

Sources of Tibetan Tradition

Edited by

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[Klong chen rab 'byams pa, *Chang gi yon tan la bsngags pa bdud rtsi'i zil mngar ma*, in *Collected Miscellaneous Writings (gsun thor bu) of Rgyal-ba Kloñ-chen Rab-'byams-pa* (Paro, Bhutan: Lama Ngodrub and Sherap Drimey, 1982), vol. 2, 328.3–331.6. Trans. KRS.]

A WEAVING SONG

Tibetan Buddhist literature is very often composed for well-educated audiences, with the expectation that readers will understand the technical philosophical vocabulary, ornate poetry, and references to Indian mythology that define so much classical Tibetan writing. If allusions to the great Indian epic hero Rāma worked to prove one's literary prowess, they also could severely limit one's audience. Literary traditions such as the songs of Milarepa went against this trend, casting the sometimes obtuse doctrinal points of Buddhist philosophy in engaging lyric poetry and using imagery from popular life to illustrate the principles of Buddhist ethics. In the popular story of Nangsa Öbum, Princess of Rinang, narratives of Tibetan life and songs with images of Tibetan material culture are employed to teach Buddhist principles of effort, compassion, selflessness, and the transformation of consciousness to a more enlightened state of mind.

As a young noblewoman in a minor principality, Nangsa Öbum is destined to be married to a proper suitor, despite the fact that her sole goal in life is to be able to practice meditation in solitary retreat, away from the intrigues of her family estate. She is married to a callous but wealthy nobleman, Drakpa Samdrup, Prince of Rinang. She marries, moves to Rinang, bears a son, and endures seven years of physical and psychological brutality from her husband and her evil aunt, Ani Nyemo. She then meets several Buddhist teachers, but before she can fulfill her desire to leave Rinang and join her teacher in retreat, her father-in-law beats her, takes her son, and imprisons her as punishment for even thinking of practicing the Dharma. Beaten and dejected, she dies in prison. Her quest really only begins there, however, for upon death she journeys through purgatory, meeting its denizens and learning of the evil deeds they committed to land themselves in such desperate circumstances. She miraculously revives, in the manner of the *délok* (chapter 14), and begins to preach to all who will listen on the importance of karma—ethical cause and effect—for staying out of purgatory and achieving a positive rebirth in the next life. In her position of authority as a revenant—one who has returned from the dead—and a teacher, she is allowed to return to her parents' home with her son. She embarks on a career as a Buddhist teacher, and like Milarepa, makes her trademark teaching the lyric poem. In the weaving song she sings to her mother after they argue over the propriety of a princess performing such “menial” labor as working with fiber and loom, she urges her audience to see the wisdom of enlightenment in the material things of mundane life. KRS

Homage to the master, the personal deities, and the muses.
May you look with compassion upon us women without religion.

Listen here, you girls my age.
Listen with your ears to Nangsa the revenant.

This girl's weaving tools will serve as examples,
As I sing a song to turn your thoughts to Dharma.

If this four-footed structure dragged on the ground
Were a thatched hut for one—what a joy it would be.

If this four-corned seat spread out below,
Were a small meditation pillow—what a joy it would be.

If I, the revenant Nangsa Öbum,
Were a contemplative—what a joy it would be.

If you, happy servant women gathered here,
Were bringing provisions for a retreat—what a joy it would be.

If these poles affixed to the left and right of the loom's top
Held victory banners for the Teachings—what a joy it would be.

If these battens holding up the loom's top
Were the master's practice instructions—how happy I would be.

If this bag full of discarded ends
Were saṃsāra discarded—what a joy it would be.

If these matching joints now joined
Were bliss and emptiness united—how happy I would be.

If the fiber placed between them
Were the reality of the ground of awareness—what a joy it would be.

If the rope fibers binding left and right
Were the conduct of the ten virtues—how happy I would be.

If this strengthening purple fiber
Were a strengthening spiritual seal—what a joy it would be.

If the supple and long fiber
Were a white path to freedom—what a joy it would be.

If these good heddles that pull up
Could pull us up to heaven—what a joy it would be.

If the good pedals that push down
 Could push down hell—how happy I would be.

If the rod separating the fibers
 Could distinguish cause from effect—what a joy it would be.

If the tension rungs that hold or release the fiber
 Were an enlightened attitude giving happiness and taking suffering—how
 happy I would be.

If the detangler freeing and removing the fiber
 Could remove the two obscurations of ignorance and neurosis—what a joy it
 would be.

If the take-up reel that rolls the finished cloth
 Were the two accumulations of wisdom and merit complete—how happy I
 would be.

If the edge adjuster that fixes the width of the cloth
 Were the single taste of the eight worldly reactions—what a joy it would be.

If the loom sound clanging, *tak tak, clang clang!*
 Were stories of Dharma talk—how happy I would be.

If working the loom fiber back and forth
 Were exchanging self for others—what a joy it would be.

If 84,000 strands of fiber
 Were the good Dharma of the sūtras and tantras—how happy I would be.

If this white cloth, supple and long,
 Were this girl's good motivation—what a joy it would be.

[*Rigs bzang gi mkha' 'gro ma snang sa 'od 'bum gyi rnam thar,*
 in *Bod kyi lha mo'i zlos gar kyi 'khrab gzhung phyogs bsgrigs kun phan*
bdud rtsi'i char 'bebs (Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 1989),
 108–109. Trans. KRS. See also Tsultrim Allione, *Women of Wisdom* (London
 and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 110–112.]

ADVICE TO PHYSICIANS

While the Tibetan medical tradition looked to the massive collection of theoretical and therapeutic knowledge known as the *Four Medical Tantras* (chapter 9) as its classical foundation, Tibetan physicians and medical scholars wrote innumerable small