

All the Wealth of Poets: The *Bodhicitta* Verses of Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltsen

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Abstract: This essay examines the 356 verses on *bodhicitta* composed by Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltsen (khu nu bla ma bstan 'dzin rgyal mtshan, 1895-1977) in 1959 and subsequently published as *Jewel Lamp: In Praise of Bodhicitta* (byang chub sems kyi bstod pa rin chen sgron ma) in 1966. Offering a handful of experimental translations of selected verses, this essay reflects on the *Jewel Lamp* both from a literary perspective and as a site for thinking about *bodhicitta* in a twentieth century context. I consider how the *Jewel Lamp's* meditations on *bodhicitta* are informed by Khunu Lama's knowledge of Tibetan and Sanskrit poetics and literary theory, as well as by his lifelong practice of renunciation. I argue that Khunu Lama depicts poetry and Buddhist practice as involving parallel processes of self-cultivation and transformation.

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་ཀྱིས་རང་དོན་རྒྱུ། །བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་ཀྱིས་གཞན་དོན་རྒྱུ།།
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Through *bodhicitta* your aim's fulfilled. Through *bodhicitta*, others' aims as well,
 Through *bodhicitta*, cast out fear. Through *bodhicitta*, provide the cure.

Jewel Lamp, verse 216

In March of 1959, as Tibetans confronted Chinese troops in the streets of Lhasa and the young Fourteenth Dalai Lama and tens of thousands of other Tibetans fled into exile in India, the Himalayan Buddhist renunciant Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen (khu nu bla ma bstan 'dzin rgyal mtshan, 1895–1977), author of the above verse, was living in a small bare room above the Varanasi ashram of Tekra Math.¹ Just three months earlier, in January of that year, Khunu Lama had embarked on a reflective practice of writing one poem in Tibetan each day in his diary, on the subject of *bodhicitta*, the foundational Mahāyāna Buddhist quality of aspiring to Buddhahood for the sake of all beings. Intermixed with the daily verses Khunu Lama inscribed in his notebook were updates (sometimes in Hindi and Sanskrit as well as in Tibetan) on events happening in Tibet, and especially about the Dalai Lama's journey toward India.²

The 356 verses on *bodhicitta* that Khunu Lama composed during this year of daily writing would subsequently be published as *Jewel Lamp: In Praise of Bodhicitta* (*byang chub sems kyi bstod pa rin chen sgron ma*), and would go on to become his most widely read work. Reprinted many times since its first publication in 1966 (in an edition containing a forward by the Dalai Lama and dedicated to the memory of the Dalai Lama's late sister, Tsering Dolma), the *Jewel Lamp* remains in print in multiple Tibetan editions, as well as in English and German translations.

The Dalai Lama has personally taught the *Jewel Lamp* on a number of occasions, often mentioning his admiration for the text. In addition to teaching the verses themselves, His Holiness often mentions the *Jewel Lamp* when giving public teachings on *bodhicitta* to both Tibetan and international audiences. More than anything else, it is these public mentions of the *Jewel Lamp* by the Dalai Lama that have brought Khunu Lama's *bodhicitta* poems to an increasingly wide readership over the six decades since they first appeared. In addition, three important works on the *Jewel Lamp* have also been published in the last 25 years, two translations and one commentary, which have served to further widen the audience for the verses.

For English-language readers, it was Gareth Sparham's elegant and inviting translation, published in 1999 with a brief biographical and thematic introduction under the title *Vast as the Heavens, Deep as the Sea: Verses in Praise of Bodhicitta*, that made the *Jewel Lamp* directly accessible. For Tibetan-language readers, Atsog Tenzin Jamyang's (a tshogs bstan 'dzin 'jam dbyangs) 2003 commentary on and analysis of the *Jewel Lamp* opened up literary and philosophical dimensions of the verses. And for German readers, Jürgen Manshardt's 2004 German translation and

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1. For detailed study of Khunu Lama's life and activities see Pitkin 2022; Angrup 2005; Manshardt 2004; Sparham 1999; Lamchen Gyalpo n.d. (2011 trans.); and Dodin 1997.
 2. Sparham 1999: 5–7 provides examples of Khunu Lama's diary entries from this time, in which he records updates on events in Tibet as they were reported in the Indian papers. Oral sources also describe Khunu Lama reading the newspapers in his later life. While his austere practice of renunciation often led him to seek solitude, he is reported to have been strikingly knowledgeable about the world and current events; see Pitkin 2022.

groundbreaking biographical study of Khunu Lama's life, based on Manshardt's years of oral history research with Khunu Lama's former disciples, made the *Jewel Lamp* more widely available.

Nevertheless, despite these publications and the many references to the *Jewel Lamp* by the Dalai Lama at large public events, there has not been much engagement in English with the verses themselves, either as literature, or as a rich site for thinking about *bodhicitta* in a twentieth century context. This brief essay cannot do anything like justice to all 356 verses, but in what follows, I offer a brief exploration of selected themes in the *Jewel Lamp*, and some reflections on how contemporary readers might approach the verses. In particular, I consider how the *Jewel Lamp's* meditations on *bodhicitta* are informed by Khunu Lama's deep engagement with Tibetan and Sanskrit poetics, as well as by his lifelong practice of renunciation. I also consider to what extent the agonizing context of events in Tibet during the time when Khunu Lama was writing may be reflected in the verses.

The task of translating the *Jewel Lamp* verses into English is not easy, despite their deceptively simple quatrain structure and individual brevity. The richness of the verses' poetic imagery and allusions, the intersection of sonic patterns and meter, and the often condensed and multivalent word choices make it challenging to formulate English renderings that are vivid, elegant, and metrically pleasing all at once. As part of my own exploration of the verses, and as a kind of readerly practice in homage to Khunu Lama's own engaged literary aesthetic, I have nevertheless experimented with translating a handful of the verses here. I have treasured Gareth Sparham's translation of the verses for years, so I propose these alternative renderings not as a replacement, but rather as a method of engagement with the *Jewel Lamp* text and its themes.

Khunu Lama's Himalayan Poetics of Aesthetic and Spiritual Cultivation

The verses of the *Jewel Lamp* reflect Khunu Lama's lifelong commitment to cultivation practices of multiple kinds. His verses explicitly and implicitly demonstrate how the literary cultivation of *nyenngak* (*snyan ngag*), classical Tibetan poetry and poetics, engages with and supports the practices of *lojong* (*blo sbyong*), Buddhist mind-training, that cultivate *bodhicitta*.³ Although the verses of the *Jewel Lamp* are pithy quatrains that compress complex meanings into few words, each verse is crafted with subtle literary refinement. The literary qualities of the verses offer evidence of Khunu Lama's lifetime of immersion in Tibetan poetics, classical Sanskrit poetry (*kāvya*), literary

3. On the history of *snyan ngag* and *kāvya* in Tibet, see among others Lin 2022; Kapstein 2003; Jinpa and Elsner 2000; Cabezón and Jackson 1996; as well as contemporary issues raised in Hartley et al. 2008.

theory, and translation scholarship, while also revealing the fruit of his decades of advanced Buddhist philosophical study and sustained meditative retreat. In order to appreciate the *Jewel Lamp* poems, we must thus attend to their cultivated literary qualities as *nyenngak*, together with their instructions and encouragement for cultivating *bodhicitta*.

In two recent and highly pertinent essays, Nancy Lin, Gedun Rabsal and Nicole Willock have pointed out ways in which Tibetan belletristic literary forms, and *nyenngak* poetry in particular, have been approached in colonizing and Orientalist ways by non-Tibetan authors. Noting the frequent neglect of *nyenngak* in western language scholarship, Lin points to the “distaste” evinced by western scholars, who portray *nyenngak* as “contrived, artificial, baroque, pedantic,” and who often overlook it in favor of other forms of Tibetan poetry which are seen as more in keeping with contemporary western aesthetic sensibilities. Lin points out historical and socio-cultural reasons why elite western readers have valorized the specific styles of poetry that they have, in particular highlighting the aesthetic impact of the Romantic and Transcendentalist movements on western tastes.

Lin suggests that western authors driven by Romantic and Transcendentalist-derived preferences have tended to valorize Tibetan literary works that conform to an aesthetics of “subjectivity, naturalness, and freedom from formal verse convention,” to the exclusion of more formal or ornate literary styles such as *nyenngak*. Guided by Lin’s analysis, we might observe that by imposing these culturally specific preferences on Tibetan materials, such western scholarship does a kind of violence to Tibetan literature, excluding some of the most prized works of the Tibetan literary repertoire and ignoring centuries of Tibetan literary theory and analysis. In response to such exclusions, Lin proposes “studying *snyan ngag*, the classical tradition of Tibetan poetry, belletristic prose, and poetics, as a decolonial endeavor,” arguing for sustained attention to all forms of Tibetan literature, and specifically to the particular philosophical and aesthetic insights afforded by *nyenngak*.⁴

Building on Lin’s critique, Rabsal and Willock articulate a decolonizing approach in their own study of *nyenngak*. They situate translation of and engagement with *nyenngak* as part of “a larger discourse on decolonization and anti-colonial translation practices” that “foregrounds Indigenous epistemologies of literary aesthetics.” Drawing on the insights of the Kenyan author and theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Rabsal and Willock analyze how the epic poem “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” by the twentieth century polymath Alak Tseten Zhabdrung (a lags tshe tan zhabs drung, 1910–1985) deliberately harnesses the cultural power of Tibetan belletristic literary virtuosity to push back against Chinese state rhetoric regarding the state’s “purported civilizing mission, which legitimizes its rule by disparaging Tibetan culture as inferior or backward.”⁵ In the face of state

4. Lin 2020, 144–145.

5. Rabsal and Willock 2022, 7.

denigration, restriction, or destruction of Tibetan cultural and intellectual works and practices, both during the Maoist period and in the present day, Rabsal and Willock argue that the cultivation of *nyenngak* “serves to reestablish the authority of Tibetan lamas as integral to the revival of Tibetan Buddhist culture in the aftermath of decades of state-sanctioned violence against Tibetans in the People’s Republic of China.”⁶

Lin, Rabsal, and Willock’s interventions highlight some of the intellectual and political stakes of writing and reading *nyenngak*, and offer important context for approaching Khunu Lama’s *Jewel Lamp*. Their analyses set the stage for focusing on the role of cultivation as an intellectual, aesthetic, and Buddhist practice in Khunu Lama’s work. Contra those who might frame the formal qualities of *nyenngak* as dry or artificial, attention to the literary ornamentation and stylistic nuance of the *Jewel Lamp* verses can enhance our understanding of their emotional richness and psychological acuity, especially regarding Buddhist practice.

Perhaps most significantly, with Lin, Rabsal, and Willock’s analyses in mind, we can note the positionality of Tibetan literary language for Khunu Lama, as a key part of a transregional and cross-cultural Buddhist civilizational repertoire that was of paramount importance to him personally, as well as to his religious and intellectual communities. As a young man, Khunu Lama left home to pursue a lifetime of immersion in Tibetan Buddhist learning, including meditative and ritual practices and scholarly disciplines of literary cultivation. He subsequently spent much of his adult life transmitting these systems of knowledge and practice to Himalayan, Tibetan, and a few western students, both during long sojourns in Tibetan regions and visits to the Himalayan valleys near his birthplace, and in the post-1959 circumstances of Tibetan exile and diaspora. Indeed, for the Tibetan refugee community in India in the years after 1959, Khunu Lama was an important bridge figure, one of several members of his generation who transmitted Tibetan lineages of Buddhist practice and literary knowledge, playing a vital role in nurturing cultural continuity in the exile context. Khunu Lama’s *Jewel Lamp*, composed at a time when Tibetan culture faced devastating threat from Chinese Communist invasion and colonization, celebrates and reaffirms the qualities of quintessentially cultivated Tibetan Buddhist literary forms.

To situate Khunu Lama’s literary virtuosity amid his broader interests, it will be helpful to briefly sketch his background and study of Buddhist and literary topics. He was admired during his lifetime as a leading exponent of Tibetan and Sanskrit literary theory, poetics, grammar, and composition, having begun his study of Tibetan and Sanskrit literary topics as a young man. Born in 1895 in the Kinnaur, or Khunu (khu nu), Valley in the Himalayan region near the border with Tibet, in what is now part of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, he spent his life immersed in

6. Rabsal and Willock 2022, 10. See also Shakya 2008. Note that Rabsal and Willock are not proposing *nyenngak* as a purely indigenous Tibetan literary form. Rather, they center the Tibetan belletristic literary tradition within indigenous Tibetan repertoires of knowledge production and cultural authority.

Tibetan religious and intellectual culture, and lived in Tibet for some twenty years. Yet in his life and work, he also maintained important connections to India. During the last three decades of his life, he spent considerable time traveling and staying in communities across the Indian subcontinent. He frequently resided in the Buddhist pilgrimage center of Bodh Gaya, but he also often lived and taught for long periods in non-Buddhist cultural spaces—including the small room in the Varanasi ashram where he composed the *Jewel Lamp*—that were highly unconventional for a Tibetan Buddhist scholar of his generation. His Kinnauri Himalayan identity shifted in cultural significance depending on whom he was with, and where: Tibetan and western colleagues and students for instance sometimes described him as an “Indian lama,” while Indian classmates and acquaintances seem to have perceived him as Tibetan or Himalayan. Khunu Lama harnessed his own distinctively Himalayan vantage point on both Indian and Tibetan cultural forms in part via his mastery of multiple literary and philosophical traditions in Tibetan and Sanskrit, achieved through his decades of study and trans-regional travel.⁷

Although he learned to read Tibetan and began to study Buddhist texts and Tibetan grammar as a child in Kinnaur, his first significant study of Sanskrit and Tibetan literary topics was as a young man in Sikkim. One of his most important literature teachers was someone he met in this early period, the famous Sikkimese polymath, literary scholar, and Dzogchen master Khangsarwa Ogyen Tenzin Rinpoché (khang gsar ba o rgyan kun bzang bstan 'dzin rin po che, 1863–1936), who was known for his commentaries on the *Mirror of Poetics*, the influential Sanskrit text on Indian *kāvya* poetic forms that Khunu Lama would also go on to study and teach.⁸ Khunu Lama met him at age nineteen in Sikkim, soon after leaving home to pursue his studies, and Orgyen Tenzin's influence on him seems to have been significant. Orgyen Tenzin apparently encouraged the young Khunu Lama's study of Sanskrit poetics and grammar, as well as linking him to a broad and ecumenical network of lineage connections that shaped not only Khunu Lama's literary studies, but also may have set the stage for the many Dzogchen and other Buddhist transmissions he later received. Indeed, I speculate that Orgyen Tenzin may have encouraged the young Khunu Lama in the non-sectarian (*ris med*) orientation toward Buddhist practice for which he later became well-known.⁹

After his literary training with Orgyen Tenzin, Khunu Lama went on to study philosophical texts at Tashilhunpo Monastery in Tibet and then to travel widely across the Tibetan Plateau, from the Tashilhunpo and Lhasa areas to Kham and Amdo in Eastern Tibet. During his years in Tibetan regions, Khunu Lama received Buddhist transmissions and teaching from some of the most famous lamas of the early twentieth century, ultimately forming relationships with twenty-two masters from across the four main contemporary branches of Tibetan Buddhism.

7. Pitkin 2022, 73–74; 94–111.

8. Angrup 2005, 17; Densapa n.d.

9. Pitkin 2022, 36–43, 100–108.

He identified all twenty-two as his root gurus (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*) in a list he later shared with his student K. Angrup, the Himalayan intellectual who subsequently became his main Tibetan language biographer.¹⁰ At the same time, throughout his travels across the Tibetan Plateau, Khunu Lama studied and taught Tibetan and Sanskrit grammar, poetry, and literary theory to a range of Tibetan Buddhist figures and secular leaders, including the young Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoché (dil mgo mkhyen brtse bkra shis dpal 'byor, 1910–1991). Notably, during his sojourn in Kham, Khunu Lama was invited to serve as literature tutor to the royal family of Dergé. There, he was asked to write a commentary on the famous sixteenth-century lexicographical text called *The Scholar's Lamp of Language* (*dag yig ngag sgron*), a lexicographical and orthographical dictionary in verse; this commentarial work remains in print in multiple editions, and after the *Jewel Lamp* it is probably Khunu Lama's best-known composition.¹¹

Finally, after over twenty years in Tibet, Khunu Lama returned to India and sought out teachers of Paninian Sanskrit grammar, further honing his literary knowledge and skills. He remained in India for the rest of his life (including an extended stay in his home valley of Kinnaur), except for a period in 1974–1975 when he traveled and taught in Nepal. Thus, by the time he began to compose the *Jewel Lamp* in 1959, Khunu Lama had been immersed for decades in both Tibetan and Sanskrit literary theory, poetics, and grammar, as well as having received Buddhist transmissions from a wide range of leading masters from across the breadth of Tibetan Buddhist traditions. All of these forms of knowledge and Buddhist practice inform the style and content of the *Jewel Lamp* verses.

Bodhicitta, Nyenngak and Lojong: The Poetics of Mind-Training

On first picking up Khunu Lama's *Jewel Lamp*, a reader might wonder about its intended audience. Are the verses offered here as instructions from a master practitioner of *bodhicitta* to the reader, perhaps best understood as a form of poetically framed Buddhist advice, such as in a genre like *shaldam* (*zhal gdams*)? Or is the *Jewel Lamp* better experienced as an intimate, inward-facing record of someone's own personal engagement with the practice of arousing and maintaining *bodhicitta* within themselves? Khunu Lama himself states at the end of the *Jewel Lamp*, in Verse

10. Pitkin 2022, 27.

11. See Angrup 2005, 24; Dodin 1997, 88; Pitkin 2022, 41. The *dag yig ngag sgron* root text was composed in 1538 by the Tibetan translator and literary scholar Palkhang Lotsawa (dpal khang lo tsa' ba ngag dbang chos kyi rgya mtsho, b. fifteenth–sixteenth century). A paperback edition of the root text with Khunu Lama's commentary was reissued in 1989 by the Mi rigs dpe skrun khang. This 1989 edition, available in Tibet and India, presents the root text, Khunu Lama's commentary, and the commentary of the contemporary scholar Kunsang namgyal (kun bzang rnam rgyal) under the title *ngag sgron rtsa 'grel dang de'i yang 'grel*. LaMacchia 2008 notes that as of the early 2000s, Khunu Lama's commentary was used in Kinnaur for teaching Tibetan language.

355, “In order to meditatively cultivate it in my own mind, I have explained this way of *bodhicitta*.” From this perspective, in taking up the challenge of writing a daily verse on this theme, Khunu Lama is practicing a kind of writing-meditation, creating the verses as a way of exhorting himself toward deeper understanding of and commitment to this fundamental Mahāyāna quality.

At the same time, in framing his verses as part of a practice of self-cultivation, and in the fruitful ambiguity of author, audience, and voice throughout the *Jewel Lamp*, Khunu Lama is also situating his verses within a long-standing Indo-Tibetan Buddhist literary and meditative tradition that links the practices of poetics, *bodhicitta*, and renunciation. When Khunu Lama says he has written the *Jewel Lamp* primarily for himself, many Buddhist readers will hear an echo of the renowned eighth century Indian Buddhist philosopher and poet Śāntideva, author of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*Guide to Bodhisattva Practice*). Evocations of Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, which in so many ways clearly serves as inspiration for Khunu Lama’s text, pervade the *Jewel Lamp*, although they are not always explicit. Khunu Lama, reflecting as he does on the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*’s themes of *bodhicitta* and renunciation, moves through the main psychological and philosophical insights of Śāntideva’s work (although not in the same sequenced order), writing verses which range from self-exhortations to practice altruism and patience, to verses critiquing selfish forms of pleasurable attachment, to verses like 337 which engage advanced points in Madhyamika philosophy.¹²

In framing his verses primarily as a self-cultivation practice, Khunu Lama certainly echoes Śāntideva’s own words. Śāntideva famously says in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* that he writes only to “perfume my own mind.”¹³ Of course, this humble stance, in which a writer disavows the status of their role as a revered teacher and guide for others, is a longstanding Buddhist convention, connected to psychological practices of renouncing fame and practicing self-concealment or reclusion, as both Śāntideva and Khunu Lama are remembered as doing. Yet such claims to be simply “writing for myself” do not prevent readers and commentators from describing both Khunu Lama’s and Śāntideva’s texts as teaching texts, which from the perspective of many readers are, at least on one level, clearly written to guide others.

However, in this case, the humilific language of “I wrote this to cultivate my own mind” genuinely seems to point to something significant that Khunu Lama and Śāntideva have in common: the idea that *bodhicitta* can be cultivated in the mind in part through the practice of writing poetry. This notion resonates through both texts, setting up an implicit connection between the two kinds of cultivation, of poetry and of the bodhisattva path. Both forms of cultivation mobilize mental faculties of intentionality and imagination, and engage in a developmental process of

12. ཀུན་རྫོབ་བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་མཚོག་གི་ ཉམས་ལེན་བདག་གཞན་བརྗེ་སོགས་ཏེ།
དོན་དམ་བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་མཚོག་གི་ ཉམས་ལེན་སྟོང་ཉིད་སྐྱེམ་པ་ཡིན།

13. Śāntideva 2011, 30 (chapter 1, verse 2); Kachru 2019a, 75.

gradual refinement. Both forms of cultivation involve a certain kind of effort, even as they can also lead to an experience of effortlessness. Khunu Lama’s own repeated references, both direct and implied, to Indo-Tibetan poetic traditions and to the Sanskritic *kāvya* tradition in particular, repeatedly emphasize these parallel practices of literary and spiritual cultivation.¹⁴

Sonam Kachru’s observations on the voice of the lyric poet in the context of Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* are highly relevant here.¹⁵ Kachru describes the lyric subject evoked through Śāntideva’s poetic form as a “subject overhearing themselves and so becoming capable of change.” Śāntideva’s poetry in this sense can be read as offering audiences access to the mental laboratory of psychological transformation within the poet, in which multiple possible internal selves—inner aspects of the self which readers can also recognize within their own minds—are recognized and led along the path to enlightenment.¹⁶ Thus when Śāntideva speaks of writing specifically to “perfume his own mind,” Kachru suggests we see this as part of a “*bringing into being* a mind, a certain way of being a person.” This is part of an “exercise in habituation” that is both contemplative and part of “a textual practice, a kind of writing of one’s life,” in which meditation is itself closely connected to reading and textuality.¹⁷ As Kachru so eloquently puts it, the “overhearing” which the poet evokes through insisting that they write to habituate, “perfume,” or train their own mind “is here pressed into service as a special variety of a long-valORIZED process of self-knowledge, mastery and care,” part of “the traditional work of philosophical therapy” that is at the heart of Khunu Lama’s and Śāntideva’s inseparably intellectual, literary and meditative Buddhist projects.¹⁸

Turning now to the *Jewel Lamp* with these considerations in mind, we can see that many of Khunu Lama’s verses can fruitfully be read through this lens of the poet’s personal cultivation of an altruistic bodhisattva attitude. Consider Verse 55:

གཞན་ཕན་ལས་སུ་སྐྱོར་བ་ན། ཚ་གང་བཞེས་སྐྱེ་ངལ་སོགས་ཀྱིས།
 སྐྱོ་བ་མིད་པར་རབ་སྐྱོ་བ། བྱང་རྒྱུ་བ་སེམས་ཀྱི་ཆ་ཤས་སྟོན།།

Yoke yourself to others’ flourishing, and then
 Heat, cold, hunger, thirst—such pains,
 Bring no dismay, but perfect joy.
 This facet of *bodhicitta* comes to mind.

Verse 81 builds on this same theme:

14. See Townsend 2021 for discussion of related themes in Tibetan Buddhist aesthetics.

15. I thank Holly Gayley for encouraging me to engage Sonam Kachru’s work in this context.

16. Kachru 2019a, 65.

17. Kachru 2019a, 75–76, italics in the original.

18. Kachru 2019a, 77.

རི་ལྷ་རི་ལྷ་རྒྱལ་སྤྲུལ་ལ།
དེ་ལྷ་དེ་ལྷ་དགོ་སྤྲུལ་སྤྲུ།

ཀྱིན་ངན་དྲག་པོ་འབྱུང་འབྱུར་བ།
འབྱུར་བ་བྱང་ཚུབ་སེམས་ལས་སྣང།།

As much as for the Buddha's heirs,
Harsh circumstances arise and grow,
Just so, just so, this grows their goodness
I think *bodhicitta* makes it so.¹⁹

One might well hear in these lines the personal reflection of someone who has tried to live in this way, and who is recounting his own thoughts and observations. In this context we might particularly note that while Khunu Lama's verses about *bodhicitta* are ultimately encouraging, they also acknowledge real distress (or worse) that the practitioner may confront, in a life committed to renunciation and the bodhisattva path.

Such an experiential dimension of the poems, in particular where the verses reflect on the transformation of hardship, is a reading that strongly resonates with what we know of Khunu Lama's own activities and life style. As I discuss in more detail elsewhere, Khunu Lama is described by students and biographers as having been deeply committed to practicing renunciation as a core aspect of cultivating *bodhicitta*. Those who knew him describe how that practice of renunciation made him vulnerable to poverty and ill health, among other challenges.²⁰ Published biographies and oral accounts all recount the austerities Khunu Lama embraced as part of his renunciatory cultivation: how Khunu Lama would give donations from visitors away, often to the next visitor or to individuals in need; how he owned no furniture, ritual objects, or even dishes; how he avoided fame and recognition, turning down honors, prominent roles, and salaries; how he ate sparingly, often only once per day, and neglected his own health; and how in many different ways he seemed to be living in accordance with the Tibetan renunciant ideal of the *jadralwa* (*bya bral ba*), or person who has "nothing left to do." Verses like 55 and 81 above, and other verses that

19. Here and below, in exploring possible renderings in English, I have moved away from the most literal word by word translation in order to attempt to reflect something of the metrical pattern of the Tibetan verses, which is such a satisfying dimension of the original. I have also experimented with English sonic effects, including internal rhyme, off rhyme, and repeated vowel sounds within a line as a way to evoke some of the sound qualities of the Tibetan. One challenge is how to work with the verb *snyam* in these two verses (to think, reflect, wonder, imagine, consider, hold in mind), which Khunu Lama uses to end both verse 55 and 81, and which he uses a number of times throughout the *Jewel Lamp*. One possibility would be to choose a single translation throughout, so that English readers could hear echoes of other verses in each place where this word appears, as Tibetan readers can. On the other hand, because English syntactical structures are much less easily compressed than Tibetan ones, using only one translation term for *snyam* constrains the possibilities for meter and sonic qualities. Here, I have chosen to emphasize the meter and sound patterns, rather than keeping to a single translation term.

20. Pitkin 2022, 81-97, relatedly 149-155.

mention fear, hunger, danger, or dismay, obliquely seem to evoke the kinds of hardships Khunu Lama experienced in the process of this kind of cultivation. (On the other hand, as I discuss in a moment, other verses mention the joy, freedom, and delight of *bodhicitta*. These verses give a sense of *bodhicitta*'s transformational power, while maintaining the experiential tone.)

Many of Khunu Lama's students have described his renunciation as part of an altruistic practice designed to increase generosity and turn away from ego-grasping. Commentators on Khunu Lama's life story explicitly locate these modes of renunciation, generosity, and altruism within the mind-training, or *lojong*, system taught by the 10th–11th century Bengali Buddhist teacher Atiśa (Atiśa Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna, 982–1055?) and by the Tibetan Kadampa masters who further disseminated and developed Atiśa's teachings in Tibet. This Tibetan *lojong* tradition is in turn understood to build upon the presentations of earlier Indian writers such as Śāntideva. Biographers and oral sources frequently link Khunu Lama directly to the Kadampa masters, as well as to Śāntideva, in a host of literary and biographical ways. For example, K. Angrup, Khunu Lama's main biographer, includes recurring textual interpolations of key Kadampa mind-training verses in his 2005 biography of Khunu Lama, and uses these passages to frame discussions of Khunu Lama's practices of renunciation and *bodhicitta*. Even more personally, multiple students describe Khunu Lama as himself being like a Kadampa master in person, or as like a second Śāntideva, in his lifestyle, appearance, and practices of self-concealment and reclusion.²¹

Associations with the Kadampas and Śāntideva reverberate throughout the verses of the *Jewel Lamp* even beyond what we have already explored. In particular, many stanzas map out or refer to essential mind-training practices quite explicitly. Verse 48 offers one good example:

མར་ཤེས་རྒྱན་རྒྱན་གཟོ་བ། བྱམས་དང་སློང་རྗེ་ལྷག་པ་ཡི།
བསམ་པ་ལས་བྱུང་བྱུང་རྒྱབ་སེམས། རང་གཞན་ཕན་བདེ་འབྱུང་བའི་གནས།།

My mothers—I recognize you, recall your kindness, commit to repay it:
Love, compassion, and the supreme
Thought—from these arises *bodhicitta*,
Wellspring of my own and others' benefit.

This verse of course sums one of the two most foundational *lojong* techniques of the Kadampas, the Seven Point Mind Training. In this practice, a meditator reflects that all beings have at some point been their mother. They then generate *bodhicitta* in a step by step manner on the basis of the gratitude, love, compassion, and altruistic commitment to help all beings be free from suffering that flow from this insight. Khunu Lama makes a number of references to this practice in particular, and to related practices drawn from the Kadampa mind-training tradition throughout

21. Pitkin 2022, 108–111.

the *Jewel Lamp*. In multiple verses, he provides condensed four-line summaries of essential mind training concepts.

Another recurring theme in the *Jewel Lamp* is the connection or parallelism that we have already noted in the context of Śāntideva, between the cultivation involved in mind training and the cultivation involved in composing poetry. Khunu Lama repeatedly hints at this connection. In Verse 303 for instance, he suggests a parallel between a poet’s cultivation of the repertoire of literary virtuosity and the Buddhist cultivation of the repertoire of *bodhicitta*, letting the idea of wealth or possessions (*bdog pa*) carry the comparison:

ལུལ་དུ་བྱང་བའི་རྒྱན་གང་ཞིག ལྷན་ངག་མགན་པོའི་བདོག་ཀུན་ཏེ།
 དེ་བཞིན་དམ་པའི་རྒྱུས་བུ་ཡི། བདོག་ཀུན་བྱང་སེམས་རིན་པོ་ཆེ།།

Exquisite *alamkāra* (poetic ornamentation)
 Is all the wealth of *nyenngak* experts
 In just that way, for holy beings
 Precious *bodhicitta* is all their wealth.²²

Here, the impact of the verse is heightened if we know a little bit about the operation of aesthetic experience within the *kāvya* aesthetic tradition of *alamkāra-shastra* to which Khunu Lama refers. Sanskrit and Tibetan commentators in this tradition describe the intentionally cultivated elaboration of both *alamkāra* poetic ornamentation, and of the aesthetic connoisseurship needed to fully appreciate it as part of a highly developed set of poetic and responsive practices. These authorial and audience forms of cultivation operate in service to the actual experience of what is called *rāsa*, the poetic “flavor” or “savor” that overtakes the connoisseur as she or he encounters an artist’s work. This experience of *rāsa*, which in many ways can be used as a metaphor for spiritual experience, is ultimately spontaneous, just as is the bodily sensation of taste, despite the processes of intellectual, aesthetic, or as here, spiritual preparation that has set the stage for it to occur.²³

Thus this verse can be read as suggesting that the wealth of *alamkāra* possessed by the poets is both a wealth of literary accomplishment and skill, while also being a wealth of vivid aesthetic experience, the experiential, affective and often embodied *rāsa* that can overtake the audience in the hands of skilled poet. Khunu Lama sets up this wealth of aesthetic experience and literary skill as a mirror image to the treasury of *bodhicitta* that is the wealth of Buddhist holy beings. By

22. In this translation, I have stayed close to the approach of Gareth Sparham, aiming for a translation that clearly highlights the parallelism in the verse and Khunu Lama’s use of *kāvya* technical terms. What I have not incorporated are the internal rhyme and meter of the Tibetan verse, which make the original so pleasurable.

23. For further discussion of *rāsa* theory in Tibet and India, and its connection to spiritual as well as aesthetic experience, see among others Lin 2022; Bronner, Shulman, and Tubb 2014; Kachru 2019b, 2012; Pollack 2018; and Townsend 2021.

invoking a parallelism between the two repertoires—between the wealth or possessions of poetics and that of *bodhicitta*—Khunu Lama seems to hint both at a possible affinity between poet and practitioner, and also at a parallel between the cultivated yet spontaneous experience of both aesthetic savor and religious awakening.

Some verses seem to actively celebrate the pleasurable virtuosity and aesthetic refinements of the Indian *kāvya* tradition through their imagery and style, reminding readers of Khunu Lama’s own long training in Sanskrit literary theory in India and Tibet. Verse 333 for instance evokes the *kāvya* tradition through the image of the “messenger of spring” (*dpyid kyi pho nya*), the cuckoo:

བྱང་ཚུབ་སེམས་ཀྱིས་བརྒྱན་པ་ཡི། ངག་གི་སྐྱོར་བ་ན་བར་འཛེབས།
 དབྱིད་ཀྱི་ཕོ་ཉ་ཚུས་པའི་སྟུ། རྟ་འཛོན་ངག་ལ་ངག་ལ་བ་སྟེར།།

Bodhicitta-moistened
 Speech is melodious to the ear,
 Just as the ears rejoice
 At the intoxicated song of the messenger of spring.

In the imagery of these lines, we might perceive a stylistic evocation of the great Kālidāsa (fl. 4th–5th century CE), the quintessential Sanskrit *kāvya* poet, one of whose best known works, the *Meghadūta* (lit. “cloud-messenger”), is filled with references to the spring song of the cuckoo and to the long-awaited coming of the monsoon rains which it heralds. Monsoon is the time in Kālidāsa’s world, and for the *kāvya* tradition in general, when spouses and lovers separated by travel or work can be reunited; the moisture and freshness of the rainy season brings beauty, fertility, and connection, and serves as an apt metaphor for spiritual experience.²⁴ Khunu Lama’s use of the kenning “spring-messenger” for cuckoo and the idea that *bodhicitta* moistened- (*brlan pa*) speech brings joy all draw on this style, as do many of his other most literarily virtuosic verses (for instance 66, 67, 69–74, 77, and 78).

For example, consider the use of kennings and poetic ornamentation in Verse 240:

ཉིན་མོར་བྱེད་པ་མཛོན་མཚོ་ཡང་། དམན་གནས་འདབ་བརྒྱ་རབ་ཏུ་བཞད།
 བྱང་ཚུབ་སེམས་མཚོག་མཛོན་མཚོ་ཡང་། དམན་གནས་དགོ་སྐྱོ་རབ་ཏུ་བཞད།།

Even while the day-bringer (sun) is high above,
 Down below the hundred-petaled (lotus) blooms
 So again, while supreme *bodhicitta* is high above,

24. I thank Gary Tubb for many discussions of these themes, 2002–2004.

Down below the mind of virtue blooms.

In verses like this, Khunu Lama uses the artistry of *nyenngak* and *kāvya* poetic practices to convey *bodhicitta*'s qualities, even as the poetic ornamentation also serves as a kind of foil for the even more precious and aesthetically satisfying experience of *bodhicitta* itself.

Yet in other verses, Khunu Lama takes the challenges of poetic composition as an example of the difficulty of expressing the transformative power and superlative qualities of *bodhicitta* in language at all. Khunu Lama notes in verse 68:

བཅའ་ཀྱང་སྟན་ངག་མཁན་དག་གིས། བྱང་ཚུབ་སེམས་ཀྱི་དཔེ་མ་རྟོན།
བྱང་ཚུབ་སེམས་དང་མཚུངས་བརྗོད་པ། དཔེ་ཡི་ཀྱང་ནི་དབུལ་བ་སྟམ།།

Nyenngak experts search
But find no metaphor for *bodhicitta*
Expressing *bodhicitta* through a simile—
I think any metaphor at all falls short.

Nevertheless, although *bodhicitta* can't be captured in mere metaphor, Khunu Lama experiments with a host of possible imagery in the *Jewel Lamp*. Among many similes and metaphors for *bodhicitta*'s dazzling power to liberate in Buddhist terms, Khunu Lama proposes that *bodhicitta* is like a fire, a sword, a magical stallion, the sun, moon, white lotuses, camphor, lightning, a lamp, a *cakravartin* king's palace, a deer, the king of mountains, gold, wealth, nectar, ambrosia, and medicine. Khunu Lama's own poetic virtuosity throughout the *Jewel Lamp* emerges in part via images such as these. These images and word play reflect *bodhicitta*'s extraordinary dimensions in dazzling literary flights, even as Khunu Lama nonetheless repeatedly insists that these examples and comparisons serve only to highlight *bodhicitta*'s ultimately inexpressible qualities.

Significantly, despite Khunu Lama's scholarly erudition and the literary skills he displays in these verses, he makes clear in the *Jewel Lamp* that he has no interest in "simply" being a scholar, if scholarship is understood as something apart from the actual practice of Buddhism. In verse 49 he seems to be speaking in some sense about himself, when he says (in Sparham's translation),

མང་ཐོས་བཅུན་ལ་སྐྱབ་ཚུགས་འཛིན། རྣམ་པར་དཔྱད་པའི་སློ་ལྡན་ཡང་།
བྱང་ཚུབ་སེམས་དང་མི་ལྡན་ན། དེ་ལ་སྲུ་ཞིག་སྟོན་པར་བྱེད།།

A learned monk, a holder of settled accomplishments,
Even in possession of an analytic intellect
Yet without *bodhicitta*—

Who would aspire to that?²⁵

Here again we hear what could be both a verse of advice to others, and an exhortation to himself, to make sure that the practice of scholarship and literary achievement, with all its rewards and satisfactions, does not get in the way of the real purpose of Buddhist learning, which in Buddhist terms is liberation. This echoes remarks Khunu Lama is reported as having made to several disciples later in his life, describing himself as a Buddhist practitioner first and foremost, and suggesting that students who only asked him for teachings on literature were missing the chance to receive Buddhist teachings that were in fact more valuable.²⁶

Significantly, some commentators who were former students of Khunu Lama described his literary erudition as itself a form of renunciatory disguise, a self-concealment akin to Śāntideva's famous pretense at laziness. Khunu Lama, in this view, hid his true identity as a master of Dzogchen and other Buddhist meditation practices under the guise of an "ordinary" literature scholar.²⁷ If worldly desires for recognition, even religious recognition, are seen as a danger, then literary expertise can be a protection against the perceived psychological or moral risk of becoming famous for Buddhist virtuosity. Yet literary fame itself can also in turn become a trap, if it leads to its own form of attachment. In this context, Verse 49 can be read as offering a kind of decoding of Khunu Lama's relationship to scholarly endeavors and perhaps to literary virtuosity itself, which people seem to have sometimes misunderstood. This verse and similar verses serve as a reminder (whether to Khunu Lama himself or to a larger audience) that he is first and foremost a Buddhist practitioner whose focus is *bodhicitta*.

Echoes of March 1959

Much of the word play and imagery of the *Jewel Lamp* evokes classical Tibetan and Sanskritic themes, as we have seen. Khunu Lama draws on his own long immersion in classical Tibetan and Indic poetic repertoires of vocabulary and style to delight, instruct, and inspire, even while the verses also continually reorient the reader toward the cultivation of *bodhicitta* as a practice superior to any purely literary activity. At the same time, hints of the twentieth century time and place of the *Jewel Lamp*'s composition do come up.

A delightful example of this comes in verse 157, where *bodhicitta* is compared with a fast jet airplane. (Khunu Lama asserts that *bodhicitta* is even faster.) This image of a fast jet offers an important, unstated rejoinder to any reader who tries to pigeonhole the verses or their author as

25. Sparham 1999, 51.

26. Pitkin 2022, 107 citing Pema Wangyal Rinpoché (interview 2005).

27. Pitkin 2022, 107-108, citing Chokyi Nyima Rinpoché (interview 2010).

representative of a “traditional” literary form that somehow fails to participate in the trappings of modernity. On the contrary, Khunu Lama’s poetics incorporates a repertoire of experience and literary possibility that seems to implicitly refute such pejorative periodizations. The allusion to air travel serves as a reminder of Khunu Lama’s wide ranging and ecumenical interests in many kinds of ideas, images, and human experiences.

A more poignant and complex question is to what extent Khunu Lama’s concern about the Chinese Communist takeover of Tibet and the violence Tibetans faced in 1959 is expressed through the verses. None of the verses directly mention the news or events of that time, even though we know from Sparham’s reports on the adjacent diary entries that Khunu Lama was following events quite closely. Yet many verses that on one level are about the bodhisattva’s practice of patience in the face of hardship can also be read as resounding with painful emotions of loss and grief, amid specific circumstances of trauma and violence.

Verse 223 is perhaps the most emotionally charged in this way:

བདེ་གཤེགས་སྐྱེ་གཟུགས་ཚཱ་དང་སྲས། ལྷ་མ་གཉེན་བཤེས་ལ་གནོད་པར།
 གཤེན་པའི་བྱང་སེམས་ཉེར་བཟུང་ནས། བཟོད་པའི་གོ་ཆ་བགོ་བར་བྱ།

When there is an assault on the Buddha’s images, Dharma, and heirs
 and on one’s gurus and beloved friends,
 Hold tight to merciful *bodhicitta*,
 Clothe yourself in the armor of patience.

Here, though Khunu Lama’s verse addresses well-known Mahāyāna themes of patience in ways that certainly echo Śāntideva and the Kadampa masters, I suggest that another resonance emerges if we are aware of when this verse was written. The timeless instructions here may not be timeless at all, but rather very much tied to a particular situation and time. The verse evokes the Chinese Communist invasion of Tibet in 1950 and the escalating military actions of the second half of that decade, the smashed religious statues and bombed monasteries and villages that people fleeing Eastern Tibetan areas had already begun to report. The “assault” (*gnod*) mentioned in the verse may refer to the danger of military violence facing people Khunu Lama knew personally from decades of living in Tibet. Indeed, the words hint at specific concern for his own treasured gurus, students, and friends. Based on Khunu Lama’s notations in his diary, the Dalai Lama was particularly on his mind during this time, especially during the weeks of His Holiness’s escape from Lhasa and difficult journey to India. In this context I have chosen to translate the term *gshin pa* as “merciful” to convey a double meaning—both the relief that *bodhicitta* might offer to a mind inflamed by grief or rage, and also the simultaneous sense that *bodhicitta* continually re-orient the practitioner toward compassion, even in the face of dreadful harm.

Within the frame of 1959 and the events of that time, it is not surprising that many other verses in the *Jewel Lamp* can be read in this double way, as both general examinations of *bodhicitta* as an antidote to anger, fear, or grief and as specific instructions for someone confronting news of events in Tibet. Verse 263, for instance, similarly can be read as both a broadly accessible Mahāyāna reflection on mind training practices of patience and compassion, and also as addressing very specific circumstances of harm and danger:

རང་གི་སྲོག་ཚེས་གནོད་བྱེད་ལའང་།	སྐྱོར་བས་ཕན་རྒྱུ་མི་ཐོགས་ཀྱང་།
ཕན་བའི་བསམ་པ་དྲོར་མི་བྱ།	གཞན་དུ་བྱང་ཚུབ་སེམས་དང་འགལ།།

A harm-doer who threatens harm to your life—
 Even if you can't directly benefit them,
 Don't forsake this beneficial thought!
 Otherwise you turn against *bodhicitta*.

In many of the verses where exhortations to engage in *lojong* mind training practices seem to work in tandem with underlying concerns about suffering and violence happening in Tibet, we might also observe the somewhat sober tone and simple language, subtly different from the exuberant diction of the more *kāvya* inflected stanzas. In a number of such verses, we also find a direct psychological confrontation with the genuine difficulties of mind training practice in moments of crisis, as well as the suggestion that *bodhicitta* provides consolation and true resolution.

Verse 89, for instance, suggests *bodhicitta* as an antidote to depression or fear. Verses 224 and 225 likewise confront difficulty and fear and overcome them with *bodhicitta*. Verses 250 and 251 describe the strength and indefatigable transformative power of the person with *bodhicitta*, no matter how hard their circumstances. In verses like these, one might see Khunu Lama as unafraid to name the difficult or painful mental states that a person may encounter, both in the ordinary progress of human experience, and perhaps in the cataclysm of events in Tibet at that time.

Ultimately, however, even when Khunu Lama seems to be implicitly addressing the dire circumstances of events in Tibet, as well as at moments when he seems to be speaking of the need to face the more quotidian but also anguishing sufferings of poverty, illness, old age, and death, Khunu Lama continually reasserts the efficacy of *bodhicitta* as both protection and remedy. The *Jewel Lamp* verses not only offer an exhortation to practice patience in the face of pain or calamity, they go beyond this, precisely through the delight and beauty evoked through their *kāvya* imagery, word play, metrical rhythms, and sounds. In the beauty of their language, the verses offer a literary and imaginal alternative to the experiences of hardship, crisis or tragedy that the reader, like the bodhisattva, must confront. Indeed, a recurring essential thought in the *Jewel Lamp* is the joy (*dga' ba*) and bliss (*bde ba*) of *bodhicitta*. Over and over again, Khunu Lama reminds himself, and the

reader, that *bodhicitta* can and will anchor them, offering a supreme, unchanging experience of joy, delight, transformation, and healing.

Khunu Lama says in Verse 329, “The splendour of the bliss of *bodhicitta* eclipses [...] the worldly happiness of a *cakravartin* emperor.”²⁸ In this Indic Buddhist image of the “wheel-turning” universal monarch, readers encounter an image of *bodhicitta* as a kind of power, protection, and abundance. Here, the Sanskrit image of the *cakravartin* emperor can be read as adding to the evocation of the joy of *bodhicitta* the weight of the glorious Indian Buddhist past and its power, in the image of the undefeatable and happy wheel-turning king.

Throughout the *Jewel Lamp* then, we see Khunu Lama bringing together the efficacy of both of the kinds of cultivation to which he devoted his life: the cultivation of poetic virtuosity, and the meditative cultivation of *bodhicitta*. The verses of the *Jewel Lamp*, in their literary form as well as in their ideas, convey the power of cultivation to transform all persons and experiences, moving continually from sorrow to liberation. Taken as a whole, moreover, the *Jewel Lamp* verses suggest a further interpretation as well. In Khunu Lama’s celebration of the wealth of Tibetan literature and his unshakable confidence in the transformative power of Buddhist practice, his verses instantiate the powerful and resilient perdurance of practitioners in this Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

As Khunu Lama says in Verse 343 (in Sparham’s translation),

གང་ལ་རྫོགས་པའི་བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས། མངའ་བའི་སྐྱེས་བུ་དམ་པ་དག
བདེ་ཡང་རྣམ་པར་འགྱུར་བ་མེད། སྐྱག་ཀྱང་རྣམ་པར་འགྱུར་བ་མེད།།

For those holy beings
Who possess complete *bodhicitta*
Be they happy or even sad,
They do not change.

28. Sparham 1999, 135, verse 329.

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