Three Creative Encounters: Tibetan Buddhist tradition and authority in American convert communities

by

Reid Meador
Class of 2014

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Religion

Middletown, Connecticut  April, 2014
three creative encounters
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acknowledgements

Many thanks to

Peter Gottschalk for grounding my thoughts in theory and for pushing me to articulate my ramblings in concise sentences (I do not envy that task);

My family—Mom, Dad, and Graham—for sharing my sense of humor and for indulging me when you don’t, and for supporting me with so much love;

Poppy for the letters and thought-provoking conversations;

My housemates, particularly Rachel and Em, for singing and dancing in the kitchen, for your support through the dark final hours, and for tolerating firsthand the alarming deterioration of both my social skills and my wrists;

The members of 84 Gnomes (Leo the Lion, RayRo, BennyDocter, Fran(zia), and G-Baby—my favorite gnomes) for providing the best second home I could imagine and for an endless supply of food, snuggles, dancing, and sleepovers;

All of my friends, especially KellyToy, my thesis buddy and all-around partner-in-crime; Sinead, Kayla, and Sarah—the megabed support group; Brendan for giving me cheese when I most needed it; Jenessa for laughing meditation and dogs; Hannah and Leah for perspective and pickles in Olin; WesWings coworkers for laughs; WesRugby for rucking and mauling; Mo for the keyboard and lasagna; Ethan for the road trip and other Buddhist adventures; and Chase for the bleached hair;

Ellie for reading so many pages;

My professors over the years who cultivated my beginner’s mind, and those who gave me suggestions for this thesis, particularly Professors Sarah Mahurin, Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Justine Quijada, Eiko, Henry Abelove, Ron Cameron, Joel Pfister, and Sasha Rudensky;

Coffee and Indian Hill for keeping me awake and promoting my happiness;

And, above all, my two sanghas, Bodh Gaya 2012 and Tara Mandala, for my introduction to Buddhism, early mornings, and for continuing to be the most incredibly expansive communities to which I have belonged—this thesis is for you all.

*

May all beings be well and happy!
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Tibetan Transliteration and Transcription

In transliterating Tibetan terms, scholars face a challenge: the spelling and pronunciation of the Tibetan language have diverged over time (much as the case with written and spoken English). Scholars of Tibetan transliterate terms according to their spelling, but this does not help the general reader in pronunciation of the terms. To ensure both scholarly accuracy to the Tibetan spelling and accessibility for readers, I provide Tibetan terms in two systems. For transliterating spelling into Roman script, I use the Tibetan Himalayan Library Extended Wylie Transliteration of Tibetan (Wylie), an updated version of the most widely accepted system. For transcribing the sounds of Tibetan words, I employ the Rigpa Phonetics system, which is, I think, a system quite accessible for the reader.

For names of people and in some cases places, I follow neither of these schemes. Instead, I honor the transliteration that the individuals themselves have devised.

For ease of reading and to avoid confusion, I provide the Wylie rendering at the first use of a Tibetan term, and after, I use the term only as rendered in Rigpa Phonetics. This thesis, after all, is primarily a study of the three Tibetan Buddhist teachers’ discourses, and these teachers, in their written teachings, use phonetically transcribed terms.

Sanskrit Transliteration

For Sanskrit transliteration, I use the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) scheme. Sanskrit transliteration is much more standardized than Tibetan, and though my three speakers occasionally use variant spellings, in my voice I accord with the IAST, with very few exceptions.
introduction
ARRIVALS

What is important? The past is past; the future is important. We are the creators...you in the West should be creative in adapting the timeless essence of the Dharma to your own cultural times and circumstances.

- *His Holiness The Fourteenth Dalai Lama*¹

Teachers must realize that this is not just about speaking in English or translating certain texts. It is about the continuity of the stream of the essence of dharma, which must unfold in this country in the most pure and authentic ways.

- *Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche*²

I held on to the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, while allowing the influence of the deep feminine to inform my teaching.

- *Lama Tsultrim Allione*³

The Dalai Lama means that we humans create the future in the most common sense, by living it day after day; some of us create Tibetan Buddhism by being Tibetan Buddhists (or choosing not to) in particular ways. We also create the future in a different sense as we talk about the future, imagine it, and translate our visions of it to others. This process—of controlling not so much the future as much as the ways

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in which the future is (always presently) imagined—is closely tied to authority and rhetorical power. In the Tibetan Buddhist case, as a religion interacts with a new environment (America), imaginings related to continuity, which link past, present, and future, become all the more important. Powerful speakers often craft the rhetorical imaginings of traditions in ways that obscure the complex work poured into them. I hope to reveal some of the ways in which particular speakers in the past few decades have imagined particular Tibetan Buddhisms in America, and to understand the possible motivations and consequences. My assumptions about how religions function loosely stem from religious studies scholars like Jonathan Z. Smith and Russell McCutcheon’s treatments of myth as intellectual activity; in other words, I take religion (Tibetan Buddhism) to be the process and products of social construction undertaken by particular religious actors, who use, discard, and interpret certain resources available to them—all the while in conversation with their audiences, institutions, and other actors.

The rhetorical construction of Tibetan Buddhism in America, at least presently, constitutes an elite mode of religion-making. While audiences hold an important power of constraint, those sanctioned to speak from within the religion—in this case, Tibetan Buddhist teachers—influence the process the most.4 Rather, I should say that for the audiences on which I focus, lay convert communities in America, Tibetan Buddhist lineage holders teaching in America influence this particular audience much more directly than lay Tibetans or Tibetan teachers outside of America. I admit to neglect speakers and groups who matter to and shape the

4 These terms—“Tibetan Buddhism” and “America”—will be glossed later in this introduction. I employ both as etic categories, terms useful for the student of religious studies.
tradition; I cannot, for instance, account for the communities of Tibetan lay refugees whose presence in the United States continues to grow in number and influence. I do not address, either, the practice, ritual, or organization of Tibetan Buddhism in America—I chart words, not actions. This introduction, not only outlining my argument but also briefly charting Tibetan Buddhism organization and arrivals to America, serves to provide some of this background.

In the course of this thesis, I will examine the discourse—primarily of the twenty-first century—of three specific lineage holders: the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim Allione. I will take a thematic approach, based on certain trends I find most addressed and emphasized as exceptional by the speakers, namely: the role of texts, the importance of places, and visions of the past. These three themes accentuated by the speakers interact to create a rhetorical Tibetan Buddhist tradition that can then be perceived as transmitted through time and space. In the speakers’ discourse lies a tension between ascribing authority to particular resources and emphasizing the ultimate importance of direct experience through meditation. This tension arises from an avowal that the truth exists outside of the resources sanctioned speakers use to expose and control it; this tension rests at the heart of the creation of Tibetan Buddhist traditions in America. From my comparison, I argue that first generation Tibetan Buddhist lineage holders in the United States address concerns of authority and continuity by discursively contending with texts, places, and pasts to construct the appearance, paradoxically, of a tradition that transcends the particular resources it encompasses.
Academic Constructions: An Introduction to the Problem

This thesis developed in part as a response to the academic work currently available on Tibetan Buddhism in America, specifically on convert practicing communities. In short, not much has been done. What has been published is authored primarily by practitioners, which is not, I believe, a fault in itself (after all, I am myself a practitioner). Still, such authorship sometimes leads to uncritical reinforcement of the very claims that Tibetan Buddhist lineage holders make themselves about the exceptionalism of Tibetan Buddhism. For academics in the past, emphasizing the singularity of Tibetan Buddhism in America served its purpose to establish the validity of Tibetan Buddhist Studies, which many thought to be unimportant, its subject a degenerate form of Buddhism. Now, however, academics must move beyond theoretical claims backed by scant evidence; it is time to stop treating Tibetan Buddhism as somehow unclassifiable with other religions (and supporting the thought that perhaps Tibetan Buddhism does contain some truth preserved from historical forces).

Indeed, academic arguments that Tibetan Buddhism in America resembles more a way of life, a scientific religion, or a philosophy, than just a religion like the rest of them strikes a similar chord to William James’ definitive example of classification: “Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it.

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5 The term “practicing communities” derives from the use of the term “practitioner” to describe someone on the Buddhist path, particularly on the tantric Buddhist path. Rather than identifying oneself as simply a Buddhist, it is common to identify as a Buddhist practitioner.
‘I am no such thing,’ it would say, ‘I am *myself, myself alone.*’

Instead of merely echoing the crab, the scholar must classify it in their own terms. Claims to exceptionalism silence opportunity for classification, comparison, and thought. Thus, by repeating claims of exceptionalism, academics shirk their responsibility to discover what lies beyond proposed uniqueness, to examine how and why exceptionalism—or, as prominent religious studies theorist J.Z. Smith would term it, “the problem of singularity”

Scholar of Tibetan Buddhism Donald S. Lopez, Jr., famous (or perhaps infamous) for his claim in *Prisoners of Shangri-La* that “we are all prisoners of Shangri-La,” records similar observations about Buddhist Studies:

> Yet the fact that this is a process of appropriation should not obscure the degree to which Buddhist Studies imitates that which it seeks to decode, for one of the most persistent and powerful metaphors in the history of Buddhism is that of transmission, that there is a dharma to be passed from teacher to student and from culture to culture, and that dharma can be translated from one language to another without that essence being lost.

Lopez’s self-reflection demonstrates marked progress for the field. I hesitate to agree that we are all inescapably “prisoners of Shangri-La”—yet we academics are indeed imprisoned in our human (flawed) incarnations, never able to claim to be merely disinterested outsiders. All the same, we can peek between the bars if we stop simply

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repeating claims to an exceptional transmission of Tibetan Buddhism and instead begin to dissect how this professed singularity functions as our training allows us.

My work departs from previous studies in its focus not on the popular phenomena of Buddhist sympathizers, nor on the appropriation and construction of Tibet—two overworked subjects—but instead on practicing communities, on their similarities and sometimes oppositional differences. Few academics have attempted specific case studies outside of texts and philosophy; Tibetan Buddhist studies has preferred to dwell safely in a zone of written texts and theoretical conjecture. Examining specific recent discourse, I ask how Tibetan Buddhism in America functions—in terms of its relationship to pre-diaspora Tibetan Buddhism, and in terms of variations within the movement—as a growing religious tradition. Even as first generation Tibetan Buddhist lineage holders who arrived in America in the 1960s and ‘70s die and retire, the tradition continues to take root in the American religious landscape. Questions arise at this juncture regarding how the religion will continue to be constructed and contested, and how speakers can maintain (the perception of) continuity. I will invest, then, in questions of how a religious tradition takes form as an apparently continuous and authoritative entity.

The academic term “tradition” as I employ it in this thesis I borrow from Michael Satlow’s theory of religion and traditions. Satlow defines the term in two ways. As an etic (that is, academic) analytic category, I use “tradition” in these two senses: to describe particular, smaller traditions, and to describe the religious tradition of Tibetan Buddhism (which encompasses many of these smaller traditions). Satlow defines the first of these uses of tradition as “(I.) static (II.) resources that (III.)
individuals, communities, and institutions understand as (IV.) authentic and regard as (V.) authoritative.” Traditions constitute what actors (in this thesis, lineage holders) must contend with (in this thesis, texts, places, and pasts); this is the process that aids the creation of the broader sense of the term, the religious tradition. Satlow understands smaller traditions as exercising “a constraining force,” in that they provide religious actors with resources that they must choose to use, interpret, address, and even ignore, sometimes to their own inconvenience. What distinguishes one religion from another is not an essence, nor shared beliefs, nor the academic theory of “a symbolic system,” but instead “a set of discrete static resources to which religious actors attribute a constraining force.” Differences within a religion can be attributed to differences in strategies that evolve from and within specific circumstances. This useful definition of religious tradition ascribes agency to speakers and thus inquires into their strategies for working with the traditions (resources) available to them. In this thesis, I will clarify when necessary if a use of “tradition” denotes a passed-on resource or the rhetorical construction called Tibetan Buddhism.

The three lineage holders I study also use the term “tradition.” They employ the term in both of the senses I have glossed above. The Dalai Lama, for instance, often speaks about religious traditions—both distinguishing between different Buddhist traditions and separating Buddhism from other religions—and he also speaks about traditions in the smaller sense—chanting as a tradition, or a certain

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12 Ibid., 134.
13 Ibid., 137.
meditative practice as a tradition. Khandro Rinpoche and Lama Tsultrim similarly deploy the term “tradition” in both senses. For the most part, then, my etic use of the category—based on Satlow’s theory—mirrors emic use.

Another important concept for my argument is “authority.” I use the term to signify “discursive authority,” based on the definition Bruce Lincoln gives in his social constructionist approach to authority: he takes authority to be “(1) an effect; (2) the capacity for producing that effect; and (3) the commonly shared opinion that a given actor has the capacity for producing that effect.”14 Here, authority rests in the relationship between the speaker and the audience. Authority relies on the audience’s perception of an asymmetry between itself and the speaker. This gap may be ascribed by office (someone “in authority”) or conferred through expertise (someone “an authority”). For Lincoln, the distinctions between the two are transcended by the fact that both “have the capacity to produce consequential speech” that wins the trust of their audiences.15 In terms of this thesis, the Tibetan Buddhist lineage holder is speaker both “in authority” and “an authority.” The institution of a reincarnated lineage bestows authority onto the lineage holder. In addition, teachers undergo rigorous training, usually through the monastic system, and thus are considered experts on Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and practice.

As I study teachers’ discourses, I mainly examine discursive authority with respect to these teachers’ claims to authority. Discursive authority, as Lincoln articulates, rests not just on speakers’ claims but ultimately on the audience’s perceptions; speakers, if successful, “command not just the attention but the

15 Ibid., 3-4.
confidence, respect, and trust of their audience, or—an important proviso—to make
audiences act as if this were so.”\textsuperscript{16} When I identify the three lineage holders’ claims
to authority, I draw attention to their attempts to inspire the confidence of their
audiences. What I cannot conclude, for the most part, is whether these attempts work,
as I have little information related to audiences’ reactions. In the scope of this thesis,
then, I primarily focus on the lineage holders’ \textit{claims} to the authority of themselves,
the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and particular resources they interpret.

\section*{Lineage Traditions in Tibetan Buddhism}

Tibetan Buddhism grants the lineage holder great authority. The monastic and elite
organizational systems of Tibetan Buddhism tend to invest in the centrality of
continuous lineages, whether of teachers, monasteries, texts, or manifestations of
superhuman beings. Tibetan Buddhism consists of four or five main orders (or
schools), Nyingma (\textit{rNying ma}), Kagyü (\textit{bKa’ brgyud}), Sakya (\textit{Sa skya}), and Géluk
(\textit{dGe lugs}), and sometimes including Bön (\textit{Bon}), which converge in their doctrines
and practices much more than they depart. All five claim the heritage of a tantric
religious tradition from India in the eighth century. Each developed a strong
monastic system and lineages of reincarnated teachers.\textsuperscript{17} As tantric Buddhist
traditions, all the orders claim to offer a path to enlightenment more expedient than
other Buddhist paths, particularly because they offer a vast variety of practices to suit

\footnotesize \textsuperscript{16} Lincoln, \textit{Authority}, 4.
\textsuperscript{17} The second Karmapa in the thirteenth century advised his students to seek his reincarnation as a boy
after he died; most cite this as the first instance of a recognized tulku, though the recognitions became
institutionalized later. The system works to ensure the political and religious interests of the sect or
lineage, based on the premise that teachers with specific allegiances will reincarnate particularly for
their lineages.
the individual practitioner. Though members of the four orders may perceive
themselves as belonging first and foremost to a specific, local lineage, they also—
monastic and lay Tibetan alike—identify themselves together as Buddhists (and, for
most of the time since Buddhism arrived in Tibet, under one religiously headed state).
While the orders share basic doctrine and organization structures, they do diverge in
some of the particularities of lineage.

In Tibetan Buddhism, lineage involves more than earthly passing on of
authority; in addition, it relies on confidence in reincarnation. Most people cannot
choose their rebirths, but accomplished masters (that is, highly skilled meditation
practitioners) present an important exception. A reincarnated master who chooses
their rebirth is called a *tulku* (*sprul sku*). 18 Those skilled enough to remain conscious
through the death and rebirth process can continually reincarnate themselves; as these
masters have developed great love for all beings, they reincarnate through a
recognizable lineage in a particular place for a specific group. 19 In addition to these
reincarnated tulkus—who are normally sought and found in a search process—
someone may be recognized as an emanation, an embodied manifestation of a
*bodhisattva* or buddha (two types of enlightened beings). These beings, no longer
constrained by the cycle of rebirth, may manifest into multiple human bodies
simultaneously and may appear even before the death of a different emanation.

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18 All Tibetan and Sanskrit terms introduced in this thesis, glossed the first time I use them, can be
found in the glossary at the end of this work. For Tibetan terms, I provide the Wylie transliteration in
parenthesis following the first use. I do not provide such information for all proper nouns, though
many of these are included in the glossary.
189.
While less of a direct connection than reincarnation entails, emanations too may hold specific lineages.20

Lineages abound: lineages of masters and teachers, oral lineages passed from teacher to student, and textual (scholastic) lineages based in the main monasteries of each order. In this complex system of overlapping lineages, individual lineage holders act as a glue: they know the textual lineage, they participate in the continuity of oral teachings, and they pass the lineage to their students. In the United States, the lineage holder takes on even more responsibility, as individual lamas (bla ma)—sanctioned Tibetan Buddhist teachers—who fled Tibet first presented the religion to American students, an audience unfamiliar with the religion and its lineages.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will introduce the Nyingma and Géluk orders in more depth. Lama Tsultrim and Khandro Rinpoche both primarily hold Nyingma lineages, though both inherit Kagyü lineages as well, and the Dalai Lama is the head of the Géluk order. These two orders present distinct organizational structures. The Nyingma order is alternatively known as the Old School. Nyingmapas (students of the Nyingma) claim they inherit the most authentic and complete lineage from early masters who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet.21 The lineage traces itself back to Padmasambhava (also called Guru Rinpoche), the Indian tantric master accredited with first bringing Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century. The Nyingma order differs from the Géluk in two important ways: in institutional structure and in doctrinal emphasis. Structurally, six main lineages of tulkus comprise the Nyingma order’s elite—a decentralized and locally organized system, as opposed to one

20 This form of lineage is important to this thesis because Lama Tsultrim Allione, one of the three teachers I will address, has been recognized as an emanation of an eleventh century Tibetan yoginī.
21 Powers, Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, 368.
centrally authorized lineage (as the Gélukpas have in the Dalai Lama and the
Kagyüpas have in the Karmapas). Doctrinally, the Nyingma order stresses the
importance of the direct experience of meditation and the connection between teacher
and student. Thus, the most powerful authorities in the Nyingma order are the tulkus,
the reincarnated masters. Additionally, the Nyingma historically detached itself from
politics, unlike the other orders, remaining intentionally decentralized.

The Nyingma order differentiates itself from the rest with its *term* tradition.
The Nyingma grants authority to two textual sets of teachings: *kama* (*bka’ ma*), a
teaching tradition of texts and knowledge passed down through time, and the terma
tradition, a system of continuously discovering teachings. The *term* (*gter ma*),
which literally translates to “hidden treasure,” is a teaching intentionally hidden by an
early master, often Padmasambhava, and discovered by later practitioners—through
visions, in dreams, or physically somewhere in the Tibetan landscape. Powers
explains the purpose of the *term* as keeping the Nyingma order teachings relevant
and updated in changing times, in order to “breathe new life into the tradition.”

Many lineages of Nyingma form around specific *term* and *tertöns* (*gter ston*)—
discoverers of the treasure—further fueling the localized organization of lineage.

On the other hand, we have the Géluk order, the newest of the four orders.
Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa, a reformer who studied under the Kagyū order,
founded the Géluk order around the turn of the fourteenth century in response to his
observations of lapses in monastic discipline and a decline in tantric practice.
Tsongkhapa built a monastery, and in the proceeding centuries, his order rapidly rose

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to prominence, known for its distinguished scholars and practitioners. In the sixteenth century, the third Dalai Lama was discovered as the grandson of a Mongol chieftain, kindling the Géluk rise to political power. Ever since 1642, when the fifth Dalai Lama unified Tibet and acted as the temporal (political) and spiritual leader of the country, the Dalai Lamas have maintained power.

Its highly centralized organization, political involvement, and doctrinal and institutional emphasis on a heavily graduated path distinguish the Géluk order. The line of Dalai Lamas has long been granted great authority over all of the Géluk order. The most authoritative position is not the tulku but the geshê (dge bshes), the monastic degree holder—and the Dalai Lama, in addition to being a tulku, studied and earned the highest geshê degree possible. To obtain a geshê degree, a monastic (traditionally, and in most cases, still, a male monk) must study rigorously for fifteen to twenty-five years or even longer; such a system results in a hierarchically arranged monastic institution known for its strict adherence to monastic codes.

While Gélukpas maintain that the path to enlightenment necessitates (as all the other orders do) direct meditative experience and oral transmission from teacher to student, the order distinctly emphasizes a graduated path of study and meditation. Unlike Nyingma doctrine, Géluk doctrine does not consider formless meditation to be

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24 Even at times when various Dalai Lamas’ actions have been questioned, Tibetans’ devotion to them remained quite strong. Devotion for the current Fourteenth Dalai Lama, however, is perhaps even greater than in the past—likely due to a combination of the circumstances of exile, his longevity, and his continued fulfillment of his position as spiritual leader despite the incredibly demanding circumstances of exile and his many roles as public speaker. Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 210, 213-215.
sufficient on its own for achieving enlightenment; instead, practitioners must undertake the path in stages under the close supervision of sanctioned teachers.

In recent history, the Rimé Movement, also known as the Nonsectarian Movement, distanced the Géluk order even further from the Nyingma, Kagyü, Sakya, and Bön. Extremely influential ever since its inception, both pre- and post-diaspora, some teachers began the Rimé as a countermovement in the late nineteenth century in response to the Géluk approach to textual study, which relied on textbooks. Rimé lamas instead required students to study Indian texts directly. The movement sought not to smooth over differences between the sects or to universalize the religion but instead to pool resources and encourage students to appreciate teachings outside of their lineage.\(^\text{26}\) Indeed, far from centralizing the orders, the Nonsectarian Movement’s emphasis on lineage highlighted evermore the particular bond between individual teacher and student, which has been the means for differentiating between the orders. Today, the Rimé Movement noticeably influences most non-Gélukpa lamas teaching in America, including Lama Tsultrim and Khandro Rinpoche.\(^\text{27}\) More recently, the Dalai Lama has claimed affinity with the movement.

\(^{26}\) Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 360. Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, a Kagyü lama who teaches Tibetans and Westerners, explains the movement: “Rimé is not a way of uniting different Schools and lineages by emphasizing their similarities. It is basically an appreciation of their differences and an acknowledgement of the importance of having this variety for the benefit of practitioners with different needs. Therefore the Rimé teachers always take great care that the teachings and practices of the different Schools and lineages and their unique styles do not become confused with one another. To retain the original style and methods of each teaching lineage preserves the power of that lineage experience.” “The Rimé (Ris-med) Movement of Jamgon Kongtrul the Great,” paper presented at the Seventh Conference for International Association for Tibetan Studies in June 1995, accessed April 3, 2014, http://www.abuddhistlibrary.com/Buddhism/A-Tibetan-Buddhism/Authors/Ringu-Tulku/The-Rime-Movement/THE-RIME-(Ris-med)-MOVEMENT.htm.

\(^{27}\) Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 362.
An Interlude: Terminology, or what is Tibetan Buddhism?

Before mapping Tibetan Buddhism’s arrival to America, I articulate what exactly I mean by “Tibetan Buddhism” and “America.” While Western academics across the board use “Tibetan Buddhism” as an etic term to describe a Buddhism that comes out of Tibet and surrounding areas (including Mongolia, Bhutan, northern Nepal, and Ladakh), the Dalai Lama rarely uses the term, nor do other ethnically Tibetan lineage holders employ it often when referring to their religion. Instead, these teachers talk about dharma or Buddha-dharma, meaning, approximately, what the Buddha taught. On the other hand, American-born teachers, including Lama Tsultrim, do indeed use the term “Tibetan Buddhism.” The term presents problems for academics beyond itssparse emic use. Some academics question the usefulness and validity of delineating forms of Buddhism by nation-state; professor of tantric Buddhism David Gray problematizes “Tibetan Buddhism” especially. Importantly, Gray writes that although most Tibetans identify as Buddhists and understand Tibet as a “geo-political category,”28 “they simply did not conceive of their tradition in nationalistic terms.”

Nation-based categorization of Buddhism causes difficulties because the categories may become understood as normative: there would seem to exist an authentically Tibetan Buddhism, in which case one also concludes that there exist heresies and divergences. In the convert communities I address in this thesis, the majority of the practitioners are not ethnically or culturally Tibetan. I do not intend to ask or answer whether these practitioners can “authentically” be Tibetan Buddhist,

29 David Gray, quoted in Payne, “Buddhism beyond the nation state.”
which is a normative question. Despite my reservations, in this thesis I will use the term “Tibetan Buddhism” as a non-normative etic category that usefully distinguishes this Buddhism (a limited religious tradition) from Zen, Vipassana, Chinese, or Japanese Buddhisms, for example. Alternative terms, such as “Vajrayāna” and “Tantrayāna,” provide no resolution, for using such a term for my thesis would exclude the greater geographical and cultural area and history of these traditions, which are not synonymous with Tibetan Buddhism but instead wider in scope. The three lineage holders, after all, represent lineages that originated in Tibet and continue among the Tibetan people.

The lineage holders sometimes use the terms “Vajrayāna” and “Tantrayāna”; they also speak about “Buddhism,” “Buddha-dharma,” and “the dharma.” A hard line between popular/emic use of the terms and academic/etic use cannot be easily drawn: rather, “the popular formulations stand then in dialectic relation to the scholarly categories,” both influenced by each other—by popular religion and academia. 30 I will simply note here that when I deploy “Tibetan Buddhism,” I speak of the etic category.

The term “America” likewise swamps us with drawbacks. The three lineage holders most often talk about Tibetan Buddhism in “the West,” as opposed to in a specific Western country. Because so many lineage holders teach equally in some combination of Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and America, sometimes lumping all these places into “the West” makes geographical sense. However, I endeavor to address Tibetan Buddhism in the United States. I try, as much as possible, to use

speeches, books, and articles meant for the lamas’ American audiences. Yet “America” is far from a normative, totalizing place, as Jeff Wilson has explored in his work on regionalism in American Buddhism.\textsuperscript{31} For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will often refer to “America” and “the United States” as a whole, signifying a set of communities that constitutes a fairly cohesive cultural location new to Tibetan Buddhism.\textsuperscript{32}

**Tibetan Buddhism Arrives in Diaspora and to America**

Before the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959 to establish an exile government in India, Tibet, its religion, and the United States rarely interacted. Westerners periodically reported back after travelling to Tibet, sometimes writing travel accounts, of which no one took much notice. A few wealthier curious westerners sought teachings from Tibetan Buddhist lamas before and soon after the exile, but not until the 1960s and ‘70s was Tibetan Buddhism brought to the United States, trickling in at first via academia’s interest in texts and individual teachers establishing exile centers. Gradually, general awareness of Tibetan Buddhism fed and was fed by popular culture and media surrounding the Free Tibet political cause. Finally, lay Tibetans began immigrating to America, individually and sparsely until 1990, when an immigration law formed clustered communities.

China’s occupation of Tibet and the exile of the Dalai Lama provided the impetus for the movement. Though other forms of Buddhism, especially Zen, were


\textsuperscript{32} Clearly, the speakers I address do not speak to all Americans or all of America. I clarify at the end of the next section of this introduction more particularly who forms the audiences to which these lineage holders speak.
already making a small splash in the alternative American spiritual scene by the
1950s, Tibetan Buddhism arrived later, for a simple reason: no one had reason or
desire to teach it.\footnote{Amy Lavine, “Tibetan Buddhism in America,” in \textit{The Faces of Buddhism in America}, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 100.} After the Chinese occupation of Tibet and subsequent fleeing of
the Dalai Lama in 1959, a stream of Tibetan refugees poured into northern India.
Especially because China aimed attacks on Tibetan religion, deeming it an obstacle to
modernity—subsequently razing monasteries, destroying texts, and targeting
monastics—the invasion drove many Buddhist monastics and prominent practitioners
into exile. These monastics and religious elite suddenly became more accessible to
foreigners interested in studying with them.\footnote{Powers, \textit{Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism}, 213.} Though few Tibetans immigrated at
first (prior to 1990, only five hundred Tibetans immigrated to the United States),\footnote{Julia Meredith Hess, \textit{Immigrant Ambassadors: Citizenship and Belonging in the Tibetan Diaspora} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 104.} the proportion of religious elite among them was quite high. The conditions of exile—
loss of homeland and threatening Chinese tactics towards Buddhism in Tibet—gave
(and continues to give) academics and lamas a sense of urgency about preserving
tradition and culture.\footnote{French Tibetan Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, for one, calls the situation a “question of life or
death of a living tradition.” In Dafna Yachin, \textit{Digital Dharma} (Philadelphia: Lunchbox
Communications, 2012), DVD.} Exile sets the stage, but it hardly explains why American
interest in Tibetan Buddhism amounted to any more than an obscure spiritual fad.
That this interest has grown remarkably since the early 1960s can be attributed to the
hard work of various actors.

Individual lineage holders and teachers caused a stir in the hippie days of
America, especially in the late 1960s and the 1970s. The Dalai Lama, so well-known
today, did not visit America until 1979. Instead, in 1955 Kalmyk lama Geshé
Ngawang Wangyal became the first teacher to spend time in America, settling in New Jersey, first serving newly resettled Kalmyk Americans, and subsequently teaching Westerners as well. Other early teachers arrived in 1960 under a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation with the goal to promote Tibetan studies. The grant funded the journey of nine teachers to the University of Washington, in Seattle, including the Sakya lama Deshung Rinpoche. Other influential teachers landed later, including Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche, the first Nyingma teacher in America, in 1968; Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, founder of Shambhala and Naropa University (the first Buddhist university in America), in 1970; and Dudjom Rinpoche, known for compiling a canon of Nyingma teachings, in 1973. At this juncture, central organization lacking, each lama independently went about establishing retreat centers, working with academics, teaching at universities, and attracting growing numbers of students.

Working sometimes in unison with these lamas, Western academics demonstrated interest in preserving Tibetan Buddhist texts threatened by Chinese occupation. Buddhist Studies departments developed in universities, beginning with the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1961. E. Gene Smith, an ex-Mormon from Utah and one of the very few American students of Tibetan language around 1959, moved in with Deshung Rinpoche and his family in Seattle. The Rockefeller Foundation recognized the Tibetan exile as an opportunity to spread the lamas’ knowledge to the West, but the lamas who fled had left most of their texts behind.37

37 The Rockefeller Foundation thus gave several institutions grants to invite elite Tibetans to cooperate in study, one of which was the University of Washington, which invited Deshun Rinpoche. According to the 1959 Rockefeller Foundation Report, “Among these refugees are lamas, members of the Tibetan ruling class, traders familiar with the economic life of the country, and others who can contribute in important ways to Western knowledge of their unusual country and its culture.” The Rockefeller Foundation Annual Report, 1959 (New York: Rockefeller Foundation, 2003),
Deshung Rinpoche and Smith began a search to compile these texts, and Smith, accompanied by letters of introduction from his teacher, travelled to India. Smith’s decades-long work to compile, digitize, and make accessible Tibetan Buddhist texts accounts for most of the access academics have today; as scholar Donald Lopez puts it, thanks to Gene Smith “the long mysterious Tibet archive became as if magically manifest in the stacks of American university libraries.” Smith paved the way for other Western academics, trained and encouraged not just by university studies but frequently by their own Tibetan Buddhist teachers as well, to study, translate, and write.

Widespread popular American recognition of Tibetan Buddhism almost entirely traces to the Dalai Lama. Without His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s arrival and subsequent global effort for the Tibetan cause, perhaps Tibetan Buddhism would have remained the interest of a few academics and curious practitioners. Writers often overemphasize the spread of Tibetan Buddhism through popular culture, leading to grand claims like Jeffrey Paine’s that “Tibetan Buddhism has evidently faced the either/or ultimatum that American academics know only too well: Publish [make movies, etc.] or perish.” Many introductions to Tibetan Buddhism (often restricted to a brief chapter in books on Buddhism in America or American Buddhism) stress the proliferation of movies like Kundun (1997), which traces the Dalai Lama’s childhood, and Seven Years in Tibet (1997), featuring Brad Pitt as a

38 Yachin, Digital Dharma.
39 Lopez, “Foreigner at the Lama’s Feet,” 265.
40 Jeffrey Paine, Re-enchantment: Tibetan Buddhism Comes to the West (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 182.
mountaineer who becomes friends with the Dalai Lama. These introductions note too the popularity of Free Tibet concerts and the press given to Hollywood students of Tibetan Buddhism.\(^{41}\)

The popular appropriation and appeal of Tibetan Buddhism in America reflects general enthusiasm for Eastern spirituality lurking about at least since the Romantics hoped to find an antidote for the materialistic and rational Enlightenment back in the early nineteenth century.\(^{42}\) Throughout various movements—from Romanticism to the Beats in the 1950s and on to contemporary New Age spirituality and the rise of yoga—visions of the Eastern “other” have entranced American popular culture. In this vein we encounter the pre- and post-diaspora Western obsession with Tibet as Shangri-La (a fictional place coined in the 1930s by James Hilton; later conflated with Shambhala, a Tibetan Buddhist mythical kingdom). Tibet-as-Shangri-La fascinated the scholar as a “fantasy which saw…Tibetan Buddhist culture itself as an entity existing outside of time, set in its own eternal classical age in a lofty Himalayan keep.”\(^{43}\) This interest in the East and more particularly with Shangri-La laid the groundwork for the success of the political cause of Tibet in attracting supporters in America, as well as for the popularity of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama has introduced many Americans—converts, sympathizers, and the public—to the religion, no doubt opening the way for other teachers to attract greater numbers of students.

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\(^{41}\) Academics include Jeffrey Paine, Donald Lopez, and Richard Seager, who have written about the popularization of Tibetan Buddhism.


\(^{43}\) Lopez, “Foreigner at the Lama’s Feet,” 252.
The influence of lay Tibetans on Tibetan Buddhism’s spread to America has been sorely underrepresented. Almost no one has written about the influence of immigration on either Tibetan Buddhism’s coming to America or the development of convert communities. Julia Hess writes about citizenship and the Tibetan diaspora, and while she does not focus on how Tibetan immigration may influence the spread of Tibetan Buddhism, she does propose that Tibetans, in forming their identity, tie nation to culture and culture to religious freedom. Thus, Tibetan immigrants in the United States create culture in four main ways, including “as something to be protected, preserved, and maintained,” and “as universally meaningful and helpful in a modern global context.” Hess, therefore, proposes that lay exiled Tibetans skillfully tie their Tibetan-ness ever more closely to their religion in order to garner more support for their lost nation. Tibetans in exile, then, contribute to the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism by portraying it as an important thing to be preserved. Lay Tibetans increasingly became more visible through movements for a free Tibet, and after the 1990 Immigration Act, the number of immigrants significantly increased. For the first time, entire groups of Tibetans arrived and settled in Tibetan United States Resettlement Project (TUSRP) resettlement sites throughout the United States, clustered primarily in the Northeast, Great Lakes, and Western mountain regions. In some cases, retreat centers serving Western students sprung up in conjunction with these clusters; in Colorado, for instance, where Naropa University, the main

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45 Ibid., 63.
46 The 1990 act provided a thousand visas for Tibetans residing in Nepal or India to come to America. The Tibetan United States Resettlement Project partly resulted from lobbying efforts of the Tibetan government-in-exile. The Act was passed in 1989 to support the establishment of twenty-one clusters of immigrants; in 1990, immigration commenced through the Act.
Shambhala center, and numerous retreat centers flourish, there exists a high concentration of Tibetan residents.\(^{47}\)

Presently, Tibetan Buddhist convert communities are organized into groups centered around retreat centers and networks that rely primarily on the lineage holder for cohesion. Seager describes the American Tibetan Buddhist community as “more a patchwork of small sub-communities often quite separate from each other, but all maintaining living links through their teachers to the broader Tibetan community in exile.”\(^{48}\) Other academics note this sense of decentralized order; Robert Thurman argues that different schools and centers competed for followers at first, which gave rise to sectarianism—according to him, competitive sectarianism pre-diaspora sometimes manifested in political and economic realms, but rarely in the religious sense.\(^{49}\) Many well-known teachers establish centers in several Western countries, creating global networks of sanghas, Tibetan Buddhist communities, which transcend an American label. The lineage holder’s position is central to these global and American communities.

I have employed the term “convert Tibetan Buddhism in America” in the last few paragraphs. My use of this mouthful endeavors to express more exactly who comprises the audiences of the three speakers in the context of this thesis. Many academics have struggled to classify Buddhism in America, to account for differences

\(^{47}\) To my knowledge, there has not been research done regarding correlation between immigrant communities and Western practicing communities, but in my experience, there seems to exist one. Clusters of both appear in the same areas of the United States, and although interactions between these groups are normally slight, I imagine they both benefit from sharing a geographical area, sometimes because of third party actors like universities.


between groups in a useful, non-normative, and non-racist manner. Unfortunately, such classification is always inadequate. Earlier scholars, including Paul Numrich, divided Buddhists in America into “two Buddhisms”: “Asian immigrant” and “non-Asian.”

This hardly allows for any diversity: how does one account for a convert of Asian descent or a second-generation Asian American Buddhist, for example? Jan Nattier’s three Buddhisms system provides us with a more nuanced approach. She outlines “import” or “elite” Buddhism, “baggage” or “ethnic” Buddhism, and “export” or “evangelical” Buddhism. She means the terms to signify the ways in which Buddhism traveled to America. “Elite Buddhism” is a “demand-driven” movement that requires time and money, resulting in a group that is primarily middle- and upper-class. “Ethnic Buddhism” is brought to America by immigrants who did not travel for religious reasons and who tend to desire to maintain cultural traditions in a new place.

Nattier’s system has warranted some critiques. Wakoh Shannon Hickey argues that the term “import” Buddhism “obscures the agency of Asian missionaries who had their own agendas.” Joseph Cheah exposes the racialized nature of the word “baggage” in its negative connotation and impression that immigrant Buddhists are not quite as integrally or intentionally Buddhist as converts.

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52 Ibid., 189-190. “Evangelical Buddhism” does not concern us here, as such missionary activity is restricted almost exclusively to the Japanese organization Sōka Gakkai (SGI); no Tibetan Buddhist groups fall into the category of “Evangelical Buddhism.”
54 Cheah, Race and Religion in American Buddhism, 16.
Despite these reservations over Nattier’s classifications, she sheds light on the class-based nature of much of current convert Buddhism. The Tibetan Buddhist communities in America to whom my teachers speak are heavily middle- and upper-class, highly educated, and primarily white. For the remainder of this project, the audiences of whom I speak will be these convert audiences. When I talk about the American cultural environment—to which the teachers appeal—I mean the cultural environment of these specific convert Buddhists. While they are not a monolithic group, these convert Tibetan Buddhists often come from similar backgrounds. I do not wish to ignore that the audiences of the speakers can be called “elite” in the sense specified above: their America is not everyone’s America.

The Lineage Holders: Biographies

I have chosen three lineage holders as my speakers. I began by selecting the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, the most well-known Tibetan Buddhist and so very influential on the perceptions of both students and non-students of Tibetan Buddhism in the United States. In order to as faithfully as possible render the variety and complexity of Tibetan Buddhist teachers’ discourse—to examine not just the differences between speakers’ discourses but also how certain orders have changed in America—I chose two Nyingma-Kagyü teachers who, while they share similar lineages, come from distinctive backgrounds. Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche, as a well-known Tibetan teacher in the circle of convert Tibetan Buddhists in America, as an often-conservative speaker, and as a student trained both in the monastic system and in British schools, serves as a speaker whose discourse frequently disagrees with the
Dalai Lama’s. And Lama Tsultrim Allione, the teacher I know best and who sparked my interest in this topic in the first place, is an American woman who has quietly worked her way to eminence in the practicing community. My inclusion of Lama Tsultrim generates questions about the authority of the foreign-born lineage holder in a religion tied closely to a particular ethnicity. Lama Tsultrim is one of a small number of American-born teachers who distinguished Tibetan teachers respect and endorse. Many speakers could have provided me with interesting material, but these three together illustrate well the variety of trends and emphases currently emerging in convert Tibetan Buddhism in America, including the rise of lay practitioners (laicization), feminism, and second-generation questions regarding American-born teachers and the continuation of the tulku system.

These three speakers provide me with substantial discourses from the twenty-first century. I have examined primarily speeches, teachings, books, articles, and interviews directed towards American audiences. However, differentiating an exclusively American audience from a Western one sometimes proves challenging, particularly in the case of the Dalai Lama; consequently, some discourses I cite, such as the Dalai Lama’s books, instead assume a broader Western audience. My focus has been the three speakers’ teachings from the late 1990s and the twenty-first century, as I aim to examine their most recent imaginings of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and its resources.

*His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso*

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, public speaker extraordinaire, hardly requires introduction. Born in 1935 in northeastern Tibet, he was recognized as the
reincarnation of the Dalai Lama two years later. The Dalai Lama is acknowledged to be the manifestation of Avalokiteśvara or (in Tibetan) Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion; until recently, he also acted as the temporal and political head of Tibet. Rigorously trained as a Géluk monastic, he holds a Geshé Lharampa degree, the highest possible. In 1950, he assumed full political power; in 1959, after the Chinese occupation of Tibet, he escaped to exile. The Dalai Lama established his exile government in Dharamsala, where he resides today. In 2011, His Holiness initiated democratizing reforms that involve his own stepping down from political power; he remains the spiritual head of the Tibetan people. The Dalai Lama has received many awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. He travels globally, delivering public speeches as a worldwide figurehead for nonviolence, the intersection of religion and science, and compassion. He also gives Tibetan Buddhist teachings and empowerments to practicing audiences, in the West since 1973 and in the United States since 1979. He has authored dozens of books in English and speaks primarily in English to his Western audiences. Despite his numerous audiences and commitments, the Dalai Lama remains devoted first and foremost to Tibetans in exile and in Tibet and the cause for a free(er) Tibet. In recent years, the Dalai Lama has expressed uncertainty about whether or not he will reincarnate again; the decision, he says, rests on the needs of the Tibetan people at that time.

The Dalai Lama states, “I am a native of the land of snows. All the six million Tibetans from the land of snows carry the common responsibility of the Tibetan cause. As for me, I am also one Tibetan from the Amdo region of Tibet, so until my death I have the responsibility of the Tibetan cause.” “His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s Remarks on Retirement—March 19th, 2011,” translated from Tibetan, accessed April 3, 2014, http://www.dalailama.com/messages/retirement/retirement-remarks.
Her Eminence Mindrolling Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche

Born in 1968, Her Eminence Mindrolling Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche grew up in India, where she received both a traditional monastic education and a British one. Khandro Rinpoche was born the eldest daughter of the eleventh throne holder of the Mindrolling lineage, one of the six main Nyingma lineages. Mindrolling includes female masters in its hereditary lineage (one of few to do so). The Sixteenth Karmapa recognized her as the reincarnation of the consort of the Fifteenth Karmapa, a Kagyü female master. She thus holds high positions in both Nyingma (as head of Mindrolling) and Kagyü lineages. In 1987, Rinpoche began teaching in North America and Europe in addition to Asia. Her North American seat of Mindrolling International—and her most significant seat in the West—she established in 2003 in the mountains of Stanley, Virginia. She previously instituted, in 1993, a retreat center in Mussoorie, India that serves as a residence for nuns and lay practitioners. Khandro Rinpoche also created and leads a foundation (Dharmashri Foundation) committed to preservation of Nyingma—especially Mindrolling—texts and teachings, which is located at Lotus Garden, the retreat center in Virginia. She wrote a book, This Precious Life: Tibetan Buddhist Teachings on the Path to Enlightenment (2005). Khandro Rinpoche travels extensively to fulfill her roles as worldwide teacher and lineage holder.

Lama Tsultrim Allione

Lama Tsultrim Allione (born Joan Ewing) grew up in New England. In 1967, at age nineteen, she travelled to Nepal and India with her college friend, marking her journey into Tibetan Buddhism, as she met Tibetan refugees and entered the
burgeoning Tibetan Buddhist scene. In 1969 she studied with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, one of the most influential early teachers to come to Europe and America. Soon after, she met the Sixteenth Karmapa (head of the Kagyü order) in Kathmandu, and, inspired by an instruction in one of her practices, she decided to follow her teacher (the Karmapa) by becoming a nun. Thus, with virtually no knowledge about the Tibetan language or basic Tibetan Buddhist principles, at age twenty-two, Lama Tsultrim became the first American ordained by the Karmapa. As a nun, she lived and studied in Nepal and India. She returned her monastic vows in 1973, soon afterwards marrying and moving back to the United States. As she became a wife and mother, she continued to study and began teaching for Trungpa Rinpoche’s Naropa Institute (now Naropa University) and organization (now Shambhala). She earned a Master’s degree in Buddhist studies/women’s studies, again travelling in Nepal and India for her Master’s thesis. Back in the United States, in 1993, Lama Tsultrim and her third husband bought land for a retreat center in southwest Colorado. Tara Mandala, encompassing seven hundred acres, grew from a camping community to a full-fledged temple and retreat center. In 2007, on pilgrimage in Tibet, she was recognized as an emanation of Machig Labdrön, an eleventh century Tibetan yoginī. Sang-ngag Rinpoche established Tara Mandala as the Western seat of the Dzinpa Rangdröl lineage. Lama Tsultrim has written two books, *Women of Wisdom* (2000)

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56 In Tibetan Buddhism, a monk or nun “returns” their monastic vows if they wish to leave the monastic system. They have taken vows presumed to be for life, and thus will cause serious negative karma if they break the vows. In order to avoid such ramifications, they must give back their vows formally to another monastic (normally their teacher) who will continue to hold pure vows.

57 Lama Tsultrim’s teachers have included the Sixteenth Karmapa, the Seventeenth Karmapa, Deshung Rinpoche, Chogyam Trüngpa Rinpoche, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, Tsokyi Rinpoche, and Tulku Sang-Ngag Rinpoche.

58 The Dzinpa Rangdröl is a terma lineage revealed by Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje. Tulku Sang-ngag Rinpoche transmitted the cycle of terma teachings fully at Tara Mandala beginning in 2008.
and *Feeding Your Demons* (2008), and Tara Mandala launched a publishing company, Machig Publications, in 2013. Lama Tsultrim teaches retreats at Tara Mandala during the summer and spends much of the year touring Europe and America.

**Overview of Chapters**

I organize the chapters of this thesis thematically; they are arranged according to three sets of resources that are useful to the three teachers in presenting Tibetan Buddhism to their audiences. Chapter one addresses texts; it examines how the speakers interpret texts in various ways, and how these interpretive strategies contribute to the exceptionalism claimed of Tibetan Buddhism. The teachers both continue endemic Tibetan historical interpretive strategies and depart from these; they combine traditional stories and language with Western discourses. Further, texts serve as vehicles by which lineage holders invest their personal experiences and roles with authority. The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim strategically interpret texts, commonly constructing Tibetan Buddhism as exceptional in both its compatibility with and as a challenge to this new American environment, simultaneously reinforcing the authority of the texts, themselves, and the tradition that supposedly transcends textual study.

Chapter two turns to places as resources. Though not physically graspable in the same way as texts, place—as an empty signifier, a space given meaning, or a fantasy—provides a poignant resource for lineage holders to create an air of singularity that makes Tibetan Buddhism especially Tibetan or especially American.
(or both, or neither). Perhaps place has come to matter so much only since Tibetan Buddhism has been displaced (from Tibet) and re-placed (into America). The emphasis that these lineage holders bestow (or resist bestowing) onto places bears comparison to the Western academic obsession with Tibet as Shangri-La. In this chapter, I look at how the teachers talk about Tibet, America, East, West, Westernization, and the world. The three teachers employ strategies of both placement and displacement—placing Tibetan Buddhism in America and displacing it so that it appears to transcend place—both of these strategies that create the perception of continuity. Further, whether they relieve or stress boundaries between places, these mappings recognize the teacher as the one who must authentically carry Tibetan Buddhist teachings across space.

In chapter three, I look at how the speakers construct the past of Tibetan Buddhism. Crucial to Tibetan Buddhist tradition are systems of lineage, of continuity on cosmic and human scales. As Tibetan Buddhism arrives and settles in a new environment, questions of authenticity of the transition arise. Lineage holders’ attempts to create a usable past reveal a tension between privileging individual relationships and experience and the need to establish the appearance of a continuous, historical tradition. The teachers posit pure origins for the Tibetan Buddhist tradition; they establish the relationship between lineage and history; and they look towards the future for a repetition of the past. For the lineage holders, the past is ultimately useful: the past lends itself as a tool for the Tibetan Buddhist path.

In conclusion, I will reevaluate how these three themes can inform an understanding of Tibetan Buddhism in America as a religious tradition—a tradition
created by religious actors doing the difficult, messy work of figuring out what resources to use and in what ways in order to ensure the perceived continuity of Tibetan Buddhism in a new environment and with a new convert audience. In light of more nuanced explorations of how the three lineage holders contend texts, places, and pasts, we can both chart developments in convert communities and inform an understanding of how religious claims of exceptionalism function. I will reconsider how the three lineage holders claim authority for themselves, the resources—texts, places, and pasts—and the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. What does this discourse mean for the future of Tibetan Buddhist convert communities? What can academics learn from a close reading of these lineage holders’ discourses?
Lama Thubten Yeshe was one of the first Tibetan Buddhist teachers to instruct Westerners back in the 1970s. He learned just enough English to communicate to his American students in their own language. His English was sufficient enough to speak in odd metaphors, such as, “Dharma is like American bed—everybody can join in” and “change misery into blissful chocolate.” The earliest Tibetan Buddhist lineage holders to teach extensively in America (particularly Lama Yeshe and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, beginning in the 1960s) shared a fondness for this contemporary, joking, casual English. The three speakers whom I study continue (more or less) this attentiveness to the ways in which they communicate with their students. All three would likely share Lama Yeshe’s intention: “Each time I talk to people I have to check what background they’re coming from…Then I try to talk according to their language.” Of course, translation is unavoidable—it takes place in every verbal communication—but here Lama Yeshe accentuates its importance. Mahāyāna predecessors of Vajrayāna valued the ability of enlightened teachers to calculate

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59 Thubten Yeshe, quoted in Paine, Re-enchantment, 55.
60 Ibid., 62.
exactly what, when, and how to speak to various audiences at particular times. The emphasis placed upon texts, speaking, and how to read and interpret such written and spoken words is of ultimate importance for these speakers, who hold textual study to be prerequisite for attaining enlightenment.

A prevalent trend in historical Mahāyāna Buddhism is the view that teachers—specifically, enlightened beings—are uniquely expert at adapting their speech to particular audiences. This idea evolved from the Mahāyāna tradition’s doctrine of skillful means—or upāya—which encompasses the understanding that the Buddha, knowing that beings have varying capacities for comprehending the dharma, taught differently (in substance as well as in style) to different people. Teachers, then, follow the Buddha’s example in their skillful communications. Historically, when other Buddhist traditions questioned Vajrayāna’s acceptance of such a huge number of texts written long after the Buddha’s time, Tibetans explained the extensive canon through language of skillful means. Given that practices are geared towards specific audiences—they are understood to be expedient, not ultimately true—scholars of Vajrayāna held that their texts offered higher levels of teachings meant for advanced audiences. Thus, Vajrayāna Buddhists emphasize the doctrine of

61 “Skill in means” is a central theme in many Mahāyāna sutras, and tantric texts—expanding on this—emphasize its importance. Tantric Buddhism is sometimes referred to as the “Method Vehicle” because of the vast array of the techniques it offers for the path to enlightenment. Powers, Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, 250-252.

62 Here, I am noting that Tibetan Buddhist speakers in America maintain that linguistic measures are necessary on the path to enlightenment. While this lines up with historical doctrine, in practice this emphasis is a more recent development, at least when it is directed to a lay audience as it is in America. Laypeople in Tibetan Buddhism pre-diaspora generally did not strive for enlightenment; instead, their practice was and is oriented towards more tangible ends—accruing merit, a better rebirth. Nevertheless, Vajrayāna Buddhism, more than any other form, doctrinally holds that anyone can become enlightened in this lifetime and claims to offer the quickest path to enlightenment. That said, this is all generalization, and there is very little written about Tibetan lay practice.
Because reading these texts requires guidance, Vajrayāna forms of Buddhism have traditionally emphasized the role of the teacher in textual interpretation. Luis Gomez explains a typical tantric Buddhist view of the role texts play in experiencing ultimate reality: “Although this experience lies beyond all linguistic procedures or operations, beyond all conceptualization, it is accessible only through some form of linguistic index. Thus, linguistic convention, while merely conventional and relative, is necessary for liberation.” The underlying view for Tibetan Buddhist scholars and teachers is that, although the experience of final liberation is ineffable, the path to this experience must be undertaken through linguistic means.

Historically, and even now, the question remains: exactly which linguistic means does Tibetan Buddhism prefer? In the Western, monotheistic sense of “canon” as a fixed, bounded collection of texts, Tibetan Buddhism lacks a universal one. Yet the idea of a canon is not absent in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, and all four orders compiled their own canons, which, while not equivalent, include generally the same sections and many of the same texts. Both the Christian canon (the Bible) and the Tibetan Buddhist canon are single compilations of texts taken to be authentic, but the Tibetan Buddhist canon is much longer, not standardized (but rather locally authoritative), and open, allowing for the continuous production of authoritative texts.

Tantric texts, though their exact origins are obscure, appear around the seventh century. Tibetans nevertheless claim tantric teachings originated from the Buddha himself or from manifestations of the Buddha. Not all tantric texts were accepted by scholar monks at the time when monasteries first compiled a canon; authenticity of a text required attested Sanskrit or Indian origins (though an important exception lies in the Nyingma school’s terma tradition). Tadeusz Skorupski, “The Canonical Tantras of the New Schools,” in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezon and Roger R. Jackson (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 95-103.

texts. In the fourteenth century, Gélukpa monks at Narthang monastery undertook the first attempt to compile a canon. Many scholars labored over a period of five hundred years to assemble the Kagyur (bKa’gyur; words of the Buddha) and the Tengyur (bsTan’gyur; Indian treatises and commentaries). Every Tibetan Buddhist canon consists of these two sections, both enormous by Christian standards: the Kagyur usually includes over one thousand texts, and the Tengyur encompasses over four thousand. Simply reading the texts is considered far from sufficient for attaining enlightenment—or even for correctly understanding the texts. Instead, oral teachings are given to truly establish understanding, oral instructions that are authoritative because of the lineage of teachers who have passed down these instructions. The student relies on their teacher to transmit the meaning, a teacher who emulates the Buddha and their own teachers through their rhetoric. Richard Nance writes that a Buddhist monastic, theoretically, “speaks in a manner that is

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65 Before any canon was compiled, Tibetans began to classify their extensive Buddhist literature. The predecessors to the Kagyur, catalogues of this literature, sought to descriptively order texts. Over time, the listing became more prescriptive, but the canon’s function remained one of classification more than circumscription. The contradictory nature of an open canon—and the inadequacy of the term “canon” in Buddhist studies—may be explained by the historical fact that “the formation of the Tibetan canon, or at the very least its shape, can be traced back to the work of cataloguers grappling with the task of imposing some kind of order on the sheer mass of Buddhist literature available to them.” The goal was less standardization than classification. Paul Harrison, “A Brief History of the Tibetan bKa’gyur,” in Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre, ed. José Ignacio Cabezon and Robert R. Jackson (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications), 70-74.


67 In addition, the entire concept of every Tibetan Buddhist trying to read and understand advanced texts may be a recent one. Historically, lay Tibetans, as well as many monastics, were far more likely to worship the books than to read them. Texts of the Kagyur are recited on special occasions and used in rituals. This is not, however, to say that the Kagyur is never read in the sense in which we understand. Harrison, “A Brief History of the Tibetan bKa’gyur,” 86. Yet the extent of literacy and reading of texts in historical Tibet is debated by scholars. Dreyfus argues that most lay Tibetans “recite religious texts every day and often memorize the briefer ones,” though the memorization relies on sound. Learning about the texts and debating them were activities reserved to monks. George B. J. Dreyfus, The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 87.

68 Lopez, “Foreigner at the Lama’s Feet,” 279.
timely, correct, and to the point; he knows when (and to whom) to speak, what to say, and how to say it. His discourse is, moreover, true, conciliatory, and pleasing.”

Here, Nance addresses writers of Indian commentaries, but this ideal holds true for Tibetan Buddhist teachers, who historically have invested energy into speaking skillfully. Through these skillful means, the teacher supposedly guides the student through the text. It is the relationship between the texts, the teacher, and the student that is at the center of Tibetan Buddhist textual interpretation.

In the relationship between the teacher, text, and student outlined above, the three speakers finally interpret texts within the main paradox of Tibetan Buddhist views on scriptural authority: the tension between the tendency to portray scripture as complete on its own for individuals (historically limited to monks and teachers) to use and the teachers’ emphasis on the tradition’s authority to interpret and validate scripture for the individual. The three teachers work within this tension, but in order to establish their own authoritative positions, they often stress the necessity of a teacher to study texts. The teacher both provides an example of following the texts’ teachings and limits misinterpretations. In this case, Craig Martin’s definition of authority rings true: “Authority is an effect produced by the relationship between a

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70 As noted previously, this relationship historically was reserved for the education of monks. Dreyfus argues that traditional Tibetan monastic education “depends heavily on a close and intensely personal link between students and teachers. In this respect, it is more akin to an apprenticeship than to modern schooling.” The Sound of Two Hands Clapping, 60.

text, its interpreters, and various audiences.” The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim construct a Tibetan Buddhism that is exceptional in both its compatibility with and challenge to the new American student and episteme, and in doing so, they reinforce the texts’ authority, their own authority as speakers, and the tradition’s authority that transcends textual study. Before examining how these teachers construct Tibetan Buddhism in America by interpreting texts, I turn to the academic study of Tibetan Buddhist texts in the West so far. There is a serious gap in much of the work done until now, in that academics have treated Tibetan texts as stable resources across cultures: they have ignored the influence of the audience, the flexibility of the interpretive world of the text.

The Problem: Western Academic Study of Tibetan Buddhist Texts

Buddhologists, including Tibetologists, were initially interested in texts. In this respect, the study of Buddhism in the West fell into line with the Western study of religion, a discipline influenced by canon-centric Judeo-Christian religions and a Protestant emphasis on Biblical authority. The discipline has long privileged written textual authority over other forms, such as oral, ritual, and institutional. Even now, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, regarded as the discipline’s standard reference work, breaks down its article on authority into three types of religions. The reader learns about “primitive” religions, which rely on oral authority and tradition; “archaic” religions, which have written texts but ultimately ascribe authority to a king; and “founded” religion, in which authority is handed down from a founder in written

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Such distinctions rely on a hierarchy that regards textual authority as the most authentic and advanced and, as such, the ultimate authority for a religious tradition. Early Buddhologists, sharing this assumption, focused their studies on the translation and interpretation of written texts. As Tibetologists responded to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, they deemed texts to be in great danger of being forever lost or destroyed. Feeling this sense of urgency, Western academics and graduate students traveled to India to talk to the last of the generation of Tibetan scholars trained in Tibet in order to compile written texts and “authentic” oral interpretations. Donald Lopez recalls his time as a graduate student in the late 1970s working with a certain Tibetan text: “the method was translation. Translation not of the words, which presumably could have been accomplished without leaving the comforts of America, but translation of the meaning, enhanced and supplemented with the lama’s oral commentary.” In addition to the urgency over the recovery of physical texts, academics sought to salvage the knowledge about these texts held by the learned masters of the old Tibet; this urgency stemmed from a fear that, with exile and diaspora, textual knowledge would become tainted, less authentically Tibetan, and that the religious tradition—a stand in for all of Tibetan culture—would be lost to history.

The study of Tibetan Buddhism by Western academics thus has often operated under the assumption that texts constitute the most authentic source of knowledge. Even pre-diaspora, academics looked to Tibet as a container of Buddhist texts, a library untouched by the outside world. As Lopez explains, this library included the

74 Lopez, “Foreigner at the Lama’s Feet,” 270.
living, oral texts provided by rigorously trained monastics residing in Tibetan monasteries. Academics are correct to conclude that textual tradition is living, and texts will continue to change in diaspora, for translation of texts is an “open-ended process” that happens any time a speaker opens their mouth. 75 Yet missing from academic work is an attunement to how audiences may contribute to the flexible interpretation of texts. As Tibetan Buddhism encounters different places throughout diaspora, textual interpretation is changing, because speakers must make these texts accessible and relevant to new audiences. It is not just that Tibetan Buddhism is translated to a new audience; rather, speakers like the teachers I examine formulate different Tibetan Buddhasms in conversation with these (here, American) audiences.

**Exceptionality**

The three teachers, when speaking about texts, highlight the variety of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and texts. In doing so, they establish for their audiences the singularity of their tradition as a religion that both transcends and peacefully co-exists with other (specifically Western, monotheistic religions). For example, while the Dalai Lama believes the Buddhist path to be the only path to enlightenment, he generally instructs his Western audiences to not convert, urging them instead to remain within their own cultural traditions. 76 Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama paints a picture of Tibetan Buddhism as exceptional in its multiplicity of individualized paths—a system that fits well into American discourse surrounding individualism,

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76 Perhaps this is an interpretation of the sixth root downfall of the fourteen tantric vows one takes when receiving a tantric initiation. The sixth root downfall instructs practitioners not to denigrate the teachings of other systems. Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 317.
diversity, and democracy. The vast and open canon of Tibetan Buddhism becomes, for the Dalai Lama’s audience, a paradigmatic celebration of diversity. In his *Essence of the Heart Sutra*, the Dalai Lama explains religious diversity to his readers:

Such diversity can be found not only among different religions but also within religions as well... in Buddha’s more philosophical teachings, we find this diversity to be most pronounced; in some cases, the teachings seem even to contradict each other! This points, I think, to one of the most important truths about spiritual teachings: spiritual teachings must be appropriate to the individual being taught... Antibiotics, for instance, are immensely powerful; they are immensely valuable in treating a wide variety of diseases—but they are useless in treating a broken leg.77

Drawing on a common historical Buddhist metaphor—that of the Buddha as a doctor who scientifically determines a cure for suffering—the Dalai Lama uses this language to place a Buddhist teaching into Western, Christian, and secular paradigms. Buddhism instills not mere religious tolerance but religious appreciation, understanding, and kindness; the tradition offers to the West a way in which to move beyond tolerance. The Dalai Lama, while explicitly endorsing the validity of all religions, implicitly makes his case for Buddhism as the most skillful spiritual path, tailored to the individual and profoundly complex. He expands the traditional explanation for Vajrayāna as the most skillful path to include all of Buddhism.78 For the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism is exceptional because of its limitless teachings that relate directly to the individual—a concept entirely naturalized and valued in the West.

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78 This argument for Vajrayāna’s skillfulness is that the Buddha’s teachings sometimes contradict (or seem to) each other because religious teachings are not inherently true but rather expedient for certain circumstances.
Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche also points out the variety of texts and teachings as evidence of Tibetan Buddhism’s exceptionality. What Tibetan Buddhism offers, she says, is “the most complicated philosophy on earth” that encourages the use of a mind-boggling display of rituals, mantras, deities, and texts, all because the simple task at hand—getting rid of cherishing oneself—is extraordinarily difficult. Like the Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche portrays Tibetan Buddhism to her audience as an exceptionally complex path, but unlike the Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche does not hesitate in explicitly maintaining that Tibetan Buddhism is the only method for achieving the state of liberation.

Khandro Rinpoche asserts that the (sometimes contradictory) variations in texts result from the skillful means of great masters; in her teaching on “Nagarjuna’s Letter to a Friend,” given at the University of California, Berkeley in 2008, she says, “some texts are exceptionally poetic; some texts are not—they are very dry. Each of them have their own benefits…there is a reason they are as they are.” Holding that there is a reason for each text exactly as it is highlights how Tibetan texts could potentially benefit American students. Khandro Rinpoche often reaffirms that Tibetan texts are demanding, and that herein lies their ability to be effective; furthermore, they are useful because they are authentically handed down from masters. Her students are well acquainted with the fact that Khandro Rinpoche does not romanticize being Buddhist; she is tough and requires students to fully commit to the Buddhist path. She believes, “traditional methods are the best methods. People

79 Khandro Rinpoche, quoted in Michaela Haas, Dakini Power: Twelve Extraordinary Women Shaping the Transmission of Tibetan Buddhism in the West (Boston: Snow Lion Publications, 2013), 19.
would argue with that. And I’m not saying that everything done in olden times has to be done again in the modern world. But a lot of wisdom has been passed down by great enlightened masters, and we can generate great benefits from that.”

The Tibetan Buddhist traditional path is exceptional for Khandro Rinpoche because of the pure, authentic lineage it represents, a lineage held by enlightened masters up to the present. As ones who have encountered the Buddha’s teachings, her students should feel obligated to take on this demanding lineage themselves. Khandro Rinpoche emphasizes the texts’ Tibetan origin to a far greater extent than the Dalai Lama. Not only are the texts exceptional in their diversity and scope; they are also exceptional because great Tibetan masters wrote them and handed them down authentically.

Tibetan texts have much to offer to (and demand much of) her American students. Khandro Rinpoche’s focus on the texts’ lineage serves to legitimate both the texts’ authenticity and the authority of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Lama Tsultrim generally explains the complexity of Vajrayāna teachings and texts similarly to the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche. The assortment is necessary, she teaches to her students at her retreat center: “Adzom Rinpoche said once—someone said, ‘why does it have to be so complicated?’…he said, ‘well, it’s like building an airplane…once you get everything into place, you can fly.’”

Invoking a master practitioner, Lama Tsultrim claims a lineage that the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche inherit by birth: that of Tibetan Buddhist masters. Lineages become all the more important as non-Tibetans inherit them, for a teacher like Lama

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81 Khandro Rinpoche, “Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche teaches on Nagarjuna text 1.”
Tsultrim must show her audiences that she has authoritative knowledge about the
tradition despite the fact that she did not receive a monastic education from birth, nor
did she grow up studying Tibetan texts (or speaking Tibetan). She ties her
explanations of texts back to her lineage more often than the other two speakers. For
example, in her teaching on the Riwo Sang Chöd (a practice text), she turns to the
actual substance of the text only after thoroughly explaining its origin: the treasure-
discoverer, how he discovered it, who his teachers were, and how she is related to this
lineage. As an American teacher, she is invested in proving the authenticity of her
own teachings on the texts of Tibetan Buddhism.

In order to further prove her knowledge of the tradition, Lama Tsultrim shows
her command of the Tibetan language. Explaining texts, she goes into great detail
(again, to an extent that the other two speakers do not) about specific words’
meanings and multiple translations, demonstrating both her fluency in Tibetan and the
teachings’ profound depth. For example, Lama Tsultrim, in a teaching on a text-
based practice, considers the word tiklé (thig le). Tiklé encompasses many meanings,
says Lama Tsultrim, and ultimately should not be translated; it may be understood to
mean, variously, “the quintessence of everything,” “seminal nuclei,” “the sperm and
the ovum, or the egg,” “vibrant quintessence of the enlightened mind,” or “the

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83 Lama Tsultrim’s extra burden in proving her authority is a complicated matter. All three Tibetan
Buddhist teachers’ authority rests on both their training (and demonstrated knowledge) and their birth
(as reincarnated masters, emanations, or descendants of a lineage holder). Lama Tsultrim was not
trained from infancy as the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche were; she is American, not Tibetan.
While she is recognized as an emanation by such Tibetan masters as the Karmapa and has received
training since her time as a nun, much of her authority she claims from her relationships with Tibetan
lamas, such as Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, and Tulku Sang-ngag
Rinpoche. As Western teachers and recognized emanations and reincarnations are still a new
development, the system has yet to become an institution authorizing in itself.

84 Tsultrim Allione, “March 3 Riwo Sang Chod teachings with Lama Tsultrim Allione,” YouTube
video, 2:00:48, posted March 7, 2013, http://taramandala.org/teaching/lama-tsultrim-will-teachings-on-
generators of bliss” (in the context of sexuality). Part of the uniqueness Lama Tsultrim finds in Tibetan Buddhism comes from its very Tibetan origin, highlighted by the depth of the meanings of the texts’ terms. The Tibetan language, at least in the context of Buddhist texts, is profound in itself; “tiklé,” Lama Tsultrim warns, “has so many levels of meaning that if you translate it as one thing, you miss all the other meanings. So the best thing is to learn the word ‘tiklé’ and then to know all its different meanings.”

Texts become important in their very foreignness, in a different sense here than for Khandro Rinpoche: Lama Tsultrim stresses the profundity of the Tibetan language itself, while Khandro Rinpoche emphasizes the Tibetan origin only in order to cast light on the authentic lineage. Yet both Lama Tsultrim and Khandro Rinpoche accentuate the Tibetan origin of their texts, while the Dalai Lama stops at describing as exceptional the diversity of the teachings. The Dalai Lama, as an extremely outspoken critic of sectarianism—both within and without Tibetan Buddhism—wishes to avoid the explicit exceptionalizing of Tibetan Buddhism over other Buddhisms and other religions. What the speakers all communicate to their audiences is that Tibetan Buddhist texts contain exceptionally complex and useful philosophical truths. Despite their differences, these teachers claim authority for both themselves—especially in Lama Tsultrim’s case—and their tradition as they introduce textual study, often by translating historical doctrine into American discourses.

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85 Tsultrim Allione, “March 3 Riwo Sang Chod teachings with Lama Tsultrim Allione.”
86 Ibid.
Compatibility

Tibetan Buddhist texts, written centuries ago, in a foreign language, and in a place across the globe, are not inherently compatible with an American environment. Rather, the teachers endeavor to present the texts’ relevancy to their audiences—though they present texts as simply in need of translation, the speakers actually strategically adapt textual resources to make them accessible. Anthropologist and linguistic studies academic Webb Keane writes about the markers of religious language, including the interpretive methods of entextualization and contextualization. These two processes exist in an oppositional relation, he explains, the one rendering texts internally cohesive and thus “extractable” from their interactive settings (i.e. readable in a cultural vacuum), and the other inserting texts into specific contexts. Such processes—or strategies, as they are always undertaken by a specific speaker—reorient a text; they relieve or stress the boundaries between a text and the context. Keane describes how entextualization and re-contextualization help to construct the appearance of a tradition that extends across time and space:

To the extent that texts can move across contexts, they allow people to create the image of something durable and shared, independent of particular realizations such as readings, interpretations, or performances or their historical transformations. One effect of the transportability of texts is the identification of spatial with temporal distance: Local practitioners may find the authority of both the scriptures and the practices they ordain to derive simultaneously from their global reach and their ancient origins.

Lama Tsultrim and the Dalai Lama use both these strategies, and Khandro Rinpoche uses entextualization, in their efforts to make Tibetan Buddhism compatible with its new American environment and thus accessible for its new audiences, all the while

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88 Ibid., 64.
maintaining the tradition’s validity. They are involved in this “transportability of texts” that lends texts authority by revealing their simultaneous applicability across contexts and authenticity in Tibetan lineage. The teachers particularly construct Tibetan Buddhist texts as compatible with American individualism, democratic ideals, and trust in rationalism.

Though Khandro Rinpoche agrees that Tibetan Buddhist texts are compatible in that they are accessible to her new American students, she, unlike the Dalai Lama and Lama Tsultrim, does not portray them as exceedingly compatible. Rather, texts were and will be understandable and relevant to anyone: Khandro Rinpoche lifts the texts out of their cultural settings entirely. To the extent that these teachings and texts are readable, understandable, and contain profound teachings, they are compatible enough with any and every environment. Khandro Rinpoche, then, provides a supreme example of one who employs entextualization. She “emphasizes the internal cohesion” of the discourses by Tibetan Buddhist masters; the texts can then be “perceived to remain constant across contexts.”89 For instance, Khandro Rinpoche urges practitioners to “embrace the teachings without bringing in too many alterations that are based upon what you would like…which may just be a perspective of a mind that is looking for convenience.”90 Fully accepting and following the pure, complete teachings descended from a pristine lineage is critical. Transporting the texts to America is not a process of rendering the texts compatible with a new environment,

for texts were, are, and always will be understandable and relevant for anyone in any
place, as long as they have enough courage to fully study and accept them.

Despite this difference, all three speakers agree that Tibetan Buddhist texts are
understandable to Westerners (perhaps even more so than to other groups). The Dalai
Lama opens his 2011 Kālacakra Preliminary Teachings in Washington, D.C., as well
as many other teachings to practicing Western communities, with a call to study. He
tells the audience, “We should be twenty-first century Buddhists. That means fuller
knowledge about modern things; meantime, equally fuller knowledge about
Buddhism. That, I consider twenty-first century Buddhist [sic].”

Buddhists today
should know about the meaning of the system, he explains, in contrast to how
Buddhists in the past simply followed their blind faith. This appeal strategically
establishes Tibetan Buddhism’s compatibility with an American episteme, or at least
a Protestant one. He frames his 2011 Kālacakra teachings as a mission to bring
Tibetan Buddhism “back to the Sanskrit root…we tend to have too much emphasis on
external, like horns and such, and forget about knowing meaning.” He criticizes the
“old-fashioned” way of practicing Buddhism—when Tibetan Buddhists recited sūtras
without knowing their meanings—and implores his audience to first learn the system
before just following “blind faith.”
The Dalai Lama constructs an essence of
Tibetan Buddhism as both the moral teachings found in all religions (see below) and a
Sanskrit meaningful root. Echoing the Protestant appeal to read the Bible (which, as

91 Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 1 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings,” teaching in Washington, D.C.,
92 The Dalai Lama refers here to the emphasis of Tibetan Buddhist lay practice on rituals—which often
incorporate musical instruments, including horns—over study. Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 1 – Kalachakra
Preliminary Teachings.”
93 Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 1 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
some Protestants argued, brings spiritual fruition, unlike participating in Catholic ritual), the Dalai Lama compels Western practitioners to return to Sanskrit root texts. Tibetan Buddhism can be rendered free of Tibetan cultural constraints like bells and horns; the true Tibetan Buddhism is a philosophical system that is understandable and ethical.

This interpretation of the role texts should play in the West is particularly complex. The Dalai Lama hands to his Western audiences a responsibility to understand Sanskrit teachings, something that other cultures and audiences have gradually lost. This Sanskrit tradition the Dalai Lama shows to be compatible with Western rationalism by collapsing the movement back to Sanskrit texts with a Western movement forward to scientific investigation. Faith has worked for thousands of years, but the last centuries have witnessed the rise of science, he says; further explaining: “Unless we investigate…we cannot make distinctions. So the Sanskrit text, the Sanskrit tradition, has two truths.” More than once, the Dalai Lama brings these two—Sanskrit tradition and investigation—into conversation. Westerners must investigate to uncover the lost root of Buddhism (Sanskrit texts), a task comparable to scientific discovery.

Playing into discourses of democracy, rationalism and morality, and American harmonious diversity, the Dalai Lama’s nonsectarian emphasis serves to establish the compatibility of Tibetan Buddhism with American values. He instructs his Kālacakra

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94 The Dalai Lama uses the language of the scientific method at points during his Kālacakra teachings. Via his translator, he explains that understanding Buddhist views on emptiness is a matter that can be looked into through investigation, an investigation that is “very similar” to “the scientific method process.” In his own voice, he tells the audience that the absence of independent reality “is what I call science.” Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 2 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings,” teaching in Washington, D.C., recorded July 10, 2011, YouTube video, 2:35:19, posted July 12, 2011, accessed April 1, 2014, http://dalailama.com/webcasts/post/225-kalachakra-preliminary-teachings/3586.

95 Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 1 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
audience that “when I talk religion, it is the essence of religion, not ceremonies, rituals…some people form some distinction, Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna—this is clearly form of ignorance [sic].” The Dalai Lama defines the moral-ethical teachings that promote spiritual paths, found in all religions, as the essence of religion. As these moral systems all agree, Tibetan Buddhism offers simply the same substance via a new singular presentation.

The Dalai Lama substantiates his call for interreligious dialogue and religious coexistence by pointing to the sheer number and variety of Tibetan Buddhist texts. He establishes the texts both as revealing the uniqueness of the Tibetan Buddhist path and as reminding that Tibetan Buddhism is only one of many valid religions. When explaining the variety of texts and teachings in Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama represents Buddhists as the ultimate nonsectarians. Of religions’ convergence he says, “We can say that regardless of whatever metaphysical explanations religious traditions employ, they all reach similar conclusions,” the conclusions being religions’ “ethical teachings.” The Dalai Lama establishes the compatibility of Tibetan Buddhism with his audience’s environment by proclaiming concordant ethical principles to be more important than divergent metaphysical teachings. This constitutes both an entextualization—lifting ethical teachings out of their cultural context so that they appear universally applicable—and a re-contextualization—placing these teachings within the language of the American democratic concept of religious tolerance.

96 Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 2 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
97 Tenzin Gyatso, The Essence of the Heart Sutra, 11.
Lama Tsultrim particularizes Tibetan Buddhism’s compatibility: she endeavors to demonstrate, via her own experience, how the tradition is compatible with ideas of American spirituality and Western feminism. Texts provide the evidence of this claim that Tibetan Buddhism resonates with and contribute to such recent liberal movements. For Lama Tsultrim to demonstrate compatibility between Tibetan Buddhism and Western feminism, she must first convince her students that the purest Tibetan Buddhist teachings truly embody feminine wisdom, despite some obvious patriarchal messages imbedded within many Buddhist texts. 

Lama Tsultrim is well aware of this discrepancy; indeed, it is what prompts her journey to find biographies of female Tibetan Buddhist masters. Dissatisfied with the patriarchal institutional side of Tibetan Buddhism and with the dearth of American female spiritual examples for her to follow, she writes in Women of Wisdom, “All cultures provide biographies in one form or another...However, our [American] culture provides very few life stories of women who are on a spiritual quest.” 

Lama Tsultrim embarks on a quest to find Tibetan female spiritual masters whose stories may be able to fill this gap, and she finds it difficult, as there are few written stories about such masters. She eventually translates and publishes the hagiographies she finds; what these texts offer to Westerners are useful images of the feminine:

Though in Tantra a vast assortment of images of the feminine were propagated, Western culture splits the feminine between the prostitute and the Madonna who passively adores her male offspring. In Tantra,

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98 There is much Tibetan literature to draw upon that treats women and men as equals, or gender as ultimately an illusion; however, throughout canonical and apocryphal literature, one also encounters numerous patriarchal messages. For example: the Vinaya (monastic code) contains over one hundred extra rules for nuns, some of them subordinating senior nuns to junior monks; some sūtras relate the Buddha’s reluctance to admit women into the monastic order; others, teaching the overcoming of attachment, provide women as objects of revulsion; and in many texts, including the popular Life of Milarepa, women are encouraged to pray for male rebirths.

99 Tsultrim Allione, Women of Wisdom, 81.
we see the emergence of female images which are sexual and spiritual, ecstatic and intelligent, wrathful and peaceful... The naked, wrathful, dancing dakini creates a different effect on the psyche than the sweetly smiling Madonna.\(^{100}\)

As Western feminism supplies Americans with a more pluralistic feminine, so does Tantra. Particularly in a spiritual context, Lama Tsultrim finds that Tibetan Buddhism offers stronger templates for feminine power: the dākinī, a female buddha, reemerges in conjunction with feminism. Lama Tsultrim’s autobiography, which takes up half of the book, clearly falls into this lineage of female Tibetan Buddhist masters, a lineage that is just beginning to flourish in the West, aided by Western feminism.\(^{102}\)

In addition to feminism, Lama Tsultrim invokes Western psychology as a discourse with which Tibetan Buddhism is compatible. These Tibetan Buddhist stories about women are important to her because, Lama Tsultrim firmly states, “Though one might say that when one deals with the development of the mind, there is obviously a transcendence of the differences between men and women, we must still realize that our experience is largely conditioned by the stories we hear.”\(^{103}\)

Lama Tsultrim slips into the language of Western psychology—the discourse through which she translates quite a few Buddhist ideas to her audiences. She unites the Buddhist doctrine of the two truths—those of absolute (or ultimate) and relative

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\(^{100}\) Tsultrim Allione, *Women of Wisdom*, 91.

\(^{101}\) Dākinī is a term both ubiquitous in Tibetan literature and difficult to translate. Literally, it is a feminine noun that means “one who goes in the sky.” It can refer to female spirits and/or to the embodiment of feminine wisdom. For a thorough discussion, see Janice D. Willis, “Dākinī: Some Comments on Its Nature and Meaning,” in *Feminine Ground: Essays on Women and Tibet*, ed. Janice D. Willis (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1987), 57-75.

\(^{102}\) Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche writes in the foreword to *Women of Wisdom*, “Tsultrim Allione’s work should not be regarded as mere feminism. This collection of stories is a great contribution to spreading the understanding of Tibetan Buddhism in the West,” 7.

\(^{103}\) Tsultrim Allione, *Women of Wisdom*, 83.
reality—-with discourse of social conditioning. The Buddhist concept of relative reality Lama T sultrim equates to the reality of our social conditioning, in which the hierarchical dualism of male and female has been continuously reinforced. Tibetan Buddhism’s stories of female masters both provide her students with advice for their path to enlightenment and urge them to challenge the relative reality of sex discrimination. These ideas ground Lama T sultrim’s Feeding Your Demons, a book (published in 2008) and practice (which she teaches through a path she calls Kapala Training) devoted to bringing together Western psychology and a traditional Tibetan practice of cutting through clinging to the self.\textsuperscript{104} Lama T sultrim repeatedly queries her audience, “How can we make these teachings most accessible and most effective in the West?”\textsuperscript{105} She has answered her own question both by combining psychology and traditional practice and by entextualizing biographies of tantric female masters, translating them and placing them, re-contextualizing them, into an English-language book alongside her own autobiography.

By explaining Tibetan Buddhism through discourses of feminism and psychology, as well as by placing her own life in conversation with Tibetan Buddhist biographies, Lama Tsultrim constructs a tradition that fits well with her American audiences’ experiences. She, like the Dalai Lama, renders Tibetan Buddhist texts into Western discourses: whereas the Dalai Lama invokes scientific investigation, Protestant textual study, and liberal values, such as democracy and diversity, Lama

\textsuperscript{104} The Tibetan Buddhist practice, which is practiced daily at Lama Tsultrim’s retreat center, is called Chöd (gcod). Machig Labdrôn (of whom Lama Tsultrim is an emanation) is famous as a Chöd practitioner and teacher. In Chöd, the practitioner visualizes a self-sacrifice—a feast at which they offer their own body to invited demons and enemies. The practice is recognized as an advanced tantric sādhana (meditative visualization practice) that is especially effective at eliminating self-clinging.

Tsultrim appeals to feminism and psychology. Both translate texts in ways that make Tibetan Buddhism accessible to their audiences. They share with Khandro Rinpoche their strategic portrayals of Tibetan Buddhism as understandable—as relevant and applicable to new audiences in a new place.

**Challenge**

*Om gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi swaha:* this is the mantra of the Heart Sūtra, a mantra exceedingly popular across Mahāyāna traditions. It is translated in various ways; the Dalai Lama renders it, “Om, go, go beyond, go perfectly beyond, enlightened, so be it.”

A look at this mantra provides an introduction to the constructions of Tibetan Buddhism as a challenge to the American context and students. On the ultimate level, exegesis of this mantra always acknowledges that the mantra is foremost awakened sound (with no intrinsic meaning) in the focused, correctly intentioned mind: the whole of the mantra is beyond the sum of its parts. On a relative level, the mantra attempts (always inadequately) to outline the indescribable state of Buddhahood, a concept all three teachers strive to relate to their students. It is a mantra that conveys the movement of going beyond, and as the Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim translate texts to their audiences, they establish the challenge Tibetan Buddhism carries for the Western student. The teachers frame this challenge as a movement *beyond* compatibility: Tibetan Buddhism’s path is ultimately ineffable (beyond rational and scientific frameworks),

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difficult (beyond mere ethical teachings), and demands full commitment (beyond
nonsectarianism and acknowledgement of religious harmony).

The teachers accomplish this by positing and opposing “Western” and
“Tibetan” conceptual frameworks before demonstrating how Tibetan ways of
knowing surpass Western ones. Still, they claim, at an ultimate level, a practitioner
must move completely beyond either cultural framework to experience the
indescribable—a state transcending all textual study. The teachers construct Tibetan
Buddhism’s ultimate experience as beyond linguistic frameworks: it is presented as a
challenge to all humans, but particularly to Westerners. They do so through their
contention with textual resources, using texts as evidence for their claims of ineffable
truth and as guides to attaining this truth. These arguments for the challenges of
Tibetan Buddhism are not limited to this contemporary, American context; they are
prevalent in historical Tibetan Buddhist texts and teachings. Jules Levinson analyzes
literature on the grounds and paths of the Géluk order, and he finds a predominant
metaphor to be that of cyclic existence (saṃsāra) as a prison, with the practitioner
first realizing their own position as a prisoner and then “consider[ing] how to respond
to such confinement.” It is a task of imagining an unknown (unimaginable)
limitless world, one without rules, boundaries, or certainties—in sum, one “not bound

107 This endemic argument historically has been presented to primarily monks. Up to twenty percent of
the Tibetan male population may have been ordained pre-diaspora, and numbers of monastics being
ordained in exile is increasing (Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, 38). In contrast, in
America no such “mass monasticism” or large-scale institutionalized monasticism has taken shape.
Tibetan Buddhism in America has been characterized by lay teachers (rather than monastic) and lay
people studying and practicing what traditionally was reserved to monks. Numerous academics note
this trend towards “laicization” in all forms of Buddhism in America, including Seager (*Buddhism in
America*, 39) and Lavine (“Tibetan Buddhism in America,” 107). Thus, the most fruitful comparison
lies between audiences of historical (and present) Tibetan monastics and today’s American lay convert
communities.

108 Jules B. Levinson, “Metaphors of Liberation: Tibetan Treatises on Grounds and Paths,” in *Tibetan
Literature: Studies in Genre*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson (Ithaca: Snow Lion
Publications, 1996), 266.
by ordinary conceptuality.” What distinguishes tantric Buddhism from the rest is its emphasis on the transformation of one’s perception of reality. The three teachers build upon a central doctrine in their presentation of the challenges the Tibetan Buddhist tradition holds for its American students.

In his 2011 Kālacakra teachings, there are times when the Dalai Lama must deal with the metaphysics of the Buddhist path. Here, he concludes, Tibetan Buddhism, through its texts, offers a useful challenge to American ways of thinking and being. Especially when it comes to descriptions of buddhahood—the ineffable and true nature of all of us—the Dalai Lama uses the traditional Buddhist doctrine of two truths (ultimate and relative) and the Mahāyāna (especially emphasized in Vajrayāna) teaching of the kāyas (different bodies of a buddha) but translates it into contemporary language. In order to understand the ultimate truth, Western logical frameworks must be foregone. Interestingly, when dealing with the ineffable, the Dalai Lama does not directly address his audience. It is one of the few topics for which he consistently relies on his translator—suggesting the difficulty of translating such challenging concepts. Concerning a text that describes the state of buddhahood, the translator says:

109 Powers, Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, 269.
110 The Dalai Lama specifically addresses his seamless switching between his own words and his use of a translator only once in the Kalachakra 2011 teachings (also quoted later this chapter): “Sometimes my sort of broken English seems more direct and more forceful than those top scholars with lots of words, very beautiful, but not direct and forceful.” That he relies on his translator more when he speaks of traditionally intangible subjects is no coincidence. I would argue it is less that his English is inadequate and more that his English style is too direct to skillfully articulate such ungraspable material. Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 2 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
111 Specifically, the Dalai Lama responds to a passage that begins, “If you ask, ‘What are the causes and conditions of the final fruit of omniscience?’ I, who am like a blind man, may not be in a position to explain (by myself), but I shall employ the Buddha’s own words just as he spoke them to his disciples after his enlightenment...” from Acharya Kamalashila, “The Middling Stages of Meditation,” Dharma Friends of Israel, accessed January 23, 2014, http://www.dharma-friends.org.il/libitem/the-middling-stages-of-meditation-by-acharya-kamalashila/.
The same goes for certain aspects of the path...and particularly the characteristics of the resultant state of buddhahood, Buddha’s qualities and so on...unless we are able to move out of the limited conceptual and cognitive framework we possess...we may simply not have access to understanding those kinds of facts. And here, we can actually, in a sense, use our ordinary personal experience as a way of getting a sense of what kind of facts these could be. Say, I always give the example of our knowledge of our birthday. None of us is going to have any first hand experiential knowledge of when we were born. And the knowledge of our date of birth is something we take for granted on the basis of taking on a third person testimony.\textsuperscript{112}

The “limited conceptual and cognitive framework” within which all humans work is especially emphasized in Western culture. The limits of rational, scientific, and logical forms of thinking are particularly present in America, due to the influence of such cultural movements like the Enlightenment. Although all humans suffer from the constraints of logical thinking, the West has particularly emphasized such rationalism. The Dalai Lama tells his audience that the West has succeeded in so many spheres of life, but the world today faces a “moral crisis.” Such a crisis requires spiritual principles which one cannot buy with the West’s wealth, cannot fix with the best medicine, and cannot make by law—even through a good system like America’s.\textsuperscript{113} The logical paradigm has become the only paradigm.

The role of texts, the Dalai Lama says, is to provide for students of Buddhism accurate and reliable testimony of enlightened beings. These masters know firsthand the qualities of the Buddha that are not accessible to other (unenlightened) beings due to their obscurations that lead to limited frameworks of knowledge. The Dalai Lama figures the challenge in terms of scientific investigation. Studying texts with a rational mind is a means to ineffable experience, but—in contrast to Western

\textsuperscript{112} Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 2 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
\textsuperscript{113} Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 1 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
assumptions—scientific discovery is not the final goal. The Dalai Lama holds that the ultimate teaching of Buddhism does not reject logic but that, in the end, the experience supersedes it.

Khandro Rinpoche also portrays the Tibetan Buddhist teachings as an important challenge to her American students’ reliance on rationalism. She talks about texts in several ways that create this challenge: as beyond conceptual (à la the Dalai Lama’s speech), as guidance and inspiration from enlightened beings, and as indicative of the difficulty of the Tibetan Buddhist path. During a 2013 commentary on the Heart Sūtra to an audience at the Rigpa Center in New York City, she introduces the text by telling her students, “If upon reading it they [new readers] cannot understand it, because it is about there being no eyes and ears and nose and mouth and so forth…and they say that they didn’t understand that at all, then you have to say, that’s the point, precisely. That is what Buddhism is trying to do.”

For Khandro Rinpoche, Buddhism does not offer an accessible path to an easy, happy experience of enlightenment; it is, especially for the somewhat lazy Western mind, very difficult and demanding, and often confusing.

The challenge does not only come from the ineffability of the actual path and experience of Buddhism. According to Khandro Rinpoche, Buddhism also provides a path that is a challenge to a culture invested in the belief that what is easy is better, in

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114 Though one must note that the Dalai Lama’s popular representation of Tibetan Buddhism has held strictly to its compatibility with science. He has publicly declared, “If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change.” Tenzin Gyatso, “Our Faith in Science,” New York Times, posted November 12, 2005, accessed April 1, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/12/opinion/12dalai.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. In the context of Kalachakra teachings, however, his language implies something different—that while Buddhism and science both rational, investigative means, the end of Buddhism surpasses that of science.

the pride of the individual, in the inevitability of (capitalist-influenced) competition, and in obsession with the beautiful. Unlike the Dalai Lama, who preaches time and again the need to stay within one’s own culture and to not convert, Khandro Rinpoche demands complete dedication to the Tibetan Buddhist path. In her 2008 teaching on “Nagarjuna’s Letter to a Friend,” she tells the audience that, while Western students are attracted to the beautiful, nonthreatening texts, what they really need are texts like this letter that are threatening, that have “a sense of being at your throat.” Instead of flowery verse about the nature of emptiness, her students need to pay attention to texts about renunciation and ones that squarely challenge ideas of self-centeredness. This is an entirely different conception of skillful means: instead of trying, like the Dalai Lama, to address Western audiences in their own terms, Khandro Rinpoche insists that Buddhist teachings are important to overcoming the problems of Western culture. The Buddhist path is no quick fix. Khandro Rinpoche, in an interview with one of her American sangha members, cautions:

But don’t just study a subject for a weekend and think that you’re done. When people say, ‘Oh, I’ve heard the teachings on the Four Noble Truths three times,’ or ‘I attended a weekend on the Four Immeasurables in 1982, now I need Dzogchen teachings,’ one feels very sorry for those people.

Students must learn to be humble and to remember that there is always more to learn—something especially difficult for American students intent on getting ahead, on getting only the highest teachings, and on treating the path as an individual

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116 Khandro Rinpoche, “Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche teaches on Nagarjuna text 1.”
117 Khandro Rinpoche holds that in the West, there is an attitude of wanting to jump straight into the highest teachings instead of beginning with the basics, including renunciation. She gives the example, “So if you tell people to be ethically correct, for example, they will say, ‘oh, yes, but everything is empty in nature.’” “Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche teaches on Nagarjuna text 1.”
118 Khandro Rinpoche, “On Buddhism in the West.” Dzogchen (rDzogs chen) is considered the highest teaching and practice of the Nyingma order.
Tibetan Buddhist teachings move beyond American contextual assumptions not just by challenging the limited logical mind but also by challenging the Western lazy, self-centered mind.

Another way Khandro Rinpoche portrays Tibetan Buddhism as exceptionally challenging to the American environment is by explaining biographies and stories as inspirational frameworks that can contribute to certainty—a state beyond belief that Khandro Rinpoche considers crucial to the path. Biographies are just one approach in the array of Tibetan Buddhist texts; they are simultaneously difficult to understand and useful as examples of the existence of actual enlightened beings:

One of the very careful approaches, or the very helpful approaches, is called anecdotes and stories. Therefore, biographies of great teachers, various anecdotes, various stories, the historical accounts of buddha-dharma, forms a very integral, very important subject matter; gives you an idea and inspires your research and your reasoning; gives you a framework and a support, a guidance to really be able to go through the processing so that the belief becomes a certainty in your own mind.119

Her students should not approach these biographies and stories as history or as “a nice bedtime story,” but instead as inspiration for devotion to the path, devotion that establishes the lineage of Tibetan Buddhist masters within oneself.120 Students must embody the teachings of the lineage, instead of simply learning about them at a distance. Texts are to be read in ways that emphasize the seriousness of the path to enlightenment. Moreover, biographies provide the Western student with a new framework: that of enlightened masters, one that transcends the limited perspective of an unenlightened human and of the self-centered Western individual. Like the Dalai

119 Khandro Rinpoche, “Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche teaches on Nagarjuna text 1.”
Lama, Khandro Rinpoche conceives of these texts as limited (as they are merely words) but also as something more than everyday speech (as they are words from enlightened beings, and thus the best guides we humans have). She explains texts to her American students so that Tibetan Buddhism appears to offer the perfect challenge to their cultural environment, especially to rationalism, to self-centeredness, and to (spurred by spiritual materialism) lack of commitment.

Similarly to the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche, Lama Tsultrim offers the terma tradition as an example of the challenge Tibetan Buddhism poses to Western rationalism. On a personal level, Lama Tsultrim talks about Machig Labdrön’s visits to her in her dreams and visions; this connection with Machig she figures as a mirror to the Nyingma terma tradition, in that an enlightened being, through the mind-stream of an incarnated being, sends new practices and teachings to unenlightened beings.

Lama Tsultrim knows that these visions, and her belief in the terma tradition and ḍākinīs, as well as other supernatural beings, are difficult for some of her Western students to accept. Nevertheless, she stands by her understanding of the terma, a treasure that is usually written in the language of the ḍākinī, a language which “is translated not with a dictionary and a grammar book, but through ‘another way of knowing’ which comes from a space which is far from the sunlit rational world dominated by the logos.”\footnote{Tultrim Allione, Women of Wisdom, 121.} The Tibetan Buddhist terma challenges Western knowledge systems, in which all must be explained in a scientific and rational way.

Rationalism becomes a limiting factor in the quest for Tibetan Buddhist ultimate realization; like the self, it is a useful concept for living in relative reality, but it will eventually be left behind. Thus, to understand Machig’s biography, “we
must surrender our Western frame of reference, which limits our ideas of what is possible and impossible,” because “at higher levels of spiritual development, the material world can be manipulated by the consciousness, and many things become possible.”

The Western framework is limited by its reliance on the material and the rational and disinterest in the spiritual. Lama Tsultrim’s going beyond is a different movement from Khandro Rinpoche and the Dalai Lama’s. The Dalai Lama does not reject the usefulness of rationalism to the extent Lama Tsultrim does; he maintains that scientific investigation can bring one close to the experience of enlightenment, while she argues that it often hinders the understanding of the ineffable. Lama Tsultrim contends that the Western mind can first learn something from Tibetan paradigms, and then ultimately move beyond frameworks altogether.

The other two, on the other hand, construct texts as helpful primarily as a challenge to *panhuman* conditional constraints. In their interpretations, texts can be and should be separated from their Tibetan-ness and taken as transcending all cultural frameworks.

This understanding of ḍākinī language and reality beyond our rational framework informs Lama Tsultrim’s insistence that the Tibetan Buddhist path requires great effort—perhaps even greater effort here because *there* (Tibet) was a place where people naturally understood the mystical. Lama Tsultrim describes that in contrast to the traditionally Tibetan way of life, Americans are always looking for the next quick fix: they prefer to pick and choose, to not commit to a spiritual path, to grab a self-help book and a couple of weeks later be healed for life. She tells her students that Adzom Rinpoche, one of her teachers, exclaimed to her, “What is it about Americans that think they don’t have to do what the Tibetans do in terms of

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122 Tsultrim Allione, quoted in Michaela Haas, *Dakini Power*, 254-5.
practice and discipline, but they’ll have the same results? It requires discipline to practice and to begin to understand the complexities of Tibetan Buddhist texts and practices. Similar to Khandro Rinpoche, Lama Tsultrim emphasizes the difficulties in committing so much time and effort to understanding and following texts.

Through their directions on reading texts, the three teachers construct the appearance of a Tibetan Buddhism that challenges—and supersedes—the American context with which it interacts. Especially responding to the question of how to describe the ineffable, to make concrete the inherently discrete, the teachers skillfully interpret the texts as beyond their American students’ non-Buddhist methods of obtaining knowledge. Lama Tsultrim, all the while establishing her knowledge of Tibetan language and texts, interprets these texts to be profound because of their Tibetan origin. While Khandro Rinpoche similarly finds the texts’ challenge to Western culture to be a result of a pure Tibetan lineage, she and the Dalai Lama interpret the texts to be much more than their Tibetan origin, for they are the work of enlightened beings—people who are beyond such cultural constraints. The texts challenge American audiences in the same way they would any audience, as attempts to describe the ineffable. Here, however, they are rendered challenging to a greater extent because of the Western context. The Tibetan Buddhist path offers a needed challenge to the problems of (generalized) Western culture, including those of individualism, selfishness, and laziness.

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Limits of Textual Study: Tradition that Transcends Scripture

The three speakers, as I have argued, invest heavily in the authority of texts and the relationship formed between teacher, student, and text. Yet two of them—Khandro Rinpoche and Lama Tsultrim—recall times when teaching and studying texts were surpassed by direct interactions between student and teacher. Such stories rest uneasily next to claims of textual authority, which rely upon conviction that texts would be understandable *even if no teacher were present*. Often, textual interpretation hides from an audience, seeming to be not constructed by the speaker but inherent in the text itself. Articulating the transcendence of personal relationship over textual interpretation, however, does recognize the authority of both the speaker, whose very presence is instructive, and the tradition, via validation of the ultimate ineffability of Buddhist enlightenment.

The Dalai Lama rarely slips into language that implies that textual study is ever inferior to other ways of knowing. Interestingly, although all orders of Tibetan Buddhism posit language as *ultimately* limited (as ultimate experience lies beyond words), the Gélukpa order has traditionally placed more confidence in the written and spoken word than the other (Nonsectarian) schools. For the Gélukpas, writes academic José Cabeżon, “linguistic-conceptual understanding is indispensable in the spiritual journey that culminates in Buddhahood. From the outset, dGe lugs pas have pitted themselves against the other Tibetan schools that advocate a more radical form of ineffability.”¹²⁴ The Dalai Lama follows this Gélukpa inclination to trust textual authority; he may also hesitate to posit more mystical forms of knowledge because, as

¹²⁴ Cabeżon, *Buddhism and Language*, 175. “dGe lugs pas” is the Wylie transliteration for the phonetically rendered “Gélukpas,” those who follow the Géluk order.
a global figurehead, he is invested in making Tibetan Buddhism as accessible as possible to a great many audiences. The other two teachers do not share this role as public figurehead. We return to an explanation from Luis Gomez: even though the experience of enlightenment transcends any “linguistic index,” it is only attainable through that very index. The “only” is, with respect to Khandro Rinpoche and Lama Tsultrim’s interpretations, debatable. If asked outright, the two teachers would likely agree that texts constitute a necessary resource for the path to enlightenment. However, the stories they tell to their American audiences are sometimes paradoxical, for in these, direct interactions definitely can transcend textual study.

For Khandro Rinpoche, sometimes the “essence of dharma” surpasses textual study altogether. In her teaching on “Nagarjuna’s Letter,” she explains the power of a blessing from a guru:

I spend every day of my life talking about texts to people, and most oftentimes, I find sometimes, that going through the same text again and again, again and again with a student, they seem to get something but not always get everything …then occasionally, I’ve often noticed there are certain moments when we allow them to go and get a blessing from our teachers, His Holiness my father for example…it’s kind of a [snaps her fingers] just a very quick blessing, but so many times what I’ve noticed is they go in and they come out, and they seem to get more understanding in that moment than years and years of words of telling the people have done…They are able to get something that is beyond words.

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125 Donald Lopez addresses the Dalai Lama’s skillful balancing of multiple roles, including how he must inhabit two different worlds: those of the English and Tibetan languages. As Lopez notes, the Dalai Lama, though he may speak differently in these two worlds, ultimately speaks from a Buddhist context. This makes the Dalai Lama’s speech to his English-language audiences an especially complex task of speaking from a Buddhist context to students whose primary contexts may be different. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “Jailbreak: Author’s Response,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 69, no. 1 (March 2001), 210-211. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1466077.


127 Khandro Rinpoche, “On Buddhism in the West.”

128 Khandro Rinpoche, “Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche teaches on Nagarjuna text 1.”
Though Khandro Rinpoche’s explanation of the blessing of the guru as exceptionally powerful is in line with Tibetan Buddhist traditional devotion to the guru, here, she explains it in relation to her particular work of talking about texts. Khandro Rinpoche, more than most teachers, expounds on the importance of the transmission of texts to the West in their entirety. It seems at first surprising that she denies that her work teaching texts may not do as much for a practitioner as one blessing could. For Khandro Rinpoche, both are important. While a student may learn from a blessing, it is a sort of ineffable, transcendent knowledge; in such a complex philosophical system as Tibetan Buddhism, a teacher must do more than give blessings. They must also ensure the authenticity and continuity of the tradition—or, in Khandro Rinpoche’s language, the “stream of the essence of dharma.” Blessings bestow authority experientially, creating the appearance that what Tibetan Buddhism teaches truly is beyond language. Emphasizing blessings, far from devaluing textual knowledge, supports textual interpretation as a demonstration of the ineffability the teachers have sought to describe.

Like Khandro Rinpoche, Lama Tsultrim reminds her students that, at times, textual study is not nearly as effective as the direct experience of one’s relationship with a teacher. Besides explanatory transmissions of practices, she says, there are also symbolic and mind-to-mind transmissions, both of which are extremely effective for the very reason that they do not involve words, which cannot directly describe the ineffability of ultimate reality. For Lama Tsultrim, although texts and spoken words can be helpful, ultimately, other transmissions prove more effective. The Buddha himself founded the tradition of symbolic transmission, when he “held up a flower
and his future student Pipphali who had arrived saw the flower and smiled…Pipali understood what the Buddha was transmitting.” Lama Tsultrim frequently cites this as an example of amazing understanding that surpasses any textual index. While Lama Tsultrim and Khandro Rinpoche’s stories here may undermine the authority they grant to texts, the stories do important work of constructing the truth or essence of Tibetan Buddhism as existing beyond individual resources. Cabezon explains two types of Géluk scholastic doctrine—linguistic and experiential—both essential to the path; he contends that they relate causally, with linguistic understanding ensuring “the soteriological validity of the subsequent experience.” In Lama Tsultrim and Khandro Rinpoche’s speech, however, experience authorizes textual understanding just as much as the reverse. These two teachers construct the appearance of a tradition that transcends the texts that they interpret.

**Authority: Texts, Teachers, and Students**

The teachers claim authority for themselves primarily in two ways: the teacher provides an example for the student to follow and ensures the authentic transmission of the dharma. The Dalai Lama and Lama Tsultrim often mention their personal relationships to the texts. The Dalai Lama is fond of reminding his audience to hold him accountable, to evaluate all their teachers to ensure they are not blindly following them. He highlights, in his own case, the Vinaya—the codes of

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129 Tsultrim Allione, “Magyu: The Mother Lineage Webcast 2014.” This Buddhist story of symbolic transmission by flower is that of Mahākāśyapa (who stayed in Pipphali Cave) in the Flower Sermon, a text highly regarded by the Zen Buddhist tradition; in fact, Zen claims Mahākāśyapa’s smiling at the flower to be the first Zen meditative experience and Mahākāśyapa to be the first patriarch of Zen.

130 Cabezon, *Buddhism and Language*, 190.
monasticism. When explaining the “Thirty-Seven Practices of the Bodhisattva”\textsuperscript{131} to his audience, he tells them, “One should not have the attitude that putting on the saffron robes is adequate for one’s dharma practice.”\textsuperscript{132} Addressing the Vinaya in his English-language autobiography, the Dalai Lama writes, “As for my own religious practice, I try to live my life pursuing what I call the Bodhisattva ideal…I choose to be a Buddhist monk. There are 253 rules of Tibetan monasticism (364 for nuns) and by observing them as closely as I can, I free myself from many of the distractions and worries of life.”\textsuperscript{133} Not only is the Dalai Lama an emanation of a bodhisattva (thus holding firsthand knowledge of obscure truths), but he is also a monastic who sets an example by following written codes. His students must follow his example, letting texts order their lives. As a teacher, his role is to help students accomplish the Buddhist path; the Dalai Lama aptly notes that “my sort of broken English seems more direct and more forceful than those top scholars with lot of words, very beautiful, but not direct and forceful.”\textsuperscript{134} The Dalai Lama imagines himself as an example for his students in that he emulates texts.

Though not a monastic, Lama Tsultrim still considers herself to live under the guidance of texts. Like the Dalai Lama, she offers her own relationship to the texts as an example for how her students may also incorporate Tibetan Buddhist texts into

\textsuperscript{131} Specifically, he addresses number thirty-one: “A bodhisattva’s practice is continually to examine our self-deception and then rid ourselves of it, Because, if we do not examine our self-deception ourselves, It’s possible that with a Dharmic (external) form We can commit something non-Dharmic,” from Togmey-zangpo, “Thirty-Seven Bodhisattva Practices,” translated by Alexander Berzin, The Berzin Archives, accessed January 23, 2014, http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level3_lojong_material/specific_texts/37_bodhisattva_practices/thirty_seven_bodhisattva_practices/37_bodhisattva_practices_lit.html.


\textsuperscript{134} Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 3 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
their lives. She tells them that you, like me—an American and an inexperienced practitioner—can take this path. Lama Tsultrim often relates to her students the story of how she became a nun:

Then one day I was reading through the sadhana Trungpa Rinpoche had given me and noticed the continual references to Karmapa. Suddenly it dawned on me that it was obviously an auspicious coincidence that I had arrived in Kathmandu at the same time as his visit and that he was there in ‘my monastery.’ At the same time I came across a line in the sadhana which said, ‘The only offering I can make is to follow your example.’ Since he was a monk it was clear to me that I should follow his example and take the robes.\(^{135}\)

It is a funny story: she tells it with a smile, remembering a time when she had absolutely no idea what she was doing, when she knew so little about Tibetan Buddhism but felt a strong visceral connection and took a leap. It is the memory of a young woman making a spontaneous decision. At the same time, she tells it seriously because it illustrates both the importance of attuning to what the texts are teaching and the importance of following one’s teacher. Lama Tsultrim imitates those before her who have followed the Buddha and their teachers—she has authority not only because she falls into an important lineage, but also because she already had that lineage within herself. Her intuition, as she describes it, is so very Tibetan Buddhist; to be a teacher is in her very nature. Lama Tsultrim speaks from her personal perspective, drawing in her students with assurance that they too can become connected to Tibetan Buddhism.

In contrast, Khandro Rinpoche almost never addresses her personal life—she does not follow the other two teachers in describing the nature of her relationship to texts in such personal terms. Instead, she addresses the teacher-in-the-West’s role in

general: it is one that imparts responsibility to the full textual teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. Khandro Rinpoche establishes her own position as necessary liaison between her students and the texts. She understands the role of the Tibetan Buddhist teacher at this juncture as both bringing and teaching the texts yet, at the same time, as ultimately transcending those same texts. The teachers’ responsibility is “to assure the transference of the teachings in the mode of transmissions. Not just selective transmissions, but entire bodies of teachings and transmissions—beginning with the Tripitaka, then sutra, tantra, kama, and terma.”

Bringing the entirety of the dharma to the West and to America will take a very long time. Texts are vital, as the pure teachings of the dharma, to the establishment of authentic Tibetan Buddhism for a new audience, and without the teachers, the texts will not be correctly translated and understood. For Khandro Rinpoche, the role of the teacher only becomes more important in diaspora, as these lineage holders present Tibetan Buddhism to audiences unfamiliar with its resources.

The relationship between student, text, and teacher is important to not only the speakers’ authority but also to how the speakers’ interpretations take shape. Addressing Jacques Derrida’s “iterability,” Keane notes that this theory does not take into account the fact that “over the course of a given interpretation the participants tend to work together to limit the possible interpretations of their utterances.” This process produces textual interpretations that aim in part to limit the student’s ability to stray from this interpretation of the text. The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and

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136 Khandro Rinpoche, “On Buddhism in the West.” The Tripitaka (“Three Baskets”) is a term for the Pali canon that includes the Vinaya (monastic code), Pali Sūtras, and the Abhidharma (philosophical teachings).
137 Keane, “Religious Language,” 56.
Lama Tsultrim interpret Tibetan Buddhist texts in many different ways. However, all three speakers construct Tibetan Buddhism as compatible with and, paradoxically, challenging to their American audience’s cultural environment. They reinforce their own authority to interpret texts for their students, and they reinforce Tibetan Buddhist texts’ authority to speak for the tradition. Constrained by their texts, these speakers nevertheless must and do endeavor to translate Tibetan Buddhism to their audiences.
A higher degree of autonomy should be given...That is the guarantee for preservation of our identity, our culture, our spirituality, our environment.

-The Dalai Lama\textsuperscript{138}

May the supreme ineffable blessings of Lamas, Knowledge Holders, Deities, Dakinis and Protectors Cause the Dharma to take root In this country of great beauty And great confusion

-Lama Tsultrim Allione\textsuperscript{139}

The very name Tibetan Buddhism denotes placement. At first glance, the placement may seem straightforward, but this is not so when we truly ask, what placement? According to the Chinese government, Tibet did not and does not exist as a discrete political territory, but merely as a region of China.\textsuperscript{140} Those Tibetans outside of Tibet who do affirm its existence will likely never return; if they do, it will almost certainly not be to an independent state. Exiled Tibetans live in an expanding


\textsuperscript{140} The Chinese government maintains, “Some Tibetans in self-exile have repeatedly claimed that Tibet and China are two different countries. What does history have to say? This argument does not conform with recorded history. It is nothing but an excuse to conduct activities aimed at splitting Tibet from China and making it into an independent state.” \textit{100 Questions about Tibet}, Beijing Review Press, 1989. In \textit{Authenticating Tibet: Answers to China’s 100 Questions}, ed. Anne-Marie Blondeau and Kati Buffetrille (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3.
global diaspora, with a central government in Dharamsala, India. Since the invasion, and particularly after 1959 when the Dalai Lama fled the country, an increasing number of Tibetan Buddhist teachers, monastics, and lay people in exile have never stood on Tibetan ground (whether one considers the Chinese or Tibetan boundaries). The political contestations surrounding Tibet are well known to the American public—at least when compared to similar international situations—a testament to the Dalai Lama’s popularity.

Religious imaginings of a place can never be fully separated from the political constructions of it. While historically there has been a tendency in the study of religion for scholars to take the religious productions of place as “outside, and above the sources of ‘normal’ [or secular] forms of moral authority,” recently, academics have considered religious imaginings as competing, interacting, and mixing with political, economic, and secular ones. Indeed, when we look at the situation regarding Tibet, we see that Tibetan Buddhism in diaspora has become increasingly tied to its Tibetan identity; inversely, Tibetan identity has also become more narrowly constructed as Buddhist. The political and the religious merge in discourses—by the Tibetan exiled elite and Western sympathizers—that both address Tibet’s current political situation and highlight the uniqueness of Tibetan Buddhism’s roots. The Dalai Lama and other elites in exile sometimes replace—in order to harness political power—Tibetan identity with Tibetan Buddhist identity, a conflation that portrays the

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141 The Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) recognized by China as a province is significantly smaller in size (by half) and in Tibetan population (by two-thirds) than what most Tibetans consider to be Tibet.
Chinese occupation as destruction of a spiritual, nonviolent country and people. These same Tibetan Buddhist speakers invoke Tibet in discourse surrounding their religious tradition—in order to harness religious authority—to promote the specialness of Tibetan Buddhism as authentically preserved in such a spiritual place.

In diaspora, Tibetan Buddhist speakers have endeavored increasingly to address the importance of place, and the power surrounding it.

Place, always socially constructed, serves as a malleable resource for the Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim as they attempt to translate Tibetan Buddhism for new audiences. Meaningful place contributes to the appearance of continuity and the establishment of lineage authority (both pre- and post-diaspora). When the lamas speak about place, they talk about *mandalas*, spiritual landscapes, retreat centers, America, Tibet, the East, the West, the human realm, the environment, and the world. As Tibetan Buddhism has been displaced—from Tibet into diaspora—and re-placed—into America—lineage holders address the importance of place by both strategically localizing and strategically universalizing Tibetan Buddhism’s authority. The teachers stress and relieve boundaries of these places (ritual, local, national, and beyond), simultaneously placing Tibetan Buddhism in particular locations and revealing how the tradition transcends placement.

Broadly, these lineage holders speak about Tibet and America, navigate the boundaries of “East” and “West”—and a movement between them, “westernization”—and address the possibility of overcoming territory. The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim invoke traditional Tibetan notions of place and employ Western discourse to make Tibetan Buddhism’s movement across
the globe meaningful for their American convert audiences. Doing so, they also promote Tibetan autonomy, construct the significance of the West as a new place for the dharma, reinforce the appearance of a transcendent truth in Tibetan Buddhism, and ultimately claim authority for their roles as lineage holders in facilitating the movement westward. Before considering their particular interpretations of places, this chapter will briefly introduce some trends in pre-diaspora Tibetan Buddhism surrounding places, and it will present the gaps in Western academic treatment of place in Tibetan Buddhism as it is repositioned in America. These two topics provide context for the speakers’ interpretations of places. Often, their discourses may be better understood in terms of earlier Tibetan Buddhist imaginings of place—of Tibet and of spiritual and ritual landscapes.

The Construction of Place in Tibetan Buddhism

Numerous texts recount the dissemination of Buddhism to Tibet as the pinning down of a demonness’ body. Janet Gyatso, in her article on such narratives, writes that Tibetans—as far back as their indigenous religious traditions—imagined their landscape as rife with male and female spirits, many of them malevolent. Thus the land contains powerful spiritual energy. In most versions of the narrative of the demonness, the Srin-mo—a supine female demon—represents the entire spirit world.¹⁴³ She opposes Songtsen Gampo (Srong-bstan sGam-po), the first Buddhist king of Tibet in the seventh century, in his endeavors. Gyatso finds that the earliest surviving versions are “mythologized accounts” that date from after the tenth century;

the myth (as she calls it) is pervasively present in nearly all histories from the time period. The demonness, in these accounts, must be suppressed by the construction of “limb-binding temples”—the first thirteen Buddhist structures in Tibet, built starting from the center of the region and spreading outwards. The temples acted both to suppress the demonness’ body and to “transform those places into Buddhist realms” via harnessing her energy. Through these prevalent narratives, Tibetan Buddhists have imagined a relationship between the spiritual and physical landscapes. John Powers notes that the continued dissemination of Buddhism through Tibet is linked to monastery and temple construction—in, for example, widespread agreement that the official establishment of Buddhism coincides with the building of the first monastery, Samye. Lineage histories too share a focus on place and the construction of monasteries. The lineages of the major orders trace themselves back to particular people and to particular places, and lineages within those orders remained quite localized—centered around monasteries—pre-diaspora.

In Tibetan discourse rests a historical tendency to construct Buddhism’s relationship to Tibet through the country’s physical geography. John Powers argues that many Tibetans believe general devotion to Buddhism can be ascribed in part to the geography itself, a place that lends itself to “religious practice and mystical contemplation.” The highest plateau in the world, Tibet boasts a landscape of open, dramatic skies and harsh, sparse mountains. Tibetans suggest that such a landscape essentially benefits Buddhist practices, such as sky-gazing meditation and

144 Gyatso, “Down with the Demoness,” 36.
145 Powers, Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, 233.
146 Gyatso, “Down with the Demoness,” 43.
147 Powers, Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, 233.
148 Ibid., 234.
understanding the doctrine of emptiness. The country has acquired titles that highlight its expansive landscape, such as “Land of Snows” and “Roof of the World.” As I examine later in this chapter, the three contemporary speakers (especially the Dalai Lama and Lama Tsultrim) share these sentiments. These speakers render Tibet’s Buddhism seemingly destined to succeed due to its geographical location.

Buddhism, in scripture and in historical ritual practice, provides several methods for making places religiously significant. Kevin Trainor articulates two ways of constructing religious place: historical connection and ritual consecration.149 Some places are marked special through their historical connections to events in Śakyamuni Buddha’s lifetime, including the places where he was born, attained enlightenment, and first taught the dharma. None of these places is located in Tibet; however, Tibetans consider places related to the historical establishment of the dharma in Tibet by enlightened masters as significant. Still, most places require ritual consecration to be rendered special; such places include stūpas—structures that contain relics—monasteries, and temples. Such consecration provides a way to continuously make places Buddhist. Trainor notes, “Virtually any place, through a ritual of enshrinement, can be rendered religiously powerful.”150 Tibetan texts on architecture provide extensive directions for construction and consecration of new religious sites,151 directions that teachers continue to follow presently in America for the building of new monasteries, retreat centers, and stūpas.

150 Ibid., 638.
151 Powers, Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, 236-242.
This material culture plays an important role in the pattern of Tibetan Buddhism’s establishment in the West. Before moving on, I will note that Tibetan Buddhism’s current diaspora and arrival to the West by no means constitutes the first time such Buddhism has spread to new places. Indian tantric Buddhists disseminated the tradition to Tibet beginning in the first half of the seventh century, and, significantly, in the early thirteenth century the Mongolian elite took up Tibet’s Buddhism, marking the introduction of the religion to Mongolia.\textsuperscript{152} José Cabeţon articulates six crucial factors in the spread of Buddhism from India to Tibet: the sponsorship of the establishment of Buddhism by ruling elite; the role of material culture, particularly art and architecture; the importance of translation of texts; the centrality of monasticism; the privileging of Indian tradition and educational systems (i.e. scholasticism); and “the role of individual and charismatic teachers.”\textsuperscript{153} Cabeţon argues that most of these trends—excluding monasticism—influence the current dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism to the West. Indeed, the Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim address such factors as they narrate Tibetan Buddhism’s spread into diaspora.

The Western Study of Tibet: Shangri-La Repeats

While great attention has been given to the historical and contemporary constructions of Tibet by various actors—including the Chinese, Western outsiders, Tibetan exiles, and the Dalai Lama—there has yet to be substantial consideration of the imaginings


\textsuperscript{153} Cabeţon, “Tibetan Buddhist Society,” 93.
of Tibet by Tibetan Buddhist teachers for specific audiences. This chapter aims to begin to fill this gap in scholarship, particularly by embedding constructions of Tibet within a greater picture of how Tibetan Buddhist speakers construct various places for convert American audiences. The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim all invent Tibet, sometimes as monolithic, yet always in response to their audiences and environment and using similar strategies as they do to construct other places, from the ritual to the whole earth. They employ many other places as useful resources; primarily, America, the East, the West, and the world. Their imaginings of Tibet constitute just a part of their greater construction of Tibetan Buddhism as simultaneously localized (particularly Tibetan) and transcendent (beyond any placement).

Self-reflexive Western academics have examined contrasting monolithic portrayals of Tibet as either a terribly backward, primitive, animalistic place or a mystical, romantic preserve of wisdom.154 These two enduring Western images of Tibet were first constructed centuries ago, originally by a few explorers, later by missionaries, and eventually by academics. Today, the Chinese government continues to promote a pre-1959 Tibet that was a stagnant, impoverished dictatorship,155 whereas exiled Tibetans and their sympathizers produce an opposing pre-1959 Tibet imagined as a progressively peaceful, religious, and nonviolent

155 “Before 1959, all except 5 percent of the Tibetan population were slaves or serfs…Economy and culture were stagnant for centuries, life expectancy was 35.5 years, illiteracy was over 90 percent, 12 percent of Lhasa’s population were beggars, and the Dalai Lama was responsible for all of this.” 100 Questions about Tibet, in Authenticating Tibet, 81.
Western academics are increasingly self-reflexive regarding their own accountability in facilitating the persistence of such images. Post-1959, swept away in the urgency surrounding cultural preservation after the Chinese invasion of Tibet, academics endorsed the image of Tibet as a spiritual preserve. More recently, academics have considered Tibet as a complex place and as a part of the greater cultural world. This has involved both placing Tibet into history—abandoning the idea of an untouched paradise or hell—and applying theoretical and academic concepts to Tibetan studies—determinedly treating the nation of Tibet and its culture as academics would others. Most academics now would agree with Donald Lopez, who claims, “to allow Tibet to circulate in a system of fantastic opposites...is to deny Tibet its history, to exclude it from a real world of which it has always been a part, and to deny Tibetans their agency in the creation of a contested quotidian reality.”

Shangri-La is largely going out of style, at least in the academic context.

In this thesis, I employ “place” as a second-order term. I take place to be always socially constructed, and not simply as physical space to which humans later attribute meaning. Rather, following in the footsteps of Jonathan Z. Smith, religious studies academics today take the approach that “there is no way to talk about space outside human perception of it, and there is never any neutral or merely physical space. Space is always a part of material culture, always social, always produced.”

156 For example: “Tibetan culture is inseparably linked to Tibetan Buddhism. Over the last 1,000 years, Tibet has developed a unique, spiritual and peaceful culture with Buddhism at its heart.” Free Tibet, “Society, culture and religion,” accessed February 23, 2014, http://www.freetibet.org/about/society-culture-and-religion.
158 Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La, 11.
Though physical space exists, these academics point out nonetheless that space never exists as only a physical space separable from culture for a human inhabiting, visiting, or peering into it. Sam Gill articulates another iteration of how human perception creates place: “Territory is always significant only as the setting for action.” The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim construct territories that act as settings for a Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Places act, then, as resources for the three teachers, resources that are useful in their malleable constructions for providing meaning to Tibetan Buddhism’s movement through the world.

**Tibet’s Buddhism**

Jonathan Z. Smith introduces mapping as a metaphor for how religious actors contribute to creating tradition. Religion is a mode of map-making, of constructing meaning, that provides humans with maps that never fit the territory they claim to encompass; religious actors then work within the fit or lack of fit that arises between maps and territories. Smith enumerates three principal mapping strategies, or “maps of the cosmos”: locative; utopian; and a third, which will “allow the incongruous elements to stand.” Locative mapping attempts to “overcome all incongruity;” it is a strategy that “guarantees meaning and value through structures of congruity and conformity.” In other words, locative maps accentuate place and result from attempting to fit the territory exactly. A utopian approach, conversely, values being in no place and thus eliminates the map (and, sometimes, the territory itself)—it

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addresses incongruity by denying its existence. The third strategy deals with the
relationship between map and territory by letting the incongruity stand: it suggests
“that symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of
overcoming disjunction.”162 As Smith notes, in this metaphor, maps are not stable,
and the three types of maps are strategies that any religious actor may use on
particular occasions: they are not a system of categorization. The metaphor works not
to label some religions as statically utopian or locative traditions but instead to allow
for thought about particular occasions (in any religion) when actors employ locative
or utopian mapping.

The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim apply all three of
these strategies as they map their Tibetan Buddhist worlds and instruct their
audiences in how to read these maps. In the case of Tibet, the Dalai Lama attends to
the subject by far the most of the three speakers, though Lama Tsultrim addresses it
fairly often. Khandro Rinpoche stays markedly silent regarding Tibet in her
 teachings to Americans. (Perhaps this is related to the abundance of time she spends
talking about East and West, generalizing her territories into global halves.) Both the
Dalai Lama and Lama Tsultrim primarily localize—or, employ locative mapping—
when they address Tibet, but to reversed ends. Whereas the Dalai Lama constructs
Tibet as a special place because of its Buddhism, Lama Tsultrim primarily talks about
Tibet Buddhism as profound because of its Tibetan origins. Though both of them
portray Tibetan Buddhism and Tibet as exceptional, the directionality—which makes
the other special—is reversed.

162 Smith, “Map is Not Territory,” 309.
For the Dalai Lama, the incongruity between map and territory lies precisely in Tibet’s current political situation. He seeks to rectify this incongruity; when the map once more fits the territory, Tibet will again be a thriving container for the dharma, the center of Tibetan Buddhism. This strategy involves first creating a map of the world with Tibet at its center, a Tibet that is first and foremost Buddhist. The Dalai Lama, in his speech directed to Western audiences, conflates Tibetan identity with Tibetan Buddhist identity—a tactic unsurprising, considering his role as spiritual head of Tibet. For instance, he declares in the book *My Tibet* (1990), “Tibetan feelings about the environment are based entirely on religion.” In statements like this, the Dalai Lama accords with the articulation made by Toni Huber (and others) of how Tibetan identity claims function in the post-diaspora world. Recent identity claims by Tibetan elites in exile have roots in Western imaginings of Shangri-La and thus “represent, at least in part, an appropriation of Western discourse by the objectified Tibetan ‘Other’ and its creative reflection back to the West.” For the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhist identity originates from pre-diaspora Tibet, which exists—at least for his American audiences—primarily as an unattainable, romanticized world. Through his demonstrated interest in and speeches on environmentalism, the Dalai Lama illustrates Tibet’s specialness for those interested

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164 Meg McLagan and Robert Barnett both make similar arguments regarding Tibetan exile identity constructions.


166 For example, the Dalai Lama continues in *My Tibet* to relate, “Our unique environment has strongly influenced us…we have had little anxiety with our vast area, low population, and distant neighbors. We haven’t felt as oppressed as people in many other human communities.” Tenzin Gyatso, “Universal Responsibility and the Environment.”
in conservation—paralleling pre-diaspora notions of Tibet’s geography. In the *EPA Journal* in 1991, he writes, “Tibetans are uniquely familiar with life on the Himalayan Plateau. This has evolved into a long history of a civilization that took care not to overwhelm and destroy its fragile eco-system…A deep reverence for nature is apparent in much of Tibetan art and ceremony.”

In this map, pre-diaspora Tibet is a center for environmentalism and spirituality, and the Dalai Lama figures Tibet’s current situation as sadly incongruous with the map he has created. Here, his speech regarding environmentalism serves as a good example of how he addresses this incongruity. Speaking at the University of Portland in 2013, he alerts his audience that a scientist “mentioned the effect of global warming from Tibetan Plateau is as much as South Pole and North Pole—so he describe Tibetan Plateau as third pole…as Tibetan, it is very, very important to know the delicate situation [sic].” The Dalai Lama portrays Tibet as threatened by the Chinese occupation, which includes a modernization agenda that endangers Tibetan traditional ways of living and as threatened by worldwide issues like global warming.

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167 For instance, the Dalai Lama says, “in the simplicity and quiet of our mountains, there is more peace of mind than in most cities of the world. Since the practice of Buddhism involves seeing phenomena as empty of inherent existence, it is helpful for a meditator to be able to look into the vast, empty space seen from a mountaintop.” Tenzin Gyatso, “An Essay on Mountains,” *Newsweek*, July 16, 1992, accessed March 23, 2014, http://dalailama.com/messages/environment/an-essay-on-mountains.


170 He writes of the “…abundant evidence of the way that Chinese authorities had ruthlessly and systematically tried to destroy our ancient culture.” *Freedom in Exile*, 231. The Dalai Lama cites forced growing of untraditional crops, exploiting of the forests, and population transfer as some of the Chinese atrocities against the Tibetan people. Population transfer especially highlights how the Dalai Lama sees the Chinese occupation as threatening culture: “For the Tibetans to survive as a people, it is imperative that population transfer is stopped…Otherwise, Tibetans will soon be no more than a tourist attraction and relic of a noble past” (ibid., 251).
warming. The Dalai Lama’s Western Buddhist audience (if it takes on his vision) will become personally invested in the political issue of Tibet.

Elsewhere, in a 2006 interview, the Dalai Lama states, “When we talk about Tibet, Tibetan freedom, then…you cannot ignore…because Tibet is a part of the world…everything interconnected [sic].”\(^{171}\) This is particularly ironic, as the Dalai Lama’s mapping of pre-diaspora Tibet as monolithically unspoiled indeed does remove Tibet from the rest of the historical world—in this mapping, Tibet seems to be not a part of this world. Now, the Dalai Lama inserts Tibet back into the world, but he retains the exceptionality of Tibet from earlier imaginings, holding that it is a special enough place that outsiders should care about its fate. He participates in what Meg McLagan explains as exiled Tibetans’ production of “Tibetan culture as a locus of endangered spirituality.”\(^{172}\) Buddhism, as a marketable religion to Westerners, opens as the Dalai Lama’s gateway into garnering political and financial sympathy. After all, the Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, and he takes this role seriously.\(^{173}\)

Surprisingly, the other Tibetan-born teacher under consideration here, Khandro Rinpoche, does not follow in the Dalai Lama’s footsteps at all. Khandro Rinpoche speaks about Tibet in relation to specific lineages and history, but she does not talk about it as a special place, at least with respect to her American audiences.

As the head of a center for Tibetan nuns based in northern India and residing most of


\(^{173}\) “Most important, is the Tibetan people outside as well as inside Tibet. Specially inside. They have trusted me. They put on me lot of hope, so therefore, I have very heavy moral responsibility to look after them, to serve them. So now I am fully committed to struggle for Tibetan survival [sic].” Tenzin Gyatso, quoted in Puri, *Engaged Buddhism*, 170.
the time there, Khandro Rinpoche maintains a strong connection to the Tibetan exiled community. Yet when she addresses her resident students at Lotus Garden (in Virginia), she never shares much about her work outside of the West. For Khandro Rinpoche, it seems that the focus on the political situation of Tibetan exile and diaspora should be separated from the concerns of the spread of Tibetan Buddhism to America. She wishes to separate religion from politics, which, to her, ensures the most authentic construction of Tibetan Buddhism as it enters diaspora. Explaining the pitfalls of early Indian Buddhism, she tells an audience in New York in 2010 that once religion is systematized, it attracts politics: “Any religion or philosophy, any profound teaching, could actually segregate people into what became known as caste systems in India…when systems enter, politics come.”\textsuperscript{174} Removing politics from Tibetan Buddhism, its teachings may avoid a similar degeneration elsewhere. Khandro Rinpoche does not speak about Tibet because she believes Tibetan Buddhism’s teachings fare best in the world when they remain separate from systematization and adaptations.

“Tibet happened. I mean Buddhism in Tibet happened! Tibet was already happening,” Lama Tsultrim tells her students at Tara Mandala, all of them laughing at the factual slip in her teaching on Vajrayāna Buddhism.\textsuperscript{175} While Lama Tsultrim recognizes that she misspoke, the teaching still reveals something about the way she conflates Tibet with its Buddhism. Unlike Khandro Rinpoche, Lama Tsultrim speaks of Tibet as a place set apart. She both constructs Tibetan Buddhism as special in its connection to Tibet and Tibet as special because of its Buddhism. Lama Tsultrim

\textsuperscript{174} Khandro Rinpoche, “Talk Two,” \textit{Concept of Lineage} (Chatham: E-Vam Buddhist Institute, 2010), series of five lectures, compact disc.
\textsuperscript{175} Tsultrim Allione, “Teaching on Vajrayana.”
narrates a Tibetan Buddhist world once centered in Tibet (but, as I will examine in the next section, transitioning now to become centered in America). Lama Tsultrim makes similar claims to the Dalai Lama’s about Tibet’s specialness. In the same teaching on Vajrayāna history, she introduces the concept of *lokapālas*, understood as protectors, guardian spirits, or energies. She tells her students that the protectors are strongly connected to place: “Because Tibet was such an altered state…people had much more of a relationship to the land and to the energy of the land…so the lokapālas were very strong.”

Lama Tsultrim’s imagining of Tibet parallels earlier Western ones, which separated Tibet from the rest of the world. For Lama Tsultrim, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition developed in a spiritually enlightened, energetic place. Tibetan Buddhism offers its Western students something very new, simply because it matured in such a remote environment.

Lama Tsultrim, in agreement with the Dalai Lama’s discourse, conceives of pre-diaspora Tibet as a container of spiritual development. She writes in *Women of Wisdom* in 2000, “With the Tibetans I found a living esoteric tradition that had been carefully transmitted from teacher to disciple, without interruption, for centuries.”

Tibetans, she believes, uniquely suited to cultivating authentic Buddhism, preserved the tradition well. In this, she echoes the “tendency of exile-Tibetans to present themselves as the sole caretakers of Buddhism worldwide.”

She is especially concerned with the relationship of the terma tradition—the discovered teachings, which she inherits as a Nyingma lama—to its Tibetan lineage. Lama Tsultrim writes in her autobiography in *Women of Wisdom*:

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176 Tsultrim Allione, “Teaching on Vajrayana.”
The very existence of the terma tradition and the language of the dakini could only evolve within a culture like that of Tibet which provided an environment for profound spiritual development. Tibet’s high altitudes, vast open spaces, low population, and lack of mechanical devices provided a silence and spaciousness for the meditator, unequalled anywhere in the world. The culture placed a high value on spiritual practice, dreams and oracles guided heads of state, and the messages from the ‘twilight world’ were heeded and valued.  

Lama Tsultrim takes the terma tradition to be uniquely Tibetan; she effectively localizes the tradition and naturalizes the sacredness of Tibet. As a special center, an origin, Tibet hovers above and beyond the historical world. By claiming connection to this Tibet, Lama Tsultrim inherits a religious tradition unlike any other. According to Lama Tsultrim, Tibetan Buddhism offers much to her students because it could not have possibly evolved in a place like America—a place decidedly in history.

**America: Re-Placement**

America provides the setting for the lineage holders’ interactions with their convert audiences. One might expect the teachers to paint America as exceptional for their students, but the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche remain remarkably quiet. Lama Tsultrim, however, speaks frequently about America and Tara Mandala (her retreat center) as places for Tibetan Buddhism. Lama Tsultrim connects the land of America and Tara Mandala to Tibet (as a re-creation of Tibet), and she holds up Tara Mandala as an example for the rest of the West. In imagining America, the Dalai Lama continues with his locative mapping. When he mentions America, he does so to stress that his students should not convert: he tells his 2011 Kālacakra audience in Washington, DC, “Traditionally, America non-Buddhist country…so I always

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emphasis…it is better to keep your own Judeo-Christian faith, and to some extent Muslim. Buddhism very new [sic].”\textsuperscript{180} The Dalai Lama figures America as a place where the dharma does not apply fully (as it does in Tibet). This assertion fits with his emphasis on democracy and diversity.

Although Khandro Rinpoche too remains silent about America, her silence stems from different concerns. Perhaps for her the particularity of America does not warrant speech because Tibetan Buddhism transcends time and place. Far from the tradition not fitting into America, it simply may be transported authentically to any location. Her silence in this way indicates a utopian mapping of Tibetan Buddhism, which expresses “the value of being in no place.”\textsuperscript{181} Instead of placing America within a structured map, Khandro Rinpoche discards the idea of a map altogether. Like Lama Tsultrim, Khandro Rinpoche founded a retreat center in America—a residence second only to her monastery in India—but while Lama Tsultrim often speaks of the origins and importance of Tara Mandala, Khandro Rinpoche is nearly silent on Lotus Garden, located in Stanley, Virginia. She only comments on it when she insists that her students there recognize that “Lotus Garden was meant to be a retreat land. And it is wonderful when there is a deepening of practice and you all spend more time…living and practicing together.”\textsuperscript{182}

Khandro Rinpoche believes Lotus Garden is special not because of its inherent placement (i.e. because of the land’s spiritual energy) but because of the practicing undertaken there. According to Khandro Rinpoche, Tibetan Buddhism, as a method for attaining enlightenment, relies not on a special connection to Tibet or to

\textsuperscript{180} Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 1 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
\textsuperscript{181} Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot,” in Map is Not Territory, 102.
\textsuperscript{182} Khandro Rinpoche, quoted in Haas, Dakini Power, 34.
America. She tells an audience at the 2011 Washington, DC Kālacakra teachings, “You can let go of self-cherishing by sitting in a humid cave for fifteen years and developing arthritis, you can do it by shaving your hair and living in a monastery, or you can do it right here, in the middle of Washington, DC.”

Tibetan Buddhism, for Khandro Rinpoche, constitutes simply one path to discovering the truth the Buddha brought to light, and as such bears no connection to the outer situation of the practitioner. Khandro Rinpoche affirms that her students can authentically engage with Tibetan Buddhism, claiming the validity of the tradition’s coming to America.

Khandro Rinpoche’s remarks contrast with Lama Tsultrim’s mapping of Tibetan Buddhism in America and in her retreat center. Talking about America, Tara Mandala’s land, and ritual space within her retreat center, Lama Tsultrim emphasizes the importance of constructing space and occupying specific places. She constructs Tibetan Buddhism as instructive for her students in its tradition of being particularly tied to place. These students need such instruction, says Lama Tsultrim, because Americans are especially lost in samsāra, the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth, (in “great confusion,” as she says at the top of this chapter), due to their lack of connection to place:

There’s very few Americans who are actually Americans, in the sense that we’re all immigrants, pretty much…so the connection with place is weak with many people, and we move, we move all over the place, and so we often don’t even know the trees or the rivers that are around us—we don’t have a deep-felt connection to place.

In this 2014 webcast, Lama Tsultrim implies that people from elsewhere (i.e. Tibet) are strongly connected to place, whereas America, as a melting pot of immigrants,

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183 Khandro Rinpoche, at the 2011 Washington, DC Kālacakra teachings, quoted in Haas, Dakini Power, 34.
lacks a unified and intuitive sense of place. Such a situation leads to a disconnect from the natural environment. This problem, Lama Tsultrim believes, can be rectified by the introduction of Tibetan Buddhism to America.

Lama Tsultrim considers America to possess great potential to become a Buddhist “container”—a term she uses repeatedly not to emphasize boundaries but to draw attention to the support a container supplies and to differentiate between changing containers that hold the supposedly unchanging dharma. In fact, the teachers all employ “container” to describe a healthy environment for the dharma, but they define the boundaries of these containers differently. While Lama Tsultrim thinks of America—and, more specifically, her retreat center Tara Mandala—as a container for the practice of Tibetan Buddhism, Khandro Rinpoche projects the notion onto the West, and the Dalai Lama describes the whole world as a container (explained later in this chapter). She proposes that for Buddhism to flourish here requires America to follow Tibet’s example. Lama Tsultrim speaks about Native American land and practice often; she co-leads retreats with Native American spiritual leaders. She considers America a land full of spirits (much like Tibet) with which Americans have yet to engage:

I’ve always felt it’s crucial for American Buddhists to relate to the spirits of this new homeland of the dharma. It was not until Padmasambhava had connected with the local spirits of Tibet that Buddhism was able to take root there. For us the Native Americans

185 The container and contained is a metaphor prevalent in Tibetan Buddhist discourse. Institutions, places, and lineages can be containers, as they safely hold the dharma in its entirety. In one explanation of the human mind as a container or pot, teachers accentuate the importance of having an attentive, mindful, and correctly motivated attitude when receiving teachings. If the pot is upside down—a mind not paying attention—or if it is cracked—a mind that is not retentive—or if it is dirty—a mind with impure, selfish motivations—then, the teachings cannot be retained. In any of these iterations, the significance of the container is in its support for the unchanging dharma. I find it difficult to track the specific origins of these container metaphors, but the teachers who explain them include Geshé Namgyal Wangchen and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.
are the people that hold this relationship with the spirits of the land and the elementals.\textsuperscript{186}

For Lama Tsultrim, Tibetan Buddhism may be transported across the globe, not because it transcends place but rather because of the ever-present possibility of a repetition—a distinct feature of Smith’s locative mapping.\textsuperscript{187} Just as Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century harnessed the spiritual energy of the demoness through the construction of temples, Lama Tsultrim wishes to engage with the powerful spirits of the American land in order to channel them into a Tibetan Buddhist landscape. Through this, America will repeat Tibet as the new container for Buddhism.

At Tara Mandala, Lama Tsultrim engages in this opportunity for repetition through connecting to indigenous spirits. She tells her students that Tara Mandala adjoins ancient Native American lands, and she invites Ute and Lakota elders to conduct ceremonies on the land of Tara Mandala in order to connect to the energies.\textsuperscript{188} Within the American landscape, Tara Mandala occupies a central place. Lama Tsultrim’s mapping process continues with an imagining of the Colorado retreat center as both falling into Tibetan tradition—a place in which she and her students perform authentic ritual—and as a special place in itself—a spiritual land with the capacity for miracles. In 1993 Lama Tsultrim and her husband searched for land on which to actualize her vision of a Western retreat center, and when they came


\textsuperscript{187} Smith, “Map is Not Territory,” 309.

\textsuperscript{188} She says in an interview, “When we arrived in 1994, Bertha Grove, a Ute medicine grandmother, came to conduct ceremonies. Over the years Bertha Grove and other Ute elders as well as Lakota teachers like Arvol Looking Horse, Nineteenth Generation Holder of the White Buffalo Calf Pipe, have continued to do ceremonies connecting to the energies of our land.” Tsultrim Allione, “Buddhism and Native American Practices.”
to this land near Pagosa Springs, Lama Tsultrim knew it was the right place. She describes the landscape, “It wasn’t until I climbed the breast-shaped peak and stood on top that I realized this really is a maṇḍala—it has a quality of receptivity and gentleness. This land has a very feminine quality.” A maṇḍala can variously be (in the tradition of Vajrayāna) a map of the cosmos, “a centering template for the psyche,” or the abode of a deity. For the retreat center to be situated on a natural maṇḍala reveals that it mirrors ultimate reality. Lama Tsultrim naturalizes the land’s particular compatibility with Tibetan Buddhism by finding it to be a maṇḍala even before any building of a temple (that would also take shape as a maṇḍala): “I realized that the land was a maṇḍala, and this breast-shaped peak was in the middle. And that was very striking to me because I’d always been very connected to the maṇḍala.”

She authenticates her retreat center’s continuation of the dharma by showing the land to be remarkably compatible with the concept of the maṇḍala.

Lama Tsultrim’s insistence on the importance of place has also guided the construction of her retreat center on the land at Tara Mandala. For instance, Lama Tsultrim designed the temple with the purpose to create a maṇḍala in which the spiritual and physical meet. The physical ritual space is a manifestation of the inner maṇḍala: this is yet another locative mapping, one that invests in “the adequacy of symbolization” that relies on “the correspondence between macro-

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190 Tsultrim Allione, “Teaching on Vajrayana.”

microcosm.” Though here the relationship acts in both ways: not only does the temple at Tara Mandala take after the cosmological maṇḍala, but it also creates that very maṇḍala. Lama Tsultrim explained in 2000—before the temple was built, completed in 2008—“What I’d like to do when we build our meditation hall is to [model] it on the circle with the four directions—the maṇḍala principle…Everyone is always commenting how amazing it is to be in a space where every direction is sacred.” While not a departure from Tibetan Buddhist traditional building styles, Lama Tsultrim’s temple, at least in its significance for her, revises a male-dominated tradition by creating space (literally) for the divine feminine. This space she crafts by choosing feminine land, by dedicating the temple to Tara—a female buddha—and by structuring spaces openly and circularly, which she takes to be more feminine than spaces organized linearly and hierarchically.

The temple at Tara Mandala perfectly illustrates for Lama Tsultrim the coming together of Tibetan Buddhism, the divine feminine, and Native American tradition. She compares the Tibetan maṇḍala to the Native American sweat lodge, both of which are based on the four directions and both of which “include teachings of the integration of masculine and feminine.” These traditions use outward methods and spaces to provoke inward experiences. In Lama Tsultrim’s view, the

192 Smith, “Map is Not Territory,” 309.
194 The original temple on the land at Tara Mandala—called the gompa (dgon pa), a Tibetan term for “temple”—was a large yurt; Lama Tszultrim and her students still use the gompa for some practices. Lama Tsultrim explains the layout of the gompa: “We have a round space and we have the shrine in the middle [of it] instead of at one end…We’re trying to move out of the dominator model into the partnership model…everyone is facing the shrine and everyone is facing each other.” Quoted in Buie, “Space as Mind/Mandala Places,” 384.
195 Tsultrim Allione, “Buddhism and Native American Practices.”
Native American tradition offers a template for how Tibetan Buddhism might best succeed in America—especially in its attunement to place.

Lama Tsultrim imagines America as a place where Tibetan Buddhism has great potential to grow and to remember its connection to place in a time when the tradition has been displaced into diaspora. Such a remembering can begin at Tara Mandala, which Lama Tsultrim models on a “summer encampment, which was traditional in Tibet. People come, receive teachings, and camp in the valleys, and they would go off to their caves and hermitages for the winter.”

In a structured mapping of the landscape, she invokes both Tibetan and American spiritual energies and provides—through her retellings of building the temple at Tara Mandala—a map for her students of how Tibetan Buddhism in America can and should progress. The Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche provide no such map, and they are more generally concerned with the movement of Tibetan Buddhism from “East” to “West” (or from the center “East” to the expanded world, in the Dalai Lama’s case), termed the “westernization” (or, sometimes, “modernization”) of Buddhism. Perhaps the difference can be attributed to Lama Tsultrim’s strong connection to America, her birthplace, residency, and primary place of teaching.

East, West, and Westernization

The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim give meaning to what they term “westernization.” The speakers face a tension: they must both maintain the transcendence of the dharma—by claiming that Tibetan Buddhism is ultimately beyond culture and placement—and make meaningful the displacement and

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replacement of the tradition—by telling their audiences a story that calls attention to placement. Such discussion presents difficulties too because westernization is a concept that clouds its own construction. While Tibetan Buddhism has indeed been re-placed and has attracted a new audience—and (for the teachers and their new audiences) this movement necessarily transforms the tradition—notions of an East/West divide—and subsequent “westernization” of an Eastern religion—construct uncritically the appearance of a stable religious tradition to be transmitted from one monolithic place to another. Particularly regarding discourse of westernization, one must remember that “East” and “West” are culturally formed territories, that the division maps the world in a way that, while seemingly natural, is quite contested. All three speakers use the terms “East,” “West,” and “westernization” to describe the general passage of Tibetan Buddhism from places inside to places outside of traditionally Buddhist countries. “Westernization” refers to the act of making Buddhism accessible to Western audiences. The teachers see themselves as active in advancing this process of westernization.

In imagining the East, West, and westernization, the three speakers must navigate the tension between claiming to map self-evident territory and acting well aware of the construction taking place. All three lineage holders address the development of westernization in ways that create their own authoritative roles as crucial translators (or cartographers, in keeping with J.Z. Smith’s mapping metaphor) charged with transmitting this Eastern tradition successfully to their Western audiences. The Dalai Lama’s speech paradoxically warns about the danger of cross-cultural movements and, at the same time, describes how Eastern spirituality can be
mapped onto the Western part of the world. Explaining, as he often does, the importance of cultural context, the Dalai Lama tells Westerners at his 2011 Sarnath teachings that different religious traditions serve the audiences of their respective contexts: “Thousand years, different part of world, different climate, different heritage, different way of life…it is necessary to have different way of approach, so these different religious traditions developed [sic].” Given this worldview, in which the cultural aspects of religions (remember, for the Dalai Lama, all religions contain essentially the same universal moral principles) reflect necessities of living in specific cultures, the Dalai Lama feels no real urge to bring an Eastern religion West, for the Western forms offer what these audiences need.

Despite this claim, the Dalai Lama imagines the westernization of Tibetan Buddhism as not so much Buddhism adapting to the West (as Khandro Rinpoche and Lama Tsultrim do) but as the West gaining something from Buddhism. In his 2011 Kālacakra teachings, the Dalai Lama develops stereotypical distinctions between East and West; the West outshines the East in its materially and technologically superiority but the territory lacks spirituality. He states, “Now, today I think many parts of world are really facing some kind of moral crisis [sic].” A wealthy materialistic culture produced a moral crisis, arising from greed: economic, materialistic, environmental, and political. This crisis cannot be remedied by anything other than spiritual

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198 Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 2 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”

199 He cites the “global economy crisis” and global warming as results of greed and a lack of principles. Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 2 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
principles—which the East offers—the Dalai Lama argues. The movement that the Dalai Lama maps is not a translation of the entire Buddhist tradition to his Western audiences but rather a contribution from Buddhism to their Western cultural environment. As such, he perceives his role as not to act as lineage holder for his Western audiences but simply to expose them to Tibetan Buddhist spiritual principles—a role quite different from Khandro Rinpoche and Lama Tsultrim’s, who see their responsibility as skillfully translating all of Tibetan Buddhism for practicing Western audiences.

Khandro Rinpoche believes separating an essence of a religion from the culture in which it formed to be possible, but she considers it difficult. In an interview with one of her close students, she contends: “I often hear westerners say how they don’t want to get into the eastern cultural aspects of Buddhism. Now, however, you must be able to separate authentic, essential Buddhist training from western culture.” Here, Khandro Rinpoche warns her students that they should be wary in the process of distinguishing between cultural aspects and the essence of Buddhism. As a Tibetan Buddhist lineage holder, her primary responsibility is to ensure that the true dharma continues wherever she teaches; as Tibetan Buddhism arrives in the West, she follows her lineage in “making sure that the purity is as pure as it was from their teachers…the East always had this.” For Khandro Rinpoche, westernization, if undertaken correctly, will result in the continuation of pure lineage

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200 The Dalai Lama tells his 2011 Kālacakra audience that this “moral crisis” cannot be bought from the market, cannot be cured through modern medicine, and cannot even be erased by law through a good system like America’s. Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 1 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”

201 Khandro Rinpoche, “On Buddhism in the West.”

202 Khandro Rinpoche, “Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche teaches on Nagarjuna text 1.”
from Tibet to the West, in which an unchanging essence is transmitted to a new audience.

In disagreement with the Dalai Lama, who proposes only to expose his audiences to Buddhist principles, Khandro Rinpoche advocates the concrete, *institutional* establishment of the entirety of Tibetan Buddhist tradition in the West. For her imagining to be actualized, she says that Western students must begin to understand the dharma more and practice the dharma in such a way that maybe in the next few years or decade or so, they can continue to actually import the teachings with less and less reliance upon Easterners...And I think that’s the only actual way the fullness of westernization of Buddhism can happen...there is the tendency to be dependent on the Tibetan teachers...if that dependency on the Easterners continues to remain, then the West will only remain to become students for a generation.203

Khandro Rinpoche advocates her Western students gradually taking over the role of continuing the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism in the West—including as teachers.204

The Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche operate under the same assumption that Tibetan Buddhism is a concrete tradition that is beyond culture and thus re-placeable, but this assumption drives them to different conclusions. Whereas the Dalai Lama warns against readily taking on another culture’s tradition, Khandro Rinpoche places responsibility onto her Western students to fully bring Tibetan Buddhism into themselves and thus into the West. She radically authorizes her students by giving them responsibility, and she encourages Tibetan Buddhism’s becoming truly implanted in the West.

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204 Khandro Rinpoche has installed multiple senior teachers at her retreat center, Lotus Garden, in Stanley, Virginia, who live there, take care of the center, and teach most of the retreats.
Khandro Rinpoche situates her students and herself as occupying a very special place. Tibetan Buddhism now rightfully begins to flourish in the West, and this generation of students is the one responsible for the transition. The displacing and interrupting force of exile into diaspora she reinvents into a structured, nearly fated movement. Khandro Rinpoche articulates in a 2009 interview, “It is not just a question of the dharma beginning to flourish in a certain country…the karma of sentient beings…is going through a transition such that the container being formed, in which the future dharma will be held, is fast pointing to the western direction.”

The West inherits Tibetan Buddhism, which Khandro Rinpoche explains in the context of karma, the Buddha’s teaching that moral actions produce effects over time. Though she never states specifically what will happen to India and Tibet in this vision of the westernization of Buddhism, her actions indicate she may be stressing the West’s significance and understating the East’s, perhaps in order for her students to grasp the gravity of their responsibility to fully embrace Buddhism. Nevertheless, Khandro Rinpoche, interviewed in Norway in 2009 about Tibetan Buddhism in the West, explains that, though the dharma does not change, “the context within which it is practiced, that it is able to benefit even more people, I’m sure that will happen.”

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205 Khandro Rinpoche’s imaginings are similar to an oft-quoted text, attributed to Padmasambhava in the eighth century and now read as a prediction, that states, “When the iron bird flies, and horses run on wheels, the Dharma will come to the land of the red faces.” As academics note, it remains unclear where this prophecy originates, and it was not interpreted to refer to airplanes and cars and the West until recently—as far as I can tell, only post-diaspora. See Stephen Batchelor, “Tibet, Tibet,” Martine and Stephen Batchelor (blog), posted January 28, 2000, accessed April 1, 2014, http://www.stephenbatchelor.org/index.php/en/tibet-tibet.
206 Khandro Rinpoche, “On Buddhism in the West.”
207 After all, Khandro Rinpoche spends much of her time cultivating space for Tibetan nuns in India, leading the Mindrolling lineage in India, and funding charitable projects for Tibetan populations in India, Tibet, and surrounding areas. She is far from abandoning Tibet and India in favor of the West—though she does spend the rest of her time promoting and teaching Tibetan Buddhism across Europe and America.
208 Khandro Rinpoche, “Her Eminence Mindrolling Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche.”
In Khandro Rinpoche’s opinion—at least when she speaks to her American students—the West inherits the authentic lineage of Tibetan Buddhist teachings, and provides the new container for a tradition that transcends culture.

Lama Tsultrim imagines the beginnings of diaspora differently. She does not make such a bold claim as Khandro Rinpoche’s, that karmic fruition preordained the diaspora and coming of Tibetan Buddhism to the West. Instead, she tells her students about the early days of diaspora, which she witnessed:

And then suddenly, it was kind of like a bomb exploding, and lamas were flying through the air, [laughter] and some of them landed here, and some of us went there, and so my generation has been in the process of bridging these two cultures, and bringing what we grew up with into interfacing with this ancient system.209

We find the chaos and suddenness—the jolt of diaspora—in this explosion metaphor; Tibetan Buddhism comes to the West not as a result of karmic fruition but from bizarre chance and those who leapt at the occasion, both Tibetan lamas and eager Westerners. Speaking from her perspective as an American-born Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Lama Tsultrim constructs westernization as the work of bringing her own experience living as a Western woman into dialogue with the “ancient system” of Buddhism. She describes the disjunction as the result of diaspora. Here, Lama Tsultrim’s vision could be classified as locative, overcoming rupture by recreating Tibetan Buddhism in the West, in contrast to Khandro Rinpoche’s utopian vision, in which rupture becomes part of a stream of chaotic existence.210

Whereas Khandro Rinpoche’s westernization movement takes place without interruption (for if no map exists, no discrepancy can either), Lama Tsultrim’s

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209 Tsultrim Allione, “Teaching on Vajrayana.”
210 Smith, “Map is Not Territory,” 309.
envisions the work of westernization as *bridging* East to West, smoothing over
disjunction of exile and restoring order to Tibetan Buddhism’s trajectory. In *Women
of Wisdom*, Lama Tsultrim describes her and her students’ roles: “We are a bridge
generation, with one foot in each continent. We must do our best to preserve the
tradition and lineage while honoring the skillful means of bringing these truths to the
West.”

To preserve the tradition will prove difficult but rewarding, she notes: in
this way, Lama Tsultrim operates under the same assumption as the Dalai Lama and
Khandro Rinpoche—that of Tibetan Buddhism as a transcendent tradition that can be
displaced and replaced without being fundamentally altered. Whether offering a bit
of Buddhism to the West, establishing the full Eastern tradition in a new place, or
bridging the two together, the speakers underscore their own roles in the work of
“westernization.”

**World and Environment: Transcending Territorial Distinctions**

While placement matters to the speakers, they hold that ultimately, the dharma
transcends territorial boundaries. Such discourse renders some Tibetan Buddhist
“truths” accessible and applicable across space, though these truths may sometimes
only be accessible through cultural approaches. The Dalai Lama’s discourse
exemplifies the work this displacement accomplishes—he is a global figurehead for
broad causes like nonviolence, environmentalism, and interreligious dialogue. If he
most advocates one particular vision, it is one that seeks to transcend territories: that
of world peace. Such a vision insists, “We must think entire humanity as a part of

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‘we’ [sic].”\textsuperscript{212} Cultural distinctions do not apply when the Dalai Lama talks about the root of suffering: “the way we born, the way we die—no differences. Easterner, Westerner, Southerner…more important, everyone have desire to have a happier life, and desire to less problems…7 billion human beings, each one, every one has right to achieve happy life [sic].”\textsuperscript{213}

The Dalai Lama translates the traditional Buddhist concept of suffering—namely, that simply by living and dying, everyone suffers—as a privileging of universal human experience over cultural placement. Laura Harrington examines this sort of vision in her work on the Kālacakra initiation. She argues that the Dalai Lama “drew from the Buddhist notion of compassion…to promote a secular ethics grounded in non-violence that could serve as a tool for global social transformation,” an ethics that “presumed a supra-territorial vision of humanity.”\textsuperscript{214} The Dalai Lama’s supraterritorial imagining differs from Smith’s utopian mapping in that it does not reject or eliminate mapmaking; instead, it operates more as a map so general as to include everywhere and account for everyone. The Dalai Lama speaks considerably more about the world, the environment, and universal humanity\textsuperscript{215} than either

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{212} Tenzin Gyatso, “Talk to Westerners Attending Sarnath Teachings.”
\item \textsuperscript{215} The Dalai Lama universalizes the human experience, for example in the 2011 Washington, DC Kālacakra preliminary teachings: “Now, seven billion of humanity, everyone want happy life [sic],” Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 2 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.” And again, speaking to Westerners at the Bodh Gaya Kālacakra teachings in 2012: “Now seven billion human beings—mentally, emotionally, physically—we are same. I think simple reason: the way we born, the way we born, no differences [sic],” Tenzin Gyatso, “The Dalai Lama’s Talk to Westerners at the Kalachakra in Bodh Gaya.” The Dalai Lama uses the Buddhist doctrine of cyclic existence (saṃsāra) of birth, death, and rebirth in these discourses.
\end{itemize}
Khandro Rinpoche or Lama Tsultrim, who both address these only insomuch as they note that Buddhism is ultimately beyond place (and beyond mapping).

The Dalai Lama imagines a supraterritorial world when he speaks about the environment. He explains how the Tibetan Buddhist view on the environment can alleviate the global ecological crisis: “Our ancient scriptures speak of the container and the contained. The world is the container—our house and we are the contained—the contents of the container…without the container, the contents cannot be contained. Without the contents, the container contains nothing, it’s meaningless.”

In contrast to Khandro Rinpoche’s or Lama Tsultrim’s containers—figured as the containers of the West and America holding the dharma—the Dalai Lama claims the whole earth as a container for all of human existence. Although he tells his Western audiences over and over that they should remain within their own cultural religious traditions, the Dalai Lama wishes to spread Tibetan Buddhism as a supraterritorial vision for global harmony. He gives the Kālacakra initiation outside of India “to make an effort, on an inner level, in favor of world peace.” To his Western audiences, the Dalai Lama emphasizes not how the tradition may be permanently established in a new place but instead, how Tibetan Buddhist principles may be generalized to coexist with other cultural environments.

Khandro Rinpoche holds that Tibetan Buddhism transcends placement because at the heart of the tradition exists an essence that all human beings can access. As her silence surrounding Tibet and America indicate, Khandro Rinpoche invests in a utopian Tibetan Buddhism that is not particularly placed. She notes,

217 Tenzin Gyatso, Freedom in Exile, 204.
“What Buddhist teachings are teaching is something that is much more to do with human-ness.”²¹⁸ Lama Tsultrim similarly explains that the religion contains a transcendent teaching within a culturally situated tradition. She underscores in a 2014 webcast to her Tara Mandala students that the true point of practicing Buddhism is “noticing, stepping back, resting in the vast awareness, and then seeing, from that point of view, what is happening.”²¹⁹ For both Khandro Rinpoche and Lama Tsultrim, Buddhism’s definitive teaching is about the transcendence of any sort of placement. While in the physical world, Tibetan Buddhism may be placed, displaced, and replaced with a variety of consequences, these teachers hold that ultimately the Buddha’s teachings contain truth accessible to all humans.

End of the Road: Authority and Place

Tibetan Buddhist teachers and lineage holders may have always related their tradition to places, but especially since 1959, when faced with a sudden displacement, teachers in exile and foreign-born teachers have found ways to make diaspora meaningful and to create the appearance of a Tibetan Buddhist tradition that both relies on its Tibetan identity and supersedes placement. Doing so, these teachers tell their audiences stories of Tibet, America, the East and the West, and the ultimate transcendence of place. While the Dalai Lama maps a general narrative of a Tibetan Buddhist world centered in the lost (but re-claimable) Tibet spreading out to a supraterritorial world, Khandro Rinpoche tells a story of a placeless Tibetan Buddhism that happened to be situated in Tibet and in the East, that now comes to the West due to the ripening of

²¹⁸ Khandro Rinpoche, in VanLoo, Khandro: Vrouwelijke Tibetaanse Meester.
cosmic-level karma. Lama Tsultrim imagines Tibetan Buddhism as coming out of a spiritual reserve and into the spiritually dry American environment.

These complex visions work to create meaningful connections between Tibetan Buddhism, places, lineage holders, and their audiences. Their visions vary so much in part because these teachers see their own roles as lineage holders and speakers differently. The Dalai Lama is the head of spiritual Tibet; he works for the Tibetan people inside and outside of Tibet, explicitly claiming this as his primary responsibility. When he speaks to American and Western audiences, he does not address them as part of a budding tradition but as people who may find some benefit from exposure to Tibetan Buddhist principles. Khandro Rinpoche, diverging from the Dalai Lama, speaks from the perspective that Tibetan Buddhism in America and in the West will evolve into an implanted, institutionalized religion—and that her students will be the inheritors. Khandro Rinpoche seems to separate her connections to Tibet and India from her connections to America and the West. She takes her role as lineage holder in the West very seriously, and she feels a responsibility for establishing a strong tradition in America. In this respect, she agrees with Lama Tsultrim, who also speaks as if Tibetan Buddhism will become its own religious tradition in America. Yet Lama Tsultrim differs in that she is an American-born teacher, with connections to Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora less direct than those of the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche. Her primary connection to Tibet is through Tibetan Buddhism; place, for her, draws connections between here (America) and there (Tibet).
All three teachers attempt to provide Tibetan Buddhism authority in the eyes of their audiences by drawing and overcoming connections between the tradition and its places. Their speech reflects a tension that religious actors must face in claiming a religion’s authority. On the one hand, the religion transcends cultural, secular, and political place; on the other, the religious vision of place mingles among—and must contend with—these others. Places, humanly invented, provide the three speakers with resources in their discursive creation of a Tibetan Buddhism in America. The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tulsrim create meaning for themselves and their audiences through the ways in which they portray the tradition as displaced and re-placed.
The tragic nature of all diasporas lies in the need to preserve at all costs the memory of what the exiled culture seeks to recover rather than being free to respond creatively to the demands of a complex historical world in which they are vitally involved.

-Stephen Batchelor\(^{220}\)

Mindrolling lineage is understood by scholars and learned masters as a lineage that is interspersed in everything that we do, particularly when it comes to the tradition of Vajrayāna Buddhism.

-Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche\(^{221}\)

Author Stephen Batchelor writes about the popular and academic constructions—by both exiled Tibetans and Westerners—of monolithic Tibet, interpreting these portrayals aimed at sympathetic Western audiences as the result of diasporic nostalgia. In diaspora, he argues, memory takes on the utmost importance as a mode of preserving tradition. Batchelor’s assessment of remembering’s place in Tibetan Buddhism in diaspora juxtaposes memory and historical time. For Batchelor, exiled Tibetans remain stuck in the past (in memory), unable to fully participate in the ever-flowing stream of historical time. However, this conclusion ignores the complexities of remembering in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The work of the three

\(^{220}\) Batchelor, “Tibet, Tibet.”

\(^{221}\) Khandro Rinpoche, “Talk One,” Concept of Lineage.
lineage holders demonstrates the variety of responses to the present situation of
diaspora, a position demanding appearances of continuity and authenticity. In his
article that agrees with Batchelor’s thesis, Paul Valliere (falling in line with much of
religious studies) suggests about religious tradition, “Memory defies time and change.
‘Remember!’ is the first commandment of tradition.” This firmly implanted
Western vision of religious tradition as rejecting or transcending time—seeking to
overcome the changes of history—does not fully explain Tibetan Buddhist speakers’
imaginings of the past. Instead, one might say that memory interacts with historical
time and change, that it is created and recreated as a response to the continued
experience of historical time. Sometimes this response is one of rejection (à la
Valliere), but sometimes it is one of adaptation. The interaction of memory with
history creates the appearance of a religious tradition that transcends time and, paradoxically, works to construct a meaningful historical time. Memory as such is
much more adaptable, as a tool for religious speakers, than either Batchelor or
Valliere seem to consider.

The three Tibetan Buddhist speakers employ narratives of the past as they do
texts and places—as resources. These narratives provide particularly useful
resources, as Satlow notes, because it is “the perception of continuity…that stands at
the heart of tradition,” and this perception depends on linking the past, present, and
future. Narratives of the past are also particularly malleable resources for these
lineage holders, as they present to American audiences a tradition that is not a part of
American collective history. The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama

(Detroit: MacMillan Reference USA, 2005), 9268.
Tsunltrim narrate the beginnings and trajectory of Tibetan Buddhist tradition through time. In order to do so, they rely on ways of imagining the past found throughout Tibetan Buddhist historiography—and they face questions that have plagued past speakers in Buddhism and other religions. What is our relationship to the past? To the future? What is the relationship of history to experience? How can time be made meaningful? These Tibetan Buddhist speakers especially invoke the discourse of lineage as they mold the narrative past. The attempts of the Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim to create a usable past reveal a tension between privileging individual experience and needing to establish the appearance of a continuous, historical tradition. These speakers fashion meaning through their narrations of the past, primarily by imagining for their students the history of Tibetan Buddhism and by explaining the system of lineage. I understand these pasts as meaningful in that they contribute to the present and future, placing both the lineage holders and their students against a backdrop of the human experience of time. Before charting the speakers’ narratives, this chapter will articulate historical trends in Tibetan Buddhist ideas of history, myth, and time, and it will consider the work done on this subject by Western academics thus far.

Narrations of Pasts in Tibetan Buddhism

The structure of time and history in Tibetan Buddhism has garnered very little academic attention, a surprising dearth given the glut of theory regarding time and religion-at-large. In order to understand what history entails for traditional Tibetan Buddhism, we must examine both Buddhist ideas of history and Tibetan ones. In
early Buddhism, one finds no sign of a systematic concept of history as understood in a Western context. As Jan Nattier notes, early Indian Buddhism does not posit decisive historical events as monotheistic religions do—even the Buddha’s enlightenment simply exposes truths already present, and his experience, far from being singular, is infinitely repeatable. We may ask, then, whether the concept or term “history” exists for Indian Buddhism—which Tibetan Buddhism inherits—at all. Nattier delineates two types of literature that may be viewed as historical: lineage charts and schemes of past and future Buddhas. She rejects lineage charts as historiographies, as they serve primarily “to assert the unchanging” nature of the teachings; in the Buddha schemes, however, we find a sense of the difference time makes. Nattier concludes that the concept of “history” in early Indian Buddhism exists, although historiographies—writings specifically concerned with recording history—do not. Within writings on the past and future Buddhas, we discern ideas that human actions have effects on the passage of time and that time can be broken into distinct periods of past, present, and future.

Regardless of such concepts, early Indian Buddhists showed little interest in historiography. When Buddhism took root in Tibet, however, a preoccupation with history led to the production of copious historiographic literature, including biographies and autobiographies. Mostly commissioned by Buddhist elites and written by Buddhist monks and lamas, this literature is largely religious in character,

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225 Ibid., 135-136, 139-140.
much of it concerned with the history of Buddhism. A.I. Vostrikov, appraising an extensive bibliography of Tibetan historical literature, finds the history of Tibet primarily framed as the history of the spread of Buddhism. While there is no exact term for “historiography” in Tibetan, a clearly marked historiographic literature exists, categorized, for instance, as “records,” “royal chronology,” or “religious chronicle.” With the emergence of a Tibetan Buddhist tradition, historiographies became increasingly common.

Western academics tend to draw a neat distinction between history and myth. As Russell McCutcheon explains, the modernist religious studies approach to myth has presumed that “one can somehow perceive and distinguish between reality as it really is, on the one hand, and reality as it happens to be (mis)represented, on the other.” Neither historical Tibetan Buddhists nor the three speakers in this thesis have invested in such a clean split between what has actually happened at precise historical dates and narratives of the past of a religious or less exacting nature; between “objective” (or evidenced) history and myth, hagiography, and narratives less concerned with historical validity. Vostrikov observes that myth and fact merge together in Tibetan historical literature; James Burnell Robinson posits that Tibetan Buddhist biographies are best considered hagiographies. Timothy Barrett similarly argues that the Buddhist concept of history includes what Western academics would

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228 These titles introduce certain texts from the eleventh to twelfth centuries. Some of these present not dated accounts but instead roughly chronological narratives of events. Van der Kuijip, “Tibetan Historiography,” 42.
consider as not just history but as myth and future visions as well. Although in English the speakers use the term “history,” no Tibetan term translates as such.

Instead of “myth” or “history,” the term “usable past” may better classify the narratives I seek to examine. The speakers’ narratives are not “disinterested history,” but at the same time, they are not ahistorical myths. To the extent that the speakers are invested in significant human action, in time that distinctly delineates present from past and future, and in how the Buddhist tradition and their particular lineages have (and will) continue in human time, they create narratives that may be deemed historical. Yet to the extent that the speakers do not concern themselves with the specific historicity or truth of the pasts they narrate, their creations cannot strictly be classified as historiographies. As I argue, they are “usable pasts,” understood as narratives interested in making the present and future meaningful through remembering the past. The usable past parallels Robinson’s Tibetan Buddhist hagiography that functions both horizontally and vertically: whereas the “vertical dimension of myth” works to make the human transcendent, the horizontal (paradoxically) “anchors” the myth, presents it as part of continuous history, and affirms “the sacred in the process of history in which we all live.”

The usable past invests not in precise recording of historical events but rather, in remembering as a

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231 For example, the jātaka tales, stories of the Buddha’s past lives, were never placed in historical time—never given a historical date or even period—but nevertheless were taken to be a part of (vast cosmological) history. Other stories and myths function as historiography, invoked as narratives of the past relevant to the present. Timothy Barrett, “History,” in Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 128-9.

232 Nattier, Once Upon a Future Time, 140. As Nattier suggests, history interested (early Indian) Buddhists only to the extent that understanding it may lead to the end of suffering. There was no concept of “disinterested history,” in writing down history for the sake of recording it. However, as Nattier asks, we may ask ourselves whether there does exist truly any historiography that is disinterested.

tool for the Buddhist path and for the authorization of the tradition and the lineage holder.

Central to the construction of Tibetan Buddhist usable pasts is the discourse of lineage. All Buddhist traditions stress the importance of systems of lineage, but only the Tibetan Buddhist system includes reincarnated teachers. Tibetan tradition takes lineage to be absolutely necessary to the continuity and authenticity of its teachings. Barrett and scholar of Tibetan Buddhism John Powers agree that the lineage system has primarily functioned to limit and control interpretations of doctrine and history. Lineages traced to the beginning of Buddhism preserve the teachings passed on from master to master in an unbroken chain. The concept of lineage paradoxically rests on both the value of collective (Tibetan) history and the significance of the transmission of Tibetan Buddhist teachings through individual connections between teacher and student.²³⁴ When reincarnation narratives construct lineages, they bridge past and present. All Tibetan Buddhist narratives of lineage operate in much the same way as the Nyingma terma narratives²³⁵ as described by Janet Gyatso: not as a “collapse of the historical into the primordial” but as “the construction of a link, a bridge” between the time of the Buddha, the golden age during which the treasure was hidden, and the time when the treasure is revealed.²³⁶ Narratives of lineage bridge time and authorize

²³⁴ Powers, Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, 311.
²³⁵ Terma narratives are the “hidden treasures” of the Nyingma order; Padmasambhava and his disciples hid these teachings in the golden age of Tibetan Buddhism, and treasure-discoverers (reincarnated masters) reveal them at the correct time in order to revitalize the tradition. They thus link the time of the discovery to the time of Padmasambhava (when the teachings were hidden) and to the time of the Buddha (when they came to be).
speakers. The lineage holders’ usable pasts rely on their rememberings of both the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and their particular lineages.

Re-Enchantment: Western Academics Narrate Tibetan Buddhism

*Re-enchantment: Tibetan Buddhism Comes to the West* is the title of Jeffrey Paine’s 2004 book written for a popular audience. The idea of a re-enchantment permeates a great deal of scholarship on Tibetan Buddhism’s trajectory to the West, a path that, looking back, academics deem nearly destined. It would be easy to follow Paine and, reflecting on the past, declare that Tibetan Buddhism came to America at just the right time, the hippie era. That Tibetans fled to exile is unfortunate, but the timing is incredible: as Paine phrases it, “Not long after the Dalai Lama fled Tibet there began not the sixties but The Sixties!” Narratives like this one paint Tibetan Buddhism arriving in America in the late twentieth century as miraculous. Paine notes too that “equally inexplicable was the young Dalai Lama’s peculiar interest in the West,” an interest that led him to “secretly teach himself English” before he came into contact with any Westerners. The success of Tibetan Buddhist lamas in America seems so unlikely that some scholars have treated it as just that—exceptional and perhaps inexplicably miraculous. Resting in the inexplicability, one no longer feels compelled to examine the complex historical and social motivations and consequences of Tibetan Buddhism in America. This chapter seeks to challenge such easy restfulness: the three teachers sometimes similarly present the history of their tradition as destined or inexplicable, and these claims must be examined in order to

238 Ibid., 190.
understand the intricacy of their positions as Tibetan Buddhist teachers speaking to American audiences at this particular time in history.239

This chapter brings into conversation the Tibetan Buddhist speakers’ narratives and recent religious studies scholarship on myth and narrative. Russell McCutcheon, for one, challenges more traditional understandings of the creation of myth as being anything other than an ordinary collective process. McCutcheon problematizes a common definition of “myths as truth,” as in stories that hold sacred, believed, or deeply felt meaning for a group. Mircea Eliade’s formulation of myth, for example, proposes that these narratives provide exemplary models for all human activity.240 Myth, for Eliade, supplies a template that human groups seek to repeat, and it conveys static truths that guide these groups through the changing world. The problem with this definition, argues McCutcheon, is that when we understand myth as a product, the process of mythmaking disappears and myths become “self-evidently meaningful things” that scholars interpret. In order to study how myths may actually generate truth, McCutcheon asks, “Might it not be that a group of people fabricate their most important meanings by means of myth?”241 Myth is not a product but a process, the toil of making something seem self-evident, and a labor that takes place in historical time.

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239 Although the three lineage holders invoke and utilize endemic Tibetan ideas about the past, exactly what they share with their Western audiences they certainly direct to them intentionally. Scholar of historic and contemporary Tibet Tsering Shakya notes, “There are…differences in the means of mobilization among Tibetans and the campaign tactics used in the West. There is no attempt by the Dalai Lama, or any other lama, to mobilize Tibetans through an appeal to Buddhist modernism or a rediscovery of a classical age of Buddhism.”239 What may appear to be traditional or self-evident accounts of the past of Tibetan Buddhism and lineages are not always so. Tsering Shakya, “Who are the Prisoners?,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 69, no. 1 (March 2011), http://www.academicroom.com/article/who-are-prisoners.

240 McCutcheon, “Myth,” 197.

241 Ibid., 199.
In agreement with McCutcheon, the Tibetan Buddhist speakers’ narratives about their tradition and lineages are strategies and products by which the speakers create meaning for themselves and their students in post-diaspora Tibetan Buddhism. J.Z. Smith describes myth as a “strategy for dealing with a situation,” a definition that conveys that myths are never stable over time but instead, constitute a “reasonable response to the inevitable social disruptions, contradictions, and incongruities that characterize the ordinary human condition.”

Looking back to Re-enchantment, it would seem that Paine himself is caught under the spell of myth, in which history is made to be self-evident, or (as Benedict Anderson says of nationalism) chance is transformed magically to destiny.

This chapter seeks to chart how the three Tibetan Buddhist speakers create usable pasts, both collective—of Tibetan Buddhism—and particular—of their own lineages. This process contributes to the appearance of continuity and authenticity as Tibetan Buddhism takes root in a new place and invests meaning in the present and future. As I will examine, the term “usable past” functions much as McCutcheon’s myth does; both involve processes of making meaning and authorizing the world of the speakers. The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim, while often drawing upon traditional figuring and rhetoric of Tibetan Buddhism’s past, react to and adapt these narratives for new audiences.

242 Smith, “Map is not Territory,” 299.
Tradition: Three Usable Pasts

One: The Dalai Lama’s Narrative

“Yellow hat, black hat, red hat,” the Dalai Lama lists the colors that have traditionally distinguished the Tibetan Buddhist orders, “Our beloved teacher, Buddha Śākyamuni, no hat [sic].”245 The distinction drawn between sectarian Tibetan Buddhism with its hats—as if the orders’ differences may be simplified to the color of their ritual hats—and Buddha, the ultimate nonsectarian, who sanctions none of these hats, draws a chuckle out of the Dalai Lama and his 2011 Washington, DC Kālacakra audience. Though this statement is historically accurate, one must ask what the Dalai Lama gains from bringing ritual hats and the Buddha into conversation. The two time periods he contrasts are quite removed from one another, and the comparison rests on many unspoken assumptions. By selectively highlighting the Buddha’s nonsectarianism, the Dalai Lama frames his prominent support of the Rimé movement as a return to a more authentic Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim all posit pure pasts of Tibetan Buddhism—ones that make time significant and, at the same time, show the tradition to surpass the confines of history. While the substance of their narratives varies, the lineage holders each cultivate a sense of collective history connecting the Buddha to post-diaspora placement in America.

The Dalai Lama’s narrative originates with Sanskrit Buddhism. The “Sanskrit Buddha-dharma” forms the base for all Buddhisms, he discloses to his same 2011

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245 Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 2- Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.” In Tibetan Buddhism, on special occasions monks and practitioners wear ritual hats. The color of these varies by order: Gélukpas wear yellow hats; Kagyüpas wear, depending on the lineage, black or red hats; and Sakyapas and Nyingmapas wear red hats.
Kālacakra audience. He emphasizes that the Sanskrit texts contain two truths that all four Tibetan Buddhist schools of thought accept. That the Dalai Lama stresses this as the pure, golden age of the Buddha-dharma is quite deliberate, a response to the current situation of Tibetan Buddhism in diaspora. With this repetitive and simple narrative of a Sanskrit origin for all Buddhisms, the Dalai Lama can advocate nonsectarianism both between Tibetan Buddhist orders and among other Buddhist traditions. Claiming that Tibetan Buddhism evolved out of Sanskrit traditions streamlines history, ignoring the Chinese influence on Tibet’s Buddhism in favor of the Indic. The Dalai Lama’s narrative supports his own causes of nonsectarianism and Tibetan freedom from the Chinese. It also appeals to his audience of Westerners: the study of philosophical texts (along with meditation derived from it) is one of the hallmarks of Western convert Tibetan Buddhism. Focusing on the Sanskrit text—philosophical, not ritual—the Dalai Lama plays into the idea, most popular in the West, that cultural additions have diluted the Buddha’s essential teachings over the years.

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246 Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 1 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
247 Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 2 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.” The two truths are the truths of ultimate and relative reality. The ultimate truth for Mahāyāna Buddhism is (nonconceptual) emptiness, which most people do not experience. The relative truth is the conventional, commonsensical, conceptual truth in which we operate daily. These truths are not, however, hierarchically ranked but rather both always true.
248 The Dalai Lama follows tradition here: Tibetans have historically preferred (nominally, at least) Indic Buddhism to Chinese. In the early dissemination period, factions developed; two distinct approaches arose, “the gradualist, scholastic, intellectualist approach of the Indians, and the sudden-enlightenment, ineffabilist, anti-analytical approach of the Chinese.” According to popular history, a debate was organized, and the Indian side won. Regardless of the accuracy of such accounts, Chinese Buddhism clearly influenced aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. Cabezón, “Tibetan Buddhist Society,” 92-93.
249 Though also an idea present in Buddhism before it came west. As Barrett notes, “the beguiling but simplistic notion that the stream is always purer the nearer one approaches its source was not solely the product of the Reformation in Europe.” Buddhists too have tended to posit a mythical or pristine origin for their tradition. Barrett, “History,” 127.
Responding to a historical question and Western students currently disposed to treat the authenticity of teachings as a matter of historicity, the Dalai Lama portrays Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna history in an entirely different manner. According to Buddhist tradition, the Buddha’s followers first debated the historical authenticity of these teachings at several councils in the centuries after the Buddha’s death.\textsuperscript{250} The Dalai Lama responds to a simple question: why wouldn’t the Buddha have given teachings on Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna during his lifetime if he considered them to be part of the dharma? Instead, distinctively Mahāyāna texts began to appear around the first or second century CE, and Vajrayāna’s tantric teachings emerged centuries later.\textsuperscript{251} The Dalai Lama addresses the authenticity of these teachings by privileging substance over placement in time. Other Buddhists have employed such arguments for authenticity of these teachings; for instance, Gyatso explains that the efficacy of a text (in bringing its readers closer to enlightenment), and whether its message conformed to Buddhist ideas of truth, was regarded as proof of its authenticity, rather than valid historical origins or authorship.\textsuperscript{252} The Dalai Lama relates to his audience at the 2011 Kālacakra teachings that when people were wondering whether the Buddha taught Mahāyāna,

Nāgārjuna’s explanation is very good; he mentioned finally, the Mahāyāna is infinite altruism and wisdom, so what is wrong? This is very true. If…such wonderful teaching not taught by Buddha but later his followers created, that sounds strange. So, indirectly, we have to accept second Buddha or third Buddha [sic].\textsuperscript{253}

\textsuperscript{250} Charles Hallisey, “Councils,” in \textit{The Encyclopedia of Buddhism}, ed. Damien Keown and Charles S. Prebish (London: Routledge, 2007), 250-252. While modern scholars doubt many records of these councils, the importance here is that Buddhist histories include the councils.

\textsuperscript{251} Powers, \textit{Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism}, 102-103.

\textsuperscript{252} Gyatso, “The Logic of Legitimation,” 105.

\textsuperscript{253} Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 3 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
The Dalai Lama repeats a common Mahāyāna understanding that the Mahāyāna teachings are so profound that they must come from a Buddha.\textsuperscript{254} Rather than questioning whether Śākyamuni taught Mahāyāna during his historical lifetime, we must accept that—regardless of who first revealed specific teachings—they all originated with Śākyamuni.\textsuperscript{255}

The Dalai Lama does not ignore historical dates; he merely deems them of little importance. He explains Tantrayāna’s roots at the 2011 Kālacakra: “I don’t think the Vajrayāna teachings need to be confined to the conventional time of Buddha’s lifetime.”\textsuperscript{256} The Buddha, as he is enlightened, does not live only for a conventional period of time and then completely disappear.\textsuperscript{257} The Dalai Lama reinforces his argument by drawing attention to the absurdity of believing the Buddha’s death marked the end of his teachings: for eons before buddhahood, Śākyamuni lived as a bodhisattva (a being on track for enlightenment), so why should the attainment of buddhahood be the end of him? On the one hand, the Dalai Lama stresses the importance of Sanskrit texts (as the earliest texts) and on the other, he posits a Buddha that (while historically anchored) acts unconstrained by human time and whose teachings remain always available.

\textsuperscript{254} According to Gyatso, by the time of the first Māhāyana texts, the efficacy of the content of a text (in bringing readers to enlightenment) was a much more important criterion for the authenticity of these texts than historical veracity. Doctrines of buddha nature and the proliferation of past and future Buddhas expand the capacity for others besides Śākyamuni to produce authentic teachings. Gyatso, “The Logic of Legitimation,” 105.

\textsuperscript{255} Śākyamuni is the only Buddha in recent memory. In Mahāyana tradition we find a large pantheon of future Buddhas prophesied to arrive. Maitreya will be next, slated to arrive either 5.6 billion or 560 million years after Śākyamuni. Nattier, Once Upon a Future Time, 26.

\textsuperscript{256} Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 3 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”

\textsuperscript{257} The Buddha is an unconventional human being because of his enlightenment. Any enlightened being would be unconstrained by conventional human experience of time. The rest of us—unenlightened beings—remain trapped in the conceptual framework of human time.
Still, the Dalai Lama imagines these ever-available teachings as increasingly difficult to access. McCutcheon describes one function of myth to be, “By means of a disguised or undetected ideological slippage, ‘is’ becomes ‘ought.'” In the Dalai Lama’s narrative of Tibetan Buddhism’s more recent trajectory, “is” becomes “ought not.” While he praises masters like Padmasambhava for bringing Buddhism to Tibet, and acknowledges Tibet’s Buddhism as flourishing for many centuries, the Dalai Lama often illustrates for his Western audiences Tibetan Buddhism’s present shortcomings:

Buddhism become too much like fashion, too much rituals…without knowing the meaning, and not much serious…we must be realistic, should not follow our traditional way…something like blind faith—that outdated…I can’t blame those people who describe Tibetan Buddhism as Lamaism, because in this society, so much sort of importance about lama. That also due to lack of knowledge [sic].

Tibetan Buddhism’s current faults include its overemphasis on ritual, ignorance when it comes to meaning of the rituals, and excessive devotion to and reliance on lamas and tulkus (reincarnated teachers). For his Western audiences, the Dalai Lama renders these characteristics, which describe primarily lay Tibetan forms of Buddhism, undesirable. It is likely no coincidence that these correspond to the hesitancies Westerners have expressed about Tibetan Buddhism, seen as the most mystical, ritualized Buddhism with an uncomfortable emphasis on guru devotion. The system, the Dalai Lama says, is completely outdated. These sentiments authorize the Dalai Lama’s causes, such as the democratization of the Tibetan government-in-exile and Western education for monastics. For his Western audiences, they validate the Western emphasis on texts and knowledge as the true Buddhism, as well as the

258 McCutcheon, “Myth,” 204.
259 Tenzin Gyatso, “Day 2 – Kalachakra Preliminary Teachings.”
hesitancy surrounding the guru system. The usable past that the Dalai Lama recounts to his Western audience authorizes, thus supporting McCutcheon’s argument that myth does not get authorized but instead authorizes the world of its users. The past as the Dalai Lama remembers it authorizes his work as continuing tradition and transporting Tibetan Buddhism back to its pure origin.

Two: Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche’s Narrative

Khandro Rinpoche similarly constructs a near-perfect Buddhism at the time of the Buddha that became gradually diluted. The substance and emphasis, however, differ from the Dalai Lama’s. Khandro Rinpoche narrates the Buddha’s discovery of the truth and the subsequent complex history of that truth becoming increasingly ritualized and institutionalized. For Khandro Rinpoche, the importance of the past lies in one’s ability to embody it: an individual’s present experience and the tradition’s history become collapsed in the true practice of the dharma. It all begins with the Buddha (naturally—until one considers Lama Tsultrim’s narrative below). The Buddha reveals a truth that was always available, and he is significant because his experience is repeatable. Khandro Rinpoche explains to an audience of students at a retreat in upstate New York in 2010, “We find Buddha, in his life, trying very hard not to systematize Buddhism. That’s why he refused teachings to be documented—not to make it into a system. So that it doesn’t become like a rule of law.” Instead of establishing himself as a founder of an institutionalized religion, Śākyamuni wandered around for forty-five years and instructed his followers to not

write down what he said. Like the Dalai Lama’s Buddha who does not wear a hat, Khandro Rinpoche’s Buddha, who actively fought systematization, serves to emphasize the pure simplicity of the historic point of Buddhism’s origin. Khandro Rinpoche, in agreement with many Rimé lamas, stresses the efficacy of individual experience over institutionalized education and study—and this Buddha confirms her sentiment. Such an origin also functions to mark the Buddha’s teachings as transcending institutions and other cultural accretions, rendering them fully available to the West.

Like the Dalai Lama’s narrative in which Tibetan Buddhism accretes too many rituals and excess focus on outer forms, in Khandro Rinpoche’s past a pure, transcendent essence of the dharma in time becomes enshrouded by an increasingly complex outer system. Unlike the Dalai Lama’s value judgment that renders this movement bad (or “ought not”), Khandro Rinpoche expresses ambivalence. Although she understands the Buddha’s teaching as “the fundamental truth,” it is not easily accessible to anyone in this saṃsāric world. Instead, “the whole emphasis of the journey of meditation or anything that today has become Buddhism is targeted and oriented towards how we can discipline our own mind” so that we may see the truth.  

While Khandro Rinpoche still distinguishes between an essential origin (at the historical Buddha’s enlightenment) and later cultural accretions, the narrative is no longer one of degeneration but instead, one of necessary adaptation.

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263 Khandro Rinpoche’s narrative agrees with many Western Buddhist teachers’ figuring of the trajectory of the tradition. For instance, Stephen Batchelor, at an American Buddhist conference, says, “It seems to me that as we look at Buddhism historically, we find that it continuously loses its agnostic
provides support to Khandro Rinpoche’s imagining of the dharma as an incredibly difficult path—one that necessitates cultural accretions.

In Vajrayāna, the practitioner invests all this energy in order to transform their perspective. Khandro Rinpoche suggests that if a student finds Tibetan Buddhist history invalid or impossible, they should attempt to transform their perspectives through this uneasiness: in other words, posited history can be a tool for moving beyond human conceptions of time. When Khandro Rinpoche introduces her students to the lives of great masters—especially Padmasambhava—she confronts the seeming lack of historicity in their biographies (as she calls them). She responds similarly as the Dalai Lama does when he authenticates Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna by offering a lifetime for the Buddha that transcends historical time. At a 2011 public teaching in Santa Fe, Khandro Rinpoche distinguishes a “complex way” of approaching human time when she relates the life of Padmasambhava:

I remember going to my teacher, His Holiness Trichen Rinpoche, and asking him, ‘how is it possible that he did all these things, is it really true?’ and Rinpoche said, ‘yes, it is very true. Why is it not possible? He lived 3,600 years!’ So when I talk about a complex way of approaching biography or the life of Padmasambhava, this is what I mean. We find him emanating in many different ways; we find him living for very long periods of time.264

What exactly does a complex approach to Padmasambhava’s life entail? Unlike some teachers, who allegorize many doctrines and stories of Tibetan Buddhism for their Western audiences—throwing out the idea of their historical bearing—Khandro

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264 Khandro Rinpoche, “Downpour of Blessings.”
Rinpoche maintains the historical legitimacy of Padmasambhava’s biography. At the same time, she does not hold that it is historical in the conventional sense of the word. Rather, she believes that the story becomes true when one perceives it through this complex approach. Khandro Rinpoche says, later on in the same teaching, that although teachers in the West tend to portray his life allegorically, “if you look at it from the perspective…let’s see Padmasambhava as a non-vegetarian and in contrast to that, I will refer to Buddha as a vegetarian figure.”²⁶⁵ Whereas the Buddha taught a difficult but simple truth of the elimination of clinging, Padmasambhava taught the same truth through more powerful, even magical, methods. Khandro Rinpoche imagines the early tantric period masters were so strangely powerful that they could perform miracles. Yet she does not condemn miracles to a distant past, for even her father performed such acts.²⁶⁶ Accepting the truth of Padmasambhava’s life is not a matter of history versus miracle and myth but instead a different level of viewing the past—one that moves beyond the confines of myth or history. The usable past is significant for Khandro Rinpoche because it brings practitioners to the path and renders the Buddha’s experience repeatable.

Khandro Rinpoche’s usable past may be viewed to directly influence the practitioner’s own life. If Padmasambhava’s incredible powers inspire one to practice dharma, then their effects have verified their truth. Truth, in the sense Khandro Rinpoche speaks of, is productive. She advises her students at a 2010 retreat, “Source is the same. Parallel to the Buddha’s own life, each one of you who practices

²⁶⁵ Khandro Rinpoche, “Downpour of Blessings.”
²⁶⁶ In Concept of Lineage, Khandro Rinpoche remembers a time when her father miraculously dropping a glass from a great height without the glass breaking as it landed. She also deems the Mindrolling lineage’s continued influence in the Buddhist world miraculous.
buddha-dharma goes through same process…you did not come to this point in your life when you are able to relate to the dharma accidentally [sic].”

Khandro Rinpoche proceeds to explain that the jātaka tales (stories of the Buddha’s previous lives as a bodhisattva) do not simply recount the Buddha’s previous lifetimes. They serve primarily to remind each person who comes to the dharma that they have commenced on the same path towards enlightenment that Buddha Śākyamuni took centuries ago. Here, distinctions between experience and history collapse, and the past becomes one great template for each student’s path to enlightenment. Khandro Rinpoche creates a usable past in the strictest sense of “usable”: she presents the past to the student to be used, to be repeated, to be embodied.

Three: Lama Tsultrim Allione’s Narrative

Almost every Tibetan Buddhist teacher’s narration of the past would begin with Śākyamuni Buddha. After all, he was the founding figure of the tradition. Lama Tsultrim’s discourse surprises because she mentions the Buddha so infrequently. She leads a Three Yāna Retreat at Tara Mandala annually, a month-long Buddhist history lesson in which she devotes the first week to the Buddha’s life. However, she openly admits that the Buddha is not her focus. When interviewed about her temple at Tara Mandala, she replied, “If the Dalai Lama walked in here, the first thing he would ask is, ‘Where is the Buddha?’”

More recently, she placed a Buddha statue on the main altar, but the statue was installed more as an afterthought than as a focal point to the student to be used, to be repeated, to be embodied.

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268 Tsultrim Allione, quoted in Haas, Dakini Power, 251.
When not teaching the Three Yāna Retreat, Lama Tsultrim’s narrative of Buddhist history begins after the Buddha’s time; it originates when the feminine enters Buddhism at the birth of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Lama Tsultrim creates a usable past in which the true Vajrayāna encompasses feminine wisdom, lost through centuries of patriarchal institutionalization. Like the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche, she acquaints her students with a golden age of Buddhism, but hers is placed differently, and her narrative works to distinguish Tibetan Buddhism from other Buddhisms, the opposite of the Dalai Lama’s nonsectarian emphasis.

“It was like an eruption into Buddhism; nothing like it had come before,” Lama Tsultrim says of the early period of Vajrayāna. Whereas the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche consider the Buddha’s discovery of the truth as the defining moment for all Buddhisms, Lama Tsultrim constructs the turning point in history as the feminine entering Buddhism. In the first case, the Buddha’s renunciation and simplistic routine constitute the lifestyle to be emulated by his followers. In the second, instead of renunciation, Lama Tsultrim writes in *Women of Wisdom* in 2000, the truth can be discovered through sacred sexuality, dance, poetry, and women. In this feminine approach—in which desires are not rejected (a masculine reaction) but accepted as a tool—we must “go beyond all our limitations, even the limitations imposed by the Buddha” in order to rid ourselves of the good habitual patterns as well

First, the temple is not a temple to the Buddha but to Tara, a female buddha. It features twenty-one Tara statues surrounding the main altar room—all painstakingly commissioned, imported, cleaned, and consecrated. On the altar with the Buddha one finds a Prajñāpāramitā (known as “Mother of all the Buddhas”) statue. Many *thangkas* (*thang ka*; Tibetan paintings) of various deities and dākinīs (female embodiments of wisdom) adorn the walls. The Buddha statue shares the main altar with other statues and images, and it much smaller and less noticeable than the Tara statues, which serve as the temple’s foci.

Tsltrim Allione, “Teaching on Vajrayana with Lama Tsltrim Allione.”
as the bad.\textsuperscript{271} The transformation was so complete, Lama Tsultrim specifies, that some people ask about Vajrayāna, “Are you sure this is still Buddhism?”\textsuperscript{272} This question, which would be perceived negatively by the other speakers, Lama Tsultrim interprets as evidence of Vajrayāna’s uniqueness and the threatening power of the sacred feminine.\textsuperscript{273} Lama Tsultrim takes an argument against the authenticity of Vajrayāna (portraying it as degenerate Buddhism) and turns it on its head, transforming its departure from with other Buddhist traditions into a confirmation of the tradition’s radical wisdom. Vajrayāna constitutes a new form of Buddhism—and it offers students wisdom that cannot be accessed through any other Buddhist path.

Vital to the successful beginnings of Vajrayāna, Lama Tsultrim imparts to her students at Tara Mandala, were female teachers. Her Tibetan Buddhism originates in Oḍḍiyāna, a kingdom somewhere in early medieval northern India accepted as the birthplace of the tradition. According to Lama Tsultrim, Oḍḍiyāna was known as “the land of the Ḍākinīs,” and the country boasted numerous respected female masters who would go on to teach the founding fathers of prominent Tibetan Buddhist lineages.\textsuperscript{274} Today, nearly all the major lineages in Tibetan Buddhism perpetuate through male incarnations. By exposing this seemingly “lost” history, Lama Tsultrim claims her rightful place as a woman teacher in the tradition. Not only does this story grant her authority, but it also proves useful for relating to her Western

\textsuperscript{271} Tsultrim Allione, \textit{Women of Wisdom}, 114.
\textsuperscript{272} Tsultrim Allione, “Teaching on Vajrayana with Lama Tsultrim Allione.”
\textsuperscript{273} The sacred feminine, in the form of Ḍākinīs and female tantric masters, manifests itself wrathfully—energetically and sometimes threateningly to the masculine, bounded worldview. Lama Tsultrim tells stories of the encounters of Ḍākinīs and Buddhist monks, in which the monk, limited by his framework of rules and good habits, must learn from the sacred feminine the need to relinquish those comforting structures in order to move beyond conceptual reality. According to Lama Tsultrim, whereas a masculine approach to Buddhism is to reject the dark, the painful, and suffering, a feminine one is to incorporate the light and dark, the beautiful and threatening. \textit{Women of Wisdom}, 85.
\textsuperscript{274} Tsultrim Allione, “Teaching on Vajrayana with Lama Tsultrim Allione.”
audience’s shared past. Lama Tsultrim draws connections between Oḍḍiyāna’s feminine influence on Tibetan Buddhism and goddess culture around the same historical time in Europe that subsequently was overridden by institutionalized patriarchy.\textsuperscript{275} The search for the lost sacred feminine, in her eyes, is a crucial quest for Tibetan-heritage and Western-heritage Buddhists.

Lama Tsultrim’s narrative continues with the increasing influence of patriarchy on these early feminine tantric teachings. Like the other two teachers, she primarily imagines a pure origin later obscured by cultural accretion. Lama Tsultrim contrasts the feminine, free, wild tantric path to the masculine, structured, monastic one; she writes in \textit{Women of Wisdom}, “When Tantra entered the male-dominated monasteries in Tibet and became codified, great female teachers became as rare as stars in the daytime.”\textsuperscript{276} Patriarchy prevailed in controlling feminine energy (as it has everywhere), and patriarchal monks rewrote the past along the way. Many female masters’ stories were forgotten, and others were revised to remove the threat these wild tantric women posed to the masculine monastic order. Lama Tsultrim refutes the fact that the Buddha only reluctantly admitted women into the monastic order by reminding her audience that “it’s not known whether these stories are historically accurate or whether, as some Buddhist scholars suggest, they were written somewhat later by androcentric and patriarchal monks.”\textsuperscript{277} Similarly, Lama Tsultrim rejects the term “prostitutes,” a common Tibetan term used to describe tantric female masters,

\textsuperscript{275} Tsultrim Allione, “Teaching on Vajrayana with Lama Tsultrim Allione.”
\textsuperscript{276} Tsultrim Allione, \textit{Women of Wisdom}, 70.
deeming it a later judgment by Tibetan monastics. All of the patriarchal and anti-sexuality codes and assumptions that today exist in Tibetan Buddhism derive from an increasing imbalance of feminine and masculine teachings.

Lama Tsultrim, in rejecting some written history as inaccurate, departs from Khandro Rinpoche and the Dalai Lama’s methods of creating a usable past. Neither of these teachers completely rejects any part of Tibetan Buddhist accepted history; rather, they only emphasize certain events over others and interpret them so as to make useful sense of this accepted history. This distinction may be partially attributable to Lama Tsultrim’s American background (though Khandro Rinpoche and the Dalai Lama have both received, to some degree, a Western education).

Traditionally in Tibetan Buddhism, historical veracity was not taken to be a marker of authenticity. Of the three speakers, Lama Tsultrim alone judges to what extent some parts of the tradition are historically accurate, which reflects an interest in historicity (perhaps influenced by her experiences in Western academia) that the other teachers do not share.

Despite labeling Tibetan Buddhist monasticism as patriarchal, Lama Tsultrim maintains the tradition’s specialness. She recognizes that there is a “split in Tibet between the cultural ideal of the sacred feminine, the ḍākinīs, and Tara, and the sexism applied to the social situation of women.” In her discourse, Lama Tsultrim tends to separate Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism, in contrast to the Dalai Lama, who conflates the two. The ideal might be the prominence of the feminine, but

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278 A name they received most likely because they taught tantric sexual practices. Lama Tsultrim writes, “It seems probable that they were not prostitutes in the normal sense of the Tibetan word which means ‘she who sells the lower part’ but rather sacred prostitutes who transmitted wisdom to their clients.” *Women of Wisdom*, 69.
the reality is systemic sexism. This model is of Lama Tsultrim’s own making, and not inherently Tibetan Buddhist; the other two speakers do not cite the sacred feminine as an ideal at all. Nor does Lama Tsultrim distinguish neatly between Western feminism and Tibetan patriarchy—which would reflect a simple privileging of American feminism over an outdated Tibetan patriarchy—for she repeatedly denounces the male-dominated social order of the West. A record of history can be streamlined into an account of this struggle between masculine and feminine. Lama Tsultrim creates a past that privileges the feminine origins of Vajrayāna that have been displaced over time.

This imbalance envisions Tibetan Buddhism at the center of a sweeping history of a feminine energy that has been suppressed across the globe; here, Lama Tsultrim proceeds in agreement with McCutcheon’s assertion that “by means of mythmaking, the historicity and specificity of each of these elements is collated into one grand unfolding narrative.” The story of the reemergence of the feminine encapsulates all of Tibetan Buddhism: the “elements” of Lama Tsultrim’s discourse, such as the past of Oḍḍiyāna, stories of female tantric masters, the use of the term “prostitute” and general prevalence of patriarchy in the tradition, and the male-dominated Western order, are arranged into a narrative. In this grand narrative, a pure origin of Tibetan Buddhism—as a feminine Vajrayāna—becomes shrouded in cultural additions over time. All three speakers create such narratives. For the Dalai Lama, a Sanskrit, nonsectarian beginning is increasingly ritualized; for Khandro Rinpoche, individual experiential truth becomes institutionalized. For the three

280 Lama Tsultrim discovers, in the course of her quest for Tibetan female masters’ biographies, stories of the descent and re-emergence of the sacred feminine in many cultures’ myths.
281 McCutcheon, “Myth,” 204.
teachers, the past is usable: the Dalai Lama claims authority for himself through a rereading of the Sanskrit text, Khandro Rinpoche advocates repetitions of the Buddha’s experience, and Lama Tsultrim expects the reemergence of the feminine.

**Lineage: Experience, History, and Authority**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, any discussion of history in Tibetan Buddhism depends on the system of lineage. The three lineage holders are considered more than trained Tibetan Buddhist teachers: they are also, to varying degrees, recognized emanations or reincarnations. The Dalai Lama is the bodily reincarnation of those Dalai Lamas before him, and the emanation of Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion. Khandro Rinpoche is the throne holder of the Mindrolling lineage, a role she inherited from her father, and the recognized reincarnation of Khandro Orgyen Tsomo, the consort of the Fifteenth Karmapa and a female meditation master. The resident lama of Machig Labdrön’s monastery in Tibet recognized Lama Tsultrim in 2007 as an emanation of the eleventh century yogini (Machig Labdrön). Lineage constitutes more than just a handing down of tradition; it functions as an authorizing force that relates the present to the past and future through a particular person.

In his article on history in Buddhism, Barrett suggests that the primary role of the tulku figure (the reincarnated master) is to control accepted interpretations of what counts as Buddhist history, confining legitimate history to the life of the Buddha and the lives of great masters in a past golden age.\(^\text{282}\) While the three speakers construct their authority in part by speaking about lineage, they do so less by controlling

\(^{282}\) Barrett, “History,” 134.
interpretations of history than by showing their own teachings to accord with accepted history. In other words, looking back to McCutcheon’s imagining of myth as authorizing—not as needing authorization—lineage authorizes the speakers in quite an expansive way. Stories of lineage create the appearance of authenticity and continuity of their teachings by authorizing the speakers’ experiences, even if these do not conform to tradition and history. Lineage functions for the three speakers as an implement of change, an authorization of experience, under the guise of continuity and history. In Gyatso’s words (which she uses to describe legitimation of the terma texts), “authenticity is demonstrated by placing the cycle’s origin within the parameters of traditions already established as authoritative.”

The Dalai Lama addresses lineage and reincarnation the least of the three teachers. As the “patron saint of Tibet,” his authority from lineage requires no explanation. In his 1991 biography, the Dalai Lama writes about the recognition of him as an emanation of Chenrezig: “I am often asked whether I truly believe this…when I consider my experiences during this present life, and given my Buddhist beliefs, I have no difficulty accepting that I am spiritually connected both to the thirteen previous Dalai Lamas, to Chenrezig and to the Buddha himself.” His personal experience verifies his rightful place in the lineage, and his role as the Dalai Lama gives credence to his experience and actions—a cyclical authorization. Once again presenting himself as an exemplary nonsectarian, the Dalai Lama connects his lineage to not just the Dalai Lamas but to the Buddha as well.

284 He is such according to the Central Tibetan Administration’s (the Tibetan government-in-exile) website.
285 Tenzin Gyatso, Freedom in Exile, 11.
The response to the Dalai Lama’s denunciation of the protector Shugden has provided an occasion for the Dalai Lama to reflect on lineage. Dorje Shugden (also known as Dolgyal; *rDo rje Shugs ldan*), a protector deity, recently became a central figure for many Gélukpas. Shugden’s origins are obscure and debated; contemporary worship of Shugden began in the nineteenth century, primarily in the Sakya order. Only in the twentieth century did numerous Gélukpas start to worship Shugden. Academic Michael von Brück articulates the issue facing the Dalai Lama: Shugden “seems to be an evil spirit causing harm to the monastic institutions and the Dalai Lamas, but at the same time he is regarded as dharma-protector of a higher rank.” The Dalai Lama claims Shugden causes harm because he arose out of hostility towards the beloved Fifth Dalai Lama. In the throes of the ongoing debate, the Dalai Lama banned worship of Shugden in 1996, subsequently beseeching all of his followers to stop worshipping the protector. Since then, a strong and visible (though numerically small) resistance movement has developed in the Tibetan exile community and in the West. Though the Dalai Lama has addressed his ban and speech primarily to his Tibetan audiences, he advises his Western audiences as well.

In the West, the Dalai Lama frames this discussion as one over lineage and authority. Regardless of the reasons the Dalai Lama gives Tibetans for his denunciation of Shugden, he uses his lineage to legitimate his denunciation of Shugden.

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287 Numerous academics argue that the Dalai Lama does not denounce Shugden for nonsectarian reasons or as a modern rejection of deity worship; instead, he does so within the confines of Tibetan tradition. Tsering Shakya argues, “Even the controversial banning of the propitiation of Shugden is couched in traditional discourse, as to whether Shugden is a benevolent or malevolent force. The Dalai Lama believes it to be malevolent, while the followers of Shugden hold it to be benevolent. There is
Shugden for his Western audiences. At the 2011 Kālacakra preliminary teachings in Washington, DC, he explains the Shugden controversy as a matter of his own investigation through personal experience and of the relationship that binds a teacher and student—called, in Sanskrit, *samaya*. The Dalai Lama himself worshipped Shugden until he was in his seventies. He warns his audience at the end of the Kālacakra preliminaries:

So then I made clear all my investigation: decision out of investigation. Then some people deliberately opposing that, so since then, I made clear, whether worship that spirit or not, up to the individual. ...but if you worship continuously, please don’t receive vows and initiation from me because then it has broken the samaya— not only me but all previous, since Fifth Dalai Lama. Thirteenth Dalai Lama also put lots of restrictions like that. So if anyone worship that spirit here, please, don’t come. And if in case you used to worship that, then in fuller knowledge if you stop, then okay...and actually, we are Buddhist; our real refuge is Buddha, dharma, sangha—not a spirit [sic].

The Dalai Lama frames the Shugden question as a matter of personal experience more than anything else, experience that involves the entire lineage. This Dalai Lama may have decided to ban Shugden based upon his own experience, but because he comes from the lineage of Dalai Lamas, any choice to continue the practice breaks a student’s vows to the full line back to the Fifth Dalai Lama and, through that lineage, to Chenrezig (of whom all the Dalai Lamas are emanations) and the Buddha himself, who acts as the origin point for all authentic lineages. Lineage legitimates experience, even as it may or may not conform to historical debates over whether or not Shugden is a benevolent or malevolent force. The Dalai Lama, in his

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no question of Buddhist modernism or an appeal to humanist rationalism.” “Who are the Prisoners?,” 189. As I argue, however, his speech to Western audiences is framed differently.
289 In “Canonicity and Divine Interference,” von Brück outlines three main arguments the Dalai Lama applies to the situation: “historical evidence, political reason, spiritual insight.”
denunciation, invokes the greatest lineage of all, prioritizing the lineage that ties all Buddhists to the Buddha over a sectarian lineage that ties Shugden worshippers to this spirit. Lineage allows the Dalai Lama leeway in his decisions and speech and also offers him a way to connect past to present to future and one Buddhist to another.

Khandro Rinpoche’s lineage works to authorize her decisions as well, though she does not frame lineage as a historical continuation. Instead, she believes lineage blends history with experience and the particular with the universal; by transcending these distinctions, lineage ensures the most authentic continuation of Tibetan Buddhism. In her discussion of general lineage and that of her specific lineage, Mindrolling, the relationship between student and lineage—manifesting as the relationship between student and teacher—constitutes the heart of authentic teachings. In the former case, Khandro Rinpoche’s vision agrees with Nattier’s assertion that the emphasis in Tibetan Buddhism on unbroken lineage reflects less a concern with history and more a claim that the teachings never change. Khandro Rinpoche consciously distinguishes lineage from the past, proposing that lineage does not guide or authorize the past so much as overcome it. She instructs an audience at Lotus Garden via Skype in 2012:

We don’t want lineage and devotion to become history. [JKR laughs] One difference between history and devotion is that history can be kept at a distance, analyzed, and discussed. But lineage and devotion aren’t a subject for discussion. They are like a mighty tree that has to grow out of you…If you separate them out, then, yes, it all becomes history.

Lineage is concerned with experience, not history, with the individual’s practice becoming part of a common experience. Lineage overcomes history by blurring

291 Khandro Rinpoche, “Lineage and Devotion.”
distinctions between present and past practitioners. If lineage is confined to the past, the practitioner will not be able to partake in it. For Khandro Rinpoche, lineage is dynamic. Rather than the Dalai Lama’s invocation of a pan-Buddhist lineage descended from the Buddha, in which the lineage holder and their students inherit a shared history, Khandro Rinpoche advocates for a repeated embodiment, a transformation of history into individual experience. Here, individual and common, experience and history, combine, and “that lineage and that devotion lead to the confidence of the lineage manifesting within you. Then you become the lineage.”

Khandro Rinpoche authorizes her own students and their experiences through her discourse on lineage. All Tibetan Buddhists hold the lineage of the dharma, and with this they take on incredible responsibility. Khandro Rinpoche works to ensure the future of her lineage through her students.

Khandro Rinpoche rarely addresses her own particular lineage, the Mindrolling. When she does, such as in a 2010 teaching in upstate New York, she finds the Mindrolling to be an outstanding template for other lineages. Here, she, as lineage holder, acts as guardian of the teachings; her students enter the lineage, but not permanently. For one, Mindrolling is “a lineage that is interspersed in everything that we do.”

Khandro Rinpoche compares the lineage to lighting an incense: the student, by practicing and cultivating the path, kindles the lineage, allowing it to permeate their whole life, so that everything becomes part of lineage. Lineage is not sectarian and should not be interested in numerical gains. Instead, practitioners use lineage as a tool for liberation, as a skillful method. This discourse presents lineage

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292 Khandro Rinpoche, “Lineage and Devotion.”
293 Khandro Rinpoche, “Talk One,” Concept of Lineage.
as entirely the individual’s experience. Yet Khandro Rinpoche clearly claims authority for herself through lineage, which she portrays as extraordinarily authentic.

She explains Mindrolling to her audience:

[Mindrolling lineage] has always worked hard in trying to preserve the very traditional and the very pure ways of practicing the dharma…since the time of…the founder of the Mindrolling lineage…the main door of the monastery remain[s] very small, and the back door very big…it’s very difficult to actually get into the lineage itself…but once you’ve entered, the back door is so big that you can leave at any time…Mindrolling’s focus is not to keep Mindrolling as a solid foundation…but that it be a platform for people to come through in order to reach a very authentic source of learning the practice of the dharma.294

Mindrolling regulates the teachings closely and does not, Khandro Rinpoche would have it, fudge teachings to please the masses. The lineage arises as an ever-present platform, a container that nurtures and holds the practitioner’s path. This lineage claims both institutional authority and experiential authority. Each experience within the lineage is authentic. The lineage as Khandro Rinpoche presents it—unlike other, larger lineages—remains untouched by tainted teachings that appeal to a wide audience. Thus, Khandro Rinpoche’s own teachings are to be read not as interpretations for a specific audience or of a situated, particular speaker but as part of the general “very authentic” dharma. Lineage authorizes Khandro Rinpoche’s teachings like it does the Dalai Lama’s, by showing her particular experience and teachings to be in line with the tradition’s shared history.

Lama Tsultrim claims authority by emphasizing the role of her particular experience, and whereas the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche’s lineages generalize and smooth over their departures from tradition, Lama Tsultrim’s formulations of

lineage highlight her uniqueness. She both demonstrates the compatibility of her life experiences with her lineage and uses this lineage as inspiration for her teachings and efforts. She characterizes her particular work: “At Tara Mandala, we do very traditional things, like the Drubchen, and we also do very untraditional things, like the demon work… it’s all based in Tibetan tradition, but it’s new, so we kind of have this span.” The lineage, especially that of Machig Labdrön, authorizes Lama Tsultrim’s untraditional work. Machig Labdrön evolved two paths of lineage—a father lineage that came from her (male) teachers, and a mother lineage that came from her direct interactions with deities, as well as teachings she evolved herself.

Lama Tsultrim similarly offers entrance into father and mother lineages, which require at least seven years of commitment to intensive practice. The father lineage is based on Lama Tsultrim’s male teachers’ knowledge continually taught from master to master for centuries. The mother lineage evolved “out of practices out of my own experience,” whether as “visions, and I guess you could say downloads, mostly from Machig Labdrön” or from her experience as a Western woman at this time, and what she finds to presently be most efficacious. Lineage authorizes her development of both paths: through the father lineage, Lama Tsultrim participates in the continuation of an authentic transmission of teachings, and through the mother lineage, she partakes in unique experiential work begun by Machig Labdrön. Lama Tsultrim’s creation of these particular lineages, which require students to commit to years of

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295 The Drubchen (drub chen) is the “Great Accomplishment,” a traditional group meditation intensive and festival that includes a continuous mantra chain. Tsultrim Allione, “Teaching on the Vajrayana with Lama Tsultrim Allione.”

296 Tsultrim Allione, “March 3 Riwo Sang Chod Teachings with Lama Tsultrim Allione.”
practice, also facilitates a future for her lineage. In order to establish a long-term lineage, she must attract and train students to carry on her practices.

At the site of lineage, Lama Tsultrim’s particular embodiment as a Western woman and her placement within Tibetan Buddhist history merge, authorizing her focus on adapting the dharma to modern times. Her 2000 autobiography contributes to making the ordinary into the extraordinary, in conceiving of her life as a Tibetan Buddhist life. She is both ordinary—a Western woman just like any other—and extraordinary—destined to be an emanation of a powerful Tibetan Buddhist yoginī. She begins her autobiography with a different sort of lineage, that of the women in her family. Her grandmother gifted her a book of Zen poetry, her first exposure to Buddhism. This same grandmother, Lama Tsultrim tells her reader, was the fourth woman to receive a doctorate from Radcliffe College. Lama Tsultrim thus links her Buddhist journey to her strong female lineage of ancestors. Further proof of Lama Tsultrim’s destined role as teacher is her connection to Tibetan Buddhism before she encountered the tradition. When Lama Tsultrim first met the Sixteenth Karmapa (the title for the most important Kagyü lineage of reincarnated masters, under whom she became a nun), she explains that the Karmapa’s translator told her the Karmapa “had said that I would become a nun and that I had been his disciple in a previous lifetime. He had therefore waived the usual preliminary stages and had given me the full ordination immediately.” From the beginning, Lama Tsultrim inherited the Karmapa’s lineage: a strong statement of authority from him regarding an American-

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297 This is a function of myth according to McCutcheon, “Myth,” 200.
298 Another example: “I suppose with these women in my ‘lineage’ it is not surprising that when I was nineteen I left my university studies and began an uncharted spiritual quest which eventually led me to write this book.” Women of Wisdom, 13-14.
born woman. Lineage allows Lama Tsultrim to claim a connection to Tibetan Buddhism that otherwise would be impossible.

Lama Tsultrim’s imagining of lineage is encapsulated in her connection to Machig Labdrön. She interprets the Karmapa’s recognition of her as both a reflection of a connection already present and an event that further authenticates her relation to Machig. The connection imbues Lama Tsultrim’s role with urgency—to save a lineage that could be lost to time (and patriarchy) and to expand its territory to include a wider audience in America. She explains in an interview, “Machig actually had a direct lineage in itself, which had dispersed into the other lineages…So we both tried to collect her actual lineage and bring that out again. That’s what I was doing already.”

For Lama Tsultrim, particular lineage authorizes what seems at first to be departure from tradition. All three speakers employ lineage to present their discourse and experience as authorized by and continuous with tradition, whether their claims accord with history or instead depart from it.

The Historical Future: Repeating the Past

Barrett includes the future in the category of “imagined history” for the study of Buddhism. The imaginings he explores are those of the far future found in all Buddhist traditions, particularly the arrival of Maitreya Buddha, the Buddha who will come as the historical successor of Śākyamuni. The three Tibetan Buddhist teachers do not address this particular “history of the future,” but they do incorporate the future into their constructed histories. The process of connecting past to present and

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300 Tsultrim Allione, quoted in Haas, *Dakini Power*, 253.
301 Barrett, “History,” 130.
future contributes to the creation of a continuous religious tradition. Tibetan Buddhist tradition does not only imagine a transcendence or collapse of history; it also posits a narrative (albeit sometimes an extraordinary one) that makes sense of the tradition’s place in time. The three teachers work within this tension, establishing both the timelessness of Tibetan Buddhism and its path through history into the future, and constructing an important role for the lineage holder along the way.

The Dalai Lama-upholds the timelessness of the dharma—its relevance anytime—but also figures the present and future Buddhism in this century specifically as a return to the past. He differentiates an essence (a message) that remains unchanged from its container (the response to the message) that changes. In a 2001 interview, he avows, “I think main Buddhist message is dealing with emotion…the level of human emotion today in the twenty-first century when compared with Buddha’s time, I think is basically the same. So there’s no need for any change of concept or teaching [sic].”302 The Dalai Lama imagines a timeless teaching—essential to the perception of continuity—and a Western audience in need of this teaching. He describes a “link between our disproportionate emphasis on external progress and the unhappiness, the anxiety, and the lack of contentment of modern society.”303 The Dalai Lama echoes a traditional Buddhist perspective of history as a process of degeneration since the time of Śākyamuni; doing so, he demonstrates the importance of Buddhism’s future in the West—and all of diaspora.

The Dalai Lama’s vision of the present and future rests in this tension. The dharma’s arrival to the West could precipitate a time of unprecedented lack of

302 Tenzin Gyatso, quoted in Puri, Engaged Buddhism, 173.
303 Ibid., 121.
spiritual wisdom or a time when Buddhists seize an exceptional opportunity to turn back to the Sanskrit text and knowledge. These competing futures work to draw attention to the Dalai Lama’s responsibility. As the transcendent message spreads to wider audiences, the room for error increases (due to the enormity of translation) on the part of the teacher and student, who are responsible for the translation of the dharma. The gravity of the situation as the Dalai Lama explains it resembles the accepted Tibetan understanding of Buddhism’s degeneration. Unlike some Buddhists, who posit a gradual corruption of the dharma, Tibetan texts articulate a long period of the pure dharma followed by a cataclysmic disappearance. Nattier argues that this outlook requires strict adherence to tradition, for anything else results in the end of Buddhism.\footnote{Nattier, \textit{Once Upon a Future Time}, 137.} In such a view, the lineage holder must uphold the dharma unchangingly; the Dalai Lama claims authority for his position as teacher in a time of change.

Khandro Rinpoche’s historical future simply continues the tradition of individuals discovering the truth that began at Buddha’s enlightenment, yet the new problems Tibetan Buddhism faces in the West provide fresh opportunities for relating to the tradition. Like the Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche’s imagining of the present and future both bridges time and authorizes the teacher’s role in Tibetan Buddhism’s introduction to new audiences. She proclaims that “the human mind is basically the same as it was 2500 years ago.”\footnote{Khandro Rinpoche, “On Buddhism in the West.”} Buddhism applies just as much now as it did then; it contains a truth that is understandable and useful across space and time. At the same time, Khandro Rinpoche, steadfast in her imagining of Buddhism as a difficult
path, tells her students that Tibetan Buddhism in the West is just a drop in a vast ocean of teachings. They should be wary of seeing Tibetan Buddhism in the West as special or complete, because “if we go back to the time of the Buddha or the time of Guru Rinpoche, we will find that the path of practice...always came from long engagement with the dharma.”

Khandro Rinpoche emphasizes here the culminated wisdom of centuries of masters over immediate experience; in order to authentically convey the teachings into the future, one must look backwards at the past’s stream of masters.

Khandro Rinpoche hesitates when she considers her Western audiences’ ability to fully take on Tibetan Buddhism. Her expression of the difficulties highlights the teacher’s role in the process of translation. She speaks about the complexities of endeavoring to separate dharma from culture, a task many Westerners have been insisting she undertake since she first came to the West:

In the beginning I was taken aback with, how can you ever do that? Because Tibetan culture and dharma is so intermixed that for me to say, ‘well, today I’m going to completely cut off being a Tibetan and speak only the dharma,’ I thought was very challenging...But then later I thought, wonderful, these people are so true, that they are actually talking about authentic dharma, not wanting to imitate Tibetans but really to practice authentic dharma...on the other hand, you have to also be wary not only of the Tibetan culture but the Western culture. So if Buddhism is now brought into the West, but mixed with it now, it’s like a big glos...there is tremendous confusion, tremendous fear, territoriality...your love for your lineage and teacher has made you almost think that this is the beginning and the end of everything [sic].

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Although Khandro Rinpoche thinks that there is an “authentic dharma,” she nearly
denies any possibility of finding it. Now that Buddhism has taken root in the West,
her audience must dissect a stew of Tibetan culture, Western culture, and the dharma.
This complex and difficult situation calls for a teacher to ensure wariness among
students, but it also requires stepping back and looking at the tradition beyond one’s
own teacher. The “glosh,” Khandro Rinpoche tells her audience at a 2010 retreat in
upstate New York, has resulted in great sectarianism and particularization in Western
Tibetan Buddhist communities. When Westerners pick and choose what Tibetan
Buddhist aspects they wish to receive, they very well may mistake an essential
Buddhist aspect for a disposable Tibetan cultural concept. For example, that
Westerners express disinterest in a strong monastic system will prove a great hurdle,
as any authentic survival of the dharma depends upon healthy monasticism.\textsuperscript{308}
Khandro Rinpoche constructs her own role as ensuring that her students’ resistance to
Tibetan cultural aspects is not merely disguised distaste for the more difficult or
foreign parts of the dharma. Khandro Rinpoche’s treatment of the future imparts the
lineage holder with a vital role in ensuring that Western audiences do not misinterpret
the timeless dharma.

Lama Tulsritrim states in an interview (published in a 2013 book), “This
tradition is still so massivelly patriarchal that we need quite a substantial change.”\textsuperscript{309}
For Lama Tulsritrim, the present and future constitute (at least an opportunity for) a
return to feminine wisdom that once stood at the center of Tibetan Buddhism.
Compared to the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche, Lama Tulsritrim gazes forward.

\textsuperscript{308} Khandro Rinpoche, “Talk Two,” \textit{Concept of Lineage}.
\textsuperscript{309} Tsultrim Allione, quoted in Haas, \textit{Dakini Power}, 251.
Whereas the Dalai Lama presents options for the future of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, in which a return to the pure past of the Sanskrit dharma is the desired path, and Khandro Rinpoche emphasizes bringing all of history into the present and future, Lama Tsultrim invests in the future’s worth. She asks questions like “how can we make these teachings most accessible and most effective in the West?” and “about the feminine in Buddhism…Is this a sidetrack or is this something that is actually important?”

Contrastingly, the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche ask primarily, *how can we introduce these teachings to a new audience so that the teachings are authentically preserved?* Lama Tsultrim’s primary concern is accessibility and translation, whereas the Dalai Lama and Khandro Rinpoche foremost wish for the preservation of the teachings.

The feminine wisdom of the past comes into existence at Tara Mandala, in America. Lama Tsultrim writes, “I held on to the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, while allowing the influence of the deep feminine to inform my teaching.”

She imagines her teachings as both a repetition of the past and as something original. As the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is authentically transmitted through time, Lama Tsultrim hopes to bring out feminine wisdom, not only as a return to the pure past but as an adaptation for the West too. She frames the connection between her original feminine teachings and those of the past as a surprising coincidence, one that gives her all the more (mystical) authority: she teaches similarly to tantric women of the past without even realizing it.

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312 She writes, “I discovered that there were many similarities between how my practice and teaching were evolving and how the early tantric women practiced together. They sat in circles and practiced in
repetition, Lama Tsultrim frames her teachings on the reemergence of the feminine as both very Western and very Tibetan, both a continuation and a departure.

The future, for the three lineage holders, may constitute a repetition of the Tibetan Buddhist past. However, this progress depends upon the past’s usefulness: far from a disinterested history, the speakers invest in pasts that are usable in assisting their students to participate in the authentic Buddhist experience. Dealing with the tension between privileging individual relationships and experience and underlining the importance of continuity and tradition, the Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsultrim narrate the past and imagine the future as useful on the Buddhist path, in giving meaning to the tradition’s present placement in America, and in authorizing them to teach. Remembering the past, the teachers hope for repetition.
When one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has
been, now comes into existence.
-Constantin Constantius\(^{313}\)

With our thoughts, we make our world.
-The Dalai Lama\(^{314}\)

This is what the lineage holders posit: a tradition (Tibetan Buddhism) which
has been (in Tibet) now comes into existence (for their students in diaspora and in
America). A repetition, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Constantius explains, necessarily
involves both sameness and departure. Without continuity, life collapses into a
meaningless collection of random moments. Without change, no human action can
be significant, and life again proves inconsequential. What I have examined in this
thesis are the Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tsurtrim’s creations of
Tibetan Buddhist traditions in America that appear to transcend the particular
resources—including texts, places, and pasts—the teachers use to imagine these
traditions. This appearance emerges in part from the teachers’ careful balancing act

\(^{313}\) Søren Kierkegaard [Constantin Constantius], *Repetition*, in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*

\(^{314}\) Tenzin Gyatso, “His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s Opening Prayer at the US Senate,” prayer in
Washington, DC, recorded March 6, 2014, YouTube video, 3:31, accessed April 10, 2014,
between claims to sameness and claims to departure. The tradition, in its supposed existence beyond human time and resources, remains the same; yet, in its timely translation to the West, the tradition inevitably departs from its pre-diaspora forms.

Khandro Rinpoche, in her 2003 book *This Precious Life*, stresses the rarity of the human rebirth, traditionally described as a rarer occurrence than a blind turtle who surfaces in the ocean only once every hundred years chancing to put its head through a single yoke floating atop the ocean. As incomprehensibly rare as this may strike us, still more incredible (Buddhist tradition tells us) is the opportunity we—sentient beings who receive human rebirths and encounter the dharma—are given to inherit the Buddha’s teachings. Khandro Rinpoche instructs us in how to respond to this precious opportunity to follow Śākyamuni:

> When the Buddha first attained enlightenment, the first thing he taught was the nature of absolute truth, the fundamental true nature of mind. But no one understood him. The Buddha then taught the first noble truth of suffering. Now, you might think that just because that ignorant group didn’t get it 2,500 years ago, we have to deal with all these rituals and listen to 84,000 tenet teachings and commentaries, and so on. These instructions, however, are being given to you. If Shakyamuni Buddha were sitting in front of you presenting the absolute true nature of mind, would you be able to understand it and put it into practice—even today, with all your potential and access to Buddhist teachings?

Thus we sit before the Buddha and his realization of the truth. Amazingly, Khandro Rinpoche conveys, he *taught* this truth, a fact that allows—as extraordinarily difficult as this may prove—students to repeat his path 2,500 years later. Khandro Rinpoche’s

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instruction depends upon the relationship between teacher, student, and teaching that, if perfected, will lead to repetition of the Buddha’s enlightenment. We students inherit these instructions; yet, we begin at the beginning, for we are just as ignorant as those before us. Everyone must access Buddha’s wisdom on their own, even as the tradition—the instructions given from the Buddha to us via Khandro Rinpoche—provides the path. Here, Khandro Rinpoche imagines the possibility for countless repetitions—both a mediated repetition of students’ listening to the teachings, and an immediate one of the direct experience of the Buddha’s enlightenment. The tradition appears to transcend the situated speaker and discourse, as it is based on an “absolute truth” and in a distant past. Still, access to this truth necessarily must arise from the interactions of the student, teacher, and resources (including teachings); in these interactions, teachers claim authority as those who carry the tradition from the Buddha to their students.

It is this relationship between student, teacher, and discourse that I wish to revisit in the remainder of this conclusion, both in terms of future academic Tibetan Buddhist studies and in terms of future social workings of Tibetan Buddhist convert communities themselves. In this thesis, I have endeavored to gesture towards an understanding of the work discourse does in Tibetan Buddhist convert communities in America, a work influenced by claims to authority and interpretations of specific resources. Considering my findings on the teachers’ discourses: what significance can we glean from this project for future academic study of Tibetan Buddhist convert communities in America (as well as Tibetan Buddhism in America more generally)?
Fortunately, we can already observe a broadening of the academic gaze. Once attentive only to texts and philosophy, Western scholars of Tibetan Buddhism are both becoming increasingly self-reflexive and expanding their research and analysis to new territories, such as practice, institutions, and communities. I hope this project contributes in some small way to the field’s latest direction. By describing texts, places, and pasts as resources, I reimagined questions of tradition and authority as part of an active process in which Tibetan Buddhist speakers interpret certain resources for their audiences. This approach highlights both the continuity tradition imposes—as the set of resources available to actors remains fairly static—and the creativity and multiplicity it allows in the actors’ interpretations of those resources. By treating Tibetan Buddhism in America as a religious tradition, and applying theory and critical thought, academics may become attuned to the ways in which speakers translate resources, such as texts, places, and pasts, in order to construct tradition and claim authority.

Our work as religious studies academics is not just to apply theory to religious communities, nor, on the other hand, is it simply to parrot the claims of these communities. Instead, our work must attempt to incorporate both at once: to redescribe these communities and to rectify our theories and categories. Though our theory and the traditions we study will never exactly fit, we continue to find ways to compare, classify, and think about religious traditions. I hope, then, that I have helped to demonstrate the usefulness of a dialogue between religious traditions and the academic discipline.

317 Smith, “When the Chips are Down,” 29. Smith expresses the goal of religious studies as “redescription and rectification” through “comparison.”
Finally, we may wonder, *what significance does this thesis hold for practitioners—teachers and students—of Tibetan Buddhism in America?* As a member of Tibetan Buddhist communities, I feel both academically and personally invested in this matter. Ever since I felt drawn towards Buddhism, first as an American college student studying and living at a Burmese monastery in India, and second as an American living and working at Tara Mandala—Lama Tsaltrim’s retreat center—this past summer, I wondered *why*.

Tibetan Buddhism, for more complex reasons than either I or academics before me have articulated, holds an appeal for me and for many others like me—and I mean *really* like me—American, upper-middle-class, educated, and white. This summer and at subsequent Tibetan Buddhist retreats and gatherings, I became preoccupied by questions concerning the people included in and excluded by, attracted to and repelled by, convert Tibetan Buddhist communities. We are always responsible for the communities in which we participate, and such communities are neither organic nor innocent (that is, removed from the realm of culture and authority) in the ways they always are imagined and realized.

My experience in convert Tibetan Buddhist communities in America has demonstrated to me the earnestness of students and teachers in their undertaking the Buddhist path. Yet, I have been troubled by what I perceive as a gap between discourse and actuality in these communities. In rhetoric, speakers espouse the nonduality of the Buddhist path—its radically inclusive nature. However, more often than not, the tradition remains exclusive and homogeneous, a reality often ignored or deemed a dualistic, misplaced conversation by the communities in question.
counter: how could anyone claim that Tibetan Buddhism (the very heart of which is nonduality and the affirmation that anyone can become enlightened) is exclusive, unwelcoming, or inaccessible? Nevertheless, convert communities remain homogenously white and rich, and while there are minority and working-class Tibetan Buddhists in America, for the most part they remain apart from retreat-based communities. Many have noted and criticized the inaccessibility of the tradition, due to the time, money, and means to travel required to attend retreats. I think that even more basically, there is a reluctance to talk about these issues within convert communities.

Over the course of my thesis research, I found this confirmed in an absence, a silence: the three lineage holders, in the discourses I examined, never spoke directly about race, class, or accessibility within their communities. Somewhat an exception, Lama Tsultrim confronts lack of conversation about inequality directly, concerning not race or class but gender. Lama Tsultrim’s motivation behind founding Tara Mandala was to provide space for the feminine—not by creating an exclusively female community, but by cultivating one open to men and women who value the feminine in Tibetan Buddhism. Lama Tsultrim believes in the importance of Tibetan Buddhists dealing with inequalities, even if these worries ultimately dissolve through...
Buddhist practice: “Sometimes questions about women in Buddhism are discouraged as being dualistic. People don’t seem to think about the fact that the development of male-oriented Buddhist institutions is heavily dualistic and has been so for thousands of years.”

Lama Tulsrim’s success in attracting students genuinely interested in engaging with gender issues in Tibetan Buddhism—in doctrine, practice, and community—demonstrates that actively cultivating space for discussion can benefit inclusion and diversity.

As I have argued, the interaction between teacher and audience holds incredible power over how the tradition takes shape. The lineage holders’ discourses—including the Dalai Lama, Khandro Rinpoche, and Lama Tulsrim’s—play a significant role in generating particular audiences, and, cyclically, these audiences influence the teachers’ translations of Tibetan Buddhism. Understanding this, teachers and students must take responsibility for the communities they and their conversations create. This self-awareness constitutes the first step towards greater diversity and deliberate openness in American convert communities, as it makes room for conversations not just about gender but also about race, class, and privilege. With willingness for dialogue, communities can begin to imagine ways in which to make Tibetan Buddhism more accessible and inclusionary.

We may all—students, teachers, and academics—benefit from taking the advice of Khandro Rinpoche as she imparts Tibetan Buddhist practice can teach us: “We have to learn to be a little bit less predictable.” Teachers and students, striving towards the social ideals they espouse, may find possibilities for creating the

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communities to which they wish to belong. This will require thinking outside of the ways in which the tradition has been established so far—for example, finding alternatives to retreats and locating centers in cities.\textsuperscript{321} The academics who study these Tibetan Buddhist convert communities would do well to approach the tradition with minds open to surprise. Learning to be less predictable allows for academics to toss out trite claims and old assumptions. With fewer expectations, we academics find space for classification, surprising comparisons, and interesting thought about a complex tradition’s discourses and their implications.

glossary of Tibetan and Sanskrit terms

This glossary provides relevant information for this thesis; as such, the list and descriptions of terms are not intended to be comprehensive. In some cases, there are Tibetan terms for Sanskrit terms, but the speakers use the Sanskrit; the Tibetan for these terms is given only when useful.

Unless noted, all Sanskrit terms (S) in bold accord to the IAST transliteration scheme and all Tibetan terms (T) in bold are rendered in the Rigpa Phonetics system. I also provide Wylie transliterations of Tibetan terms. I grant exceptions to these systems of transliteration in the case of a few heavily used terms that the speakers render differently.

Avalokiteśvara. (S; in T, Chenrezig)
Bodhisattva who embodies the compassion of the Buddha; Buddha of compassion.

Bodhicitta. (S)
“Awakened heart-mind”; the intention to work towards the liberation of all beings, or to serve all beings.

Bodhisattva. (S)
A being aspiring to enlightenment; an enlightened being who vows to work for the liberation of all sentient beings.

Bön. (T, Wylie bon)
One of the five main Tibetan Buddhist orders (recognized as such, including by the Dalai Lama), though it is thought to continue early Tibetan indigenous religion as well.

Buddha. (S)
“Awakened one”; can refer to either the historical Buddha (Śākyamuni) or (in Mahāyāna) any enlightened being; in Vajrayāna, can also refer to a deity that manifests buddhahood.

Chenrezig. (T, Wylie spyan ras gzigs)
See Avalokiteśvara.

Chöd. (T, Wylie gcod, Rigpa chö)
“To sever”; a tantric practice, accompanied by singing and musical instruments, geared towards ending self-clinging, in which the practitioner visualizes a self-sacrifice—a feast at which they are the offering to the demons invited.
Ḍākinī.  (S; in T, Wylie mkha’ ’gro ma, Rigpa khandroma)  
The divine feminine; feminine wisdom; female embodiment of enlightenment; tantric female buddhas who act as guardians of the teachings.

Dalai Lama.  (T, Wylie ta la’i bla ma, Rigpa ta lé lama)  
Reincarnate lineage of Gélukpa order that began in the fifteenth century; the Dalai Lamas are also held to be emanations of Avalokiteśvara.

Dharma.  (S)  
Truth; religion; the Buddha’s teachings; reality of the universe.

Drubchen.  (T, Wylie drub chen)  
“Great Accomplishment”; traditional Tibetan Buddhist group meditation retreat and festival that lasts for about ten days; includes intensive meditations, a twenty-four hour mantra chain, and traditional feasts and rituals.

Dzogchen.  (T, Wylie rdzogs chen)  
“Great perfection”; regarded as the highest teaching and meditation practice by the Nyingma and Bön orders; non-tantric path of recognizing the nature of mind.

Géluk(pa).  (T, Wylie dge lugs pa)  
One of the five main Tibetan Buddhist orders; “system of virtue”; school of Tibetan Buddhism founded in the fourteenth century that emphasizes scholastic preparation before tantric practice, and the politically dominant school in Tibet since the end of the sixteenth century; Yellow Hat school; school of the Dalai Lamas.

Geshé.  (T, Wylie dge bshes)  
Academic monastic degree awarded by the Géluk, Sakya, and Bön orders; generally requires twelve to forty years of rigorous study, including scholarly inquiry into philosophical texts, memorization, and formal debate.

Gompa.  (T, Wylie dgon pa, Rigpa gönpa)  
Generally refers to a monastery or a temple.

Guru Rinpoche.  
“Precious Guru”; one of the honorific names used by Tibetans for Padmasambhava.

Hīnayāna.  (S)  
“Lesser vehicle”; a somewhat derogatory term for earlier Buddhist traditions (the historic successors of Theravāda) employed by Mahāyāna Buddhists; also, the first and lowest of the three vehicles (yānas) recognized by Tibetan Buddhism.

Jātakas (Jātaka tales).  (S)  
Collection of stories of the Buddha’s past lifetimes (prior to his enlightenment) as a bodhisattva.
Jetsün(ma). (T, Wylie rje btsun ma)
Honorific title meaning “venerable” or “reverend,” –ma denotes feminine.

Kagyü(pa). (T, Wylie bka’ brgyud pa)
One of the five main orders of Tibetan Buddhism; school of Tibetan Buddhism originating with Tilopa in the eleventh century; “oral/teaching lineage”; school of Karmapas.

Kagyur. (T, Wylie bka’ ‘gyur)
The first section of the Tibetan Buddhist canon; collection of texts attributed to the Buddha; contains over a thousand texts for which there is no standard edition.

Kālacakra. (S)
“Wheel of time”; a cycle of tantric practices.

Kama. (T, Wylie bka’ ma)
Nyingma set of teachings that are said to be handed down from Padmasambhava; counterpart to the terma tradition.

Karma. (S)
“Action”; the Buddha’s teaching that moral actions produce effects.

Karmapa. (T, Wylie karma pa)
Principal reincarnate lineage of the Kagyü tradition; the current Karmapa is the seventeenth.

Kāya. (S)
A body of the Buddha, one of three bodies of the Buddha (trikāya) in tantric Buddhism: dhammakāya (truth body), sambhogakāya (enjoyment body), and nirmānakāya (created body).

Lama. (T, Wylie bla ma)
 Traditionally, a qualified tantric teacher; recently, used also in some orders as an honorific title for a monastic or advanced practitioner who has completed a three-year retreat.

Lokapāla. (S)
“Guardians of the world”; protector deities associated with particular orders or lineages that are invoked to materially aid a monastery or practitioner and to remove obstacles to practice.

Machig Labdrön. (T, Wylie ma gcig lab sgron, Rigpa Machik Labdrön)
Eleventh-century tantric yoginī known especially for teaching Chöd.
Mahāmudrā. (S)
“Great seal”; regarded as the highest teaching and meditation practice by the Géluk, Kagyü, and Sakya orders; non-tantric path focusing on the nature of mind.

Mahāyāna. (S)
“Great vehicle”; movement or approach (whose first texts appeared by the first or second century CE) that introduced new philosophical concepts and path to Buddhism, particularly the bodhisattva ideal and the concept of two-fold emptiness (the emptiness of all things); sometimes called “the bodhisattva vehicle”; in Tibetan Buddhism, the second of three vehicles (yānas).

Maitreya. (S)
Future Buddha who will come in this world as the historic successor of Śākyamuni Buddha; predicted to arrive when the dharma is nearly forgotten on the earth.

Maṇḍala. (S)
Circle; sacred place; template for mental transformation; (depiction of) a realm or abode of buddhas or deities; an offering that represents the cosmology of the universe.

Mantra. (S)
Ritual phrase, generally associated with and used to invoke a particular deity in tantric practice.

Mindrolling. (T, Wylie smin grol gling)
One of the six major Nyingma lineages; Khandro Rinpoche is current throne-holder.

Nāgá. (S)
Water spirit in snake form.

Nāgārjuna.
Second-century Indian Buddhist philosopher regarded as the founder of the Mādhyamika school of thought; said to have received teachings (including the Heart Sūtra) from nāgás.

Nirvāṇa. (S)
State of release from saṃsāra; the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice; awakening.

Nyingma(pa). (T, Wylie rnying ma)
One of the five main orders of Tibetan Buddhism; oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism, based on Padmasambhava’s lineage; “ancient,” Old School.

Oḍḍiyāna. (S; in T, Wylie u rgyan, Rigpa Urgyen)
Country believed to be responsible for the dissemination of Buddhism to Tibet; often conflated with Shambhala, the mythic kingdom; known as a pure land.
Padmasambhava.
Tantric teacher from Oḍḍiyāna who is credited with bringing Vajrayāna to Tibet in the eighth century.

Prajñāpāramitā. (S)
“Great Mother”; the philosophical teaching of the unification of compassion andemptiness; also, embodied as the “Mother of all Buddhas.”

Rimé. (T, Wylie ris med)
Nonsectarian movement that emphasizes a pluralistic approach, originating among Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyü, and Bön schools as a response to Géluk scholarship; founded in the late nineteenth century; more recently endorsed by the Dalai Lama (Géluk) as well.

Rinpoche. (T, Wylie rin po che)
“Precious one,” honorific title for high-ranking reincarnate teachers.

Śādhanā. (S)
Tantric meditational cycle that involves visualizing oneself as a deity, recitation of mantras, and other ritual gestures and visualizations in order to transform the practitioner’s perception of reality.

Sakya(pa). (T, Wylie sa skya)
One of the five main orders of Tibetan Buddhism; founded in the twelfth century; “path and result” order; school of Sakya Trizins (a hereditary line of the Khön family).

Śākyamuni. (S)
The historical Buddha (also known as Gautama Buddha), who attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree.

Samaya. (S; in T, Wylie dam tshig, Rigpa damtsik)
Set of vows given to initiates in Vajrayāna tradition that creates a bond between student and teacher (guru and disciple); commitments that a practitioner makes to the lineage.

Saṃsāra. (S)
Cyclic existence of birth, life, death, and rebirth.

Sangha. (S, IAST samgha)
Buddha’s followers; traditionally, a community of Buddhist monastics; recently, more loosely applied to any community of Buddhist practitioners.
**Shugden (Dorje Shugden).** (T, Wylie *rdo rje shugs ldan*, Rigpa *dorje shukden*)
A dharma protector, especially known as a sectarian protector of the Géluk order; in a controversy over his status, supporters see him as an emanation of Buddha Manjushri, while the Dalai Lama and other denouncers claim he is a malevolent spirit.

**Songtsen Gampo.** (T, Wylie *Srong-bstan sGam-po*)
Seventh century Tibetan king who is accredited with first introducing Buddhism to Tibet.

**Stūpa.** (S)
Ritually consecrated structure that contains relics; circumambulated by practitioners.

**Sūtra.** (S)
“Thread”; in Tibetan Buddhism, text attributed to the Buddha, manifestations of the Buddha, or his disciples.

**Tantra(yāna).** (S)
Texts and approach emphasizing liberation through the senses and perception of reality, not in renunciation of them.

**Tara.** (S, IAST *Tārā*; in T, Wylie *sgrol ma*, Rigpa *drolama*)
Popular Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna female deity; a female buddha in Tibetan Buddhism, she takes many forms.

**Tengyur.** (T, Wylie *bstan ‘gyur*)
The second section—for which there is no standard edition—of the Tibetan Buddhist canon; selection of over three thousand Indian treatises and commentaries on Kagyur texts.

**Tenzin Gyatso.**
The Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s (the current Dalai Lama) shortened refuge name.

**Terma.** (T, Wylie *gter ma*)
“Hidden treasure”; a teaching hidden—either physically in the land, or through dreams or visions—by past masters in Tibet to be revealed at a later time, in order to revitalize aspects of the Nyingma order; authoritative teachings in the Nyingma order as the counterpart to the kama.

**Tertön.** (T, Wylie *gter ston*)
Lama who discovers or reveals terma.

**Thangka.** (T, Wylie *thang ka*, Rigpa *tangka*)
Tibetan painting, applied to cloth, depicting a highly stylized Buddhist deity, maṇḍala, or scene.
Theravāda. (S) From *sthaviravāda*, “Teaching of the Elders”; the oldest Buddhist tradition still practiced today, and the primary form of Buddhism practiced in much of Southeast Asia.

Tiklé. (T, Wylie thig le) Essence or drop of the subtle body; vibrancy of the subtle body.

Tripiṭaka. (S) “Three Baskets”; Pali canon consisting of Sūtras (words of the Buddha), the Vinaya (monastic codes), and the Abhidharma (philosophical discourses).

Tulku. (T, Wylie sprul sku) Reincarnated lama who chooses their incarnation for the benefit of all beings; emanation or physical form of the Buddha.

Upāya. (S) “Skillful means”; concept that the Buddha taught appropriately to each student, that his teachings should be taken as not ultimately true but rather instrumental to the student’s path.

Vajrayāna. (S) Tantric Buddhism; path that employs tantric texts, deeming them to be the most effective for reaching enlightenment; called “mantra vehicle,” “method vehicle,” “perfection vehicle”; the third and highest of three vehicles (yānas) in Tibetan Buddhism.

Vinaya. (S) Monastic disciplinary code.

Yāna. (S) “Vehicle”; division of methods and practices; Tibetan Buddhism recognizes three vehicles: Hinayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna.

Yoginī. (S) Female master practitioner or honorific term for female Tibetan Buddhist teacher.


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