

Songs that Tell the Thousand-Year Story of the Shangpa Lineage

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Abstract The literary genre known as “song” (*mgur*) includes a vast range of verse composition in the Tibetan language. It is a broad category and subsumes many subcategories, ranging from simple ditties to highly stylized poetics. The subject matter has a similar range, everything from religious cantos to expressions of sadness and yearning for freedom, often disguised in modern songs. Their purpose also varies, from rhythmic songs that accompany physical labor to spontaneous outpourings of spiritual experience from great Buddhist masters, inspiring faith and motivation through example. This essay will examine a collection of such spiritual songs from the Shangpa Kagyü lineage. The songs were collected into a single text, known popularly as the *Shangpa Ocean of Song* (*shangs pa mgur mtsho*), by Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé in the nineteenth century. It begins atemporally with verses attributed to the Buddha Vajradhara and continues chronologically through lineage holders up to the nineteenth century, presenting the songs of some twenty masters. In doing so, the collection also reveals a kind of history of the Shangpa lineage and its doctrines by means of the narrative context surrounding each song. We have chosen a small sampling of the songs to explore and elaborate. We bring it up to the very recent past with a song of aspiration by the great meditation master Kalu Rinpoché, who brought this formerly unknown school of Tibetan Buddhism into the modern world.

Introduction

Songs (*mgur*) were one of the most iconic and popular forms of literature in Tibet, continuing to the present day. Lying somewhere between simple folk songs (*glu*) and highly formulaic poetics (*snyan ngag*), these songs allow for a freedom in composition and limitless range of subject matter. Songs of experience (*nyams mgur*) reflect the author’s subjective experiences in an accessible style with many applications, whether in the field of religion or daily life. In the case of the former, they allow not only for celebration of spiritual accomplishment, but often reveal feelings of struggle and even failures on the spiritual path. In all cases, they are edifying for both the reader and the author. They also tell a story. In Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé’s (’Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas, 1813–1900) more-or-less chronological collection of the songs of the Shangpa Kagyü (*Shangs pa bka’ brgyud*) masters and their ancestors, a thousand years of its history can be dis-

cerned, in both its continuity and all its diversity. The following songs selected from his collection, when taken in context, offer a particularly delightful way to learn the history of a lineage.

The following essay will briefly introduce the Shangpa lineage and Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé, one of its main proponents and creators of its later anthologies. His projects of collection and preservation in the nineteenth century were crucial for the continuation of this and many other Tibetan lineages. We will focus on his collection of verses from the Shangpa lineage holders, which not only conveys their experiences but also the narrative history of the school. An examination of the meaning and function of this genre of Tibetan literature called songs of experience, as well as the challenges of translating them, will precede the actual translations. The necessarily limited number of songs chosen here represent three separate contexts and time-frames. First, the Indian antecedents at the source of the Shangpa tradition will include some short verses from three important ancestors: Niguma, Sukhasiddhi, and Rāhulaguptavajra. Then follow some examples from the first Tibetan adepts: Khyungpo Naljor (Khyung po rnal 'byor 1050/990–1127) and his disciple Mokchokpa Rinchen Tsöndru (Rmog lcog pa Rin chen brtson 'grus, 1110–1170). Third, the later Jonang branch of the lineage will be presented through the work of two brilliant scholar-poets, Kunga Drolchok (Kun dga' grol mchog, 1507–1566) and Tāranātha (1575–1634). Each work will be contextualized through both their meaning and their narrative, two aspects that I consider inextricable. Finally, a short aspiration prayer by the previous Kalu Rinpoché will bring our survey of the tradition up to the present.

The Shangpa lineage of Tibetan Buddhism had been considered a rare and endangered tradition until recently when the modern head of the lineage, Karma Rangjung Kunkhyab (Kar lu Rin po che Karma rang byung Kun khyab, 1905–1989), founded monasteries and retreat centers in India and Bhutan after the Tibetan diaspora and traveled widely to establish teaching and retreat centers internationally. However, the preservation of the associated literature can be largely credited to the work of the great eclectic savant, Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé in the previous century and his predecessors, mainly Kunga Drolchok and Jonang Tāranātha. Kongtrül adopted a system for organizing the main streams of meditation instruction by tracing the instructors who brought them from India into Tibet and called it the Eight Great Chariots of the Practice Lineages (*sgrub brgyud shing rta chen po brgyad*). In this system, Shangpa Kagyü took its place alongside some of the well-known and more widespread traditions, such as that of Nyingma, Kadam, Marpa Kagyü, and Sakya Lamdré. In his great efforts to preserve as much of these teachings as possible through the collection of texts into five great treasuries or anthologies, he paid special attention to scarce and imperiled lineages, such as the Shangpa lineage and the other three “chariots”: Pacification (*zhi byed*), Approach and Attainment of the Three Vajras (*rdo rje gsum kyī bsnyen sgrub*), and the Six-Branch Yoga of Kālacakra (*sbyor drug*). In the explanation of his motives for producing *The Treasury of Precious Instructions* (*Gdams ngag rin po che'i mdzod*), his most iconic of anthologies in its assemblage of texts from all these lineages, he stated:

The continuity of the Shangpa teachings, Pacification, Approach and Attainment, and some others are extremely rare and nearly going extinct. With the noble aspiration of hoping to benefit the continuity of the teachings of empowerment, reading transmission, and guidance, and in order to give meaning to my great diligence and exertion of effort, and so that the frayed rope of those long lineages would at least not break, we must pay some attention to them.¹

Thanks to the success of his efforts, carried forth by Kalu Rinpoché and others, and the ongoing publications by the Tsadra Foundation of his major works, which now includes the two volumes on the Shangpa Kagyü from the *Treasury of Precious Instructions*, the teachings of this lineage seem to be fairly well preserved and accessible. Now it only remains to appreciate them.

Among the texts that Kongtrul included in the Shangpa volume of the *Treasury of Precious Instructions* is a collection of verse, often called songs of spiritual experience, attributed to some of the Shangpa ancestors and later lineage-holders, spanning over a thousand years. Kongtrul collected these from various sources, primarily the individual biographies (*rnam thar*) of the authors, and called it *An Ocean of Blessings Meaningful to Hear: Collected Vajra Lines, Dohās, and Melodious Songs of the Glorious Shangpa Kagyü*.² They have been reproduced in several subsequent collections, though nothing that predates the *Treasury*.³ They are not found in the collection of Kongtrul's own works, so it would seem that he created it as a stand-alone text, or specifically for inclusion in the *Treasury*. They are, of course, intended for inclusion in offering rituals (*guru puja*) that extol the virtues of the masters and inspire faith in their teachings. Here, a short selection of songs will be presented as a less painful way to introduce some of the predecessors of the lineage and its teachings.

Expressions of spiritual inspiration or “songs of realization” were in evidence from as early as the seventh century CE, usually written in the late Middle Indo-Aryan dialect of Apabhramṣa.⁴ Many such verses from the *mahāsiddhas*, the great adepts of India, were brought into Tibet with the spread of Buddhism and found their way into Tibetan canonical collections, such as those of the great Brahmin Saraha and the south Indian master Dampa Sangyé (Pha dam pa sangs rgyas,

1. Jamgön Kongtrul 1999, 12:386. See more on Kongtrul's eclectic projects (*ris med*) in Kongtrul 2007, 31–42.

2. *Dpal ldan shangs pa bka' brgyud kyi do ha rdo rje'i tshig rkang dang mgur dbyangs phyogs gcig tu bsgrigs pa thos pa don ldan byin rlabs rgya mtsho*. In *Gdams ngag mdzod*, Shechen edition, vol. 12, 463–559; Palpung edition, vol. 8, 757–853 (not listed in English table of contents). Previously translated in Zangpo 2003. My translation of this text in volume 12 of the *Gdams ngag mdzod* is forthcoming from Shambhala Publications as *The Treasury of Precious Instructions: Essential Teachings of the Eight Practice Lineages of Tibet: Volume 12: Shangpa Kagyu*. Used here with the kind permission of the Tsadra Foundation.

3. For instance, in Karma Rang byung kun khyab 1990's. And anonymous editor 1996, 317–530.

4. For examples of Apabhramṣa dohās and their translations see Jackson 2004.

11th c.–1117).⁵ The custom of expressing near-ineffable spiritual experience in poetry and song was taken up enthusiastically by indigenous Tibetans. Most famously, perhaps, by the great yogin and poet Milarepa (Mi la ras pa, 1028/1040–1111/1123), who’s so-called Hundred Thousand Songs (*mgur ’bum*) are sung, recited, and studied to this day.⁶ Such collections are also known as a multitude or “ocean” of song (*mgur mtsho*).

The term “song” (*mgur* or *mgur dbyangs*) should be understood in a very broad sense as verse or poetry. In his book on modern Tibetan literature, Lama Jabb has identified *gur* (*mgur*) as a recognizable genre due to “[h]istorical endurance, simplicity of style and language, colloquialism, metric flexibility, and a sense of spontaneity alongside accessibility and popular appeal.”⁷ Experiential songs (*nyams mgur*) are understood to be spiritual, where *nyam* (*nyams*) in this context refers to meditational experience. In a collection of such songs, Thupten Jinpa states, “Because they are simultaneously so personal and so metaphoric, the songs of spiritual experience form a unique category of religious literature in Tibet.”⁸ Other terms used here are “vajra lines” (*rdo rje tshig rkang*), referring to ancient “original” lines spoken by ancestral sources, and *dohā*, an Indian word that technically means verse composed in couplets, but has become a more general term almost synonymous with *gur*, while retaining a sense of Indian antecedents. It is not known whether most of these verses were actually voiced in tuneful song by their creators, or written down as poetry, though they may be “close to the melodies of music.”⁹ The sense is that any expression of verse is said to be “sung.” Perhaps “poetry reading” would be more precise.

The wide range and rather loose interpretation of “song” allows for a wide variety of expressions and uses, making the task of translating a selection of them pleasantly challenging. In his study of the subject, Roger Jackson cites one list of possible subjects for songs of spiritual experience: “Don grub rgyal, who has written the most comprehensive study to date, lists seven major types of *mgur*, those that (1) remember the guru’s kindness, (2) indicate the source of one’s realizations, (3) inspire the practice of Dharma, (4) give instructions on how to practice, (5) answer disciples’ questions, (6) admonish the uprooting of evil, and (7) serve as missives to gurus or disciples.”¹⁰ All of these and then some are in evidence in the following selection. In the songs from indigenous Tibetan masters, I have focused on those that express some irony regarding the hardship of a life dedicated to the single-pointed pursuit of enlightenment. In other words, those to which ordinary Dharma practitioners might relate—rather than those with soaring and spectacular glimpses of ultimate

5. For a thorough study, see Schaeffer 2005.

6. Milarepa’s dates are usually given as 1052–1135, but vary. See his songs in the perennial classic, Chang 1962. Also Andrew Quintman’s translation of *The Life of Milarepa* in Tsangnyön Heruka 2010.

7. Jabb 2015, 5.

8. Jinpa and Elsner 2000, 19.

9. Jinpa and Elsner 2000, 14.

10. Jackson 1996, 374. Citing Don grub rgyal 1985, 194–95.

reality. In this, it is good to keep Thupten Jinpa's advice in mind: "The experiential poems posit a particular challenge to the translator, since they combine a deliberate use of vernacular and even colloquial terms or expressions with quite complex esoteric vocabulary. It is easy for translators to be tempted into reading too much high mysticism into what may sometimes be a very ordinary or simple expression of feeling. Ultimately, one effect of the experiential songs is their union of the spiritual with the everyday, so that sacred experience is expressed through the popular and even the familiar."¹¹

Most of the songs here and in other collections are couched in a narrative that puts them in the context of the circumstances in which they were sung or composed. As a translator, these narratives are crucial to consider. One trend in translating songs and other writings of the great Tibetan masters is to attempt to elicit the same response in the reader as the original did, whether or not the outcome is faithful to the words. This is not my approach, as it asks the translator to make assumptions that one can somehow know what the authors' intentions and the listeners' reactions were those many centuries ago, or that one's own response is the only correct one. (And when is that ever true of poetry?) Without the information from the narratives, life stories, and occasional commentaries to contextualize them, a translator would be even more challenged.

In some cases, the narrative is greatly reduced from the original source. According to Andrew Quintman, the famous biography of Milarepa was extracted from the collection of his songs by Tsangnyön Heruka (Gtsangmyon Heruka, 1452–1507) in order to make a more readable chronological version. It certainly did that, and Tsangnyön also reformulated the collection of Milarepa's songs to make them more accessible to accompany the life story as a supplement.¹² Nevertheless, there is the danger in any anthology that the poems will float unmoored outside of historical time and place and person, for better or for worse. Kongtrul's collection of Shangpa songs is also guilty of a vastly reduced context for the songs, except in the case of Khyungpo Naljor. However, the hagiographies from which they are extracted provide plenty of material, too much to cover here. Nevertheless, in order to relate the poetry to the person, as much of the circumstance and setting as possible was considered when making the translation.

Jamgön Kongtrul authored a very long supplication to this lineage that includes many of the same authors that produced these songs and included it in this volume of the *Treasury*.¹³ It is called a biographical supplication (*rnam thar la gsol 'debs*) in that it is meant to extol the liberated lives of these masters. However, one finds precious few details of their lives actually recorded therein. Rather, it is a dithyramb full of incredible, awe-inspiring, abstract realizations of the highest order, each one vying with the other in their descriptions of the ineffable. What is impressive is Kongtrul's unswerving faith, while the descriptions of actual individual adepts are lost within the heaped-on

11. Jinpa and Elsner 2000, 27.

12. Quintman 2014, 137–142.

13. 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 12:389–447.

praises. I can honestly say it was the most tedious translation I've ever done. It is the adepts' own voices in the following collection of experiential songs that convey, to me at least, their real characters, full of real experiences described in a nuanced way, and the wisdom that resulted.

Songs of the Indian Ancestors of the Shangpa Kagyü

The Shangpa lineage in Tibet traces to Khyungpo Naljor, who visited India and met with 150 gurus, as the story goes. The main ones were the two *ḍākinīs* Niguma and Sukhasiddhi, and the great adepts Rāhulaguptavajra, Maitrīpa, and Vajrāsana, all of them dating from the tenth to eleventh centuries. Brief verses attributed to the first three are represented here. It seems likely that their songs were recorded by Khyungpo Naljor, according to his memories of the very unusual encounters he had with them. The narratives that resulted and come down to us today reveal levels of meaning that might speak more to Khyungpo Naljor's experience than that of the masters themselves. Niguma in particular, whose teachings Khyungpo Naljor received in dreams and dream-like experiences in a charnel ground, and which form the very basis of Shangpa practice, is veiled in mystery.¹⁴ It is fitting that many of the songs and vajra lines attributed to her speak of illusion, blurring the lines between a supposed reality and a felt experience, no matter how "unreal." In the following two quatrains, Niguma not only dismisses the entrapment of our own thoughts, which is a common Buddhist trope, but even enlightenment itself as an actual thing.

This variety of desirous and hateful thoughts
that strands us in the ocean of cyclic existence,
just realized to be without intrinsic nature,
makes everything the land of gold, my child.

If you meditate on the illusion-like nature
of all illusion-like phenomena,
illusion-like manifest buddhahood
will arise through the power of devotion.

Here, devotion (*mos gus*) is the subjective experience, or even a kind of transformative emotion, that allows for the feeling of an awakened state, even though no such thing exists ontologically. Devotion is generally understood as the total commitment to a spiritual master, a heightened sense of love associated with an intense personal relationship—I and Thou. There is the assump-

14. Harding 2010, 1–22.

tion that such transformative feeling occurs only between people, rather than concepts or deities. This song, however, seems to suggest that the devotion to the spiritual journey itself could awaken such feelings. Similarly, the knowledge of discursive thought and everything else as illusion results in the joy of finding oneself in the land of gold. This is a reference to a legendary island where everything is precious—where you couldn't find an ordinary rock even if you tried—a pure land (*zhing kham*s) by definition, not the purity that stands in contrast to impurity.

This idea is of course not unusual in Buddhist literature, but here the instruction to Khyungpo during his already altered state of consciousness, while asking Niguma if her magical appearance floating in space is real or not, strikes him with unusual precision. Niguma also taught him an entire treatise called *Stages of Illusion*¹⁵ that turns the traditional Mahāyāna approach of paths and stages upside-down, pulling the rug out from the detailed cartography of spiritual progress. Dākinīs in general are the very embodiment of illusion, their female form recalling the association of the feminine with the perfection of wisdom that cognizes emptiness (*prajñāpāramitā*). Tibetan literature is replete with stories of spiritual adepts encountering these forms in visionary experiences, though it is unusual for a Tibetan lineage to be sourced primarily in two such women, whether in visions or real life.

Sukhasiddhi seems at first to be a little more down to earth (literally, in this case). Her story of a sixty-something housewife who is banished from home for giving the last family food to a beggar could really have happened in ancient India. And her enterprising survival method of growing hops for her start-up brewery reminds us of women's enduring strength. One of her customers is a female practitioner who buys her beer and takes it to her partner, the yogin Virūpa, dwelling in a nearby forest. When Sukhasiddhi finds out where the beer is going, she refuses to accept payment. When Virūpa finds out that she is donating his beer, he asks to meet her, and the rest is history. Or legend. Elderly Sukhasiddhi transforms into a sixteen-year-old girl, pure and white. That is how Khyungpo Naljor finds her, also in a charnel ground, where she gives him this instruction:

Disengaged from the objects of the six senses,
non-recollection is the path to transcendence.
No conceptual thought is the realm of phenomena,
free of mentation—that is mahāmudrā.

Don't meditate! Don't meditate! Don't mentally meditate!
Mental meditation is the machination of conceptual thought.
Concepts bind you to cyclic existence.

15. *Sgyu ma lam rim*. Translation in Harding 2010, 37–133.

In empty space, which lacks awareness,
with awareness tame the root of mind.
Tame the root and rest relaxed.

As with Niguma's verses, the songs of experience make most sense in the context of their pronouncement. Translation should take the circumstances into consideration whenever possible. What does it mean that Sukhasiddhi becomes a beautiful young woman? Not just that yogis can then appreciate her. The Tibetan word for *dākinī* (*mkha' gro ma*) means "she who moves through space," and the only thing in our experience that does that is awareness itself. Just so, that pure intrinsic awareness, which underpins all experience, is unchanging and eternal—ever youthful and beautiful. Awareness never ages; it only is covered up and disguised by discursive thought. So Sukhasiddhi urges Khyungpo Naljor to give up concepts. And above all, not to meditate! Meditation, after all, can be the most deleterious of contrivances, with all its incumbent hopes for success and fears of failure.

What then? Sukhasiddhi's answer is in the last verse, which is perhaps her most famous utterance and often used as the means to point out the nature of mind, such as during the fourth empowerment in a tantric initiation. This space or sky (*nam mkha'*) is itself without awareness (*rig med*), and thus empty. That which possesses awareness (*rig bcas*) is the mind (*sems*). One needs to get a hold of that mind by the roots and tame it. Then once tamed, relax. This seems straightforward, and I have translated it as that. However, there is more to it.

Sukhasiddhi appears in several adept lineages besides the Shangpa. One in particular is the lineage called Pacification (*zhi byed*) that was based on the teachings of the south Indian master Pha Dampa Sangyé (d. 1117). Two of the terms that occur in our verse here appear together throughout Dampa's unique teachings: "root of mind" (*sems kyi rtsa ba*) or simply "the root," and "tame" or "control" (*bcun*). That the two appear so often together seems more than random, and leads me to believe they are particular to Sukhasiddhi's lexicon. However, *chün* (*bcun*) is more often spelled as *chü* (*bcud*) in the Pacification literature. This can also mean to control, but has the additional meaning of to squeeze or intensify. This changes the idea slightly to something like "intensify the root [of mind and then] rest relaxed." That is, focus intently and then relax into it, a fairly common mahāmudrā instruction. An interesting example from one Pacification instruction states "Outward intensification (*bcud pa*) is to look fixedly at whatever objects arise to the five senses. Once the consciousness of the three times is cut off, settle in the radiant clarity of a moment of consciousness. Inward intensification is to maintain strict [attention] on precisely whatever subtle or obvious thoughts arise. Once they are suddenly grasped, settle into the pristine, clear freshness in the state of bare presence."¹⁶

16. 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 13:319. Translation in Jamgön Kongtrul 2019, 416.

In another text of Sukhasiddhi's teachings, our verse is expanded by an added first line and explained in interlinear notes (here in parentheses) from an unknown editor. The result would be as follows:

With the physical yogic exercise (legs slightly crossed, left hand in the threatening gesture at the heart, the right thumb and little finger grasped and the other three raised)
in empty space, which lacks awareness,
with awareness (visualize) taming the root of mind (looking with sharp eyes).
Tame the root and rest relaxed.¹⁷

Now we are in the realm not of mahāmudrā but of the tantric completion-phase practices based on yogic manipulations of the physical body and yogic gazes to achieve that same realization. This adds a whole new dimension, although we cannot know whether that first line was part of the original, or whether it was added later. Just as we cannot know whether tame or intensify is the “correct” translation of the verb. Such deviations are exceptionally challenging for the translator. In any case, including all the potential nuances and options is fairly impossible, especially in a short and sweet song that is meant to inspire through its very simplicity.

The next selection is from Rāhulaguptavajra, or Lama Rāhula, another of Khyungpo Naljor's primary Indian masters. Of the other two male teachers who greatly influenced him, Maitrīpa was a prolific composer and important teacher who has received much attention elsewhere.¹⁸ Vajrāsana was not included in the collection, apparently not a singer. Lama Rāhula, on the other hand, was instrumental in guiding Khyungpo Naljor, the only one who came to him in Tibet to continue his training. He was an important source of the Four Deities Combined Practice—those four deities having appeared to Rāhula throughout his life. However, his final piece of advice, before taking leave of his disciple in Tibet and flying solo back to India, was not concerned with detailed meditation instructions, nor with lofty abstract teachings, but rather appears to be practical and somewhat playful personal advice. It is called *Vajra Lines in Six*,¹⁹ referring to both the number of syllables in each line and the number of verses. There often seems to be a fascination with enumeration, which may add a bit of challenge and fun to the poetic endeavors of some masters. I have tried to follow suit, though the difficulty of translation from a monosyllabic Tibetan to equivalent syllables in English means that much is lost in translation, particularly rhythm. Perhaps the following is an example of privileging form over content, which may not always be advisable.

17. 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 12, 318.

18. Some examples are Mathes 2021 for his life and Brunnhölzl 2020 for some of his songs.

19. *Zhal gdams rdo rje'i tshigs drug ma*, in 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, 1999, 12:475–76.

The root of suffering
is fixation on self.
Without hate or desire,
settle in evenness.

Life changes and ends but
is not done; born again.
Care for cause and effect,
uphold sacred pledge.

Since nature is union,
this rainbow-like body
appears without substance.
Always remember that.

This life's desires will come,
next life's path will be shown
by Buddha-like gurus.
Always remember that.

Until you are stable,
you're busy and upset.
Like a wounded gazelle,
practice alone yourself.

Beings in this age of war
have great pride and envy.
Like a lamp in a vase,
hide your good qualities.

Songs of the Early Tibetan Masters

Khyungpo Naljor likely memorized the previous verses as he heard them and consequently wrote them down. After he returned to Tibet, and after Rahūla's lengthy visit, he set about teaching and establishing monasteries, the first one being in the valley of Shang, from which the tradition derives its name. He also began to compose his own verses. Clearly they reflect the main themes of his masters, particularly the importance of recognizing all phenomena as illusion. Kongtrul included the following verses, among others, from Khyungpo's biography.²⁰ Though echoing the advice of the two *ḍākinīs*, one senses a certain male perspective in the first. That could be because Khyungpo Naljor was attempting to reform a group of slacker monks by first manifesting enticing gods and goddesses and then regaling them with frightening death-lord minions in order to scare them into line.

All objects of desire and hatred
come from your own mind.
To the yogin, these appearances
of death-lord forms, like flesh-eaters,
carrying various weapons in their hands
to reap our life-force right now,
are liberating if known as illusions.
Even when surrounded by captivating
beautiful goddesses adorned with jewels,
singing songs with sweet melodies,
if you know they are self-appearing illusions,
they have no power to ensnare you.²¹

After that, of course, “everyone applied themselves diligently to study and meditation.” Another time when he was challenged by a skeptical *geshé*, he displayed miraculous feats, such as passing through mountain cliffs and hovering in the air. After that, the *geshé* was convinced, and asked which instruction had resulted in such abilities. Khyungpo responded simply with the following six-line, seven-syllable song:

Experience the illusion-like nature
of all illusion-like phenomena
to manifest illusion-like buddhahood.

20. Rmog lcog pa, in Karma Rang byung kun khyab 1990's, 1:59–143.

21. 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 12:489.

Phenomena appear but are unreal.
The childish view them as real, causing delusion.
Appearing while nonexistent—how amazing!

The learned and accomplished Khyungpo Naljor gathered thousands of disciples in Tibet. However, the corpus of teachings received from the Lady Niguma, known as the Five Golden Dharmas of the Glorious Shangpa Kagyü (*dpal ldan shangs pa'i gser chos lnga*), had been placed under a command seal by the ḍākinī herself as a single or one-to-one lineage for seven generations. (Khyungpo Naljor was himself the third, after Buddha Vajradhara and Niguma). That meant that there was just one favored disciple who received it all: Mokchokpa Rinchen Tsöndru (1110–1170). Mokchokpa had trained with several great lamas before meeting Khyungpo Naljor, but was not satisfied with his progress. He accomplished two years of retreat with Khyungpo's guidance, and experienced the culminating realizations of illusory body, dream yoga, and lucid clarity, three of the Six Dharmas of Niguma (*Ni gu chos drug*). After the death of Khyungpo Naljor, he spent two more years in retreat, and then, to resolve any remaining doubts, he sought out the great Gampopa Sönam Rinchen (Sgam po pa Bsod nams rin chen, 1079–1153), lineage holder of the Marpa Kagyü (Mar pa bka' brgyud) and disciple of Milarepa. Gampopa recognized their teacher-student relationship from previous lives and Mokchokpa was able to receive teachings from him during lucid dreaming, an ability he had mastered previously. In particular, he gained realization of mahāmudrā in Gampopa's system. He left Gampopa after a year. In a visionary experience of the ḍākinī Sukhasiddhi, she repeated this single stanza to him three times:

Until phenomena's nature is actualized,
Nourishment by human food obscures meditation experience.
Sever the bonds of food and clothing,
and eat the food of meditative absorption.

Thereafter he cut the ties to food and clothing and remained in retreat in the cliffs of Mokchok for twelve years. He composed many vajra songs during that time. In a retreat situation, especially if hungry and cold while obeying Sukhasiddhi's instructions, such songs are spontaneous expressions of feelings composed for their own sake, rather than as teaching tools. These first few verses of *Seven Royal Possessions Complete in Oneself* seem to be reminders of his decision to enter retreat in the first place.

I acted to defeat enemies and protect friends,
but at no time were the enemies defeated,
and at no time were the friends satisfied.

Now my main act is to live without enemies and friends.

I acted to propitiate gods and exorcise demons,
but at no time were the gods satisfied,
and at no time did the demons leave.
Now my main act is to live without gods and demons.

Though I chased after emptiness
reaching the view of emptiness is endless.
Now my main act is to cut to the root alone.²²

Some of his songs are quite candid about the actual hardships of protracted meditation retreat.

Although expressing dismay at very real meditation conundrums at first, the verses also offer Mokchokpa's instructional personal resolutions in this *Song of Six Attitudes of an Experienced Mind*. Meditators everywhere might relate to these issues. Mokchokpa uses the poetic device of repetition to emphasize the tricky or deceitful-like nature of spiritual practice, literally: "as if even the view deceives and deceives the yogin" (*blta bas kyang rnal 'byor bslu bslu 'dra*), as well as the repetition of the line as a kind of refrain.

At first I resolved my false assumptions,
but sometimes doubt still came up.
It's as if even the view tricks the yogin.
Now I ask only to keep a simple mind.

At first I realized the unborn,
but sometimes inflation still came up.
It's as if even meditation tricks the yogin.
Now I ask only to keep an undistracted mind.

At first I acted without fixation,
but sometimes attachment still came up.
It's as if even the conduct tricks the yogin.
Now I ask only to keep an unfixated mind.

At first I rested with one-pointed mind,

22. *Rgyal srid sna bdun rang la tshangs ba'i mgur*. 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 12:495.

but sometimes hopes and fears still came up.
It's as if even the fruition tricks the yogin.
Now I ask only to keep a spontaneous mind.

At first I made surpassing progress,
but sometimes anxiety still came up.
It's as if even the eight concerns trick the yogin.
Now I ask only to keep a crazy mind.

At first I renounced loving relatives,
but sometimes face-saving still came up.
Now I ask only to keep from saving face.²³

At first faith was born,
but sometimes complacency still came up.
It's as if laziness tricks the yogin.
Now I ask only to keep diligent and yogic.

May I not grow weary of faith and devotion
to the one deity, the Three Jewels.
May my devotion be uninterrupted
to the one parent, the holy guru.

May I not corrupt with extra words
the instructions of awakened mind's essence.
Practice is more dear than further scholarship.
I will stay by myself and keep practicing.²⁴

And finally, in this *Instruction on Eight Hardships*, there is yet another honest confession, and another enumeration. The eighth hardship is enlightenment itself—might as well just admit it.

It's hard to tire of the faults of cyclic existence
and devote oneself to transcendent Dharma.
It's hard to believe in the Dharma of cause and effect

23. I believe the third line of this exceptional three-line verse been left out in all available editions.

24. *Nyams myong blo drug gi mgur*. 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 12:497–98.

and then to have faith without sorrow.
It's hard to reject all sickness and pain
and then put this human body to use.
It's hard to find a compassionate guru
who has scripture, reason, and esoteric instructions.
It's hard to find a disciple who rejects distractions
and then cultivates meditative experience.
It's hard to abandon all attachment and aversion
and then compassionately work for others' welfare.
It's hard to meditate single-pointedly
free of dualistic conceptual thinking.

This instruction on the eight hardships
is valuable to all who practice Dharma.
Only a few out of a hundred get them all;
that's why attaining awakening is so hard.²⁵

Mokchokpa established a small monastery in Mokchok and his teaching and wisdom were passed on in the main Shangpa lineage to Kyergangpa Chökyi Sengé (Skyer sgang pa Chos kyi seng ge, 1154–1217), from him to Nyentön Rigongpa Chökyi Sherab (Gnyen ston Ri gong pa Chos kyi seng ge, 1175–1255), and then to Sangyé Tönpa Tsöndru Sengé (Sangs rgyas ston pa Brtson 'grus seng ge, 1107–1278), who was the seventh in what became known as the Seven Jewels of the Glorious Shangpa Kagyu. Then the vajra seal placed by Niguma on her instructions was lifted, and the Five Golden Dharmas could spread openly. These five instructions are mapped using the analogy of a tree: the roots are Niguma's Six Dharmas; the trunk is Amulet Mahāmudrā; the branches are the Three Integrations on the Path; the flowers are the White and Red Celestial Goddesses; and the fruit is Immortal and Infallible. These and other Shangpa practices were transmitted down a long lineage of adepts, eventually dispersing into twenty-four separate lines. Later masters consolidated twenty-three of those into one, and kept as a separate lineage the short or direct transmission (*nye brgyud*) that was received by the great adept Thangtong Gyalpo (Thang stong rgyal po, 1361–1484) in his visionary encounters with Niguma and Sukhasiddhi.²⁶ Both long and direct transmissions also entered other schools, such as the Gelukpa and Jonang lineages. For Jamgön Kongtrul, the Jonang lineage became especially important.

25. *Dka' ba rnam brgyad gdams ngag*. 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 12:498.

26. For the story of these encounters and the whole amazing life of the adept, see Stearns 2007.

Songs from the Later Lineage

Kunga Drolchok (1507–1566) was one of the later masters counted in the Shangpa tradition known as the Jonang line. Kunga Drolchok had spent thirty-one years of his life, starting from the age of seven, gathering instructions and empowerments from as many masters of various lineages as he could find. Though he was personally involved mainly in Sakya and Kālacakra practices, after a visitation from our *ḍākinī*, Niguma, his faith in the Shangpa teachings was ignited. During his abbacy of Jonang Monastery, from 1546 until his death, he finally organized all the various instructions he had gathered into a collection known as *One Hundred and Eight Guidebooks of Jonang*. This work seems to have been an inspiration and the precedent for Jamgön Kongtrul's great anthology projects, and in fact the whole of Kunga Drolchok's text is included in the last volume of *The Treasury of Precious Instructions*.²⁷

Kunga Drolchok identifies the following song as a “long-distance song” (*rgyang glu*), belonging to a genre better known as “calling the lama from afar” (*bla ma rgyang bod*). Typically these reveal a rather self-deprecating yearning for instruction or comfort from one's teacher, full of awareness of one's own faults and failures on the spiritual path. In the colophon, Drolchok states that it was “composed spontaneously as a whip to encourage my vigilance.” In that sense, it functions as an act of confession to acknowledge shortcomings and a determination to do better, with the guru's blessings. It was composed in the somewhat unusual style of eight-syllable lines that has been attributed by some as typical of Eastern Tibet, although Kunga Drolchok was originally from Mustang. When this style is chanted or sung in Tibetan, the first syllable is emphasized: “Refuge—not sought elsewhere Gyagom / Mind—undivided I go for refuge...” etc. I could not faithfully translate the whole song in that style without resorting to horrible English.

Refuge that I needn't seek elsewhere, Gyagom,
I take refuge in you with mind undivided.
Father, unerring lord guru,
turn your one child's mind to Dharma.

In action, I diligently pursued worldly thoughts;
my body disciplined, yet my mind shameful.
In name, I'm called religious, but I'm a hypocrite.
This you see with your compassion, my chief guru.

27. *Jo nang kbrid brgya*, in 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 18:127–353. Translated by Gyurme Dorjé in Jamgön Kongtrul 2020.

The place, samsara, though I seem to know its faults,
my mind is ever wandering in useless activity.
Mentally suspicious, my body is left behind in retreat.
This should be abandoned; please see it with wisdom.

In character, I am decidedly tough.
On the spot, I don't hide from any nonsense.
I am betrayed by myself, turning my own head.
Father, doesn't this just stir your tears of love?

In Dharma, my fiction of knowledge and awareness
mentally pleases me with my own childish prattle.
Of meditation and the like, I take little account.
Father, does this not concern you?

Karma's impressions in my mind are inexhaustible.
My character is not detached from samsara's swamp.
Present-time consciousness has not been recognized.
This song of what I'm missing is getting long!

Hey! This piled-stone illusion of a monk's form,
intelligent or stupid—it's deluded to analyze it.
The venerable image of lovely qualities is a rainbow.
Fixated concepts analyzing its value are vulgar.

Samsara's pit of nasty vomit is ruinous
when touched with the idea that it's delicious.
Mind's indefinite perceptions are pervasive.
To take a tenuous stand on their existence is crazy.

In mindfulness with singular mental consciousness,
witnessing [my own] non-dharmic [thoughts] was rough.
Whatever I've done is reflected in illusion's mirror.
By the code of true or false, it was all distraction and deceit.

What I've done has destroyed the crops of emancipation,
scorched by the drought of my conceptual analysis.

I understand, but will not leave it at that,
nor ever leave “meditation” as an empty word.
Now if I die it is good; living is also okay.
My aim, I know, is to consummate virtue.²⁸

The recognized incarnation of Kunga Drolchok at Jonang was the great polymath Drolwai Gönpö (‘Gro ba’i mgon po), better known by the translated Sanskrit name, Tāranātha (1575–1634). He was author of countless works on history, grammar, philosophy, epistemology, tantric ritual, and meditation, among other subjects. He figures prominently in many schools and lineages, as either protagonist or antagonist, but holds a special place in the Shangpa Kagyü. He also was graced with visions of the ancestral ḍākinīs, and was a prolific composer of texts on the Shangpa histories and teachings, as well as a “singer of songs.” The first selection is a song of nine-syllable lines that was composed at the age of twenty-three, while Tāranātha was residing at Samding Monastery, and was stated to be a counsel to himself as an incentive. One can almost imagine him standing before his reflection wagging his finger at himself. The refrain *snying med po* sets off each six-line verse. Literally this is “heartless” or something without an essence or purpose. “Hollow man” seems to capture the sense, while also recalling T.S. Eliot’s stunning poem that also ponders impermanence: “We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men...”²⁹

om svasti

I bow to the three precious sources of refuge
and say these words that dawned in my mind.

You tell of meditating in mountain retreats,
which makes a good impression in others’ eyes.
But on closer examination, your mind is not joined to Dharma.
How can this be the honest holy Dharma?
Now it’s time to practice from the heart.
Discard this life’s goals, hollow man!

You hasten to teach, supervising study and contemplation,
but at the slightest adversity abandon the holy Dharma.
Renowned as a scholar, you’re a waste of a human life.
How can someone like you be a good spiritual mentor?

28. ‘Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas 1999, 12:423–24.

29. Eliot 1936, 101–108.

Now it's time to tame your mind.
Point your finger inward, hollow man!

You see the fleeting nature of cyclic existence,
but really don't believe it and become negligent.
When it's time to pass on, you will not feel confident,
yet you don't worry about it; a careless madman.
Now it's time to prepare for the next life.
Turn your mind to the Dharma, hollow man!

You need nothing more, yet harbor attachment and aversion.
Your pride in your qualities is as big as Mount Meru.
You conform to social norms, though no one is impressed.
You who have done so little but expect so much:
now it's time to reject the eight worldly concerns.
Whatever happens has the same value, hollow man!

You can't give up even a little sleep for the sake of Dharma.
Later this year will do, you think with good-natured forbearance.
You want instant signs of experience, you empty braggart.
You don't control your desire for food, wealth, and fame.
Now it's time to concentrate on a single intention.
Be rid of your deepest hopes and fears, hollow man!

After adolescence, youth fades and deteriorates.
All your followers just repay benefit with harm,
yet you are still open-minded and not sick of it.
You plan for this life as if you don't know better.
Now it's time to wholeheartedly stop activities.
Train your mind to be impartial, hollow man!

All who bear the title of guru do not practice Dharma.
All their disciples are not keepers of sacred pledge.
All the people even lack shame and conscientiousness.
In these hard times of decline of the Buddha's doctrine,
no matter how many ways you try to help others,
mostly it just harms yourself and does not help them.

Once you gain stability in the Dharma,
the benefit for others will arise continuously.
Give up the sporadic semblance of helping others
in this life and concentrate on yourself.

This is the time to embrace the holy Dharma.
Since that is indeed the case, keep it in mind.³⁰

Tāranātha later applies a similar incentive to others. In the following case, to some yogins living in the hidden land of Latö who requested instruction. He takes an ironic jab at them as “great meditators” (*sgom chen*), a common term for lay practitioners, dismissing them with the wrathful shout of *phat*, often used by such practitioners. With its random variations of seven, eight, or nine syllables per line, those who chant it in group rituals must work hard to keep to a regular fast-paced rhythm, probably fudging some of the syllables. (At least that is this translator’s experience).

namo guru

Sovereign guru, my single sufficient father,
I supplicate you continuously without a break.
Turn my disciples’ minds to the Dharma
and bless them to realize all-pervasive mind.

At this time, you’ve accrued all favorable conditions,
you have met a qualified spiritual master
and received many profound instructions.
Now, no matter what, do not render them futile.

This body is a composite heap of flesh and bones,
unbefitting to hold as stable and permanent.
Establish your virtuous practice right away
without postponing it to a later time.

Those without meditative experience make false claims
and mouth on with assertions about emptiness.
They are at risk of succumbing to dark, empty talk.
It’s vitally important to scrutinize cause and effect.

30. 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 12:529–30. Also in Tā ra nā tha ca. 1990, 1:783–85.

With unceasing longing devotion,
fervently engage in supplicating the guru,
but don't try to cling to that as real.
Your mind and the guru's are no different.

Not knowing yourself, you wander cyclic existence,
but irresistible compassion is most important.
The delusion of clinging to its reality tricks you.
Regard all joy and sorrow as a dream.

This ordinary consciousness of your mind
need not be modified, for it is dharmakāya.
Whatever arises are the experiences of discursive thought.
Understand them to be like water and waves.

However meticulous your conduct,
please don't be false and hypocritical.
It's crucial to be in harmony with Dharma.
Perverse "great meditators:" *phaṭ*—be gone!

For continuous meditation day and night,
it's most important to lack action or work.
Effortlessly maintain that with mindfulness.
If you are left in the dark: *te le le*—despair!

The fruition, this buddha of your own mind,
is fundamental, not from baseless delusion.
Do not fall into the abyss of hopes and fears.
You need assurance of knowing this decisively.

All that appears is the dharmakāya.
Sure, it's fine not to make biased distinctions,
but artificial pure view undermines autonomy.
Stick to your guru's lineage.³¹

31. 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 12:536–37. Also in Tā ra nā tha ca. 1990, 1:866–68.

One time when Tāranātha was staying at Yoru in Tsang, he saw that many things were changing. Then, as if taking his own advice one step further from the above song, to recognize one's own mind as the guru, he realized that even all appearances arise as teachers to introduce the nature of mind. The three-step progression in the later verses adds to the sense of the gradual process of realization. It also provides us yet another play with enumeration.

om svasti

Here in Yoru where auspiciousness spreads
at the time of flowers in the Ox Year,
I, a yogin free from bias,
fondly recall my kind lord guru.

Indeed, I have previously wandered until now
in cyclic existence from beginningless time.
Yet, here in this cycle without bottom or boundary,
the precious one sends my mind to buddhahood.

Although the six kinds of migrators are kind parents,
not one has helped me out of cyclic existence;
no guide to prepare me for everlasting [happiness].
For such essential plans I ask my mentor.

This physical composite of flesh and blood
will destruct; we know not at all when.
Those who lack confidence in the afterlife,
please focus inward with this knowledge.

Fearing my death, I sought out a guru.
I fully applied all practices, as rock breaks bone.
Since then, I know I'll be perfectly fine when I die.
Don't you need a provision for such a carefree state?

First, these ever changing four seasons;
second, these pictures of rising and falling prosperity;
third, these grave changes in the land and country:
these are the same teacher showing impermanence of the conditioned.

First, this farming that never ends;
second, these mean, ungrateful responses to care;
third, the salt water that doesn't quench when drunk:
these are the same teacher who shows us futility in action.

First, this seething bustle of the village;
second, this busy-bee activity of insignificant toil;
third, these wispy white clouds that flex and roil:
these are the same introduction showing aimless samsara.

First, this rainbow of formless appearance;
second, this clear echo without locality,
third, this unreal dream that produces joy or pain:
these are the same teacher who shows appearance as mind.

First, the magical machinations of outer appearances;
second, the doors of perception of inner mental awareness;
third, the emptiness of basic space without identity:
these are the same inseparability of pouring water into water.

When a little meditation experience is born,
any and all appearances demonstrate this.
Any acts of the three doors serve to enhance it.
When you think about this meaning—*a la la!*

Now then, whatever little is left of this life
will be spent in accomplishing the practice,
keeping to remote mountain retreats,
and integrating whatever arises on the path.

Surely my benevolent, precious guru
granted inconceivable blessings in the past.
Now again please grant your blessings;
Dharma Lord, I have no other refuge.³²

32. 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 12:537–38. Also in Tā ra nā tha ca. 1990, 1:976–38.

Jamgön Kongtrul's Colophon for *An Ocean of Songs Meaningful to Hear*

The precious Kagyü tradition considers singing vajra songs extremely important and the custom has spread widely. However, the long tradition of the Shangpa Kagyü has not spread much in this context, so even texts containing samples of the songs of that lineage of adepts have become like daytime stars. I have gathered these mainly from the biographies and similar sources, and supplemented them from the [songs of] the later lineage wherever appropriate. Whatever sublime quintessence of the elixir of the profound teachings from this lineage was to be found is now contained in this golden receptacle of former virtue. Karma Ngawang Yönten Gyatso Lodrö Tayepai De compiled this at the secluded retreat of Devikoti at Tsadra Rinchen Drak. May this become the cause for the immaculate long tradition of the glorious Shangpa Kagyü to spread and flourish in all directions and times. Let virtue prevail.³³

Contemporary Aspiration

To properly conclude this brief foray into songs of the Shangpa lineage, the following brings us up to the very recent past with a composition by Khyabjé Kalu Rinpoché, Karma Rangjung Kunkhyab (1905–1989), who was considered the Shangpa lineage-holder. Though not identified as a song, the following *Eight Thoughts of a Great Being* is perhaps the most common kind of verse, that of an aspiration prayer. In its title, Rinpoché uses irony in connecting “great being” (*skyes bu chen po*) with “thought” (*rnam rtog*). This term, often rendered as “discursive thought” or “conceptuality,” is decidedly not the right word for the intentionality (*dgongs pa*) associated with the awakened mind of a great being. In using it here, however, the idea of a great being shifts to mean someone with an altruistic intention, even if they are still in the throes of conceptual thought. This makes it practical and plausible, here on Earth.

Eight Thoughts of a Great Being, an Aspiration Prayer

By the truth of the compassion of the sublime refuges,
and the power of this virtuous root and pure noble thought,
may whatever suffering felt by migrators throughout space
be dispelled by my own effort alone.

33. 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1999, 12:558.

May the hopes and desires of beings be fulfilled
by worldly and transcendent virtue and goodness.

May my body, flesh, blood, skin, and so on
benefit any sentient being appropriately.

May I absorb the suffering of all mother migrators,
and they all attain my happiness and virtue.

As long as the world remains, for that long in my being
may a thought of harming another not arise for an instant.

In the benefit of beings may I not waver for an instant
with despair, fatigue, and so on, but exert myself diligently.

May all beings beset by poverty, hunger, and thirst
effortlessly find whatever resources they desire.

May I take upon myself the great burdens of unbearable suffering
of hell beings and others so they can be free of them.

Karma Rangjung Kunkhyab's aspiration.

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