Patrul Rinpoche on Self-Cultivation: The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Tibetan Buddhist Life-Advice

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Abstract
Buddhist forms of “ethical advice”—instructions that address life’s problems and offer methods for alleviating them—are widespread in Buddhist literary history. This dissertation studies four such works, all written by the nineteenth-century Tibetan teacher Dza Patrul Rinpoche (Rdza dpal sprul O rgyan ’jigs med chos kyi dbang po, 1808-1877). I provide a rhetorical analysis of these compositions and endeavor to show how each aspires to reach outside of itself to act on its respective audience. The compositions do so, I argue, by deploying special literary devices that encourage their audiences to invest themselves, emotionally and imaginatively, in the practices of self-development that the works themselves advocate. The aim of the project is to use Patrul’s writing as a case study to suggest modes of analysis that can offer us insight into the ways in which specially designed modes of writing enable moral self-cultivation. The dissertation specifically addresses the relationship between the recurring themes of singularity, performativity and reflexivity as they appear in Patrul’s advice writings. I argue that these compositions employ discursive devices that play on their audience’s feelings and expectations, aspiring to generate affective responses that range from utter hopelessness to profound relief. They employ expositional strategies designed to compel their audiences to imagine familiar practices anew. Finally, their performative character calls attention to the status of Patrul, the model author, as a singularly capable and skillful teacher. The reflexive nature of Patrul’s works thereby serves to provoke the implied audience’s imagination about “Patrul” the heroically talented teacher. These self-reflexive writings also act as devices for Patrul’s own self-transformation. They are sites of imagination, opportunities for Patrul to enact a self-creation via the medium of advice writing. Patrul’s compositions not only aspire to work on their audience. They, in and of themselves, constitute transformative work for Patrul.

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Alak Zenkar Rinpoche offers a concise account of the extraordinary life and teaching career of Dza Patrul Orgyen Jigme Chökyi Wangpo (1808–1887), one of the most influential Tibetan masters of the nineteenth century. The biography has been reprinted a number of times since it was first published in the 1980s, and is included in most recent editions of Patrul’s most famous work, Kun bzang bla ma’i zhal lung. Bodhicaryāvatāra. Prayer to the Lineage of the Bodhicaryāvatāra | Lineage Prayers. This prayer to the masters of the lineage of explanation for Bodhicaryāvatāra, from Patrul Rinpo... Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was one of the greatest Tibetan masters of this century. The translator and editor of this book, Matthieu Ricard, is one of the ablest translators today. I was fortunate to receive the teachings in this book as they were given by Khyentse Rinpoche in France in 1986. The book is a commentary of Patrul Rinpoche’s "The Heart of The Enlightened Ones". It begins with the commentary but also contains the root text of Patrul Rinpoche’s writing. There is a short biography included of Patrul Rinpoche and also of Dilgo Khyentse. That was a real treat!