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Rimé Revisited: Shabkar's Response to Religious Difference

Rachel H. Pang¹

Abstract

This article analyzes Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol's (1781–1851) Tibetan Buddhist response to interreligious and intersectarian difference. While there exist numerous studies in Buddhist ethics that address the Buddhist perspective on contemporary issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and terrorism, there has been considerably less attention paid to Buddhist responses towards religious difference. Moreover, the majority of the research on this topic has been conducted within the context of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. This article examines Shabkar's non-sectarian ideas on their own terms, within the context of Buddhist thought. I demonstrate the strong visionary, apocalyptic, theological, and soteriological dimensions of Shabkar's *rimé*, or “unbiased,” approach to religious diversity. The two main applications of these findings are: (1) they broaden the current academic understanding of *rimé* from being a sociological phenomenon to a theological one

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grounded in social and historical particularities; (2) they draw attention to the non-philosophical aspects of Buddhist ethics.

Introduction

In *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*, Damien Keown defines the field of Buddhist ethics as “how Buddhism might respond to the ethical dilemmas confronting the modern world” (x). One of the ethical dilemmas that confront not only Buddhists but all religious communities is the issue of how to respond to religious difference. With the contemporary proliferation of communicative technologies and the increased displacement of people across the globe, this issue becomes increasingly difficult to ignore for any religious community.

In the popular imagination, Buddhism has the reputation of being a religion that embraces tolerance, inclusion, and pluralism. Yet, as several scholars have recently remarked, this reputation is a “romanticized perception” that is “open to question” (Kiblinger 3; Hayes 65). From among studies that have examined the historical Buddha’s perspective on religious diversity according to the Pāli canon, Abraham Vélez de Cea has argued, “the Buddha’s view of religious diversity is best understood as a form of pluralistic-inclusivism and his attitude as pluralistic” (1). By contrast, Richard Hayes has argued that pluralism in the contemporary sense of “the attitude that variety is healthy and therefore something to be desired,” “is not one of the values promoted in the literature of classical Indian Buddhism” (1, 18). Still, other scholars such as Kristin Kiblinger have highlighted incidents where the historical Buddha adopted an inclusivistic attitude towards other religions (33–38). Thus, even with regards to a single figure’s—the historical Buddha’s—attitude towards religious difference, there is scholarly disagreement.

With regards to traditional Buddhist discourse addressing religious difference, Perry Schmidt-Leukel and John D'Arcy May have suggested, "As far as its traditional discourse is concerned [Buddhism] seems to have been, by and large, as exclusivistic or inclusivistic in its soteriological claims as any other of the major religious traditions" (15). Indeed, there lacks a single pan-Buddhist attitude towards religious difference. For example, Mahāyāna Buddhist thinkers such as Zhiyi (538–597 CE), Zongmi (780–841 CE), and Kukai (774–835 CE) used the strategy of "hierarchal inclusivism," to acknowledge other traditions of Buddhism as valid but subordinate to their own (Burton 321–322). On the other hand, Nichiren (1222–1282 CE) is well known for taking an exclusivist attitude towards other Buddhist traditions (Burton 324). Thus, when considering the issue of Buddhist attitudes towards religious diversity, it is important to keep in mind that Buddhist thinkers from different historical periods and cultural milieus held varying attitudes towards religious difference.

One important historical example of a Buddhist response towards religious difference was the so-called non-sectarian or *rimé* (Tib. *ris med*) "movement" of nineteenth-century eastern Tibet. The term "*rimé*" means "impartial" or "unbiased." In the context of discussions of inter-religious and intrareligious diversity, it is often rendered into English as "non-sectarian." Members of the non-sectarian "movement" included Jamgön Kongtrul, Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo, Chokgyur Lingpa, Dza Patrul, Ju Mipham, and others (Smith 237, 250). While the usage of the term "movement" for describing this religio-cultural phenomenon is disputed (Gardner 111; Schapiro 51), the significance of the legacy left by this group of Buddhist luminaries is widely acknowledged. Jamgön Kongtrul and his colleagues' profound influence upon contemporary forms of Tibetan Buddhism is well known, with Geoffrey Samuel remarking, "Tibetan Buddhism today outside the Gelugpa order is largely a product of the Rimed movement" (537). Similarly, Alexander Gardner

notes, “Many Tibetan lamas who teach in the West have come to characterize themselves and their teaching as ‘Rimay’” (113).

Indeed, many contemporary Buddhist centers, events, teachers, and teachings carry the label “*rimé*.” For example, Khentru Rinpoche is described as a “*rimé* master”; this title was awarded by Lama Lobsang Trinley and conferred by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 2003 (*Tibetan*). There is also the Rime Buddhist Center, a “non-sectarian” Dharma center founded by Chuck Stanford or Lama Changchup Kunchok Dorje in Kansas City, Missouri (*Rime*). In 2014, there was even a “Rimay Monlam” or “non-sectarian prayer festival” in Garrison, New York (*Rimay*). Indeed, the term “*rimé*” has become so widely popular in contemporary Buddhist circles that Gardner has pegged it a “fuzzy catchall” (112). And yet, how was the term *rimé* used in pre-modern contexts, before the contemporary efflorescence of *rimé* lineages, Buddhist centers, and events?

This article will focus on how Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (1781–1851) portrayed his non-sectarian approach to religious and sectarian diversity in his *Collected Works*. Renowned for his songs of spiritual realization, spiritual autobiography, and promotion of vegetarianism, Shabkar was also a vocal advocate for an unbiased approach towards the various sects within Buddhism and the various religions without. Shabkar’s promotion of non-sectarianism predates the activities of members of the non-sectarian “movement” by approximately three decades.² Following an examination of the semantic range of the term “*rimé*” in Shabkar’s *Collected Works*, I will discuss the way in which non-sectarianism is portrayed in both theory and practice in Shabkar’s *Collected Works*: theoretic-

² I have as yet not found any evidence of formal contact between Shabkar and the non-sectarian “movement” in the Kham region of Tibet. However, it is said that Patrul Rinpoche desired to meet Shabkar. While Patrul was en route to Amdo, Shabkar died. It is said that Patrul Rinpoche made one hundred prostrations in the direction of Amdo as a result (Ricard xv, xv n. 6).

cally grounded in traditional Buddhist thought, the primary aim of being non-sectarian is for soteriological purposes. There are also strong visionary, apocalyptic, and theological elements to Shabkar's articulation of non-sectarianism.

The Semantic Range of the Term “Unbiased” (Tib. *ris med*) in Shabkar's Writings

Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa has illuminated the problems associated with translating the term “*rimé*” as “non-sectarian,” preferring instead to use the word “unbiased” (47-48). The term *rimé* is not found in the *Great Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary*, but rather, exists as a derivative of the term “*phyogs ris med pa*,” which also exists in the variant forms of “*phyogs su ris med*” and “*phyogs med*.” It defines “*phyogs ris*,” the antonym of “unbiased or “impartial,” as: (1) faction³ (Tib. *shog kha*, Ch. 派系, 宗派); (2) “to take sides based on attachment and aversion” (Tib. *phyogs 'dzin chags sdang*; Ch. 偏袒, 偏私) (2: 1766). The negation of this term is “*phyogs ris med pa*,” which the *Great Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary* defines as “without bias or partiality” (Ch. 没有偏私, 无私, 无倾向, 无偏向) (2: 1765). This rather broad definition reflects the vast semantic range of the term “*rimé*” and its variants in Shabkar's *Collected Works*. Hence, the term “*rimé*” is not limited to the description of sectarian relationships.

Although Shabkar uses the word “*rimé*” in the context of “Dharma that is unbiased towards tenet systems,” the term also appears in other contexts (Zhabs dkar, *snyigs dus* 1: 428.4). On the most concrete level, the term “*phyogs med*” is used to describe physical location. Literally meaning “directionless,” it is also appropriately translated as “un-

³ *The New Tibetan-English Dictionary of Modern Tibetan* defines “*shog kha*” as “group, clique, faction, party, sector” (1104).

fixed” in this context. Shabkar sings about the “happy Dharma practitioner who wanders through unfixed mountain hermitages” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 3: 379) and advises his audience to “wander without direction!” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 5: 278). He even describes himself as “Shabkar, the one who wanders in kingdoms without [a] fixed [location]” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 5: 290). The rationale for this aimless wandering is to reduce one’s attachment to the mundane world and minimize possible sources of distraction. The “unfixed mountain hermitage” (Tib. *phyogs med ri khrod*) is the itinerant yogin’s rightful abode, as he or she has ideally severed all societal ties.

Reflecting the “directionless” physical location of the yogin is a second usage of this word: an unbiased attitude towards all beings. This unbiased attitude is prevalent throughout Mahāyāna Buddhism and entails refraining from attachment towards friends and aversion towards enemies (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 3: 518). In particular, yogins should train in generating love and compassion for all beings without bias, with the rationale being that they were all once their mothers in a previous lifetime (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 3: 243). The end result of such training is to be able to perform the activities of great religious masters who are able to “benefit beings impartially through the warmth of their all-encompassing wisdom, love, and compassion” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 5: 200). Shabkar gives an example of two such masters: the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. In a song sung to a group of weeping women who did not receive the opportunity to meet the Dalai Lama, Shabkar describes both the Dalai Lama the Panchen Lama as, “You, who have come for the sake of beings, without bias” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 5: 241).

The term “unbiased” is also frequently used to describe the ideal form of compassion, which in its classic Mahāyāna formulation is “boundless” or “immeasurable” and does not discriminate between friends or enemies (Patrul 195-217). At one point in the *Collected Songs*,

Shabkar proclaims: “May impartial compassion be generated!” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 3: 23). Impartial compassion is also often described using the recurrent metaphors of light rays, the sun, and occasionally, the moon, as in the cases of: “the sun of compassion dawns impartially” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 5: 64), “the light rays of compassion radiate impartially” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 5: 300), and “the impartial light of the sun and moon of great wisdom and compassion” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 5: 165).

Another context in which the term “*phyogs su ris med*” is frequently used is in descriptions of the mind’s natural condition, or literally, its “way of abiding” (Tib. *gnas lugs*). Regarding this, Shabkar sings, “The mind’s natural condition is primordially emptiness-clarity/ it is impartial and encompasses all” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 4: 351). This idea of the impartial nature of the mind’s natural condition is related to the idea of emptiness-clarity being “devoid of limits or a center” (Tib. *mtha’ dbus med*) (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 3: 89). In the context of the mind’s natural condition, it is also possible to translate “*phyogs med*” as “directionless,” where “direction” serves as a metaphor conveying the limitless dimension of the mind’s natural state. For example, in the following passage, it makes sense to translate the term as “directionless”: “Always observe one’s own mind/ it is without basis, without abode, and directionless” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 3: 107). In this way, the “directionless” nature of the yogin’s mind is physically reflected in the fact that he or she lacks a fixed abode.

Finally, being “impartial” lies at the very basis of reality itself and is an important aspect of the enlightened state of mind. It is also a measure by which one can ascertain whether or not one has attained spiritual realization. At one point Shabkar sings, “The yogin who has not abandoned bias/ even if he practices, has strayed into being a charlatan” (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 3: 712). Thus, according to Shabkar, being “impar-

tial” or “unbiased” is an ideal that lies at the very core of spiritual attainment. From this analysis of the semantic range of the term “*rimé*” and its variants, it is clear that being impartial towards various sectarian traditions is but *one* aspect of the ideal of impartiality. This point is often lost in discussions regarding the non-sectarian movement in nineteenth-century Kham.

***Rimé* in Theory**

Precedents in early Buddhism, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna

The ideal of impartiality is in no way unique to Shabkar or nineteenth-century Tibet, but rather, has its origins in the teachings of the historical Buddha (Tulku 13; Oldmeadow 23-28). The ideal of impartiality also figures prominently in classic Mahāyāna thought. As mentioned previously, the ideal form of compassion in Mahāyāna Buddhism is “boundless” or “immeasurable” and does not discriminate between friends or enemies. This is apparent in the following classic Mahāyāna text, Śāntideva’s *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

So like a treasure found at home,
Enriching me without fatigue,
All enemies are helpers in my bodhisattva work
And therefore they should be a joy to me. (Śāntideva 93)

Similarly, the ideal of impartiality manifests in Vajrayāna as the ideal of pure perception. Shabkar explains this concept and how it relates to Vajrayāna spiritual practice as follows:

It’s really impossible for us to know at this point what teachings are good and bad. If you don’t know, it’s better just to have pure perception towards it. All phenomena

are the manifestations of mind. Yogis practicing the generation stage meditate upon the impure universe and beings as pure, and it will become a pure mandala. If you practice pure perception, even if it's not pure, you will perceive its appearance as pure. (Zhabs dkar, *chos bshad* 74.4)

The principle behind the practice of pure perception is that all phenomena are manifestations of our minds, and in their original state, are devoid of conceptual labels. However, our ego-grasping causes us to categorize phenomena into categories of “good” and “bad,” and we develop attachment and aversion, which causes us to stray from the most natural mode of perception. The goal of Tantric or Vajrayāna training is to transform one's mode of perception by gradually eradicating all grasping to conceptual categories, with the end goal of perceiving phenomena as they are. Pure perception is so critical to Vajrayāna training that Shabkar notes, “The core of the samaya of spiritual forefathers is devotion and pure perception” (Zhabs dkar, *chos bshad* 100.4). With regards to how pure perception relates to religious and sectarian difference, Shabkar writes:

In this way, if you follow the intention of the Buddha's words, then don't categorize teachings into “good” and “bad” . . . Have pure perception towards all tenet system unbiased like the sun. This is a critical instruction. If you don't understand this, but fall under the sway of attachment and aversion—categorizing the teachings and slandering other tenet systems—you will have lost the Buddha's instructions. (Zhabs dkar, *chos bshad gzhan phan nor bu* 108.4)

Shabkar extends this statement to include religions other than Buddhism as well:

Thus, not only should you have faith, devotion and pure perception towards Sarma, Nyingma, Sakya, Karma, Drukpa, Dakpo, Drigung, Jonang, Bonpo, Hwashang, and even other religions, it is not suitable to slander or abandon them. (Zhabs dkar, *chos bshad* 66.5)

The vision

An interesting element of Shabkar's portrayal of non-sectarianism that has yet to be identified in the work of Jamgön Kongtrul and his contemporaries in Kham is its theological, visionary, and apocalyptic dimensions. Around the year 1845, after having received repeated requests from disciples to compose an "emanated scripture"⁴ on the teachings of Padmasambhava, Shabkar supplicates to Padmasambhava while in retreat. One day, at dawn, Padmasambhava appears to him, making the following revelation:

Hark! Listen, son of noble family! As the auspicious connection for accomplishing the great objective of the teachings and beings, initially, at the Heart of the Lake, I appeared in the form of Tsongkhapa, blessed your mental continuum, and bestowed the *Lamrim*. Afterwards, when you were staying at Tashi Nyamgaling, the mountain hermitage on the banks of the Machu river, I appeared in the form of Lord Atiśa, opened the door of your mind, and bestowed the empowerment of the *Samadhi of Sixteen*

⁴ Between the years 1815 and 1846, Shabkar composed a series of *Nine Emanated Scriptures*. These texts draw their names and inspiration from the legend of *The Great Emanated Scriptures of Orally Transmitted Quintessential Instructions* (Tib. *snyan brgyud kyi man ngag sprul pa'i glegs bam chen mo*) transmitted to Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) by the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in a vision.

Spheres, and gave you the *Scriptures of the Kadampa*. Now, having shown my actual face, I give you the teachings in actuality. Because of this, be glad! Generally, although all buddhas are one taste with the expanse of primordial wisdom, in particular, my three aspects are one with their mental continua, just as you have previously known. In particular, you should understand the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions without exception to be emanations of your kind root lama. One's root lama is also the display of one's mind. From primordial times, the essence of the mind itself is also empty, uncompounded like the sky, and spontaneously established; it encompasses all that is animate and inanimate, and is the ground for the manifestation of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. If one recognizes emptiness-clarity as the *dharmakāya*, one understands the depth of the Dharma. (Zhabs dkar, *o rgyan* 574.2-575.3)

As Shabkar continues to press Padmasambhava for advice on composing the text that would become the *Emanated Scripture of Orgyen*, Padmasambhava makes a remarkable prophecy:

In the future, during the degenerate age, according to the prophecy of King Kriṣi's dream: "The precious teachings of the Buddha will not be destroyed by outsiders, etc. Rather, Buddhists, having mutually divided the Dharma into categories of good and bad, will quarrel due to attachment and aversion, destroying the teachings." In the future, during the degenerate age, when the *Emanated Scripture of Orgyen* is placed upon the heads of people—whether Dharma practitioners or worldly individuals, it will dispel all partiality concerning the Dharma, and cause pure perception to arise everywhere. Thus, it is good to compose

these unprecedented elegant sayings that benefit the teachings and beings. (Zhabs dkar, *o rgyan*, 576.1-4.)

These passages reveal interesting facets of Shabkar's non-sectarian message. Firstly, they reveal its visionary and apocalyptic dimensions. Not only is an unbiased attitude one of the qualities of an authentic Buddhist practitioner, it also serves the purpose of combatting the predicted downfall of the Buddhist teachings. Moreover, Shabkar's *Emanated Scriptures of Orgyen* in particular will play a prophetic role in miraculously reversing the destruction of Buddhism by insiders; simply by placing it upon people's heads, it will have the power to "dispel all partiality concerning the Dharma." The very title of Shabkar's *Emanated Scriptures of Orgyen* also has visionary origins. Originally, when Shabkar's disciples requested the composition of this text, they referred to it as the "*Emanated Scripture of Padmasambhava*." It was only after Shabkar's visionary experience, that he renamed it the "*Emanated Scriptures of Orgyen*" according to the vision. These visionary and apocalyptic elements of Shabkar's portrayal of non-sectarianism lend an additional legitimacy and potency to his message.

The first passage above makes the claim that Padmasambhava, Atiśa, and Tsongkhapa are in essence, one. Although there are textual precedents for this idea in the writings of the Kadampa masters and the second Dalai Lama (Zhabs dkar, *o rgyan*, 441.1-443.4.), these figures are generally viewed by most Tibetan Buddhists as the figureheads of distinctive Tibetan Buddhist sects: Padmasambhava as the founder of the Nyingma sect, Atiśa as the founder of the Kadampa sect, and Tsongkhapa as founder of the Geluk sect. This claim makes the boundaries between sects seem less absolute. In particular, the claim that the Dzogchen teachings represent "the culmination of the Secret Mantra, the intention of the buddhas" would be an interesting point of debate between different sectarian traditions (Zhabs dkar, *o rgyan*, 575.5.). This statement is

also reminiscent of the “hierarchal inclusivism” of other Buddhist schools such as Huayan and Tiantai in China.

Thirdly, Shabkar’s portrayal of *rimé* is strongly rooted in tantric Buddhist cosmogony. According to Dzogchen thought, the version of the historical Buddha’s spiritual journey found in the *jātakas* and *sūtras* (i.e., generating bodhicitta, accumulating accumulations for three immeasurable kalpas, etc.) is but the “expedient meaning” (Zhabs dkar, *snyigs dus* 2: 24.5-6). The “definitive meaning” is the version of the story found in the Dzogchen tradition. That is, the individual that we know as the historical Buddha had in fact already attained full enlightenment as the buddha Samantabhadra (Zhabs dkar *snyigs dus* 2: 24.6-25.1). From within a pure realm, it is said that Samantabhadra displayed the Dharma in inconceivable ways (Zhabs dkar, *snyigs dus* 2: 25.1-2), manifesting as buddhas, bodhisattvas, and spiritual masters to teach the Dharma in accord with the propensities of beings (Zhabs dkar, *snyigs dus* 2: 25.3-4). The logical conclusion is that all “spiritual friends” are in fact manifestations of the Buddha, and that their diversity is due to the varied propensities of sentient beings. Because of this, Shabkar notes that because all the bodhisattvas and scholar-adepts of India and Tibet are “limitless emanations of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, we should not be one-sided and narrow minded” (Zhabs dkar, *snyigs dus* 2: 22.4). Because of their cosmogonic origins, it would be inappropriate to discriminate or look down on various Buddhist teachers and traditions.

***Rimé* in Practice**

The visionary, theological, and apocalyptic dimensions described above reside in the background of Shabkar’s portrayal of non-sectarianism. In his *Collected Works*, Shabkar’s main concern is with the way in which *rimé* applies to the spiritual path: as a basic attitude, as an integral element of

spiritual practice, and as an intrinsic quality of the enlightened perspective.

Rimé: the basic attitude

Shabkar portrays *rimé* as the basic attitude of the authentic Buddhist practitioner. As discussed earlier in this essay, there is Buddhist precedent for espousing this unbiased attitude, and that this unbiased attitude is not limited to the context of religious difference. Still, within the context of interreligious and inter-sectarian relations, what does Shabkar mean by “unbiased”? A stanza from the *Emanated Scripture of Orgyen* gives a succinct summary of his point of view:

May all male and female beings who hear this song pacify
bias—aversion and attachment—to tenet systems and be
in harmony with all—with faith, devotion, and pure per-
ception—impartially benefitting the teachings and beings!
(Zhabs dkar, *o rgyan*, 367.1)

Thus, to be “sectarian” is to engage in bias and partiality, essentializing external objects and ideas as “good” and “bad.” To be non-sectarian means to be impartial, non-judgmental, and to have “pure perception” towards all. Moreover, the scope of one’s non-sectarianism should not be limited to Buddhist sects alone, but rather, should encompass other religions as well (Zhabs dkar, *chos bshad*: 57.6, 66.5). The rationale behind this is the theological idea that the Buddha and other enlightened beings emanate in countless forms, each suited to teach different types of beings (Zhabs dkar, *chos bshad*, 63.2.). Even “heretical” religions are seen as the Buddha’s compassionate “skill-in-means” (Skt. *upāya*) (Zhabs dkar, *chos bshad*, 68.4). In support of this potentially controversial idea, Shabkar cites Pema Karpo (1527-1592): “One should know that the forefathers

made the path of the heretics and so forth in order to gradually guide them” (Zhabs dkar, *chos bshad*, 68.6).

Shabkar’s views on *rimé* as being first and foremost an attitude resonates with the works of Jamgön Kongtrul (1813–1899). In his autobiography, Kongtrul praises Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo for his “pure view for all the teachings of the Sage without bias,” and is highly critical of others who maintain “the relative superiority and inferiority of different Buddhist traditions, or the relative purity or impurity of different lineages . . . [and] are full of meaningless suspicions and resistance concerning even their own traditions, like the proverbial skittish old yak that causes himself to become shy” (86). In a passage that sounds uncannily similar to Shabkar’s admonitions throughout his *Collected Works*, Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö (1896–1959)⁵ writes:

[In Tibet], the Sakya, Geluk, Kagyü, and Nyingma schools were established by the devil of philosophical systems. The teachings were agitated by disputes and so became disturbed. As a result of partiality both one’s present and future lives are wasted and oneself and others brought to sin. As there is essentially no meaning in this at all one must give it up with certainty and guard the teachings of the Buddha which, on account of the fact that he attained to the stage that is without fear, cannot be destroyed by anyone from outside. As it explained in the sūtras the teachings can only be destroyed from within, like a lion killed by the ravages of worms in its stomach. (Aris 227)

⁵ He is one of the reincarnations of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820–1892). Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö was a *rimé* master who represented a link between the masters of Jamgön Kongtrul’s generation and *rimé* masters of the twentieth century (Oldmeadow 102–103).

Here, Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö makes an allusion to King Kriṣi's prediction reminiscent of Padmasambhava's prophecy to Shabkar. Through this allusion, it becomes clear that the repercussions of not preserving an unbiased attitude will not only be "abandoning the Dharma," but will also contribute to the demise of the Buddhist teachings. It is thus perhaps not surprising that Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö concludes with a prayer for non-sectarianism: "May all those who hold the teachings as precious strive to make an effort in the actions of discarding prejudice and of studying the explanations of the doctrines and their realization . . . Cause harmony to rise in the monastic community and discard verbal sectarianism. Do not cut the Dharma into divisions and sections" (Aris 226).

Rimé on the spiritual path

The significance of maintaining an unbiased attitude while on the spiritual path is apparent in one of Shabkar's songs: "The yogin who has not abandoned bias/ even if he practices, has strayed into being a charlatan" (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 3: 712). Furthermore, if an individual slanders the tenet systems of others due to bias, such an individual is considered not only to have "rejected the Dharma" but also to be "a destroyer of Dharma" (Zhabs dkar, *chos bshad* 113.2; *o rgyan* 496.3). Shabkar explains that pre-enlightened beings have obscured perception, and they are thus incapable of judging the validity of the various tenet systems (Zhabs dkar, *o rgyan*, 467.6.). He reminds his audience that the eleventh-century Indian master Atiśa purposely did not teach the tantras to the people of Tibet because they were incapable of perceiving them properly (Zhabs dkar, *o rgyan* 473.2.). Therefore, while on the Buddhist path, individuals should practice the tenet system that they feel the most affinity towards, but train in pure perception towards all others (Zhabs dkar, *o rgyan* 366.6, 475.6.). By practicing pure perception in this way, they will even-

tually perceive all appearances as pure in that “all phenomena are the manifestations of mind” (Zhabs dkar, *o rgyan* 74.4.). Echoing many past Buddhist masters, Shabkar states: “Equanimity is the most important oral instruction” (Zhabs dkar, *o rgyan* 114.2).

While Shabkar maintains that it is acceptable for Buddhist practitioners to practice one tradition and maintain pure perception towards others, in his own spiritual life, Shabkar takes things a step further. Reminiscent of the approach of Jamgön Kongtrul and his contemporaries in Kham, Shabkar requests teachings, transmissions, and empowerments from as many different sects as possible. This aspect of his spiritual path is reflected in one of his songs, sung upon seeing clouds rising above Mount Machen in Amdo province:

Namo Guru!

Ya ki! In the vast space of emptiness-clarity,
You, the sun who radiates empty luminosity in the ten
directions,
That is, the Buddha, protector of beings,
I entreat you to turn the wheel of Dharma in Tibet.

In the sky of the southwestern peak,
You floating white clouds like overflowing milk,
That you are Padmasambhava and spiritual sons, how
joyous!
Please teach us the view of Dzogchen.

In the sky of the eastern peak,
You rising white clouds like heaps of fresh yoghurt,
That you are Milarepa and spiritual sons, how joyous!
Please teach us the view of Mahāmudrā.

In the sky above, is a white banner

You, the white clouds that extend in the four directions.
 That you are Tsongkhapa and spiritual sons, how joyous!
 Please teach the view of great Madhyamaka!
 (Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 4: 395)

Although this song mentions Madhyamaka, Mahāmudrā, and Dzogchen, Shabkar’s spiritual study was not limited to these three traditions; he also practiced Mind Training (Tib. *blo sbyong*), Pacification (Tib. *zhi byed*), and Chö (Tib. *gcod*).⁶ Shabkar’s interest in learning from multiple Buddhist traditions is in some ways reminiscent of the version of religious pluralism that Diana Eck advocates in the contemporary American context. In *A New Religious America*, Eck aims to revise the concept of pluralism so that it is not merely about diversity, but involves the “engagement, involvement, and participation” in this diversity (69). There are four dimensions to her “new pluralism”: (1) “active engagement with plurality,” (2) “go[ing] beyond mere tolerance to the active attempt to understand the other,” (3) “not simply relativism” in that it involves an “engagement with, not abdication of, differences and particularities,” (4) the “process of pluralism is never complete but is the ongoing work of each generation” (70-72).

Rimé as part of the enlightened perspective

Finally, Shabkar portrays a truly unbiased attitude as being the natural outcome of the Buddhist path properly followed. This unbiased attitude is an intrinsic part of the enlightened perspective, the ineffable experi-

⁶ From his *Collected Songs*: Zhabs dkar bya btang 3: 18,130,160,197,501,610; Zhabs dkar bya btang 4: 395,520,592,593; Zhabs dkar bya btang 5: 63. Shabkar’s *Life* details the non-sectarian nature of his studies and spiritual training. Shabkar’s *Life* has been translated by Matthieu Ricard and his team (2001). For more on the topic of non-sectarianism in Shabkar’s autobiography in particular, please see Pang (2014).

ence of the way things truly are. In a description of the enlightened yogin's mind, Shabkar sings the following:

When I have grasped the view's natural place,
I am no longer subjected to bias.
If asked, "What is that like, for example?"
It is like the vast encompassing sky.
It is the bliss of the yogin without bias.
(Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 3: 87)

It is clear from this passage that this lack of bias is an intrinsic aspect of the enlightened state of mind. Still, how does this unbiased attitude relate to sectarian difference? In the following song of spiritual realization, Shabkar considers three distinct Buddhist tenet systems—Madhyamaka, Mahāmudrā, and Dzogchen—from an enlightened perspective. He concludes that from an ultimate perspective—"the king of views/ that is like the sky"—they do not contradict one another:

Free from eternalism or nihilism
I am a Madhyamaka.
Free from bias,
I am a Dzogchenpa.
Free from refuting or establishing
I am a Chakchenpa [i.e. practitioner of Mahāmudrā].

I offer this song of spiritual realization
to the lineage lamas of
Madhyamaka, Dzogchen, and Mahāmudrā.
Through this may you bestow all your blessings.

I make a single wish:
may all realize
the king of views
that is like the sky.

(Zhabs dkar, *bya btang* 4: 593)

Similarly, Shabkar addresses this topic in the following “song of the definitive meaning” (Tib. *nges don*), he sings:

Like the sky free from extremes, however you observe it,
one’s mind is devoid of extremes, going towards the
centre.

As there is nothing greater than this,
it is called great Madhyamaka, free from extremes.

In the unimpeded vast expanse of the mind itself:
emptiness-clarity,
are all the phenomena of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* without
remainder

As they have all entered utter perfection, and there is
nothing greater than this,
It is called the Dzogchen.

The emptiness-clarity of mind itself, like the seal of the
king,
seals everything in *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* without
exceptions.

As there is no seal greater than this,
It is called Mahāmudrā.

When equipoised in the natural condition just like that,
may the mind be courageous like the sky!
piercing like the sun and moon!
spacious like the atmosphere!
vast like the earth!
majestic like the king of mountains!

(Zhabs dkar *bya btang*, 5: 63)

Part of the power of the statements made through these songs comes from the medium through which they are conveyed. “Songs of spiritual realization” (Tib. *mgur*) are not considered by Tibetan Buddhists to be ordinary songs, but instead, the spontaneous utterances of Buddhist masters expressing the ineffable enlightened state. Through these songs of spiritual realization, Shabkar presents a compelling case that the enlightened state necessarily entails an unbiased attitude towards all phenomena, including different sectarian traditions.

Conclusion

The strong visionary, apocalyptic, soteriological, and theological elements of Shabkar’s articulation of non-sectarianism force us to contend with the issue of methodology in Buddhist ethics. In this essay, I have considered Shabkar’s non-sectarian thought as a Buddhist response to religious difference. However, as Damien Keown has remarked, there are major differences between Buddhism and western ethics, in that “Buddhism does not fit entirely with any of the available Western theoretical models” (24). For instance, when secular Euro-American philosophers consider the proper ethical response to religious difference, it is not necessary for them to consider supernatural sources of authority such as God, the cosmic law, rebirth, or karma.

Nevertheless, in comparative contexts, it is helpful to consider Buddhist responses to religious diversity from the perspective of Buddhist ethics. That is, the heuristic category “ethics” provides a powerful tool by which we can bring Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and secular philosophers together for a mutually illuminating discussion. However, at the same time, it is important to remember that there are aspects to the Buddhist responses to religious diversity that lie outside the purview of ethics defined as the “critical analysis of those values by

people such as philosophers” (Keown 27); the visionary, apocalyptic, soteriological, and theological elements of Shabkar’s non-sectarian thought are a case in point.

Likewise, most studies on Buddhist responses to religious difference conducted so far have been within the context of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Most Christian theologians are interested in categorizing Buddhist responses to religious diversity using the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—a system derived from Christian theology. While these categories are useful for Buddhist-Christian dialogue, they fail in that they do not enable us to fully and accurately capture Buddhist responses to religious difference. Therefore, the particular interpretative lens that we choose in our research plays a large role in shaping what we are able to perceive. In this essay, I have aimed to categorize Shabkar’s response to religious diversity in nineteenth-century Tibet as much as possible on its own terms. However, it is also my hope that this article will open up discussion on the topic of Buddhist responses to religious diversity within Buddhist studies and Buddhist ethics; it is already a flourishing subfield in Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

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