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Rubin Museum of Art

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The *Samgha* and the Taxman: A Tibetan Regent's Economic Reforms and the Ethics of Rulership¹

William K. Dewey²

Abstract

This article examines how Tibetan Buddhists believed a state should be governed justly by considering the political agenda of the regent Ngawang Tsültrim (1721–1791) and how he was influenced by the Indian *nītiśāstra* tradition and similar indigenous traditions of ethical rule. *Nītiśāstra* originally, under Kauṭilya, promoted wealth and power. Later proponents (both Hindu and Buddhist) more strongly emphasized the primacy of *Dharma* and justice for the poor, and in this form it most influenced Tibetan Buddhist political thought, including the legislative decrees of Ngawang Tsültrim. He tried to relieve the Tibetan peasants from the

¹I am grateful to Dorjé Kyab, Professor Jampa Samten and others at Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies for assistance in translating and interpreting the regents' biography. Thanks to Professor José Cabezón for guidance in this project, and to Victor Forte and the reviewers for their suggestions.

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heavy tax and labor obligations of the Tibetan social system, and otherwise pursued economic justice. In so doing, he also wanted to ensure that resources continued to flow to the *Samgha*, the supreme field of merit. Accordingly, the decrees targeted aristocratic rather than monastic corruption. They prioritized the maintenance and reform of existing economic obligations over economic development or redistribution of wealth. Ngawang Tsültrim's decrees demonstrate a tension within the *nītiśāstra* tradition which can also be found when today's religions (including socially engaged Buddhism) pursue goals of social justice. These goals may conflict with the goal of spreading the faith, and especially with the social and financial structures that support religious institutions, but may be responsible for social ills.

Introduction

Two of the most basic questions in political thought are (1) What goals ought a ruler pursue? and (2) How should the ruler obtain them? In more ethical terms, how is a state to be governed justly? Tibet under the Dalai Lamas (1642–1959) attempted to answer these questions by functioning as a *chösi sungdrel* (*chos srid zung 'drel*), a union of Buddhist *Dharma* and politics. Taking inspiration from Buddhist, Indian, and indigenous sources, Tibetan political thought portrayed the ruler as a savior in the Buddhist cosmos, but also as one who pragmatically and ethically acts in the world. For such a pragmatic philosophy of rule, Tibetans turned to the Indian writings known as *nītiśāstra*, or “treatises on ethics,” a genre that included general ethical advice along with material specifically on statecraft. The genre encouraged rulers to seek state prosperity, but also to support the

weak and promote religion. It therefore justified two goals that were in tension: providing financial support to the *Samgha* and relieving the burdens of the poor. The Tibetan regent Ngawang Tsültrim (Ngag dbang mtshul khri ms, 1721–1791)³ in particular drew on these theories to justify his reforms, which protected *miser* (*mi ser*), or peasants,⁴ from corrupt taxation, but also ensured that Tibet's economic system supported the *Samgha* above all else. Ngawang Tsültrim's policies successfully accomplished both goals on his terms, but they also served to entrench the hegemony of the established Gelug monasteries.

This article first explores the sources of Tibetan political thought, including Buddhist and indigenous sources, but focusing in particular on the *nītiśāstra* tradition. Considering original Indian sources of the tradition (*Arthaśāstra* and *Rājanītiśāstra*) and Tibetan sources (Mipham's *Treatise on Ethics for Kings*), I explore how these works encouraged rulers to gain wealth (*artha*) for the realm, pursue justice for the lowly, and protect and patronize religion. Then I consider the life of the regent Ngawang Tsültrim, which is detailed in a 1798 *namthar* biography in two volumes by Lobsang Thukjé (Blo bzang thugs rje), an abbot of his home monastery Sera Me, and in a shorter biography in the anthology *Lives of the Ganden Tripas*,⁵ and I place his life in the context of Tibetan economic and social structure. I examine Ngawang Tsültrim's legislative policies of reform, and how they were inspired and justified by the *nītiśāstra*, by examining the contents of his legislative decrees, including their aims and implementation. Finally, I analyze how his policies actually played out in Tibet's

³ He was retroactively considered the first Tsemönling (Tshe smon gling) incarnation, but not in his lifetime.

⁴ The translation of *miser* is controversial; see below for the debate on Goldstein's translation as "serfs." I have mostly left the term untranslated in this paper.

⁵ This text details the lives of the Ganden Tripas (*dga' ldan khri pa*), "holders of the Ganden Throne," who led the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Ngawang Tsültrim served as the 61st Ganden Tripa from 1778 to 1785.

economy and society, how they implied a certain conception of justice and right rule, and how they illustrate tensions between improving the lot of Tibet's poor and supporting the *Samgha*.

Nītiśāstra and Other Sources of Tibetan Buddhist Thought

Tibetan Buddhist thought on rulership includes, first of all, ideas common to the Buddhist world. According to Steven Collins, political ideals can be found in the *sūttas*, *jātakas*, and other literature of early and Theravāda Buddhism (417–418). Early Buddhist thought was often critical of rulers, and it described their livelihood as inherently immoral and therefore to be renounced. But it also contained visions of an “Ideal Moral Commonwealth” ruled according to Buddhist principles with a minimum of violence (420–422, 562). The ruler of such an ideal state might be a *cakravartin*, a “wheel-turning monarch,” who bears the same thirty-two great marks as the Buddha (Tambiah 43). The Indian emperor Aśoka was the paradigmatic *cakravartin*, who renounced violence following his conquests and spread the *Dharma* across Asia (Cabezón and Mi pham 253). Mahāyāna treatises like the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* describe bodhisattvas who periodically incarnated themselves as compassionate kings (254). Accordingly, Tibet's first great ruler Songtsen Gampo (605–650) came to be identified with the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Kapstein, *Tibetans* 57–59, *Assimilation* 144–155). Buddhist scripture and treatises also outline the duties of these rulers to rule compassionately while placing the service of the *Dharma* first (Cabezón and Mi pham 252–255).⁶

Tibetan political tradition combined the *cakravartin* ideal with that of the *chösi sungdrel*, the union of *Dharma* and politics, also known as the *luknyi* (*lugs gnyis*), “two traditions.” Peter Schwieger sees in the *luknyi* the

⁶ Examples include the *Aggañña Sūta* and Asaṅga's *Bodhisattvabhūmi*.

idea “that the religious system must be respected by the secular ruler, and the secular ruler must adhere to the moral guidelines of the religious system” (35, 60). According to the modern Tibetan historian Lobsang Trinlé, the *chösi sungdrel* began when the Sakya lineage holders were granted rule of Tibet by the Mongol Yuan rulers (Schwieger 43–46). After the Fifth Dalai Lama came to power in 1642, his minister Desi Sangyé Gyatso declared, “Government and teaching have become one” (51, 245n166).⁷ The Dalai Lama, believed to be an incarnation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, was uniquely able to promote this idea by actions like building the Potala (named after Avalokiteśvara’s palace) on the former site of Songtsen Gampo’s palace (52). The idea of a union of religion and politics suggests that the two could conceivably be separated, but many scholars have argued that no such separation is legible in Tibetan tradition (Illich). Even laymen who ruled Ganden Phodrang (Dga’ ldan pho brang), the government created by the Dalai Lamas,⁸ were described as “masters of the two traditions” (Schwieger 5).⁹ The ideal of the *chösi sungdrel*, like that of the *cakravartin*, suggested that the ruler should prioritize the *Dharma* without providing specific advice on how to do so.

Tibetans also had their own traditions of ethical rulership that drew on Buddhist scriptures and treatises that related to these ideas. The indigenous Tibetan tradition of *michö* (*mi chos*), or “human *Dharma*” was contrasted with the scriptural Buddhist morality of *lhachö* (*lha chos*), “di-

⁷ The quotation is from a collection of Tibetan source texts entitled *Bod kyi yig tshags phyogs bsgriqs*, published in Tibet by Rdo rje tshe brtan.

⁸ Ganden Phodrang was originally the estate of the Dalai Lamas, given to the Second Dalai Lama by a local ruler in 1518. It became the name of the government of central Tibet after the Fifth Dalai Lama took control in 1642 (Powers and Templeman 190).

⁹ Polhané, a layman who ruled during the time of the Seventh Dalai Lama, is one who bore this title (Petech, *Aristocracy and Government* 7–8).

vine *Dharma*.” It “generally refer[red] to the customs that govern righteous conduct in society” and provided more practical advice than scriptural sources (Cabezón and Mi pham 211).¹⁰ The tradition began with Tibet’s earliest laws (traditionally attributed to Songtsen Gampo), the Ten Virtuous Acts and the Sixteen Pure Human Moral Rules, in addition to works like the *Elder Brother’s Advice to the Younger Brother* that dealt directly with politics or relevant ethical issues (French 441–443).¹¹ These moral codes do date from the Tibetan empire, if not from Songtsen Gampo’s hand, and draw on Buddhist material like the Five Precepts, as well as more general principles like respecting elders (443–444). *Michö* influenced not only the secular law but the monastic documents known as *chayik* (*bca’ yig*), which can be translated as “monastic guidelines” or “monastic constitutions” (Jansen, *Monastery* 105, 151; Jansen, “Monastic” 598n8; Ellingson 205–206). They were based on the *Vinaya*, in addition to local monastic traditions (Ellingson 208–209). The rulers of Ganden Phodrang, because of the *chösi sungdrel*, were no less responsible for the monasteries than for other state functions, and often authored *chayik* as a means of extending political control (Jansen *Monastery* 17–18). *Chayik* resembled civil laws in their language, and a mutual influence is apparent because their authors were the same individuals (or at least shared a common monastic education) (149). The goal of law, monastic or civil, was to preserve social harmony, rather than to produce karmic benefits for individuals, as karma is a force beyond law (174–75).

These sources refute the notion (expressed by Max Weber, among others) that Buddhist thought was too ascetic to encompass worldly concerns such as economics or statecraft (Weber 216–219, 268).¹² However, it

¹⁰ Cabezón translates *lhachö* as “people’s Dharma.”

¹¹ These texts, found in Dunhuang, actually date from the late imperial period.

¹² Weber argues that Buddhism’s otherworldly orientation prevented it from giving rise to a capitalist ethic, whereas he sees *Arthaśāstra* as having a worldly economic orientation

is clear that Tibetans did feel the need for pragmatic advice on these subjects, beyond the doctrinal treatments in scripture. For such pragmatic advice, they turned to the Indian genre of *nītiśāstra*, which literally means “treatises on ethics”; *nīti* means “moral and practical guidance” (Cabezón and Mi pham 243). The genre encompasses general works of ethics of a practical bent (dealing only tangentially with dharma and doctrine), many of which dealt with kingship and statecraft. Works dealing with kingship gave rise to the subgenre *rājanīti*, “ethics for kings.” In practice, however, this label and similar titles of works do not clearly distinguish between general ethical works and those focused specifically on kingship (243–244). The *nītiśāstra* tradition originated with the encyclopedia of statecraft *Arthaśāstra*, attributed to Kauṭilya (also known as Cāṇakya).¹³ The *Arthaśāstra* was never translated into Tibetan, but inspired other *nītiśāstra* works that were known to Tibetans (the Tibetan translation is *lugs kyi bstan chos*), including the *Rājanītiśāstra* (*Rgyal po lugs kyi stan chos*), a work traditionally attributed to Cāṇakya (Cabezón and Mi pham 246).

Cāṇakya’s *Arthaśāstra*, as the title of the work suggests, is a treatise on *artha*, one of the four human aims in Hindu tradition, alongside *kāma* (pleasure), *Dharma* (duty), and *mokṣa* (liberation) (Rangarajan “Introduction” 1). *Artha* can mean wealth, but it has a broader sense of success or obtaining what one desires (McClish and Olivelle). The *Arthaśāstra* had much to say about economic matters, but also governance more broadly,

but neglecting the individual in favor of the state. Kyaw notes that other scholars in Buddhist Studies like Spiro, Tambiah, and Gombrich have made similar assumptions about Buddhism’s unconcern with the economic world (290–91).

¹³ According to traditional narratives, the work arose out of Cāṇakya’s advice to emperor Chandragupta Maurya (321–297 BCE) as he rose to rule India, but it was likely written much later.

including taxation, law, and warfare (Rangarajan “Introduction” 1–3). *Artha* was usually seen as a lesser aim, and the work has attracted the label “Machiavellian” due to its advocacy of apparently unethical actions (22).

The *Arthaśāstra* encouraged the prosperity of the realm, but for the king’s sake rather than the people. Ideally, the king was the ultimate owner of property and benefited from its productive use (Rangarajan, “State” 55–56). Agricultural land was the most important source of wealth, and the *Arthaśāstra* advocated that the state cultivate its own lands and extract produce and labor from peasants (62–63; Kauṭilya 235). The state was to be directly involved in other sectors like trade and manufacturing, and at the same time encourage private enterprise that could be taxed (Rangarajan, “State” 60). Destructive military conquest might equally be a means of acquiring wealth, indicating that general prosperity was not the intended aim (Rangarajan, “Introduction” 2–3). Nevertheless, the *Arthaśāstra* did encourage some concern for the people. Overtaxing the farmers would destroy the productivity from which the ruler seeks to profit (Rangarajan, “State” 59). The ruler should provide for disadvantaged sections of society: children, women, the disabled, and the very poor. Unfortunately, many rulers and officials exhibited avarice, power-hunger, or corruption (72–73). Laws should be made against official theft and bribery, as well as economic offenses like price gouging and breaches of contract (Kauṭilya 264–266).

Despite the *Arthaśāstra*’s focus on material gain, it does argue that the king has religious duties. It asserts the supremacy of *artha*, “because *Dharma* and *kāma* depend on *artha*” (83). But because *artha* is the necessary economic basis for *Dharma*, the *Arthaśāstra* “is a guide not only for the acquisition of this world but also the next” (79). It is the king’s duty to make sure subjects follow the *Dharma* proper to their station. Although following the *Dharma* leads to personal happiness, “when *Dharma* is transgressed, the resulting chaos leads to the extermination of this world” (85).

Accordingly, the *Arthaśāstra* directs the king to protect and establish temples (Rangarajan, “State” 38). Brahmins and ascetics are to be given special privileges, like tax exemptions, but nonbrahmanical ascetics (like Buddhist monks) are given fewer privileges and used mainly as spies (34; Kauṭilya 72). Olivelle has argued that passages praising the Vedas were insincere, religious devotion being a mere expedient for worldly power (McClish and Olivelle).

Later Indian *nītiśāstra* works (dating mainly to the first millennium CE) are written in verse, expressing an ethical focus that goes beyond pragmatic advice for the ruler (Cabezón and Mi pham 243–251). The *Rājanītiśāstra* is one such work, clearly belonging to this later tradition despite being attributed to Cāṇakya (Cabezón and Mi pham 244, 246; Sternbach “Tibetan”). The *Rājanītiśāstra* and similar works go beyond what is expedient for the ruler to advocate policies that benefit the people, and also provide generally applicable ethical advice.¹⁴

The *Rājanītiśāstra* describes the king’s acquisition of wealth as a necessity of rule but insists on ethical constraints. Its maxims compare the king to a pollinating bee and a milkman, who should avoid destroying their own sources of wealth (Sternbach, *Cāṇakya-Rāja-Nīti* 26–27). If subjects are deprived of a “means of earning one’s livelihood,” they will abandon the kingdom (29). The king should distribute wealth to the weak and the poor. More so than in the *Arthaśāstra*, corrupt officials are criticized, and a power-hungry king is portrayed as a threat to his subjects. For this reason, the king should uphold the *Dharma* in the course of his rule: “The king is the source of *Dharma* . . . the kingdom is the fruit of *Dharma*” (24–

¹⁴ Other texts in this genre that were translated into Tibetan include *Garuḍa Purāṇa*, *Bṛhaspati Saṃhita*, and the *Nītiśāra* of Kāmandaki; Mipham quotes a long list of works by Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu authors, including Mātṛceta, Buddhaguhya, Ravigupta, Vararuci, Masūrākṣa, and Amoghavarṣa (238–240)

27). He should see religious individuals as the source of his power and patronize them: “The king is the peak of righteousness. The root of righteousness are monks and brahmins. . . . Therefore, protect ascetics and brahmins” (37–38).¹⁵ The *Rājanītiśāstra* supports the pragmatics of power, but more strongly insists that the ruler support religion above all else.

Nītiśāstra works like the *Rājanītiśāstra* were included within the Tibetan canon as non-Buddhist works deemed intellectually valuable, although some material was excluded for being contrary to Buddhism (Cabezón and Mi pham 251).¹⁶ Scholars in Tibet beginning with Atiśa (980–1054) wrote works of “advice to kings,” and this continued through the Ganden Phodrang era, although the texts were often not labeled as *nīti*, but as similar genres like *lekshé* (*legs bshad*) (260–263). One of the most representative works in this genre is the *Treatise on Ethics for Kings* (*Rgyal po lugs kyī bstan bcos*), written in 1895 by the influential Nyingma scholar Mipham (1848–1912), for the prince of the Dergé kingdom (x, 8–33). Although this work postdates Ngawang Tsültrim, he could have been influenced by the earlier works it cites, such as the Indian *nītiśāstra* literature and works by Tibetan Gelugpa authors (267). Although the *Treatise’s* vision of ideal politics is imbued with religious ethics, it provides more practical advice than a doctrinal treatise (211–212, 247–248).

Mipham’s *Treatise* is concerned with wealth, but not for the sake of making the king rich. Mipham states that if the king is virtuous, the kingdom’s wealth will increase (230), but wealth should not be hoarded or come before the *Dharma* (49–50, 208). The text has little to say about productive enterprises, unlike the *Arthaśāstra*, but Mipham does echo the advice in the *Rājanītiśāstra* that a ruler should not destroy his own means of

¹⁵ See also Cabezón and Mi pham 166.

¹⁶ Specifically, the *nītiśāstra* texts were part of the Tengyur, along with treatises and other noncanonical material included in that section of the Tibetan canon. *Nītiśāstra* passages on caste, capital punishment, and military affairs were not included.

wealth through greed: “A herdsman plucks flowers, leaving their root intact.” A king should remember that most of his subjects are poor when taxing them: “Only rarely is the annual food, drink and clothing they obtain enough to lead a worry-free life” (Cabezón and Mi pham 115–116). Although the king cannot overcome inequality that resulted from karma, this inequality should not be compounded by partiality in collecting taxes or enforcing laws (114–117). In a section on compassion based on Śāntideva’s *Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, Mipham declares that “The king ought to think/ ‘Who, in this land, except for me/can protect the most poor and powerless/those who suffer and have no refuge’” (125). Whereas the king should be compassionate toward the poor, he is to protect the people from the rich and corrupt officials (38, 52).

Mipham especially stresses the king’s duty to spread and patronize the *Dharma*. He alludes to the text of the *Rājanīśāstra* by explaining, “Ascetics and brahmins/are called the ‘roots’ of the king.” In a Tibetan context, “ascetics and brahmins” mean the monastic institutions: “He should therefore protect the different divisions of the saṅgha/by respecting the saṅgha’s property and so forth” (166). Mipham quotes a passage from the *Smṛtyupasthāna Sūtra* that the king should not capriciously increase or decrease “wealth and landholdings,” specifically meaning those of the *Samgha* (79, 277–278).¹⁷ Mipham offers highest praise for the *Samgha*: “this holiest of fields, the precious saṅgha . . . cannot be compared to any other community” (216–217). Describing the monastic community as a supreme field of merit suggests that kings have a duty to support them with lavish donations. As we will see, all of these principles were endorsed by the regent Ngawang Tsültrim and his biographer.

¹⁷ It was a common practice for Tibetan rulers to redistribute land away from the disfavored, including not only aristocrats, but also monasteries that conflicted doctrinally or politically with the ruler (Goldstein, “Circulation” 451).

Historical Background: Regent Ngawang Tsültrim and the Tibetan Socio-economic System

The career of Ngawang Tsültrim shows how these ideals were put into practice by Tibetan rulers of Ganden Phodrang. His career is particularly illustrative of the Gelug religiopolitical hegemony that arose in the eighteenth century, and it is comprehensively covered in a 1798 biography by Lobsang Thukjé, an abbot of Ngawang Tsültrim's home monastery Sera Me. The real ruler of central Tibet was usually a regent, from the death of the Seventh Dalai Lama in 1757 up until the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's enthronement in 1896. The regents typically were Gelug monks or reincarnate lamas, and Ngawang Tsültrim exemplified such rulers' close ties to the Gelug establishment. He was born in Amdo in 1721, and soon began his monastic education in local monasteries before enrolling in the great monastery of Sera Me (Grags pa mkhas grub 2a-2b). After years of religious study, he advanced into the succession to be the 61st Ganden Tripa (*Dga' ldan khri pa*) or Ganden Throne Holder, the monastic leader of the Gelug tradition and heir to the throne of the Gelug founder Tsongkhapa. Attracting the attention of the Qing emperor Qianlong, he served in his court as imperial religious teacher from 1765 to 1777. In 1777 he was appointed regent by the emperor after the death of the regent Demo Rinpoché (Grags pa mkhas grub 4a-5b). He served as Ganden Throne Holder from 1778 to 1785, so that he ruled not only Ganden Phodrang but also the Gelug monasteries (Grags pa mkhas grub 17b). In 1786, he gave up the regency and returned to Beijing to serve as *thamka lama* (*tham ka bla ma*), or the highest ranking Tibetan monk in Qianlong's court (Blo bzang thugs rje 2:251b-252a, 255b). The emperor reappointed him as regent in 1791, in response to the crisis of the Gorkha invasions of Tibet, and he died shortly after his return to Tibet (Blo bzang thugs rje 328a-376a).

One of Ngawang Tsültrim's primary aims as regent was to ensure that the government could finance itself and the great monasteries without laying unjust burdens on the people. In order to understand taxation's impact on Tibetan society and religion, one must understand that wealth was fundamentally based on land and agriculture (Kapstein, *The Tibetans* 175; Goldstein "Circulation").¹⁸ *Miser* were hereditarily bound to their estates, and they were legally required to work for their landlords and give them shares of the produce. The landlords could be aristocrats, the Ganden Phodrang government, or the Gelug monasteries, who were the greatest beneficiary of the system (Goldstein, "Serfdom" 521–524; Carrasco 3–4). Although *miser* had rights and were not treated as property, they did not have freedom of movement, and they could not dissolve their relationship with their lord. Goldstein thus calls the *miser* "serfs," a designation disputed by others ("Serfdom" 522–523).¹⁹

The Ganden Phodrang government demanded a share of the grain harvest from aristocrats, which they passed on to *miser* by making them work the *demesne* land, as well as demanding other labor obligations (Goldstein, "Taxation" 10; Carrasco 25–26). Calculated based on their landholdings, taxes in cash or in kind were also imposed directly on *miser* who

¹⁸ Pastoralism, despite its importance to a number of Tibetan communities, was relatively peripheral to the economy of Ganden Phodrang, although pastoral "estate" existed which owed meat and dairy products as taxes.

¹⁹ Goldstein defines serfdom as "a type of hereditary superordinate-subordinate relationship in which the subordinate (the serf) possesses a legal identity independent of the superordinate" (522–523). They are distinguished from slaves in not being property of a master. Beatrice Miller argues that there are too many differences from European serfdom to use the term, including the relative prosperity of Tibetan farmers ("Response"). The dispute has some political overtones because the People's Republic of China claims, based on Maoist ideology, to have liberated Tibetans from serfdom.

worked the government's estates (Goldstein "Taxation" 7–13).²⁰ The *miser* were especially burdened by the *ulak* ('*u lag*) or *corvée* tax, which required them to assist in the transportation of goods, either by providing beasts of burden such as yaks or ponies, or paying money. Although there were strict rules that officials could not demand transportation without the proper permits, large shipments were often involved; and, as will be seen below, abuses were common (16–17). The *miser* were thus potentially subject to many taxes, which could also include wool, meat, butter, a certain poisonous flower, and even military conscription (10–15).²¹ *Miser* who were relatively wealthy were also the most heavily taxed, preventing them from accumulating wealth (Goldstein, "Serfdom" 4). Regardless of to whom the *miser* owed service, they were vulnerable to arbitrary and corrupt demands from landlords.

The structure of taxation encouraged corruption. The revenue work was delegated to the *dzongpön* (*dzong dpon*), or district leaders, and lesser aristocrats who worked at remote posts and were given meagre plots of land. Because of distance, there was little direct supervision from the central government. In a village on government lands studied by Goldstein, the district leader acted as an absentee lord, delegating the collection to others (Goldstein, "Taxation" 6).²² For these reasons, officials often engaged in the illegal practice of revenue farming by collecting taxes in excess of what was mandated and taking the difference (25–26). In 1847

²⁰ In the case of the village described by Goldstein, the assessment was levied on the village as a whole and villagers decided how it should be divided up.

²¹ Of course, the specific taxes varied by region and type of landlord, but the overall pattern remained the same. Cassinelli and Ekvall's work is a dedicated study of the administration of the Sakya region, which was not directly under the administration of Lhasa (246, 249). By contrast, Goldstein's study of taxation is based on the peasants of Samada who were direct subjects of Ganden Phodrang. The overall pattern of taxation was broadly similar across central Tibet, but each village had a unique situation.

²² See also Cassinelli and Ekvall 332–34.

the Lhasa government introduced the office of the *lang* (*glang*), “bull,” as an advocate for the *miser* against abuses (Carrasco 93).²³ But generally, it was seen as a legitimate prerogative of the ruling classes (whether rulers, aristocrats, or monks) to extract the production and labor of the *miser*. There were few opportunities for *miser* to accumulate wealth or earn alternative livelihoods.

Given their supreme religious position and dominant economic standing, how did monasteries fit into the system? They levied similar taxes on their subjects; but, according to Jansen, there were reasons why *miser* might prefer monastic landlords to other landlords. They saw the *Samgha* as a worthy recipient of wealth, with fewer oppressive tendencies than aristocrats. The economic position of monasteries “was seen by Tibetans as a stable and maybe even a more *just* alternative to the hegemony of feuding aristocrat families” (Jansen, *Monastery* 112). Monasteries regularly engaged in moneylending, which provided a needed source of credit. Although there were some abuses, the practice was never prohibited, and borrowing was considered equivalent to donating to the *Samgha* (110–113). Acting out of concern with the monastery’s reputation, the second Tsemönling regent,²⁴ the successor incarnation to Ngawang Tsültrim, wrote an edict in 1820 addressing corruption and exploitation of subjects at his monastery of Sera (98–99).

The Decrees of Ngawang Tsültrim: Just Taxation and the *Samgha*

Ngawang Tsültrim’s political goals and his religious and ethical justifications for them can be discerned through his legislative decrees, which are detailed in his biography. The decrees pertained to various subjects like

²³ This office came to be regarded, nonetheless, as another instrument of extraction.

²⁴ Tshe smon gling Ngag dang ‘jam dpal tshul khriims rgya mtsho (1792–1864).

monastic discipline and Nepali-minted currency, but focused especially on just taxation and countering corruption (Blo bzang thugs rje 221b–239a).²⁵ Ngawang Tsültrim’s legislation was based on previous anti-corruption measures issued by the Seventh Dalai Lama in 1751 and by Demo Rinpoché in 1767 in an attempt to ensure that the *miser* were not over-taxed and that the rich paid their fair share (229a–229b).²⁶ The biographer explains that Ngawang Tsültrim found it necessary to issue further rules because these previous decrees were not being obeyed (222b–223a). After a first decree, issued in 1777, condemning corruption in the collection of taxes, particularly *ulak* (221b–227b), he issued two follow-up decrees in response to continuing abuses. A 1780 decree contains seven articles detailing punishments for corrupt officials, as well as systematic procedures for collecting and recording taxes (227b–237b), and a 1783 decree clarified these rules for the grain tax (237b–239a). The mere existence of his laws did not guarantee that they would be followed, but Ngawang Tsültrim showed concern with implementation by noting ongoing problems and taking steps to correct them.

Ngawang Tsültrim and his biographer frame his ruling activities in terms of an overarching Buddhist cosmology in which Tibet is central to Avalokiteśvara’s plan for salvation. As “the arising and spread of the precious teaching of the Buddha is said to depend on a king who has control over all the earth,” the biographer places Ngawang Tsültrim in the lineage of 100,000 such kings, including the great emperor Aśoka (1b–2b).²⁷ Ngawang Tsültrim’s 1780 decree, mentioned above, describes more specifically how he fits into the Tibetan lineage of rulers as part of Avalokiteśvara’s dispensation:

²⁵ The dispute over this currency eventually led to war in 1788.

²⁶ See also Blo bzang ‘phrin las 1091.

²⁷ There are varying enumerations from the *Vinaya*, *Abhidharma*, and so forth.

In this country, the limitless incarnations magically emanated by the Sublime Avalokiteśvara have shown the inconceivable kindness of setting sentient beings on the path toward higher realms. Especially, the King of Doctrine Songtsen Gampo. . . protected his disciples with the Ten Virtuous Laws. . . . In particular, assuming the form of a monk king, the omniscient Supreme Conqueror, the Fifth Dalai Lama. . . completely dispelled all the darkness of ignorance of all the sentient beings in the world's realms, and, in particular, of those who live in the land of snows, with the light of the lamp of both sun and moon, religion and politics. . . . Gushri Khan, the fortunate *Dharma* king, and all the succession of regents [*sde srid*] and rulers [*srid skyong*] offered morally upright service to support the deeds of the Dalai Lamas.²⁸ Therefore, in this country, this marvelous tradition of the twofold religion and politics [*chos srid gnyis ldan*] known as the heaven-mandated Ganden Palace is flourishing. (228a–228b)

According to this explanation, Avalokiteśvara's ancient plan to give Tibet's sentient beings the benefit of the *Dharma* has been carried out by all of Tibet's rulers, from Songtsen Gampo up to Ngawang Tsültrim. It includes not only Avalokiteśvara's Dalai Lama incarnations but the other rulers and ministers (such as Ngawang Tsültrim) who supports the Dalai Lama. Such a description of the Ganden Palace government places Ngawang Tsültrim near the center of the Buddhist cosmos and indicates that his first priority is to preserve the *Dharma*, the *raison d'être* of the Tibetan government.

The biographer drew on *nītiśāstra* and analogous traditions to show that Ngawang Tsültrim ruled both effectively and ethically. Diverse

²⁸ Note that *srid skyong* was Ngawang Tsültrim's own title.

writings, Tibetan and Indian, are quoted to this effect including aphorisms of the Fifth Dalai Lama and Tsongkhapa, Indian *nītiśāstra* texts and Buddhist sūtras (247a–247b). For instance, the biographer quotes the *Nītiśāstraprajñadaṇḍa*, attributed to Nāgārjuna,²⁹ to describe the virtues of a ruler: “Toward one who has the six qualities of perseverance: exertion, courage, steadfastness, power, intelligence, and conquest, even the gods are afraid” (247a). The *Rājanītiśāstra* is quoted in praise of his diligent, responsible rulership: “Therefore, with all possible efforts/The land should be cared for/If the land is cared for/Life, renown, and armies will all increase” (247b). Another quote from this text illustrates how his tax reforms are benevolent to subjects and also in the realm’s self-interest: “Tend the country like honey/you must not kill the bees/ Like the owner who milks a cow/so the king with the earth, they should keep them happy” (221b). The biographer’s portrayal of Ngawang Tsültrim as an ideal ruler grounds him in the practical tradition of *nītiśāstra*, in addition to the Buddhist cosmos.

The introduction to Ngawang Tsültrim’s 1777 decree explains how the fate of the Buddhist *Dharma* depends on worldly actions, including the government’s support for the *Samgha*, and ethical conduct (based on the *michö* and *chayik* codes) on the part of rulers, lay people, and monks. In tying the fate of the *Dharma* to the actions of the ruler, it invokes a major theme of later *nītiśāstra* literature:

The sacred source of absolutely all happiness, benefit, prosperity, and well-being in this world, the Buddha’s *Dharma*, depends on it being spread through teaching and practice and lasting a long time; and upholding, protecting, and

²⁹ The work is likely not by the Indian philosopher but compiled from a variety of Sanskrit verses by a Tibetan translator in the ninth century (Cabezón and Mi pham 238n9).

spreading that very *Dharma* depend on the work of the supreme patron [the emperor] and the priest [Dalai Lama];³⁰ and such things as the unity, pure discipline, study, teaching, and growth of the *Dharma*-practicing *Samgha* depends on the monasteries' own regulations [*bca' khrims*] remaining consistent with tradition. The laypeople likewise must abide by the Pure Human *Dharma* [*tsang ma mi chos*]³¹ without confusion as to which actions are right or wrong, beneficial or harmful as affirmed by the secular law [*rgyal khrims*]. (222a)

Ngawang Tsültrim still portrays his decrees in terms of Ganden Palace's purpose of preserving the *Dharma*, but he connects this goal to ethical and lawful behavior on the part of the Tibetan people including himself. As far as lay people are concerned, ethical behavior means following the precepts of *michö*, which ideally forms the basis for all Tibetan law. In the case of monks, it means following the rules and regulations, like the *chayik*. Based ideally on the *Vinaya*, *chayik* encourages discipline and also the unity of the community (Ellingson 212, 217), even helping to maintain the social order beyond the monastery (Jansen, *Monastery* 180). On this communal discipline depend the knowledge and dissemination of the *Dharma*. But the Tibetan government also has a role to play in supporting the *Samgha*, especially by giving it an adequate share of resources and assuring its internal discipline. This justification suggests that Ngawang Tsültrim's intention in these decrees is that the *Samgha* should receive the large share of wealth due to it (rather than others in the system, such as corrupt nobles and aristocrats, diverting taxes for their own enrichment).

³⁰ *gong ma mchod yon*

³¹ The *tsangma michö* are the aforementioned Sixteen Pure Human Moral Rules attributed to Songtsen Gampo, which encourage respecting the *dharma*, fulfilling duties to friends and family, and acting with benevolence and moderation in public and private life (Cabezón and Mi pham 211n1).

But the biographer also explains these decrees in terms of Ngawang Tsültrim's desire to help ordinary people: "he aspired to protect all from destitution—the monks and lay people of Tibet in general and in particular the *miser* of limited means from the government, aristocratic, and religious estates—and to establish them all in prosperity and happiness" (221b). His agenda is portrayed as showing compassion worthy of a bodhisattva, not just because of his association with Avalokiteśvara or another deity, but because of ethical actions consistent with the *michö* and *nītiśāstra* traditions (Sternbach, "Indian" 97–131).

Ngawang Tsültrim's 1777 decree accordingly is aimed at protecting *miser* from corruption in the *ulak* tax and excessive labor obligations. Officials had been using the *ulak* system as free transportation for their own business concerns, without government approval, and resorting to numerous devious tactics of corruption involving falsification of documents. Ngawang Tsültrim urges inspectors to be vigilant:

If the permit has been duplicated and attached on the back side, or has been stolen through forgery by someone who isn't the proper owner, it must not be accepted . . . Because the number of loads sent to central Tibet is required to be attached to the bottom by the district office, in order to have their own private loads sent along with [the legitimate loads], they sneakily write down a declaration of the number of loads along the bottom edge of the permit paper, and a large number of government and private loads mixed together is actually sent. Finally, when they arrive in Lhasa, they cut off the figures and seal on the bottom edge of the permit [as if they were only sending the government loads]. (Blo bzang thugs rje 224b–225a)

However, Ngawang Tsültrim does note that such loads may include legitimate government business:

But if they originate from those who actually have the right permits, such as great lords and the monasteries great and small, including Samyé's religious [lit. "white"] goods, these loads should be sent forth to the south and north. Apart from these, loads of salt and grain, which cause great hardship for the *miser* to carry, will not be permitted to be sent. (224b)

It is noteworthy that despite the disapproval of officials burdening the peasants for personal profit, the great monasteries are expressly permitted to use the *ulak* as much as they liked. This policy accords with *nīti* treatises which saw the support of the *Dharma* as the ultimate aim of government, and it is not surprising in a government where monks had so much power.

Ngawang Tsültrim's 1780 and 1783 decrees similarly focus on corruption in the grain tax, especially dishonest bookkeeping used by landlords to avoid taxes and by tax collectors to enrich themselves. When the grain tax was collected, the grain was supposed to be cleaned of rocks, chaff, and other impurities, and allowance was made for cleaning in the tax quotas, but sometimes the process became an opportunity for embezzlement. In response, these decrees create detailed procedures of tax collection to discourage these practices, including monetizing the tax to reduce incentives for cheating (238b). Ngawang Tsültrim presents himself as the defender of the weak and the scourge of corrupt officials, whom he investigates thoroughly and to whom he yet shows mercy, both actions which are frequently reinforced in the *nītiśāstra* literature:

Furthermore, whoever collects the income of the annual taxes from the hand of the *miser* of the local districts and estates but does not offer it to the proper government offices, and steals it straightaway, will be investigated by me. I think that if I were to punish them right away, because so

many *miser* and citizens would have to come forward to give evidence, it would cause too much trouble, so I will wait. But from now on I have decided not to be so lenient in cases where revenue is due to the central government and it is not given to the government offices, I advise you to remember! (234b)

Public shaming is another tactic encouraged in the *nītiśāstra* literature: according to Mipham, “The shameless lose their status/by virtue of their great disgrace”³² (136). In the 1780 decree, Ngawang Tsültrim goes so far as to publicly shame corrupt officials by naming them in the decree, in addition to delivering judicial punishments:

[T]he district officials Dragangpa and Tsati Losang Döndrup and the tax collector Lepé Chang took 1,500 *khel* [*khal*] by trickery, from the grain that was to be cleaned of the barley collected in the earth dog year (1778), and divided it up among themselves. From the taxes that were collected, they divided up 1,150 *khel* of grain [for themselves]. Because they had acted corruptly in both the former and latter case, they themselves, along with their servants, were arrested, and the court investigated and questioned them very forcefully [*tsha ‘dri*]. . . . Because they had no respect for the *Dharma*, [the corrupt officials] also selfishly took the grain belonging to Samyé and its butter lamps for themselves. Some of them were punished under the law and some government officials were removed from their posts, and henceforth into perpetuity none of their descendants were allowed to enter the government service. . . . They

³² The tactic of public shame had precedent in the disciplinary procedures of Sera Monastery. The *Great Exhortation* of Sera Je college encourages publicly pointing out offenders, with increasing specificity, before formally punishing them (Cabezón 341–342).

were made to give back to the central government's treasury the full amount of what they had stolen until a certain month and date in the iron mouse year (1780). In addition to these payments heavy fines were levied. The criminals legally should receive heavy penalties under the law, such as being exiled [from Tibet], but because I have become a mature lama, I will again have mercy on them. They will be appointed to an office where they will have a lot of practice paying taxes: they will be reduced to the rank of ordinary taxpayer. (Blo bzang thugs rje 231a–231b)

Aside from being publicly shamed, punishments for corrupt officials entailed restitution and removal from office, and exile—though Ngawang Tsültrim desisted from the last because “no one would be left” (231b). These punishments were similar to those prescribed by the *Arthaśāstra*, which include heavy fines in order to compensate for corruption, although he did not resort to the harshest punishments like the death penalty. Capital punishment was a theoretical possibility under Ganden Phodrang, in addition to floggings and mutilation (Kawaguchi 384–385). In the era of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, punishments involving torture and mutilation were carried out with some official reluctance due to their karmic negativity (Goldstein, *History* 206–208), and this consideration also explains why capital punishment was rarely if ever applied.³³ An example of judicial torture was the *tsendri* (*tsha 'dri*) interrogations which involved beating witnesses who were giving inconsistent testimony until one recanted (206). As quoted above, Ngawang Tsültrim applies the *tsendri* to prosecute the corrupt officials, and shows no concern

³³ The case in question was gouging out the eyeballs of the minister Lungshar. He survived, but in other cases of mutilation or imprisonment it was not uncommon for the victim to die, for instance when Demo Rinpoche was imprisoned for using black magic against the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (Goldstein 43).

that this punishment would be karmically negative. However, the decree does emphasize his mercy to them in not applying the punishment of exile.³⁴ Ngawang Tsültrim is portrayed in terms of traditions of ethical rule that emphasize mercy and protection of the weak, if also harsh and even cruel punishment of the guilty.

The decrees of Ngawang Tsültrim go beyond fighting corruption to encompass the behavior of government officials, as well as private business, trade, and production. He is concerned that travel and the use of *ulak* by government officials, even if legal, could be harmful. Ngawang Tsültrim's most common advice to lowly district officials, as well as the entourage of the highest lamas, is "you must not oppress (*brdab gsigs*) the miser" (39a–39b, 55b, 66a–66b). Official delegations could be especially burdensome as they had to be provided horses, food, and lodging, and could be enormous, as with the Panchen Lama's 1780 journey to Beijing. The biographer notes that the regent followed his own advice on his own long journeys to Beijing, not staying too long at a given place, so as not to place excessive demands on the *miser* (333a–333b). For similar reasons, solicitations for large religious projects were directed toward the aristocracy, with the rationale that the expense would burden the *miser* (62a–62b).³⁵

In his legislation, Ngawang Tsültrim also tries to suppress manufacturing and commerce that he considered harmful. Officials are warned at several points in the decrees that they are not to create factories or workshops for their own benefit:

In the interests of justice for the subjects of the precious government on the districts and estates everywhere, you should act principally for the service of the government.

³⁴ Mipham (quoting the *Satyaka Sūtra*) encourages the just king to be compassionate to his enemies (71–72).

³⁵ Of course, aristocratic donations would also benefit Ganden Phodrang's treasury.

Otherwise shameless actions like constructing factories for one's own profit [*rang don gyi bzo grwa*], or selfish and greedy actions like imposing monopolies on the *miser* are destructive to the government. (230a)

This pronouncement looks like a general condemnation of commerce and manufacturing; but, as stated, the rules apply to certain situations where the wealthy had power over the common people. Elsewhere, Ngawang Tsültrim similarly condemns the construction of factories or workshops alongside economic offenses against the *miser* like monopoly pricing, fraud, and corruption in taxes (224b, 227a). He follows the lead of *Arthaśāstra* and the rest of the *nītiśāstra* tradition in condemning economic activities considered to be unfair or exploitive. His condemnation of workshops is sometimes qualified with the phrase “that were injurious to the *miser*,” suggesting that (like in other forms of corruption) landlords took advantage of the boundedness of the *miser* to the land in demanding labor (224b, 227a). Another major concern is officials using state property for private purposes, or diverting their attention away from the business of government (230a). One need not assume that these decrees express a general disapproval of commercial activity.

Ngawang Tsültrim's legislation is unconcerned with promoting trade or commerce by individuals, but does encourage production and trade that supports Ganden Phodrang and the Gelug monasteries.³⁶ Monks who care for monasteries are forbidden from private trading, especially moneylending, and are instead to focus on study and practice (232a). This prohibition is rooted in the *Vinaya*, but it should be noted that the *Vinaya*'s

³⁶ The exception was the currency dispute with the Gorkha rulers of Nepal, which was of importance to Lhasa merchants. Ngawang Tsültrim portrayed himself as looking out for the people in general (not just traders) by maintaining the value of the currency. The government itself had a strong financial interest in these matters, however, due to its own stake in trade, the cash in its treasury, and the taxes it levied (Blo bzang thugs rje 225b–226b).

supposed prohibitions on monks handling money or engaging in trade are looser than has been supposed, particularly in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* that Tibet adopted (Schopen, “Good” 101–102). Monasteries in India were heavily involved in enterprises like moneylending, and this activity is encouraged in *Vinaya* texts in order for the monastery to be a good steward of lay people’s meritorious donations (91–93; Schopen, *Buddhist* 32–33). These texts describe appointing individual monks as financial administrators to look after donations (Silk 84, 183). Schopen has found evidence that Indian monks commonly had individual wealth, a practice implicitly accepted by much *Vinaya* literature (“Good”; “Bad”; *Buddhist*), but the monastic code does discourage monks from seeking gain or from taking money that belongs to the monastery as a whole (Schopen, “Good” 103; Silk 154). As Jansen has noted, Tibetan *chayik* similarly prohibit monks from engaging in business for personal profit but accept that monasteries, as corporate entities, may support themselves through practices like moneylending (*Monastery* 106–113). Tibetan monks were usually responsible for their own upkeep, but Ganden Phodrang had a policy of supporting monks in order to curb their financial independence from the government and their monastery, which would also free them to focus on study and practice (90–95). Ngawang Tsültrim accepts as legitimate the Tibetan government’s involvement in manufacturing operations of its own, as well as monopolies in *ulak*-supported trade (Blo bzang thugs rje 128a, 181b, 217a). Much of this trade was connected to Buddhism and ritual goods, and directly involved the monasteries. According to Carrasco, Ganden Phodrang did not allow the formation of a merchant class in which people could become independently wealthy (90–91, 213), and Ngawang Tsültrim’s legislation does not encourage such commerce, in many cases restricting it. His laws are also consistent with Tibetan *nītiśāstra* tradition, which does not encourage wealth-generating enterprises other than what benefits state and *Samgha*, in contrast with the *Arthaśāstra*’s advocacy of

economic diversification. As Ngawang Tsültrim took action against practices that involved official abuse, he also discouraged economic competition with the government and monasteries.

***Nītiśāstra*, the *Samgha*, and Tibetan Society**

The biography depicts Ngawang Tsültrim ruling in a way consonant with the *nītiśāstra* tradition, taking specific actions to support the *Dharma* and pursue justice, and not merely being a religious figurehead. *Nītiśāstra* authors from Kauṭilya to Mipham portray the king as one uniquely able to defend the weak, and Ngawang Tsültrim fulfilled this duty by reforms to ensure justice to the poor. It was long recognized in Tibet that the *miser* were vulnerable to official exploitation, and Ngawang Tsültrim built on previous rulers' attempts to reform the tax system to protect them from unjust taxes and labor obligations. Ngawang Tsültrim also sought implicitly to curb the power of the aristocracy, echoing their depiction as a threat to both ruler and people in *nītiśāstra* works. The aristocrats in Tibet lost ground to the monasteries over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through a pattern of land confiscation supported by the regents (Goldstein, "Circulation"). Ngawang Tsültrim, concerned that the corrupt officials were gaining wealth at the expense of the central government and monasteries, furthered this trend. The aristocracy's wealth did not come only at the expense of poor farmers, but of the entire system of religion and politics. Echoing the pattern identified by Goldstein, Ngawang Tsültrim's anti-corruption decrees mostly target aristocrats (the

government's revenue officers coming from this class), and the punishments in these decrees include confiscation of aristocratic estates and redistribution to the monasteries.³⁷

Ngawang Tsültrim's policies were consistent with the *nītiśāstra* tradition in supporting the *Dharma* above all else, which he identified with the Gelug order. As the Ganden Tripa, he would have viewed monastic interests as his own, and he would have most strongly identified with the monastery of Sera.³⁸ Because he owed his position to the monastic hegemony in politics, the economic position of the Tibetan *saṃgha* was crucial to his own continued power. Although works like Mipham's *Treatise* envisage the king overseeing the realm's *saṃgha* (192–193), Ngawang Tsültrim had a greater power to act directly in matters of monastic discipline. His decrees address aspects of the economic behavior of monks, but primarily in order to encourage adherence to the *Vinaya* (Blo bzang thugs rje 232a).

It is striking that Ngawang Tsültrim does not consider the possibility of monastic corruption in his legislation. He of course agrees with the *nītiśāstra* tradition that monks are the supreme field of merit and therefore have the right to appropriate resources including *ulak* labor (Cabezón and Mi pham 216–217). The reason he does not focus on their abuses may have been that the monasteries were in reality less burdensome and even economically beneficial toward the *miser* (Jansen, *Monastery* 112). On the other hand, monks had motives for economic extraction similar to aristocrats, such as financial insecurity.³⁹ Tibetan history shows

³⁷ Ngawang Tsültrim also gave monasteries the properties of estates where the family line had died out (Blo bzang thugs rje 231a–235a).

³⁸ After Ngawang Tsültrim's death, his successor Tsemönling incarnations (one of whom also held the regency) received a *labrang* estate that gave the incarnations a more direct financial interest.

³⁹ On the allowances received by monks, see Jansen, *Monastery* 91–92.

that monks were not exempt from the human tendency of power to corrupt (as seen in their involvement in political intrigues and even armed rebellions). It is possible that Ngawang Tsültrim dealt with abuses on monastic estates in other ways, without a public decree, or that he did have conflicts with monasteries that the biographer, a monk from Sera, chose to overlook. If Ngawang Tsültrim's decrees display favoritism toward the monasteries, he could have been motivated by political and religious concerns broader than his personal position; strong monasteries would promote the Gelug *Dharma* and the stability of Ganden Phodrang.⁴⁰

Ngawang Tsültrim's reform efforts did not overturn the social hierarchy or the traditional economic expectations of the *miser*. They continued to be obligated to finance the Ganden Phodrang government and, especially, the monasteries. There was no question of emancipating them from these obligations, or of giving them a say in government. Ngawang Tsültrim also showed little interest in promoting private economic undertakings that might compete with the existing system, such as trading, commerce, and manufacturing.⁴¹ He was not concerned with income inequality as such and did not redistribute wealth to the poor beyond fighting

⁴⁰ His largesse only extended to Gelug monasteries; neither he nor other rulers of Ganden Phodrang supported the other sects extensively.

⁴¹ These segments were small within the Tibetan economy before the modern era. According to the economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, ruling elites around the world have often been hostile to new forms of enterprises because they could enrich potential competitors. In their view, there is a potential for innovation in all societies, and ruling elites' creation of "extractive institutions," both political and economic, leads most societies on a conservative path (83–93). From a religious rather than economic perspective, Samuel argues that Gelug hegemony over the centralized Ganden Phodrang government hindered innovation within Tibetan Buddhism. In the eighteenth century and thereafter, the Gelug order became more conservative and hostile to other traditions like the innovative nonsectarian Rimé movement, which flourished on the Tibetan periphery, outside state control (525–552).

corruption. An alternative view is that the monasteries benefited the *miser*, not only spiritually but also materially. Jansen has argued that the monasteries were more favorable to economic development than aristocrats, who fought destructive wars in addition to extracting wealth: “When placed in the historical context of Tibetan political history, the monastic economic model may have been the most viable option” (*Monastery* 111). Jansen argues against modernist (and Chinese Communist) views that Tibetan monasteries discouraged development in favor of religion or exploited the poor (111–112). Ngawang Tsültrim believed that the *miser* should retain their traditional lifestyle and obligations, which supported the *Samgha*, but wanted to reduce their unjust burdens within the system. This policy accorded with many sources of Tibetan political theory, including the Tibetan Buddhist *nītisāstra* tradition. On the other hand, alternative strategies like diversifying the economy, or even redistributing wealth, also have precedent in the *nītisāstra* tradition (far from being exclusively modern concerns).⁴² No historical inevitability dictated that the Buddhist *Samgha* had to be supported by monastic landlordism. In other times and places, it was supported by mercantile wealth (as in the Silk Road polities surrounding Tibet), or by the largesse of lay monarchs. Rather, this system arose out of the unique course of Ganden Phodrang’s development after the victory of the Fifth Dalai Lama.

Conclusion and Assessment

My analysis is necessarily limited in scope. Because my study is based on Ngawang Tsültrim’s biography, it relies on the biographer Lobsang Thukjé’s interpretations of his motivations. It is primarily the biographer

⁴² Cāṇakya accordingly describes economic diversification as a source of prosperity for individuals and (more importantly) the state, although the economy is largely agrarian. By contrast, Mipham has less to say about economic development.

who references *nītiśāstra* explicitly in his analyses, although Ngawang Tsültrim's decrees do refer to similar Tibetan traditions like *michö*, and he would have been familiar with *nītiśāstra* like any educated Tibetan.⁴³ Although Ngawang Tsültrim's outlook was often shared with other Buddhist rulers in Tibet and beyond (as can be seen in Mipham's *Treatise*), and questions of ethical rule were relevant throughout Buddhist history, historical and regional variations should not be ignored. Ganden Phodrang was unique even in the Tibetan region for the way monasteries dominated the state, and the ethical quality of its rulers varied over time.⁴⁴

Ngawang Tsültrim's "*Samgha* first" policies may seem a welcome antidote to materialism. He also had an admirable concern for the poor and recognized oppressive aspects of the Tibetan social system of his era. But his reforms also preserved the ruling establishment, the Gelug order, against its rivals. Although Ngawang Tsültrim's reforms freed the *miser* from excessive taxation and maintained economic benefits provided by monasteries, the *miser* continued to have an inferior status and owe large shares of produce and labor to others. They remained bound to a lifestyle that rarely gave anyone much wealth, except a few large landowners. But eighteenth-century Tibetan rulers, taking the economic system for granted, would have seen relieving tax burdens as the most obvious way to assist poor farmers. *Nītiśāstra* ideals also discouraged harmful uses of resources, like aristocratic luxury or warfare.⁴⁵ Of course, neither Ngawang Tsültrim himself nor Tibetan thinkers like his biographer and the

⁴³ Rulers or rulers-in-training were also more likely to peruse this material.

⁴⁴ Later regents (prior to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's assumption of power) were more likely to redistribute land to their own monasteries or be involved in intrigues (Shakabpa 575–617).

⁴⁵ Although he was not a complete pacifist (Tibet fought a major war with Nepal at the end of Ngawang Tsültrim's life), Ngawang Tsültrim and most Tibetan rulers who followed were not especially interested in conquest.

nītiśāstra authors would have judged his policies purely by material standards. His subjects would have shared Ngawang Tsültrim's dedication to the *Samgha* as the supreme field of merit; their own sons and brothers often joined the great Gelug monasteries.

The issues of political ethics involved in Ngawang Tsültrim's agenda have relevance today beyond Tibet. Although "socially engaged Buddhism" has been identified as a modern phenomenon, Buddhists have long been concerned with the ethics of rulership. Buddhism's scriptural and philosophical tradition did not offer much in the way of worldly advice, and so Tibetans turned to *nītiśāstra* and the similar Tibetan tradition of *michö*. *Nītiśāstra* was originally a tradition of *realpolitik*, but adapted to Buddhist values by later advocating political and material support for religion and an ethical concern for the people. Even so, *nītiśāstra* literature contains inherent tensions between supporting the *Samgha*, who preserve *Dharma* through learning and practice, and pursuing justice in this world. Some might consider an exclusive focus on social engagement to be excessively secular for a religion that seeks to renounce the world, but today's Buddhists may not see a contradiction between maintaining the *Dharma* and social engagement. At the same time, because of the need to prioritize resources and time, and institutional needs, there still might be a strong tension between these goals.

One of the biggest sources of tension in social engagement is that Buddhist and other religious institutions are often implicated in the same oppressive conditions that they seek to address. The root causes of social ills may be mirrored within the institutions, which overlook and take such structures for granted, or even support them as necessary for the institution. In contemporary society, these issues might include racism (American religious institutions are often segregated, even as they campaign for civil rights) and gender inequality (which is common in Buddhist monastic settings, even as Buddhist leaders promote women's education). The

financial needs of religious institutions, especially, can implicate them in the same social ills that they seek to combat. In the case of Ngawang Tsültrim, monasteries depended on the labor and produce of heavily taxed *miser*, even as he tried to address their plight. Buddhist institutions today may depend for their financial needs on state tithes, corporate donations, and contributions solicited from the faithful. These sources could conflict with professed Buddhist ideals if an organization gained donations by corrupt or manipulative means, or donations came from a corporation or government that acquired its wealth by unethical means, or had an agenda of gaining power. Corruption within monasteries is a present concern throughout the world.⁴⁶ Influential backers of Buddhism include wealthy business tycoons, many with close ties to politicians in countries like China, as well as the powerful militaries of countries like Burma and Sri Lanka (where monks have also been involved in protests against the government). If Ngawang Tsültrim's efforts appear constricted or blind to oppressive features of a system he supports, this limitation is not just a product of his era and social position, and it should be recognized that engaged Buddhists today face similar challenges.

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⁴⁶ For instance, monastic corruption recently sparked raids by authorities on monasteries in Thailand ("Thailand").

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