



Book review

Renunciation and Longing: The Life of a Twentieth-Century Himalayan Buddhist Saint

By Annabella Pitkin. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2022, xxviii + 286 pages, ISBN 978-0-226-81692-0 (paper), \$32.50.

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ANNABELLA Pitkin's choice of Khunu Lama (1895–1977) as the subject of a monograph might surprise scholars and practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism alike. When she asked the Dalai Lama to expound upon the rinpoche's influence, he replied, “None at all ... Among our Tibetan people, he did not teach very much” (78). And yet, Pitkin uses Khunu Lama's perceived lack of influence to theorize her titular terms, renunciation and longing, in a sophisticated discussion that will benefit scholars of Tibet, Buddhism, and Religious Studies.

A brief biographical note is in order before addressing Pitkin's larger theoretical discussion. Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen was a wandering mendicant, devout Buddhist scholar-practitioner, and a twentieth-century link in the long tradition of heterodox saints in Tibetan hagiography. Although he was a Buddhist renunciant (Tib. *bya bral ba*) and not particularly antinomian, Khunu Lama did not wish to be affiliated with any institution or school, and his life on the road was spent willfully defying Buddhist categories even as he actively sought Buddhist teachings. Khunu Lama lived much of his life in Varanasi, sometimes in an ashram, donning the yellow robes of a *sadhu* rather than the maroon robes of a Tibetan Buddhist. He came to be so associated with India in his academic interests, appearance, and residence that many knew him as the “Indian lama” or “Indian beggar” and even thought that he was Indian, rather than an itinerant Tibetan. Pitkin suggests that Khunu Lama deliberately obscured his Buddhist attainments, sometimes behind his national identity, sometimes behind his beggarly appearance, and still other times behind his pedantry such that Tibetans would perceive him as a Sanskrit grammarian and Tibetan-language scholar whose proficiencies were merely academic.

Nevertheless, despite and because of his iconoclastic tendencies, Khunu Lama achieved some renown among the most rarefied circles of the Tibetan Buddhist orthodoxy. The rinpoche spent much of his career gathering Buddhist teachings, but, fairly or unfairly, acquired a reputation for hoarding his knowledge like a miser rather than disseminating it widely, hence the Dalai Lama's answer recounted above. Pitkin shows that, contra this perception, Khunu Lama did indeed transmit many lineages of teachings and practices, sometimes in widely-attended public teachings, and, instead of accepting the Dalai Lama's assessment at face value, takes up the more interesting question of why Khunu Lama actively cultivated this reputation for inaptitude and unimportance, despite his obvious attainments and influence. And indeed, Pitkin shows that Khunu Lama's influence was considerable. He composed his most famous original work, *Jewel Lamp: In Praise of Bodhicitta* (Tib. *Byang chub sems kyi bstod pa rin chen sgron ma*) in 1959, and began disseminating it in the early



1960s, which culminated in a transmission to the Dalai Lama himself and the publication of a popular edition in 1966. Although he had long served as a teacher to the Dalai Lama's tutor Ling Rinpoche, Khunu Lama's reputation among Tibetan communities peaked in the early 1960s when the Dalai Lama publicly prostrated to Khunu Lama, affirming his status as a Buddhist master (76). Khunu Lama continued to be solicited by Tibetan Buddhists for teachings until his death in 1977, shortly after which two of his rebirths were identified, both of whom are still active and have continued teaching his core message of non-sectarian (Tib. *ris med*) bodhicitta, and who seem poised to elevate Khunu Lama from a singular iconoclast into an incarnate lineage.

Pitkin diverges from the usual presentation of Tibetan lives (Tib. *rnam thar*) by other Tibetan studies monographs, which often devote an early chapter to the relevant figure's biography and another to their teachings before launching into analysis. In a process that mirrors Khunu Lama's own life of wandering, Pitkin instead organizes her work thematically, weaving Khunu Lama's life and teachings into chapters on transmission lineages (chapter one), renunciation (two), mendicancy (three), dislocation and continuity (four), the interplay between renunciation, separation, and guru devotion (five), and death (six). The benefits of this organizing schema are considerable, but it does have the drawback of making the book more difficult to skim for both specialists in Tibetan Studies and non-academic readers who might be more concerned with the life and teachings of Khunu Lama himself than a theoretical discussion of the paradox of absence in Buddhist transmission lineages. For those specialists in Tibetan Studies who are willing to grant the volume a close read, Pitkin joins an accomplished lineage of scholars like Alexander Gardner, Holly Gayley, and Heather Stoddard, among many others, who have used the genre of lives to explore larger issues within Tibetan Buddhism.

Fortunately, the thematic organization pays off: the sophisticated discussion that Pitkin provides is thought-provoking, perhaps even paradigm-shifting. She generalizes from one of the most obvious questions facing scholars of Khunu Lama to difficulties that have plagued the Buddhist tradition ever since Shakyamuni Buddha's own *parinirvana*: How could Khunu Lama simultaneously be the recipient of the Dalai Lama's prostrations and remembered as lacking any religious influence? How can practitioners cultivate devotion for teachers who are so often absent or hidden behind veils of physical absence, emotional callousness, or, especially, death?

Pitkin answers these questions by introducing "renunciation" and "longing" as analytic categories rather than as mere descriptors. She argues that renunciation is the single most dominant theme of Khunu Lama's life and hagiographies, as well as a key concept in understanding the paradox posed above. Pitkin asks, "Buddhists in many times and places have wrestled with what it means to be a renunciant. Should a person live in a cave or become a monk or a nun in a bustling monastic complex? Should a practitioner give up wealth, family life, or sexuality? Or is true renunciation really about an inner attitude of non-attachment in the midst of possessions and activity?" (49). She treats Khunu Lama as modeling a novel mode of renunciation in a modernist age, in which the renunciatory ideal of simplicity is extended to including not only physical or emotional pleasure, but also any sort of renown in the public sphere. In this rationale, Khunu Lama's perceived lack of influence is not indicative of his failure as a teacher, but rather of his success as a practitioner, such that he was able to spread the dharma without overtly calling attention to his own attainments.

However, in a welcome turn, Pitkin analyzes renunciation not only doctrinally, but also affectively, in the lived experience of Khunu Lama and those whom he had nominally renounced. As Pitkin observes, renunciation is often understood doctrinally as a remedy for suffering, but in emotional terms is also the engine of further suffering. Pitkin asks, "What happens to our commitments to other people when we renounce? What kind of freedoms does renunciation bring? How do renouncers feel about those they leave behind (or at least appear to leave), and how do individuals and community members feel if they are among those who are left?" (49).

Pitkin posits “longing” as a bridge between the renounced and renouncer in a discussion that I think will be the book’s most lasting contribution, of use to scholars of Buddhism, but also to anyone struggling with loss. Pitkin argues that, counterintuitively, it is the teacher’s very absence that allows devotion to flourish, their very hiddenness that allows them to serve as a key link in a lineage chain. She grounds this discussion in a number of episodes in Khunu Lama’s own biography, for instance in the pain he causes his family by choosing to renounce his life for the sake of the dharma, in his elusiveness as a teacher, and in his stubborn refusal to formally take on Drikung Khandroma, his most devoted disciple, as an attendant, even as he saw her intense devotion. Pitkin proceeds to expand the concept into a Buddhist category more generally, adducing examples from across the tradition to show how longing becomes the site of both suffering and devotion. Especially compelling examples are shown in the lives of Shantideva, whose disembodied voice famously continued teaching the dharma even after Shantideva himself had departed the world, and the Buddha himself, who by passing into *parinirvana* abandoned the very disciples who were convinced that he had overcome death, but in the process inaugurated the Buddhist lineage.

Death is of course the ultimate site of separation and longing, and Pitkin theorizes its function in the formation of Buddhist lineages and in the affective lives of Buddhist practitioners. When Khunu Lama dies, Drikung Khandroma cries so long and hard that it impairs her vision, but is all the more inspired to preserve and spread his teachings in the world. Pitkin suggests that across Buddhist lineages the moment of death is both a moment of deep grief and longing (the guru is gone), but also of validation (the guru’s teachings are soteriologically effective, as evidenced in the manner of their death) and creativity (and I too can bring those teachings into the world). This tension resolves doctrinally in guru yoga, wherein the karma of the teacher and student are unified such that there is no longer any separation between the two, but remains a painfully unresolved tension for most practitioners. Although Pitkin does not shy away from analyzing renunciation and longing in terms of socio-economic power relations, as in the case of a dispute over which community was entitled to Khunu Lama’s remains and so would benefit from his death, the establishment of longing as a pan-Buddhist category is one of the most significant contributions of Pitkin’s work.

There are at least two additional methodological approaches for which Pitkin deserves to be lauded. The first is a broad reliance on Tibetan analytic categories even as she puts those categories in dialogue with western theoretical schemas. Pitkin resists the urge to analyze Khunu Lama’s life through the tired binary of modernity and tradition, and instead utilizes Tibetan categories themselves in a way that never feels heavy handed, using non-discrimination (Tib. *ris med*), devotion (Tib. *mos gus*), and renunciation (Tib. *bya bral*) as her bedrock categories. Second is her use of feminist analysis and attention to women and women’s experiences. Pitkin devotes considerable space to showing Khunu Lama’s influence on subsequent generations of religious women and the many contemporary lineages of Tibetan religious women who can be traced back to Khunu Lama. Pitkin focuses especially on the life of Drikung Khandroma Sherab Tharchin, a religious teacher and scholar who in 1970 began devotedly following Khunu Lama as his attendant and disciple over his own protestations, and became a renowned teacher in her own right following his death. When reading Pitkin’s account, it seems obvious that both should be given extended treatment, and yet it would have been easy for a different scholar to overlook the importance of Drikung Khandroma and lineages of other Buddhist women in evaluating Khunu Lama’s influence and legacy. Pitkin’s approach serves as a model for scholars who wish to incorporate feminist modes of analysis into studies that do not obviously center around gender without simply “adding women and stirring,” or confining all gendered analysis into a single chapter.

In short, *Renunciation and Longing* is a welcome contribution that will benefit a wide swath of Buddhist Studies scholars, although it is perhaps a touch too technical to be useful for undergraduates or non-specialists. Tibetan Studies scholars will benefit from Pitkin’s elegant summation of twenty years of dense research

in a volume that reads lightly. But the greatest benefit of the volume will be to Buddhist Studies scholars theorizing the teacher-student relationship and the role of absence in Buddhist practice. Pitkin not only unpacks “longing” in philosophical terms, as the root of desire and suffering, but shows its affective dimensions in the lived experience of Buddhist practitioners, as well as its ultimate soteriological utility. In Pitkin’s account, absence and death do not disrupt transmission lineages, but are the very conditions for the longing and devotion that culminate in enlightened practice and allow the lineage to continue.

I could immediately think of possible applications of Pitkin’s use of “longing” to my own research and imagine that other Buddhologists will find the same. Much of my dissertation treated Jamgon Kongtrul (*Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros Mtha’ yas Rgya mtsho*, 1813–1899), who, like Khunu Lama, devoted his life to cataloging and reviving transmission lineages that many feared were on the cusp of extinction, gathering even the most obscure teachings and using dream transmissions and *terma* (Tib. *gter ma*) revelation to revive lineages that had already died out. Kongtrul comes across, both in his disciples’ biographies and his own autobiography, as a stodgy individual, and glimpses into his emotional world are rare, though not absent—for instance, some measure of his sentimentality comes through in the elaborate, ritually exhaustive funeral he holds for his housecat or in long passages describing his affection for certain teachers he has not seen in person for many decades. I have previously analyzed Kongtrul’s obsession with transmission and revival in largely political terms, namely as a way of escaping the censure of the Gelugs, a rival monastic school who seized political power in Kongtrul’s home region, but after reading Pitkin I am keen to revisit my materials to see what happens if I instead treat Kongtrul’s revivals as an act of longing for teachers past, wrought by existential distress. Such a theory of longing allows for the introduction of affective elements into one’s analysis without devolving into armchair psychoanalysis. I imagine that I am not alone, and that other scholars will similarly benefit from Pitkin’s insightful analysis.