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Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism: The
Foundations of Authority in Gelukpa Monasticism (review)

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versation partners, even friends. Ontotheological foundations—revealed, tried, exonerated—graciously manage to provide deep rooted and fruitful places for learning. Reading Hindu texts through other Catholic and Jesuit eyes, but still with Derridean care and agility, promises to complement and even reconstruct this pioneering *Buddhisms and Deconstructions* and its Magliolan inspiration.

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IDENTITY, RITUAL AND STATE IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM: THE FOUNDATIONS OF AUTHORITY IN GELUKPA MONASTICISM. By *Martin A. Mills*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. 404 + xxi pp. with 12 black and white plates.

In Tibetan Buddhism, there is a type of teaching called a *dmar kbrid*, a “red instruction,” wherein the *lama* brings students through a teaching as a physician might dissect a corpse, pointing out and explaining the various parts and organs and their places and functions. In *Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism*, Martin Mills has done very much the same thing, with the exception that the body he examines is still very much alive, and emerges, to my eyes at least, as a new and wholly vital entity. Mills exposes the subcutaneous and sanguine body of Tibetan Buddhism, the bones and muscles that make up its structure, the blood that flows through it, and the organs that keep it alive, in “a plain and open manner,” just as in a *dmar kbrid*.¹ The value of such a presentation truly cannot be overstated. An attempt to catalog the contents of each chapter would be both impossible and counterproductive, as the wealth of theoretical material and ethnographic detail is a large part of what makes this book so powerful. Instead, I will identify several topics, several of the vital organs alluded to, that are either not commonly noticed in the academic study of Buddhism, or that are given fresh perspective by Mills’s anthropological and sociological methodology, and that are so crucial to understanding how it is that Buddhism lives in a typical Himalayan village. The latter portion of this review explains why I place such high value on this book and its potential place in Buddhist-Christian studies.

Identity, Ritual and State is an ethnography of Kumbum Monastery in Lingshed, Ladakh (the eastern half of the Kashmir valley, located in Jammu and Kashmir, India), but its concerns are much more far-reaching than a single remote Himalayan village. The central question of the work is “how we are to understand the nature of religious authority in Tibetan Buddhist monasticism” (p. xiii), although it might more properly be the religious authority of Tibetan

Buddhist monastics. This answer is worked out in three overlapping areas of analysis: local ritual activity, ecclesiastical structure of the monastery, and the ritual foundations of Tibetan political thought (p. xvii).

Mills convincingly asserts that there is a framework within which Buddhism happens in the Himalayas. The starting point of this framework is birth itself, which establishes the embodied person. The very physicality of personhood has several implications. First, the body is embedded in a very specific local space and place, and personhood is thus not only embodied, but also chthonic—intimately bound up with the earth or soil onto which it is born. At birth, persons are injected into a complex matrix of relations between people and various spirits, such as household gods and protectors, *nāga*, and itinerant demons. For example, Lingshed is divided into seven subterritories, each under the jurisdiction of a local deity whose physical abode and reign are well known to all in the village.² These deities are associated with features of the local geography, and they regulate and influence local agricultural and social production, so birth in one area or another signifies a relation with the deity presiding over it. The land itself is imbued with a notion of personhood and agency. The human body is also the repository for pollution (*sgrib*), which comes about as a result of violating the established hierarchy of space and place and from bringing about changes to the local matrix of embodied persons. Both bodily pollution concerns and the need for proper relations with local spirit numina mandate definite, ongoing ritual attention. Rituals are occasioned in response to births, deaths, spirit possession, unintentional pollution of places or household objects, and movements within the monastic ecclesiastical structure, or happen regularly according to an astrologically and agriculturally influenced calendar.

Rituals are performed by monks not only because they are trained specialists, but because of their renunciate status. Ritual authority is conceived in terms of subjugation or taming (*'dul ba*) of the landscape and its inhabitants. The Tibetan word *'dul ba* is also used to translate the Sanskrit term *vinaya*, and the connection between the two is not lost on Kumbum villagers and monks. What makes monks able to subjugate local numina is their renunciation, via ordination into monastic life. Our usual understanding of Buddhist renunciation is that monks renounce the cycle of *saṃsāra*; however, in the Tibetan sphere, monks more obviously renounce the cycle of agricultural and social production. Monks are celibates who are physically removed from the household and its attendant farming activities. The technology of subjugation is that those outside the reproductive or *saṃsāric* cycle have power over those within: the Buddha was thus able to defeat Māra, the lord of death. Buddhism's action on the Tibetan landscape has always been subjugatory, for as Mills relates, the writhing demoness whose body makes up the territory of Tibet had to be “nailed down” before the Chinese princess Kongjo could bring a Buddha image into Tibet (pp. 13–14). Monks can repeat such subjugations because of their separation from the agricultural cycle in which local gods operate.

The limits of monastics in subjugation are amply illustrated, however, in the

story of the founding of Samye monastery, which required the intervention of the married tantric yogi Guru Padmasambhava. Again conceived in terms of subjugation, Padmasambhava had to be invited from India to tame and convert to Buddhism the local demons who had been destroying each day's work as the monastery was being built because the monks of the nascent monastery did not have the power to subjugate the demons themselves. In present-day Lingshed, Mills determines these limitations to be the result of incomplete renunciation, a theme that runs throughout the book. Monks, born as embodied persons in the local chthonic domain, are limited by this chthonicity and by the jurisdiction of the local spirit numina. Their ordination requires the propitiation of local spirits (pp. 253–254). Further, monks are dependent on lay contributions for sponsorship of monastic rituals, and the very quarters in which they live are owned by the lay households that they supposedly renounce (p. 65). The quarters of monks are not actually part of the monastery, though they are generally thought of as part of the greater monastic temple complex, and this straddling of lay and monastic domains further complicates the renunciate status of monks, and thus their ritual potency.

Because subjugation requires renunciation and renunciation of embodied status, the real power lies in tantra, which effects a total transformation within the bodily framework either through sexual yoga or through a meditative mastery of the death and birth process. Mills explains this as yogic renunciation, as opposed to monastic renunciation. Yogic renunciation results in a complete freedom from the rigors of the birth and death process and an emancipation from the limits of the ordinary body. The exemplars of this mastery within the Geluk system is the reincarnate *lama*, also known as *rinpoche* or *tulku* (*sprul sku*, Skt: *nirmāṇakāya*), who are believed to have consciously chosen and conditioned their rebirths, instead of being forced into birth by karma. Reincarnates are, as the determiners of their rebirths, outside the jurisdiction of the local spirit numina who usually preside over all reproductive activities. *Tulku* have a much greater purity, are free from pollution, and, because they are completely extricated from the cycle of both *samsāra* and mundane production, can defeat demons and convert spirits. Furthermore, while Buddhist monastic texts translated from Sanskrit authorize monks to ordain other monks, in reality only reincarnates ordain monks in Ladakh and Zanskar. As Mills points out, the importance of ritual authority and power of reincarnates is the mainstay of their political authority in the Tibetan cultural sphere. Tibetans revere the Dalai Lama as the protector of the land of Tibet, rather than as a teacher of compassion and peace.³ Monks have access to the same sort of tantric authority, but only indirectly. The monastery's head monk (*slob dpon*) undertakes a two-week meditative retreat each year to instill in himself the presence and power of Yamāntaka, the chief tutelary deity of Kumbum monastery. Monks harness the power of Yamāntaka by generating themselves (*bdag bskyed*) as him in *skangsol* rites. They then invoke and reenact the trope of subjugation by ritually subjugating the local deities and recommitting them to allegiance and service to Buddhism.

The *skangsol* rite is one of the most ubiquitous in Kumbum, performed annually in lay households but also in the monastery at certain times each day, month, and year to propitiate and invoke the power of local dharma protectors (*choskyong*) for the prevention of malevolence. In showcasing the ongoing influence of local spirit numina in the monastic sphere, the repeated performance of *skangsol* in the monastery demonstrates again how monastic renunciation in Tibetan Buddhism is incomplete. Lay sponsorship of the rites both in households and in the monastery further complicates the uneasy situation monks find themselves in between the renounced and the lay worlds. Lay sponsorship also points out the exchange relationship between laity and renunciates. Lay householders participate as sponsors in monastic rites so that the blessings (*sbyin rlabs*) of the rite will accrue to their household unit and its subsequent subsidiaries. The flow of blessings also illustrates another important structural component of power in Himalayan Buddhist communities, whereby the most pure and powerful are at the highest point of the body, monastery, room, or what have you. Mills gives several examples of how monks and villagers in Kumbum would go to great lengths to properly situate themselves and others, spatially, to maintain the proper spatial pecking order of power and purity. This arrangement facilitates the downward flow of blessings (sometimes envisioned as a fluid “nectar” in Tibetan Buddhism), from a rooftop household shrine to the rest of the building, or from the monastery on the hill to the remainder of the village, for example.

The preceding several paragraphs can only roughly sketch out the contours of Mills’s vast, coherent, and penetrating analysis of Buddhist life in Kumbum; I do hope, though, that I have given some semblance of how embedded local personhood, renunciation of it, subjugation, and tantric yogic power all function in a verticalized hierarchy to order and structure, to give shape and vitality, to Buddhist thought, belief, and practice in Lingshed. The argument is truly compelling, and it explains a great deal for which we cannot otherwise account. The presentation of the anthropological data is tremendously fascinating, entertaining, and truly a refreshing shift, as ethnography often is, for those of us whose work is primarily textual and philological. Those more doctrinal components are not at all missing here, for Mills incorporates a great deal of Buddhist “philosophy” and shows that Kumbum’s vision of local Buddhist cosmology is wholly consonant and integrated with “orthodox” Buddhist views.

There are a few practical flaws to this book, and they are glaring enough to merit mention, but I do not want to conclude with those, so I will catalog them here before moving on to a few words on why I believe this book to be so important for Buddhist-Christian studies. Typographical and grammatical mistakes are present on about every other page, which is truly puzzling given the obvious care and attention to detail shown in every other facet of this book. Several bibliographic entries are missing so that some important references cannot be consulted—again, a pity, because the bibliography is quite extensive and valuable in its own right. The philological Buddhistologist will also come across a number of infelicities in the Tibetan and Sanskrit: *bbikku* (intending Pāli *bhik-*

kbu?) for *bbikṣu*, for example, as well as the nonuse of diacritical marks. The rendering of Ladakhi-Zanskari pronunciations of Tibetan is sometimes puzzling as well, such as *gyesgus* for *dge skos*, which I have always heard pronounced *geskos*, or *lozbong* for *blo sbyong*. The philological errata will go unnoticed or overlooked by most readers, but the others do give pause when one considers that the book, available only in hardcover, lists at \$150. At that price, I do not feel it too much to ask that the publisher carefully edit the volume, at least for obvious problems.

I hasten to emphasize that on balance, the value of Mills's work far, far outweighs these largely cosmetic concerns. Here, in short, is why:

Tibetan scholars have themselves often conceptualised . . . transformation in terms of the dynamic of *zhi-lam-dre*, 'the basis, the path, and the fruit.' The first of these terms—*zhi*, or basis—is usually used to refer to the pre-existing foundation of practice, referring to the five *skandhas* that are collectively the embodied consciousness that is gradually transformed through religious discipline. As a *pre-existent* context to that practice—both conceptually and temporally—its nature and importance have remained largely unspoken in many Tibetan Buddhist exegetical texts, which have primarily concentrated on elaborating the concepts of path and fruit. This should not surprise us: few things can be taken more for granted than the ground on which we stand. However, the tendency for western commentators and translators of Tibetan Buddhism to similarly concentrate on the last two elements of this dynamic (usually in reasonable deference to the existing textual traditions) is altogether more problematic, since it leaves the conceptual importance of *zhi* not simply unspoken, but *absent* (or, at best, conceptually marginalized as a 'folk tradition'). (Mills 329–330, italics in original)

Recently, Buddhist studies scholars have become increasingly aware of the difficulties posed by the long-standing divide between textual and anthropological studies of Buddhism; more generally, religious studies have grown progressively more attuned to the necessarily multidisciplinary nature of our field. The concern here is not merely one methodological approach over another, but that purely textual and philosophical scholarship elides an indispensably important component of Buddhism because it fails to take into account the people and cultures that are the foundation and the starting point of Buddhist life. *Identity, Ritual and State* makes an enormous contribution by educating us on the conceptual presuppositions of Tibetan Buddhists and by pointing out that they are quite different from our own, a critical observation for Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Years ago, Gordon Kaufman aptly characterized a study of Buddhist-Christian dialogue as "ideational," that is, concerned with discussing "general philosophical considerations,"⁴ and much of the following discussion has taken place along those lines. We have discussed paths and fruits, theology and soteriology, meditation, ethics, and monastic codes. We have given less attention to the "on the ground" realities of the people, both Buddhist and Christian, who

generate and practice these ideas. I would argue that, at least in the case of Tibetan Buddhism, where nearly every monk and scholar starts out as a member of a household in a village, we risk misunderstanding the motivations behind the texts we study if we do not know something of their more quotidian foundations and history.

The question “who is dialoguing with whom?” has also been asked in these pages on more than one occasion. We cannot but notice that the academic dialogue is between academics: Christian and Buddhist theologians and scholars, or, more properly, scholars and theologians of Buddhism and Christianity. A very small fraction of these were born into cultures that at all resembled Lingshed or any other village in Ladakh, Zanskar, Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, or any of the other locales where the Buddhist discourses we discuss originated, and thus, we are—without the contextual insights of work such as Mills—not privy to the social life of the concepts therein contained. Put simply, we cannot know what Tibetan Buddhist ideas mean to Buddhist Tibetans. The dharma texts we pore over in American universities are carried unopened around fields in Lingshed to bless crops, and without knowing such facts, we run the risk of radically misunderstanding *how* and *why* Buddhism is important to Tibetans. This study of power and authority presents a fresh new view of the meaning of Buddhism for Buddhists. A full contextualization can bring the voices of Buddhists into the Buddhist-Christian dialogue in new and previously inconceivable ways, and can highlight shared and disparate elements of Buddhism and Christianity that we could not help but otherwise overlook. For these reasons and many, many more, I do not recommend, but implore the readers of this journal to read and study *Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism*; I have every confidence that such consideration will be tremendously profitable for the future of Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

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NOTES

1. Pabongka Rinpoche, *lam rim rnam grol lag bcang*, Asian Classics Input Project no. S0004: 16b.7–17a.

2. I had the opportunity to confirm Mills’s ethnographic account with several monks from Lingshed who were studying at Drepung Gomang from 2000 to 2002.

3. This statement probably merits some qualification in the modern era. However, in India the Dalai Lama is widely believed to have protected the Himalayan region from the earthquakes that devastated Gujarat in 2001. The pending calamity was divined at the annual Losar festival and ritually prevented, events widely reported in the Indian press. See http://www.tibet.ca/en/wtnarchive/2000/7/20_3.html and <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2001/20011104/himachal.htm#2> for Indian and Tibetan press coverage.

4. G. D. Kaufman, “The Historicity of Religions and the Importance of Religious Dialogue,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 4 (1984): 5.