

Political Rivalry and Doctrinal Debates: A Modern Tibetan Response to the Controversy of Buddhist Revelation

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In the history of Buddhism political conflict has often been tied to doctrinal issues and discussions concerning the authenticity of scriptural sources. One such example can be found in Tibet during the so-called “renaissance period” from the 10th to the 14th century. During this time various schools would compete for the favors of the political establishment, often doing so by claiming superiority on doctrinal issues. This paper traces the history of one of the key discussions in this period, namely the controversies surrounding the treasure tradition (*gter lugs*) of the Ancient School (*rnying ma*), and outlines the main areas of content while also considering a modern response to this conflict offered by one of the greatest masters of 20th century Tibetan Buddhism, Mipham Namgyal (1846-1912).

The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism is home to a transmission of Buddhist teaching known as the “Treasure tradition” (*gter lugs*), a unique religious system that only recently has

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become the focus of attention in the West.² This tradition propagates the reverence of religious material known as “Treasure” (*gter ma*), blessed words and objects said to originate in the enlightened intent of buddhas and bodhisattvas. According to the Nyingma School, the Treasures are most often comprised of spiritual instructions concealed by enlightened beings for the purpose of discovery at a later predestined time when their message will invigorate the Buddhist teaching and deepen spiritual understanding. Central to this process is the figure of the Treasure revealer (*gter ston*)—the person who acts as a medium for the re-emergence of this inspired material into the human world. Accordingly, beginning in the eleventh century and continuing into the present, the Nyingma School identifies a large number of Treasure revealers and grants authoritative status to their discoveries.

It did not take long from the first major Treasure revelations in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries before skeptics from rivaling Buddhist schools began questioning their authenticity.³ The appearance of the Treasures coincided with the second wave of Indian Buddhist import to Tibet from the tenth to fourteenth centuries. At this time, as the texts and practices of the New Schools (*gsar ma*) and the older Nyingma tradition became increasingly measured against one another, tensions often ran high as the life-giving favors of the political and financial establishment were perceived to be intimately linked to publicly demonstrating the supremacy of one’s own religious tradition at the expense of others. The New Schools primarily sought to establish themselves by emphasizing the Indian origin of their texts—an origin the Nyingma School had difficulty proving, in part due to the long time span since its textual import from India in the eighth and ninth centuries. As a verifiable Indian origin became the central measure for authenticating Buddhist scripture in Tibet, the texts and practices of the Nyingma School were quickly disclaimed as Tibetan forgeries and interpolations. Even so, the approach to validation propagated by the New Schools was never rigorously applied internally and would occasionally be suspended with if seen to conflict with the inherited textual corpus

² For an overview of the Treasure system see Doctor 2005.

³ Although traditionally Sangye Lama (11th cent.) is said to have been the first Treasure revealer it is uncertain whether this attribution is factual or represents a later attempt to trace the tradition to more ancient roots.



of the New Schools themselves. Nevertheless, as this new-found standard of evaluation became increasingly normative in the Tibetan discourse on authenticity, the stage was quickly set for a polemical confrontation over the validity of the Treasures.

Traditional Polemics

The lack of mention of the Treasures in outside sources until the thirteenth century tells us that in terms of adherents and political influence the Treasure tradition must have been a relatively minor movement at least until the time of Nyangral Nyima Özer (1124-1192) in the second half of the twelfth century. During the first half of the thirteenth century, however, with the appearance of polemical works denouncing Treasure revelation we may assume that the tradition had gained momentum through the revelations of Nyangral Nyima Özer and Guru Chöwang (1212-1270)—the two most prominent figures among the early Treasure revealers. The earliest known critique of Treasure revelation is by the scholar and polemicist Chak Lotsawa Chöje Pal (1197-1265), who advanced his criticism of the Treasures as part of a general complaint against practices and scriptures circulating in Tibet that he perceived to be spurious in nature.⁴ Having argued at length against the general teachings of the Nyingma School he concludes this section of the text with a critique of the Treasures and Guru Chöwang, concerning whom he remarks:

At the time when Samye Monastery was being constructed Guru Padmasambhava arrived from India and vanquished false teachings. Then, having made a few auspicious connections by accepting students, he returned to India. Later, Pekar, a Gyalpo spirit, entered the body of a Nepalese known as Kakarudzin. He put on a meditation hat, placed feathers in it and put on a brocade cloak. He then went to Samye where he declared himself to be Padmasambhava and taught innumerable perverted teachings and thereafter these numerous wrong teachings spread. The many false teachings were then manipulated by the one known as Guru Chöwang who became possessed when a Radza spirit entered him after telling him that they were Treasure texts.

⁴ Chak Lotsawa 1979: 2-18.2. See also Martin 2001: 111-116.



Subsequently, nāgas, demons, and Gyalgong spirits gathered around his false teachings which resulted in outbreaks of leprosy and psychotic fits. These were then taken as his signs of accomplishment. Such texts that appear from Treasures are not authentic.⁵

There were other thinkers of this period, such as Jigten Gönpo (1143-1217),⁶ Sakya Pandita (1182-1251), and possibly even Butön (1290-1364),⁷ who, like Chak Lotsawa, saw it fit to issue warnings against the Treasures. In a text attributed to the famed scholar Butön Rinchen Drub the author seems to agree with Chak Lotsawa's assessment of Guru Chöwang and comments: "Such false teachings, pretending to be the words of [Padmasambhava], were presented as Treasure revelations by Chöwang who was under the influence of demons. Thereby numerous incorrect teachings were put into writing leading many beings down the wrong path."⁸

The main objection of the early polemics seems to have been a concern that the Treasures were false Tibetan compositions devoid of spiritual continuity with Buddhist India. Although the condemnation of the Treasures was often categorical and determined, the early skeptical writings generally offer little historical, philosophical, or philological deduction to support the critique. This did not, however, prevent these writings from becoming standard models for subsequent condemnations of the Treasures by the New Schools. Thus, two centuries following the critiques of Sapan and the other early polemicists, the Treasure apologist Ratna Lingpa (1403-1478) sums up the skeptical arguments in the following manner:

There are some ghostly and sectarian people...who criticize the Treasures. They say that the Treasures are false and never were concealed. Even if the Treasures should happen to be genuine, they will say that they are earth teachings, stone teachings, and wooden teachings as they were concealed in earth, rocks, water, and so forth. Yet other people claim that

⁵ Chak Lotsawa 1979: 13.2-14.2.

⁶ On the critique of the Treasures by Jigten Gönpo, see Martin 2001: 157.

⁷ A polemical work attributed to Butön is contained in Chak Lotsawa 1979: 25.3-36.3. Kapstein has argued against this attribution (2000: 253, no. 35).

⁸ Chak Lotsawa 1979: 26.4-5.



if the Treasures had been concealed at the time of Urgyen Padma during the early spread of the teaching they would have turned to dust by now. Therefore, since they are still intact, it is claimed that we deceptively hide and discover them ourselves. Still others say that the Treasures are controversial, have little success, and only benefit others slightly while yet other people say that the oral transmission of the Treasures are broken as they do not have an oral lineage. They call them “teachings that burst forth” because it is claimed they have no spoken transmission or empowerment.⁹

Being a Treasure revealer himself, one should of course not uncritically accept Ratna Lingpa’s characterization of the skeptical positions as he would have no interest in making this critique appear any more sensible than necessary. Nevertheless, his description of the criticism does indicate that, until the fifteenth century, the critique of the Treasures had developed only slightly from its early formulations quoted above. Furthermore, this hermeneutical *status quo* appears to have continued into the following centuries as well, as the polemical literature increasingly ossified around previous positions. Thus, the arguments set forth by the Gelugpa scholar Sumpa Khenpo (1704-1788) in the eighteenth century remain by and large identical to the critique advanced during the early days. Although the Treasure revealers are no longer portrayed as possessed by demons, Sumpa Khenpo still suggests that the Treasures are best avoided as they are composed by charlatans wishing to deceive the public. Characteristic of the polemical literature, both skeptical and apologetic, Sumpa Khenpo states his position in no uncertain terms but offers no actual arguments in support of his view.¹⁰

Despite the assumptive nature of the skeptical critiques, the Nyingma School clearly felt a need to defend its revelations and, rather than stoically ignoring the criticism, it soon composed a series of vigorous and spirited rebuttals of the charges brought forth against the Treasures. Among the various apologetical writings of the Nyingma School, the most detailed works related to Treasure revelation are the two Treasure chronicles by Guru Chöwang

⁹ Ratna Lingpa 1977: 219.4-220.4.

¹⁰ Kapstein 2000: 131-132.



and Ratna Lingpa.¹¹ At first glance, the two chronicles resemble each other as both authors are concerned with demonstrating commonalities between the Treasures and the generally accepted Indian Mahāyāna canons, though Ratna Lingpa's Treasure chronicle is both longer and more detailed. The primary theme throughout this treatise is an attempt to situate the revelatory activity of the Treasures firmly within mainstream Mahāyāna Buddhism. Like Chōwang, Ratna Lingpa claims that Treasures are not only religious texts and objects revealed in Tibet but include anything meaningful that previously has been concealed, in actuality as well as figuratively, from the perception of sentient beings. This may include, but is not restricted to, the Buddha's teaching. Ratna Lingpa defines a Treasure in the following words: "It is a Treasure because it is concealed. It is a Treasure because it is hidden. It is a Treasure because it is inexhaustible. It is a Treasure because it fulfills needs and wishes."¹²

There is, however, little reason to believe that Ratna Lingpa's arguments actually ever succeeded in persuading any number of skeptics of the spiritual validity of the Treasures. On the contrary, it seems that the attempts by Treasure apologetics to argue that Treasure revelation is an integral part of mainstream Buddhism-or rather, that mainstream Buddhism *is* Treasure revelation-fell on deaf ears as critics continued to advance their objections in much the same manner of the early centuries.¹³ Thus, the exchange of views came to a hermeneutical halt, and as late as the nineteenth century, we find Jamgön Kongtrul defending the Treasures with essentially the arguments of Guru Chōwang against criticisms not unlike those advanced by Chak Lotsawa.¹⁴

We have witnessed here some traditional attempts to argue the deceitful nature of the Treasures and followed the subsequent replies to this critique by the followers of the Nyingma School.

¹¹ Guru Chökyi Wangchuk 1979; Ratna Lingpa 1977. Apart from these two compositions we also find several shorter apologetic remarks on Treasure revelation scattered in works concerned with the general defense of the texts and practices of the Nyingma School. See for example Sok Dokpa 1998.

¹² Ratna Lingpa 1977: 39.3. Elsewhere, I have described Ratna Lingpa's Treasure defense in detail (Doctor 2005)

¹³ Interestingly, skeptics never countered the Nyingma School's equation of the general Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna canons with its own Treasure revelations by pointing out the difference between the highly institutionalized form of revelation practiced by the Nyingma School and the much less formalized Indian revelations.

¹⁴ See Doctor 2005: 204-5, n. 98.



We have also noticed how a number of basically unconvincing arguments, advanced by skeptics and apologists alike, remained surprisingly stagnant over the centuries and, on the whole, failed to effect any significant change of opinion on either side of the religious divide. Surely, the perceived need by Tibetan scholars to follow established party lines and adhere to positions already formulated by the founders of their respective traditions must have inhibited the vitality of the Treasure debate considerably. Nevertheless, the inherent difficulty of determining the validity of claims of revelation *per se* no doubt also contributed to this situation. Let us now look closer at this issue and try to gauge its effect on the way that the Treasures have been perceived.

Although Tibetan attempts to bridge the divide between the skeptic and the devotee generally are few and far between, their influence cannot be dismissed offhand. Importantly, the famed master of the Nyingma School, Ju Mipham composed a brief commentary on this issue, seeking broader perspectives outside the traditional dichotomy of right and wrong.

Mipham's View: A New Hermeneutics?

The text in question belongs to the Treasure tradition and discusses the identity, not of the Treasures, but of the visionaries who claim to have uncovered them. Previous scholarship in this area is sparse and little information on the Treasure revealers is available. This text, entitled *Gem that Clears the Waters: An Investigation of Treasure Revealers*, is composed by the renowned nineteenth-century master of the Nyingma School Ju Mipham.¹⁵ It is more concise than many other works by Mipham, yet it is an excellent source of information on Treasure revealers and questions of their validity. Right from the outset, Mipham acknowledges that the Treasure tradition, to which he himself belonged, contains certain fraudulent elements who exploit the good faith of devotees by posing as genuine Treasure revealers.¹⁶ In this way Mipham does position himself within the traditional polemical framework of right

¹⁵ Mipham 1984 (abbr. *Gem*). On Mipham see Pettit 1999; Schuh 1973b. For an introduction to his collected works see my "Introduction to the Tibetan Text" in Ju Mipham 2004. The complete translation, juxtaposed to the original Tibetan, appears as Chapter 3 in Doctor 2005.

¹⁶ Mipham was posthumously recognized as a revealer of mind Treasures (Dudjom 1991: 880). More importantly, he was one of the foremost students of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, who was intimately involved in Treasure revelation throughout his life.

and wrong, and he certainly writes hoping to expose those who unjustly pose as genuine visionary masters. However, in the course of writing, Mipham also touches on a number of issues of intrinsic interest for the study of the Treasure tradition that differentiate his text from the standard presentations of the saint–fraud dichotomy so often found in Tibetan polemical writings on this topic.

Mipham diverts from his usual scholastic writing style and presents a lively critique, full of both humor and sternness, of spiritual fraud in the name of Treasure revelation. His thoughts on this subject are noteworthy for several reasons. Most important, they are a rare acknowledgement that the issue of authenticity is more complex and warrants deeper methodological consideration than the standard polemical evaluations would have us believe. Second, as a critique of the Treasure revealing community from within the tradition itself, it provides important insights into the challenges the Nyingma School faced in curbing what appears to have been a widespread presence of deceit in the name of Treasure revelation. This insider’s challenge to the authenticity of proclaimed revealers indicates the difficulty the Nyingma School experienced in maintaining a clean name and reputation in the public perception. Perhaps Mipham felt that this type of challenge would be difficult to address effectively in an environment of traditional philosophical discourse and that by adopting a more colloquial and direct style of writing he could better address the issue in a straightforward manner that would prove comprehensible to both commoners and scholars alike.

Acknowledging the polemical nature of the text, the editors of Mipham’s collected works placed it adjacent to his famous replies to Gelugpa criticism of his controversial *Bodhisattvacāryāvatāra* commentary.¹⁷ According to the brief colophon, it was composed “suddenly as it came to mind,”¹⁸ and its style and language convey a sense of freshness and directness rarely encountered in classical Tibetan literature. The text contains no opening verses of praise or prayer and immediately tackles the issue at hand in a straightforward manner free from distracting philosophical sophistications. The fact that this is not an “ordinary” scholastic composition makes it all

¹⁷ Kunzang Palden: 67.

¹⁸ Mipham 1984: 487.



the more intriguing and fascinating as a window into the Treasure tradition, as Mipham speaks from his heart and addresses the culprits directly in a way that hits home much more effectively than would the elegant prose style for which he is otherwise so well known.

Mipham's homeland of eastern Tibet was generally inclined towards a charitable view of the Treasure tradition, so Mipham is not obliged to defend the tradition's basic premises. Instead he can concentrate on weeding out negative elements within the Treasure culture. In this process, he commences by characterizing the false revealers and then proceeds to evaluate the damage they inflict. Toward the end of his analysis, he offers devotees suggestions on how to identify such imposters. Mipham's admission that charlatans exist within the ranks of Treasure revealers indicates that even the Nyingma School's east Tibetan heartland must have harbored significant public concern that not all revelations could be trusted. Previous studies have for the most part described criticism of the Treasure tradition as stemming from scholars outside the Nyingma School, but Mipham makes it clear that the issue of authenticity was a concern for the Nyingma School as much as for anyone else. In fact, he urges its followers to take the outsiders' critique to heart and calls it "nectar-like advice."¹⁹

Although Mipham admits to the falsity of certain Treasure revelations, we should not therefore conclude that he generally finds Treasure revelations suspect or spurious. Rather, his goal is to expose the false revealers and expel them from the community so that the inspired lives of genuine Treasure revealing masters can shine unblemished by public mistrust brought on by frauds and imposters. Clearly a level of public criticism of the Treasure revealers existed at the time. The internal controversies over the compilation of the *Store of Precious Treasures*²⁰ would no doubt have contributed to the tattered image of the tradition, but the misgivings Mipham addresses here seem to have been rooted in a more fundamental and widespread suspicion among the general populace. Mipham acknowledges this mistrust, and speaks to the frauds as follows:

¹⁹ Ibid.: 476. 1.

²⁰ See Khakyab Dorje 1981b; Blondeau 1988.



Hey Treasure revealers! Although all inhabitants of the Snowy Land claim to have heartfelt interest and trust in Guru Padmasambhava, they do feel weary seeing the deceit of liars claiming to be Treasure revealers...so stop lessening the fortune of those who have trust in Padmasambhava.²¹

Later, Mipham supports this statement by quoting from Urgyen Lingpa's *Chronicle of Padmasambhava*, which says "except for dead dogs, anything is revealed as Treasure,"²² referring, in Mipham's interpretation, to weariness with random objects being presented by imposters as religious artifacts blessed by saints in a bygone dynastic era. The scholarly establishment of the Nyingma School seems to have viewed so-called "new Treasures" (*gter gsar*) with a certain measure of skepticism while referring to the "older Treasures" (*gter rnying*) as genuinely authentic and worthy of practice. The idea that past things are better, of course, reflects a universal concern in matters of religion that spans all cultures and regions.²³ Nevertheless, given that Treasures in their very being represent an endorsement of spiritual and religious innovation, it is fascinating to find Mipham extolling this principle. He makes it clear on several occasions that he prefers the older Treasures and hails such early figures as Nyangral Nyima Özer, Guru Chöwang, Rigdzin Gödem (1337-1408), Ratna Lingpa, and Karma Lingpa (1326-?) as authentic masters whose Treasures can be followed with confidence. Likely, many masters within the Nyingma School were concerned that emerging revelations would include some works of charlatans. As for Mipham, how does he characterize such frauds? He makes no attempt to conceal his disdain for those who deceptively claim to possess the spiritual qualities required for Treasure revelation. He describes these people as power hungry individuals who will do anything to achieve the fame and economic benefits afforded genuine spiritual masters. In a lively blend of prose and poetry he exposes the many tricks that such individuals employ to gain their desired

²¹ Mipham 1984: 476.

²² Ibid. 484. The original passage is found in Urgyen Lingpa 1996: 576.

²³ A fact noted by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who comments, "That 'the world lieth in evil' is a plaint as old as history... All agree that the world began in a good estate, whether in a Golden Age, a life in Eden, or a yet more happy community with celestial beings. But they represent that this happiness vanished like a dream and that a fall into evil... presently hurried mankind from bad to worse with accelerated descent; so that now (this "now" is as old as history) we live in the final age, with the Last Day and the destruction of the world at hand" (Kant 1960: 15).



goals. According to Mipham, these goals are dominated by the wish for fame and wealth and their coveted byproducts. Lamenting the prevalence of such desires, he exclaims:

When examining closely those who announce Treasure teachings, they wish for fame, look for wealth, and search for women and so place hope in their Treasures with expectations burning like fire. How rare are those free from lies and deceit!²⁴

These of course are not novel themes in the life of a fraud, but their mention in this text is intriguing as it offers a glimpse into the culture and politics surrounding the Treasure tradition and its revelatory output. As Mipham introduces the schemes of the false revealers we hear of practices such as inserting the names of wealthy people into the preceding prophetic inventory (*byang bu*) of the Treasure, lobbying spiritual authorities for recognition, declaring beautiful women as religious emanations especially suited for partnership, and the common Tibetan (and perhaps universal?) practice of denouncing all adversaries as deceitful demons.²⁵ The predictable result is that the community's faith is shaken and decreases. Mipham deplors this state of affairs and speaks directly to the imposters in an attempt to change their crooked ways. In addressing the false revealers he adopts a common Tibetan strategy in communicating with obstacle makers by first issuing a polite request followed by a wrathful threat of the unpleasant consequences of non-compliance. He first appeals to the moral conscience of the false revealers by reminding them of the destabilizing effect they have by causing the faithful to question the entire Treasure tradition, thereby severing the connection to the liberating instructions of Padmasambhava. For those who ignore such requests, Mipham then issues a warning of the dire karmic consequences awaiting such liars when, in future existences, they will find their tongues transformed into plows employed for farming. Thus, Mipham reminds the false revealers that there are severe consequences to all parties when someone falsely assumes the mantle of a spiritual adept.

²⁴ Mipham 1984: 482.

²⁵ Ibid 485.2-3.



Despite Mipham's lively account of the imposters and their unfortunate effect on the Treasure tradition, the issue of definitively determining the authenticity of such figures has not yet been resolved, and one is still left wondering what to do about the Treasure revealers

and their claims. Since Tibetan religious history is amply filled with accounts of respected saints behaving in highly unconventional ways, the roguish actions described above cannot in themselves constitute any final measure for conclusively identifying a fraud. Although the ways of the charlatans appear deplorable by any standard, evaluations based on mere behavioral observation therefore seem insufficient. At the very end of his essay, however, Mipham proposes a measure by which one can, in his view, finally settle the question of authenticity. The text's concluding verse suggests that: "If you should ever feel doubt in this regard, it is best to resolve this hesitance in the presence of a powerful person."²⁶

This simple advice points directly to the fact that although the Treasure community is plagued by a group of deceitful charlatans behaving in outlandish ways, ultimately there is no verifiable evidence to aid the devotee in distinguishing deplorable frauds from those beings lauded by Mipham as authentic compassionate masters. Naturally, the lifestyle of a fraud would be predictably short-lived if it did not outwardly resemble its object of imitation, but the real reason that makes the two groups so difficult to distinguish is that both parties identify the source for their discovery in the mental visions of the revealer, thus suspending the availability of the kind of verifiable evidence on which people ordinarily rely when assessing claims of origin.

Mipham's suggestion that only a spiritually powerful person can determine the validity of the Treasure revealers is an acknowledgment that evaluations based exclusively on historical premises or observations of behavioral conduct will fail to provide any final and definitive answers. According to Mipham, ultimately it is only the spiritual intuition (i.e. the mastery of supramundane knowledge that perceives the minds of others) of authoritative leaders that can validate the claims of the Treasure revealers.

²⁶ Ibid. 487.4.



On what grounds can he say this? To answer this we must first look at some of the ways in which Treasure revealers traditionally emerged as successful visionaries in Tibet.

The religio-political realities of nineteenth century east Tibet where Mipham lived were to a large extent governed by the mechanics of a feudal-like society in which major decisions were taken by a relatively small and exclusive financial, political, and religious elite. In such a society any suggestion of delegation of authority to the masses would certainly not have been encouraged, if even conceived of. Thus, an aspiring Treasure revealer would often ascend to fame only through active endorsements by the established regional powers.²⁷ In theory (and certainly rhetorically), this support would be extended based on a recognition of certain spiritual qualities in the Treasure revealer whereby his revelations, by extension, would be considered endowed with the liberating potency of a genuine Treasure. In reality this process was of course open to the negotiations of spiritual or political intrigue, and the outcome not always a given. Nevertheless, although such social and economic realities had a real and lasting influence on the way the Treasure tradition developed and flourished, one must also consider other more diffuse elements to the validation of the Treasure revealer such as the influence of his personal charisma and magnetism, and his ability to fulfill both the practical and spiritual needs of the general populace. Although political and religious connections often could go a long way in advancing a given Treasure revealer's career, Tibetan history is also rich in examples of charismatic visionaries rising to prominence primarily through the strength of their personal magnetism, only subsequently to be aided by established authorities. This latter factor, while more vague and hard to pinpoint than political backing, seems to have been one of the key ingredients in the success of the Treasure tradition, and would occasionally provide a validating capacity rivaling even that of the religious and political establishment.

²⁷ Martin has noted the importance of strong aristocratic affiliations for the potential Treasure revealer and points out that some of the most successful visionaries, headed by Nyangral Nyima Özer and Rigdzin Gödem, were themselves of blue-blooded descent (2001: 26-27).

Regardless of whether Treasure revealers ascended to fame primarily through the support of a religio-political power base or via their personal magnetizing qualities ultimately they would have to persuade a broader public – monastic and lay - of the value of their Treasures so that they could be adopted into a broader social religious framework. Considering the hierarchical structure of traditional Tibetan religious society, much of this communal adaptation would certainly have occurred almost by default simply through the type of authoritative adherence that Mipham prescribes. Although it is doubtful whether any ordinary follower of the tradition ever felt blessed with a real mandate to validate the spiritual leaders of the Nyingma School, one should not disregard the influence of the collective devotional following in authenticating religious figures such as the Treasure revealers. Regardless of their charisma or political support, the Treasure revealers would eventually have to sustain and fulfill the needs of a faithful audience through their revelations. Not only in the short term by providing an attractive novelty, but also by establishing over time the value of their revelations to Buddhist practitioners by demonstrating such Treasures to be a reliable medium for spiritual growth and fulfillment for those who embrace them.

The process through which a devotee of the Treasure tradition can arrive at a final conclusion regarding the validity of a given Treasure revealer does, as Mipham points out, not include any foolproof checklist of outwardly observed characteristics. Mipham's solution to this problem is an appeal to authority; a move that in the traditional Buddhist context has long precedence in the practice of relying on the matured wisdom of spiritual elders. In the context of finding authenticity as an insider within a tradition dominated by revelatory activity, Mipham's advice therefore constitutes a traditional but also quite pragmatic approach to validation. Implicit in his advice, however, is the deeper consequence that to invest a spiritual teacher with full authority each devotee is ultimately forced to perform a validation based on a leap of faith. In the absence of any empirically verifiable modes of evaluation, Mipham suggests that the doubtful should rely on "a powerful person" in matters of authenticity, but, of course, identifying such an authority must eventually be performed on similarly faithful grounds as the initial



evaluation of the Treasure revealer takes place.²⁸ Significantly, the validating onus thus returns to the individual devotee who is required, in the final analysis, to form a personal judgment of the Treasure revealer based on the strength of faith rather than any tangible and verifiable evidence of his credentials or the simple endorsement of a religious or political elite.

Recognizing that the final authenticating measures for Treasure revelation lie beyond what can be objectively verified, it appears a less rewarding exercise to perpetuate a debate of the Treasures along a simplified framework of true or false. Instead, looking beyond the traditional saint–charlatan paradigm may allow for other more rewarding perspectives for studying this fascinating literature that would enrich our understanding of the philosophical and hermeneutical value of this unique Buddhist tradition. To acknowledge the influence of the community—a community that is, of course, composed of faithful individuals—in authenticating scripture does not necessarily entail a failure to critically examine the religious claims of the Treasure tradition. Rather, this understanding allows us to engage with the Treasure revealers and their texts in a manner free from the confines of methodologies tainted by the influence of religious politics. In this way we may explore with fresh eyes the intricate drama that unfolds when religious claims, inspired saints, deceitful frauds, and Tibetan politics all come together in the complex phenomenon of Treasure revelation. Although Mipham is firm in his denunciation of fake revealers, we may today, while not abandoning careful philological and historical evaluations of individual Treasure scriptures, modify and soften the rhetoric that so often accompanies Treasure evaluations in Tibet and the West by acknowledging that what makes a visionary a saint or transforms a revelation into scripture is indeed a complex interplay of many factors, among which the faith and intuition of the devoted community plays no small or insignificant part.

²⁸ Here the encouragement of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) to develop faith “on the strength of the absurd” may come to mind (e.g. 1985: 79). Kierkegaard’s positions on faith and its relevance for the religious life and ethics contain a number of notable parallels in the Buddhist Mahāyāna tradition, such as the perceived legality in Mahāyāna Buddhism of a spiritual being discontinuing his or her outward ethical behavior for the sake of a greater and higher good that may not always be identified through reason alone. However, in this particular context of evaluating religious authorities Mipham, while possibly approving of the basic principles in Kierkegaard’s famous “teleological suspension of the ethical” would no doubt have questioned his exhortation to abandon the universal ethics prescribed by tradition.

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