

“ANYTHING IS AN APPROPRIATE TREASURE
TEACHING!” AUTHENTIC TREASURE REVEALERS
AND THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF NONCELIBATE
TANTRIC PRACTICE

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From Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs’s *Zhal gdams*:

[Some individuals] compose many confused and isolated teachings pretending they are *dākinī* codes and Treasure teachings, writing them with wording mistakes and incorrect meaning.

There are also some who, not knowing how to write, steal previous authentic *gter stons*’ scriptures and pretend they are their own Treasure teachings, thus deceiving others. While they do not possess the wisdom eye to interpret correctly the ordinary actions they want to accomplish immediately, they pretend to remember their previous births, not to mention pretending to have the clairvoyance to know the past and the future.¹

From O rgyan Sku gsum gling pa’s *Rnam thar*:

Since then, in accordance with the activation of the auspicious potentials of the Treasures, every kind of prophetic song of esoteric revelation, symbolic script, prophetic catalogue, and numerous super-divine *sādhanas* spontaneously appeared [to him]. However, some misbelievers would comment baselessly that Padma gtum po is a fake Treasure revealer and a false realised being.²

¹ Bstan ‘dzin rgya mtsho (2003: 38–39).

² A bu dkar lo (2003: 82). Padma gtum po is an epithet of O rgyan Sku gsum gling pa. O rgyan Sku gsum pa (also known as Padma bdud ‘dul gtum drag rol ba’i rdo rje,

Again, it is said that there are individuals who claim that some of [Padma] gtum po's Treasure teachings are produced out of his fabrications, and therefore they are not Treasure teachings. As for that, there is no reason that all of what he says is not certainly a Treasure teaching. If a person is a genuine Treasure revealer, through the blessing of his attention (*thags gtad pa*) anything is an appropriate Treasure teaching.

For instance, some people used to say that the great Treasure revealer Khams gtsang gter chen Padma mkha' khyab pa manufactured some of his Treasure caskets, just like bricks, and they were not retrieved from Treasure troves.

One day, the Treasure revealer [Padma mkha' khyab pa] carried a bag full of his Treasure teachings and Treasure caskets on his back and arrived in front of Nyag bla Bsod rgyal, also known as Gter chen Las rab gling pa. Khams gtsang then placed all of them near the master. While he was on his way out, the master's attendant inquired:

"This Khams gtsang gter ston's stuff, shall I throw it outside or place it somewhere? I don't want to trample on it."

Gter chen Bsod rgyal said:

"What? That's impossible! These are the Treasure objects and Treasure teachings revealed by Khams gtsang gter ston!"

The attendant replied:

"He composed the Treasure teachings, and, likewise, he manufactured the Treasure caskets. He hasn't retrieved anything from Treasure troves!"

Gter chen [Las rab gling pa] said:

"Even if he had composed them, they are Treasure teachings, and likewise even if he manufactured them, they are Treasure caskets. He is a genuine Treasure revealer and therefore by just directing his intention he blessed them as actual Treasures. For the devout beings to believe in it, it does not matter if he did or did

1934-2009) was the founder and the leader of the *rnying ma* monastery Thub bstan chos gling, more popularly known as Lung sngon sgar in Dga' bde village near Dar lag/Dari in mGo log (Qinghai Province). A Treasure revealer, O rgyan Sku gsum gling pa apparently revealed hundreds of texts collected in eight volumes.

not retrieve them [the Treasures] from a Treasure trove. It depends if the individual is a representative of Padma [sambhava] or not!”³

Within the spectrum of Buddhist Tantric practices, the authenticity of the Treasure revelations (*gter chos*) has been a source of debate for centuries.⁴ Tibetans have adopted and developed different spiritual practices that have been accepted as authentic by some and criticised as controversial by others. What does it mean to be an authentic Treasure revealer (*gter ston*)? How are today’s Treasure revealers practising the teachings associated with their revelations? And above all, how are both monastic and noncelibate religious leaders dealing with the Tantric practices that are central to Treasure revealers’ careers? In the three passages reproduced above the authors respond to an essential question lying at the core of the Treasure issue: how can we distinguish between real revelations and fake ones?

In this article I attempt to give possible answers to this question and to contribute to the study of Treasure revelation in its contemporary milieu of Sichuan and Qinghai in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). I will do this by sharing some of the material I have gathered regarding the dynamics at work in the ‘making’ of a genuine Treasure revealer and the moral implications of some Tantric practices, namely the ‘skilful means’, or *thabs lam*, which include the practice of sexual exercises often associated with revelation. Recent scholarship has pointed out the main features that shape classical Treasure revelation and have identified some of the taxonomical developments of the tradition.⁵ I will introduce some of these issues only tangentially, since the scope of my efforts is to explore issues related to present-day Tibet as seen and expressed by active

³ A bu dkar lo (2003: 92–93).

⁴ On the question of authenticity of *gter ma* see Aris (1989), Kapstein (1989), Gyasto (1986, 1993), Schwieger (1990), Tshewang (1995), Martin (2001: 16–29), Blezer (2001), and Doctor (2005).

⁵ Schwieger (1990), Gyatso (1998), Germano (1998), and Jacoby (2007).

Treasure revealers. For this study I have used two sources: the first consists of written sources, namely biographies and writings of contemporary Treasure revealers, and the other is a series of oral communications gathered during interviews in the field with Treasure revealers.

I was first drawn to the question of authenticity and moral behaviour in the Treasure revelation tradition when I read O rgyan sku gsum gling pa's *Rnam thar* during my stay at Bde chen 'od gsal rdo rje's residence at Rdza mer chen monastery in Shar mda' in 2005. There, I was also captured by another important reading, a collection of oral instructions (*zhal gdams*) on morality and ethics for Buddhist practitioners that the late teacher and Treasure revealer Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs (1934-2003) offered a few years before his death. Not only was Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs one of the highest spiritual and authoritative leaders of twentieth-century Tibet, but he was also a full-ordained monk, and he was well-known for his strict position concerning ethics and morality among both monastic and noncelibate Buddhist practitioners.

Today in Tibet, despite the obvious changes brought about by the new socio-political geography and the new challenges triggered by the religious policy of the PRC, Treasure revealers are still active and revelation and visionary activities continue to be a visible aspect of Tibetan lived religion.⁶ Just as in the past, issues concerning authentic Treasure revealers and the moral implications of their lifestyles and activities are still at the centre of debates. For instance, Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs remarked on this issue in a series of oral instructions addressed to both monastics and laypeople that he gave publicly at Bla rung sgar in 2000/2001. Recently, his disciples collected this advice into a booklet, the *Zhal gdams*.⁷ Discussing the importance of

⁶ I have discussed the political context of religion and Tibetan Buddhism and the role of Treasure revealers in present-day Tibet and PRC elsewhere. See Terrone (2008), Terrone (2002; and Forthcoming). See also Germano (1998).

⁷ Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho (2005: 129).

maintaining the pure and untainted vows, he offers his opinion on the moral choices at stake within the ‘two systems’ (*lugs gnyis*), the religious system (*chos lugs*) and the secular system (*srid lugs*). He describes these as the ‘saffron monastic community’ (*rab byung ngur smrig gi sde*) and the ‘white-robed group with long hair’ (*gos dkar lcang lo’i sde*) respectively.⁸ The *Zhal gdams* is divided into five sections but here I will focus on the third chapter titled ‘Straying from the holy and sublime Dharma’ (*dam pa lha chos dang sbyar nas ‘chad pa*). In this chapter Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs elaborates on both the importance of maintaining pure vows and commitments and the problematic aspect of (im)moral behaviour among noncelibate Tantric professionals (*sngags pa khyim pa*).

In the present inquiry I will elaborate on the perspectives of the noncelibate group of Treasure revealers by providing two examples, namely Bde chen ‘od gsal rdo rje (b. 1921), currently the spiritual leader at Rdza mer chen dgon pa in Shar mda’, Nang chen, and Gter chen Bkra shis rgyal mtshan (b. 1956), one of Bde chen ‘od gsal rdo rje’s closest disciples. Bkra shis rgyal mtshan currently lives with his consort Mkha’ ‘gro Dpal chen lha mo and their children at his household not far from his teacher’s residence in Shar mda’.⁹ For this study I will use a series of interviews I have conducted with them and recorded on notebook and video. In exploring these issues on morality and Treasure revealers’ lifestyle choices, it is important to keep in mind that while Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs was a full-ordained monk and therefore tended to promote a *vinaya*-influenced discourse of morality and ethical decorum, Bde

⁸ Bstan ‘dzin rgya mtsho (2005: 37).

⁹ Bkra shis rgyal mtshan and Mkha’ ‘gro Dpal chen lha mo are one of the few couples of Treasure revealers currently operating in Tibet. For a study of one ‘couple’ of Treasure revealers see Jacoby (2007). Exemplary biographies of this kind in present-day Tibet are those of Nam srpul ‘Jigs med phun tshogs and his consort, the late Tāre lha mo (1938-2002). Padma ‘od gsal mtha’ yas (1997) and Builard (2005). See also Jacoby (2007; 357–61).

chen 'od sgal rdo rje and Gter chen Bkra shis rgyal mtshan represent the eclectic class of noncelibate Tantric professionals, or *sngags pa*. Like other religious personalities encountered in this essay, these three people claim to be visionaries and Treasure revealers. I have chosen to introduce their insights because they represent both types of religious professionals, monastic and noncelibate, who have chosen to live according to different religious lifestyles.

Within the spectrum of Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the class of noncelibate or householder Tantric professionals (*sngags pa khyim pa*) and their system of religious activities and teaching transmission is as rich as it is complex. Traditionally noncelibate professionals included figures such as the *sngags pa, rnal 'byor pa*, and *gter ston*, but the list goes beyond this general classification if we consider sub-groups of religious experts engaged in specific Tantric systems of practice.¹⁰ Historically, while Treasure revealers have contributed to the production of an enormous body of liturgical as well as soteriological scriptures and many among them have emerged as some of the finest Buddhist scholars in Tibet, they have also triggered centuries of controversy. As inspiration, miraculous apparitions, and visionary virtuosity constitute crucial criteria to determine Treasure revealers' authenticity, they have also generated criticism from other Tibetan Buddhist traditions who assert that most Treasure scriptures (*gter chos*) are fraudulent (*zog*) and false (*rdzun*), and that their revealers, the *gter ston*, are nothing more than skilled impostors moved by self interest and the satisfaction of sensory needs.¹¹

¹⁰ The list could include figures such as the *gcod pa, lha pa, zhi byed pa*, and others. See Samuel (1993) and Davidson (2005).

¹¹ Among Tibetan critics of the *gter ma* traditions and of the Rnying ma school in general are Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182-1251), Bcom ldan Rig pa'i ral gri (1227-1305), Sum pa Mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor (1704-1788) and among the Rnying ma adherents are, for instance, Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552-1624). See Kapstein (1989: 230–31).

Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs was well-known for his strict opinion on ethics and vows for monastics and lay practitioners alike. In many of his public talks he would stress this aspect of Buddhist practice to his audience. His comments on the two orders of practitioners (*Jugs gnyis*), secular and religious, can be appreciated in the following passage:

Now, as for the householder Tantric practitioners, I believe that although they are followers of the Tantric path of the Mahāyāna, they should also study the path of the Śrāvakayāna of the Hīnayāna, but they don't do this and it is a big mistake.

In the *Dpung bzang* it is written:¹²

As I, the Victorious, have said, the householder Tantric professionals reject conceptuality and rituals from the entire Vinaya, the pure ethical conduct according to individual liberation. They practise the rest.

The group of saffron-robed monastics and the white-robed and long-haired group are both great communities of religious practitioners existing already from the time of the three great ancestral religious kings.¹³ Additionally, given that these groups of religious beings are respected by everyone for being different from common human beings, they are a group suitable to be recipients of offerings. Therefore, it is necessary to accumulate virtues honouring the precepts of individual liberation, Bodhisattva, and mantra, with pure commitments, and with one's own mind merged into the Dharma. Preserving vows and commitments as pure and not indulging in condemning the behaviour of householders is surely important. Therefore, renunciants safeguard their vows and commitments in any circumstance, and this will make them worthwhile recipients of offerings. Tantric professionals and Treasure revealers, instead, who master their particular inner realisation and their signs of realisation and powers, virtues that are more extraordinary than others, must have a distinctive quality: they must have the ability to control people's minds. Instead, they do not possess distinctive virtues such as realisation marks at all, still less the tendency to practice the yoga of their

¹² The *'Phags pa'i dpung bzang gis zhus pa'i mdo* (Skt. *Āryaśubāhuparipṛcchanāmatra*).

¹³ Srong bstan sgam po (c. 614-650), Khri Srong lde btsan (754-797), and Khri Ral pa can (c. 815-835).

own bodies as skilful means. They rely [instead] on many women and are motivated by attachment under the pretext of necessity even though they don't understand anything about channels, air, and seminal nuclei (*rtsa rlung thig le*).¹⁴

As we have seen in the first of the three short passages in the beginning of this essay, Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs directs his criticism to the class of householder Tantric professionals (*sngags pa*) and Treasure revealers (*gter ston*) who, according to him, indulge in immoral and unethical behaviour and lack real knowledge of esoteric practice. In the specific case of Treasure revealers, he expresses concern for the use and misuse of 'real' Treasure teachings by charlatans (*zog po*) who commit plagiarism by appropriating revelations performed by authentic Treasure revealers from the past and diffusing them as their own productions. He continues by claiming that many Tantric professionals pretend to be Treasure revealers and compose practice texts full of mistakes and confused teachings, which they then disseminate as Treasure teachings (*gter chos*) and *dākinī* codes (*mkha' 'gro'i brda*).

According to Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, those who have an open mind have the power to understand if they are authentic Treasure revealers. However, he strongly disapproves of bad behaviour (*spyod ngan*) such as sexual misconduct, which is conducive to vicious actions and is representative of a charlatan (*zog po*)'s fake Treasure revelations (*gter rdzun*). To corroborate his convictions, Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs elaborates on ethical conduct according to the *Sdom gsum rnam nges* in order to emphasise the importance of adhering to yogic discipline in one's practice.¹⁵ According to Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, noncelibate Tantric professionals, including Treasure revealers, must commit themselves to the practice of good conduct and accept

¹⁴ Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho (2005: 37–38).

¹⁵ This theme of theological works is primarily represented by Mnga' ris Paṅ chen Padma dbang rgyal (1487-1542)'s *Rang bzhin rdzogs pa chen po'i lam gyi cha lag sdom pa gsum rnam par nges pa zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos*. See Ngari Panchen (1996).

the five precepts of the lay practitioner (*upāsaka*) thus avoiding killing, stealing, proclaiming the false, sexual misconduct, and alcoholic intoxication.¹⁶ In the following passage, he remarks that the temptation to produce fake Treasures for one's own benefit entices those individuals who fail to become monks, implying that only those who embrace the *prātimokśa* vows (*so thar gyi sdom pa*) are moved by purity of intentions.

Moreover, keeping one's own mind transparent, one has the power to understand if he has or has not similar virtues [to recognize *saṃsāra*]. For those who have any such virtues who place the blame on the evil mantrā and make the passing of time through sexual misconduct the basis of their happiness, the ultimate objective of taking the monastic vows [and abandoning] the behaviour of noncelibate Tantric specialists will never be wrong. For those who are unable to become monks, they should not undertake any negative actions such as those of charlatan Treasure revealers and of householders. He should take any given vow of the *prātimokśa* to heart and refuse any attitude of remorse. Therefore, for all those who wish to perform whichever right path, first of all it is necessary to train in a suitable supreme discipline.¹⁷

After reading these passages, I have the impression that among today's Buddhist personalities in eastern Tibet, there are two concerns that seem to influence the Buddhist community's perception of Treasure revealers. One is a Treasure revealer's attitude and behaviour, such as the way he interacts with

¹⁶ Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho (2005: 45). Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs expands on the topic of these precepts by adding that householders can approximate the sphere of the novices if they embrace a more austere approach (*brtul zhugs yan lag*). This would mean taking eight precepts instead of five: replacing the avoidance of sexual misconduct with complete sexual abstinence on some specific days and adding the precepts of refraining from eating after midday, refraining from using entertainments, and refraining from sleeping in luxurious beds. Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho (2005: 44–45).

¹⁷ Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho (2005: 44).

the people around him, the community he leads and represents, and the way he conducts his religious activities. These relate primarily to the moral and ethical behaviour of the individual. The other is the quality and validity of his revealed teachings (*gter chos*). Usually both these aspects are considered when it comes to the analysis and recognition of a true Treasure revealer, with one aspect often overshadowing the other. However, as the Third Rdo grub chen 'Jigs med bstan pa'i nyi ma (1865-1926) also observes, 'behaviour' (*spyod pa*) per se should not necessarily constitute a reliable means of authenticating Treasure revealers since authentic noncelibate Tantric professionals have often been criticised for their bizarre, unconventional, and often 'apparently' immoral manners.¹⁸ Mkhon po 'Jigs med phun tshogs's comments are clear examples of this.

If we look at contemporary Treasure revealers' auto/biographies, there are two principal factors that contribute to the shaping of a religious person into a Treasure revealer. On the one hand is the self-realisation coming from visions of encounters with Padmasambhava and/or *mkha'gro ma* and direct reception of Treasure teachings (*gter chos*).¹⁹ On the other hand is the recognition by one or many authoritative leaders who confirm the validity of the emerging Treasure revealer by means of public authorization (*mnga'gsol*).

On the topic of how he was first recognized as a Treasure revealer, in his autobiography Bde chen 'od gsal rdo rje (b. 1921) recalls:

It was when I was a young boy, about six or seven year-old that I understood that I was to be involved in Treasure revelation activity. A few years later, when I was a little bit older on my way to Lhasa on pilgrimage doing prostrations, I met the Karma-Finding *dākinī*. In that occasion she spoke to me and said:

¹⁸ Thondup (1996: 157).

¹⁹ For the role of Padmasambhava and *mkha'gro mas* in the Treasure tradition see Dowman (1973; 1984). See also Ngawang Zangpo (2002) and Ye-śes-mtsho-rgyal (1978).

There is some Treasure work (*gter gyi bya ba*) for the two of us!

It was Kun bzang ‘gro ‘dul who, among others, proclaimed that I was a Treasure revealer.²⁰ In accordance with his prophecy that in the future many Treasures would necessarily descend [upon me], he also knew that there would be a total of eight volumes [of Treasure teachings] of mind Treasures and also earth Treasures. Following that event, I revealed a Treasure just in the presence of the King of Rwa sgreng, Bu bla Mtshan nyid bsod bstan rin po che. The master spoke to me and said:

“You are a Treasure revealer!”

He thus authorized my activities. Then, even the well-known great Treasure revealer Nyag bla Byang chub rdo rje said to me that I was a Treasure revealer.²¹ He entrusted me with the retrieval of a Turquoise Treasure (*g.yu gter*), which I later retrieved according to his prophecy. This is common knowledge also thanks to many masters’ prophecies, including the sixteenth Karma pa’s. Famous contemporary masters told me that I was a Treasure revealer and wrote edicts for me. I have faultless letters [saying] that I am a Treasure revealer by the Sa skya [master] Zlu lding Mkhan chen, Mkhan po A chos, and Mchog [gyur] gling [pa].²²

In the Treasure tradition there are minor and major Treasure revealers (*gter ston phran chen*). As Gu ru Chos kyi dbang phyug has written in his *Gter ‘byung chen mo*, a classical characteristic of a Treasure revealer should be the comprehensive nature of his revelations that should include the three classes of teachings *bla rdzogs thugs*.²³ A major Treasure revealer, therefore, should have

²⁰ Dpal me mkhyen brtse Kun bzang ‘gro ‘dul rdo rje, also known as Grub dbag bde chen rdo rje (1897-1946), was one of bDe chen ‘od gsal rdo rje’s root teachers.

²¹ Nyag bla Byang chub rdo rje (1926-c.1978), renowned noncelibate teacher of *rdzogs chen* (Great Perfection) and Treasure revealer, was one of Bde chen ‘od gsal rdo rje’s root teachers.

²² Bde chen ‘od gsal rdo rje’s oral and written communications. Rdza mer chen monastery. Shar mda’, Nang chen, Qinghai. August 21, 2001.

²³ *Gter ‘byung chen mo* (1979: 116.5-116.5). See also Doctor (2005: 35) and Dargyay (1979: 69–70).

enough material to cover the three classes of *bla rdzogs thugs gsum*, or the practice (*sgrub thabs*) associated with Padmasambhava (*bla [ma]*), the Great Perfection system (*rdzogs [chen]*), and the meditation on the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (*thugs [rje chen po]*).

According to the Rnying ma master Rdo grub chen ‘Jigs med bstan pa’i nyi ma (1865-1926), spiritual leaders can examine and validate Treasure revealers in two basic ways. In his *Gter gyi rnam bshad* he writes that one such way is to receive a visionary confirmation from the three roots (*rtsa gsum*), i.e., *gu ru, yi dam*, and *mkha’ ‘gro ma*.²⁴ The other method, more practical, is to analyse the Treasure revealer’s Treasures scriptures. In addition to these two instructions, he also warns observing of a Treasure revealer’s behaviour is not enough to judge a Treasure revealer’s authenticity. Rdo grub chen himself dismisses the first option, the visionary confirmation of the authenticity of the Treasure revealer, as a rare circumstance. The second, however, is still the most common way to examine a Treasure revealer. Here we can immediately notice that Rdo grub chen ‘Jigs med bstan pa’i nyi ma was not concerned with the behaviour of a Treasure revealer and with his having a consort. Rather, he emphasises the content and quality of the revealed material.

In August 2001, when I was studying at Rdza mer chen dgon in Shar mda’, I asked Bde chen ‘od gsal rdo rje to explain to me what the main characteristics of a great Treasure revealer are and how to distinguish a great Treasure revealer from a minor Treasure revealer. He replied by saying:

The Treasure teachings I have received cover *gu ru sādhana (bla sgrub)*, *rdzogs chen*, and mind *sādhana (thugs sgrub)*. Since I am an individual who has [revealed]

²⁴ *Las ‘phro gter brgyud kyī rnam bshad nyung gsal ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, in *The Collected Works (gsung ‘bum) of rDo grub-chen ‘Jigs-med bstan-pa’i ñi-ma*. Reproduced photographically from blockprints and manuscripts from the library of the Ven. Dujom Rinpoche by Dodrub Chen Rinpoche, vol. IV (Nga), pp. 377–447, Gantok, 1974. (Delhi: Dodrup Sangye). See translation in Thondup (1986).

the entire path to enlightenment (*sangs rgyas kyi lam*), I am a great Treasure revealer (*gter chen*).²⁵

Bde chen 'od gsal rdo rje's statement above emphasises the content and type of Treasures as criteria for validating a Treasure revealer rather than focusing on a Treasure revealer's moral behaviour. A number of other scholars from the past within the Rnying ma school also take this position, such as the great thinker 'Ju Mi pham (1846-1912). He also suggests that in the final analysis, only spiritually powerful religious personalities can determine the validity of a Treasure revealer. In his *Gter ston brtag pa chu dwangs nor bu*, 'Ju Mi pham proclaims that only the spiritual intuition of authoritative leaders can validate the claims of Treasure revealers:

If you should ever feel doubt in this regard,
It is best to resolve your hesitation in the presence of a powerful person.²⁶

Therefore, as Doctor suggests in his analysis of Mi pham's text, the interplay of both faith and the intuition of a devoted community plays a decisive role in determining the validity of a Treasure revealer.²⁷

We can appreciate this attitude reflected in the contemporary context. According to the noncelibate Tantric master and Treasure revealer Bkra shis rgyal mtshan, it is only through an accurate examination of a Treasure revealer's collected revelation material that an educated and authoritative religious personality can recognise the reliability of a Treasure revealer's

²⁵ Bde chen 'od gsal rdo rje's personal oral communication. Rdza mer chen dgon pa, Shar mda', Nang chen. August 18, 2001.

²⁶ From 'Ju Mi pham's *Gter ston brtag pa chu dwangs nor bu*. Translated by Andreas Doctor (2005: 71).

²⁷ Doctor (2005: 51).

claims and the validity of his teachings. During an interview I conducted with him, Bkra shis rgyal mtshan proclaimed:

The way to understand the validity of a Treasure revealer is to analyse his Treasure teachings since just looking at a person is not enough to understand if he is a Treasure revealer or not. If we look at his Treasure teachings, then we can understand [if he's an authentic Treasure revealer]. It is important to see if there is the *guru sādhana* and what the quality of it is, and then if his collection includes *yi dam sādhana* and *mkha' gro sādhana*. Additionally, we must see if among all his [Treasure] teachings there is also the triad of the *mnan bsregs 'phangs gsum*.²⁸ Without this material an individual cannot be considered an authentic Treasure revealer. But if someone wants to be sure if a Treasure revealer is authentic he should ask to look at his collected Treasures so he can analyse them.²⁹

One point that Bkra shis rgyal mtshan clearly emphasises is that no matter what sort of people Treasure revealers are and no matter what behaviour they manifest, an evaluation of the validity of their revelations based exclusively on their apparent attitude and behaviour is not sufficient. This idea corroborates the opinion expressed also in Rdo grub chen 'Jigs med bstan pa'i nyi ma's *Gter gyi nam bshad*, in which he comments on false Treasure revealers:

One cannot judge Tertons as inauthentic because of their imperfect and mercurial character, even to the slightest extent [...]. Among the false Tertons there are many who are harmonious with people, who seem to have disciplined conduct, and are fortunate and charismatic. At the same time, among the authentic Tertons there

²⁸ *Sri mnan pa gdon bgegs bsregs pa gtor zor 'phangs pa ste gsum*, or the *sri*/demon suppression, burning obstructing spirits, throwing *gtor ma*.

²⁹ Bkra shis rgyal mtshan's personal oral communication. Skye rgu mdo (Yushu, Qinghai), July 2006.

are many who are loose in speech and behaviour and who get involved in many activities that people will condemn without the least hesitation.³⁰

Regarding the features of a Treasure revealer, Bkra shis rgyal mtshan adds that next to the *thugs* and *rdzogs*, revelations of cycles associated with the *bla ma* (i.e., Padmasambhava) together with the oral transmission received from the *dākinī* are fundamental. Only then, with the intercession of his awareness (*rig pa*), the Treasure revealer can understand the teaching and with this inspiration can proceed to the teaching's interpretation and composition. The Treasure revealer's successes and failures, according to Bkra shis rgyal mtshan, are part of a larger and superior scheme pertaining to the Buddhafield (*zhing khams*):

If we consider a Treasure revealer, within his Treasure teachings he should have recognized first of all the Teacher [Padmasambhava]'s instructions, then the *dākinī*'s oral transmission, and then his own power of awareness. Subsequently, all the earth Treasures from the ground, spiritual Treasures (*thugs gter*), mind Treasures (*dgongs gter*), and pure visions (*dag snang*) will necessarily appear to a Treasure revealer. As a consequence, within the scriptures that he receives, there will be mind Treasure scriptures and pure visions coming from every Buddhafield. He will obtain complete liberation according to the designs planned by the deities in the Buddha-fields, [which will also designate] the way he lives and acts, his connections with the Buddha-fields, and his religious crafts. He will gain liberation through his deeds and will retrieve earth Treasures from all the sacred places he visits whenever the proper time has arrived.³¹

Returning to 'Ju Mi pham's analysis, in his work on the examination of Treasure revealers, he also warns that a Treasure revealer needs to show signs of realisation such as authentic pure visions and experience (*tshad ldan gyi dag*

³⁰ Thondup (1996: 157).

³¹ Bkra shis rgyal mtshan's personal oral communication. Skye rgu mdo, Yushu TAP, Qinghai, December 2005.

snang dang nyams myong gi drod rtags), a point on which Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs seems to agree as we have seen above. Without these signs ‘Ju Mi pham asks, how is one to believe that he and his teachings can liberate others? He writes:

However, in new Treasure teachings the source is Padmasambhava and the lineage therefore only consists of the Treasure revealer, so how could he mature and liberate others unless he himself has the fresh signs of authentic pure visions and experience? Surely he needs such signs.³²

An interesting view on the issues related to authentic Treasure revealers emerges from a reading of Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs’s comments on how to examine (*brtag pa*) Treasure revealers. Like other Treasure revealers’ opinions, the author emphasises the examination of Treasure scriptures rather than Treasure objects such as statues, ritual daggers, and so forth, as if to suggest that scriptures constitute the essence of Treasure revelation. First of all, Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs claims that to be considered a Treasure revealer, one must be able to understand (*shes nus pa*) the yellow scrolls (*shog gser*) and the Treasure teachings (*gter chos*) he reveals.³³ Additionally, the authentic Treasure revealer must prove some personal past connection with Padmasambhava. In Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs’s *Zhal gdams* we read:

Regarding examining if one is or is not a Treasure revealer, it is said that if the realiser is a Treasure revealer he should be able to understand the yellow scrolls and the Treasure teachings. Furthermore, it would be good to analyse some personal accounts of [the Treasure revealer’s] direct encounters with O rgyan Rin

³² Mi pham (225: 1–2). Doctor’s translation (2006: 55).

³³ One of the characteristics of the yellow scrolls (*shog ser*) beyond their yellowish colour is the script they contain. These are said to be written in nine various symbolic scripts according Rdo grub chen ‘Jigs med bstan pa’i nyi ma. See Thondup (1986: 84–85; and 126–36). These include the *mkha’ ‘gro ma’i brda yig*, or the ‘*dākinī* code’.

po che. However, as most people are unable to do this [examination], this [reflects] what many scholars and realised beings such as omniscient teachers and enlightened masters say. If one is really a Treasure revealer, he has the appropriate understanding of, experience in, and realisation of the awareness of the Great Perfection. Having a genuine faith in the Victorious Lord Padma ‘byung gnas, one [the Treasure revealer] would immediately obtain the essential perception of a master. With great perseverance towards realisation s/he continuously exerts her/himself in the approach and accomplishment practice.³⁴

Interestingly, after having defined the criteria for determining who can be an authentic Treasure revealer in the *Zhal gdams*, Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs’s observations then switch over to moral behaviour. A major criticism that he specifically directs against noncelibate Tantric specialists and Treasure revealers concerns their sexual misconduct (*spyod ngan*). Mkhan po ‘jigs med phun tshogs criticises the custom many of them practise of having multiple consorts.³⁵ Additionally, he is also very critical of their laxity and immoral behaviour for indulging in drinking and sensory pleasures under the pretext of acting in accordance with their Tantric training. Again, in his *Zhal gdams* Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs elaborates on noncelibate Tantric professionals and Treasure revealers proclaiming:

Without any knowledge of winds, channels, and seminal nuclei but motivated by desire deceived as necessity, they (the *sngags pas* and *gter stons*) engage with many women. Despite being absolutely devoid of any of the fundamentals of the generation and perfection phases they engage [in the practice of liberating/killing enemies by the wrathful application] of the karma of destruction motivated by hatred. Also, motivated by desire, they make unrestrained use of servants.³⁶

³⁴ *Zhal gdams* (2003: 43).

³⁵ For the role of consorts in Tantric Buddhism see Jacoby (2007) and Young (2004).

³⁶ *Zhal gdams* (2003: 38).

Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs’s firm convictions about maintaining the purity of vows even prevented him from pursuing his prophesied career as a great Treasure revealer. According to his biography, he received a prophetic catalogue (*lung byang*) indicating that a ‘consort’ would offer herself to him to fulfil their common past aspirations. Had he accepted her, he would have had access to the gates of five profound Treasures that would pacify the decay due to the times of turmoil and “make the sun of happiness shine over the land of snows.”³⁷ Apparently things did not go exactly as the prophecy announced; Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs did once meet a woman who offered herself as a spiritual consort, but he didn’t comply with her intentions. When he was at Gnubs lung trying to open a large Treasure door, the auspicious signs did not manifest. While staying at the cave apparently something fantastic happened:

A young woman showing all kinds of signs of realisation appeared in front of him and said “We have the mind mandate transmission from previous aspirations. I am your karmic consort.”

But the Master thought to himself “Generally, I don’t feel like being judgmental. However, the knowledge-holders who inquire beyond worldly existence in accordance with the instructions of the profound path say: ‘Of all the illusions, the female illusion is the most extraordinary.’ This is highly admirable. Nowadays, the mentality of ordinary people is disgraceful. Moved by personal motivations, they engage in perverse acts of pleasure in the guise of [acting with] disciplined behaviour. At this point, I won’t do it [i.e., engage with a consort]. Instead, I will follow the exemplary model of the teachings.”³⁸

Mkhan po ‘Jigs med phun tshogs favoured monasticism and the precepts of the *vinaya* code and refused the use of consorts, knowing that renouncing the practice with a consort would affect his revelations. According to him, only those who truly persevere towards the path of realisation by exerting

³⁷ Bsod dar rgyas (1990: 37). Sodarje (2001: 52).

³⁸ Bsod dar rgyas (1990: 36). Versluys (2001: 50–51). This translation is mine.

themselves in the accomplishment practice (*bsnyen sgrub*) can be real Treasure revealers.³⁹

But why are women now involved in such a debate? How could the number of consorts a Treasure revealer engages with influence a Treasure revealer's authority? In other words, do morality issues fit as criteria to validate the authenticity of a Treasure revealer? My sense is that Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs attempts to add a moral tone to the discourse. However, his comments seem to underestimate a crucial point: most Treasure revealers are noncelibate and many have multiple female consorts. Other outstanding Tibetan scholars have often directly or indirectly pointed out the key role of consorts for Treasure revealers. In the passage above, does Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs criticise the practice of having promiscuous behaviour? Or rather is he critical of the performance of consort practice? I suggest that Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs questions the entire tradition of consort practice altogether. He thus not only contests the tradition of consort practice, he also opposes the concept that Tantric practitioners derive power from it.

Consort practices are a type of skilful means that have a central role in the Treasure revelation system. As Rdo grub chen 'Jigs med bstan pa'i nyi ma clarifies, there are two reasons for a Treasure revealer to have a consort for his practice. The first is that the union of the Treasure revealer with a consort represents and intensifies the ultimate state of bliss (*bde*) and emptiness (*stong*), a state that optimises the reception of mind Treasures. In this case, the support of a consort in the revelation process enhances the revealer's power to decode or decipher the symbolic scripts in which the Treasure often first appears.⁴⁰ The second purpose is the fulfilment of a consort's karmic connection with the Treasure revealer and the commitment to complete the mission to reveal the Treasure for the benefit of the sentient beings.⁴¹

³⁹ For a study of the concept of 'sex' in Buddhism monasticism see Gyatso (2005).

⁴⁰ Thondup (1986: 130).

⁴¹ Thondup (1986: 82–83).

Recently, in her study of the great female Treasure revealer Se ra mkha' 'gro (1892-1940), Sarah Jacoby has pointed out how consorts play an important role in revelation. In her words:

Treasure revelation is founded upon a Tantric understanding of the body in which mental realisations are generated from manipulating the channels, winds, and seminal nuclei of the subtle body (*rtsa, rlung, thig le*). Unique to the Treasure tradition is the link between the generation of textual and material Treasures and the biologically generative act of sexuality. Specifically, the role of the female consort is linked to Yeshé Tsogyal's mnemonic and encoding powers; female consorts aid Treasure revealers in their process of decoding the Treasure's symbolic scripts.⁴²

Such a view is also confirmed by current Treasure revealers. According to Bkra shis rgyal mtshan, a consort (*thabs grogs*) is an important companion for a Treasure revealer's practice, although it is not the *condicio sine qua non* of Treasure revelation. A Treasure revealer can still reveal Treasures, especially material objects such as earth Treasures (*sa gter*) without a consort, and a few can even become great Treasure revealers, as in the case of Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs and Grub dbang lung rtogs rgyal mtshan (a.k.a. Mkhan po A chos). However, as Bkra shis rgyal mtshan's comments clearly illustrate in the following passage, in the process of Tantric practice the cooperation of a consort can increase the Treasure revealer's chances to reveal more Treasures, especially mind Treasures:

If a high being who is a *mkha' 'gro ma* unites with a great Treasure revealer of superior birth they will get great achievements and then they will be able to retrieve many Treasures. This is known as 'auspicious connections of method and wisdom' (*thabs shes kyi rten 'brel*) and it is also called the 'true nature of the auspicious connections' (*rten 'brel gyi chos nyid*). Then, for instance, if there is a

⁴² Jacoby (2007: 102; and 233–39).

teacher who is a Treasure revealer without a consort, he will be like a single person having only the power (*shugs*) of one person being without a partner, since the double power coming from a couple will not be possible.⁴³

It is my sense that the custom among many noncelibate Tantric specialists and Treasure revealers of having more than one consort and the ambiguity of such a situation disturbs religious figures committed to a monastic lifestyle who encourage the support of celibate monastic institutions such as Mkhān po 'Jigs med phun tshogs. Nevertheless, Bkra shis rgyal mtshan justifies having more than one consort through linking this behaviour to prophecy. He remarks:

The fact that some Treasure revealers have more than a single consort depends on both [personal] necessity and required conditions. Some [Treasure revealers] have more than one prophesied *mkha' 'gro ma*; others have just one. It's up to them to comply with the prophecies or not and to decide to have only one consort or many. For instance, if there are many Treasures some will go to that *mkha' 'gro ma*, some to that *mkha' 'gro ma* and some others to that other *mkha' 'gro ma*; this is due to prophecies, and to the karmic consequences. Without all this, a single *mkha' 'gro ma* could not get all the karmic connections for herself. However, if a person unites with many consorts, this will also create attachment and hatred.⁴⁴

He also observes:

There are many prophesied consorts (*lung zin mkha' 'gro*), but if one is not an authentic *mkha' 'gro ma* then we talk about karmic tendencies. It will be only a question of desiring a woman who gives pleasure. But since it is not a necessity [for the practice], she won't be beneficial. It will not be of any benefit to the

⁴³ Bkra shis rgyal mtshan's personal oral communication. Interview. Skye rgu mdo, Yushu TAP, Qinghai, December 2005.

⁴⁴ Bkra shis rgyal mtshan's personal oral communication. Interview. Skye rgu mdo, Yushu TAP, Qinghai, December 2005.

retrieval of Treasures, but only to personal pleasure. Without a consort being prophesied it will be harmful and detrimental not only to one's own experience and realisation, but also to all the Treasures. For instance, there are some people who say they are Treasure revealers and that their prophesied consorts have been announced in the statements and prophecies of their teachers but they never actually engaged with them [the consorts]. However, since they do not engage with their consorts, they don't have many Treasure teachings. Thus, it will be said that they are not good Treasure revealers and that their consorts are not good *mkha' 'gro ma*.⁴⁵

Bkra shis rgyal mtshan goes a step further in his discussion of consort practice when he frames the practice in the wider context of skilful means (*thabs lam*):

What is called method and wisdom [practice] is considered generally an auspicious conjunction of events (*rten 'bre*). Relying on such an auspicious conjunction of events will result in the production of many more virtues. If [a Treasure revealer] needs to retrieve a material Treasure from the ground, for instance, or if there is a Treasure teaching to be received, he should engage in the performance of method activity (*thabs bya*) for a period of time, meaning performing the method and wisdom practice with a *mkha' 'gro ma*. This would be the result of the auspicious conjunction of events. We call these main practice the path of skilful means (*thabs lam*), and they consist of what in Tibetan is also called 'having intercourse'. Therefore, in this case, *thabs lam*, as reported in many Tibetan writings, consists of a series of activities including mental thoughts, upward and downward movements of the seminal nuclei (*thig le*), and the four levels of joy such as the *dga' ba*, *mchog dga'*, *dga' bral*, *lhan skyes dga'*, which are experienced during a union between a man and a woman and therefore also between a *mkha' 'gro ma* and a Treasure revealer.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Bkra shis rgyal mtshan's personal oral communication. Interview. Skye rgu mdo, Yushu TAP, Qinghai, July 2006.

⁴⁶ Bkra shis rgyal mtshan's personal oral communication. Interview. Skye rgu mdo, Yushu TAP, Qinghai, December 2005.

In this passage, Bkra shis rgyal mtshan emphasises the soteriological aspect of *thabs lam* practice, according to which the union of ‘method and wisdom’ (*thabs dang shes rab*) has the potential to liberate the mind and create favourable circumstances. In short, noncelibate Tantric figures perceive sexual union in yogic practice as an implement to intensify a state of psychological receptivity that is pivotal to their spiritual advancement and revelation of Treasures. In Tibet, the exercise of consort practice is supported by a corpus of ritual systems, namely Yogatantra and Mahāyoga, stemming back from as early as the eighth century.⁴⁷

Therefore, although he admits that the use of consorts is optional, Bkra shis rgyal mtshan believes that a consort can assist along the path to enlightenment. This means that a Treasure revealer’s visionary activity can be optimised through the combination of the practice of channels, winds, and seminal nuclei and consort practice, where union with a consort creates an additional support (*lag rten*). On this regard Bkra shis rgyal mtshan observes that:

For those who do not know how to practice the channels, winds, and seminal nuclei, if they are Treasure revealers, they can reveal Treasure teachings anyway, but it won’t be the same. All the paths of practice reach Buddhahood. Just like reaching the Pure Land, the purpose is the same. Meditations through the generation phase (*bskyed rim*), the perfection phase (*rdzogs rim*), and channels, winds, and seminal nuclei (*rtsa rlung thig le*) all have the same purpose, removing obscuration (*sgrib pa dag*). However, if there are auspicious conjunctions of events (*rten ‘bre*) conducive to practising with a consort, then this is particularly good. But one is also allowed to practise by himself [without a consort]. A *gter ston* with a consort can practise with her since the consort is his support (*lag rten*) and she is called female support (*mi mo lag rten*). This is just like Mi la ras pa whose female

⁴⁷ Dalton (2004: 4).

support was [the deity] Tshe ring ma. Relying on her as his support he practised his channels, winds, and seminal nuclei and attained Buddhahood.⁴⁸

Concluding Remarks

Returning now to the passages translated in the beginning of this essay, it seems with regard to the Treasure tradition some of the issues of authenticity and falsehood are a matter of scholars' perceptions. On the one hand, Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs emphasises morality by criticising those tantric practitioners and Treasure revealers who diverge from what he considers the ideal path. On the other hand, the accused, in our case O rgyan Sku gsum gling pa, defends himself (or is defended by his biographer for him) by justifying his behaviour by the cultural and ideological constructs allowed in his society. Extravagant Treasure revealers are recurrent in the Tibetan religious world and these are criticised by some and praised by others.

Descriptions such as the ones above are interesting in that not only do they frame the debate in the ideological sphere, but they also attempt to provide a structure to understand how Tibetan Buddhists perceive the distinction between authentic and false Treasure revealers. An interesting note is that all the writings examined in this essay are authored by Rnying ma adherents and therefore all try to give a positive lustre to the tradition they represent. Works such as Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs's *Zhal gdams* and O rgyan Sku gsum gling pa's reactive biography are important because the issues of authentic Treasure revealers and to a larger extent the place and role of noncelibate Buddhist leaders are intimately linked to the role of religion in present-day Tibet.

If we consider the data and information explored in this paper, we find a few conclusions to our main question of how to authenticate Treasure revealers and their discoveries. Apparently, one criterion is the behaviour and the conduct of Treasure revealers and more generally of the entire noncelibate

⁴⁸ Bkra shis rgyal mtshan's personal oral communication. Interview. Skye rgu mdo, Yushu TAP, Qinghai, July 2006.

Tantric community. Another criterion is the quality and the consistency of their revelations. Although the latter is more likely to constitute a standard procedure for determining the authenticity of Treasure revealers' literary production, 'Jigs med phun tshogs adds a moral tone to the debate over authenticity as if to defend the tradition from outside critics who misunderstand Treasure revealers' noncelibate lifestyles to be expressions of moral laxity.

Although academic scholarship has recently shed some light on this topic, still much research needs to be done to formulate a clearer theory on the criteria to validate authentic Treasure revealers. In this paper, I have represented a few comments by some current Treasure revealers in Tibet. However, these comments are largely anecdotal and often inconsistent when it comes to explaining the internal logic. A reading of Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs's advice in the *Zhal gdams* shows that the non-conventional or extravagant (*smyon pa*) and often questionable behaviour of noncelibate Tantric practitioners still seems, as in the past, to foster criticism by religious elites, namely full-ordained monastics. Other noncelibate religious specialists, however, convey the idea that Treasure revealers cannot be judged or validated by analysing their behaviour and that only an analysis of their collection of Treasures can ultimately provide legitimacy to their claims.

I would conclude that, in terms of taxonomical formulations, Treasure revealers' authenticity springs mainly from three sources. First of all, a Treasure revealer's claimed and/or recognised link with his past as one of the principle disciples of Padmasambhava; second, his realisation as a true Tantric practitioner; and third, the quality and comprehensive nature of his revealed Treasures. The latter, as we have seen above, entails an accurate investigation of the Treasure revealer's *gter chos*, which should ideally be a broad collection of the three major *bla rdzogs thugs* cycles of practice. The one who investigates a Treasure revealer's authenticity must be an exceptional Buddhist master. This, however, seems to be appropriate as *a posteriori* type of investigation, whereas the *a priori* investigation of a Treasure revealer is instead given to the force of prophecy and vision. These seem to manifest predominantly before the

would-be Treasure revealer has begun his career and produced entire cycles of practice according to his mandate.

Among today's Tibetans religious personalities, the debate seems to be open regarding the proper behaviour and conduct a Treasure revealer should display in order to be credible and to provide a good image and model to the Buddhist community. But are Treasure revealers supposed to be models for the communities they live in? In general, I would say that from the material I have read and the people I have talked to this is not exactly the case. In this regard, it is important to observe that most, if not all, Treasure revealers who lead religious communities, not only have lay people and devotees among their followers, but also male and female monastics. However, leaders such as the late Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs argue that they must be, given that he emphasises moral conduct in addition to the traditional criteria for determining the validity of a Treasure revealer. Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs's remarks clearly indicate that in the changed circumstances of present-day Tibet, in which Buddhism is open to not only sectarian criticism, but also state censure, the Treasure tradition can hardly afford to be perceived as morally corrupt.

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