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Mountain Dharma: Meditative Retreat and the Tibetan Ascetic Self

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A Review of *Mountain Dharma: Meditative Retreat and the Tibetan Ascetic Self*

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Mountain Dharma: Meditative Retreat and the Tibetan Ascetic Self. By David M DiValerio. New York: Columbia University Press, 2025, ISBN 9780231220224 (paperback), $35.00.

Historians of Tibetan Buddhism will welcome this scholarly study of the historical developments of the category of meditative retreat ("mountain dharma") from the Thirteenth to the Nineteenth centuries. Previously, with *The Holy Madmen of Tibet*, DiValerio presented a fine-grain analysis of the specific historical context in which the social identity of the Kagyu order came to be reimagined during the Fifteenth century. In this work, although still largely attending to the Kagyu context, he turns his attention to the changing contexts in which individual meditative retreat as a social and religious phenomenon in Tibet may be understood more generally. In particular, DiValerio's recognition and explication of the impact of Jamgön Kongtrül's reconceptualization of the meditative retreat on the Tibetan Buddhist world, now a global phenomenon, will be helpful to other historians as they continue to reflect on the wider effects of such localized developments.

In the first chapter, DiValerio scopes out some of the "prescriptive literature" that details the material concerns for the "ascetic self" undertaking individual retreat, and these form the basis for subsequent

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chapters. He draws on Yangönpa Gyeltsen Pel's *Blazing Jewel* (Thirteenth century) and Karma Chakme's *Direct Advice on Retreat* (Sixteenth century) as normative texts, calling these the two most influential retreat texts of the "premodern period" (34), with Drakar Lozang Pelden's *Garland of Pearls*, presumably from the early Twentieth century, serving as an important contrast even while sharing many of the same material concerns. Although occasionally referencing other sources and genres, DiValerio focuses on these three texts to represent the specific context of individual meditative retreat as their primary purpose. He also, importantly, acknowledges the "enormous importance of oral discourse in Tibet's subculture of individual long-term retreat" (42), which may complicate the certainty of any conclusions and necessitates further investigation of the topic. Even so, the enduring influence of the first two texts speaks to the centrality of the material concerns to which DiValerio turns his attention in subsequent chapters.

The second chapter, "Locating the Ascetic Self," analyzes the ways in which the prescriptive literature manages concerns regarding the dwelling space of the retreatant. Interestingly, unlike in the Indian Buddhist context, very little such concern existed (45). Instead, as DiValerio explains throughout the chapter, the emphasis in the prescriptive literature on which he relies is the mountainous terrain itself. Having situated the powerful cultural significance of the Tibetan mountain landscape, DiValerio expresses its centrality for Tibetan Buddhist practice and identity.

By virtue of these associations, in both the discourse of retreat practice and that of the broader Tibetan culture in which it circulates, remaining "in the mountains" expresses synecdochally the whole of the eremitic ideal. In this way the "mountain" of the "mountain Dharma" functions in a way very similar to the "forest" or "wilderness" (*vana*, *aranya*) of the ascetic traditions of the early centuries of Buddhism in Indian, and more recently in the Theravada societies of Southeast Asia, where the "forest monks" have established themselves as the inheritors of the ascetic and meditative tradition (48).

The remainder of the book explores the ways that this fundamental perspective serves as the basis by which ideals surrounding individual retreat conditions are propounded, problematized, or reimagined by successive generations in the prescriptive literature (and oral discourse, presumably). The location itself, the retreatant's attunement to it, its history as a place empowered by previous adepts (such as Milarepa), and its capacity for isolating the retreatant from the ordinary world foreground the sense that the individual meditative retreat does not create a new subjectivity—as Gavin Flood's concept of the "ascetic self," to which DiValerio alludes, proposes—so much as serve as the space in which an altered sense of self is to be assumed for the duration of the retreat. I will return to this point below.

An important theme that animates the third, fourth, and fifth chapters—"isolating," "nourishing," and "preserving" the ascetic self, respectively—is the relationship between the idealized solitary meditator and his (almost always) ties to persons and communities inside or outside of the retreat setting. These are the most compelling portions of *Mountain Dharma*—to what extent can the solitary retreatant, particularly novices, maintain, and be *expected* to maintain, strict isolation while procuring sustenance or enduring sickness? The prescriptive literature attempts to foresee, mitigate, or otherwise reimagine the dangers of these relationships, and in the details of these responses the richness and complexity of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as a whole come into focus. The prescriptive literature concerns itself not simply with the individual retreat setting as a distinct phenomenon but as a microcosm of Tibetan Buddhist practice, and DiValerio charts the historical developments within and across lineages by means of their responses. These details should interest not only specialists in Tibetan Buddhist religious or cultural history but scholars of religion as well.

Mountain Dharma's central contention concerns what DiValerio frames as "lived deferential reverence," which is an attitude of devotion toward lama and lineage broadly construed. DiValerio argues that this

attitude has come to dominate the individual retreat experience over time, so much so that the very possibility of spiritual attainment, and hence buddhahood, is regarded by the prescriptive literature as less and less possible, as the temporal gap between contemporary practitioners and the enlightened masters standing at the head of the lineage continues to widen. This is a serious implication, and it emerges from a reading of the prescriptive literature less as rhetoric than might be warranted. Specialists should evaluate this. DiValerio writes:

> In both the physical world and the mental one, in space and in time, the retreatant's being is oriented through references to the past masters of the tradition. These mechanisms continually reinforce the connection while never expunging the sense of the meditator's lesser status. (138)

Certainly, everywhere in the Buddhist literature of Tibet one finds that the present pales in comparison to the past, and as DiValerio indicates this frequently serves as justification for modifications in practice; the precursors in Indian Buddhist literature to these sorts of diminished expectations abound. But the question remains whether these are to be taken literally or, in part at least, as exhortations to more rigorous practice. It may be that these diminished expectations in the prescriptive literature have served, over successive generations, to create the very conditions that this literature bemoans. But simultaneously, these generations uphold their root lamas as enlightened masters, yet this again may be less than literal. There is much that DiValerio offers for thoughtful consideration in these regards.

For historians of Tibetan Buddhism, scholars of religion, and interested practitioners, the final chapter, "The Tibetan Ascetic Self in Time," will be especially welcome, for it is a deep dive into the ways that the famed non-sectarian polymath Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tayé has changed the very parameters of the retreat as a category. DiValerio observes in a specific context what seems to be true more generally: "Kongtrül's version of retreat is drastically different from earlier centuries of individual

long-term retreat" (176), and the details that he provides are another strength of the book. The contemporary, globally practiced version of Tibetan Buddhism that we take as normative, judged however literally against its predecessors, has been deeply impacted by historical conditions and the responses to those conditions from the tradition(s). DiValerio shows how we could consider Jamgön Kongtrül's version as foremost among these responses. DiValerio's treatment shows just how much many other aspects of Tibetan Buddhist practice are implicated in the topic of retreat and how much more we could learn by research into historical developments from premodern to modern Tibetan religious culture.

The only significant problem with *Mountain Dharma* is its inadequate conceptual scaffolding, and this could be a drawback for those unfamiliar with the resources to which DiValerio alludes. For example, the concept of the ascetic self borrowed from Gavin Flood is, on my reading, put to significantly different use in *Mountain Dharma*, as suggested above. That is, DiValerio seems to identify the ascetic self of the retreatant as a temporary state of being, so to speak, that the conditions themselves impose, not—as I read Flood— as a transformed product of religious practice, however measured. This may relate to DiValerio's reference to David McMahan's recent work *Rethinking Meditation*, which sees the contemporary enthusiasm for meditation as an instrumentalist one that dispenses with important historical context. This might contextualize the worry, expressed above, about the claim that the possibility for spiritual transformation became displaced by the culture of lived deferential reverence. From that perspective, the efficacy of meditation is practically irrelevant, and one's place in the transmission of the lineage is primary. This is why an overly literal representation of the prescriptive literature may be problematic.

In any case, these conceptual links are not so fully developed, and the secondary literature not so fully explicated as to make clear these connections or the nature of the personhood that the Tibetan "ascetic self" instantiates. The "imaginal self," which seems to be a Jungian concept,

appears a few times throughout the volume, but is not explained in either that context or developed as an analytical one here, which is unfortunate. Conceptual development may not be DiValerio's concern here, but readers will have to infer his interpretation or know the secondary literature well enough to create their own.

A general editorial comment: because there exist no universally accepted conventions for the transliteration of Tibetan terms and names, books such as this, which aim to reach beyond the specialist audience, might serve their readers better by including an appendix of the transliteration conventions used by the author along with the widely accepted Wylie format. Another option, commonly used, would be to include the Wylie in parentheses after the first occurrence in the body of the text. Here, the Wylie is given in the endnotes, which is less friendly to the reader.

These concerns aside, *Mountain Dharma: Meditative Retreat and the Tibetan Ascetic Self* is an important contribution to our understanding of not only individual retreat but the conditions and developments of religious practice in the Land of Snows. Both scholars and interested practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly the non-sectarian tradition of Jamgön Kongtrül, will encounter much of value in every chapter. Specialists in other Buddhist traditions, whether East Asian or Southeast Asian, and perhaps even those working in Daoist contemplative traditions, may find the author's attention to historical detail helpful for drawing comparisons. Scholars of religion, particularly those interested in the topic of asceticism and the Foucault/Hadot conceptual arena, will likewise discover much of interest in this volume.

Works Cited

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