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# The 'Age of Faith' and the 'Age of Knowledge': Secularism and Modern Tibetan Accounts of Yogic Power

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# The 'Age of Faith' and the 'Age of Knowledge': Secularism and Modern Tibetan Accounts of Yogic Power

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# The 'Age of Faith' and the 'Age of Knowledge': Secularism and Modern Tibetan Accounts of Yogic Power

Annabella Pitkin

This paper approaches the dynamics of secularization and post-secularism among Tibetan Buddhists through the lens of 'miracle' narratives, both oral and textual. I argue that such narratives function as a lightning rod for complexities surrounding secularism and its religious doubles. Tibetan Buddhist genres of historical and biographical writing brim with accounts of extraordinary yogic abilities (Skt. *siddhi*, Tib. *dngos grub* and Skt. *ṛddhi*, Tib. *rdzu 'phrul*), ranging from clairvoyance to flight.

Combining interviews with Tibetan Buddhist scholars and practitioners, oral commentaries, and textual analysis, I engage with analyses of yogic power articulated by three contemporary, primarily diaspora-based Tibetan Buddhist scholar-practitioners. I argue that their analyses of yogic power offer approaches

to negotiating secularism, modernity, and religious commitment using Tibetan Buddhist philosophical tools, in ways that resonate with contemporary debates about processes of secularism in Asia and elsewhere.

**Keywords:** Tibetan Buddhism, biography, yogic power, secularism, memory, modernity.

## Introduction: Modernity, Secularism, and Yogic Power

Tibetan Buddhist accounts of extraordinary displays of yogic power, sometimes described as ‘miracles’ in English,<sup>1</sup> highlight complexities surrounding secularism and its religious doubles. Reading other people’s minds, walking on water, knowing the future — accounts of such activities are familiar to millions of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhists from the life stories of great Buddhist practitioners. Yet narratives of extraordinary activities pose a potential challenge for audiences today. How do practices of telling or writing, listening to or reading, and reflecting on such stories fit with the categories of secularism, rationalism and modernity that are so influential in today’s globalizing practices of knowledge production? Such questions resonate far beyond the Tibetan world.

A number of contemporary Tibetan Buddhist scholar-practitioners, both in diaspora settings and in geographic Tibet, engage with these questions in ways that I argue contribute to ongoing debates among international scholars of religion and theorists of modernity. I focus here on the perspectives of three exile-based scholars from one particular lineage community, the Drikung Kagyu, a branch of one of the four main traditions of Tibetan Buddhism active today.<sup>2</sup> Their interpretations are part of much larger contemporary conversations about cultural change and the role of religion happening across the Tibetan Buddhist world. While I focus here on the perspective of Drikung thinkers based outside geographic Tibet, many of the intellectual currents these thinkers explore are transregional. In particular, Tibet-based intellectuals actively engage parallel questions of memory, faith, and knowledge in significant and influential ways, often in dialogue with diaspora thinkers, although I cannot fully address those dynamics here.<sup>3</sup>

I had the opportunity to explore questions about secularism, modernity, and yogic power with three Drikung Kagyu scholars in a series of conversations in 2013 and 2014 in Dehradun, India, and New York City. I spoke with the senior yogic retreat master Dordzin Drubpon Dondrup Palden Rinpoche (Rdor ‘dzin sgrub dpon don grub dpal ldan rin po che; colloquially abbreviated as Dordzin Rinpoche), who lives in semi-permanent mountain retreat in the southern Himalaya and is a leading instructor for Drikung retreat practitioners, especially at the important Lapchi retreat center in eastern Nepal; Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen (Mkhan chen nyi ma rgyal mtshan, b. 1976), who is a *khenchen* (a leading *khenpo*, i.e., abbot/professor) of the Kagyu Monastic College in Dehradun, India; and Karma Rinchen (Karma rin chen, b. 1980), a lay scholar-practi-

tioner educated in classic Drikung monastic and yogic curricula, who currently lives in New York City.

My conversations with them focused on displays of yogic power attributed to one early modern Drikung Kagyu master, a retreat hermit named Drikung Drubwang Amgön Konchog Lodrö Rinpoche (‘Bri gung grub dbang a mgon dkon chog blo gros rin po che). This practitioner, hereafter referred to as Amgön Rinpoche, lived from the late 19th to mid 20th century. Taking oral and written stories of Amgön Rinpoche’s life as our starting point, Dordzin Rinpoche, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen and Karma Rinchen spoke with me about how to interpret accounts of yogic displays in stories of Amgön’s and other masters’ lives.

Dordzin Rinpoche, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen, and Karma Rinchen each brought a slightly different perspective to bear on questions of secularism and yogic power, reflecting both generational differences and distinctions in the focus of their own intellectual and religious interests. Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen was educated in Drikung monastic settings, primarily in India. Today he is a leading Drikung teacher of international as well as Tibetan and Himalayan students, and his own scholarly and pedagogical projects touch on questions of modernity and secularism in a variety of ways. His extensive social media contacts and his many international students and frequent international travel in Asia and North America give him a broad perspective on the complex philosophical and cultural environments in which contemporary Buddhists now live. His incisive presentation of the relationship between modernity, secularization, accounts of yogic power, and Buddhist devotional priorities is at the core of my analysis in this article. He is a philosophical interlocutor with whom I have found it extremely fruitful to think.

Karma Rinchen was Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen’s classmate and, later, student, and was Dordzin Rinpoche’s personal student for four years. He also has a multifaceted perspective, though his is slightly different than Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen’s. Karma Rinchen grew up in a nomadic area in Gawa (sGa ba) in eastern Tibet, in the Kyura Tertön Tshang (sKyur ra’i gter ston tshang) family. He was educated in monastic settings in geographic Tibet as well as in India, and now lives a New York City lifestyle he characterizes as “urban.” He uses social media to engage with friends in Tibetan communities in many parts of the Tibetan world, but is less involved with non-Tibetan social networks than Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen. Karma Rinchen does not currently hold a public role as a Buddhist teacher, but he has been asked to teach on several occasions, and Tibetan acquaintances turn to him for explanations of Buddhist

ideas and practices. As a layperson with a wide acquaintance among Tibetan lay as well as monastic communities, he describes his own perspective as bridging these views.

Dordzin Rinpoche speaks from the vantage point of someone a generation older than Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen and Karma Rinchen. In a sense his is the most 'traditional' perspective I discuss here, though he, like the other two scholars, is keenly attentive to contemporary dynamics of change in the Tibetan Buddhist world. He is a deeply venerated senior retreat master, perhaps best known within the Drikung community. He does not often travel outside of the southern Himalayan region, or indeed leave his retreat, although he has had several international students seek him out at his hermitage. He is not active on social media. Many of the stories about Amgön Rinpoche's yogic displays that he shared with me in 2013 involved people he knew personally. Questions of memory and loss of memory emerge as particularly important themes in his reflections.

Throughout our discussions of yogic power, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, Dordzin Rinpoche and Karma Rinchen all articulated their interpretations of yogic displays using classic Buddhist terminology. Yet they elaborated their interpretations in ways that I argue work to significantly reframe dominant international accounts of secularism around the needs and concerns of present day Tibetan Buddhists. I argue in what follows that in their discussions of yogic power, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, Karma Rinchen, and Dordzin Rinpoche each challenge claims about the non-rationality of Tibetan Buddhist practices and interpretations. Their interventions disrupt a range of reductive views of Tibetan Buddhist intellectual life, which has been variously caricatured both as deeply anti-modern, mired in magic and superstition, and conversely as an idealized 'rational religion,' whose insights seamlessly mirror those of the natural sciences. Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen and Karma Rinchen in particular powerfully assert the central role of reason in their understanding of Buddhism. At the same time, their analyses also complicate the privileging of secularism and secularist accounts of rationality as uniquely authoritative aspects of modernity. Highlighting considerations of time period and history, they situate questions about yogic power and secularism within the wrenching upheavals in the Tibetan Buddhist world since the 1950s, in which religious connections and cultural identities have become destabilized both in Tibet and in exile, and narratives of past masters' lives emerge as resources for continuity and renewal.

## Amgön Rinpoche's Yogic Displays

Amgön Rinpoche became famous for his exceptional meditative achievements and for his remarkable activities, including clairvoyance, extraordinarily rapid travel, and his expansion of food, drink, water, snuff, and medicine so as to render them inexhaustible. Stories about his yogic displays are often funny, focusing on intimate and local details. One of the most well-known stories about him in both oral and textual sources describes how he brought fresh *momo* (Tibetan meat dumplings) from the city of Lhasa to Drikung Monastery in the space of a few hours, dazzling a group of incredulous young monks with a meal that was still hot, having traveled the hundred and twenty or so kilometers each way through his yogic power. Amgön Rinpoche remains a significant figure within Drikung lineage memory still today among exile Tibetans, as well as within geographic Tibet. Although exact dates for his life are difficult to determine, he lived from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. A great master from the previous generation, Amgön Rinpoche's activities are described in two published biographies,<sup>4</sup> and transmitted in many oral narratives. These textual and oral narratives circulate among present day Drikung Kagyu Buddhists living in Tibetan areas of the People's Republic of China, in Dehradun and the Indian Himalayan region, and in diasporic communities outside Asia.

I focus here on the interviews I recorded in 2013-2014 with Dordzin Rinpoche, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, and Karma Rinchen, including their oral accounts and commentaries on Amgön Rinpoche's activities. I have also consulted textual religious biographies (*rnam thar*) of Amgön Rinpoche, in particular the 2004 biography by the Tibet-based Drikung scholar Khenpo Konchog Gyatso (Mkhan po Dkon mchog rgya mtsho, b. 1969), published in Lhasa, which is currently the most well-known.<sup>5</sup> When I use the terms 'narrative' or 'life story' in what follows, I am thus referring to the multiple strands of oral and textual material that taken together form the basis for community memory of an individual. My emphasis here, however, is on the interpretations of yogic displays offered by the scholars with whom I spoke, rather than on analysis of the textual and oral narratives themselves. I examine these narratives in detail in a forthcoming study.

The Drikung tradition, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions more generally, offer many examples of yogic virtuosity, some closely paralleling Amgön Rinpoche's. Amgön's activities, however, offer a revealing focus for several reasons. Accounts of his life, including the most recently published biography (Dkon mchog rgya mtsho 2004a), emphasize his displays of yogic power, far more so than do

accounts of some other recent figures. (In general, while Tibetan Buddhist biographic genres often depict displays of yogic power, they do not always do so. The presence or absence of such depictions vary partly for reasons I discuss here, as well as for reasons connected to the Tibetan genre distinctions of 'outer,' 'inner' and 'secret' biographies.)<sup>6</sup> Chronologically speaking, Amgön Rinpoche lived during the first half of the twentieth century, prior to the social dislocations and trauma of the 1950s in Tibet, but on the eve of their occurrence. Many of Amgön Rinpoche's own students and their students are still alive, and stories about him now circulate between geographic Tibet and exile Tibetan communities. Thus although Amgön himself is one generation removed, and lived most of his life in one place, at Drikung Til Monastery, he is a figure who in many ways bridges present and past, and connects Drikung communities across the spatial and temporal distances produced by the profound changes of the twentieth century. In part because of this, present-day textual and oral accounts of his activities are closely and explicitly linked. Stories about his activities offer a fruitful context for discussing displays of yogic power, together with questions of tradition, change, and continuity.

According to the published biographies of his life, Amgön Rinpoche was born in the latter half of the nineteenth century in a humble rural community. As a young man he practiced the full repertoire of Drikung Kagyu Buddhist meditative and yogic practices, especially *Mahāmudrā*. He was a non-celibate yogic practitioner (*sngags pa*) rather than a monk, and lived most of his life as a deeply renunciant retreat hermit (*mtshams pa*) in a cave above Drikung Til Monastery in central Tibet. Textual biographies and oral accounts say he pursued a lifestyle of profound disengagement from ordinary worldly concerns.

Both the written biography and oral accounts emphasize his persona of radical unconventionality. This persona is itself a highly legible form of Tibetan religious virtuoso behavior.<sup>7</sup> The archetypes of the 'crazy lama' (*bla ma smnyon ba*) and the renunciant-hermit (*bya bral ba*) are longstanding ideals of Buddhist practice, familiar to Tibetans from exemplary figures such as the foundational Kagyu saint, Milarepa (1052-1135).<sup>8</sup> Consider Amgön's disregard for clothing, money, food, and his own appearance; his tendency to speak bluntly to everyone, even the powerful nobility; the fact that he was sometimes perceived as crazy by others. In these and other ways, Amgön Rinpoche's life and activities, including his display of yogic powers, are described as embodying the renunciant ideals, unconventional style, and charismatic power of great yogic practitioners of the past.

Amgön was not well-established as a religious figure initially. His 2004 biography describes him as sometimes mocked by relatives, monks, and village people for his odd ways. But by middle age he had begun to develop a reputation as a great practitioner. In his later years he became rather famous. According to Khenchen Konchog Gyatso's biography of him (Dkon mchog rgya mtsho 2004a) and oral narratives, eventually Amgön was sought out by devotees from as far away as eastern Tibet (hundreds of kilometers away from Drikung Til), and was often consulted by politically and socially influential people from Lhasa, like the powerful Ragashar aristocratic family.

Most famously, following the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1933, Reting Rinpoche Thubten Jampel Yeshe Gyaltzen (Rwa sgeng rin po che Thub bstan 'jam dpal ye shes rgyal mtshan, 1911-1947) consulted Amgön Rinpoche. One of the most politically polarizing figures of the early twentieth century in Tibet, Reting Rinpoche was a leading Buddhist religious hierarch, who assumed the Regency of Tibet after the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and was placed in charge of locating the child who was the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Although Reting was ultimately ousted from power, disgraced, and died under suspicious circumstances, during the period of his ascendancy from 1935-1941 he was truly the 'king' of Tibet, as Amgön Rinpoche is said to have ironically called him. Reting is described in textual sources (including Dkon mchog rgya mtsho 2004a and Dung dkar 1981) and in oral narratives as visiting Amgön Rinpoche to request his help in locating the rebirth of the Dalai Lama through his clairvoyant abilities. Owing to this connection with Reting, Amgön Rinpoche became known outside Drikung circles. For instance, the entry for Amgön in the encyclopedia compiled by the prominent twentieth century Tibetan scholar Dungkar Rinpoche (Dung dkar 1981) focuses mainly on this connection with Reting.

To give a flavor of the kinds of activities Amgön Rinpoche is described as performing, let me briefly retell several stories about him that Dordzin Rinpoche told me in 2013.<sup>9</sup> These stories all highlight Amgön Rinpoche's displays of yogic virtuosity, each placing his yogic activity in a slightly different social context, and making a range of social, moral and political points. Except for the last episode I present, these are not necessarily the most famous narratives about Amgön, although versions do appear in the 2004 textual biography (albeit in less or differing detail). Yet these narratives highlight key aspects of Amgön's yogic activity and serve as important crucibles for exploring potential conflicts surrounding secularism and its religious doubles; they were among the stories that Dordzin Rinpoche chose to focus on when telling me about Amgön Rinpoche.



At first glance, all Amgön's actions in these stories appear to demonstrate classic forms of yogic accomplishment, such as clairvoyance, expansion or contraction of material substances, and extraordinarily rapid locomotion. Such yogic actions are often grouped within the repertoire of yogic powers called *siddhi* in Sanskrit and *ngödrup* (*dnagos grub*) in Tibetan. These yogic powers are frequently taxonomized in Indic and Tibetan Buddhist literature (Swearer 1973; Orzech 1998; Kirti Tsenshab 2011; Gethin 2012), and are presented in Buddhist sources as predictable consequences of meditative practice, in particular associated with concentration (Skt. *samatha*; Tib. *zhi gnas*) meditation.<sup>10</sup> As we will see, however, the three Drikung scholars whose interpretations I explore here did *not* frame Amgön Rinpoche's deeds as examples of ordinary *ngödrup*. Rather, all three of them explained Amgön's deeds as exemplifying a different kind of yogic outcome, in a way that I argue is central to their explanations of yogic power, modernity, and the role of religious activity in contemporary Tibetan society.

With this in mind, let us turn to the stories. The first situates Amgön Rinpoche among the rural farmers and herders with whom he grew up, and who were a majority of his disciples. In this episode, Amgön Rinpoche encounters a stingy family who offers to act as his patron, and Amgön displays what appear to be clairvoyance and the yogic power of manipulating the size of objects and their location in space. In Dordzin Rinpoche's words, "Amgön Rinpoche came to visit a family. The family said, 'Do you need anything?' But Amgön Rinpoche said, 'Nothing, nothing, there is nothing I need.'" The family pressed him to accept their support, and Amgön Rinpoche demurred several times. "Finally Amgön Rinpoche said, 'I want firewood.' In reply, the family said, 'We have no firewood.'" Here the implication in the story, borne out by the comments of other people with whom I listened to the story including Karma Rinchen, is that the family was being ostentatious, making a show of offering to materially support Amgön, but not being sincere.

But, as implied in the oral account, Amgön Rinpoche knew that they were being evasive, and that the family had a great deal of dried yak dung, suitable for fuel. "Amgön Rinpoche said, 'I will accept the dried yak dung fuel.' The family protested and said, 'We'd like to give you the yak dung but we have no way to offer it to you — you live too far away and we have no way to transport it to you.' Amgön Rinpoche said, 'Will you *really* give it to me? If you will give it to me then I have a way to transport it myself!'" And, paraphrasing here, since the details of the story are confusing without gestures, he took off his monk's shawl

and swung it over the large expanse of the yak dung and tied up the corners of the shawl as if making a package. Then suddenly it was as if all the yak dung was inside his shawl, although the shawl was still of a dimension that Amgön Rinpoche could carry, and he had not moved to walk around collecting the dung and putting it in the shawl. "Then he took the whole lot away with him."<sup>11</sup>

This particular episode provoked many comments, both when Dordzin Rinpoche first told it to me and a Tibetan colleague in 2013, and later when I listened to a recording of it with Karma Rinchen and another Tibetan companion. On both occasions, people listening commented, "That story really sounds like 'magic' (using both the English term 'magic' and the Tibetan term *sgyu*, for illusion). Both Dordzin Rinpoche and subsequently Karma Rinchen took pains to explain that although this story of the yak dung sounds like 'magic' it is not. Likewise, and importantly, they both commented that in terms of genre, although this episode *now* sounds like a 'folktale' (*sgrung*), it is not. According to Karma Rinchen and Dordzin Rinpoche, this and similar accounts of Amgön Rinpoche's activities are in a different narrative category, that of religious biography (*nam thar*).<sup>12</sup> Where the term 'folktale' might evoke connotations of unbelievability for some listeners, these episodes should not be misunderstood in that way. As Karma Rinchen put it, "Amgön Rinpoche's display was 'real' (*dnagos gnas*);" i.e., it was not merely an illusory display.

Both Dordzin Rinpoche and Karma Rinchen paused here to explain that stories about yogic displays like this change over time, both in terms of what stories can be told, and how they are received. According to Dordzin Rinpoche, it is because of massive changes in the Tibetan world in the years after 1959 — in particular, the tragic deaths of many lamas who personally knew Amgön Rinpoche and could talk about him from direct experience — that stories about Amgön now are starting to sound like 'folktales,' despite the fact that they are not. Dordzin Rinpoche said in this context, "It is now difficult to tell or write the stories of Amgön Rinpoche," because so many living sources are gone. Dordzin Rinpoche also lamented the erosion of memory, in this case his own, saying, "I knew or heard many Amgön Rinpoche stories over the years, but mostly [now] I have forgotten." Karma Rinchen added, when listening to this conversation in recorded form, "There used to be many such remarkable lamas with such qualities, but now people don't believe it." This comment suggests that the facticity of Amgön's deeds appears to recede, as the links of memory and belief are altered. I return to these points about memory, change and continuity below.

The next story places Amgön at his monastery in the midst of a conflict with other, more conventional monks, and suggests that his unconventional persona and reputation for extraordinary qualities did not always sit well with the monastic community. In the story, the other monks at Drikung Til got fed up with Amgön Rinpoche's crazy ways. In Dordzin Rinpoche's words, "The retreat-yogi Amgön Rinpoche had a strange, unusual personality. Because of this, many Drikung monks said he was crazy and wanted to expel him from the monastery. But when they told Chetsang Shiwe Lodro, he said to them, 'If you expel him then I too will leave!'" Drikung Chetsang Rinpoche Tenzin Shiwe Lodrö ('Bri-kung Che tshang rin po che bstan 'dzin zhi ba'i blo gros, 1886-1943) was the sixth Chetsang Rinpoche and thirty-seventh co-head of the Drikung lineage.

"So the monks decided to get rid of Amgön Rinpoche secretly, without telling Chetsang Rinpoche. They went to Amgön's retreat cave and took all his things and him and went to throw him out." Drikung Til is located on a high mountain ridge, and the main monastery gate is located at the end of an extremely long winding road up the mountain. The monks here seem to have deposited Amgön Rinpoche and his few possessions down at the foot of the mountain, at the beginning of the steep ascent. However, "When they returned to the monastery they found he had already returned there before them," somehow having re-climbed the steep hill extraordinarily fast, and without being seen. This happened not once but twice, after which the monks who wished to expel Amgön Rinpoche gave up and left him alone. Dordzin Rinpoche emphasized that this was a story he had heard from others in the Drikung Til community who had known about it directly, although he had not witnessed it himself.

This account shows Amgön Rinpoche displaying what appear to be the yogic accomplishments of rapid locomotion and "making what is near far and far near" (Gethin 2012). They also hint at beloved qualities of humor (the mean monks are so surprised when they cannot eject him) and cleverness that are closely connected with the 'crazy lama' or 'saintly madman' personae that Amgön apparently embodied. This story also illuminates the diversity of styles and practices potentially coexisting within a single Tibetan Buddhist monastery, ranging from Amgön Rinpoche's yogic virtuosity to more conventional monastic approaches to propriety, and the potential for conflict between the two. Here the conflict is resolved by the 'trump card' of Amgön Rinpoche's extraordinary qualities, which indicate (as does the wholehearted defense of Amgön by the revered head of the lineage) that Amgön Rinpoche's style of practice and accomplishments are supreme, even if misunderstood by those of limited capacities.

The final story I will retell here depicts the relationship between Amgön Rinpoche and Reting Rinpoche, the powerful Regent of Tibet, a topic extensively discussed in the 2004 textual biography. Dordzin Rinpoche's oral account was briefer than the 2004 biography, which reports many visits by Reting to Amgön and numerous funny exchanges of dialogue; Dordzin Rinpoche's oral account instead emphasized the personal quality of Amgön Rinpoche's clairvoyance and the idiosyncratic but politically insightful way he revealed his visions. This episode touches on famous historical events with enormous consequences for Tibetan society, and encapsulates the dynamics of political controversy connected to these events in multiple ways. In the version Dordzin Rinpoche recounted to me, "Reting Rinpoche came to ask Amgön Rinpoche, 'Where is the next Dalai Lama reborn?' Amgön Rinpoche answered, 'If I answer, the Lhasa government won't like it. But [actually] Gyalwa Rinpoche [the Dalai Lama] was born in India, Lhasa, [and] Amdo.' Then Reting Rinpoche said, 'Please, please [explain],' and begged Amgön to tell him what he knew by his pure perception. So Amgön Rinpoche [clarified] and said, 'Near the Blue Lake [Kokonor, in Amdo, where the Fourteenth Dalai Lama was in fact born] in sheep skin clothing, there he is.'"

Dordzin Rinpoche summed this up by saying, "It all turned out as Amgön said: His Holiness was born in Amdo, the son of herder-farmers (which explains the sheepskin), then he went to Lhasa, and then he left and went to India." Karma Rinchen, with whom I listened to a recording of this account, further explained that Amgön's statement that "the Lhasa government would not like it if he prophesied about Amdo, Lhasa and India" was Amgön's complicated way of saying that he had foreknowledge of the events surrounding the coming end of the then Lhasa government, perhaps even hinting at the events that were to come in the 1950s; however, this would have been impolitic to say directly. Here, despite the narrative context of clairvoyance and Amgön's persona as a 'crazy' hermit, we see Amgön remembered as an astute observer of political realities on many levels.

### **"Tibetans are 'International!': Secularism and Modernity as Forms of Social Capital"<sup>13</sup>**

So how should contemporary listeners understand and respond to these narratives? This was the question I posed to Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen, Dordzin Rinpoche and Karma Rinchen; it formed the starting place for our discussions. Although each scholar brought a slightly different perspective to reflecting on this question with me, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen, Dordzin Rinpoche, and Karma Rinchen all began by emphasizing that within the Tibetan Buddhist



context, witnessing a display of yogic power (as a bystander, as a subsequent narrator, or as a listener/reader) implicates a person in multiple acts of interpretation, devotion, and memory. These acts of interpretation, devotion, and memory are conditioned by the specific historical moment and cultural location in which the witness finds him or herself, and how close he or she is to the event.

Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen and Karma Rinchen further noted that neither displays of yogic power nor Buddhist ways of talking about them are new. Indeed, Buddhist ways of talking about displays of yogic power are attributed directly to the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. What is new however, in their view, are the particular ways in which contemporary Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist communities now engage with such displays, and with the practices of recollecting them through story and memory.

According to both Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen and Karma Rinchen, our present historical moment has distinctive implications for people around the world, including for Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. This novelty of the present day has direct consequences for how individuals and communities witness and respond to displays of yogic power. Shifts in how people relate to such displays are not limited to Tibetan Buddhists from Tibetan or Himalayan backgrounds. However, throughout our discussions, both Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen and Karma Rinchen emphasized the changes occurring in particular for ‘Himalayan people’ (*Hi ma la ya mi*), a phrase Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen used, and which Karma Rinchen picked up on in our subsequent discussions after I mentioned it to him.

Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen defined the term ‘Himalayan people’ in the context of our discussion as referring to Tibetan Buddhists from culturally linked areas of the geographic Himalayan region, in particular from Tibet, Khunu (Kinnaur), Nepal, Ladakh, Bhutan, and Sikkim, as well as Buddhist people from those regions now living elsewhere. Our discussion focused only on Buddhist responses to accounts of yogic power, and did not explore Hindu or Muslim ideas, although many Himalayan communities include people from multiple religious traditions neighboring one another. Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen used the general term ‘Himalayan people’ and sometimes spoke specifically about ‘Tibetans’ (*Bod pa*), in the context of highlighting changes in the post-1959 Tibetan cultural world across the Himalayan geographic region, and in the attitudes and practices of Himalayan Buddhists generally.

All three Drikung scholars I spoke with, and especially Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen and Karma Rinchen, explicitly framed their comments about interpreting Amgön

Rinpoche’s extraordinary displays first by situating contemporary Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhists within the temporal space of the ‘modern.’ They used the English term ‘modern,’ as well as Tibetan phrases like ‘present day people,’ (*deng sang gi mi rabs*) or ‘modern times’ (*deng rabs*), ‘our generation’ (*nga tsho’i mi rabs*), and ‘the new generation’ (*mi rabs gsar pa*). Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen and Karma Rinchen explicitly located themselves within this generational category. In parsing distinctive elements of this ‘new generation,’ they highlighted specific contemporary circumstances of Tibetan exile, diaspora, and international travel, and framed these as qualitatively different from long-distance travel in which Himalayan people have traditionally participated. In Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen’s words, “Previously the situation was different: the members of the lineage community were connected, all in one place. But post-1959 the situation is different. Each lineage is now *international*,” he said, using the English term. “In fact, Tibetans are *international*.”

Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen’s use of the English term ‘international’ to gloss the Tibetan experience of post-1959 diaspora is a powerful intervention, one that acknowledges a painful reality of displacement and disempowerment concealed beneath the veneer of a new globalism.<sup>14</sup> For many Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhists, the mid-twentieth century indeed appears as a crucial historical watershed. The incorporation of Tibet into the newly established People’s Republic of China (PRC) after 1949, the 1959 flight of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetans into Indian exile, and the establishment of Tibetan diaspora communities in India and elsewhere around the world are often seen by Tibetans and outsiders as marking a profound social and historical transition, although the nature of this transition is often debated.<sup>15</sup> This transition calls into question the transmission of inherited religious and cultural material. It profoundly — maybe permanently — destabilizes the relationship between past and future in Tibetan settings, opening new questions about the continuity of Tibetan identities, Buddhist transmission lineages, institutions, and social practices of all kinds (cf. Shakya 2000; Hartley 2008).

These questions about Tibetan cultural continuity and religious identity are asked against a historical backdrop composed of multiple strands of Chinese and western secularism. Here, secularist claims are linked inextricability to assertions of secular modernity and social progress. Influential Chinese nationalist projects have posited secularism as central to modernity since the late Qing, with both Nationalist and Communist Chinese governments developing new categories of religion and secularism, often in dialogue with or against Western evolutionary theories

of society and religion. Some Chinese thinkers posited the complete disappearance of religion as a mark of social progress (Duara 1995; Yang 2008). Although Tuttle (2005) argues that such an approach to secularism was not monolithic, the waves of temple destruction and persecution of religious practitioners that occurred during the Cultural Revolution, for instance, suggest how literally such views could be enacted. Tibetan communities in diaspora and within the People's Republic of China (PRC) have repeatedly found their social, intellectual, and religious practices being 'evaluated' via the categories of western and Chinese secular modernities (Cabezón 2008; Kolas 2008; Yang 2008, 2011; Duara 1995). As Shakya (2000) points out, Chinese colonial projects in Tibetan areas have emphasized "the notion of underdevelopment (*rjes lus*)," implying "that Tibet lagged behind in technology, and more importantly, that it was culturally stagnant and backward."<sup>16</sup> This in turn echoes European colonial attitudes and ambitions toward both Tibet and China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Earlier North American and European accounts of secularism often presented secularism as an opposite of religion, and as an intrinsic, necessary component of modernity. Such views often built on Weberian notions of a progressive (though painful) 'disenchantment' of the world. Secularism in this sense is associated with privileged claims to realism, naturalism, and a scientific world-view. Religion, by contrast, appears extra-rational, irrational, or connected with anthropological categories of myth, magic, and symbol (Asad 2003; Casanova 2011). This type of secular/religious binary has often been mapped onto to a separation between a modern present or a future of innovation, and a traditional past from which people must break to be modern (Benavides 1998; Hervieu-Léger 2000).<sup>17</sup> In this context, Buddhist accounts of yogic power potentially provoke a range of tensions and ambivalences. These include western secular anxieties about anti-modern or 'pre-modern' cultural Others. In this formulation, western convert Buddhists may display anxiety over the fact that Tibetan Buddhists cling to 'irrational' beliefs; conversely, some Tibetans may be concerned that accounts of yogic power will make outsiders look down on Tibetan Buddhist society.

Asian Buddhist communities have often had to wrestle with special versions of the anxieties of secularism, often framed in terms of persistent conceptual extremes (Lopez 1998; Almond 1988; Ivy 2005; relatedly Hansen 2003). On one hand, some often-sympathetic presentations of Buddhist ideas and practices describe Buddhism as a rational system of meditation instructions primarily aimed at the individual. In this formulation, Buddhism offers psycholog-

ical insights, health benefits, and positive or ethical mental states, as well as (more recently) useful understanding about brain function and other neurological phenomena. In this view, Buddhism sometimes appears *more* intrinsically rational, compatible with science, and 'naturally' modern than most, if not all, other religions.<sup>18</sup> This view of Buddhism develops via specific European, often Protestant, projects of knowledge dating from the colonial period, in which notions of rational, non-theistic and ritual-free Buddhism were mobilized by European scholars to critique both European forms of religion and Buddhism as actually practiced by Asian Buddhists (Almond 1988; King 1999; McMahan 2008; Lopez 1998; Blackburn 2010; Turner 2014).

At the other extreme, Buddhist communities and practices have been presented by non-Buddhist scholars and by some Buddhist reformers as profoundly non-rational, even anti-rational, and thus as incompatible with (often nationalist) projects of modernity (Almond 1988; Lopez 1998, 2005, 2006).<sup>19</sup> In such presentations, Asian Buddhist communities' involvement in ritual or in practices invoking supernatural phenomena and apotropaic concerns (including blessings, amulets, mantras, protective substances, relics, pilgrimage and circumambulation) are seen to disqualify them from both rationality and modernity. Also problematic from such perspectives are Buddhist practices of devotion and patronage to teachers and institutions as well as monastic education systems emphasizing Buddhist texts and rituals, rather than 'modern' international secular topics such as science and math (Almond 1988; Lopez 1998; Blackburn 2010; McDaniel 2011; Bubandt and van Beek 2012; Turner 2014).

Tibetans have found themselves positioned within these representations of Buddhism in almost every conceivable way (Lopez 1998). Some authors have presented Tibetan Buddhism as the most rational and science-compatible of present-day Asian Buddhisms—a kind of ideal modern religion. Others have presented Tibetan Buddhists as the most benighted, backward, and superstitious (Lopez 1998; King 1999; Yang 2011). In a kind of mystical super-Orientalist-reversal, some observers of Tibetan societies have even singled out what they see as the 'non-secular' and 'non-modern' elements of Tibetan culture as its only valuable, authentic, or marketable aspects, relegating all modern or secular forms of Tibetan culture to the margins or dismissing them as inauthentic (Lopez 1999; Kolas 2008; Jabb 2012; Yeh and Coggins 2014). Tibetans in the diaspora who inhabit new roles as refugees, clients, or religious figures with international and convert followings have found they must increasingly navigate this spectrum of challenges to the legitimacy of Tibetan Buddhist practices and

narratives (Prost 2006, Zablocki 2009). Tibetan secular and religious intellectuals, both in exile and inside Tibet, have themselves also debated competing claims about cultural authenticity, modern Tibetan identity, and the effects of secular versus religious nationalism (Diehl 2002; Yeh 2007; Hartley 2008; Robin 2008; Bhum 2008).

In this context, Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhists often find they must simultaneously engage international claims and assumptions about secularism, rationalism, and modernity, while also facing ever more urgent tasks of maintaining continuity and the face-to-face ritual and social spaces of lineage cohesion and community. Dordzin Rinpoche's poignant remark that it is now hard to tell stories about Amgön Rinpoche's deeds, because many people who knew Amgön personally are dead and he himself has forgotten many stories he knew, comes to mind here. This comment illustrates the high stakes of maintaining lineage memory and the difficulties therein. At the same time, the above overview of international assumptions about secularism and rationality highlights the challenges of memory work when non-secular claims are being made, such as those about yogic power. It is precisely these challenges that Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen and Karma Rinchen arguably navigate, with their framing of the Himalayan 'new generation' and the shifts in how 'Himalayan people' now respond to stories about yogic power.

To further contextualize their comments, it is helpful to briefly sketch some of the innovative institutional steps the Drikung lineage has taken to address practical aspects of lineage cohesion and continuity. Since the 1990s, the Drikung community in Dehradun, India, has built a group of religious, cultural, and educational institutions.<sup>20</sup> These include the Drikung Institute and Songtsen Library for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, an institution focused on Tibetan history which hosts international academic conferences as well as Buddhist meditation retreats and rituals; Samtenling Nunnery, a monastic center for women; Jangchubling Monastery, the main exile seat of the Drikung Kagyu lineage; and the Kagyu College, an updated version of a traditional Drikung Kagyu *shedra* (*bshad grwa*), or monastic commentarial school, of which Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen is a leader. The public presentation of these institutions, in their architecture, curricula, scholarly and religious affiliations, websites, and programming, incorporate attention to both Tibetan and international modernist ideas about what Buddhism should be. Yet these institutions also have been constructed explicitly to maintain Drikung educational, ritual, and intellectual continuity in the contemporary world, with special focus on the Tibetan diaspora.

Technology and social media also play an important role in Drikung adaptations to the international diaspora. Drikung leaders and teachers like H.H. Drikung Chetsang Rinpoche (the diaspora-based head of the lineage), Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen, and administrators at Drikung institutions now make use of social media and communications technologies, including Skype, podcasts, live streamed broadcasts, Facebook, and WeChat to reach students around the world, and to connect far-flung members of the lineage to each other. Many Drikung people routinely use services like WeChat or Facebook, not only socially but to listen to Buddhist lectures and join Buddhist discussion groups. In this the Drikung Kagyu community is not at all unique. These technologies now contribute to the transmission of Asian and international Buddhist materials and community ties in lineages across the world. These technologies constitute one element, though not necessarily the most important, of Tibetan Buddhist engagements with practices often represented as modern. Although as Lawrence (1989) and others point out, technology and modernity are hardly synonymous, these technological tools work to reframe the physical and imagined spaces of the Drikung lineage, linking an expanded range of Tibetan Buddhist social worlds across geographic and temporal distances.

Yet the above mentioned Dehradun-based Drikung institutions also serve as in-person gathering places for masters and students from across the Drikung lineage world. They satisfy a need for personal lineage connections in a way technology seems not to do.<sup>21</sup> Even elderly or ill practitioners will travel long, expensive distances to participate in major community events. In-person gatherings maintain a face-to-face community of ritual, teaching, and relationship based on physical travel and assembly rather than solely mediated by technology. The 2013 two-month long Winter Teachings gathering in Dehradun, for instance, brought together Drikung masters with international Buddhist centers in Asia, Europe and North America; long-term meditators from cave hermitages and isolated monasteries in the Himalayan region, Ladakh, north India and Nepal; and monks, nuns and lay people from Drikung communities around the world. Not coincidentally, it was in this setting that I conducted many of the interviews on which this article is based.

### **Making Sense of Yogic Power: *Siddhi*, *Dzuntrül* and Recollection**

In the 'international' diaspora context Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen describes, accounts of the lives of past masters remain crucial, as a source of continuity, history, and identity. Indeed, as I discuss, recalling accounts of past masters

is a crucial component of maintaining the kind of face-to-face community that Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhists (and others) prioritize. Yet life stories (textual and oral) of past masters also challenge new generations and new kinds of readers with tales of extraordinary yogic feats that scandalize international secular and modernist norms.

In our conversations, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, Karma Rinchen, and Dordzin Rinpoche addressed this potential conflict for contemporary Tibetan Buddhists, between the need to learn about lineage masters' lives, versus the non-secular or non-modern sounding content of life stories, especially where accounts of yogic power are concerned. They explained the *mechanism* by which practices of reading or listening to life stories are linked from a Buddhist point of view to yogic practices of self-cultivation, memory and devotion.

Explanations by Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, Dordzin Rinpoche, and Karma Rinchen all hinged on the need to distinguish two different levels of yogic power or yogic display. One level of yogic power is *ngödrup*, which I translate here as 'displays of yogic power' (Skt. *siddhi*, Tib. *dnagos grub*). These are powers produced as a side effect of concentration meditation and/or tantric practice, according to mainstream Indic and Tibetan Buddhist treatises. These *ngödrup* yogic powers, extraordinary as they may seem to bystanders, are generally classified in Buddhist texts and oral exegesis as 'ordinary' (*thun mong*). The only non-ordinary yogic power in this sense is Buddhahood, also called 'the supreme yogic power' (*mchog gi dnagos grub*).

This supreme form of yogic power, i.e., enlightenment, can also manifest in a display, which disciples or potential disciples can witness. This second type of yogic display should be named differently, to distinguish it from the 'ordinary' *ngödrup* powers. It is termed 'supreme display' (*mchog gi rdzu 'phrul*; hereafter *dzuntriül* for short) and is described as enlightenment simply manifesting. Thus while Amgön Rinpoche may *seem* to be displaying 'ordinary' yogic abilities, i.e., *ngödrup*, in the above stories, he is not. Rather, he is spontaneously displaying his enlightened state, *dzuntriül*, which I will translate here as 'display of realization.'

Multiple Buddhist traditions make such distinctions, and insist that, remarkable as they may seem to bystanders, *ngödrup* abilities are totally ordinary in an ultimate sense, i.e., by contrast to Buddhahood. Tibetan exegetes, like Indian authors before them, state that Buddhahood is the only supreme yogic accomplishment. Ordinary *ngödrup* are powerful, and often delightful and thrilling to witness or recount. They are popularly beloved across the Buddhist world. But as Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, Dordzin Rin-

poche, and Karma Rinchen all stated, from a Tibetan Buddhist soteriological perspective, *ngödrup* are fundamentally a distraction from the real goal, which is Buddhahood.

Moreover, *ngödrup* also problematically resemble magic, or illusion (Tib. *sgyu*, Skt. *māyā*). Tibetan and Indian authors — both in the contemporary period I discuss here, but also in earlier strata of Buddhist writings — often frame magical illusion as a fraught, primitive category of naïve falsehood or manipulation (in a way that curiously resonates with certain earlier western anthropological claims about primitivism, religion, and modernity). Concern about the slippery and stigmatized categories of magic and illusion may indeed have something to do with the discomfort my Tibetan colleagues expressed at the thought that I might perceive Amgön Rinpoche's activities as a type of ordinary magic or 'super power.' In the context of discussing Amgön's deeds, my three interlocutors all deployed 'magic' in our discussions as a pejorative term, connoting unreality, and suggesting credulity on the part of audiences and charlatanry or manipulation by performers. Karma Rinchen for instance noted that "people today" don't believe in magic, and commented, in relation to Amgön Rinpoche moving the yak dung, that "it looks like mere magic, it is hard to believe."<sup>22</sup>

Inappropriate yogic displays of *ngödrup* are frequently highlighted as a problem in canonical Indic and Tibetan Buddhist literature. In *sūtra* passages the Buddha Śākyamuni expressly criticizes attachment to or displays of *ngödrup* and forbids monastics from performing them (Gethin 2012; Strong 2007). Inappropriate yogic displays are said to work against the Buddhist community, either by increasing the resistance of skeptics, by making credulous people believers for the wrong reasons, or by making Buddhist monks appear to be simply one among many groups of wonder-working specialists (Gethin 2012; Gomez 1977). An important rationale for Buddhist caution about *ngödrup* powers indeed appears to be the fact that they are understood as not unique to Buddhists, but simply as the predictable side-effect of certain meditative techniques. Only Buddhahood is distinctive, in the sense of being uniquely produced by the Buddhist path. As Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen commented, "Americans think meditation leads to 'miracles' [using the English term 'miracle'], but this is not the real point. All sorts of religions have miracles, so miracles themselves cannot be the key." These older Buddhist criticisms of *ngödrup* seem to resonate deeply with contemporary concerns about modernity and secularism for certain contemporary Tibetan Buddhists.

*Dzuntriül*, in the sense of supreme displays of enlightened realization, are by contrast understood to be the real thing:



displays of true insight into the nature of reality. *Dzuntrül* in this sense are the manifestation of an enlightened state that is framed by Drikung exegetes, and Buddhists generally, as a form of power with a completely altruistic orientation; this sets them apart from the potentially manipulative power embodied in *ngödrup*. As Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen elaborated in detail, *dzuntrül* manifest interactively, because of an interpersonal encounter between an enlightened teacher and his or her students. Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen explained that displays of *dzuntrül* by Tibetan Buddhist lamas must be understood as depending upon three things. First, the actual enlightened realization of the meditator, who in this context should be understood as a lama, a teacher of others; his or her realization is the cause of the display (*rgyu*). Second, the inner capacity of the student and their karmic ties with the lama form the *condition* for the display (*rkyen*). Third, the *time* must be right for the display (*dus tshod*), in the English sense of the ‘time must be ripe’; this is the moment when the student is ready and will benefit from the display.

Thus in an important sense, these displays are social in nature, requiring an interpretive community of karmically connected witnesses and the context of a teaching moment. Here we might think of the stingy patrons in the yak dung story or the doubting monks as disciples to be ‘tamed’ through Amgön’s displays, their errors radically corrected via yogic activity that exactly matches their needs. Or perhaps it is we, the audience for the narrative, who are in fact the ones for whom transformation is intended. The student’s (or audience’s) self-cultivation toward Buddhahood, in this framework, can only proceed when he or she has the model and guide of the meditator-teacher. Conversely, it is the student’s individual karmic needs that call forth a particular display of yogic accomplishment from the teacher. The subsequent memory-work of the student in recollecting and recounting the enlightened deeds of her teacher then keeps that teacher’s qualities firmly in view, as the focus of the student’s (and the community’s) devotion and emulation. In this hermeneutics of interpersonal or communal perception, displays of *dzuntrül* are always therefore about teaching, memory, and faith (*dad pa*).<sup>23</sup>

For Buddhist soteriology, the first point, regarding the realization of the lama, is structurally crucial: from the point of view of Tibetan Buddhist exegetical traditions, the phenomena labeled *dzuntrül* are fundamentally expressions of the meditator’s own direct experience of the ultimate nature of reality. As Karma Rinchen explained, according to the Kagyu perspective of *Mahāmudrā*, insight into the ultimate nature of reality and total freedom from the

three poisons of hatred, addiction, and ignorance produces internal changes in the meditator. The meditator’s vital energy and mind become indivisible (*rlung sems dbyer med*). *Dzuntrül* are an external display of this internal change; indeed, they may be seen as proof of this internal change, through witnessed displays of transformations of matter and consciousness.

*Dzuntrül* at the level of display are not purely private; they are interpersonal and ultimately communal events, as both Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen and Karma Rinchen emphasized.<sup>24</sup> In Karma Rinchen’s words, “For the lama the play of enlightenment is happening all the time, but we only notice it in *dzuntrül*.” That is, it is the karmically structured needs and capacities of the disciples that literally call forth miraculous displays from the teacher. This presentation of *dzuntrül* thus hinges equally on a correct, in the Buddhist sense, understanding of *karma*, the Buddhist theory of cause and effect, and on the devotional relationship between master and disciple.

Such a presentation of *dzuntrül* is highly rationalized. It is marked by internally systematic and coherent sequences of cause and effect, and by an emphasis on interpersonal and communal ways of knowing, rather than an appeal to private experience. But this internal rationality is not secular as that term is usually understood. This conceptualization of *dzuntrül* remains resolutely rooted in Buddhist analytical categories and Buddhist concerns about meaning and value. This presentation of *dzuntrül* may therefore hint at ways to rethink the supposedly privileged relationship between secularism and rationality. Buddhist thinkers like my interlocutors are deploying Buddhist conceptual tools in ways that arguably work to reclaim the terrain of rationality (and the significant social capital that goes with rationality) from secularists, while maintaining their commitment to specifically Buddhist concerns.

Alternately, my interlocutors’ comments about *dzuntrül* may be seen as reflecting Buddhist modernist sensibilities here, more than specifically secular ones (in the sense Gayley 2013 and McMahan 2008 use the term). Seen in that light, their analysis of *dzuntrül* offers a reworking of inherited Buddhist analytic motifs for the purpose of addressing contemporary social and intellectual concerns, while nevertheless continuing to offer an intentional *alternative* to secular modes of discourse.

Karma Rinchen and Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen elaborated important implications of understanding *dzuntrül* as both an expression of enlightenment *and* as profoundly interpersonal, both in the sense of being communally legible and karmically conditioned. Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen



explained that a manifestation of *dzuntrül* should not be understood as an expression of selfish intention on the part of the lama-meditator. Rather, the lama-meditator is understood here to be a *bodhisattva* practitioner, someone who has taken binding vows to constantly benefit others, and whose conduct has become the spontaneous fulfillment of these *bodhisattva* vows. For such a person, displaying *dzuntrül* is not a calculated act. Instead, it occurs whenever such a display would be helpful to the witnesses, whose own personalities, karmic makeup, and needs condition what occurs. This offers a gloss for the stories of Amgön Rinpoche above: the stingy family in the yak dung story is challenged precisely in their stinginess; the disbelieving monks at the monastery are dazzled and subdued in their willful attempts to get rid of Amgön Rinpoche; the arrogant Reting Rinpoche is humbled by a clairvoyant power greater than his own.

The spontaneous character of such *dzuntrül* displays is significant, according to Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, because it is thus possible to distinguish between *dzuntrül* arising out of (and clearly indicating) authentic Buddhist insight and accomplishment on the Buddhist path, versus either hallucinations arising in meditation, or manipulative or illusory performances of magical illusion or of *ngödrup*. Making this distinction between valid and validating Buddhist displays and fake or irrelevant displays by charlatans or practitioners of non-Buddhist techniques is a long-standing Buddhist concern (Gethin 2012; Strong 2007). Tibetan life story and meditation instruction genres of literature and oral narrative emphasize the need for critical discernment on the part of any meditator, both to correctly distinguish false, demonic, or hallucinatory experiences from real moments of insight, and to correctly choose a trustworthy teacher who is not a charlatan, and who can lead one to enlightenment.

Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen offered a classic Buddhist interpretation of when *dzuntrül* can manifest and how disciples can evaluate both yogic displays by their teacher and experiences arising in their own meditation. He explained that where *dzuntrül* displays would “benefit the minds of sentient beings” then it is acceptable to show them; by contrast, in situations where *dzuntrül* would confuse or mislead sentient beings, then they are not to be shown. Similarly, a meditator can test experiences that may arise in meditation to see if they stabilize in specific Buddhist ways. According to Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, a real visionary experience will increase in strength and clarity the more the meditator concentrates on emptiness and the altruistic spirit of *bodhicitta*. But a demonic obstacle or hallucination will fade after meditation on

emptiness and *bodhicitta*, and then one knows it was just an obstacle. *Dzuntrül*-like displays likewise can be checked for authenticity by ascertaining whether they benefit beings and reflect enlightened qualities

Yet while this is a classic Buddhist presentation, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen gave an unusual analogy for it, saying, “This is just like a fake Apple phone made by the Chinese. The fake phone will break when used — it won’t perform its function, revealing itself to be a copy rather than the real thing.” That is, fake realizations will disappear when you try to develop them by meditating on emptiness or *bodhicitta*; they will not perform the functions of enlightenment and benefit for sentient beings. *Dzuntrül* can be evaluated in similar ways. The recommendation to check whether a meditative practice ‘works’ is of course classic Buddhist advice. But Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen’s framing of this classic advice in the language of phone knock-offs takes the implications one step further. In the Chinese phone analogy, we get not only a possible critique of the supposed wonders of the Chinese economy and the benefits it brings to Tibetans, but we also get an implicit reminder not to assume that a ‘modern’ product like an Apple phone has any *privileged* relationship to the real, authentic, functional, or useful.

Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen’s use of the fake Apple phone analogy suggests his and his students’ familiarity with the desires and experiences of technological modernity, which in his comments elsewhere he identifies as one contemporary source of social capital to be reckoned with. Yet in his analogy, it is the wondrous technological product, the Apple phone, which may turn out to be a fake. External or technological modernity is no proof against charlatanry, illusion, or fraud; only personal investigation (trying to make a phone call) can show whether something is real in the sense of whether it works.

### The Age of Faith and the Age of Knowledge

In his distinctive intellectual style of recalibrating categories of tradition and modernity, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen verbalized a conceptual sequence linking a meditator’s capacity to display *dzuntrül*, the Buddhist tradition of devotional reading, and the diasporic and modern need for ‘Himalayan Buddhists’ to remember their past. He elaborated these ideas around the very old and centrally important Buddhist technical term ‘recollection’ (Skt. *smṛti*, Tib. *dran ba*). This term has a range of meanings but can refer both to that recollection which is often translated as ‘mindfulness,’ i.e. the opposite of distraction, as well as to the recollections of devotional practice and memory, in the sense of not-forgetting (Gyatso 1992).

In Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen's exegesis, a Buddhist life story, whether oral or written, centers on recollection of several kinds: For the lama-meditator who is the subject of the life story, recollection refers to their own inner qualities and yogic realizations, as they are never 'distracted' from the true nature of reality. At the level of the reader/listener (positioned as the student), Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen says recollection refers to their devotional focus on the teacher they are reading about. In Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen's explanation, recollection through the act of reading or listening to Buddhist biographies becomes a process in which the student, within a devotional framework, literally takes on the teacher's qualities, becoming more and more like the teacher. (Therefore, as the Khenchen pointed out, one must choose one's Buddhist biographical reading/listening carefully, so as to develop the qualities one actually wants. This was a point also echoed by Karma Rinchen.) Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen further noted that recollection through practices of reading and remembering teachers is crucial for the continuity of the lineage itself. In the context of lineage then, this suggests that recollection is a kind of historical remembering, insuring the continuity of an unbroken chain of lineage memory across both geography and time (Hervieu-Leger 2000). Both Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen and Karma Rinchen emphasized that such remembering is important both for diaspora Tibetans and Tibetans in geographic Tibet. Recollection in this sense thus also speaks directly to the concerns about broken links of memory voiced by Dordzin Rinpoche.

Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen contrasted the reading practices and attitudes towards yogic power of previous generations of Tibetan Buddhists in Himalayan societies with the attitudes of people today. He stated that "Himalayan people had strange ideas previously — lay people didn't read [religious biographies] and similar things. A layperson might say, 'I'm a Drikungpa' but they didn't know much about it. Reading was work for monks and nuns. But now, after 1959, now Himalayan [lay] people will read and study." This perspective in some sense is a modernist one (McMahon 2008); in this context the international pressures and new educational institutions of the post-1959 world are seen to produce the benefit of greater lay participation in Buddhist life, and new engagements with forms of Buddhist identity. 'I'm a Drikungpa' means something different in this setting, according to Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, than it did before, and that difference is connected to new practices of knowledge.

But this new community of lay readers is also a community of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhists who make

new judgments about the validity and trustworthiness of Buddhist masters. Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen and Karma Rinchen both argued that members of the 'new generation' combine their novel experiences of 'international' diaspora and cross-cultural encounters with new experiences of learning, literacy, and technology. As a result, these Drikung scholars say, contemporary Drikung people, and Tibetan Buddhists more generally, evaluate accounts of yogic power according to new criteria of plausibility and rationality. These new lay readers may not be impressed by accounts of yogic power in the same ways as previous generations. In fact, for some Himalayan people, as Karma Rinchen mentioned when talking about Amgön Rinpoche and the yak dung, accounts of yogic power may provoke concerns about being criticized for believing in magic.

The post-1959 shifts in who reads, and how they understand what they read, are central to Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen's most powerful theoretical formulation. He suggests a new periodization of Tibetan Buddhist intellectual and religious life, a periodization that intervenes directly in questions of modernity and secularism. In his words, "The time before 1959 was the 'age of faith' (*dad pa'i dus rabs*), and the time after 1959 is the 'age of knowledge' (*shes rab gyi dus rabs*). So one needs to know." In this formulation, the ages of faith and knowledge form a historical sequence, interrupted yet linked by the transformations of 1959. In the present day, one needs to know more (facts, information, biographical material) in order to find and trust the Buddhist path and a Buddhist teacher. Indeed, present day people may simply not have the same capacity for faith that earlier generations had. "In earlier times," according to Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, "the display of *dzuntriil* by lamas was an opportunity to develop great faith in the lama." But now the situation is different: in Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen's words, "In our present time, a lama might display *dzuntriil*, but the disciples won't believe it very much — believing it is a little bit difficult."

In a similar vein, we might think of Karma Rinchen's comment when listening to the recording of Dordzin Rinpoche's account of Amgön's deeds: "There used to be many such lamas. But now people don't believe it." This statement may suggest a sense of diminishing capacities in the present generation, but that was not Karma Rinchen's main point. Rather, he emphasized that every generation is culturally and intellectually distinctive, and that this extends to the ways they tell stories and recall the past. As he put it, "In Milarepa's time, people had different ways of thinking, just like their ways of talking and eating, etc. were different." As people's habits and preferences changed, "the stories changed over time, just like Milare-

pa's *namthar* and how it is told changed." Thus the people of today have their own needs and capacities, which must be addressed.

According to Karma Rinchen, these generational shifts are actually part of why Amgön Rinpoche's biography is important for present day Himalayan people and for Buddhists in general. Amgön's life story is less historically remote and alien than earlier masters like Milarepa, and people know Amgön was a real historical person. At the same time, both Karma Rinchen and Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, as well as other Tibetan scholars and practitioners I spoke with, suggested that it is no accident that the life of Amgön Rinpoche is being memorialized in textual biographies and oral narratives specifically with accounts of his *dzun-trül*: because he is one generation away, but only one, he challenges the incredulity of contemporary readers and listeners while opening up the possibility of faith. He is historically traceable, no figment of the imagination, but not actually, troublingly present.

Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen's 'age of knowledge' in many ways appears as a secular age (with a nod to Charles Taylor). It might seem to be an age in which faith has diminished or vanished, replaced perhaps by a Tibetan form of secular skepticism. This secular skepticism might seem to be partly about new forms of knowledge, and partly about the present generation's desire to distance itself from associations with magic and other categories of non-modernity that they know are stigmatized. But crucially, for the Drikung exegetes I spoke with, the present 'age of knowledge' is in fact one in which faith may have changed shape or become more difficult, but in which the role of faith as necessary in Buddhist practice has not shifted.

According to these Buddhist scholars, faith in the lama is crucial for real soteriological progress on the Buddhist path. Such faith is precisely the quality developed by reading or listening to life stories of masters and through recollection. Indeed, here faith, knowledge, and recollection go together: one needs to know the lineage well if one aims to generate the necessary devotion. Moreover, Himalayan and Tibetan people specifically 'need to know' their own religious and cultural pasts in order not to lose access to them. There is a strong suggestion, in tandem with Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen's other comments, that present-day *Tibetan Buddhists* in Himalayan societies both inside and outside geographic Tibet 'need to know' how to learn and know things in specifically Tibetan Buddhist ways. They need to maintain modes of knowledge which, though now potentially open to all in Himalayan societies including lay people, ironically may be overlooked or shunned in the present day, because of competition from

new international, modern, secular modes of knowing and learning, which are so closely associated with status and power. Here we might think of Foucault's comments about the intimate relationship between knowledge and power in a society. "Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault in Rabinow 1984: 73). In these terms, one could say that the scholars I discuss here are deeply invested in the question of what regimes and discourses of truth will operate for Himalayan Buddhists.

Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen states that in his view, the ideal would be: "Fifty percent faith, fifty percent knowledge — the key is half and half. Before there was too much faith and too little knowledge, now there is too little faith." The 'need to know' is thus in part about correctly balancing knowledge and faith. From the side of the lamas, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen asserts, the capacity for *dzuntrül* is already there; it's the disciples who are questionable. "For doing *dzuntrül*, the foundation is a connection with a disciple who has faith. If we don't have 100 percent [English term] faith, then we won't really be able to perceive the lama's *dzuntrül* ... The lama has the capacity for *dzuntrül*. So saying there are or are not *dzuntrül* — really the basis is the connection with the disciple who has faith." Here we may perceive a suggestion that present day people are better at cultivating faith for figures of the past than for troublingly present figures of our own time. Or perhaps Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen's suggestion is rather that reading/hearing narratives like those about Amgön is a kind of training in faith for present day skeptics.

At the same time, as Karma Rinchen and Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen both described, this faith must be the right kind of faith, the faith of knowledge (*shes rab gyi dad pa*) and explicitly *not* blind faith, the faith of ignorance (*rmong dad pa*). This latter opposition is again not new; it is a distinction Tibetans attribute to the historical Buddha. But in the contemporary Himalayan and diasporic context, the 'faith of knowledge' takes on new meanings. It is the faith verified by 'checking' (*brtag dpyad byed pa*) via a hermeneutic of communal (and sometimes technological) evaluation as well as individual karmic capacity. In this Tibetan Buddhist context, the secular age has been reframed around an internal rationality incorporating devotion, faith, and the tangible presence of masters whose enlightenment can be displayed through activity.

We might observe in closing that Drikung intellectuals asserting continuity with the past within the new 'age of knowledge' turn out to be far from marginal figures in global debates about secularism. Increasingly, scholars in

multiple international locations speak of ‘post-secularism,’ and new forms of ‘religion-making’ as integral to the realities of the contemporary world (Dressler and Mandair 2011). Some scholars argue that the ‘secular’ is itself not separable from the religious, or highlight ritual dimensions of secular practices, for instance in modern national politics and sports. Some have attempted an anthropology of secularism itself, questioning the presumed naturalness and privileged realism or rationality of the secular (Asad 2003). These revaluations of secularism often also question the very idea that modernity is characterized by a break with the past, or even that modernity exists as a separate space at all (Hervieu-Léger 2000; Latour 1993). Such questions echo Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen’s questions, and some speak to his answers.

Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen’s formulation of the ‘need to know’ in the ‘age of knowledge’ emerges as a Buddhist response to claims and judgments of international secularism. In his assertion that Himalayan Buddhists must learn how to ‘know’ things in explicitly Buddhist ways, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen points to a new era in which crucial continuity with the past remains. Most of all, I would argue, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, Dordzin Rinpoche, Karma Rinchen and other contemporary Tibetan Buddhist intellectuals assert throughout all the interventions I discuss here the validity and ‘adequacy’ (Asad 2003) of Tibetan Buddhist forms of life. In so doing, their arguments reveal the terrain of secularism, like the terrain of religion, as a landscape not only of knowledge, but also of power.

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## Endnotes

1. In this article I discuss the Tibetan terms *dnagos grub* and *rdzu ‘phrul* and the corresponding Sanskrit terms *siddhi* and *ṛddhi*, which I define below. I avoid the English term ‘miracle’ to translate any of these terms, since the semantic field of the English term differs substantially from the Tibetan or Sanskrit. My thanks to Khenpo Kunga Sherab for highlighting this issue (personal communication, November 2014).
2. The Kagyu school is one of the four main branches of Tibetan Buddhism active today. The Drikung Kagyu is one of the leading Kagyu sub-lineages surviving into the present. It was founded by Kyoba Jikden Sumgon (Skyob pa ’jig rten gsum mgon, 1143-1217), who established Drikung Til Monastery (*‘Bri gung mthil dgon pa*) in Central Tibet in 1179. See Gruber 2010; Dkon mchog rgya mtsho 2004b.
3. I do not discuss the Tibet-based intellectual dynamics in this article because of concerns regarding the current sensitive situation for Tibetan intellectuals in geographic Tibet, as well as for reasons of length. I hope to discuss these dynamics in a separate essay in the future.
4. Dkon mchog rgya mtsho 2004a; *‘Bri gung pa chos ‘byor* 1996.
5. Konchok Gyatso, who also uses the name Rase Dawa (Rase zla ba), has contributed in major ways to contemporary Drikung intellectual life, in particular through his many historical and biographical publications.



6. For instance, Konchok Gyatso the author of the 2004 Tibetan biography of Amgön Rinpoche which I discuss here, also published a biography of a close contemporary of Amgön's, Drikung Pachung Rinpoche ('Bri gung Dpa' chung rin po che, 1901-1988) in 2004. This biography of Pachung Rinpoche contains virtually no depictions of yogic power.

7. See Pitkin 2011, forthcoming. DiValerio 2015: 93, 261 n. 39-40 offers an excellent discussion of the ideas of a Tibetan Buddhist yogic 'imaginaire' and 'repertoire' on which virtuosos and interpretive communities draw.

8. Ardussi and Epstein 1975, Stearns 2007, Quintman 2014; DiValerio 2015, in particular Chapter 7, which briefly discusses Amgön Rinpoche and Konchog Gyatso, the author of the 2004 *nam thar*.

9. Unless otherwise noted all interviews were conducted in Tibetan. All translations here are my own. I discussed difficult points of meaning and interpretation in Dordzin Rinpoche's stories with Karma Rinchen and another Tibetan friend, based on my audio recordings of Dordzin Rinpoche's stories. I conducted separate interviews with Karma Rinchen about yogic accomplishment and interpretation, and separate interviews with Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen.

10. I explore the main Indian and other sources of influence on such Tibetan taxonomies in a separate study. The most common Tibetan taxonomy of *ngödrup* are the sets of eight 'mundane' (*thun mong*) *ngödrup* (Skt. *siddhi*), 'mundane' in the sense of different from the supreme *siddhi* of Buddhahood. See for instance Gethin 2012. Dungkar 1981: 755, gives a standard list: eye potion, swift-feet, sword, travels to terrestrial realms, magic pills, travels to celestial realms, invisibility, essence extract. ("*mig sman/ rkang mgyogs/ ral gri/ sa 'og / ril bu/ mkha' spyod/ mi snang ba/ bcud len*").

11. This story is reminiscent of a famous episode from the *Life of Milarepa* in which Milarepa astounds his closest disciple by placing himself inside a hollow yak horn, without either making himself smaller or the yak horn bigger. Kagyu audiences in particular would notice the connection. See Quintman 2014.

12. In this context, Karma Rinchen and Dordzin Rinpoche explained the term *nam thar* as being an account of a practitioner's liberation, intended, as they emphasized and as I explore below, as a model of Buddhist practice for others. They did not address distinctions between oral or textual material in this conversation (i.e., whether to define *nam thar* as a specifically textual literary genre). They contrasted *nam thar* with the category of 'folktale' or *sgrung* in this discussion both on the basis of the

perceived reliability of *nam thar* in contrast to the mythic quality of *sgrung*, and because of the explicitly Buddhist soteriological intention of *nam thar*.

13. On social capital see for instance Bourdieu 1984.

14. Relatedly see Aihwa Ong's comments on transnational identities of Cambodian refugees in the US (Ong 2003).

15. While claims that the events of the twentieth century "brought modernity" to Tibet are often made in Chinese, English, and sometimes Tibetan language contexts, such claims overlook the multiple dynamics associated with modernity present in Tibetan social and intellectual life prior to the 1950s. See Gyatso 2004, 2015; Lopez 1998, 2005; Hansen 2003.

16. Shakya 2000: 29; "underdevelopment" is his translation of *rjes lus*. 'Backwardness' is another common rendering in English.

17. See Berger 1967, 1974; subsequently he critiques this view (i.e., 2005); Gauchet, 1985/tr. 1997; Casanova 1994, 2011; McMahan 2008, Dressler and Mandair 2011, Bubandt and van Beek 2012.

18. Almond 1988; Ivy 2005; McMahan 2008; Zablocki 2009; note critiques in Blackburn 2010 and Turner 2014. Contemporary collaborations between Buddhist meditators and neuroscientists, for instance, may be mobilized to emphasize Buddhist rationalism. Many Buddhist scholars including people with whom I worked on this article emphasize the internal rationality of Buddhist teachings, practices and ideas. However, in many instances this Buddhist rationality includes space for activities and narratives that secularists appear uncomfortable with. An extreme secularist position is articulated by neo-atheist Sam Harris in *Tricycle Magazine* in 2006, urging that Buddhists stop labeling Buddhism as a religion.

19. For the nineteenth century British scholars Almond describes, Buddhist ritual and apotropaic practices appeared incompatible with full civilization (Almond 1988). Bubandt and van Beek (2012) describe related concerns within Thai secularism.

20. This construction happened under the auspices of the 37th Drikung Chetsang Rinpoche, one of the two leaders of the lineage ('Bri gung che tshang dkon chog bstan 'dzin kun bzang 'phrin las lhun grub, b. 1946). The other leader of the lineage, the 36th Chungtsang Rinpoche ('Bri gung chung tshang rin po che bstan 'dzin chos kyi snang ba, b. 1942), remains in Tibet. Since the mid-seventeenth century, the Drikung Kagyu lineage leadership has been shared between two incarnation lineages, the *Chetsang* and *Chungtsang Rinpoches*. For more detail see Gruber 2010; Dkon mchog rgya mtsho 2004b.



21. Drikung Til Monastery in Central Tibet also historically serves this function, and remains the prime place of pilgrimage for many lineage members. However the current Tibetan situation complicates its use as a gathering place for the multiple branches of the lineage, although for certain special occasions it may still retain this role. See Kapstein 1998.

22. However, the category of magical illusion can also be a fertile realm of display and transformation for Indian and Tibetan Buddhist thinkers writing both in tantric and sutric contexts. I explore elsewhere the tantalizing question of how and when the creative play of magical illusion may be invoked in displays of yogic power.

23. I thank Holly Gayley for the apt term ‘hermeneutics of perception.’

24. This presentation echoes the classic Buddhist formulation of the three bodies of a buddha: The ‘truth body’ (Skt. *dharmakāya*) expresses a buddha’s own enlightenment at the level of enlightened experience, and the two levels of ‘form body’ (Skt. *rupakāya*) represent the interactive, teaching aspects of an enlightened being’s activity toward others. Much Buddhist literature on form bodies deals with technical aspects of display and transformation, both relevant to Tibetan presentations of yogic display, which I consider in detail elsewhere.

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## Interviews

Dordzin Drupon Dondrup Palden Rinpoche, April 2013, Dehradun, India.

Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen, April 2013, Dehradun, India.

Karma Rinchen, September-October 2014, New York City.

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