

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Volume 20, 2013

## Reimagining Buddhist Ethics on the Tibetan Plateau

Holly Gayley

University of Colorado, Boulder

*Copyright Notice:* Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: [cozort@dickinson.edu](mailto:cozort@dickinson.edu).



# Reimagining Buddhist Ethics

## On the Tibetan Plateau

Holly Gayley<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This article examines the ideological underpinnings of ethical reform currently underway in Tibetan areas of the PRC, based on a newly reconfigured set of ten Buddhist virtues and consolidated into vows taken en masse by the laity. I focus on texts of advice to the laity by cleric-scholars from Larung Buddhist Academy, one of the largest Buddhist institutions on the Tibetan plateau and an important source for an emergent Buddhist modernism. In analyzing texts of advice, I am interested in how leading Buddhist voices articulate a “path forward” for Tibetans as a people, calling simultaneously for ethical reform and cultural preservation. Specifically, I trace the tensions and ironies that emerge in their attempts to synthesize, on the one hand, a Buddhist emphasis on individual moral action and its soteriological ramifications and, on the oth-

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Religious Studies, University of Colorado, Boulder Email: [gayley@colorado.edu](mailto:gayley@colorado.edu).

er hand, a secular concern for the social welfare of the Tibetan population and the preservation of its civilizational inheritance. In doing so, I view ethical reform as part of a broader Buddhist response to China's civilizing mission vis-à-vis Tibetans and new market forces encouraged by the post-Mao state.

### Vow-Taking on the Tibetan Plateau

In Tibetan areas of the PRC, a new movement to assert Buddhist ethics is gaining momentum. Today Tibetans are taking vows en masse to stop engaging in activities like selling yaks for slaughter, fighting with knives or guns, and wearing tiger, leopard, or otter pelts as trim on their clothing. These vows are based on a newly formulated set of "ten virtues" (*dge bcu*) with prohibitions against hunting, wearing fur, stealing, visiting prostitutes, drinking alcohol, smoking, gambling, selling livestock for slaughter, fighting with weapons, and trading in arms. Whole villages and towns are committing to these ten virtues (or some portion of them) at the behest of their local lamas and clan leaders. This movement is brand new, and it is happening now.

This reformulation of lay Buddhist ethics is novel in several ways. First of all, it does not follow the traditional division of Buddhist virtues into the categories of body, speech, and mind, proscribing the physical acts of killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct alongside unwholesome ways of speaking and thinking, such as lying, slander, covetousness, and malice.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the new ten virtues focus on observable vices that affect

---

<sup>2</sup> The traditional ten Buddhist virtues proscribe the following non-virtues: killing (*srog gcod pa*), stealing (*rku 'phrog byed pa*), sexual misconduct (*'dod log spyod pa*), lying (*rdzun tshig*), slandering (*phra ma*), harsh speech (*tshig rtsub*), idle chatter (*ngag 'khyal*), covet-

social life in Tibetan areas. Each virtue prohibits a specific activity and is easily translatable into a vow to be taken by the laity. By adapting Buddhist ethics to address concrete social problems, Buddhist leaders are shifting the purport of moral choices from individual self-cultivation and the soteriological goal of a favorable rebirth to a concern for Tibetans as *a collective in this life*. The modernist emphasis on this-worldly social issues further distinguishes the new ten virtues from their traditional Buddhist counterpart.

Moreover, the manner of disseminating the new ten virtues through communal vow-taking is novel. The movement began in ad hoc fashion in the 1980s and 1990s with individual Buddhist teachers asking their lay followers to raise their hands in order to forsake specific vices, like drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes or hunting. More recently, this has evolved into more systematic efforts by monasteries and lay associations to promote vow-taking, based on the ten virtues or a local variant of them, household by household among whole communities and later tracking their performance.

The epicenter of this movement lies on the border of Sichuan and Qinghai Provinces in the county of Serta (Ch: Seda),<sup>3</sup> emanating from Larung Buddhist Academy, one of the largest and most influential Buddhist institutions in Tibetan areas of the PRC. Certified in 1987 as an ecumenical institute, Larung Buddhist Academy is a leading advocate of

---

ousness (*brnab sems*), malice (*gnod sems*), and wrong views (*log lta*). The first three have to do with negative actions of the body, the next four with speech, and the last three with mind.

<sup>3</sup> A county within Kandze Prefecture (Tib: Dkar mdzes; Ch: Ganzi) of Sichuan Province, Serta has a number of variant renderings: Gser rta, Gser thar, Gser thang, and Gser ljongs.

ethical reform and the locus of an emergent Buddhist modernism,<sup>4</sup> spearheaded by its charismatic founder Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok (Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, 1933–2004) and his successors.<sup>5</sup> The influence of Larung Buddhist Academy is keenly felt across the Tibetan plateau not only because of the prominence of its founder and its scale as an institution—with more than ten thousand monks and nuns—but also because many of the monastics who study there return to their home monasteries, bringing with them attitudes shaped by leading voices at Larung. This means that ethical reform has fanned out to areas surrounding Serta, such as Dzamthang, Drango, Ngawa, and Nyagrong, and also leapfrogged to places further away like Yushu.

In what follows, I examine the ideological underpinnings of this movement to rearticulate Buddhist ethics into a platform for social reform. Specifically, I examine how seminal works of advice to the laity by Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok and one of his principal successors, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö (Mkhan po Tshul khrims blo gros), have helped to shape this nascent ethical reform movement on the Tibetan plateau. In respective works of advice, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok provides the broad ideolog-

---

<sup>4</sup> The aspects of Buddhist modernism most evident in the works of advice to the laity discussed here have to do with (1) a this-worldly emphasis on ethics and social reform and (2) a rationalist presentation of Buddhism and its compatibility with science. Other aspects of Buddhist modernism as highlighted by David McMahan (2008), such as “de-traditionalization” entailing a shift from institutional authority to privatized religion, do not apply in this case. Instead, ethical reform stemming from Larung Buddhist Academy reasserts the authority of Buddhist leaders in governing social life and encourages vow-taking as a collective practice.

<sup>5</sup> Previously scholars have examined Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok’s reform of monasticism and critiques of non-celibate yogins; see respectively Germano 1998 and Terrone 2010. Among his successors, progressive cleric-scholars have been as interested in ethical reform as they have been in participating in a conversation on Buddhism and science. For example, see Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho n.d. and Tshul khrims blo gros 2004.

ical backdrop for the movement in his influential *Heart Advice to Tibetans for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (composed in 1995),<sup>6</sup> and Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö formulates this into a coherent series of action points in a later work, *Timely Advice: A Mirror that Illuminates the Two Systems* (2004).<sup>7</sup> I trace how the reimagining of Buddhist ethics in these works undergird the newly reformulated ten virtues as articulated in a recent handbook, *The Code of Ten Virtues Promulgated by Serta Larung* (2010),<sup>8</sup> and formally introduced in vow-taking ceremonies in recent years. I also base my discussion on interviews conducted in the summer of 2011 with Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö and others as well as recorded speeches, slogans, and posters produced by Larung Buddhist Academy.<sup>9</sup> The multimedia dimension of this movement is significant given the small percentage of Tibetans who can actually read Tibetan. Nonetheless, these publications by Larung cleric-scholars target a newly educated lay audience that has gained literacy in Tibetan through minority universities (*minzu daxue*) in Beijing, Lhasa, Chengdu, Lanzhou, and Xining. Progressive-minded monastics are also avid readers of materials by leading cleric-scholars at Larung Buddhist Academy, especially those who have spent time studying there.

---

<sup>6</sup> Mkhan chen 'Jigs med phun tshogs 'byung gnas, *Dus rabs nyer gcig pa'i gangs can pa rnams la phul ba'i snying gtam Sprin gyi rol mo* (composed in 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Mkhan po Tshul khriims blo gros, *Dus su bab pa'i gtam Lugs gnyis gsal ba'i me long* in *Yang dag lam gyi 'jug sgo blo gsar yid kyi dga' ston* in his collected works in two volumes (2003–4). This work has also been published in a stand-alone volume, *Lugs gnyis gsal ba'i me long* (2004) and reprinted in a newly released four-volume set of his collected works (n.d.). The page numbers given here refer to this recent reprint.

<sup>8</sup> 'Phrin las, *Gser ljongs bla ma rung gis gtan la phab pa'i dge bcu'i lugs srol* (2010). This is a composite text replete with excerpted passages and quotations from Buddhist masters, past and present. The main editor and compiler of this work is given as 'Phrin las, who in the colophon states that he has fashioned a multifaceted jewel from the speech of many wise and learned ones.

<sup>9</sup> I have gathered audio-visual materials related to ethical reform during regular trips to Tibetan areas of the PRC between 2004 and 2011.

In these tracts of advice to the laity, Khenpos Jigme Phuntsok and Tsultrim Lodrö position Buddhist ethics as central to the “path forward” (*mdun lam*) for Tibetans as a people, alongside cultural preservation, secular education, and ethnic unity. As in colonial Southeast Asia and Meiji Japan,<sup>10</sup> Buddhist leaders at Larung are encouraging the Tibetan laity to withstand the corrosive effects of rapid social change through a newly focused adherence to ethical principles. In doing so, they offer a Buddhist response to the civilizing mission articulated in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) discourse and to neoliberal ideology embodied in post-Mao state-sponsored initiatives to promote market capitalism. Both the Khenpos articulate ethical reform as part of an overarching Buddhist vision of progress, attempting to rescue Tibetans from the stigma of backwardness (Ch: *luohou*; Tib: *rjes lus*) assigned to minorities in state-sponsored media.<sup>11</sup> They do so while simultaneously promoting the preservation of Tibetan culture, which creates an underlying tension in their writings between reformist and preservationist impulses. To think through this tension, I trace the modernist elements in works by Khenpos Jigme Phuntsok and Tsultrim Lodrö, particularly how they interweave religious and secular concerns in addressing social issues facing Tibetans today. These tracts of advice and the movement they have spawned offer a concrete platform for social reform that, as we shall see, is not without its ironies.

---

<sup>10</sup> For example, see discussion of Khmer Buddhist vernacular works such as the *Gatilok* in Hansen 2007 and moral reform among new Buddhist groups in Meiji Japan such as the Hanseikai in Thelle 1987.

<sup>11</sup> See Gladney 2004 on the construction of Han Chinese as “modern” made possible through the representation of minorities as “primitive.”



## The Path Forward for Tibetans

Ethical reform began in Tibetan regions of the PRC in the 1980s as part of a widespread effort to revitalize Buddhism and Tibetan culture in the post-Mao era. One finds in the biographies of contemporary Buddhist masters references to ethical advice given to the laity, such as a public exhortation to not use pesticides, explosives or snares that harm animals in the context of a large-scale ritual gathering where the lay *upāsaka* (*dge bsnyen*) vow was bestowed.<sup>12</sup> These kinds of events indicate the importance of vow-taking ceremonies to reconstituting Tibetans as Buddhist after an almost twenty-year hiatus of religious practice—starting with the socialist transformation of Tibetan areas in the late 1950s until the inauguration of reform across China in 1978. In such cases, it is not entirely clear what constitutes the *upāsaka* vow, one or all of the customary five precepts (to refrain from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and consuming intoxicants) or simply the refuge vow in addition to the exhortations described. The main point is to note that ethical reform and vow-taking have been part of the Buddhist revival since its inception in the 1980s. What is novel today is the systematization of such ad hoc advice into specific vows designed around a reconfigured set of ten Buddhist virtues.

A landmark came in 1995 with the publication of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok's influential *Heart Advice to Tibetans for the 21st Century* (hereafter: *Heart Advice*), whose message has been disseminated in the intervening years through videos, speeches, slogans, posters, and even pop music.<sup>13</sup> In *Heart Advice*, the Khenpo presents a Buddhist vision of the “path forward” for Tibetan into the 21st century during a time when debates over modernity and the role of Tibetan culture were raging among urban

---

<sup>12</sup> This example is dated to 1985 in Padma ‘od gsal mtha’ yas 1997: 60–61.

<sup>13</sup> See Gayley 2011 for a detailed study of this text and its modes of dissemination.

Tibetan intellectuals (Hartley 2002). Advocating Tibetan unity in order to move forward as a nationality (Ch: *minzu*; Tib: *mi rigs*), *Heart Advice* outlines the basis for collective action in a programmatic set of values that promotes Buddhist ethics as a mainstay of Tibetan culture and the custodian of progress.

Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok begins *Heart Advice* by harkening to the imperial period (seventh to ninth centuries) as a point of ethnic pride and source for Tibetan civilization. In particular, he emphasizes Tibet's long history as a civilization, dating back to "our ancestor" (*rang re'i mes po*) the seventh-century emperor Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgampo), who expanded the Tibetan empire to cover much of central Asia, introduced a Tibetan system of writing, and began the centuries-long project of importing Buddhism into Tibet. By asserting that Tibet has long been civilized, the Khenpo tacitly challenges the Han "civilizing project" and the stigmatized identities that typically develop among minorities in China (Harrell 1995). The imperial period provides an important source of ethnic pride and unity as an era of Tibetan glory and might, as a time of political unity across the Tibetan plateau, as the moment of Buddhism's first propagation in Tibet, and as the ancestral source for Tibetans symbolically construed as relatives. As such, this period is a crucial touchstone in ethical tracts emanating from Larung Buddhist Academy, which idealize the Tibetan past by harkening to its origins as a righteous land with inhabitants of noble character (*ya rabs*) in contrast with a morally degenerate present in which Tibetans are being pulled by alien forces toward modern forms of barbarism.

In *Heart Advice* as a whole, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok advocates for a synthesis of the ancient and modern (*gna' deng zung du sbrel*), whereby Buddhist ethics stands for the ancient while science and technology stand for the modern. He takes a relatively progressive stance, asking Tibetans to "maintain the worthy traditions of our forefathers so that

they do not vanish” while also “adopting new, modern [forms of] knowledge, to the degree that they are beneficial in both the long and short term” (3–4). *Heart Advice* thereby advocates preserving Tibetan culture alongside promoting secular education and economic development, going so far as to encourage Tibetans to become more active in commerce, manufacturing, and construction (102–107). In order to rescue Buddhism from any lingering associations with superstition (Ch: *mixin*; Tib: *rmongs dad*),<sup>14</sup> more than half of *Heart Advice* is dedicated to discussing the compatibility of Buddhism with science and emphasizing the rational character of Buddhist faith.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the Khenpo promotes Buddhist ethics as the custodian of progress, tempering the negative aspects of technological advancement with moral discernment and complementing economic development by promoting psychological well-being and social harmony.

In another milestone, in 2000 Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok made a speech to a crowd of thousands, exhorting ordinary Tibetans to stop selling yak and sheep for slaughter. The seed for his remarks, originally delivered on the annual celebration of the Buddha’s descent from heaven (*lha babs dus chen*), can already be found in a short passage about the compassionate treatment of animals in *Heart Advice* (97–98) and in speeches made by the Khenpo during the 1990s.<sup>16</sup> However, this particu-

---

<sup>14</sup> Even though Buddhism falls within the current state definition of religion and thereby officially avoids the taint of superstition, CCP white papers on Tibet still associate religion with backwardness. See for example, Information Office of the State Council 2001.

<sup>15</sup> In this regard, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok draws from the discourse of Buddhism and science among exile Tibetans, most prominently the Dalai Lama whom he met when visiting India in 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Excerpts from his speeches to the monastic community and laity can be found in a recently published memorial volume giving a year by year account of his activities

lar speech had a special impact because it was captured on video and distributed widely on VCD (video CD). Its cover features an image of yaks grazing on the grasslands and the simple plea, “Please liberate and ransom lives” (*Tshe thar srog blu byed rogs*). This plea references the longstanding Tibetan practice of liberating the lives (*tshe thar*) of yaks and other livestock by paying the purchase price in order to forever spare them from slaughter.<sup>17</sup> Thereafter the Khenpo’s speech was also published in several venues as a short text of advice, called “A Request Made to All Tibetan Men and Women.”<sup>18</sup>

In this speech, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok takes a modernist tack characteristic of his works addressed to the laity that integrates religious and secular concerns, in this case examining the ethical and socio-economic repercussions of slaughter. On the ethical side of the issue, he vividly portrays the cruel treatment of livestock as they are transported to Chinese cities, like Lanzhou and Chengdu, describing how cattle and sheep stand under the sun for days on end, packed into trucks, unbearably thirsty. Deprived of food and drink on their journey, they arrive only to be butchered in mechanized slaughterhouses, which he compares to torture chambers filled with cries of anguish and spurting blood. In this exhortation, he calls for compassion towards animals, given the terrible

---

from 1989 to his death in 2004, titled *Chos rje yid bzhin nor bu'i 'dra 'bag Rjes dran snying gi bdud rtsi* (no publication information).

<sup>17</sup> A red thread around the neck or pierced into its ear marks a yak’s status as liberated, in this case free to die a natural death, through it may still be used for carrying loads or milking (in the case of the female ‘*dri*).

<sup>18</sup> “A Request Made to All Tibetan Men and Women” (*Gangs can pho mo yongs kyi snyan lam du phul ba'i zhu yig*) appears in *Sha chang tha ma kha sogs kyi nyes dmigs phyogs bsdus* (2003: 117–125) as well as in the collected works of Tsultrim Lodrö, where it is followed by his own appeal for vegetarianism: “Lecture on the Precepts regarding Eating Meat: A Mirror that Clarifies [Ethical] Discernment” (*Sha'i kha zas gnang bkag gi bslab bya blang dor gsal ba'i me long*); see Tshul khrims blo gros 2004, vol. 2: 358–405.

conditions of their death, and asks Tibetan nomads in his audience not to sell their livestock for slaughter. Additionally, in more explicitly Buddhist terms, he emphasizes that the ripening of karma for the one who sells livestock for slaughter is identical to that of the butcher who does the actual slaying.

On the socio-economic side of the issue, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok expresses concern over the impact on the nomadic way of life due to transferring large amounts of livestock from the Tibetan plateau to Chinese cities. This concern stems from the commodification of meat production and increase in the slaughter rate since economic reform began in the 1980s, and notably this has only intensified since the “Develop the West” campaign launched in 2000.<sup>19</sup> In his estimation, excessive livestock sales bring little profit to Tibetans, representing wasted capital that cannot be recouped, and beyond that presents a grave threat to the nomadic way of life by draining the livestock population.

Whether or not his assessment holds up to scrutiny,<sup>20</sup> for our purposes, it is important to note the Khenpo’s concern for preserving a nomadic way of life in Tibetan areas. This mirrors his wider interest in preserving local Tibetan customs, articulated in *Heart Advice* among the “worthy traditions of our forefathers” (*pha mes kyi srol rgyun bzang po*) to uphold so that they do not vanish (4).<sup>21</sup> Yet it is not clear in his speech

---

<sup>19</sup> On changes in the slaughter rates after privatization in the 1980s, particularly the impact of the Develop the West campaign, see Gaerrang 2012.

<sup>20</sup> His claim reflects a premodern notion in which livestock represents a household’s wealth, a notion that persists today in areas where livestock remains the most reliable form of capital.

<sup>21</sup> Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok lists three key items for Tibetans as a people to uphold as “worthy traditions” in the midst of change, namely: the beneficial aspects of their values (*bsam blo’i dge mtshan*), the distinctive style of their erudition (*thun min gyi rig*

how else nomads are to make their living and why they would keep their livestock if not for meat (and dairy) production. Despite the modernist bent of his speech and his progressive stance on economic development more generally, in this case Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok seems to marshal Buddhist values in order to resist the project of commodification, particularly the integration of local goods into a wider Chinese economy. In this, one can detect an anti-assimilationist bent to ethical reform, given that the increase in slaughter rates and livestock transfers are tied to Chinese demand for yak meat and other Tibetan goods.

An ethnic inflection can also be seen in the VCD version of his speech, which is preceded by a graphic thirty-minute video containing footage from Hui slaughterhouses, titled “Sentient Beings without a Protector” (*Mgon med pa'i sems can*). After the opening shots featuring yaks grazing peacefully on the grasslands, the video portrays slaughter house scenes, similar to those invoked by Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok in his speech, in which yak are forcibly bound and their throats slit, leaving them to die in a pool of their own blood. This slow and gruesome process is shown in real time accompanied by music meant to rouse a sympathetic response. In one music video that replicates Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok’s message, the mantra *Oṃ Maṇi Padme Hūṃ* accompanies slaughterhouse footage as part of the background music, providing a distinctively Buddhist gloss to the scene.<sup>22</sup> Although the overt message is to liberate animals from slaughter, there is a secondary ethnically-inflected message embedded in “Sentient Beings without a Protector.” The video contrasts an idyllic scene of Tibetan grasslands and grazing yaks with the horrors of a slaughterhouse run by an ethnic other; the workers are

---

*gzhung*), and their local customs (*yul srol goms gshis*). In the body of this work, it becomes clear that the values and erudition he refers to here derive from Buddhism.

<sup>22</sup> “The Cry of Humble Creatures” (*Nyam chung srog chags kyi smre sngags*) on *Rigs zhen gyi 'bod pa* 2007.

Hui men, predominantly Muslim and identifiable by their distinctive white caps.

Indeed, the yak has become a synecdoche for a quintessentially Tibetan way of life and emblematic of the new ethics. Notably the cover of the 2010 handbook, *The Code of Ten Virtues Promulgated by Serta Larung*, features a pastoral scene with yaks grazing on the grasslands, reminiscent of the VCD cover for “Sentient Beings without a Protector” and Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok’s speech that follows. Due to the prominence of the anti-slaughter campaign, the yak has become a symbol of the movement—with all its connotations of a traditional, nomadic way of life—suggesting that adherence to Buddhist ethics and the preservation of Tibetan culture are linked. This same message is explicit in a well-known slogan by Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, “Don’t lose self-determination, don’t agitate the mind of others” (*rang tshugs ma shor, gzhan sems ma dkrugs*). Having made its way into pool halls, tea houses, blogs, posters and even pop songs,<sup>23</sup> this slogan asks Tibetans to preserve their own culture and moral integrity while living harmoniously alongside other nationalities (Rig ‘dzin dar rgyas n.d.).

By implication, those who lack “self-determination” (*rang tshugs*) have lost their integrity through assimilation. This implication is evident in a poster hanging at Larung Buddhist Academy in 2011, lampooning people who mix in Chinese terms when speaking Tibetan. The poster depicts characters from *Journey to the West*, the fictional retelling of Xuanzang’s pilgrimage to India which has become a ubiquitous presence on television in China. In the poster, the pig-headed character Zhu Bajie

---

<sup>23</sup> At least one Tibetan blogger has taken up Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok’s message in a post titled “Contemporary Tibetans Who Have Lost Their Resolve” (*Rang tshugs shor ba’i deng gi bod pa*), which first appeared in October 2006 on [www.tibetl.com](http://www.tibetl.com). The slogan also appears in a pop song, titled *Dran gdung* and performed by Sher bstan with lyrics by Lung rtogs bstan ‘dzin, on *Rigs zhen gyi ‘bod pa* 2007.

appears befuddled, placing one finger in his mouth while confessing: “I am a pig-headed combo-language speaker” (*nga sbrags skad bshad mkhan phag mgo can yin*). Delivering a sharp glance in his direction, the monkey character Sun Wukong mocks him: “You are a pig-man who lacks self-determination” (*rang tshugs med no phag rgan khyod*). Quite pointedly, the poster portrays hybrid language speakers in unflattering terms—as a kind of dim-witted monstrosity lacking in integrity.

For Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, Buddhist values and Tibetans culture both need to be protected against potential loss through contact with the dominant Han culture and integration into the greater economic, educational, and political system of modern China.<sup>24</sup> But do the two actually go hand in hand? To what extent does ethical reform, as it is articulated in the new ten virtues, support or undermine Tibetan customs and way of life? To address this, we need to examine the more systematic approach to ethical reform by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö and its expression in programmatic terms in *The Code of Ten Virtues Promulgated by Serta Larung*.

### The Two Systems: Religious and Secular

A sequel to Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok’s influential work of advice to the laity has been written by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö, one of his principal successors at the helm of Larung Buddhist Academy. His *Timely Advice: A Mirror that Illuminates the Two Systems* (hereafter: *Timely Advice*) builds on the ideological orientation of *Heart Advice* and presents a systematic series of action points concerning Buddhist ethics, Tibetan culture, and secular education. This far-ranging work is arranged according to specif-

---

<sup>24</sup> *Heart Advice*’s usage of “culture” (*rig gnas*) subsumes Buddhism as one of its essential elements and also includes Tibetan language, dress and local customs.



ic aspects of Tibetan life with Buddhist-inflected advice for each aspect. It includes prescriptions regarding daily habits of dress, food, drink, and hygiene; concerns over carrying weapons, fighting over the grasslands, and cruelty toward animals; exhortations regarding the importance of secular education; and Buddhist topics such as karmic cause and effect. In its systematic approach to social issues, *Timely Advice* contains many of the seeds for the new ten virtues, particularly in its discussion of not selling yak for slaughter, not carrying weapons, not consuming alcohol, and not wearing fur.<sup>25</sup>

As an organizing principle of the work, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö discusses religious and secular vantage points on each of these social issues. Indeed, the “two systems” found in the title—and which lend the work its modernist bent—refer to the religious and secular (*chos srid*) or in Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö’s language, religious and worldly (*chos dang ’jig rten*). The religious aspect refers to Buddhist values, like love and compassion, as well as moral action and its karmic repercussions in determining one’s rebirth. As can be expected, the secular aspect has to do with worldly concerns like public health, economics, and social welfare. Although these vantage points often appear to be in competition—and this is one of the tensions in the work—Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö seeks to demonstrate that religious and worldly concerns are compatible and point to a single, correct course of action. In fact, one of the main tasks of *Timely Advice* is to illuminate the compatibility of these two vantage points with regard to each of the topics treated therein.

---

<sup>25</sup> In addition to his systematic presentation in *Timely Advice*, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö has periodically disseminated posters and released recorded speeches on Buddhist ethics; the latter are readily available today in Tibetan marketplaces in Xining and Chengdu.

As an example, let us consider his discussion of the faults involved in wearing tiger, leopard, or otter pelts as trim on traditional Tibetan coats. In *Timely Advice*, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö takes a multifaceted approach to this topic in criticizing the vanity of such ornamental trims, which has as much to do with international law and world opinion as it does about compassion towards animals. Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö begins by stating: “Blind to our own conceit, when we cover the trim of our clothing with the fur of tiger, leopard, and otter, to our own eyes it appears beautiful. But in the eyes of other nationalities, it has no beauty; [others] consider [wearing fur] to be extremely savage behavior. In fact, it violates both religious and worldly [mores]” (246). From a Buddhist vantage point, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö cautions against forcing others to kill for the sake of vanity and invokes the Mahāyanā ideal of “an attitude of love and affection for all sentient beings as a mother loves her only child” (246). From a worldly vantage point, he critiques the excesses involved the high cost of pelts, amounting in his estimation to one or two years of an average Tibetan’s salary, and emphasizes the high numbers of animals killed to make a single trim for a traditional Tibetan coat. As a result, Tibetans create the conditions (i.e., market demand) for wild animals to be illegally hunted and imported into China and in the meantime provoke a low opinion of the Tibetan people (250).<sup>26</sup>

The two systems allow Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö to make a forceful argument against wearing fur, one that chastises Tibetans for their vulgarity (*ma rabs*) in moral terms and for their vanity (*mdzes par rlom pa*) in wasting income on ornamentation. Besides advocating a Buddhist stance against hunting, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö is clearly concerned with rescuing Tibetans from the category of backwardness. Debates of how “tradi-

---

<sup>26</sup> More emphasis is given to the worldly vantage point on this topic with three and a half pages dedicated to it (247–250) in contrast to the half page on the religious vantage point (246–247).

tional” fur trims are aside, he asks Tibetans to alter a custom for the sake of world opinion and Buddhist values. It is noteworthy that the Khenpo’s condemnation—as well as ad hoc vows to forsake pelts—preceded the Dalai Lama’s remarks at the 2006 Kālacakra empowerment, which inspired pelt-burning incidents across the Tibetan plateau in the months that followed.<sup>27</sup> Emily Yeh refers to the burnings as “spectacles of de-commodification,” which deliberately obliterated the exchange value of pelts and concurrently instilled a sense of Tibetan solidarity and moral worth in choosing religious loyalties over economic interests (2012). Yeh’s conclusions suggest, at least in certain cases, that contemporary ethical reform asks Tibetans to perform their loyalty to Buddhist leaders over and against their own material interests. The anti-slaughter campaign is a case in point, since the associated vow asks Tibetans to renounce income from livestock sales (for a set period of time) as an affirmation of the Buddhist values of compassion and non-violence.

The reputation of Tibetans is also a central issue for Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö in a short section of *Timely Advice* on hygiene (*gtsang sbra*), which does not feature in the new ten virtues (264–265). Signaling his concern over the stigma of backwardness—and tacitly accepting the terms of the Han civilizing discourse—this section considers hygiene as it relates to how other nationalities regard Tibetans. Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö emphasizes the need to change the widespread perception of Tibetans as dirty, which he suggests causes them to be scorned and treated with contempt by other nationalities. The Khenpo is practical enough in

---

<sup>27</sup> Not only was *Timely Advice* published two years beforehand but Larung leaders had already inspired some Tibetans to forsake wearing fur in vow-taking ceremonies. For example, encouraged by Chinese environmental groups and local Tibetan lamas—who were in turn inspired by advice from Larung leaders—vows took place in Dechen Village in Dzado County, Qinghai in 2005 prior to Dalai Lama’s remarks (Yeh 2012). In his remarks, the Dalai Lama also expressed concern over the reputation of Tibetans on the world stage.

his advice to ask all Tibetans to wash regularly and dispose of garbage properly. Specifically, he urges urban Tibetans to wear clean and fresh-smelling clothes and to keep their homes tidy. Even though he links hygiene obliquely to *Vinaya* precedents, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö is otherwise explicit in his call for reform (*bsgyur bcos*) in Tibetan bodily practices due the secular priorities of a new era (*dus rabs gsar ba*). Here religious considerations take a backseat to worldly preoccupations with the status of Tibetans among other nationalities, and the reformist impulse wins the day.

In another case, we see Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö attempt to reverse the terms of the civilizing discourse altogether. In his section on food, he makes a passionate appeal for vegetarianism that attempts to rouse compassion in the reader for the suffering of animals and, in line with his approach using the “two systems,” also alerts them to health problems associated with meat eating, such as heart disease and high blood pressure. Yet overall his argument for vegetarianism in *Timely Advice* takes an unusual tack by critiquing the excesses of exotic Chinese banquet dishes and, in an anti-assimilationist vein, asking Tibetans to eschew such culinary practices. The dishes that he mentions all involve cooking or eating—while still alive—poultry, fish, or mammals. Each dish is described in excruciating detail, including the infamous case of eating live monkey brains right out of the skull. Elsewhere I argue that this is a deliberate way to turn the tables on the civilizing discourse, whereby Han modernity becomes the barbaric other to a noble Tibetan tradition anchored in Buddhist ethics.<sup>28</sup> There are several ironies to this critique, including the prevalence of vegetarianism among Chinese monastics (in comparison to their Tibetan counterparts) which may have indirectly

---

<sup>28</sup> I develop this point in a paper, “Eating Monkey Brains: Exoticizing the Han Banquet in a Tibetan Buddhist Argument for Vegetarianism,” delivered at the American Academy of Religion conference in San Francisco, November 2011.

influenced Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö's stance on vegetarianism.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the wide availability of fresh vegetables today and other alternatives to the Tibetan staple diet based on meat and dairy has only come about in recent decades with improved road conditions and greenhouse cultivation favored by Han Chinese.

In another reversal of the civilizing discourse, following his predecessor's lead, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö contrasts the present degraded state of the Tibetan people with their glorious history as a Buddhist civilization. He calls on Tibetans to live up to this former glory by preserving their culture which is otherwise in danger of dissolution and even extinction. In this, he follows Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok (among others) who expressed concern over the loss of Tibetan culture in terms of language, dress, and customs.<sup>30</sup> *Heart Advice* conveys this palpable threat of loss in statements such as: "If we Tibetans do not even wear our own dress and also do not use our own language, at that point, we will have cast aside the name "Tibet""and "For any people, once their language, civilization, and customs vanish, they have actually turned into another nationality" (99 and 10–11).<sup>31</sup> In the passages where these statements are found, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok identifies assimilation as the main culprit—

---

<sup>29</sup> Since its founding in 1987, there have been a number of Chinese monastics residing and studying at Larung Buddhist Academy. When I asked him about whether his appeal for vegetarianism was influenced by Chinese Buddhist texts or practice, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö vehemently denied it.

<sup>30</sup> See the Panchen Lama's 70,000 Character Petition written to the CCP Central Committee in 1962; this text has recently become available through its publication in Chinese and translation into English by the Tibet Information Network 1997. The Dalai Lama uses the term "cultural genocide" along similar lines, but emphasizing state policies that obstruct religious freedom rather than assimilation by Tibetans themselves.

<sup>31</sup> The first of these quotes has become well-known enough to circulate today on a series of scroll-like posters advocating Tibetan language preservation, available in cities with large Tibetan populations such as Lhasa, Xining, Lanzhou and Chengdu.

imagined to be a process of “imitation” (*lad mo*) of other nationalities (presumably Han) and therefore the loss of Tibet’s distinctive national characteristics.

In a similar vein, in *Timely Advice*, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö warns of “mixing” (*dres*) with other nationalities and the attendant threat of becoming “mottled” (*khra shig ge*) culturally (245). His use of the term “mixing” over “imitation” is likely due to his concern over how Tibetans today intersperse Chinese terms when speaking Tibetan, a concern that prompted him to collaborate with other intellectuals to create a dictionary of modern terms featuring neologisms in Tibetan for everything from tractors to lipstick.<sup>32</sup> (The poster mentioned earlier with characters from *Journey to the West* is part of a Larung-based campaign to purify the Tibetan language of foreign terms.) In *Timely Advice*, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö emphasizes that social change and engagement with other cultures need not present a problem so long as Tibetans “protect the purity of the culture established by our ancestors in the midst of such changes and, regarding the views and deeds of others, guard against what is faulty and adopt what is good” (245). Here, without rejecting social change, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö asks Tibetans to protect the integrity of their own culture and guard against the negative influence, ideological and moral, of other nationalities. This follows what Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok calls for in *Heart Advice*: to preserve what is worthy from the past and to adopt new forms of beneficial knowledge.<sup>33</sup> Yet one might

---

<sup>32</sup> The dictionary provides a photograph and the associated term in Chinese, Tibetan, and English for each item (*Rgya bod dbyin gsum gsar byung rgyun bkol ris 'drel ming mdzod* 2007).

<sup>33</sup> *Timely Advice* follows this approach explicitly in its final chapters that focus, on the one hand, on valuing Tibetan culture and learning more about Buddhism and, on the one other, studying modern science and asking parents to send their children to school.

ask: who decides what is essential and worthy in Tibetan culture to be preserved and what can be jettisoned for moral reasons?

Despite the impulse to preserve the purity of Tibetan culture, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö seems nonetheless to be keen on reforming certain Tibetan customs that run counter to Buddhist values. For example, he criticizes the practice of wearing long knives at the waist and carrying guns across the back. He calls this “a foolish custom, wicked and vile” (*blun po'i srol ngan tha chad pa*), which poses a “grave threat” (*gal rkyen shin tu chen po*) to Tibetan society.<sup>34</sup> His main concern here is with the adverse effects of fighting over the grasslands on the Tibetan population. Not only is the death rate a concern for him but also wasted lives. Because of fighting with weapons, young Tibetans wind up in prison or spend years living like a wild animal, having escaped the law to some mountaintop. On a collective level, he identifies fighting over the grasslands as one of the main social problems facing Tibetans in nomadic areas, bringing ruin to households, clans, and regions. These types of quarrels lead clans to stockpile weapons, which in turn drain the wealth of individual households because (in his estimation) twenty yaks need to be sold for slaughter in order to purchase each gun. In the end, Tsultrim Lodrö concludes, unity among Tibetans is eroded and Tibetan society rots from within.

The progressive nature of such advice cannot be overlooked. Here and elsewhere, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö is bold enough to critique Tibetan customs, outlining which are noble (*ya rabs*) to be preserved and which are vulgar (*ma rabs*) to be abandoned. Through his critique of certain Tibetan customs, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö models ethical discern-

---

<sup>34</sup> His discussion of weapons spans two brief sections in *Timely Advice* (260–263): “settling internal disputes” (*nang 'khrug zhi 'jags bya rgyu*) and “not routinely wearing weapons” (*mtshon cha rgyun du mi 'dogs rgyu*).

ment at a communal level with regard to contemporary social issues and asks Tibetans to undergo a comparable reevaluation of customs, new and old, in order to move forward as a people. To the question, who decides about what to preserve and what to abandon on a communal level, the answer is clear: Buddhist leaders are providing the moral compass for Tibetans as a people. Still another question remains: at what point does ethical reform go too far and run counter to the aim of preserving Tibetan culture? While it may be premature to attempt to answer this at such an early stage of ethical reform, we can outline some of the tensions involved by looking at the new ten virtues and the related vow ceremonies that are now underway.

### The New Ten Virtues

The systematization of the new ten virtues, between 2008 and 2010,<sup>35</sup> suggests a fresh intensity to ethical reform. Among long-term factors, it can be seen as a response to state policies in nomadic regions since the mid-1990s (but only recently implemented in Serta) involving fencing the grasslands and resettling nomads in row housing at county seats. With the increase of population in county seats and without any provisions for job training, a host of social ills are becoming more rampant, the very ones targeted by the new ten virtues, such as drinking, gambling, and fighting with knives. In this vein, the new ten virtues can be

---

<sup>35</sup> A handout on “The Code of Ten Virtues Promulgated by Serta Larung” (*Gser ljongs bla ma rung gis gtan la phab pa'i dge bcu'i lugs srol*) is dated to the earth rat year (2008–2009), whereas the text bearing the same name was published in 2010. University students from areas near Serta, who I spoke with during the summer of 2011, confirmed that the vows have been taking place in their hometowns only in the last year or two. The vow to give up selling yaks for slaughter, taken household by household in a town for a period of three years at a time, has been going on since at least 2006 (Gaerrang 2012).



seen an attempt to stem the slow tide of social disintegration. More immediately, it can be seen as a constructive mode of mobilization and alternative to the protests that swept across the Tibetan plateau in the months leading up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, in which Larung Buddhist Academy did not participate, and the terrible wave self-immolations that have escalated since 2009 in neighboring Ngawa and elsewhere on the Tibetan plateau.<sup>36</sup>

The new ten virtues find systematic expression, first in 2008 in a handout listing what the ten virtues are (see my translation below) and later in a 2010 publication that explains the rationale behind each of the virtues. Both are titled *The Code of Ten Virtues Promulgated by Serta Larung* (hereafter: *Code of Ten Virtues*); I will use this title to refer to the text rather than the handout unless otherwise noted. This 2010 publication in roughly sixty pages, distributed by Larung Buddhist Academy (alt: Serta Larung in the title of the text) and expressly not for sale,<sup>37</sup> goes through each of the ten virtues in order, with explanations ranging from two pages to a dozen for each virtue.

The *Code of the Ten Virtues* relies heavily on Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö's work for its inspiration and content, with large portions of *Time-*

---

<sup>36</sup> Indexing the intensity of this historical period, between February 2009 and June 2013, there have been 120 self-immolations on the Tibetan plateau. For a list of their names and biographies, see the International Campaign for Tibet (<http://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/#inexile>). Scholarly writings on the subject can be found in "Self Immolation as Protest" in the *Cultural Anthropology Forum* (<http://www.culanth.org/?q=node/526>) and the December 2012 issue of *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* on "Self-Immolation in Tibet" (<http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/collections/journals/ret/index.php?selection=0>).

<sup>37</sup> The back cover carries the following warning: "commercial distribution is not permitted" (*tshong las kyi ched du 'grem spel byed mi chog*).

ly *Advice* copied wholesale.<sup>38</sup> Yet it lacks the reformist zeal of *Timely Advice*, presenting a more traditionalist face to the new ten virtues. In making its case for renewed adherence to Buddhist ethics, the *Code of Ten Virtues* invokes time-honored sources of authority, using extensive quotes from past Buddhist masters and focusing on the logic of karmic retribution. The text thereby places reform within a traditionalizing framework as opposed to the more self-consciously modernist rhetoric of Khenpos Jigme Phuntsok and Tsultrim Lodrö, who seek to marry Buddhist values with scientific theories and socio-economic concerns. This may point to a different audience for the *Code of Ten Virtues* than the urban intellectuals and educated lay elite for whom the two systems approach of *Heart Advice* and *Timely Advice* would be most persuasive. Given that the text is not for sale and distributed freely, its audience is certainly prospective vow-takers in nomadic areas around Serta as well as those who have taken the vows. Of course, the voices of Khenpos Jigme Phuntsok and Tsultrim Lodrö still come through in sections where they are quoted, but their most progressive points and strident language are rarely featured.

Although it receives less emphasis, the “two systems” as elaborated by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö remains an implicit category in the *Code of Ten Virtues* text. This can be seen in the putative sources given for the new ten virtues: the secular code of sixteen *mi chos* or “human mores” propagated by Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century and the traditional ten Buddhist virtues (referred to as *lha chos* or “divine mores”) imported from India.<sup>39</sup> In actuality, the new ten virtues share more in

---

<sup>38</sup> For example, in the first chapter on “not selling [livestock for] slaughter” (*bshas tshong mi bya ba*), pages 2–5 are copied almost verbatim from *Timely Advice*, pages 289–292. This type of copying is not uncommon in Tibet, where there has not traditionally been a notion of plagiarism.

<sup>39</sup> Reference to these two sources appear in several places including a separate chapter at the end of the book, which consists of a long quote by Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok (58–59) detailing the specifics of “the regulation of sixteen-fold pure human mores” (*mi chos*

common with the precepts of the *upāsaka* vow—especially with regard to not killing, stealing and consuming intoxicants (and one might also consider visiting prostitutes as a type of sexual misconduct)—than the traditional Buddhist ten virtues or the sixteen *mi chos* which emphasize respect for one’s parents, nobility, and elders; benefiting one’s country; and acting with honesty, kindness, etc.<sup>40</sup> It might be more accurate to say that the sixteen *mi chos* are put forward in order to justify a modernist articulation of ethics in this-worldly terms and to find an ancient, indigenous antecedent for such an approach. In any event, it is clear the “ten virtues” as a name derives its authoritative weight by echoing, or reimagining, the Buddhist category of ten virtues.

In harkening to the imperial period, the *Code of Ten Virtues* contrasts a pristine and idealized Tibetan past with a morally degenerate present, much in the same way that Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö does. This occurs in several chapters. For example, the chapter on not stealing or robbing (*rku jag mi bya ba*) contrasts the imperial period as a fortunate era—governed by *dharmarājas* (*chos rgyal*) and imbued with peace, prosperity, and noble demeanor among its people—with the degenerate present when people are powerfully drawn toward vile behavior and when theft by deception and stealth is rampant, even to the point of extortion by the authorities. Along similar lines, the chapter on not gambling (*sho rgyan mi bskug pa*) quotes a prophecy by Padmasambhava at length, which refers to degenerate times when “ancient customs and worthy deeds are cast away like spit,” “the ten non-virtues gather like clouds,” and “people turn their back on the Three Jewels” (42). As a result, the

---

*gtsang ma bcu drug gi khrims*) and “the regulation of ten virtues or divine mores” (*lha chos dge ba bcu’i khrims*).

<sup>40</sup> The new ten virtues are also reminiscent of the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, a scripture of advice to the young layman Sigāla with its injunctions against drinking, gambling, adultery, etc.

prophecy warns, the local deities and ancestors become enraged, and plague and other calamities ensue. In this prophecy, the ten virtues, ancient customs, and faith in Buddhism are the ingredients of a flourishing society and the rejection of them leads the Tibetan people to ruin. Notably, the effects of non-virtue accrue to society as a whole, just as peace and prosperity followed from the royal stewardship and noble conduct in the imperial period.

In the rhetoric of the text, the new ten virtues are a means to counteract the degeneracy of such times. What are the ten virtues? Here is a translation of the “The Code of Ten Virtues Promulgated by Serta Larung” handout, which lists the ten virtues in negative form (i.e., the non-virtues to abandon) and specifies what is indicated in each case in a single sentence:

### **The Code of Ten Virtues Promulgated by Serta Larung**

*Gser ljongs bla ma rung gis gtan la phab pa'i dge bcu'i lugs srol*

1. Not to sell for slaughter: One should not sell horses, cattle, sheep or dogs to be butchered.
2. Not to steal or rob: One should not steal secretly inside or outside [the home] or rob by force.
3. Not to fight with weapons: One should not fight using knives or guns.
4. Not to consort with prostitutes: One should not consort with prostitutes, Chinese or otherwise, due to the current danger in Tibetan areas of many dreadful diseases arising from this.

5. Not to sell guns or opium: One should not buy guns of various sizes from other places and sell them within Tibet, and one should not buy or sell opium.
6. Not to smoke opium or cigarettes: One should not smoke any type of opium or tobacco.
7. Not to drink: One should not drink any type of liquor.
8. Not to gamble: One should not play games based on wagers of a lot of money or valuables.
9. Not to hunt: One should not kill by various means any wild animals, predator or prey.
10. Not to wear animal fur: One should not wear the skin of wild animals such as leopard, otter, or fox.

Please cast off these ten—selling for slaughter, etc.—in this life and in future lives.

Through these ten, such as the vows to not sell [livestock] for slaughter, one experiences well-being and benefits in both this life and the next. And that's not all: one secures the welfare of [every being] including animals.

Faithful people, this is very important. Please be diligent in this system of ethics.

There are a few points worthy of note in this list before we return to the explanation of them in the *Code of Ten Virtues* text. To begin, notice that the list places “not to sell for slaughter” first, harkening to the origins of the movement and also giving prominence to the item most associated with Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok. And it places “not to wear animal fur” last, perhaps to distance itself from the controversial fur burning incidents in

2006. Because of the fur burning incidents, the injunction to not wear fur is now associated with the Dalai Lama and, of the ten virtues, is the only one that is a *fait accompli* across most of the Tibetan plateau. For this reason, the chapter on not wearing fur in the *Code of Ten Virtues* text reiterates only briefly the logic in *Timely Advice* and then thanks Tibetans for actualizing injunctions against fur by contemporary Buddhist masters.

The items on the list of ten virtues are drawn from the texts of advice to the laity by Khenpos Jigme Phuntsok and Tsultrim Lodrö with a few exceptions. These are the fourth, fifth and eighth on the list: “not to consort with prostitutes,” “not to sell guns or opium,” and “not to gamble.” Although not a focal point in *Heart Advice* or *Timely Advice*, such items seem to be a natural extension of concerns expressed in these works about maintaining the vitality of the Tibetan population and protecting their economic wealth. In contrast, vegetarianism, despite holding a prominent place in *Timely Advice*, does not appear on the list of the new ten virtues. By Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö’s own admission in an interview, this is because vegetarianism should be an individual’s choice based on health considerations and the availability of alternative sources of nutrition.

The final exhortation on the handout also deserves attention. In the last lines, it is clear that the ten virtues are designed as vows for the laity to take. It states: “Through these ten, such as the vows to not sell [livestock] for slaughter, one experiences well-being and benefits in both this life and the next.” Adherence to these virtues are assumed to take the form of vows (*dam bca’*). Additionally, in this statement, one can detect the two systems underpinning the reference to benefits in this life and the next. Here as in *Heart Advice* and *Timely Advice*, the effects of non-virtue are promoted as having a positive effect on one’s worldly fortunes in this life as well as one’s soteriological prospects for a favorable rebirth in the next.

Returning to the *Code of Ten Virtues* text, the first chapter on not selling livestock for slaughter is the longest and sets the tone for the work as a whole. As one might expect, it focuses on the suffering of livestock and the karmic repercussions of selling yak for slaughter. It opens with long quotes by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö emphasizing the enormous hardship that livestock undergo first in their unremunerated services as pack animals and providers of dairy, wool, and dung (for fuel) and then finally being slaughtered for a meager amount of enjoyment by those who consume meat. This cruel treatment is contrasted with normative Tibetan notions of affection (*sha tsha*) and repaying the kindness (*drin lan*) of others as well as the Buddhist view of regarding all sentient beings as one's own parents in some previous lifetime. Apart from that, the chapter focuses on a detailed explanation of karma, in which the only innovative point is the mention of supply and demand, causally tying the choice to eat meat with the enormous suffering of the livestock that is slaughtered.<sup>41</sup> Missing from this opening chapter is the socio-economic argument and graphic depictions of slaughterhouses found in Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok's "Request to All Tibetan Men and Women."

For this reason, from the outset, the *Code of Ten Virtues* seems more conservative in its presentation of Buddhist ethics than the discussion by either Khenpo on the same points. Indeed, the first chapter ends by harkening to Buddhist masters of yore who advocated liberating the lives of animals and then asks Tibetans to uphold "the worthy traditions of our ancestors and forefathers" (*yab mes gong ma rnams kyi lugs srol*

---

<sup>41</sup> The *Code of Ten Virtues* text states: "At present, each day scores of blameless creatures experience immeasurable suffering. The reason for their death arises in dependence upon people's meat consumption. If one does not eat meat, there will be no reason for the experience of great suffering and death by [these] creatures. It is said in many *sūtras* and *tantras* that those who eat meat incur great evil" (7). This point is not entirely new; see Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol 2004, 81.

bzang po). This is just one example of the traditionalizing style of the *Code of Ten Virtues* text, which masks the innovative nature of ethical reform in asking Tibetans to commit en masse to a rearticulated set of ten virtues in formal vows.

Other chapters likewise rely heavily on explanations of karma and quotes from past Tibetan Buddhist masters in order to ground the new ethics in traditional sources of authority. For example, the chapters on not using or trading weapons depend on the testimony of revenants (*das log*), who reportedly travel to the realms beyond death and provide vivid accounts about the torments of hell. As such, these chapters employ a Buddhist version of fire-and-brimstone rhetoric, harkening to rebirth in the hell realms as the karmic consequence for violence. The same holds true for the chapters on not drinking and not smoking, which rely on quotes from *sūtras* as well as the statements and prophecies of past masters. Once again, the threat of rebirth in hell looms large for those who partake in wicked substances (*rdzas ngan*). Drinking and smoking are age-old vices, whose problematic nature has long been recognized, so the compiler of the *Code of Ten Virtues* text may not have felt it necessary to introduce anything new on the topic. Yet in the hands of a stronger writer and in the spirit of the two systems, these chapters might have at the very least included a discussion of the health detriments of alcohol, tobacco and opium consumption.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, in his discussion of food and drink, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö is bold enough to

---

<sup>42</sup> The opium trade was a major concern in areas of Kham during the Republican Era. This issue was taken up by Yudru Tsomu in her paper, "Poppy Fields: Poppy Cultivation and the Opium Trade in Kham during Early Twentieth Century," presented at the International Association of Tibetan Studies conference in Vancouver, August 2010.



mention domestic violence as a social problem connected with alcohol consumption.<sup>43</sup>

That said, the *Code of Ten Virtues* does explicitly take up contemporary social issues, including ones not discussed in either *Heart Advice* or *Timely Advice*. For example, there is a section on “not consorting with prostitutes” (*smad tshong ma mi bsten*)<sup>44</sup> in which the main focus is public health. In this chapter, there is very little by way of Buddhist rhetoric. Instead, the text warns its readers about the AIDS epidemic and the risk to one’s wife and children if one contracts AIDS from a prostitute. The text then appeals to its readers to not risk spreading the dreaded disease of AIDS for the welfare and happiness of one’s homeland, family line, and the Tibetan people at large. Notice here that the discourse on abandoning this social ill as with many others—smoking, drinking, gambling, fighting with weapons, and hunting—is primarily directed at the male Tibetan population, which would be more likely to engage in such activities. It also contains an ethnic inflection in referencing Chinese prostitutes, which implicitly discourages “mixing,” in this case through sexual contact, as a means to protect the social body of Tibet.

Although lacking in reformist zeal, the ideas presented in the *Code of Ten Virtues* nonetheless follow from the writings of Khenpos Jigme Phuntsok and Tsultrim Lodrö. This can be seen in the emphasis given to certain emblematic action points like the anti-slaughter campaign; rhetorical flourishes such as the way that the Tibetan past is idealized in relation to a degenerate present; and the implicit reliance on the two sys-

---

<sup>43</sup> Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö criticizes the popularity of drinking for a variety of reasons including domestic violence (258–260). The mention of domestic violence is quite progressive; it is a topic not typically raised in Tibetan Buddhist texts of ethical advice.

<sup>44</sup> *Ten Virtues*, p. 16–25. Prostitution remains the target of this appeal with no mention of safe sex. In practice, according to one informant, adultery is sometimes also included as a prohibition.

tems in discussing the implications of moral choices in this life and the next. Two extra items at the end of the text show how faithfully the *Code of Ten Virtues* text follows their lead and indicate once again how cultural preservation and Buddhist ethics go hand in hand in these reform efforts. Following the discussion of the ten virtues are chapters on Tibetan language and liberating the lives of animals. The first of these emphasizes the importance of preserving the Tibetan language and consists of quotes from eminent Buddhist masters, such as Gendun Chöphel (Dge 'dun chos 'phel), the Tenth Pañchen Lama (Pañ chen bla ma), and Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok himself among others. The second extols the benefits of liberating animals along the lines of “A Request Made to All Tibetan Men and Women” but with more reliance on scripture.

This dual emphasis of reform efforts—to reaffirm Buddhist ethics and preserve Tibetan culture—is reiterated in the forward, which gives two rationales for the composition of the text. These are firstly to address “suffering in *saṃsāra* in general and in particular the cause of experiencing suffering in the three lower realms, principally the ten non-virtues” and secondly to address “lack of esteem for the Tibetan language” (i). Without addressing these issues, the forward to the *Code of Ten Virtues* warns that “in time our people, the Tibetan nationality, will vanish” (i). It goes on to emphasize:

What’s more, [the ten non-virtues] are the cause of ruin in both this life and the next. In this life, for example, [there will be] a shortened lifespan, many diseases, the depletion of wealth, and low status. Ominous signs [of this] are [already] evident and visible to us. In the next life, there can be no doubt [about the effects]: rebirth in whichever of the three lower realms is appropriate as evidenced in the Kangyur and Tengyur . (i)

This passage has a sense of urgency, exhibiting a concern over the survival of Tibetan culture and the declining fortunes of Tibetans as a people. The role of ethics is clearly tied to the fate of Tibetans in this life and the next, gesturing to the two systems. But here as elsewhere the reformist impulse is masked in a traditionalizing tendency, citing the authority of the Kangyur and Tengyur (canonical collections of Buddhist scriptures) on these points. Despite its more traditionalist approach, the *Code of Ten Virtues* may have a far-reaching impact by translating advice by Larung leaders into action.

### **Implications of Vow-Taking**

Given the emerging trend in vow-taking practices, Buddhist ethics in Tibetan areas of the PRC are now shifting from the domain of individual moral conscience to a communal practice regulated by local monasteries. Indeed, vow-taking based on the ten virtues is becoming a potent and pragmatic strategy for social integration, binding the laity more closely to the authority of Buddhist leaders and monasteries.

What is the process for taking these vows? In brief, in videos from the late 1990s and early 2000s containing Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok's speeches on ethics, one can see people among the crowds in attendance raising their hands and thereby voluntarily taking on one or another vow. In an interview in May 2011, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö stated that this practice still continues in which a high ranking Buddhist teacher will give teachings on ethics and on the spot people will be inspired to take vows to forsake one or more behaviors, such as drinking, smoking, hunting, etc. In the last several years, however, a new process for vow-taking is spreading. In this new process, whole villages and towns are converting to a local version of the ten virtues (or some portion of them) at the

behest of monastic and clan leaders, and there is little individual choice in the matter.

Even though the emergent practices around the new ten virtues are varied, the basic pattern is that the head of the household takes the vow annually on behalf of the family as a whole. Monitoring is done by either monks or other families.<sup>45</sup> In Dzamthang, I was told that each household must have five families confirm that their vows were upheld in a given year, whereas in Nyarong the monastery maintains records on each household. If a member of the family transgresses one of the vows, then the household initially must pay a fine of anywhere between 500 and 2000 RMB, which goes toward the performance of purification chants or local meritorious works like temple construction. If the transgression is severe or repeated, that household is refused religious services at the monastery, including chanting for sick relatives or funeral services that help to ensure a favorable rebirth.

It is too early to assess the effects of the new ten virtues on Tibetan culture and way of life. Anecdotally, with no drinking at weddings and festivals, I have been told that people in dry towns no longer stay up late singing folk songs.<sup>46</sup> If this is true across the board, one might wonder if Buddhist ethics and the preservation of Tibetan culture are actually compatible. Moreover, some of the restrictions are already creating a backlash. Through students in Xining, I was made aware of negotiations for exemptions in fines for families with business people who need to attend banquets where alcohol is consumed and with college students far away in cities who are prone to going to bars with friends on the

---

<sup>45</sup> My discussion of these local variations is based on conversations held in the spring of 2011 with Tibetan students from nomadic regions studying at universities in Xining.

<sup>46</sup> Personal communication from Gerald Roche, who garnered this information from his students in the Plateau Music Project.

weekend. Even among clerics in neighboring regions, the new ten virtues are not uncontested.<sup>47</sup>

On another front, nomad families who give up selling livestock for slaughter need to find new ways to earn income, either temporarily or permanently, depending on the duration of the vow. I have found it curious that the anti-slaughter campaign was the first and remains the most prominent part of the new ethics, apart from the dramatic fur burning incidents in 2006. It seems to undercut the very Tibetan lifestyle that it showcases in ubiquitous images of yaks grazing on the grasslands. If Tibetans no longer derive significant income from yaks, why maintain a herd? Of course, nomads can still obtain milk products from the female counterpart to the yak (called *'dri*), but the income is significantly less than that what is gained by selling yak for slaughter. In his field research on vows to renounce slaughter, taken for an initial three-year period in Rakhor village of Hongyuan County, Gaerrang found the loss of income and overgrazing due to a surplus of yak to be significant issues (2012). For these reasons, after the initial three years, most of the families did not renew their vows. Those who did renew their vows had surplus wealth that allowed them to defray the economic loss, and not coincidentally they also had familial ties to the local clerics promoting these vows.

When I queried him about whether or not the new ten virtues may transform Tibetan culture (*rig gnas*), Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö stated flatly that the world is changing and so the Tibetan way of life (*tsho ba*) also needs to change. The term for “way of life” in Tibetan can also mean livelihood, and he continued in this vein, remarking that children should get a good education to expand their job opportunities, teenagers can

---

<sup>47</sup> Personal communication from Emily Yeh, who reports having encountered dissenting voices among cleric-scholars in Jigdril and other areas.

gain technical skills in Tibetan crafts and medicine, and adults can find alternate sources of income like harvesting medicinal herbs. But what precisely is the difference between Tibetan culture and their way of life? In *Timely Advice*, the Khenpo defines culture as “the distinctive way of life and means of subsistence which emerges from a people’s knowledge” (277–278).<sup>48</sup> Admittedly, by his own definition, it is not so easy to distinguish the two.

How the new ten virtues may affect Tibetan culture remains to be seen. Regardless, the rhythm of life in these areas is changing. The Tibetan way of life is in flux, and with the new ten virtues, cleric-scholars from Larung Buddhist Academy seek to steer social change in line with Buddhist values. In this monastic-driven movement for ethical reform, the laity is being called on to live a “lifestyle in accord with the dharma” (*chos dang mthun pa’i tsho ba*)—which is not simply a reassertion of tradition, but rather an adaptation of Buddhist ethics to address current social problems and chart out a path forward for Tibetans as a people.

## Bibliography

Bstan ‘dzin rgya mtsho. *Klad chen dang sems kyi ‘brel ba la dpyad pa*. N.p. and n.d.

Gaerrang. *Alternative Development on the Tibetan Plateau: The Case of the Slaughter Renunciation Movement*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2012.

---

<sup>48</sup> The Tibetan reads: *rig gnas zhes bya ba ni skye bo rnam kyis shes rab las byung ba’i tsho ba dang gnas pa’i thabs khyad par ba zhig la zer*. Overall in *Timely Advice*, the two aspects of Tibetan culture given the most weight are Tibetan language and Buddhism with local customs seemingly less privileged as an essential part of Tibetan culture than in *Heart Advice*.

Gayley, Holly. "The Ethics of Cultural Survival: A Buddhist Vision of Progress in Mkhan po 'Jigs phun's *Heart Advice to Tibetans for the 21st Century*." In *Mapping the Modern in Tibet*, edited by Gray Tuttle. Sankt Augustin, Germany: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2011.

Germano, David. "Re-membering the Dismembered Body of Tibet: Contemporary Tibetan Visionary Movements in the People's Republic of China." In *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*, edited by Melvyn Goldstein and Matthew Kapstein. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Gladney, Dru. *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects*. London: Hurst & Company, 2004.

Hansen, Anne Ruth. *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860–1930*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007.

Harrell, Stevan. "Introduction." In *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, edited by Stevan Harrell. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995.

Hartley, Lauran. "'Inventing Modernity' in Amdo: Views on the Role of Traditional Tibetan Culture in a Developing Society." In *Amdo Tibetans in Transition: Society and Culture in the Post-Mao Era*, edited by Toni Huber. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. *Tibet's March Towards Modernization*. Beijing, November 2001. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20011108/index.htm>> (accessed on June 6, 2012).

'Jigs med phun tshogs 'byung gnas. *Dus rabs nyer gcig pa'i gangs can pa rnams la phul ba'i snying gtam Sprin gyi rol mo* (composed in 1995). N.p. and n.d.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Chos rje dam pa yid bzhin nor bu 'Jigs med phun tshogs 'byung gnas dpal bzang po'i gsung 'bum*. 3 vols. Hong Kong: Xianggang xinzhì chubanshe, 2002.

McMahan, David. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas. *Skyabs rje Nam sprul rin po che 'Jigs med phun tshogs dang Mkha' 'gro Tā re lha mo mchog gi rnam thar Rig 'dzin mkha' 'gro dgyes pa'i mchod sprin*. Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1997.

'Phrin las. *Gser ljongs bla ma rung gis gtan la phab pa'i dge bcu'i lugs srol*. N.p. and n.d.

"Rang tshugs shor ba'i deng gi bod pa" ("Contemporary Tibetans Who Have Lost Their Resolve"). *Ti se'i bu rgyud*. October 13, 2006. Online. Available [HTTP: <http://www.tibetl.com/blog/user1/lcjk/archives/2006/5206.html>](http://www.tibetl.com/blog/user1/lcjk/archives/2006/5206.html) (accessed on October 15, 2006).

Rig 'dzin dar rgyas. *Chos rje dam pa 'Jigs med phun tshogs 'byung gnas dpal bzang po mchog gi mjug mtha'i zhal gdams rang tshugs ma shor/ gzhan sems ma dkrugs zhes pa'i 'grel ba Lugs gnyis blang dor gsal ba'i sgron me* (composed in 2004). N.p. and n.d.

*Rigs zhen gyi 'bod pa (New Spring Melody: VCD produced by G.yu thog rnam rgyal dgon)*. ISRC CN-H09-07-302-00/V.J6. Xining: Qinghai Kunlun Yinxiang Chubanshe, 2007.

*Rgya bod dbyin gsum gsar byung rgyun bkol ris 'drel ming mdzod*. Chengdu: Sichuan Minorities Publishing House, 2007.

*Sha chang tha ma kha sogs kyi nyes dmigs phyogs bsdus*. Hong Kong: Xianggang xinzhì chubanshe chuban, 2003.



Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol. *Food of Bodhisattvas: Buddhist Teachings on Abstaining from Meat*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Committee. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004.

Terrone, Antonio. “‘Anything Can Be an Appropriate Treasure Teaching!’ Authentic Treasure Revealers and the Moral Implications of Noncelibate Tantric Practice.” In *Tibetan Studies: An Anthology*, edited by Peter Schwieger and Saadet Arslan. Halle: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2010.

Thelle, Notto. *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan: from conflict to dialogue, 1854–1899*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1987.

Tibet Information Network. *A Poisoned Arrow: The Secret Report of the 10th Panchen Lama*. London: Tibet Information Network, 1997.

*Tshe thar srog blu byed rogs (Please liberate and ransom lives: VCD produced by Larung Buddhist Academy)*. ISRC CN-G04-01-417 00/V.J6. Chengdu: Chengdu Yinxiang Chubanshe, 2001.

Tshul khirms blo gros. *Dus su bab pa’i gtam Lugs gnyis gsal ba’i me long*. In *Yang dag lam gyi ‘jug sgo blo gсар yid kyi dga’ ston*. 2 vols. Hong Kong: Fojiao cihui fuwu zhongxin, 2003–2004.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Skye ba snga phyi’i rnam gzhaḡ srid pa gsal ba’i me long*. Hong Kong: Fojiao cihui fuwu zhongxin, 2004.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Lugs gnyis gsal ba’i me long*. Hong Kong: Fojiao cihui fuwu zhongxin, 2004.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Dus su bab pa’i gtam Lugs gnyis gsal ba’i me long*. In *Yang dag lam gyi ‘jug sgo blo gсар yid kyi dga’ ston*. 4 vols. N.p. and n.d.

Yeh, Emily. “Transnational environmentalism and entanglements of sovereignty: The tiger campaign across the Himalayas.” *Political Geography* 31/7 (2012), 408–418.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Blazing pelts and burning passions: Nationalism, cultural politics and spectacular de commodification in Tibet." *Journal of Asian Studies*, 72/2 (2013), 319-344.