. Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel and mi pham rgya mtsho (1969, 81).

²²⁴ It is not clear here exactly which tantric texts Gendun Chöpel is referring to, or whether they contain Buddhist or non-Buddhist tantric teachings, although one assumes the former.

²²⁵ Vatsyayana himself presents oral sex as a rather conditional practice and evinces a certain amount of ambiguity about the relative appropriateness and cleanliness of this form of sexual activity in his *Kamasutra*, see /

²²⁶ The fact that Mipam himself wrote a commentary on a Sanskrit Buddhist text outlining the *upasaka* vows, and that his take on lay sexual misconduct there parallels that of other Tibetan monastic authorities already mentioned almost exactly, makes this assumption even more reasonable. For a brief discussion of Mipam’s presentation of lay sexual misconduct, see Cabezón (2017).

²²⁷ *Rtags gcig phan tshun sbyor ba ni/ gzhang dang kha la mang bas na/ nad kyi khungs kyang khyab che bas/ de la shin tu gzab rgyu gal.*

²²⁸ See note 173.

²²⁹ While the exact etymology of this term remains uncertain (Cabezón 2017), my own encounters with the phrase suggest that it is frequently used to refer to individuals who are perceived to be either ‘neither male nor female’ or both male and female at the same time. While I have observed some Tibetans use this term in the context of online discussions to refer to effeminate homosexual men, other Tibetans have argued that the term most properly describes third sex/gender individuals such as Indian *hijras* who are either inter-sex or castrated ‘eunuchs’. As such, much like with the more scriptural, erudite *ma ning*, ‘polo molo’ evinces a certain confusion or conflation between gender orientation and biological sex. The term has a somewhat derogatory flavor, and it has not, to my knowledge, been taken up as a proud, self-designation by LGBTQI Tibetans who tend to use English terms or more technical neologisms like *mtshan mthun/gcig [dga’ rogs] sgrig [byed] mkhen*, and so on. During my time in McLeod, I witnessed Tibetans refer to Mariko, a Tibetan friend who identifies as a transgender woman, as both *ma ning* and polo molo. Mariko, a former monk who now works as a model, dancer and makeup artist, has in the last few years been interviewed about her experiences as a transgender woman in various English and Tibetan-language media platforms, and has become a widely recognized and celebrated voice for increased LGBT acceptance and visibility across the Tibetan diaspora. In a 2016 Tibetan-language video interview both Mariko and her interviewer glossed MTF transgenderism as having “the [physical] body of a boy with the mental constitution or nature of a woman’ (*bud med kyi gshis rgyud, bu mo’i rang bzhin*, see “Second Episode: The Brave Tenzin Mariko with Tenzin Phuljung (*snying stobs can gyi ma ri ko*),” Facebook video, 8:14 10mins Talk Show, May 7, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/141558556054924/videos/511487795728663/>). I have heard Mariko repeatedly stress that her identity as a transgender woman is not the same as hijra, both on and off camera, a point which I suspect indicates Mariko’s desire to distance herself from hijras’ low social status and frequent association with sex work and crime, and the idea that being transgender implies some kind of significant externally visible non-normative sexual characteristics (castration, congenital genital anomalies etc.). That Tibetans may have wanted to reduce Mariko’s identity to externally-visible biological facts was made strikingly clear in comment threads that emerged after Tenzin Phuljung shared his Tibetan language interview with Mariko, where more than one (seemingly male) Tibetan commentator found Mariko’s own descriptions of her identity inadequate, and insisted that she ought to be ‘checked to determine if she was actually a boy or a *ma ning*’. Other commentators joked that if one’s penis was too small then it made sense to do as Mariko was doing, further pointing to the extent to which the ‘truth’ of queerness was understood by some Tibetans at least to be linked to essentially biological, sexual characteristics. (although see Gyatso 2015 for some hints from Tibetan medical commentaries about the distinction between gendered subjectivity and bodies).

²³⁰ While Nida’s correlating of homosexuality with oral sex and disease could be read both as an implicit moral judgement of LGBTQ individuals on Nida’s part and a confirmation of Jacoby’s suspicions about oral sex indexing deviant, queer sexuality in Tibetan contexts, Nida has made his views on the non-deviance of LGBTQ individuals clear, cf. for example Chenagsang 2018, 92 – 94; 196 – 199).

²³¹ *Rang gi lag sor bsten nas ni/ bskyod cing bde ba dang/ stu mje bcos ma bsten pa ni/ sman gyi lugs dang ‘gal ba min.*

²³² *Zhi mo jo mo rgan mo sogs/ rang rtsa mnyes nab de ba ‘phel/ zhi lis rang nyid khu ba ‘byin/ ‘jig rten lugs dang mthun pa yin// ‘dod chags me lje ‘bar ba’i dus/ ngo tsha’i gos ni yongs su tshig/ mdor na rang sems gang mthun gyis/ bde ba la ni spyod par bya.* Nida uses colloquial terms for ‘girls/women’ and ‘boys/men’ popular in Amdo (i.e. *zhi mo/zhi li*) here, echoing Charnak’s regional vocabulary. My gloss of ‘*jig rten lugs* as the ‘worldly or natural, everyday life approach [to sex]’ is in accordance with Nida’s suggestions.

²³³ During his career as a physician, Nida has recommended that Buddhist monastics, in seeming contravention of the Vinaya, adapt tantric Jnanamudrā-style masturbation procedures to relieve themselves in cases of extreme sexual frustration or discomfort. For a vivid account of Nida’s (unsuccessful) attempt to recommend ‘medical’ masturbation to a non-Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhist nun who believed that her overpowering urges to masturbate were being caused by a demon and who came to him as a ngakpa seeking an exorcism, see Chenagtsang (2018 94 -95).

²³⁴ *Sbrum skabs btsir gnon ‘grams yong srid/ ‘khrig pa slong dgos zhes rgyud bzhir gsungs/ ‘on kyang pha ma chags ldan pas/ lus gnad shes na ‘khrig par bya.* In his following stanza Nida goes on to note that “some [people/experts] explain that childbirth will be easier if couples have sex from behind or from the side before the child is born in particular.” He emphasizes though that this ultimately depends on the mother’s physical and mental state of being. (*lhag par phru gu ma skes sngon/ rgyab dang zur nas ‘khrig byas na/ phru gu skye sla ‘ga’ zhig bshad/ lus dang sems kyi khams la bstun*).

²³⁵ *Zla mtshan ‘bab pa’i dus su ni/ khrag shor lus khams zhan pa dang/ rtsa ‘khrugs sems kyang mi bde bas/ gyem pa slong zhes rgyud bzhir gsungs// lus brtas nad med ‘dod ldan ma/ grib la mi zhes gсар bu tshos/ spyad kyang mi ‘grig mi mthun med/ kyad par ‘di dus mngal mi chags// shugs che drags na khrag mang ‘chor/ gdan du shog ‘jam lag physis khobs/ ‘khrig rjes pho mo gnyis ka yis/ ‘dod pa’i dbang po bkru ba gces.*

²³⁶ For more information on the incorporation of tantric vocabulary and ritual procedures into otherwise non-tantric Indian kāmāsāstra texts, see Ali (2011) and Wojtilla (1990).

²³⁷ For more on Dr Nida’s highly qualified approval of the use of pornographic films to stimulate arousal for sexual meditation, see Chenagtsang (2018, 193 – 195). See Joffe (2016e) for a translation of a humorous Tibetan anecdote about visiting monks secretly watching porn films at a Tibetan ngakpas’ Dharma center in California, and a discussion of the ethics of monks’ watching/visualizing sex versus engaging in it.

²³⁸ There are no known references to same-sex Karmamudrā practice in traditional sources. Being inherently heteronormative, these assume that partnered sexual yoga will be practiced between a male-bodied yogi and female-bodied yogini. Nida’s encouragement of homosexual practitioners is thus unique. Male-bodied meditators imagining themselves as ‘female’ yidams and vice versa is common Vajrayāna practice and Nida reminds his readers that yidam are ultimately beyond conventional gender. He explains the necessity of transgender and homosexual practitioners visualizing themselves and their partners in whatever gendered form will most stimulate bliss and allow the practice to work, however, while offering the disclaimer as well that advanced practices involving the mixing and exchanging of the “red and white *thig le*” (i.e. the sucking up of conjoined semen and menstrual blood as mentioned in the previous chapter) are inherently heterosexual/heteronormative, see Chenagtsang (2018, 196 – 199).

²³⁹ As Sparham notes: “The essential point in systematic Buddhist Tantric morality is just how arbitrary, but necessary, the means are as a complement to the absence of their having an absolute basis. Ultimately, there are no beings, there is no suffering, and there is no altruism. All this is fabricated like a magical apparition conjured up by a magician. Accordingly, there is no absolute right and wrong and no absolute prohibitions when it comes to what can and cannot be employed as a means to the end. The means vary according to what is of benefit to those beholding such appearance. Reality does not dictate because, ultimately, there is no true reality. It is just done as a means to an end because others’ well-being is privileged” (2018, n.p.).

²⁴⁰ Gechō explains towards the end of his treatise: “the disciplined monk Mipam wrote from what he heard [i.e. from what he had studied, theory], the dissolute libertine Chöpel wrote from experience. The power of the essential blessings [offered by these two approaches] is not the same, lustful men and women will know through experience” (*mi pham btsun pas gsan nas bris pa dang/ chos ‘phel ‘chal pos myang nas bris pa gnyis/ byin rlabs gnad kyi tshan kha mi ‘dra ba/ chags ldan pho mos nyams su blangs na shes, Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel and mi pham rgya mtsho 1969, 98*).

²⁴¹ While we know that Gendun Chöel was familiar with and influenced by Marxism, it is unclear to what extent the ex-monk may have been exposed to developments taking place in the then burgeoning, transnational discipline of sexology while he was residing in India. At any rate, his dōten betrays little influence of modern sexology. The 1930s and 1940s saw a proliferation of sexological publications by Indian intellectuals in Indian languages on such topics as sexual health and reform, sexual dysfunction, family planning, eugenics, and

marriage, material which positioned the universality and usefulness of modern sexological knowledge vis-à-vis putative Indian culture, psychology, and nationalism in complex, diverse ways (Alter 1994; 1997; Pande 2017). Prominent sexologists like Magnus Hirschfeld and Margaret Sanger also visited India as part of highly publicized cross-cultural public outreach missions during this time as well, see Fuechtner (2013), Stearns and Beutel (2015).

²⁴² His summary of the ultimate nature of reality which appears in a parenthetical aside and immediately follows this line reads: “Here, the ineffable reality or meaning of the ultimate nature of the universe and all its inhabitants is said to be a unity [but with two aspects]: when one conceives of it from the perspective of negation, it is ‘emptiness’; when it appears from the positive perspective, from the side of its affirmation or fulfilment (*sgrub phyogs nas*), it is bliss. So, don’t frighten yourself with thoughts about how it can possibly be that the absolute negation of emptiness and the positive affirmation of bliss are attributed to a singular basis. All those sorts of reflections are fundamentally in keeping with duality [so don’t worry]” (*‘dir brtan g.yo’i rang bzhin mthar thug pa’i brjod med kyi don zhid la/ dgag phyogs nas bsam tshes stong pa dang/ sgrub phyogs nas shar tshes bde ba yin pa gcig la zer zhid/ stong pa de med dgag yin/ bde ba de sgrub pa yin pas gchi gcig tu bskur ga la rung snyam pa sogs gnyis ‘dzin la phyi mob col ba’i rigs pa de kun la ma ‘jigs par bya’o*). Gechö then goes on to explain the ultimate, non-conceptual blissful nature of awareness in the stanzas that immediately follow. These, while innovatively expressed, are fairly orthodox in tantric Buddhist terms, and amount to a sort of introduction to the true nature of mind and sexual bliss. See Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel and mi pham rgya mtsho (1969, 94 – 98).

²⁴³ This slowing down and relaxing approach to premature ejaculation aligns with comments Nida made to me about premature ejaculation during an interview I conducted with him in California in December 2017, which I later incorporated into the Karmamudrā book (cf. Chenagtsang 2018, 199 - 203). The idea that deep connection, fulfilling relationships, and psychological and emotional happiness, security and confidence are the ultimate remedy for *ro tsa* problems appears as well in Nida's dōten. For example: "When after looking [you find] your destined, karmic partner and you accord with each other in heart-and-mind and your mental suffering is cured, you will be freed from your *ro tsa* [problems] as well - so, watch over your heart and mind with care! (*las grogs btsal nas zhe mthun zhid/ sems kyi sdug bsngal zhi ba’i dus/ ro tsa las kyang grol ba yin/ des na sems la bya ra gces*). And also: "When you know another's heart like one's own and are relaxed, comfortable, and happy in your body and mind, it is easy to make your sexual organs work well for you. This [condition] is necessary for both men and women” (*gcig sems gcig gis shes pa dang/ lus sems lhod cing bde ba’i dus/ dbang po las su rung ba sla/ ‘di ni pho mo gnyis kar mkho*). This advice on taking more time to mutually connect and feel pleasure strongly parallels Keesling's instructions connected with preliminary 'sensate focus' exercises as well.

²⁴⁴ See Chenagtsang (2018, 331 – 332)

²⁴⁵ A similar method for ejaculation control and orgasm enhancement to Tibetan ‘holding, pulling up and spreading’ *‘khrul ‘khor* can be found in Taoist sexual alchemy practices, as presented by contemporary teacher Mantak Chia. This method which Chia and many of his neo-tantric proteges know as the ‘Big Draw’, involves men pulling up and circulating ‘hot’, aroused sexual energy in their bodies when they feel the urge to ejaculate. In contrast to Vajrayāna procedures in which the *thig le* is directed up to the crown of the head through the central channel, Taoist practitioners pull aroused sexual energy or *jing* up through a back subtle channel and then down a front one, through the so-called ‘microcosmic orbit’. The so-called ‘Cool Draw’ or ‘testicular breathing’ (or ‘ovarian breathing’ for women) – i.e. mentally drawing sexual energy from the testicles/ovaries to circulate through the microcosmic orbit in its unaroused, cool or *yin* state, in synch with breathing and without self-stimulation – parallels Yutok’s ‘no-*rtsa rlung’ thig le* breathing preliminary training exercise as well. See Chia and Winn (1984) and Chia and Abrams (2009). The similarities between traditional Vajrayāna and Taoist ejaculation control procedures may indicate a common heritage (Nida himself notes similarities between Taoist and Secret Mantra methods in the introduction to his three-part dōten; see also Samuel (2008) and White (1998) on the possibility that Indians inherited tantric yogic subtle body practices from China). That said, as we saw with Keesling, similarity in procedures may have nothing to do with shared culture or direct influence and may have more to do with the fact of shared biology and physiological response than shared culture.

²⁴⁶ See Lopez and Jinpa in Chopel, Lopez and Jinpa (2018 [Kindle edition]) for further discussion of the various editions of Gechö’s treatise.

²⁴⁷ Gechö's ngakpa father and Dr Nida were both recognized as reincarnations of Rigdzin Palden Tashi, one of the major founders of the Rebkong ngakmang. It is thus perhaps fitting in more ways than one that Nida should have composed his own dōten.

²⁴⁸ The full stanza reads: "when the baby is surgically removed through a C-section, or is born with an episiotomy, if the wound is not properly healed, give up penetrative intercourse and use other methods [for pleasure]" (*phru gu gshag 'don byas pa dang/ mngal kha gshag nas skyes pa la/ rma kha legs po ma sos par/ 'khrig sbyor spang la thabs gzhan bsten*)

²⁴⁹ As mentioned above, however, the lapsing of Sorig Khang International's Tibetan language website has meant that the entire treatise in its original form is now no longer as available as it once was to Tibetans.

²⁵⁰ I was not alone in this observation. During a conversation over Facebook messenger in January 2016 about NT and Sherab's translation, Tibetan historian Dr Tsering Shakya voiced identical concerns to my own about the practicality of Keesling's techniques for the average Tibetan man in exile.

²⁵¹ I had heard that Gechö's dōten was banned reading material in many monasteries in Tibet, something Nida later confirmed. Indeed, Gechö himself says that monks ought not to read his book.

²⁵² One of Nida's most important teachers in this regard was Khenpo Troru Tsenam (*khro ru tshe rnam*, 1926 – 2004), a greatly revered doctor and ngakpa who had an enormous impact on Nida. Troru Tsenam's life exemplifies the complex official and unofficial relationship between religion and traditional medicine in post-occupation Tibet. Troru Tsenam was ordained as monk at six and studied Nyingma and Kagyu curricula at Troru and Kathok monasteries, where he earned the highest academic honors. He was then placed in a labor camp for ten years during the Cultural Revolution, where all expressions of religion were illegal, but where he continued to work covertly as a religious teacher and somewhat more openly as a doctor. Chinese government officials later formally apologized to him for having confused him for a lama in place of a doctor and having imprisoned him, and from the late 70s onwards he began to provide instruction in both medical and Buddhist practice on a large scale and became involved in several publication and preservation initiatives. He served as a teacher and curriculum developer at major state-funded educational institutions for Sowa Rigpa in Central Tibet and travelled to the United Kingdom in 1994 on the invitation of Akong Rinpoche and his Tara Institute of Medicine. For more on Troru Tsenam's life in English, see Ken Holmes, "Professor Khempo Troru Tsenam Rinpoche, Tara-Rokpa's Director of Studies, a more detailed biography and interview," Tara Rokpa, accessed October 16, 2019, <http://www.khenpo.org/tara/khenpo.html>.

²⁵³ For more details, see Joffe (2017a).

²⁵⁴ For more information on transnational developments around the intersection of religion and science in Sowa Rigpa, see Adams, Schrempf and Craig (2010) and Craig (2012).

²⁵⁵ While the Four Tantras describe methods for diagnosing spirit maladies and prescribe the use of mantras for healing in places, overall the texts do not provide detailed instruction in tantric/ritual healing methods, assuming instead that doctors will either refer patients to ritual specialists when required or will look to other sources (like the Yutok Nyingtik, for example) for further instruction on how to master and apply these methods themselves.

²⁵⁶ Unfortunately, the Sorig International Tibetan language site where this was originally published has lapsed, and at the time of writing I only had a copy of my English translation on file.

²⁵⁷ Following this introduction, Nida then goes on to suggest five specific areas in which research into the integration of medicine and Buddhism/Tantra could be beneficially pursued. These areas are, briefly: 1) research into the "outer, inner, and secret" perspectives on demons and spirit-caused sickness, and how these might correlate with other etiologies for disease and misfortune 2) ways in which traditional explanations of the vajra body or tantric subtle anatomy can supplement medical theories of the body 3) investigation into the medical value of sutric and tantric Buddhist dietary and lifestyle recommendations (specifically, Nida notes that "practices like chulen or elixir extraction (*bcud len*), religious fasting (*smyung gnas*), prostrations and circumambulations, visualization, physical yoga training (*lus sbyong*), Nejang yogic self-massage, and *rtsa*

rlung channels-winds procedures have exceedingly great preventative and curative benefits”) 4) increased study and application of the ritual healing procedures, tantric yogic instructions, pharmaceutical recipes, and ritual methods for protecting against contagious diseases as found in Tibetan terma texts and 5) increased appreciation for and research into Buddhist psychological theories and treatments as embodied in doctrines of karma, interdependent causation, Madhyamaka philosophy, and the practice of ‘calm-abiding’ (*zhi gnas*) or so-called ‘mindfulness’ meditation and Dream Yoga.

²⁵⁸ The Dharamsala Mentseekhang curriculum now includes a supplementary syllabus on Buddhist philosophy but anthropologist of Tibetan medicine Stephan Kloos has noted (2014) that this is not always fully followed and is intended to provide, introductory general knowledge, rather than any sort of training in Secret Mantra.

²⁵⁹ Given its unique features and status as a ‘Vajrayāna for doctors’ manual, the Yutok Nyingtik has received remarkably little sustained attention from non-Tibetan scholars. In her well over five hundred page long sweeping treatment of the relationship between religion and medicine in Tibetan intellectual history, Janet Gyatso mentions the Yutok Nyingtik only in passing and she says next to nothing about its contents. For existing English-language studies of the Yutok Nyingtik aside from Nida’s work, see Erhard (2007), Garrett (2010), and Samuel (2016). See also Gentry (2019), for an interesting discussion about the influence the sixteenth century Nyingma apologist and ngakpa-doctor Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyaltsen’s (1552 – 1624) practice of the Yutok Nyingtik’s Guru Yoga *sādhana*s had on his argument for the divine scriptural status of the Four Medical Tantras.

²⁶⁰ Yutok’s heart-disciple Sumtön records that the “seal” of secrecy on Yutok’s revealed teachings was removed (i.e. he gave the first public transmissions of these) in 1198, although Yang Ga has argued that text already existed as early as 1188 (see Gyatso, 2015, 435). Sumtön Yeshe Zung’s notes, which form the original core of the cycle, have been edited and expanded by several different master lineage-holders, making the Yutok Nyingtik, a highly composite and polyvocal scripture.

²⁶¹ Throughout this dissertation I have typically written as if Yutok was the author of particular cited teachings. As Nida explains in his introduction to his and Hungchen’s edition of the Dharma-cycle, however, while the Nyingtik’s preliminary practices, Guru Yoga *sādhana*s, empowerment rituals, outline of tantric vows, *gtor ma* and medicine offering rites are all based on Sumtön’s handwritten “notes” (*zin bris*) based on Yutok’s direct oral teachings, the cycle’s Completion Stage practices, including its Karmamudrā instructions are unattributed (a short text on *‘khrul ‘khor* practices that closes this section is attributed in the colophon, funnily enough to “the one known as Nida” but as the contemporary Nida explains there is no historical information on this individual). Given that Yutok was a ngakpa said to have been versed in sexual yoga practices, it is not unreasonable to assume that the Nyingtik’s sexual yoga instructions derive from his oral teachings. Nida states that the Nyingtik’s Dzogchen teachings were based on Sumtön notes but were expanded by Zurkharwa in the fifteenth century. Several new texts and edits were added by Desi Sangye Gyatso and the Fifth Dalai Lama in the seventeenth century, by Jamgön Kongtrul Rinpoche in the nineteenth, and Karma Jigme Chokyi Senge in the twentieth century (see Nida’s summary in *Nyi zla he ru ka* 2005, 1 - 8).

²⁶² Nida underscores the fact that the Yutok Nyingtik and Yutok and Sumtön all belong to the Nyingma tradition, noting that the *bsnyen sgrub* and Dzogchen practices found in the cycle are all distinctly Nyingma. Nonetheless, he stresses that the Yutok Nyingtik is “a non-sectarian doctrinal system (*grub mtha’*)” which practitioners from any school are able to practice (*Nyi zla he ru ka* 2005, 7). For further commentary from Nida on the Yutok Nyingtik’s non-sectarian qualities, see Joffe (2016c).

²⁶³ Until quite recently, the field of Tibetan medicine has been almost entirely dominated by hereditary, male physicians. In the last quarter of a century however, the training of female doctors without pre-existing familial connections has advanced hugely, both inside and outside of Tibet. For more on gender and the transmission of medicine see Gyatso (2015) and Craig (2012).

²⁶⁴ Yutok’s preliminary practices also include the circumambulations of an icon of the Medicine Buddha while reciting his mantra and performing special visualizations. This practice is unique to the Dharma-cycle and not typically found in other *sngon ‘gro* systems. Practitioners of Yutok’s preliminaries ideally perform the full cycle of preliminaries four times each day, along with protector practices in the evening, *tsok* and other prayers. While the four-session model of practice is fairly standard, rather than repeat key portions of specific prayers 108 times as is customary, practitioners repeat them 101 times. This enables them to recite each major prayer 404 times in

a day, a number with particular significance in Sowa Rigpa. Tibetan medical tradition recognizes 404 basic categories of illness: i.e. 101 types of illness which arise spontaneously and usually resolve by themselves without intervention; 101 types of illness caused by spirit provocation which require ritual therapy; 101 types of illness that arise with the seasons and through poor diet, lifestyle and so on, and which respond to medical intervention; and finally 101 types of karmic illness inherited from previous lifetimes which can only rarely be cured in one's current lifetime and which do not respond to medicine. By reciting each preliminary prayer 101 times four times a day, practitioners intone one iteration of each major preliminary practice for each type of illness, each day. For more on these points and Yutok's *sngon 'gro* more generally, see Chenagtsang (2013).

²⁶⁵ *Rigs 'dus rgyal ba bla ma sman rgyal gyi dkyil 'khor du dbang dang gdams pa thob pa'i rnal 'byor gyis* (HUM chen he ru ka and nyi zla he ru ka 2005, 310).

²⁶⁶ Once the appropriate retreats have been completed and pacts made, these spirits, when requested, whisper in doctor's ears or appear in their inner vision, divinatory mirrors etc., helping them to correctly diagnose disease and suggest treatments in difficult, confusing, or recalcitrant cases.

²⁶⁷ These routine preliminaries are described as: venerating and offering service to the one's teachers and other objects of worship, the giving of donations to the weak and poor, dispensing of medicine to the sick [for free], saving sick people and animals from death through ransom offerings, building and restoring Buddhist temples and monasteries, improving dangerous roads, expounding the teachings of the Buddha, organizing group practice sessions and celebrations, and so on. See Chenagtsang (2013).

²⁶⁸ The Tibetan original was, once again, along with several other articles in Tibetan by Dr Nida, originally hosted on the Sorig International Tibetan language site (www.sorig.net) but the domain for this site has lapsed. Sorig.net used to be the Tibetan language site, but now all old links divert to an English language site under the same name. I have discussed with Nida on several occasions whether the Tibetan language site's content will be rehomed online. Nida, not having the technical know-how for managing domain content, has left this issue to others.

²⁶⁹ Jamgön Kontrul Rinpoche also explains that for those who wish simply to "enter into connection [with Yutok and his lineage]" (*'brel 'jog*) practicing the preliminaries in retreat for four days and a Guru Yoga *sādhana* for three to make up one week is permissible at a bare minimum (cf. Joffe 2016c).

²⁷⁰ These abodes, while originally associated 'on the outer' with pilgrimage sites throughout India and the Himalayas, were subsequently relocated in Tibet as part of complex processes involving tantric exegesis by scholars and yogi-meditators and socio-economic and political factors involved in the institutionalizing and incorporation of pilgrimage sites by Buddhist authorities. For more on these processes and the identification of the twenty four abodes in Tibet, see Huber (1990; 1999).

²⁷¹ In his short survey of Tibetan *lus sbyong 'khrul 'khor* lineages, Minyak Gonpo likewise notes the extent to which tantric yogic bodily exercises have been incorporated into medicine. He explains that traditionally, tantric yogi/nis have focused on 'mental training/purification' (*sems sbyong*), using bodily training/purification as an auxiliary practice to facilitate that more ultimate goal. He notes that there exist "many uncommon, profound Dharma teachings concerning *sems sbyong* in the [various] classes of Secret Mantra tantric texts and texts of esoteric, pith instructions by great adepts", which "go beyond the kinds of things that can be practiced by ordinary, uninitiated (*phal pa*) people". While he acknowledges that explaining such instructions to the uninitiated risks succumbing to the tantric transgression of "proclaiming/shouting out the secrets" (*gsang ba sgrogs pa*), he clarifies that this does not mean that tantric yogic practices cannot therefore be taught to ordinary people at all. As he explains:

"Ordinary, worldly, uninitiated people's aim in doing *lus sbyong* is to increase bodily strength, lightness [i.e. agility], to be free from sickness, increase longevity, clarify perception, and increase mental well-being, and so on. As such, *lus sbyong* is here regarded as primary, with *sems sbyong* seen as a helpful or supportive factor (*mthun rkyen*). Still, the body and the mind are indivisible and joined together as fire is to heat. If one has mental happiness, one enjoys bodily well-being and fewer diseases, when one is physically well, one's perception is clear and one is mentally happy. For this reason, mental training remains indispensable [even for ordinary people]. Thus, not only [do I think that] this Tibetan *lus sbyong* science of ours which has such great benefits for people is something that absolutely should be explained to others, I am very disappointed as well

that despite it being something that everyone really ought to be introduced to, it has hitherto been something talked about or explained only very little. The Tibetan science of *lus sbyong* is a supplement to the science of physical body exercise (*lus rtsal rig pa*) and is included in the science of healing (*gso ba rig pa*). An indispensable and most excellent science or field of knowledge (*rig gnas shig*), *lus sbyong* increases people's bodily strength, extends their longevity, frees them from sickness, and promotes ethical conduct, and as such doing research into and increasing and promoting it is of the utmost importance." (2002, 3-4)

²⁷² Although Nida now lives in Rome as a permanent resident with his wife and two sons, he travels on a Chinese passport and is registered as a county doctor in his home region of Tibet. Most of the patients who came for consultations with him over that week knew him and his background well (indeed, a not insignificant number of the patients who showed up were members of his extended family).

²⁷³ In another striking instance of local Tibetans' positing Nida as lama, I joined Nida one day at a local Tibetan restaurant for a lunch funded by one of his many cousins. This cousin, a middle-aged nomad mother, brought her pre-pubescent son with her. During the course of our meal, she explained somewhat anxiously that her son was doing poorly in his studies and she was concerned for his future. She requested that Nida give the boy something of his as a blessing, to help her son do better at school. After some deliberation Nida took off the sweat-stained wife-beater he was wearing under his shirt and gave it to the boy to wear. "This is really the Tibetan way!" Nida remarked to those of us foreigners at the table who had been unable to follow his cousin's local dialect and request. This appeal was somewhat ironic, considering that Nida had by his own regular admission, been a terrible, truant student as a child. Indeed, at one point later in our trip, Nida shared with me how he had hated attending school so much as a kid that he had once pulled out one of his own teeth as a way to avoid attending classes. See Joffe (2017a) too, where Nida explains that while attending the Mahlo Sokdzong ethnic minorities middle school "my grades were pretty inferior on account of my childhood propensity for distraction and laziness" yet "despite having lost all desire to go to school I was unable to find any cause to get myself expelled".

²⁷⁴ *Bla* also appears as the first syllable in the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit word 'guru', "lama" (*bla ma*). Since *bla* can mean wandering soul-force as well as "high, above" and the concluding syllable suggests *a ma* or "mother", exegetes have typically glossed *bla ma* as either "the mother of the soul or flighty life-force" or as "the one who looks down from on high like a mother". For more on the etymology of *bla ma*, see Tucci (1977) and Lopez (1996).

²⁷⁵ Cycles of Vajrayāna practices typically include *tshé dbang* ceremonies, which are often performed at the close of other initiations. Such ceremonies are aimed at securing the longevity of would-be practitioners so they will have sufficient time to accomplish the transmitted practices in this lifetime. For a bio-culturally oriented explanation of the potential efficacy of *tshé dbang* and related Tibetan longevity *sādhana* practices (*tshé sgrub*), see Samuel (2012; 2014).

²⁷⁶ Available texts on *bla gnas* are oriented towards the healing of humans but see Maurer (2019) for a discussion of the circulation of *bla* through the bodies of horses, in the context of equine veterinary medicine.

²⁷⁷ The *bla* is typically said to pervade the feet at the new moon and then to progress from the big toe up the side of the body as the moon waxes until it reaches the crown of the head at the full moon. It then flows gradually back down the opposite side of the body to the feet as the moon wanes. *Bla* is said to move up from men's left toe and down their right side and to move up from women's right big toe and down their left.

²⁷⁸ Nida clarified that we should recite the short-vowelled Sanskrit syllables briefly and repeatedly in a quick steady rhythm and intone the long vowel ones in a slower, more extended way as we massaged each point in a relaxed way free of haste or strain. Nida encouraged us to experiment with touching and massaging different points in and around the *bla gnas* listed for each lunar day to discover which areas felt more sensitive, numb, pleasurable and so on. Any increase in sensitivity, pleasant tingling, itching, warmth etc. in and around the point we were massaging ought to be taken as a sign that our *bla* was stirring and increasing.

²⁷⁹ Nida explained that in general, we ought to visualize the mantric syllable resting in a blended red (hot) and white (cool) *thig le* energy-drop with a balanced temperature, as per the instructions in Mipam's text, but in

cases where we might wish to cool down a specific point we could visualize a cool, white *thig le* by itself as a seat for the syllable or visualize a single red, hot one if we needed to heat the spot up. Low libido is often associated with cold disorders (*grang nad*), cold or weak kidneys, circulatory problems and weak digestive heat in Tibetan medicine and so the emphasis of such massage is mostly warming, however. Mipam himself explains that points can be smeared with warming medicated unguents made from ingredients like clarified butter, honey, deer musk, nutmeg as part of the practice and recommends that points be heated in the sun and then massaged, see Dge 'dun chos 'phel and mi pham rgya mtsho 1969, 119).

²⁸⁰ As Ali explains, in the context of describing Chandrakala, Padmaśrī “adds further mantras that involved the visualization/activation of other syllables on the vagina and clitoris that were to be used before touching the woman’s body or even for the purpose of deterring the advances of rival suitors... Most notably, the ‘three syllable’ (tryaksara) and ‘stimulation’ (ksobhana) mantras, as well as a visualization of a rival suitor’s name within the vagina of his beloved, together with seed syllables and the like, in order to kill him” (2011, 48).

²⁸¹ Pronouns are implicit in Mipam’s pithy verses, as is typical for much Tibetan writing, so it is not entirely clear whether readers are supposed to be visualizing syllables and smearing substances on their own or on their lover’s bodies or on both/either. Mipam’s instruction to do things like “rub and kiss on the location to arouse exceeding pleasure and thereby increase bliss” (*mchog tu dga' bas nyed cing 'o bya sogs/ gnas der lhag par byas pas bde 'phel*) suggests that his instructions are to be performed on a partner’s body. Nida made it clear however, that the practice could and should be applied as a form of self-arousal/healing as well. One could argue that this represents the further ‘tantrification’ of a quasi/para-tantric practice, since contra the claims of the contemporary, global New Age ‘Tantric/Yoni Massage’ industry, explicitly tantric yogic *rtsa rlung 'khrul 'khor* forms of massage like Nejang almost always involve yogis and yoginis applying massage to their *own* bodies as part of self-cultivation, rather than techniques intended for use on others.

²⁸² Scholar of Japanese Buddhism Bernard Faure explains how nyasa makes the bodies of sentient beings and Buddhas equivalent in the context of Japanese esoteric Buddhism: “Nyasa is the cosmologization or divinization of the body (or of an object), which is effected by touching its various parts, depositing the corresponding deities or energies [often in the form of mantric seed-syllables] in them, and "sealing" them with appropriate mudrās (symbolic gestures). Through these macro and microcosmic correlations, which allow for the superimposition of a cosmic diagram on the grid of the body, man is cosmicized, while the cosmos is divinized (and ultimately, humanized). Man becomes a universe in expansion (and resorption), that is, a living mandala” (2000, 554 – 555). For more on such ‘imposition’ and cosmicization of the body, and humanization of the cosmos in the context of the Kalachakra, see Wallace (2009).

²⁸³ These categories are: speech-purifying/activating mantras (here repeated recitations of the Sanskrit and Tibetan alphabets); standard mantras for multiplying the power of one’s recitations and for “saving” or sealing the power of these once completed, said before and after recitation practice respectively; a few exoteric mantras connected with healing Buddhas and some more esoteric mantras connected with Yutok and yidam from the Yutok Nyingtik; standard mantras for the purification of all diseases and negative forces associated with the five [Indian] elements and associated with the essence of Body, Speech, Mind and the elements in their wrathful, tantric mode as the five Dakas/Herukas and Dakinis; mantras for influencing the three humors and diseases connected with imbalances of these; mantras for chronic internal or metabolic disorders; mantras for the five solid organs (heart, lungs, liver, spleen, and kidneys) ; mantras for the five hollow organs (gallbladder, small and large intestines, bladder, stomach); mantras for the digestive organs/digestive problems; mantras for pain/pain-killing mantras; mantras for colds and fever; mantras for neurological problems; mantras for the sense organs; mantras for the thyroid and thyroid disorders; mantras for the joints and rheumatism type disorders; mantras for skin and scalp problems; mantras for wounds and injuries (first aid mantras for burns, to stop bleeding, heal cuts as well as for hemorrhoids); mantras for blood pressure, mantras for reproductive issues (for menstrual problems, infertility, increasing/decreasing sex drive, for contraception, for facilitating conception and easing labor etc.); mantras for psychological and sleep disorders; mantras for addiction and detoxification; mantras for preventing infection of contagious diseases and increasing immunity, reducing allergies, as well as for protecting against fire and floods); and finally the Four *rbad* mantra that cures one hundred diseases which I discuss further below.

²⁸⁴ For a discussion of Mipam’s preservation and promotion of Chinese magical rites as part of the Tibetan genre of *gto* rituals, and as part of an overarching Buddhist rubric focused on benefitting Tibetan commoners and their everyday needs, see Lin (2005).

²⁸⁵ Sam Van Schaik, “Magic, Healing, and Ethics in Tibetan Buddhism,” University of Oxford podcasts, podcast audio, December 6, 2018, <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/magic-healing-and-ethics-tibetan-buddhism>.

²⁸⁶ For a discussion of inscribed and recited mantra magic among Burmese weizza, see Patton (2012; 2018). For ethnographic treatment of the busy array or “cacophony” of multiple overlapping magical, medical and religious influences in Thai Buddhist ritual traditions, see McDaniel (2013) and also Jenx (2018). For a detailed comparison between tantra-like Theravada meditation methods and Vajrayāna proper, see Crosby (2019).

²⁸⁷ For a translation of a discussion by Nida on mantra healing “do’s and don’ts” see Joffe (2017c).

²⁸⁸ The adverbial expression *rbad de*, means “completely, totally” but *rbad* by itself has a more onomatopoeic quality. While it sounds somewhat similar and is used in rather parallel ways to the wrathful, exorcistic syllable *phaT* the two syllables are nonetheless distinct.

²⁸⁹ I.e. *rang nyid ngo bo*, “your essence-being, your own [true] face”. Nida suggested that to aid this perception we could imagine that a tiny Chenrezig resided in the heart-center of outer form.

²⁹⁰ While Mipam’s text says nothing about group practice specifically, Nida encouraged members of our class to consider completing their accumulation vigil with others. As it happened, Lama Bob ended up opening his ngakkhang up for the night for those who wanted to practice the *sādhana* together. Nida explained that unbroken group recitation amplified the power of mantras and suggested that those who joined bring strong spirit alcohol like vodka which they could bless with the force of their accumulated mantras at the end of their one-night retreat.

²⁹¹ Various Vajrayāna scriptures describe Shiva and his consort in their non-Buddhist tantric forms of Bhairava/Bhairavi as being conquered by superior tantric Buddhas, who then take on these Śaivite deities’ forms and attributes as Buddhas. Accordingly, *lha chen dbang phyug*, i.e. Shiva/Bhairava appears as an important worldly deity in Tibetan Buddhism, where he is typically described as Chenrezig in worldly guise. Rites of propitiation to the enlightened ‘Buddhist’ Shiva and his retinue form the main practices of the so-called “worldly offerings and praises” (*jig rten mchod bstod*) *sādhana*s of the *bka’ brgyad* teachings mentioned in Chapter Three.

²⁹² Troru Tsenam’s comments about the need to disseminate and disclose traditional Tibetan tantric knowledge more widely to ensure its survival possess a certain bitter irony here, given the fact that he, like Nida, had to keep his status and activities as a ngakpa fairly covert to avoid reprisals. Nida also told a story about how during his time as a student at the Lhasa Mentsekhang he had kept a small image of the Medicine Buddha on the wall above his bed in his dorm room. Several Tibetan students and teachers warned him that he should remove it since overt expressions of religion were forbidden in the secular, state institution but he refused, and simply covered it with a curtain.

²⁹³ In compiling his texts on mantras and *gto* rituals Mipam notes that he compiled specific practices so that they could be beneficial to others. In his larger compendium of *gto* rituals, he goes to the trouble of explaining more general tantric Buddhist ritual procedures in a little more detail, which suggests a concern with making his work more widely accessible, at least relatively speaking (Lin 2005). In his mantra compilations Mipam only includes mantras relating to the first three of the four tantric ‘actions’ (pacifying/curing; increasing/expanding; and controlling/magnetizing) and purposefully leaves out violent or killing actions (*drag las*), to avoid these falling into the wrong hands. He likewise claims that his large *gto* collection includes only ‘benefiting’ rituals (*phan byed*), although these nonetheless include procedures for harming and killing enemies. While Nida and Hungchen’s *sngags kyi be’u bum* collection is skewed towards protective and curative procedures it likewise features violent rites to ‘subdue’ enemies in several places throughout.

²⁹⁴ The notion of ‘self-secrecy’ is invoked again by Bhutanese Nyingma ngakpa Bhakha Tulku Pema Rigdzin Rinpoche in his foreword to Ian Baker’s illustrated 2019 book on Tibetan tantric yoga practices. In justifying Baker’s disclosure of ideas and imagery related to some of the most secret areas of Vajrayāna practice, Bhakha

Tulku notes that it is “well-established...that texts reveal only the outer meaning and that the inner meaning is conveyed to the practitioner directly by his or her teacher”. He acknowledges that “in old Tibet, this transmission occurred when the teacher whispered the secret oral instructions into a disciple’s ear through a hollow bamboo tube” but adds that, “ultimately it is only through direct experience that the secret, non-conceptual meaning arises in the mindstream of sincere practitioner. The innermost practices of Tantric or Vajrayāna Buddhism are in this sense *rang sang*, or self-secret. In other words, whatever can be said about them is like giving someone a map to a hidden treasure. The map indicates the way, but unless the map is understood correctly the treasure remains an unattainable dream.” (2019, 8)

²⁹⁵ One of the ways in which Nida’s audiences for Karmamudrā teachings specifically are unprecedented is in terms of their average age. As mentioned in Chapter Five, the period between about eight and thirty years of age has traditionally been considered the ideal time in which to engage in *rtsa rlung* practices. I have heard Nida joke on numerous occasions about how so many of his students worry about whether they are qualified in terms of their level of yogic training, initiation etc. to engage in sexual yoga, but ironically, most of them are, at least by traditional standards, disqualified simply because they are too old and tired (it is not uncommon that thirty is the *youngest* age of attendees at some of Nida’s teachings). Aging and the accumulated physical and psychic stress this brings (childbirth, physical labor, and the grief of losing loved ones in particular) damages, deforms and knots the channels and depletes the store of *thig le*, reducing libido which makes stimulating the requisite levels of joy and sexual excitement for Karmamudrā practice difficult or impossible. In his ‘Cure for Horniness’, Lelung explains that it is very difficult to succeed in Karmamudrā unless one begins training before thirty (he specifies though that both male and female Karmamudrās’ “youthful beauty should have fully matured”, *lus lang tsho dar la babs pa*, before they begin practicing, i.e. that they should not be pre-pubescent). As Nida explained, traditional yogic training was an elegant system in which yogi/nis’ began practicing from pre-pubescence so that they mastered *rtsa rlung*, *gtum mo* etc. by the time they reached the age when they were most horny and inclined to enter into sexual relationships or marry. Nida is of the opinion, however, that traditional cut-off ages are no longer as relevant in the contemporary context, where quality of diet, life and overall life-expectancy had improved dramatically. He also cites Yutok, who states that humans, provided they are healthy, can maintain a strong libido into their seventies. Moreover, Nida’s Karmamudrā teacher in Tibet Lhanyön Rolpa Tsal continued practicing well into his seventies (see pg. 245) and when Nida asked him about traditional texts’ statements about being too old to practice he retorted that these texts’ authors must have said this merely because *they* were impotent (cf. Chenagtsang 2018, 71 -72).

²⁹⁶ Like Dr Nida, Lelung Zhepai Dorje also emphasized the medical value of tantric yogic exercises (this is especially apparent in Lelung’s pith instructions on so-called *bhrU rlung* yogic breathing exercises said to be traceable back to the eighth century Muslim alchemist Jabir, *dza ha bir*, in which the ngakpa clearly explains how these tantric yogic procedures can be used to treat specific medical problems (see Bzhad pa’i rdo rje 1974 - 1976). This curative component of Lelung’s teachings is also highlighted – albeit critically – in the entry for Lelung in the Dungkar Tibetan Dictionary. Part of this entry states: “Although he took *dge tshul* and *dge slong* monastic vows he later relied on a number of women [i.e. Karmamudrā consorts]. He is said to have had unobstructed clairvoyance and to have been an accomplished tantric adept (*grub thob*)” The compilers go on to accuse Lelung Rinpoche of composing several volumes worth of texts which “mixed together Nyingma and Gelukpa teachings that don’t belong together at all” and which described “practices and medical treatments [to be performed] while using a consort” (*rnying ma dang dge lugs gang la yang mi gtogs pa’i chos phar bsre tshur bsre mang po zhig dang bud med bsten skabs kyi lag len sman bcos bris ma sogs kyi dpe cha brtsams pas*, Monlam dictionary app 2019).

²⁹⁷ Although he clarifies that he is writing his text at the request of his consort, and while he does provide more information on the ideal qualities of a male consort than is often found in texts written for men, by men, in practice Lelung Rinpoche shifts his focus quite regularly between giving instructions to male-bodied and female-bodied practitioners. These gendered dimensions of his text are fascinating and deserve fuller analysis but are unfortunately beyond the scope of this chapter.

²⁹⁹ To wit: “When the time comes to have sex itself, for superior practitioners, the man should clearly visualize himself as Thukje Chenpo (i.e. Chenrezig) and the woman should clearly establish herself as the Secret Wisdom Dakini Sangwa Yeshe. Even if you cannot visualize [yourselves in this way], you should resolve completely and think to yourselves that you really are [these meditative deities]. Maintain [divine tantric] pride. Visualize that

the outer vajra or penis has the inward form of a white, five-pronged vajra and visualize clearly that the outer form of the lotus has the inner form of a red three petalled lotus...Even if you can't establish this visualization, the most important thing is that you maintain the divine pride that you are the two father and mother yidam deities".

³⁰⁰ Lelung does describe a simple ejaculation control *'khrul 'khor* that is highly similar to those discussed in the previous chapter.

³⁰¹ For more on Togden Shakya Shri's life, lineage, and legacy, see Kathok Situ Chokyi Gyatso (2011); Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche (2005); and Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2014).

³⁰² Shakya Shri's Ati Yoga terma appears in a cycle of mind-treasures (*dgongs gter*) revealed by the ngakpa in the course of visions he had while meditating in retreat, during lucid dreams, while recovering from illness and so on. The text we included comes from a collection of terma that describes itself as the "ultimate consummation" of esoteric practices from the oral lineage teachings of Creation Stage practices associated with Chakrasamvara in the Kagyu tradition (*snyan brgyud gsang ba'i mthar thug*). Shakya Shri's collection of revelations includes extensive instructions on Tummo and Karmamudrā practices involving catheter training. Indeed, Shakya Shri notes in his history for these teachings that he was especially concerned about restoring the catheter sucking and penis retraction practices (*thur ma, rdo rje sbubs 'dren*) once associated with the "white [robe] yogi lineage" (*dkar brgyud*) which appeared to have lapsed. He explains that yogis had inquired of him whether such practices still existed and he had wondered himself, so "blazing with unbearable devotion and powerful longing for previous [masters] of the white [robe] lineage" all of these teachings appeared as fully-formed visions in his mind and he recorded them. He then taught these practices to students who put them to use, experienced great spiritual accomplishments, and came to have belief in them (Shakya shrI 1998a). The hybrid Anu-Ati Yoga text we included as an appendix in the Karmamudrā book and which does not involve Tummo or catheter procedures is titled "The Stages of Instruction on the Swift Path of the Great Bliss of Primordial Purity, the Highest, Great Secret Heart-Essence of the Awareness-Holder Siddhas" (*ka dag bde chen myur lam gyi khrid rim rig 'dzin grub pa'i thugs tig gsang chen bla med*). It appears as a kind of segue in the collection between more elaborated *rtsa rlung* practices and Mahamudrā and Dzogchen instructions. Shakya Shri explains in his colophon to the text that "although all sorts of other Lower Gate Great Bliss [i.e. Karmamudrā] methods have been compiled in most of the classes of tantras in the New and Old schools, these have all been ones involving exertion or effort. No one before now has been able to proclaim an essential teaching like this, one which is totally effortless and which [arises] from the state of primordially pure *rig pa* that goes beyond all conceptual thought" (Shakya shrI 1998b, 892 – 893). Even though in Shakya Shri's original revelations these instructions come after teachings on sucking practices, Nida explained that this 'effortless', 'unelaborated' sexual *sāghanā* was quite popular among ngakpa and ngakma in Rebkong, who had not trained in more complicated catheter practices.

³⁰³ The bulk of the book's contents was made up of reworked transcripts from several such teachings, although I synthesized material from other sources as well, see my breakdown in Chenagtsang (2018, 29 – 32).

³⁰⁴ Few students who attend Nida's introductory Karmamudrā teachings go on to intensively practice Karmamudrā either alone or with a partner in retreat, and my conversations with Nida's students from different parts of the world has shown that not all those who receive Karmamudrā teachings from him go on to diligently practice Yutok's *thig le* breathing meditation at least once a day as he recommends.

³⁰⁵ Nida went back and forth on whether to include information about couple's practice in the book, since he felt this was something that should be best left to oral instruction under a teacher. At the same time, he recognized that most readers would be having ordinary sex with partners already, and so decided that some information about how to bring their existing sexual practices 'onto the path' even if they were uninitiated could be of benefit to them.

³⁰⁶ As I have described elsewhere, in his book "Sex, Sorcery, and Spirit: The Secrets of Erotic Magic" Miller draws on Tibetan tantric yogic frameworks and practices to augment Western sex magic procedures originally developed by Victorian occultists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a section on preliminary, daily practices of purification for example, Miller,

“...provides a set of visualizations based on the Vajrasattva meditation that forms a key part of Tibetan preliminary or ngondro practices, which prepare tantric Buddhist practitioners for advanced tantric meditation. Rather than visualize the tantric Buddhist deity Vajrasattva above their heads as usual, readers are instructed to imagine a generic pair of male and female deities in sexual embrace, or ones from their own tradition, and instead of reciting Vajrasattva’s 100 syllable mantra as they imagine white purifying nectar pouring from these figures and washing impurities from their being, Jason provides an original mantra for harnessing the combined essence of the elements which he directly received via trance when communicating with elemental spirits. In the same book, Jason also teaches altered versions of Tibetan Tummo...yoga and spirit offering and dedication rites based directly on Tibetan Buddhist models. Jason has stressed to me that he is not advocating for a hybridized Vajrayāna or an anything goes syncretism here. Instead, he has described his approach as ‘Jailbroken Tantra’ – spiritual technology freed from the constraints and controls of proprietary software. Through this notion Jason seeks to return the sorcerous technology of Vajrayāna to what he imagines as its original source in the decentralized authority and expertise of legendary ngakpa adepts. For Jason, reframing Vajrayāna as magic and as technique ultimately frees its unique technology from what he sees as stifling monastic regulation and later theocratic institutionalization and co-optation in Tibet” (Joffe 2017d, n/p).

³⁰⁷ As Nida explains in the Karmamudrā book:

“Today many students need a lot of *tri* or explanation and theory. Without such explanations, their meditation often doesn’t work. This is part of the reason why I think it is so useful to provide general explanations of things like the Vajra Body and empowerment. In ancient times, practicing meditation without much theoretical understanding worked for most practitioners. Even without knowing the exact theory of what they were doing, they were able to achieve great results. This was because they had trust – in themselves, in their teachers, in their traditions and lineages. Today everyone is an intellectual. We all have so many doubts, so many ideas, so much is yes-and-no. A lack of trust in ourselves and our innate capacities and in the capacities of our teachers and fellow practitioners is especially prevalent. Low self-esteem is one of the biggest problems of our times. People do not trust themselves. That is why today, in order to help students practice better and get results, the teachings have to be presented in a way that is accessible to the intellect. If students know the reasons behind traditional practices, things work better. This is a bit like praying. Students often ask me if they should chant Tibetan Buddhist prayers in Tibetan or not. There are many reasons why it is good to chant in Tibetan. Many prayers were received by great practitioners of the past through dreams, visions and profound meditative states. They carry with them a special power which we can tap into if we use them in their original form. Even so, saying prayers in Tibetan is much less powerful if you do not know the meaning of what you are reciting. We have to accept that we are not living in ancient times. We cannot transmit the teachings exactly how they were transmitted 500 years ago. This is no fault of the teachings, it has to do with the strange humans we have here now!” (Chenagsang 2018, 177 – 178).

³⁰⁸ For a fascinating, ethnographically informed discussion about Tibetan traditional medicine in exile’s relationship to global health and the former’s status as a kind of global “humanitarianism from below”, see Kloos (2019).

³⁰⁹ I was not personally present for the Dalai Lama’s speech. A video recording of his full speech can be found here: I have produced translations of his words based off of transcripts and paraphrases produced by staff at Tibet Times/*bod kyi dus bab* (see for example, Pad+ma rgyal. “Mngon lkog rgyab mdun mtshungs pa gngang rogs”, *Bod kyi dus bab*, March 23, 2016, <http://tibettimes.net/2016/03/23/146460/>) which I have compared with video recordings of the Dalai Lama’s speech. It appears to be fairly common for Tibetan journalists in exile to report on the speech of interviewees, presenters and public figures via written notes and memory rather than direct transcript, so there are a number of minor divergences between the Dalai Lama’s speech as cited in articles such as the one above and as heard in recordings. My summary here is the result of comparing journalists’ versions with such videos, and I believe it does an adequate job of conveying the gist of the Dalai Lama’s sentiments.

³¹⁰ In his speeches of advice, the Dalai Lama regularly associates *rmongs dad* with Hindus, Christians and Tamang (as well as other nominally Buddhist Himalayan border people), whose approach to religion he frames as being focused on externalized deity veneration, rote ritual, and the reification of concepts (see discussion in Lempert 2012). The Dalai Lama’s characterization of these groups’ approach to religion as superstitious and irrational compared to that of informed Buddhists aligns neatly with common Tibetan explanations for the fact

that Buddhists are called *nang pa* or 'insiders' in Tibetan and Buddhism is called *nang don rig pa*, or 'the science/study of inner matters or meanings'. Here Tibetans are not just 'insiders' because their country has for centuries maintained a Buddhist majority population and hegemony in which non-Buddhists are 'outsiders' or 'foreigners' (*phyi rol pa*), but because they place no faith in the concreteness of 'outside' appearances or in the intercession of any outside liberating power that somehow exists beyond the scope of one's own awareness/nature/capacities. A Buddhist is thus someone who looks for the ultimate source of both suffering and salvation, the origin of all experience and phenomena, inside or within (*nang la*). In this more philosophically inclined exegesis, non-Buddhists are thus not only frequently literally foreigners, but more importantly are people who place their faith in outer projections or fetishized appearances, whose devotion is deluded because they have failed to realize that there is no permanent or authentic source of Refuge outside of their own inner Buddha-nature or mind.

³¹¹ The question of Tibetan language proficiency requirements continued to be contentious throughout my time assisting at the College and beyond, and despite the College's pretensions of inclusivity, so far classes continue to privilege Tibetan-medium teaching and teaching materials over English to a significant extent.

³¹² As mentioned above, the Yutok Nyingtik was practiced and transmitted most prominently by doctors of the Zur lineage, founded by the prolific ngakpa-doctor Zurkharwa Lodrö Gyalpo (1509 – 1579). Zurkharwa had strong associations with Kagyu teachings and the rulers of the Tsang region who patronized them and fought wars against the Dalai Lamas based in U. After defeating his Tsangpa rivals, in a strikingly ecumenical, magnanimous move that accorded with his conception of medicine as "impartial", non-sectarian knowledge, the Fifth Dalai Lama re-established the medical school located within the fortress of his enemy in Shigatse. This school was associated with the Tsarong family lineage, an inheritor of Zur teachings and Yutok Nyingtik practice. Studying the code of conduct (*bca' yig*) that the Great Fifth devised to regulate the educational, social, and ritual lives of students at the Tsarong school, Van Fleet (2016) details how the Great Fifth ratified the Yutok Nyingtik and its private practice by students while "deprioritizing" it at the same time in favor of new public liturgical practices of his own composition. Van Fleet suggests that by adding supplication prayers and a *las byang* ritual liturgy of his own composition and by editing portions of the Nyingtik, the Great Fifth "reformed" and redeemed the Yutok Nyingtik, but my sense is that she may be reading too much into the Dalai Lama's statements in his *las byang* colophon in light of her broader argument in her article. While the Great Fifth indeed mentions that he condensed and removed "unwholesome" (*mi bde ba'i*) portions from the Nyingtik he only indicates that he did this in the *outer* Guru Yoga *sādhana*, and not the entire Dharma-cycle, as Van Fleet seems to imply or assume. Van Fleet also implies that the "unwholesome" sentences had to do with reprehensible admixtures of New and Old School systems in the text. While the Great Fifth does go on to state that he kept the Old and New Teachings distinct, it is not clear that this was his purpose in making the edits he describes in the antecedent lines. When I asked Nida what the Dalai Lama meant by "unwholesome" passage, he explained that this phrase merely referred to printing errors and had nothing to do with doctrinal issues.

³¹³ Figures like the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, Ju Mipam Rinpoche and Jamgön Kongtrul Rinpoche, who all studied medicine but did not practice it full-time as professional doctors, received initiation in the Cycle and practiced its *sādhana*s, for example.

³¹⁴ Gyurme stood out among his peers as being especially knowledgeable about and dedicated to Dharma, and I doubt that every one of his peers would have been as meticulous. Historically, Tibetans have been quite avid meat-eaters, Buddhist prohibitions against killing notwithstanding. Eating consecrated meat (especially beef) is a requirement in 'transgressive' tantric *tsok* practices, but this fact did little to mitigate Gyurme's sense that meat-eating was associated with sin and impurity. In this he may have been influenced by more recent trends towards lay vegetarianism in Tibet, associated with ethical reform movements that have been promoted by charismatic lamas since the 1980s. For more on such movements (as well as the measure of controversy they have accrued) see Barstow (2017) and Gayley (2016).

³¹⁵ Some of the books in the Research Center's catalogue are also available to read and download online at the Buddhist Digital Resource Center, although tantric grimoires containing mantras as well as texts with instructions on *thabs lam*, the Path of Means, or Karmamudrā practice, are restricted and require permission from the librarians to access (if texts on these topics appear in a *gsung 'bum* or 'collected teachings' anthology of a lama, they are not restricted, however). In order to gain access to such texts individuals must indicate which lineage-holder for the practice has authorized them to study the text, and supply information about that lineage-

holder's own teachers. In 2019, when seeking access to a scan of a lengthy text discussing Karmamudrā practice by the Fifth Lelung Rinpoche on Dr Nida's behalf, I sent the librarians a photograph of Nida with his guru Lhanyön Rolpa Tsal, who was one of his Karmamudrā teachers (as seen on pg. 245), which was sufficient along with an explanatory email about our purposes to gain access to the text.

³¹⁶ Conze is here referring to the Cyril Henry Hoskin a.k.a. Lobsang Rampa (1910 – 1981), the surgical fitter/plumber from Plympton in the United Kingdom who penned *The Third Eye* (Rampa 1956), an allegedly autobiographical novel about Hoskin's life as a Tibetan lama in Central Tibet prior to and during the Chinese invasion of the country. After being outed as a fraud by Tibetan Studies scholars who hired a private detective to determine who really authored the best-seller, Hoskin defended his work by claiming that his physical European body (which admittedly had never visited Tibet or even left the U.K.) had been taken over by the consciousness of a benign Tibetan lama in 1950. This lama's body had perished in Tibet and being in need of a new one to continue his work as a spiritual teacher outside the scope of Chinese control, he had approached Hoskin in an out-of-body vision and asked if the foreigner would let him adopt his. The latter acquiesced and from that day, by Hoskin/Rampa's reckoning at least, Hoskin ceased to exist. For more on Hoskin and his claims see Bharati (1974) and Lopez (1998).

³¹⁷ As Lorea mentions, perhaps the paradigmatic example of this approach in anthropology is Elsie Clews Parsons who in 1939 published material in her *Pueblo Indian Religion* which ultimately resulted in the retributive murder of several of her assumed informants for the violations of their initiatic oaths and which triggered book burning campaigns among Pueblo Indians in the 1960s.

³¹⁸ For a brief discussion of some of this dynamic in the context of anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann's ethnographic research into ritual magic groups and witchcraft covens in England in the 1980s, see Joffe (2016g).

³¹⁹ For a discussion of the history of mass Kalachakra tantra empowerment ceremonies in Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion, and their role in the forging of geopolitical links between Tibetan lamas and Chinese authorities, see Tuttle (2007). For an overview of the empowerment's global significance and recasting as a 'ceremony for world peace' in the post-invasion, diasporic context, see McLagan (2002).

³²⁰ As it happens, Lorea's call for a more ethnographically informed Tantric Studies coincides with similar appeals from within the field of (Western) Esotericism Studies. Like Tantric Studies, the somewhat newer field of Esotericism Studies has up until recently been marked by a decidedly textualist bent. See Crockford and Asprem (2018) for an explanation of how this is currently slowly changing.

³²¹ Alexander Berzin, "Common Root Tantric Vows," Study Buddhism, accessed October 16, 2019, <https://studybuddhism.com/en/advanced-studies/prayers-rituals/vows/common-root-tantric-vows>.