Sorting Through the Library of Hubert Decleer and Finding What it Means to be Rimé

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Despite the August heat in Kathmandu valley, Hubert Decleer's body, seated upright in a meditative posture, showed no signs of decay for more than three days. This sign of realization has a long and rich history in the spheres of Tibetan Buddhist practice, and it leaves those of us who loved Hubert with the distinct impression that he accomplished what he set out to do. There was plenty that Hubert wasn't interested in, and he wouldn't hesitate to say so, especially since he was keenly aware of the limits on time and lifespan, and he was determined to prioritize what was most important. For many years before he died, I had recognized his critical discernment and his painstaking approach to scholarship, both in regard to the kind of research he engaged in and the kind of research he valued. But it was only after his death, as I sat in his study going through the Tibetan books that had been on and around his desk at the end, that his definingly inclusive approach came through clearly to me. When viewed through the snapshot of the assembled texts on his desk and on the shelves surrounding his workspace, Hubert's interests reflect a systematic approach that resonates with the ethos of *rimé* (*ris med*).

What does it mean to be *rimé*? The Tibetan word is often translated as "nonsectarian." But *rimé* conveys more than that—a panoramic view, not fixed in any prejudice or affiliation or position. I once asked a lama I respect what *rimé* means to him, and he said something like this: a practitioner who really is *rimé* is without any bonds at all, it's as if they're dead to the world. This was not what I expected to hear, and I have yet to understand fully what he meant, but the crux seems to be that for him, to be *rimé* is to show an utter lack of clinging to any position at all. If *rimé* can mean "nonsectarian" and "dead to the world" while also conveying an expansive open-minded perspective, it is safe to say the term has a wide semantic range.

Hubert died on August 25, 2021. He was at home with his wife, the poet Nazneen Zafar, in their apartment within the Benchen monastery complex near the *kora* route that runs around the Swayambhunath Stupa in Kathmandu, Nepal. Hubert had been diagnosed with advanced lung cancer just three months before, and he knew his death was not far off. He took the time left to him to say farewell to family and friends and to focus on preparations for dying. A few years prior, he had also attempted—unsuccessfully—to donate his full library so it might remain intact. There was not enough time to organize and catalogue Hubert's library before his death, so when I was able to visit Kathmandu, starting in January 2022, I found myself sitting alongside Nazneen

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in her grief, amongst his many books. Even in the early months of her mourning, Nazneen was concerned about what to do with all the books. She has spent decades steeping in Tibetan studies research, but she does not read Tibetan, so I offered to go through the library and label the books with English labels and arrange them so she could decide which friend, scholar, or monastic center might appreciate them. Initially, I had thought of this as an archival project, but it became clear that no single recipient would take everything on, and the library would be divided up little by little. In fact, Nazneen had already begun to share out the books before I arrived, so the project would be piecemeal. Over the subsequent few years on annual trips to Nepal, I took time to sit in Hubert's study, arranging and documenting the books. Other friends visiting Nazneen also took shifts, Andrew Quintman among them.

There were the books he had kept close at hand in his library, and then there were cupboards and cupboards piled with books throughout their apartment, as well as a large storage space filled with books. Hubert had accumulated them over the many decades during which he had studied Buddhism, starting with a seminar under Étienne Lamotte in the 1970s. That class inspired him to dedicate his life to the subject. The striking array of genres and topics by writers from across the spectrum of Tibetan Buddhist thought and practice is a testament to Hubert's curiosity and his insatiable taste for finding connections between texts, images, sacred sites, oral histories, and scholarly publications. Hubert made a note of the person who had given him each book and stuck it discreetly inside. This was the case with a couple of books I had given him over the years, and I found my name written in his unmistakable hand on a sticky note inside the front covers. The books that had been in storage were dusty, and some of the labels that Hubert had affixed in his miniscule, light-touch cursive were nearly illegible.

During my visit in early 2022 I managed to spend only an hour here and there in the early morning or when Nazneen was running errands in the afternoon. I knew she was reluctant about the task in case I found it boring or onerous. But in truth, the pleasure of sitting among those many books, surrounded by Hubert's drawings and beloved plants, glancing up into his personal altar, consoled and compelled me. Taking advantage of a day alone in the apartment when Nazneen had to visit the visa office, I sat uninterrupted for many hours in Hubert's study, which was still scented with the incense he liked. As I wrapped and unwrapped *pecha* (traditional oblong, loose-leaf books), I thought about all the hours he had spent working there—reading, writing, translating, making connections across time and place. He would give a joyful shout when he discovered a missing clue to a research puzzle he was solving, or sing a few-note melody in appreciation when he came across a useful insight on the part of an old friend or a fresh idea from a promising student. I sat in his study and thought about the periods of reflection and rest he passed looking out the window, drawing, humming, tending his plants, and feeding the familiar crows and monkeys who gathered on his windowsill. He had been in that room reading when the earthquake hit in 2015.

I met Hubert and Nazneen in 1997 when I was in Nepal as a student on the School for

International Training's Tibetan Studies program. This study abroad program connected Hubert with many US-based Tibetan Studies scholars who came of age in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. I carry a memory that Hubert shared with me in 1997 about an experience in Lamotte's seminar, almost as if it were my own. Over tea in McLeod Ganj, Hubert told me about reading an assigned Kadampa text on impermanence. Hubert was gripped. Like an entomologist's insect pinned to a wall in the face of such clarity, he knew he had to follow this path to completion. Hubert told me the text instructed meditators that it is not enough to know this might be the last year of one's life, the last month, week, or day of one's life; rather, one needs to be aware that when one breathes in, one might not breathe out again. Hubert's sense of urgency, of pressing impermanence was reflected back to me as I sat in his library carefully unwrapping and arranging the books he had pored over and left behind.

After lunch Hubert would often rest in his study on a simple navy-blue cotton mat on the floor, reading. If a guest (there were often houseguests) walked by, he would raise his hand in a greeting that seemed ritual, symbolic, meaningful, but abstract. When he took a break, his humming filled the hallway as he strode in his leather slippers to the kitchen, where in the old days before he quit smoking, he'd have a cigarette and a Nescafé, black with sugar, mixed with steaming hot water from the floral Chinese thermos that was always full. If a houseguest taking a break from their own reading and writing found Hubert there stirring his coffee, he might share a thought about what he'd been reading, a promising connection he had made between texts. At one time, when I was Hubert and Nazneen's guest, I was working on an adaptation of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* for children and families. When I happened upon Hubert mixing his coffee in the kitchen, he shared an exciting idea he had about visual depictions of Śāntideva. On another day, he was thrilled to have found textual proof of a reincarnate teacher in the Sanskritic Buddhist world, suggesting that the practice of recognizing reincarnate lamas did not originate in Tibet. He'd talk through his findings, finish his coffee, and return to his desk.

Sitting quietly alone in Hubert's room leafing through his personal archive, at arm's length from his desk I found Nyingma, various Kagyü, Sakya, Geluk (fewer than the others), Kadam, Jonang, and Bön texts, as well as Mahāyāna Sūtras and Purāṇas. The texts nearby spanned genres as well. There were revealed treasures, biographies, histories, philosophical texts, and ritual instructions. I had expected to find the books related to Hubert's well-known research on Swayambhunath and Yamāntaka (*gshin rje gshed*) and Atiśa, and I found them, but I found so much more. The array was not vague or haphazard, nor was it by any means comprehensive. The word that came to mind was *rimé*.

With that term in mind as I moved from stack to stack and shelf to shelf, I remembered conversations I heard Hubert have with Tibetan speakers he met in places like Shigatsé, Reting, and Kyirong. (I traveled with Hubert when I was his student and later when I worked as an assistant to the SIT program directors before I started my graduate studies.) People quickly assessed Hubert

as an erudite scholar and dedicated practitioner, and often asked him about his affiliation with a given Tibetan Buddhist lama or lineage. He answered consistently, often with gestures I found charming and a touch theatrical. He'd shake his head from side to side and wave his hands out in front of him while saying, *Nga rimé yin*. This could be translated as, "I'm nonsectarian," which is fair, and that was how I understood it at the time. But reflecting on the books left piled up in his library, I came to see his statement in a more complex light.

I observed many exchanges like this during the years I worked with Hubert, just after I graduated from Barnard College. I had moved to India to live with Tibetan nuns at Dolma Ling, in Dharamsala. After I'd been there about a year and made some progress learning colloquial Tibetan, Hubert and Kabir Heimsath came through town with a group of students and offered me a job as a program assistant. I was thrilled. Taking the job offer led to a period of regular travel to India, Nepal, and Tibet with various groups of students. I was in my twenties, inexperienced, and I watched Hubert closely for cues about how to behave, how to move through temples and monasteries, and more deeply and subtly, I looked to him for cues about what mattered. I observed his gestures and his jokes and took notes on what he taught me about approaching a shrine or identifying deities in wall paintings. I missed a lot. I remember he seemed irritated when I asked one too many times who Ekajaṭī (*ral gchig ma*) was. Now I wonder how I could forget her, with her single eye, single sharp tooth, and single pointed breast. Back then, when I heard Hubert insist so adamantly on his *rimé* identity, I took it as a rhetorical statement, thinking he was making a point about the value of open-mindedness and the dangers of insider/outsider attitudes. His books offered a more complex scope.

To offer a glimpse of what I learned in his library, rather than reproducing a full list of the books, I'll provide a sketch. It held a range of texts from early Nyingma revelations to scholastic works of the Geluk school. Not surprisingly, there were many Kagyü texts, with multiple lineages represented. But the Nyingma materials formed the largest portion of the collection I sorted through. On his desk I found the collected works and revelations of Sera Khandro (*chos nyid mkha' 'gro'i gsang mdzod*). I found the first volume of Jamgön Kongtrul's *Great Treasury of Revealed Treasures* (*rin chen gter mdzod*). The *Testament of Ba* (*dba' bzhed*), an account of Buddhism's arrival in Tibet, was nearby. Mipham Rinpoché's *Gateway of Knowledge* (*mkhas 'jug*), and the collected works of Khenchen Gangshar Rangdröl Wangpo, teacher of both Trungpa Rinpoché and Thrangu Rinpoché, were also right there. Pema Lingpa's treasures were richly represented, along with his biography, his collected works in a beautiful rice-paper *pecha*, and three short volumes of accompanying *sādhanā*s bound together.

From the Drukpa Kagyü, I found the collected works of Drubchen Shakya Shri and the biographies of the Khamtrul incarnations composed by the Fifth Khamtrul. The Shangpa Kagyü was represented by a collection of life stories from members of that school. The other Kagyü texts that

were next to Hubert's desk include the collected works of Thangtong Gyalpo and a *namthar* of Marpa.

The Sakya texts included a history of Mahākāla traditions (*mgon po'i chos 'byung*) and selected volumes from the collection of *sādhanā* manuals and related ritual materials of the Sakya (*sgrub thabs kun btus*). The Geluk materials, which were few, were mostly associated with Tashi Lhunpo monastery and included a categorization of the tantras by Kedrup Gelek Pal Sangpo. The Jonang materials centered unsurprisingly on Tāranātha, with five of his historical works alongside a history of the Jonang tradition by Ngawang Lodrö Drakpa, and Tāranātha's history of Yamāntaka practice (*gshin rje gshed skor gyi chos 'byung rgyas pa yid ches ngo mtshar*). The Kadam materials, which were so vital in Hubert's early inclination to study Tibetan Buddhism, included instructions from early Kadampa masters and texts by Atiśa, together with the biography of Vanaratna in two versions by Go Lotsāwa.

A few Mahāyāna Sūtras were on the bookshelf where Hubert kept his personal altar, including the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* (*shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i mdo*) and the *Golden Light Sūtra* (*'phags pa gser 'od dam pa mdo sde'i dbang po'i rgyal po*). The shelf also held texts related to Swayambhunath, including a guide to the stupa and an account of its restoration (*bal yul shwing kun so gso dang rje rang rig gdung rten gyi dkar chag*). Swayambhunath was in many ways the center of Hubert's world—he and Nazneen circumambulated the stupa daily, and his expertise on the monument's history was exquisitely detailed and comprehensive. His fluency in storytelling was legendary, and he had so many stories about that stupa.

Among these and many others, I found books labeled with the names of beloved friends and books from students and scholars with whom Hubert had parted ways, as happened when someone disappointed him and did not find their way back. I began labeling the texts according to their obvious affiliations—Nyingma, Kadam, Kagyü, Sakya, Jonang, Geluk, and Bön—since this seemed most practical for the purpose of redistribution. Yet even as this system proved efficient, I felt compelled to keep track of what had been closest at hand for Hubert at the end. I do not want to overemphasize the significance of the proximities, and chance was surely a factor in what I found on his desk and near his altar. Still, it struck me that in imposing order, I was undoing something essential about how Hubert moved among his books as living things.

In the months between when Hubert received his diagnosis and when he passed away, Hubert's daughter Kashi and her family were able to visit him in person. Countless colleagues and old friends, like me, connected with him as best we could by video chat on WhatsApp. I hadn't seen Hubert in person for five years. My last call with him was stiff as I tried to contain my sadness and be a reliable friend to him and Nazneen. My sorrow worsened hers, and she had urgent work to do caring for him in his final months, weeks, days, breaths. Our last conversation felt perfunctory, so I treasure the accounts that other friends have shared with me about their final calls with

Hubert—friends who were able to be more at ease, who shared a laugh or a last insight about a research project or translation. One by one, we all reluctantly hung up.

Now that a few years have passed, the collection of texts I found on and around Hubert's desk as I sifted through his Tibetan collection helped me understand something important about Hubert's version of *rimé*. Considering the range of meaning from "nonsectarian" to "dead to the world" to utterly unbiased, there is not a perfect fit. He could be very determined in his positions, and he loved the world even as he grew ever more reluctant to spend his attention and energy there, but together his books reveal a distinctly *rimé* quality. Hubert was so expert, so exacting, so disciplined and determined. His eyes were wide open to the inevitability and unpredictability of death. He wanted his own work and that of others to be rooted in a valid assessment of what really mattered. At the same time, as the assortment of texts assembled around him at the end suggests, his tastes were expansive, covering so much Tibetan Buddhist ground. His was an inclusiveness that was nevertheless particular, critical, and discriminating. Sitting amongst his books, I found a portrait of a curious adept. The books he had near him at the end reflect a life spent reading widely, across traditions and genres, with a *rimé* thinker's open mind.