

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

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

Volume 29, 2022

*A Buddhist Sensibility: Aesthetic Education at Tibet's
Mindröling Monastery*

Reviewed by Nancy G. Lin

Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley
nlin@shin-ibs.edu

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

A Review of *A Buddhist Sensibility: Aesthetic Education at Tibet's Mindröling Monastery*

Nancy G. Lin¹

A Buddhist Sensibility: Aesthetic Education at Tibet's Mindröling Monastery. By Dominique Townsend. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021, 272 pages, ISBN 978-0-231-19487-7 (hardback), \$120/978-0-231-19487-7 (paperback), \$30/978-0-231-55105-2 (e-book), \$29.99.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a profusion of ornate literary Tibetan texts and costly material objects were made and circulated for Buddhists across the Tibetan plateau and other parts of Inner Asia, the Himalayas, and the Qing court. Ruling courts, monastic institutions, and aristocratic families networked and competed with each other to build and renovate monasteries and temples, develop their own narratives and values, lay claim to fields and systems of knowledge, and negotiate their positions under the rubric of the “two systems” (*lugs gnyis*), integrating the Dharmic and the worldly (*chos srid zung 'brel*). Although a fair amount of attention has been given to the political history of this period, its voluminous sources have remained largely untapped by Western-language scholars, along with questions they invite about aesthetics, material culture, and Buddhist approaches to worldly concerns. With *A Buddhist Sensibility: Aesthetic Education at Tibet's Mindröling Monastery*, Dom-

¹ Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley. Email: nlin@shin-ibs.edu.

inique Townsend makes a pioneering contribution to these areas of inquiry.

A Buddhist Sensibility offers the first book-length account of Mindröling, which was founded in central Tibet in 1676 and became a key monastic center of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhism. Townsend centers her study around its founder Terdak Lingpa (1646–1714) along with members of his aristocratic family, the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682), and others connected with the institution. The book’s stated purpose is twofold: to treat “Buddhist aesthetic formations during the first fifty years of Mindröling’s history” and to take part in “a broader investigation of aesthetics and materiality in the field of religious studies” (19). Townsend defines aesthetics as “the concern with art, taste, as well as the study of the senses more broadly,” encompassing “things material” (20, 11). She asserts that aesthetics provided the “connective tissue” between Buddhist and worldly activities (24) and argues that Mindröling promoted an inclusive and cosmopolitan aesthetic or worldview through its Nyingma sensibility based on Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) philosophy. Townsend’s book marshals an impressive array of textual sources—including biographies and autobiographies, monastic histories, letters, and monastic constitutional guidelines—to bring an important period of Tibetan history to life through many fascinating details, and it explores lines of inquiry that are of general interest in the humanities yet remain insufficiently studied in Tibetan and Buddhist studies.

Chapter one traces mytho-historical narratives of Terdak Lingpa’s Nyö clan that culminate in the establishment of Mindröling. It provides important context for the remainder of the book and serves as a useful account of the monastic center’s origins, several key figures, and the values Terdak Lingpa and his clan prioritized in their biographical representations. In particular, the life stories and ancestry of Terdak Lingpa’s parents highlight expertise in classical fields of knowledge (*rig gnas*), Great Perfection practice, and an unbiased (*ris med*) approach to accepting and including diverse students and teachers, including women. As much of the

chapter focuses on beauty and materiality, I now turn to these themes. The chapter begins with a vivid anecdote in which the handsome body of the first, divine Nyö ancestor who descended to Tibet made a strong impression on the local population. In such stories, Townsend asserts, “beauty is not skin-deep but is symbolic of virtue and power” (26); she later adds the noteworthy observation that “the most common Tibetan word for beauty (*mdzes pa*) also connotes elegance, power, and effectiveness” (31). Townsend draws a through line between this ancestral story and narratives about Terdak Lingpa himself, centering on the protagonists’ mastery of aesthetics, sense perceptions, and their objects. Such mastery, in her interpretation of the sources, can bring about calm, peace, wonder, delight, and clarity for those who encounter them, responses that indicate their efficacy as teachers.

The second chapter discusses how Terdak Lingpa, the Fifth Dalai Lama, and others “articulated and manifested their vision of Mindröling as a new civilizational center” for Great Perfection practice that could benefit and nurture Greater Tibet (*bod chen*; 55). By architecturally referencing the Tibetan, Indian, and Chinese styles attributed to Samyé, Mindröling was established as a cosmopolitan center that, like its precedent, could “tame” Tibet while strengthening the Nyingma tradition itself. As Townsend reports from a dream attributed to the Fifth Dalai Lama, the physical structure with its deity statues were regarded as contributing to the long life and success of Tibetan rulers, and by extension to the well-being of their subjects. The significance of material culture and aesthetics for Buddhist ends is commented on elsewhere in verses attributed to Terdak Lingpa and displayed outside Mindröling’s main assembly hall. In Townsend’s reading, Terdak Lingpa “interweaves the materiality of the building with the philosophical tenets and practices he and his lineage are known for—the doorways are the Two Truths, the pillars are miraculous abilities,” and so on (72). These particular verses stage symbolic relations between material objects and Buddhist concepts and goals with enticing clarity. Beyond this, Townsend asserts, the poem presents the physical

structure of the building and its decorations as materially supporting and protecting Buddhist practice and learning.

In this chapter Townsend also returns to what she characterizes as the unbiased (*ris med*) worldview at Mindröling, especially with respect to women. As she points out, at least five women from the Nyö family lineage emerged as major figures, with two recognized as fully fledged transmitters of the Mindröling lineage and its teachings through such media as contemporary wall paintings and liturgies still in use today. Townsend notes that the prominence of women at Mindröling was likely also facilitated by the family's aristocratic status, complicating the historical picture of who could gain access to privileged positions, and under what conditions.

Such issues notwithstanding, Townsend points out that Mindröling served as inspiration for later figures associated with nonsectarianism such as Ju Mipham Gyatso (1846–1912), highlighting its importance for our understanding of the term “unbiased” or “impartial” (*ris med*) as used during Mindröling's formative historical period. As she frames it, the term developed through Great Perfection philosophy and practice and “refers to the impartiality and non-discriminatory perspective of full awakening”; it was anthropomorphically idealized by Terdak Lingpa as “a renunciant without direction, limits, or bias” (75). Elsewhere, Townsend shares, the term refers to communally gathered people who are diversified by gender, age, socioeconomic class, region, and religious groups. These are relevant observations that contribute to our historical understanding of the term *ris med* and its usage. Maintaining this level of specificity throughout the book would have strengthened Townsend's overall analysis—that is, by citing primary sources as evidence and discussing how they use the term *ris med*, and by clarifying elsewhere when the author is making general, second-order claims about what an unbiased worldview entails at Mindröling or at large.

The remaining chapters are thematically organized around significant topics in Mindröling's history. Chapter three showcases Townsend's

skill in translating and interpreting poetic letters written in the styles of courtly poetry and prose (*snyan ngag*, adapted from Sanskrit *kāvya*) and song-poetry (*mgur*). Townsend explores how letters addressed by the Fifth Dalai Lama to Terdak Lingpa “reveal a worldview in which interdependent relationships constitute the person” (88), such as recurring connections with key figures in Tibetan Buddhist history that are highlighted through Terdak Lingpa’s previous incarnations. She also finds in these letters a “pragmatic application of Buddhist teachings to the world” (88). The celebration of Ngödrup Pelzom’s relationship with Terdak Lingpa as his tantric ritual partner, wife, and lover is a highlight of the book thanks to its in-depth analysis and sensitive treatment of gender roles and relations. In the second half of the chapter, letters by Terdak Lingpa are characterized by Townsend as giving “literary expression to the impartial or unbiased ideal,” both through their range of recipients including women, aristocrats, religious authorities, and political leaders across Tibetan-speaking regions, and through their reflection on such topics as “fulfilling social responsibilities” and “coping with complex emotional experiences” (105–106). Here Townsend effectively demonstrates the potential of poetic forms to advise, console, and entertain, both within and beyond monastic networks.

Chapter four draws from Mindröling’s constitutional guidelines (*bca’ yig*) to foreground Mindröling’s commitment to training students in the arts and sciences, including literary arts, astrology, and medicine along with strictly Buddhist subjects. Townsend suggests that their integration into Mindröling’s curriculum helped “crystalliz[e] the qualifications for which Nyingma practitioners were valued most” from the late seventeenth century forward (123). This entailed in part an “education in aesthetics,” which Townsend glosses as “all that concerns the senses and the objects of the senses” (124–125). Terdak Lingpa’s concerns included proper performance of ritual arts, including melodies, chanting, instrumentation, offerings, mandalas, and dances, on which Mindröling’s prestige partly depended. A Mindröling education, Townsend reports, also became a “precious commodity” in central Tibet because it offered training

in the literary arts and other “worldly fields of knowledge” that were difficult to obtain otherwise (141). Given Mindröling’s major role in central Tibet for education in the arts and sciences, as well as the adoption of its curriculum by Nyingma monasteries in Kham and other regions, this chapter is a valuable contribution to the history of the fields of knowledge (*rig gnas*) in Tibet.

The concept of aesthetic education at Mindröling is more clearly developed in chapter five, where Townsend tends to focus her usage of *aesthetic* more narrowly on concerns with beauty, taste, and pleasing the senses, and asserts that “such an education connects Buddhist and worldly spheres” (145). Townsend hypothesizes that lay aristocrats preferred to train at Mindröling due to the prestige of the Nyö family clan, the charisma of Terdak Lingpa and his brother Lochen Dharmaśrī, its symbolic and aesthetic links to Samyé, its impartial worldview which was more inclusive of diverse students, and the “two systems” of Dharmic and worldly expertise promoted there. Likening Mindröling to a modern liberal arts college, Townsend notes its “institutionalized charisma” and instillation of good taste (150) as well as its emphasis on language arts, such as calligraphy and rhetorical composition, for aspiring lay officials looking to exhibit skills, cosmopolitanism, and belonging in the appropriate ranks of social and political hierarchy.

The writings of the lay aristocrat Dokharwa Tsering Wangyal (1697–1763), marked by the liberal use of courtly Tibetan poetics, serve Townsend well here. In Townsend’s analysis, Dokharwa and the future Tibetan ruler Polhané (1689–1747) trained at Mindröling primarily to learn literary arts (and in Dokharwa’s case, also astrology), not religion. Yet other anecdotes in her book suggest that their religious engagements were greater during their time there than they might have been otherwise. In a striking comparison, Townsend reads “a notable resonance” between an erotically charged biographical account of Polhané’s separation from his favorite lover and Polhané’s first meeting with Terdak Lingpa (162). The possible affective relations between the erotic and the

devotional remains an understudied topic in Tibetan and Buddhist literature, one that deserves further consideration.

In the epilogue, Townsend reflects on the legacy of Terdak Lingpa and others in establishing Mindröling as a key Nyingma monastic center during his lifetime and renewing it in the face of repeated challenges. The first part focuses on the years immediately after Terdak Lingpa's death, which saw devastating losses at the hands of occupying Zungar Mongols in the early eighteenth century, including the razing of the monastery, the execution of family members, and the destruction of the Nyingma tradition elsewhere in central Tibet. These events have been covered elsewhere, yet anecdotes from Mindröling oral tradition offer a vital glimpse into how, according to Tibetan perspectives, religious practice could affect historical outcomes. These include the decision of Terdak Lingpa's son to cut his hair and ordain as a monk against family expectations, and how the considerable merit he accumulated as a practitioner was interpreted as figuring into the circumstances of his death.

Townsend further details how Terdak Lingpa's daughter Mingyur Peldrön helped rebuild Mindröling both materially and in terms of its reputation. Notably, Townsend interprets her biography as suggesting that she was suspicious of the value of the "conventional" fields of knowledge, favoring the study of Buddhist doctrine. Did this have historical ramifications for the curriculum at Mindröling, even if only briefly? Townsend does not directly address this question, but she concludes that Mindröling's role in training lay aristocrats was the most relevant way in which Buddhist and worldly concerns were bridged by the institution.

A significant new point raised here is that as married, noncelibate tantric adepts, the senior chairs at Mindröling could be regarded by laypeople as "direct exemplars" who maintain "worldly engagements with family" (189). Aristocratic students seem to have remained a small but significant minority at Mindröling until the 1950s, with Mindröling maintaining its role in the arts and sciences and in widely adopted rituals that

continue today. Townsend also notes that Mindröling has continued to recognize a relatively high number of women masters through the generations and up to today.

Townsend's study raises many fascinating and intriguing points about aesthetics and materiality in Tibetan Buddhist history that are worthy of our attention and reflection. However, this book's overly broad definition of aesthetics, along with its unclear framing of aesthetics and materiality in relation to Tibetan historical approaches to these topics, weakens the ability of such terms to serve heuristically for the purposes of her study, and by extension, for other work in our field and beyond. Her analysis often stops short of addressing important questions about how beauty, aesthetics, and material objects operate in these sources and for their readers. If the common Tibetan word for beauty (*mdzes pa*) "also connotes elegance, power, and effectiveness" (31), might this not prompt us to reconsider whether "beauty" is an adequate translation, or alternatively, whether we need to further investigate and explain Tibetan terms such as *mdzes pa* in their historical contexts, including Tibetan theories of aesthetics? To raise a related question, are beauty and beautifully made objects consistently treated as symbols in Townsend's sources—as arbitrarily designated, conventional signifiers of virtue, power, and other desirable qualities? Or might they at times operate via indexical or iconic relationships, as delineated by Peirce's semiotic theory? For example, might human beauty be indexically (causally) linked to virtue and power, and/or to activities such as meritorious accumulation or purificatory practices that result in all three of these qualities?

Other topics deserve further treatment in future studies, including the benefits of beauty as claimed or implied by Tibetan sources. "Pleasure, beauty, and enjoyment need not be a distraction" from Buddhist ends, Townsend affirms (72), but is there a positive reason for these to be present? If they are beneficial, necessary, or integral to Buddhist projects, how? As for analyzing Tibetan approaches to materiality, must material objects always be perceived by the senses and aesthetically appreciated to

exert effects? Whether or not this is the case, is it worth distinguishing between different kinds of material objects, their properties, effects, and so forth, such as in Terdak Lingpa's mastery of things as diverse as his corporeal features, ornaments and dress worn on the body, and other objects such as hurled yet miraculously unbroken teacups? Addressing these questions would be helpful for understanding Mindröling's formation, the history of aesthetics in Tibet, and for the study of aesthetics and materiality at large.

A Buddhist Sensibility contributes significantly to our understanding of a consequential monastic institution and its role in Tibetan history. It paints more diverse scenes of early modern society in central Tibet, which include and valorize women and lay aristocrats along with male monastics and tantric adepts. It also joins a growing body of publications on Buddhist materiality authored by scholars of religion. Townsend's book is at its best when it showcases translations and lively details from primary sources that raise compelling questions about the histories of aesthetics and materiality in Tibetan Buddhist contexts. As a study of materiality, the book is limited by its almost exclusive reliance on textual sources rather than on visual and material objects, and by only passing references to the findings and insights of art historical scholarship. Although tragic histories of destruction and disordering at Mindröling have posed considerable obstacles to studying its objects and spatial design, ongoing and future research on these aspects of Tibetan and Himalayan sites at large are crucial to our understanding of aesthetics and material culture. The analysis of objects themselves cannot be neglected if we wish to expand and refine our knowledge of this period and what it can tell us about the formation of Buddhist cultures, values, and concerns. That said, Townsend's work should be of interest to scholars of Tibetan, Himalayan, Central Asian, and Buddhist studies for its fine study of a monastic institution and its integration with lay society, as well as for its stimulating forays into aesthetics, poetics, and educational models.