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## Controversy over Buddhist Ethical Reform: A Secular Critique of Clerical Authority in the Tibetan Blogosphere

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# Controversy over Buddhist Ethical Reform: A Secular Critique of Clerical Authority in the Tibetan Blogosphere

Holly Gayley

This article explores the online debate in the Tibetan-language blogosphere over a burgeoning ethical reform movement. Annually, whole villages and clans in nomadic areas along the eastern reaches of the Tibetan plateau are committing to a newly formulated set of ten Buddhist virtues that include vows not to sell yaks for slaughter, not to fight with weapons, and not to drink, smoke, or gamble. Spearheaded by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö and cleric-scholars at Larung Buddhist Academy in Serta, concerned with the erosion of social values in the face of state modernization policies, novel vow ceremonies have generated a new level of commitment to Buddhist ethics among Tibetan nomads in the region while spawning controversy over the role of religion in the public sphere.

A set of virulent critiques of ethical reform have appeared since 2012 in Tibetan blog posts by well-known intellectuals like Jamyang Kyi and Notreng. This article examines the

secular terms through which clerical authority is criticized in the Tibetan blogosphere and several responses that address the polarizing tendency of online debate due to the circulation of misinformation and slander. How is the Tibetan blogosphere creating a new public forum for the secular critique of religion? On what grounds are Tibetan bloggers challenging Buddhist clerical authority online? How do monastics and their supporters advocate, in response, for the role of Buddhism in governing Tibetan social values?

**Keywords:** Buddhist ethics, Tibetan blogosphere, anticlericalism, religion and media, Larung Buddhist Academy.

## Introduction

The immediacy of digital media means that compelling events, as shared through anecdotes and images, can be diffused rapidly and engender lively online debate. Since the mid-2000s, when the Internet became more readily accessible in Tibetan areas of China, the Tibetan-language blogosphere has emerged as a public space in which to share views outside of official channels and discuss issues of Tibetan identity, culture and politics—albeit in coded ways for sensitive topics.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, this public space is circumscribed by the omnipresence of state control in regulating cultural productions and political discourse and by the ‘great firewall’ of China which tends to block exile Tibetan blogs and news websites,<sup>2</sup> even as Tibetans in the diaspora have access to blogging websites based in China and participate in blogosphere debates over events happening on the Tibetan plateau.<sup>3</sup> While the Internet has provided a platform for Buddhist leaders and institutions on the Tibetan plateau to reach large audiences, especially among Chinese speakers,<sup>4</sup> it has also created a significant Tibetan-language forum on independent blogging websites for educated Tibetans, lay and monastic, to debate the role of religion in society. Heidi Campbell highlights the importance of the blogosphere in considering the ways that religious authority is both challenged and affirmed online (2010), querying the extent to which the Internet serves a democratizing or leveling function, i.e. giving voice to those marginalized within traditional hierarchies. In this article, I take up Campbell’s call to explore “how and why members of different groups challenge or strengthen a particular type of religious authority online” and the “larger question of the role technology plays in the process” (2010: 273).

As a case study, I focus on a heated and protracted debate over a burgeoning ethical reform movement inaugurated in 2008 by cleric-scholars at Larung Buddhist Academy, the largest and most influential monastic institution on the Tibetan plateau, located in Serta County along the border of Sichuan and Qinghai Provinces.<sup>5</sup> In the wake of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), once religious practice was again publicly allowed in China, a handful of Buddhist leaders in Serta began bestowing ethical precepts during the 1980s and 90s in ad-hoc fashion on ritual occasions or as an ethical code specific to their monastery.<sup>6</sup> At that point, ethical reform could be considered a relatively minor facet of the broader movement to reconstitute Buddhist teachings, practices and institutions in the post-Mao era, which was taking place amid wide-ranging cultural revitalization efforts. Yet its significance increased over time. Larung founder Khenpo Jigmé Phuntsok (Mkhan po ‘jigs med phun tshogs), a towering figure in the revitaliz-

tion of Buddhism on the Tibetan plateau, linked Buddhist ethics to the larger project of preserving Tibetan culture in a landmark work of advice to the laity, titled *Heart Advice to Tibetans for the 21st Century* (composed in 1995).<sup>7</sup> Video footage from the late 1990s and early 2000s shows him bestowing vows to large-scale gatherings of thousands of Tibetan nomads raising their hands to indicate their commitment to one or another precept.<sup>8</sup> Ethical reform has taken on a new urgency and further systematization in the wake of the largely peaceful protests that swept across the Tibetan plateau in 2008, China’s Olympic year.<sup>9</sup>

A new set of ‘ten virtues’ (*dge bcu*) was promulgated by Larung Buddhist Academy in 2008 and subsequently spread through mass vow-taking ceremonies among whole villages and clans in surrounding nomadic areas.<sup>10</sup> As an adaptation of the traditional ten Buddhist virtues, the new ten virtues combine elements of a temperance movement with an orientation toward non-violence. The new ten virtues consist of precepts not to sell livestock for slaughter, not to steal, not to fight with weapons, not to consort with prostitutes, not to sell weapons or drugs, not to smoke, not to drink, not to gamble, not to hunt, and not to wear animal fur on the trim of traditional Tibetan coats.<sup>11</sup> This list represents a significant variation on the traditional ten Buddhist virtues, which proscribe actions on three levels—physical (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct), verbal (lying, harsh speech, slander, idle chatter) and mental acts (ill will, covetousness, wrong view)—through there is some overlap in precepts at the physical level.<sup>12</sup> While the traditional ten virtues are closely tied to an individual’s prospects for rebirth, the new ten virtues and associated vows address contemporary social problems, such as the loss of family wealth in a recent upsurge in gambling, the threat of AIDS due to increasing prostitution, and fighting over grazing rights on the grasslands since decollectivization.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, the conception and diffusion of the new ten virtues can be regarded as a constructive approach to the corrosive effects of rapid social change due to a host of factors, including state modernization and marketization policies.

In discussing blogosphere debates over ethical reform in this article, I refer specifically to the new ten virtues promulgated by Larung Buddhist Academy, which have spread since 2008 through mass vow-taking ceremonies in counties near Serta, primarily in Kandze Prefecture of Sichuan Province.<sup>14</sup> In doing so, I follow Tibetans bloggers who reference the ‘ten virtues’ in relation to Larung Buddhist Academy, Serta, and/or Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö (Mkhan po Tshul khrims blo gros), the main architect of ethical reform and one of Jigmé Phuntsok’s principal successors at Larung Buddhist Academy.<sup>15</sup> To complicate matters,

however, the method of implementation for the new ten virtues varies widely, since it has been left up to local monasteries to oversee the vows in their affiliated villages and clans (*sde ba, tsho ba*),<sup>16</sup> including tracking violations and enforcing punishments. Complicating matters further, the Monastic Association (*Dge 'dun mthun tshogs*) in Serta—constituted in 2010 to deal with a variety of monastic issues including ethical reform—formulated its own revision of the new ten virtues in 2013 for the thirty monasteries in Serta County.<sup>17</sup> When discussing the ten virtues, then, one has to ask which ten virtues: the traditional precepts from Buddhist canonical sources, the new ten virtues promulgated in 2008 by Larung Buddhist Academy, ad-hoc ethical precepts bestowed by Buddhist leaders and monasteries, or the revised ten virtues from 2013 being implemented by the Monastic Association in Serta County? The conflation of these has led to some confusion and misinformation on Tibetan-language blogs.<sup>18</sup> Even though the vows and their enforcement are supervised by local monastic authorities, blogosphere critiques tend to focus on the more visible and well-known figure, Tsultrim Lodrö

### The Secular Terms of Debate

The online debate over the new ten virtues erupted on multiple blogging websites in two major phases, sparked by events reported through anecdotes and images published online in November 2012 and August 2013 respectively. The first phase began with reports of monasteries enacting fines for violations of the new ten virtues and refusing funerary services to the families of violators. The second phase was set in motion by provocative photos of a public confession ceremony, which turned out to have no direct connection to Larung Buddhist Academy or the new ten virtues. By November 2013, Tibet Web Digest called the new ten virtues one of the most hotly debated topics on the Tibetan blogosphere during the previous year.<sup>19</sup> Drawing further attention to the issue, *High Peaks, Pure Earth* provided a translation into English of one of the key opinion pieces in the debate by Jamyang Kyi ('Jam dbyang skyid), a former newscaster who became a popular singer, feminist writer, and avid blogger, in which she champions the role of the secular intellectual in calling for freedom at times of religious dogmatism and repression.<sup>20</sup> Here I examine fifteen opinion pieces on the topic from the following Tibetan-language blogging websites: *Sangdhor* (*Seng rdor dra ba*, [www.sangdhor.com](http://www.sangdhor.com)) which has since been closed, *Amdo Tibet Blog* (*Mtsho sngon po zin bris*, [blog.amdotibet.cn](http://blog.amdotibet.cn)), *New Youth Network* (*Gzhon gsar dra ba*, [tbnewyouth.com](http://tbnewyouth.com)), *Gendun Chöpel Literary Network* (*Dge 'dun chos 'phel rtsom rig dra ba*, [www.gdqpxh.com](http://www.gdqpxh.com)), and the exile-based *Khabdha* (*Kha brda*, [www.khabdha.org](http://www.khabdha.org))

which is officially blocked in China. Cumulatively, there were approximately 25,000 visitors and/or readers for these opinion pieces in the Tibetan-language blogosphere and almost a thousand comments, with individual posts on the topic typically garnering between one and two thousand visits—a substantial number by standards on the Tibetan blogosphere.<sup>21</sup> Generally-speaking, bloggers and commenters include Tibetans who have received a secular education in minority universities (*minzu daxue*) in China, monastics or former-monks who pursued a traditional education in the monastery, and Tibetans educated and living abroad—remembering the caveat that exile readers have more access to the blog posts of those inside China than vice versa. Despite the locus of ethical reform being northern Kham, mainly Kandze Prefecture of Sichuan Province, it has generated interest among Amdo writers based in Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province, like Jamyang Kyi and Notreng (Rno sbreng), a secular intellectual and former monk. This indicates the significance of ethical reform as a fulcrum for debate over the role of religion in the public sphere, extending well beyond the locus of its implementation. In what follows, I carry out a survey and close reading of these blog posts to identify the key points of debate and the rhetorical strategies used by bloggers in critiques and defenses of the new ten virtues. Specifically, I analyze the secular terms through which clerical authority is criticized in the Tibetan blogosphere and several responses to this critique that address the polarizing tendency of online debate due to the circulation of misinformation and slander.

Secular critiques of the new ten virtues in the Tibetan blogosphere constellate around individual rights and freedom in raising the following issues: the perceived compulsory nature of the new ten virtues, the economic hardship for nomads of not selling livestock for slaughter, the need for free speech in public forums and fear of reprisals for speaking out against monastic authorities, and the harsh penalties reported for violators. An anticlerical tenor is evident in a number of blog posts that raise the specter of priestly corruption while challenging the authority of clerics to impose penalties on the laity and refuse them religious services. Yet it is notable that bloggers in this debate rarely question Buddhist values writ large or even the specific precepts of the new ten virtues—with the exception of not selling one's livestock for slaughter.<sup>22</sup> Instead, they focus on the implementation of the new ten virtues, criticizing the methods of punishing transgressors and by extension the scope of monastic authority. This bracketing off of Buddhist values may indicate a predicament on the part of bloggers who seek to resist the dominance of Buddhism in Tibetan society while also demonstrating their

loyalty to Tibetan culture. The anticlerical rhetoric on the Tibetan blogosphere has certain resonances with Chinese secularism, yet is by no means a matter of towing the party line. Bloggers on both sides of the debate over ethical reform are fiercely loyal to the common cause of preserving Tibetan culture and ethnic unity, while disagreeing about whether Buddhist ethical reform helps or harms that common cause. Indeed, the taint of communism—or the ‘red taint’ (*dmar po’i dri ma*) as one blogger puts it—is expressly used in a pejorative sense to discredit one’s opponent and ironically happens on both sides of the debate as illustrated in examples discussed below. This smear tactic is made possible by the relative anonymity of bloggers using pen names.

In terms of the role of digital technology in the process, it is clear that: (a) the debate has been incident-based, sparked by discrete events reported and disseminated rapidly through provocative anecdotes and images shared on social media and blogs, and (b) opinion pieces are hastily forged in response to these events and circulate online based, for the most part, on second- and third-hand accounts rather than personal testimonials or sustained research. As a result, hearsay and hyperbole have been able to flourish, what one monastic blogger refers to as an “endemic cycle of inciting discord.”<sup>23</sup> As I argue in what follows, the incident-based nature of this debate, structured around a series of provocations, tends to obscure the substantive issues of ethical reform, particularly the economic hardship to nomads of not being able to sell their livestock for slaughter. In tracing the arc of this online debate during its liveliest year, starting in November 2012, I chart the specific issues raised and the secular terms in which both the critique and defense of ethical reform are articulated. Following Campbell’s line of inquiry, I suggest that the online critique of clerical authority discloses a noteworthy, but circumscribed, leveling function of the Tibetan blogosphere.

### Leveling of Authority in Tibetan Cyberspace?

As a starting point, it is important to acknowledge that Tibetan-language blogging websites have provided a novel and significant space for secular critiques of the role of religion in Tibetan society. Such criticisms are generally taboo among Tibetans and marginalized to the realm of gossip, even though there has been an outspoken group of Amdo intellectuals based in the Chinese cities of Xining and Lanzhou, who decry the influence of religion on Tibetan society and seek to create a new secular culture. This group of ‘new thinkers’ have incubated their ideas under the influence of Western philosophy and the May 4th

Movement in China. The best known among them, writing under the pen name of Shokdung (Zhogs dung), regards religious belief as an ‘old and decaying tendency’ (*bag chags rnying rul*) that needs to be shed in order for Tibetans to modernize (Hartley 2002; Wu Qi 2013: 222–31). Secular intellectuals and bloggers can and do take real social risks in raising critiques of religion in a public forum, whether it be a newspaper, literary journal, or blogging website, particularly if they are well-known writers who cannot easily hide behind a pen name. The risk in criticizing clerics can be attributed in part to the traditional respect for Buddhist leaders, whether reincarnate lamas (*sprul sku*) or cleric-scholars (*mkhan po*), in Tibetan society. But it is also as an effect of more than sixty years of domination by the Chinese Communist state, whereby criticism of Buddhism can easily be misconstrued as a treacherous assault on Tibetan culture, already under siege. For this reason, those who criticize Buddhism online can be subjected to harsh comments.

Acknowledging the importance of Tibetan blogs in providing a space for social critique does not necessarily imply that the Internet fosters the democratization of authority, religious or otherwise. In addressing this issue, we must take into account the digital divide, characterized by greater access to the Internet in urban areas of China and exacerbated by low literacy rates among Tibetans in rural and nomadic areas. Even among educated Tibetans in China, many have completed their education beyond primary school in Chinese-medium schools and thereby have insufficient knowledge of literary Tibetan to read and write at an advanced level. Composing Tibetan literature has always been an elite practice, once the purview of monastics and the aristocracy, and now shared by Tibetans who have studied at minority universities in cities like Chengdu, Lanzhou, Xining, Lhasa and Beijing. Although writing a blog post may not require literary talent as such, apart from the proliferation of poetry and short stories online, it does still require strong writing skills. Further exacerbating the digital divide is the ‘great firewall’ of China, already mentioned, which impedes the transnational flow of discourse through blocking routine access to exile Tibetan blogs and new websites, though VPNs and proxy servers are available.<sup>24</sup>

The rise of Tibetan literary journals in the mid-1980s and the space they opened for self-expression and social critique among Tibetan intellectuals in the post-Mao era is well documented (Shakya 2008; Rabgey 2008), but the effects of the digital revolution on Tibetan writing has received less attention. There have been several targeted articles about the tragedy of self-immolations on the



Tibetan plateau as debated on exile Tibetan blogs (Rekjong 2012; Tsering 2012) and as expressed in coded fashion through poetry on Tibetan-language blogging websites in China (Robin 2012). More comprehensive studies to date on Tibetan uses of the Internet have been limited to Chinese-language websites (Rabgey 2008; Terrone 2010b) and exile websites and bulletin boards in English (Bray 2000; Brinkerhoff 2012; Helland 2014). Though rarely thematized in these studies, the linguistic register of online usage is important as Tibetans prefer their own language for certain topics, such as internal debates, potentially to avoid the gaze of outsiders.<sup>25</sup> Proliferating since the mid-2000s, Tibetan-language blogs have expanded the space for self-expression and social critique among educated Tibetans in China with more diverse content and less editorial restrictions than literary journals. Even so, once posted, the possibility of censorship and reprisals looms. Controversial posts can and do get removed after they gain widespread readership and come to the attention of state regulating authorities, including the blog posts by Jamyang Kyi and Notreng which sparked the two phases of online debate over the new ten virtues in November 2012 and August 2013 respectively.<sup>26</sup>

At a pioneering workshop on *Defining Tibetan Cyberspace* held at Columbia University in May 2015, scholars reflected on the degree to which digital media serve a democratizing or leveling function among Tibetans. Lama Jabb (Bla ma skyabs) emphasized that Tibetan cyberspace is multivocal and multilingual with no single authority holding the power to control meaning and representations, while Gedun Rabsal (Dge 'dun rab gsal) pointed out that Tibetan intellectuals, students and monastics can exchange opinions on relatively equal footing given the lack of social hierarchy in the layout of blogs. Popular blogging sites like *Amdo Tibet Blog*, *New Youth Network*, *Gendun Chöpel Literary Network* and the exile *Khabdha* are arranged in sections by topic, and the posts within each section are typically listed according to date or popularity.<sup>27</sup> This means that the layout of blogs contributes to an online leveling of hierarchies by not privileging specific categories of contributors. Nonetheless, markers of difference are evident in the photos and names of bloggers, which may indicate monastic or lay status as well as the gender of the author or commenter. In addition, the writing style of a given blogger (including grammar and spelling) signals their level of erudition and can influence the authority granted by readers to the opinions expressed in their blog posts. At the workshop, Françoise Robin pointed to the low presence of female Tibetan writers online (less than 5% of bloggers) and gave examples of gendered criticisms and sexual harassment in comments on blog posts by women, which discourage their

participation.<sup>28</sup> Thus blogs as a medium for Tibetan writing can serve to both level and reinforce hierarchies that are operative in offline contexts.

New social media platforms, such as Weibo (a microblogging site) and WeChat (an instant messaging mobile app) are more democratic than blogs, since video and voice features allow for greater participation among populations with low literacy.<sup>29</sup> However, as Lauran Hartley cautioned at the *Defining Tibetan Cyberspace* workshop, the popularity of Weibo and WeChat runs the risk of diminishing the online space for debate. Self-selection into affinity-based groups and the constraints on the amount of text on newer platforms means that opinions cannot be exchanged in much depth and communication is restricted to those who likely already share a similar perspective on issues. Yet even with the rise of Weibo and WeChat, the online debate over ethical reform on Tibetan-language blogging websites sustained the attention of numerous writers and thousands of readers over the course of a year. The bloggers who contributed spoke largely in secular terms as part of a new educated elite able to challenge the authority of religious figures in Tibetan society. With the exception of the prominent female writer Jamyang Kyi, most of the bloggers on this topic appear to be male, in line with the more general pattern of male-dominance in the Tibetan blogosphere. Overall, there have been more critiques of the new ten virtues than defenses published, though several defenses have been put forward, including at least two by monastics.

The cleric-scholar spearheading ethical reform, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö, has not responded directly online—though some of his oral remarks were posted to Khabdha in January 2016—despite having a strong web presence on Weibo and other microblogs.<sup>30</sup> When I asked him about this point in April 2015, the Khenpo stated that his ideas can be found in his published writings and speeches, so he feels no need to respond online.<sup>31</sup> Certainly his statement could be read as a rationalization to avoid dialogue with critics of the new ten virtues. Yet implicit in his statement may also be a relative valuation of modes of writing—the text being more authoritative than the blog. His hesitation to engage in the online blogosphere debate, whatever the rationale, calls into question the degree to which the Tibetan blogosphere can bring about a leveling function that would place those on both sides of the debate on equal footing. Buddhist leaders can remain aloof by opting not to participate in blogosphere debates, while Tibetan nomads are underrepresented owing to low literary rates. While a new elite of educated Tibetans avail themselves of the relatively unregulated space of the blogosphere to exchange ideas

and the recent post quoting Tsultrim Lodrö (discussed at the end of this article) indicates that he has been paying attention to online critiques, it is unclear whether the nomads who are most affected by the new ten virtues can and do tune in.

### Shutting the Dharma Doo

Though not the first blog post on the topic, what sparked the online controversy over the new ten virtues was a series of four incidents, described by the well-known blogger Jamyang Kyi and published on 4 November 2012. Jamyang Kyi publishes under the pen name Minduk (Smin drug) and was a regular contributor to the blogging site *Sangdhor* before it was closed down. Titled “Incidents Connected to the Ten Virtues Code,”<sup>32</sup> her blog post recounts in brief but vivid terms a series of four incidents involving harsh punishments to violators of the new ten virtues. Giving her blog post the quality of a report from the field, each incident is described in a short paragraph including the name of the individual and their clan. Jamyang Kyi refrains from comment and simply offers the incidents up to the scrutiny of her readers. Here is a translation of the most cited from the series, which shows the tenor of her blog post and the issues highlighted therein:

A man named Ramang Pema (Rwa mang Pad ma) from the Shotsang clan (Zho tshang gi tsho ba) sold off his livestock thereby transgressing the [ten] virtues code. Because of this, the dharma door was shut on him. Afterwards, one of his children died. He asked many times for the dharma door to be opened, but it did not open. In the end, not a single lama or monk arrived [to conduct a funeral] and, in anguish, he threw the child’s corpse into a river.<sup>33</sup>

In her account, Jamyang Kyi uses the term, ‘shut the dharma door’ (*chos sgo rgyab*), to indicate the denial of religious services to those who transgress their vows to adhere to the new ten virtues. Later in this article I will discuss responses to this and other issues raised by her blog post. For now, let us imagine the shock and dismay for Tibetan readers of someone being denied religious services for the funeral of a family member, with potentially devastating consequences for his or her future rebirth, as a result of the once-typical nomadic activity of selling livestock for slaughter. The other incidents she chronicles raise equally troubling issues, including fines exacted for violations, forcible confessions, and banishment. Whether or not these accounts are accurate—and verifying them would be difficult due to the limited information provided—they struck a chord online, and the readership of her post grew steadily over the year after its initial publication.

The wide circulation and overwhelming response to this post—with 9,700 views and 524 comments—shows the power of mediated witnessing in the digital age, whereby electronic media allow for certain types of stories and images to rapidly circulate and provoke either dismay or disbelief. In regimes of censorship, electronic media provide a crucial outlet for sharing information that otherwise does not circulate through mainstream news sources, which in China are state controlled. For example, the Chinese-language blog by dissident Tibetan writer Woesser (‘Od zer), *Invisible Tibet (Mthong mi thub pa’i bod, woesser. middle-way.net)* which uses a server outside of China,<sup>34</sup> provided essential information on the protests that swept across the Tibetan plateau from March 2008 in the lead up to the Beijing Olympics. Woesser continues to post information about sensitive and typically censored material, including protests, arrests, self-immolations, disasters, discrimination targeting Tibetans in China, and the impacts of state policy in Tibetan areas. In Jamyang Kyi’s blog post “Incidents Connected to the Ten Virtues Code,” while it is monastic rather than state dominance that is being challenged, its credibility relies on the new and valued role of the dissident blogger in Tibetan society. A personal friend of Woesser, Jamyang Kyi is a former television newscaster and journalist, who became better known as a popular singer in the late 1990s and as a feminist writer and public intellectual in the mid-2000s.<sup>35</sup> In 2008, she was jailed for sending text messages with information about the protests in Ngawa and later blogged about the harsh treatment she endured during her two months of incarceration.<sup>36</sup> Augmenting her standing, the writings of both these prominent female bloggers is disseminated via *High Peaks, Pure Earth*, a English-language website that publishes translations from Tibetan and Chinese of politically penetrating essays, songs and news by and about Tibetans in China.

Another critique of the new ten virtues on *Sangdhor* followed two days after Jamyang Kyi published her account of these four incidents. The main issue that she surfaced, the harsh punishments for violators of the new ten virtues, and the language of shutting the dharma door was picked up and elaborated on by another blogger named Chakrom (‘Khyags rom).<sup>37</sup> Referencing Jamyang Kyi by name as a ‘famous writer’ and repeating the account translated above, Chakrom further questioned the nature of punishments raised by her initial post. In particular, he queried why the ten virtues are referred to as tradition (*srol rgyun*) but implemented as if they were law (*khriims*), which can also mean ‘regulation’ or ‘code.’ In his estimation, a tradition is something voluntarily upheld by ordinary people without penalty or force, whereas a law is something imposed from above that requires punishment in order to gain compli-



ance. In its presentation by Larung Buddhist Academy, the new ten virtues are indeed referred to as tradition, harkening back to well-known antecedents of the canonical ten Buddhist virtues as well as the sixteen 'human mores' (*michos*) attributed to the seventh-century Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po).<sup>38</sup> The ideological work done by Tsultrim Lodrö in his short treatise, *An Explanation of the Ten Virtues Tradition*,<sup>39</sup> is precisely to ground the innovation of the new ten virtues in traditional Buddhist ethics. Nonetheless, in the summer of 2014, I heard the new ten virtues colloquially referred to as a regulation, code or law (*dge bcu'i khrims*), even when discussed positively in reference to the decline in local crime. Whether viewed as tradition or regulation, the implementation of the new ten virtues has become a focal point of debate due to incidents reported regarding harsh punishments for violators.

In his blog post, Chakrom also points to the economic hardship for nomads who lose their main source of income by vowing not to sell livestock for slaughter. In his estimation, the imposition of economic hardship contradicts the pure motivation (*kun slong gtsang ma*) expected of monks in benefitting sentient beings. Implicitly, he accuses monks of not caring enough about the fate of nomads, and he is not alone in this. Apart from the imposition of fines and punishments, the economic impact on nomads is a key point of contention as the new ten virtues spread beyond Serta to neighboring nomadic areas, though it tends to get overshadowed on the Tibetan blogosphere by the disturbing reports about the implementation of ethical reform. In fact, well before the issue of penalties arose, an anonymous blogger had already pointed out the economic hardship to nomads in a blog post dated to 5 November 2011 on *Amdo Tibet Blog*.<sup>40</sup> In a list of 'ten great disappointments' (*blo pham chen po bcu*) in relation to the new ten virtues, this blogger expressed concern over economic decline in nomadic areas as well as the threat to the nomadic way of life. He states, "Without concern for ordinary people's living conditions and long-term future, lamas and tulkus impose various Buddhist regulations on the faithful masses (*dad ldan mang tshogs*), threatening to eliminate Tibetan nomadism with its thousand-year history" (Anonymous, 5 November 2011). It is noteworthy that this anonymous blogger is the only critic in the debate (among the posts I located) who presents himself as an eyewitness to the effects of ethical reform. The blogger self-identifies as someone from Washul Serta (Dbal shul Gser rta), combining clan and place name, writing anonymously out of fear of reprisal.

Not only are Buddhist teachers seen as lacking sufficient concern for Tibetans by critics of ethical reform, Tibet-

ans are also disparaged for their blind faith, which is also the term for superstition (*rmongs dad*) in Tibetan. The anonymous blogger on *Amdo Tibet Blog* speaks of the 'bad custom' (*goms srol ngan pa*) of Tibetans who listen to the advice of lamas and believe them rather than improving their own standard of living. This same rhetoric can be found in another post on *Sangdhor* several months later on 16 May 2013 by blogger Ser Munsel (Gser mun sel) who expressed dismay over the handling of violations by lamas and monks and concern over the ensuing controversy as a threat to Tibetan unity.<sup>41</sup> This blogger casts the new ten virtues as an unnecessary burden on the laity due to monastic regulation, the suppression of dissent, and expulsion of transgressors from the moral community tied to local monasteries. In line with the views of 'new thinkers,' for Ser Munsel, this amounts to corruption that preys on the "blind faith in the mindstream of the masses" and a "gullibility in the national character of our Tibetan people."<sup>42</sup> Despite the anticlerical tenor of his critique, Ser Munsel expresses concern that the contentious nature of the new ten virtues and its implementation could create serious mistrust towards monks and doubts about the monastic system more generally. This implies this blogger's overall support for the monastic system with criticism reserved for its excesses.

### Anticlerical Rhetoric among Secular Critics

Anticlerical rhetoric constitutes a strong thread in the secular critique of the new ten virtues in the Tibetan blogosphere. This comes out clearly in Jamyang Kyi's second blog post on the topic, titled "The Impact of the Ten Virtues Code" and published on 27 November 2012 within a month of her initial post on the topic.<sup>43</sup> Here the central issue shifts from punishments for transgressions to freedom of speech with religion represented as both a repressive and regressive force in society. Jamyang Kyi pits intellectuals (*shes yon can*) against religious authorities by praising the former as defenders of freedom throughout human history and the latter as responsible for "the oppression of rigid traditions and strict religious codes that hinder [ordinary people's] desires and aspirations and curtail [freedom of] speech."<sup>44</sup> In this post, the intellectual stands for progressive ideas, while the 'holy ones' (*dam pa*) of Tibet, both reincarnate lamas and cleric-scholars, are deemed backward, trying to consolidate their own power to the detriment of society at large. Once again, there are key incidents around which she constellates her critique, the alleged suppression of dissent by Tulku Tendzin Dargyé (Sprul sku Bstan 'dzin dar rgyas) at a gathering of monastics in Serta and a subsequent series of forced confessions and pledges at his monastery's annual ceremony

to renew ethical vows. But even before describing these events, Jamyang Kyi raises the specter of corruption on the part of reincarnate lamas and cleric scholars—not as one or two corrupt individuals but categorically in an anticlerical vein—whom she accuses of “paying lip service to religion, while engaging in rotten behavior that is bound up internally in self-interest.”<sup>45</sup> Tendzin Dargyé is then introduced by way of these incidents in order to instantiate her sweeping claims about history in general and hindrances to progress for Tibetans in particular.

This type of secular criticism relies on the trope of priestly corruption that has a distinctive genealogy in Chinese secularism and casts Buddhist clerics as willfully misleading the faithful Tibetan masses.<sup>46</sup> Anticlericalism is deeply embedded in Chinese secularism, starting with the secularizing campaigns to destroy temples and convert them to schools from the late Qing through the Republican era (Ashiwa 2009; van der Veer 2011, 2013). By the Maoist period, this anticlerical ideology culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) with its rampant destruction of religious institutions and persecution of religious figures alongside other elites in struggle sessions. Blog-sphere critiques of ethical reform today routinely bleed into slanderous remarks that bear a strikingly resemblance to the Republican Era press characterizations of clerics as cunning and sexually debauched, misleading the illiterate and gullible masses (van der Veer 2011: 273). I have already mentioned the language of misleading the gullible masses in Ser Munsel’s blog post. With respect to sexual debauchery, the anonymous blogger from Serta accuses the Buddhist clerics spearheading the new ten virtues of imposing a strict ethical code on ordinary Tibetans while duplicitously eating meat and consorting with prostitutes on visits to inner China (Anonymous, 5 November 2011). This is precisely the kind of slander that tends to overshadow and detract from substantive debate.

In addition to invoking the trope of priestly corruption, for her part, Jamyang Kyi sees the strict imposition of Buddhist ethical norms as a kind of violence, or in her words, “propagating Buddhism through brutality” instead of through “non-violent activity to benefit others.”<sup>47</sup> One wonders here if Jamyang Kyi is intentionally drawing out the importance of non-violence within the new ten virtues (constituting half the precepts) to point out a hypocrisy in implementation. This issue comes out more overtly in a blog post discussed below, when Domé Bu (Rdo me ‘bud) accuses monks who issue harsh penalties of abandoning the precept of non-violence and thereby being no different from those that they punish.<sup>48</sup> Violence and oppression are themes in several posts in the online debate over ethical reform. Lamas and cleric-scholars are called “terrorists”

and characterized as wielding “influence with the bloody stench of brutality” and leading a “religious dictatorship.”<sup>49</sup> In portraying ethical reform as a forcible imposition on Tibetan nomads with local dissent suppressed, Jamyang Kyi champions the role of the secular intellectual in questioning the hegemony of religious elites. This takes quite a bit of daring in the Tibetan context with a populace that remains deeply devoted to Buddhist masters and readily equates criticism directed at Buddhism with conformity to Chinese Communist Party rhetoric and disloyalty to Tibetans as a people.

The lama implicated in the incidents described in both of Jamyang Kyi’s blog posts is Tendzin Dargyé, the head of Puwu Monastery in Serta, which had its own well-established ethical code for almost twenty years prior to the new ten virtues introduced in 2008 by Larung Buddhist Academy.<sup>50</sup> In 2010 Tendzin Dargyé became the principal figure in implementing the new ten virtues within Serta County by establishing the Monastic Association to oversee the activities of the thirty monasteries in Serta, and by serving as its chair in its initial years of operation. When asked about the issue of free speech, Tendzin Dargyé denied any dissent within the Monastic Association, so one is left to wonder whether these incidents happened as described and, if so, to what extent lamas were actively involved in or appraised about them. This points to an epistemic quandary for researchers and readers vis-à-vis the reliability of information in the blogosphere, which has not undergone a vetting or verification process.<sup>51</sup>

As a counterpoint, the blogger Bongdzi (Bong rdzi) published a critique of Jamyang Kyi’s views on 12 December 2012 in a post titled “Jamyang Kyi and the Ten Virtues Code.”<sup>52</sup> Though by no means a defense of the new ten virtues, he raises several cogent issues. First, since Jamyang Kyi is an avid woman’s rights advocate, he asks why she refuses to consider the possible benefits to women of the ten virtue’s stance against prostitution, gambling, and the consumption of alcohol. These are activities which, when married men engage in them, can cause considerable harm to the family through sexually-transmitted diseases, gambling debt, and domestic violence (though these social problems are by no means reducible to alcohol consumption). He also questions her implicit critique of clerical authority as authoritarian in her initial post regarding incidents of shutting the dharma door. In his view, according to democratic principles, any voluntary association can have rules, which, if violated, lead to expulsion from that association. He gives the example of sports teams that require their players not to consume alcohol and can expel players for non-compliance. While offering a thought-provoking counterpoint, Bongdzi indulges in his

share of mudslinging by referring to Jamyang Kyi as a Red Guard (*dmar srung dmag mi*) who seeks to ‘destroy the old’ (*rnying gtor*).<sup>53</sup> Continuing in this vein, he accuses Jamyang Kyi of being ignorant of democratic principles and simply spouting propaganda based on her former role as a television newscaster. As mentioned previously, association with the ‘red taint’ of communism is an important way for Tibetans bloggers to attempt to discredit an opponent in online debate, an unfortunate way that public discourse can turn into character assassination. According to Lama Jabb, Jamyang Kyi has effectively been silenced online by the array of negative comments and responses to her blog posts—at least for the time being.<sup>54</sup>

Bongdzi’s blog post also points to a distinction that needs to be made between the ethical principles encapsulated in the new ten virtues and the methods by which they are implemented. As already mentioned, the new ten virtues combine elements of a temperance movement with non-violence. Grounded in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, a scripture focused on lay Buddhist morality, strictures not to drink or gamble have been invoked in Buddhist temperance movements from Sri Lanka to Japan, endeavoring to reinstate Buddhist values for the purpose of social uplift in contexts of rapid modernization and/or colonialism.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, non-violence has been central to Tibetan articulations of their Buddhist identity in approaching political issues in the diaspora. While none of these precepts would be objectionable as something voluntarily undertaken, the question raised by secular critics has to do with coercion and enforcement. Yet, as Bongdzi points out, the new ten virtues in and of themselves do not prescribe a system for implementing, let alone enforcing, these precepts with fines and punishments for transgression. The implementation has been left up to individual monasteries to decide in conjunction with local leaders as they encourage their affiliated villages or clans to take up the new ten virtues.<sup>56</sup>

That said, the widespread implementation of the new ten virtues through mass vows, tracked and enforced by monastery officials, introduces an element of coercion that did not previously exist. Although households can and do opt out of subscribing to the ten virtues, we must recognize the potential social cost in not participating in the moral and ritual community tied to local monasteries. Unlike churches and denominations in North America or Europe, where an individual or family can easily decide to change congregation, in nomadic areas on the Tibetan plateau, villages and clans have been affiliated with a designated monastery for generations and cannot readily make such a change.

## Rekindling the Fire of the Cultural Revolution

The issue of coercion resurfaces in the second round of debate over the new ten virtues. It was set in motion by a disturbing series of photographs posted to Weibo, showing monks punishing thieves and gamblers at Kirti Monastery (Ki rti dgon) in Ngawa Prefecture.<sup>57</sup> The photographs show young Tibetan men lined up in a monastery courtyard with cardboard placards hanging down from their necks, naming their crimes. The placards visible in the photographs say either thief (*rkun ma*) or gambler (*rgyal ’jog*). The photographs are starkly reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, when ‘class enemies’ were publicly humiliated in struggle sessions and their political crimes written on placards hung from their necks. Except that in these photographs, Buddhist monks are shown presiding over the event with large crowds of nomads lining the courtyard as witness. These photographs circulated via Weibo and WeChat and the next day began to appear in the blogosphere with commentary. On 29 August 2013, no less than three blog posts were published on separate Tibetan websites: *New Youth Network*, *Amdo Tibet Blog*, and *Khabdha*.<sup>58</sup>

Though the photographs were taken at a monastery of the Geluk tradition with no association to Larung Buddhist Academy, they were hastily associated with Tsultrim Lodrö and the new ten virtues. An *Amdo Tibet Blog* post with the title “The Offenses Accumulated by Tsul-lo and the Propagators of the Ten Virtues” (using a nickname for Tsultrim Lodrö)<sup>59</sup> shows four photographs from the Weibo series with a poignant question or comment below each one.<sup>60</sup> The author whose English moniker is Stray Yak seems unaware that the events depicted took place at Kirti Monastery and focuses his comments instead on their resemblance to Cultural Revolution. Therein he bemoans the current plight of Tibetans under religious regulations, deemed stricter than state law. The main issue for this blogger is the severity of the punishments as depicted: “In general, gamblers are not good people, but to use such a method [of punishment] is overly excessive. Isn’t this offense contrary to the disciplinary code of the dharma?” (Stray Yak, 29 August 2013). Other bloggers followed a similar line of reasoning, suggesting that the offenses by the monks in enacting such a punishment is comparable to the offenses being punished, equally contravening Buddhist ethical principles.

Along these lines, a blogger on *Khabdha* named Domé Bu called this incident “the resurrection of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet” in a post titled “The Ten Virtues Code is Nearly Suffocating the Masses.”<sup>61</sup> There he accused the monks presiding over the event of being like ‘terrorists’ (*drag spyod pa*) who act contrary to the non-violence

espoused by the Buddha and thereby risk destroying the reputation of all Buddhist clerics. Specifically, he reprimands them for mistreating ordinary people on whom they ironically depend for support:

Recently in photographs spread on the Internet, if you look at the mood and expression of the monastic judges, they appear to have a vindictive manner toward those who transgressed the ten virtues as if they had killed their own mother or father. Is this the proper behavior of monks? In the case of Tibet, the monastic community has the highest degree of learning. What is there to say when they treat other types of people around them with scorn and disdain? In sum, what is the difference between good and bad with respect to those who violate the ten virtues and you who punish them? (Rdo me 'bud, 29 August 2013)

In this passage, Domé Bu shares his own impressions from viewing the images from Kirti Monastery circulating online and how they made him question the ethical behavior of monks as moral exemplars in society. Throughout the post, he addresses the monks involved directly, asking them not to create more suffering for Tibetans, already burdened by difficult living conditions.

The first commenter on his blog post echoed Domé Bu's concern by suggesting that monks should not interfere with activities of the laity. In this commenter's view, such interference is "a form of mixing the two, religion and politics, which are contradictory and incompatible."<sup>62</sup> Comments of this nature invoke a reading of Tibetan history that has become popular among the 'new thinkers,' who regard Buddhism as the cause of Tibet's decline and its susceptibility to domination by outside powers (Hartley 2002, Wu Qi 2013). Needless to say, this view aligns with Chinese Communist Party rhetoric that condemns the union of religion and politics (*chos srid zung 'brel*)<sup>63</sup> under the rule of Dalai Lamas as a "feudal serfdom under theocracy" that relegated Tibet to "poverty, backwardness, isolation and decline."<sup>64</sup> Given the multivalence of the term for politics (*srid pa*), which can also mean society and the temporal order as a whole, the blog comment to Domé Bu's post can also be read as a secularizing call to delimit the role of monastics in Tibetan society. When I showed this comment to Tsultrim Lodrö, he retorted that it is precisely the role of monastics to interfere with the laity and benefit society in a variety of ways—through education, moral guidance, traditional medicine and other domains of knowledge.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, many monasteries run schools, official and unofficial, for children to learn to read and write Tibetan, and monks have also been engaged historically as Tibetan medical doctors. Moreover, ethical extortions to the laity

have always been a mainstay monastic activity, a site where religious values clearly bleed into social life.<sup>66</sup> These opposing views highlight the fact that underlying debates about the new ten virtues is the larger question of the role of Buddhist monastics in contemporary Tibetan society and, as a corollary, the scope of clerical authority.

The third post on August 29th offers one of the most sustained and cogent critiques of ethical reform, asking in its title: "Who is Rekindling the Fire of the Cultural Revolution?"<sup>67</sup> One of the photos from Weibo, with a row of young Tibetan men bearing placards stating their crimes, occupied the top portion of the blog post, clearly prompting the question in its title. The post was written by Notreng, a former monk who joined the ranks of 'new thinkers' in viewing Buddhism as detrimental to freedom and progress; he is also the founder of the website *New Youth Network* on which this post was published.<sup>68</sup> In the strong anticlerical language of this post, Notreng accuses Tsultrim Lodrö and his associates of establishing a 'religious dictatorship' (*chos lugs pa'i sger gcod*) in nomadic areas. His critique focuses on what he perceives to be the compulsory nature of ethical reform, enacted through coercion and fines, which he compares to placing a yoke on the Tibetan masses. For this reason, Notreng advocates persuasion over enforcement and champions freedom of choice. Addressing Buddhist clerics directly, he states:

In general, whether or not someone liberates their livestock or whether or not they give up eating meat is their own individual affair. This [right] should not be plundered by a dharma association or other authority. However, you speak of love and compassion and at the same time covertly establish taxes. If we don't call something like this 'dictatorship,' what do we call it? If it's not the spirit of the Cultural Revolution, what is it? (Rno sbreng, 29 August 2013)

Although he seems to conflate the new ten virtues with vegetarianism, his basic point is that not selling yak for slaughter and not eating meat should be a matter of individual choice rather than mandated by religious authorities. To clarify, the new ten virtues promulgated by Larung Buddhist Academy asks nomads not to sell their livestock for slaughter, but does not forbid slaughtering livestock for one's own consumption and does not mention vegetarianism, though Tsultrim Lodrö is also a strong advocate for vegetarianism. For that reason, these issues tend to get conflated online

In this post, Notreng ties freedom of choice to the economic implications of adopting the new ten virtues, asking how nomads can survive, let alone pay medical and educational



bills, while being asked to give up their principal means of income. He puts the predicament poignantly as follows: “Without selling livestock, who will pay the medical bill to heal the problem when wife Tsomo is suffering from illness? Who will pay the tuition for the dear son Döndrup who is anxiously looking around the tent?”<sup>69</sup> Tying this economic question to the future of nomadic pastoralism on the Tibetan plateau, he asks: “If households sell all their livestock to be liberated, what should future generations of nomadic masses do as a livelihood? Are you advising them all to become monks and nuns and practice the essence of dharma?”<sup>70</sup> With these questions, Notreng points to the real tension between idealized ethical standards and the practicalities of living as a householder in nomadic areas.

While Notreng raises economic factors, the main thrust of his opinion piece is the issue of coercion and punishments for violators of ethical reform, which seem to be the lightning rod for the online controversy over the new ten virtues as a whole. Regarding the photographs he saw the day before on WeChat, as elsewhere, we get a window into the blogger’s first impressions: “When I saw those photographs on WeChat of a group of robbers and gamblers made to stand, draped with a placard around the neck, in the middle of a crowd of ordinary people and monks, while another was tied to a tree, my first reaction was: *This is the Cultural Revolution. This is the Catholic Inquisition*” (Rnobsreng, 29 August 2013, emphasis mine). Here one gets a sense for the visceral moment of seeing these images, which impelled him to call attention to the cruelty of such a public humiliation in front of a crowd. Notably, he acknowledges that the photos were taken at Kirti Monastery and that he is not sure if the incident is related to Tsultrim Lodrö. This shows a certain degree of self-reflexivity lacking in the other posts on that day, which recognizes epistemic uncertainties in relation to the origin and context of information circulating online.

Still, there is a mismatch between the pretext for his article, the release of photos from Kirti Monastery in digital media, and the brunt of his critique, Tsultrim Lodrö and the new ten virtues promulgated by Larung Buddhist Academy. This mismatch seems to undermine his credibility; as one commenter put it: “No one will listen to Notreng’s lies. This is Kirti Monastery in Ngawa. Ha ha ha!” Others followed suit in the comments to his blog post: “This is slander to our great Khenpo, who shines bright like a youthful moon in his activities for Tibetan religion and politics (*bod kyi chos srid*)” and “This is Kirti Monastery. I don’t think it has to do with Tshul-lo. Whether or not what you’re saying is true, you didn’t do your research well.”<sup>71</sup> Another blog post, several days later, by Jampal Dorjé (‘Jam dpal rdo rje)

discusses how the photographs from Kirti Monastery have been misused to criticize Tsultrim Lodrö and emphasizes that bloggers should be wary of making such criticism without knowing the facts of the situation.<sup>72</sup>

### The Endemic Cycle of Inciting Discord

The few defenses published online tend to correct misinformation and attempt to provide a more balanced view of the new ten virtues. The most systematic defense that I found on the Tibetan blogosphere is titled “The Actual Benefits of the Ten Virtues,” composed by a self-identified monastic from Serta named Yeshé Döndok (Ye shes don rtogs) and posted on the exile-based *Khabdha*.<sup>73</sup> His defense begins by citing the rampant deforestation in Tibetan areas and the disappearance of many wild animals from the Tibetan plateau, such as the Tibetan antelope, wild yak, wild ass and musk deer. This, he fears, will be the fate of yaks and other livestock given state pressures to develop animal husbandry for profit. Other bloggers fall on different sides of this issue. For example, Popa Thayé (Spobs pamtha’ yas) writes that Tibetans should protect yaks from being sent to market and slaughtered commercially, because they have become a symbol of the Tibetan people.<sup>74</sup> By contrast, Nyugtsé (Smyug rtse) makes the case that raising livestock for commercial purposes will not, in and of itself, lead to the extermination of the yak, citing the growing numbers of chickens and pigs raised commercially by the Chinese.<sup>75</sup> Alongside the issue of cruelty to animals in commercial slaughterhouses, for Yeshé Döndok and the monastic promoters of the new ten virtues, the loss of the yak (the male *g.yag* and its counterparts, the female ‘bri and yak-cow hybrid *mdzo*) would spell the end of the nomadic way of life, already threatened by state resettlement programs, and thereby the greater potential for assimilation to Chinese language and culture in urban settings.

Yeshé Döndok’s blog post goes a long way toward dispelling misinformation about the new ten virtues. He emphasizes the voluntary nature of engagement by describing how monastics conduct a vote and that those who decline to participate are not threatened or driven out of town. Moreover, the punishments are only for those households who decide to participate, take the vows, and later breach them. Offline, Tsultrim Lodrö made a similar point: that decisions on whether or not to undertake vows associated with the new ten virtues are made household by household, with a certain percentage of households declining to participate in each area.<sup>76</sup> In line with what the Khenpo has told me,<sup>77</sup> Yeshé Döndok states that any fines assigned for violating the ten virtues are dedicated to community facilities, such as schools, expressly not to



be used to support the living expenses of monastics or monastery building projects, unless they involve facilities designed specifically for the laity, such as circumambulatory temples (*skor khang*). Describing the more tangible benefits, Yeshé Döndok cites a notable decline in three areas: banditry at mountain passes in nomadic areas, loss of family wealth due to gambling, and fighting over the grasslands. Admitting that abuses in the implementation of the new ten virtues are possible,<sup>78</sup> Yeshé Döndok also warns against spreading rumors without first investigating their claims.

In response to the second wave of criticism, in a post titled “Redressing Tsultrim Lodrö,” a monk named Goyön (Sgyon) overtly calls for a more balanced discussion with regard to the new ten virtues.<sup>79</sup> His blog post was published on the *Gendun Chöpel Literary Network* on 17 September 2013, within a month of the online circulation of the photographs from Kirti Monastery discussed above, and garnered more than two thousand readers. Goyön begins his opinion piece by warning of the dangers of criticizing a ‘cultural icon’ (*rig gnas kyi brda mtshon*) like Tsultrim Lodrö in whom many have high esteem and faith, which runs the risk of “severely damaging and shattering the society’s faith.”<sup>80</sup> A self-confessed early critic of the new ten virtues, Goyön decided to write his defense in order to take a stand against the “endemic cycle of inciting discord” and advocate for more respectful and balanced online debate, especially with regards to those who have made a valuable contribution to Tibetan culture and society. In the extreme, Goyön points out that the Khenpo has been accused of having a “red taint,” being a “dictatorial and authoritarian propagator of the [Buddhist] teachings” and a “custodian of the remnants of the Cultural Revolution,” and “causing the ruin of Tibetan society and impediments to Tibetan livelihood.”<sup>81</sup> In his review of various forms of slander, once again we can see that the main way to discredit an opponent in debate in the Tibetan blogosphere is to associate him or her with the ‘red taint’ of communism—an ironic accusation for a Buddhist leader to say the least. As others before him, Goyön asks his readers to distinguish between the content of the new ten virtues and the excesses in its implementation, rather than blaming everything on Tsultrim Lodrö in such virulent terms.

Along similar lines, Tsultrim Lodrö has emphasized that critics of the new ten virtues tend to point fingers at people rather than shed light on substantive issues. As he said offline, regarding Jamyang Kyi and other blogosphere critics of the new ten virtues, “they focus on the person; they don’t focus on [their] endeavors.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, the debate devolves to finger-pointing and criticizing

particular individuals, largely the Khenpo himself. He continued, “On the Internet, all kinds of things are said: a lot of accusations made and criticisms waged.”<sup>83</sup> But he avers that this is done without much understanding or research: “These days, many who present criticism don’t understand the situation with regard to clerics. They write and post on the Internet without doing research.”<sup>84</sup> Examples he mentioned include the mistaken conflation of the Kirti Monastery photographs with the new ten virtues and a blog post by Jamyang Kyi about vegetarianism, which claims that the Khenpo is forcing nomads to become vegetarian to the great detriment of pregnant women and fetal health.<sup>85</sup> Yet, from his speeches in *Healing Medicine for Our Times*, it is clear that the Khenpo mainly encourages monks and nuns to become vegetarian, while asking the laity to give up meat only twice a month and on special holy days.<sup>86</sup> This shows how misinformation, alongside mudslinging, proliferates online.

Overall, Goyön hails Tsultrim Lodrö as a ‘twenty-first century monk’ (*dus rabs nyer gcig pa’i grwa ba*) attempting to revitalize Tibetan culture and improve people’s standard of living. Toward the end of his lengthy post, he reviews the Khenpo’s major accomplishments to date, including initiating a vegetarian movement directed primarily at monastics, campaigning to ban fur on the trims of traditional Tibetan coats, working to preserve the Tibetan language by creating a dictionary with neologisms in Tibetan for modern terms,<sup>87</sup> and campaigning for AIDS education and prevention for Tibetans. Notably, the Khenpo’s efforts to discourage wearing fur preceded the 14th Dalai Lama’s speech at the 2006 Kālacakra, which prompted fur-burnings across the Tibetan plateau,<sup>88</sup> and his promotion of vegetarianism began several years before the 17th Karma-pa made his appeal for vegetarianism at the 2007 Kagyu Mönlam in Bodh Gaya, India.<sup>89</sup> The Khenpo’s mobilization efforts on myriad fronts have had a tremendous impact, rendering him a leading cleric-scholar on the Tibetan plateau. The inauguration of the new ten virtues is thus just one of several movements that the Khenpo has spearheaded, suggesting that ethical reform remains in service of a broader agenda to preserve and reform aspects of Tibetan culture in response to rapid social change, such as increasing prostitution and the threat of AIDS. For this reason, Katia Buffetrille is perhaps too hasty in dubbing ethical reform as “an emergent Tibetan Buddhist fundamentalism” in her discussion of vegetarianism (2015: 113). This characterization runs counter to the Buddhist modernist perspective in writings by Tsultrim Lodrö and his predecessor, Jigmé Phuntok, as I have argued elsewhere (Gayley 2011, 2013).<sup>90</sup>

Indeed, in his attempt to synthesize religious and secular values in his 2004 work, *Timely Advice: A Mirror that Illuminates the Two Systems*,<sup>91</sup> Tsultrim Lodrö exhibits a modernist sensibility in orienting Buddhist practice towards a this-worldly rationalized system of ethics. In this work, which provides the ideological underpinnings of the new ten virtues, religion and the secular or worldly (*chos dang jig rten*) serve as two distinct but compatible vantage points that the Khenpo presents on social issues pertaining to contemporary Tibetan life. For example, in arguing against wearing fur, he makes a case from the religious point of view that one should not harm other living creatures for either food or clothing, but especially not for the vanity of fur trims on a traditional Tibetan coat. From the secular vantage point, he makes an economic argument based on the high cost of fur relative to the income of ordinary Tibetans, alongside an environmental argument exhibiting concern for rare species of animals whose pelts are illegally imported into China (Tshul khriims blo gros 2003-4, vol. 2: 261-5). The implication is that a 'lifestyle in accord with the dharma' (*chos dang mthun pa'i 'tsho ba*) improves one's situation in this life and the next, such that a single beneficial course of action becomes self-evident. Neither capitulating to the terms of Chinese modernity nor narrow-mindedly asserting Buddhist values, in his writings, Tsultrim Lodrö endeavors to harmonize religious and secular values, deemed to be equally relevant to social issues and public life.<sup>92</sup> Following in the footsteps of his predecessor Jigmé Phuntsok, he and other cleric-scholars at Larung Buddhist Academy are attempting to carve out a Buddhist vision of progress for Tibetans as a people (Gayley 2011, 2013). As one aspect of this vision, Tsultrim Lodrö promotes the visibility of Buddhism in the public sphere through ethical reform.

On 26 January 2016, as I was finalizing this article for publication, a post attributed to Tsultrim Lodrö appeared on the exile-based *Khabdha*, titled "To Maintain Equanimity is Worthwhile."<sup>93</sup> It quotes from a speech that the Khenpo made at Larung Buddhist Academy, but was posted online without his knowledge or consent. The post acknowledges a range of criticisms found on the Internet, having to do with the Khenpo's broad-based activities. Two criticisms, as noted in the translated excerpt below, have to do with his advocacy of compassion for animals,<sup>94</sup> though neither is explicitly related to the ten virtues. The former references the traditional practice of ransoming or liberating the lives of animals,<sup>95</sup> and the latter refers to the standard Buddhist precept not to kill, and only implicitly relates to the new ten virtues in terms of the economic hardships for Tibetan nomads who have lost their main source of income by not selling livestock for slaughter. The post opens as follows:

I've seen many things on the Internet, including numerous criticisms about me by others. Some suggest that ransoming the lives [of animals] is mistaken. Others suggest that creating the dictionary [of Tibetan neologisms] is mistaken. Still others suggest that AIDS prevention is mistaken, that it is not a monk's concern. Critics disapprove [in other ways] as well. When I say that it's not appropriate to take the life of an animal, there are even cleric-scholars and monks who repudiate me, stating that it's necessary to allow slaughter (Tshul khriims blo gros, 26 January 2016).

One wonders here if the Khenpo is responding to a recent critique by Pema Tsering, a cleric-scholar from Lhasa, which has circulated via WeChat since 24 July 2015 and was published in translation on *High Peaks, Pure Earth* on 19 January 2016.<sup>96</sup> Pema Tsering characterizes the new ten virtues as a movement informed by a "dictatorial sentiment" (*sger gcod kyi bsam pa*) without adequate consideration of the economic or living conditions (*dpal 'byor gnas, 'tsho gnas*) of Tibetan nomads. As others before him, he criticizes monastic implementation of ethical reform through collecting signature and enforcing punishments, citing specifically "threats [that] involve the possibility of cutting out all relationships with local monasteries including the performance of funeral rites."<sup>97</sup> His critique rehearses a number of points that I have traced throughout this article, yet Pema Tsering constructs his case far more cogently and with greater civility than others. In a less common stance, he also critiques the traditional practice of liberating yak, popularized in recent years by numerous Tibetan lamas but for which Tsultrim Lodrö is particularly well-known.<sup>98</sup> Pema Tsering cites the potential for overgrazing on the grasslands given the current fragility of Tibetan ecosystems. Overall his critique is well formulated, significantly advancing the discussion, yet it repeats a common error: that the new ten virtues forbid Tibetans from slaughtering livestock for their own consumption. One wonders if this incongruity is the result of misinformation circulating on the Internet or if Tibetan nomads on the ground are getting a different message than initially set forth in the 2008 formulation of the new ten virtues. In his remarks, Tsultrim Lodrö concludes by cautioning his audience against emotionality (*chags sdang*) and harsh speech (*tshig ngan*) that foments debate, asking them to maintain unity (*mthun sgril*), non-sectarianism (*ris med*), and equanimity (*btang snyoms*). What he does not do, given that the Khenpo did not intend for his remarks to appear online, is address the substantive issue of economic losses to Tibetan nomads from not selling livestock for slaughter.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have surveyed the main concerns expressed in the online controversy over Buddhist ethical reform in the Tibetan blogosphere, focused on the liveliest year of debate. As we have seen, these concerns are predominantly secular in nature, having to do with perceived infringements on individual rights and freedom, such as the potentially coercive nature of ethical reform, the severity of penalties for transgressors, and the economic impact on nomadic households with limited means of livelihood. I have argued that the latter concern tends to get overshadowed by the provocative incidents involving penalties, which sometimes prove to bear no relation to the new ten virtues. While the Tibetan-language blogosphere opens up a novel and significant space for the secular critique of Buddhist clerical authority, it only partially serves a leveling function in Heidi Campbell's terms. This is due to the digital divide favoring online access for educated Tibetans living in urban settings and exacerbated by the 'great firewall' of China that creates a barrier to transnational discourse. Who is missing from this blogosphere debate? While monastics have participated, the figureheads of ethical reform, Tsultrim Lodrö and Tendzin Dargyé, have not engaged (of their own accord) in online debates, undermining the democratizing potential of the blogosphere. While women have also participated, especially in commenting, the most prominent female voice in the debate, Jamyang Kyi, fell silent in the wake of negative comments. In conspicuously short supply have been Tibetan nomads from regions where the ten virtues are being implemented. Except for the anonymous blogger from Serta, most other bloggers have reported or responded to stories heard, blog posts read, or images seen on Weibo and WeChat. The debate over the new ten virtues would be greatly enriched by a diversity of voices, especially those who experience its effects firsthand. Ethical reform has controversial features with high stakes for the future of the nomadic way of life on the Tibetan plateau, yet as Goyön cautions, a more balanced picture is needed, one that elucidates the complexities of its ideological underpinnings, modes of implementation, and ongoing effects in nomadic areas of Kandze Prefecture where it has mainly spread. Given the prevalence of misinformation and mudslinging, whether the Tibetan blogosphere can become a forum for more constructive and substantive debate on this issue remains to be seen.

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The author would like to express appreciation to the Buddhist leaders who took the time to meet and discuss the new ten virtues between 2011 and 2015, especially Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö and Tulku Tendzin Dargyé. This article about debate over ethical reform in the Tibetan blogosphere would not have been possible without the initial input of Tsering Shakya and Françoise Robin, who shared links to seminal blog posts on this topic. Thanks to Dolma Kyab, the research assistant for this project who spent many tireless hours sorting through Tibetan blog posts and comments; to Professor Padmatso who helped with interviews in 2014 as she and the author embarked on a related collaborative research project; to colleagues at the pioneering conference on *Describing Tibetan Cyberspace* held at Columbia University in May 2015 who sketched a rough chronology of Tibetan-language Internet usage and raised several of the issues discussed in this article; and finally to Françoise Robin, Nicole Willock, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful suggestions on the penultimate version of this article.

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## Endnotes

1. In "Newtibet.com: Citizenship as Agency in a Virtual Tibetan Public," a pioneering study of Tibetan blogs, Tashi Rabgey (Bkra shis rab dga') charts the rise and fall of newtibet.com, a Chinese-language blog that self-consciously styled itself for Tibetan users as a public forum for "the social critique of contemporary Tibet" (2008: 334). In "Fire, Flames and Ashes: How Tibetan Poets Talk about Self-Immolations without Talking about Them," Françoise Robin analyzes how Tibetans use coded language to represent and reflect on the escalating phenomenon of self-immolations in poetry on the Tibetan blogosphere (2012).
2. For example, popular news and blogging sites that are blocked in China include the blogging site *Khabdha* (*Khabdha*, <khabdha.org>) and new sites such as *Phayul* (*Phayul*, <phayul.com>) and the *Tibet Times* (*Bod kyi dus bab*, <tibettimes.net>) as tested on 26 October 2015 using <en.greatfire.org>, which includes a list of past reports dating back to 2012.

3. See two short articles about online debates over self-immolation on exile websites by Dhondup Tashi Rekjong (Rig 'byung Don grub bkra shis) in the April 2012 issue of *Cultural Anthropology Online* on "Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet," edited by Carole McGranahan and Ralph Litzinger (2012), and by Chung Tsering (Chung tshe ring) in the December 2012 issue of *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, edited by Katia Buffetrille (2012).
4. See Terrone 2010b for a discussion of the Chinese-language websites of several leading Buddhist figures from eastern Tibet and, as a corollary, Helland 2014 for a typology of Tibetan exile websites in English.
5. For more about Larung Buddhist Academy, or more formally Serta Larung Buddhist Academy of the Five Sciences (Gser thang bla rung dgon rig lnga'i nang bstan slob grwa) and its founder Khenpo Jigmé Phuntsok (Mkhan po 'jigs med phun tshogs), see Germano 1998, Terrone 2010a, and Gayley 2011.
6. For example, the biography of Namtrul Jigmé Phuntsok (Nam sprul 'jigs med phun tshogs) and Khandro Tāré Lhamo (Mkha' 'gro Tā re lha mo), who rebuilt and lived at Nyenlung Monastery (Snyan lung dgon) in Serta, mentions the couple giving ad-hoc vows and ethical exhortations to the laity on ritual occasions as early as 1985 (Pad ma 'od gsal mtha' yas 1997: 60–61). Meanwhile, Tulku Tendzin Dargyé (Sprul sku Bstan 'dzin dar rgyas), the founder of the Monastic Association in Serta discussed below, mentioned that his own home institution, Puwu Monastery (Phu'u dgon), has a longstanding tradition of upholding an ethical code among its lay constituents which he revived in the 1980s. Interview in July 2014, conducted with Padmatso (Padma 'tsho).
7. Mkhan po 'jigs med phun tshogs c. 1995. See Gayley 2011 for a study of this work, which has periodically been republished, and the connection between ethics and cultural preservation within it.
8. *Chos rje dam pa yid bzhin nor bu dgongs pa chos dbyings su bsdu te/ lo 'khor gsum lon pa'i rjes dran ched bsgrigs* [Compilation Commemorating the Three Year Anniversary since the Dissolution into Dharmadhātu of the Dharma Lord, Wish Fulfilling Jewe : Set of two VCDs, including speeches by Khenpo Jigmé Phuntsok and songs dedicated to his memory]. No publication information, c. 2007.
9. Rioting was mainly focused in Lhasa, the capital city of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Robert Barnett discusses the contradictory reporting on this wave of protests in the *New York Times* article, "Two Realities of Tibet," published on March 21, 2008.
10. Elsewhere I discuss the ideological backdrop of the new ten virtues (Gayley 2013); here I focus on debates over its implementation on the Tibetan blogosphere.
11. This list comes from a handout on "The Tradition of Ten Virtues Promulgated by Serta Larung" (*Gser ljongs bla ma rung gis gtan la phab pa'i dge bcu'i lugs srol*) dated to the earth rat year (2008–2009). There is also a text of the same name which explains the new ten virtues (see 'Phrin las c. 2010). I would like to express my appreciation to Gaerrang (Kabzung, Skal bzang) for sharing copies of the handout and text with me.
12. The new ten virtues bear more resemblance to the traditional *upāsaka* vow and the ethical guidelines for laity outlined in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*. In terms of overlap, the four precepts related to non-violence toward animals and humans could be viewed as an extension of the first traditional Buddhist precept not to kill. Not consorting with prostitutes is related to the third precept not to engage in sexual misconduct, though traditionally the emphasis was on adultery rather than prostitution. Not stealing is the only precept that is identical in the traditional and new ten virtues. Tendzin Dargyé noted that the new ten virtues are a simplification of the traditional ones by reducing their scope to the physical level (interview in July 2014).
13. On the issue of fighting over the grasslands in nomadic areas, see Emily Yeh 2003.
14. As of 2014, this ethical reform movement had spread mainly in Kandze Prefecture of Sichuan Province, including Serta, Nyarong, Drango, Tawu and Dartsedo with limited activity in Dzachukha, Dege and Payul and also a few pockets beyond that including Yushu in Qinghai Province and Dzamthang in Ngawa Prefecture of Sichuan Province. Interview with Tsultrim Lodrö in June 2014, conducted with Padmatso.
15. To list just a few of his writings and transcribed speeches with an emphasis on Buddhist ethics, see Tshul khrims blo gros. 2003–4, 2012a and 2012b.
16. The social formations in nomadic regions of Amdo and Kham are typically viewed as tribal groupings based on a shared notion of common ancestry (Eckvall 1968: 28–9), whether through actual kinship or mythological origin accounts. More specific terms for these social formations include "clan-based tribal groups" (Horlemann 2002) and "segmentary tribal groups" (Pirie 2005), though Horlemann suggests that territoriality supersedes ancestral ties in these groupings. Nonetheless, I prefer the term 'clan' to 'tribe' due to the latter's negative connotation and association with the primitive.
17. Interview with the current heads of the Monastic Association, Khenpo Tsephun (Tshe phun) and Wangchuk Tsegyur (Dbang phyug tshe 'gyur), in June 2014, conducted with Padmatso.



18. For example, in Jamyang Kyi's initial post on the topic, the fourth and final incident, involving three men who were banished after being accused of stealing a sacred object out of a *stūpa*, is dated to 2007 before the formalization of the new ten virtues by Larung Buddhist Academy (Smin drug, 4 November 2012). Nevertheless, the punishment in this incident was picked up by another blogger to stand for the new ten virtues as a whole. See Brtan skar, 27 July 2013; this blogger also goes by the moniker Star-R.
19. Dhondup Tashi Rekjong, 5 November 2013.
20. See <[highpeakspureearth.com/2014/the-impact-of-the-so-called-ten-virtues-by-jamyang-kyi/](http://highpeakspureearth.com/2014/the-impact-of-the-so-called-ten-virtues-by-jamyang-kyi/)>, published on 22 May 2014 and accessed on 29 May 2014.
21. Given the controversial nature of the topic, several of these blog posts were subsequently removed from circulation. While I was able to recover the original entry in each case, unfortunately comments are generally not preserved on Internet archive services.
22. Gaerrang has done a study on the “slaughter renunciation movement” as an independent phenomena from the new ten virtues, tracing its evolution and debates about it on the ground in the village of Rakor in Dzamthang County. See Gaerrang 2012 and 2015.
23. Sgo yon, 17 September 2013. This could more literally be translated “an endemic back and forth between those who incite discord” (*phun tshun dbyen dkrugs slong ba'i las rtsom mkhan bdo ba*).
24. Within China, VPNs and proxy servers can be used to access blocked sites, but it would be difficult to assess how many Tibetans have access to these and routinely use them.
25. Tsering Shakya (Tshe ring shā skya), comment at the Defining Tibetan Cyberspace workshop at Columbia University on May 1–3, 2015.
26. Smin drug, 4 November 2012 and Rno sbreng, 29 August 2013.
27. These sites have integrated homepages featuring new posts and menus with sections such as news (*phrin gсар*), culture (*rig gnas*), education (*slob gso*), and literature (*rtsom rig*) as well as discussion (*gleng brjod*) and debate (*brgal brtag*). The actual names of sections vary on each blog site, and some sites also serve as a host for the blogs of individual writers, customized to varying degrees.
28. Françoise Robin, “The Tibetan Internet: Ladies Last?,” presentation at the Defining Tibetan Cyberspace workshop (2015).
29. Released in 2009, Weibo is a microblogging site that combines elements of Twitter and Facebook, both which are blocked in China. It is designed for publishing a small amount of text with embedded links, images and (most recently) video. Launched in 2011, WeChat is a mobile phone app using text and voice messaging; it has the capacity to share both images and videos to a circle of friends or subscribers to a public account.
30. Tsultrim Lodrö has a least four websites dedicated to him: his micro-blog in Chinese, <[www.weibo.com/cichengluozhu](http://www.weibo.com/cichengluozhu)>; his microblog in Tibetan, <[www.weibo.com/cclzzw#\\_rnd1430407427438](http://www.weibo.com/cclzzw#_rnd1430407427438)>; his blog in Chinese, <[blog.sina.com.cn/u/1397323170](http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/1397323170)>; and a website named after his book series in Chinese, <[www.huidengzhiguang.com/index.shtml](http://www.huidengzhiguang.com/index.shtml)>. Thank you to Sherab Wangmo (Shes rab dbang mo) for identifying these.
31. Interview with Tsultrim Lodrö in April 2015, conducted with Dolma Kyab (Sgrol ma skyabs). The Khenpo has two main works that provide the ideological backdrop for the new ten virtues: *Timely Advice: A Mirror that Illuminates the Two Systems* (*Dus su bab pa'i gtam lugs gnyis gsal ba'i me long*) in Mkhan po Tshul khirms blo gros 2003–4 and *An Explanation of the Tradition of Ten Virtues* (*Dge bcu'i srol gyi rnam gzhaq*) in Mkhan po Tshul khirms blo gros c. 2012b. While publications out of Larung Buddhist Academy tend to have a limited circulation, both these works can be found as e-books at <[www.tibetanebook.com](http://www.tibetanebook.com)>.
32. Smin drug, 4 November 2012. The blogging website has since been closed.
33. Smin drug, 4 November 2012. Here I have revised the translation provided by Dhondrup Tashi Rekjong on *Tibet Web Digest*, published 5 November 2013. This incident is also cited in ‘Khyags rom, 6 November 2012. Unless otherwise indicated, all other translations in this article are the result of my collaboration with Dolma Kyab, who served as research assistant for this project.
34. According to Irina Garri's presentation on Internet dissent at the *Defining Tibetan Cyberspace* workshop (2015), Woesser's blogs repeatedly faced closures until she switched to an American server. Since 2008, <[woesser.middle-way.net](http://woesser.middle-way.net)> has been blocked in China.
35. The dating for Jamyang Kyi's emergence to visibility in these various guises is thanks to a personal communication from Françoise Robin.
36. See “‘They’ By Jamyang Kyi” on *High Peaks, Pure Earth* <[highpeakspureearth.com/2008/they-by-jamyang-kyi](http://highpeakspureearth.com/2008/they-by-jamyang-kyi)> (accessed 6 May 2015).
37. ‘Khyags rom, 6 November 2012. This post received 1202 views and 4 comments.



38. These antecedents are mentioned in ‘Phrin las c. 2010 and *Dge bcu’i srol gyi rnam gzhag* in Mkhan po Tshul khriims blo gros c. 2012b.
39. *Dge bcu’i srol gyi rnam gzhag* in Tshul khriims blo gros, c. 2012b.
40. Anonymous, *Deng dus kyi dge bcu’i khriims gсар ba las byung ba’i blo pham chen po bcu*, posted to *Amdo Tibet Blog* on 5 November 2011. Given its publication nearly a year before Jamyang Kyi sparked a widespread online debate on the topic, this post received a modest 317 views and 7 comments.
41. Gser mun sel, 16 May 2013. This post received 1099 views and 86 comments.
42. Gser mun sel, 16 May 2013. The Tibetan for these phrases reads: *mi dmangs mang tshogs gyi rgyud kyi rmongs dad* and *nga tsho’i bod kyi blun rmongs mi rigs kyi rang gshis*.
43. Smin drug, 27 November 2012. I would like to express my appreciation to the editors of *High Peaks, Pure Earth* who shared the original post with me. It initially received 1697 views and 66 comments and later gained widespread attention due to its translation and publication on *High Peaks, Pure Earth* on 22 May 2014 after the original had disappeared from the Internet.
44. Smin drug, 27 November 2012. Translation modified from *High Peaks, Pure Earth* (see note 20 above). The Tibetan reads: *gu dog pa’i sgrig srol dang/ dbang btsan pa’i chos khriims kyi btsir gnon ‘og ‘dod ‘dun bkag cing smra sgo gcod pa...* Interestingly, Jamyang Kyi categorizes the Buddha as a freedom-loving intellectual alongside Jesus and Socrates.
45. Smin drug, 27 November 2012. The Tibetan reads: *kha chos lugs la g.yar zhing khog rang don la bcol ba’i rul song gi bya spyod*.
46. There is also a longstanding Tibetan tradition among iconoclastic Buddhist teachers of criticizing corruption and hypocrisy among their own ranks.
47. Smin drug, 27 November 2012. The Tibetan for these phrases is: *gdug rtsub kyis nang chos spel* and *‘tshе med gzhan phan gyi spyod*.
48. Rdo me ‘bud, 29 August 2013.
49. These phrases come from three different sources: “terrorists” (*drag spyod pa*) in Rdo me ‘bud, 29 August 2013; “influence with the bloody stench of brutality” *gdug rtsub kyi khrag dri bro ba’i kha dbang*) in Smin drug, 27 November 2012; and “religious dictatorship” (*chos lugs pa’i sger gcod*) in Rno sbreng, 29 August 2013.
50. The information in this paragraph primarily comes from an interview with Tendzin Dargyе in July 2014.
51. This issue is taken up in Tashi Rabgey 2008.
52. Bong rdzi, 12 December 2012. There were 1063 readers and 16 comments.
53. This is a reference to the Cultural Revolution campaign to destroy the so-called ‘four olds,’ namely old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits.
54. Lama Jabb, comment at the *Defining Tibetan Cyberspace* workshop at Columbia University on May 1–3, 2015.
55. On the temperance movement in early twentieth-century Sri Lanka, see Bond 1992: 61–7 and De Silva 1981: 374–8. On the Buddhist temperance association, Hanseikai, established in 1886 during Japan’s Meiji Restoration, see Thelle 1997: 199–202.
56. Although Tsultrim Lodrö is the ideological force behind the new ten virtues, he is not involved in its implementation. As he explained in an interview in April 2015, this is because Larung Buddhist Academy is an ecumenical Buddhist institute rather than an ordinary monastery with associated villages or clans.
57. In a comment at the the *Defining Tibetan Cyberspace* workshop, Tsering Shakya mentioned that Kirti Monastery lost a degree of popular support in the wake of this incident and the Internet controversy it sparked.
58. The three to be discussed below are Rno sbreng, 29 August 2013; Stray Yak, 29 August 2013; and Rdo me ‘bud, 29 August 2013.
59. In Golok and surrounding regions, it is common to call religious figures by nicknames that combine the first syllables of their name (in this case, Tsul from Tsultrim and Lo from Lodrö).
60. Stray Yak, 29 August 2013. It received 2475 views and 24 comments.
61. Rdo me ‘bud, 29 August 2013. This post has 19 comments and an unknown number of readers. The Tibetan for the cited phrase is: *bod na rig gnas gсар brje ro langs*. The term *ro langs* is commonly used to refer to zombies.
62. This comment was posted on 29 August 2013 by Rgyang mig.
63. On the term, *chos srid zung ‘brel*, see Dung dkar blo bzang ‘phrin las 1981 and Christoph Cüppers 2004.
64. China White Paper on “Fifty Years of Democratic Reform in Tibet.” Beijing: Information Office of the State

- Council of the People's Republic of China, 2009. Available online at <[http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2009-03/02/content\\_17359520.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2009-03/02/content_17359520.htm)> (accessed 5 May 2015).
65. Interview with Tsultrim Lodrö in April 2015.
66. Indeed, there are numerous pre-modern treatises arguing against drinking, smoking and gambling as well as intermittent appeals for vegetarianism. See, for example, *Sha chang tha ma kha sogs kyi nyes dmigs phyogs bsdus* (2003) for a compilation of ethical exhortations to abandon eating meat, drinking alcohol, and smoking tobacco. On vegetarianism, see Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol 2004 and Geoff Barstow 2013.
67. Rno sbreng, 29 August 2013. This post received 1818 readers and 58 comments; it has since been removed.
68. Personal communication from Françoise Robin, who kindly forwarded the link for this blog post to me.
69. Rno sbreng, 29 August 2013. The issue of how nomads can pay for medical care if someone in their household gets ill is an important one, raised more recently in stark terms in a short story by Akyab Dargyé (A skyabs dar rgyas), titled “Black Yak” (*G.yag rog rog*), posted to *Butter Lamp: Tibetan Literary Network* (*Mchod me Bod kyi rtsom rig dra ba*) on 26 March 2015. Thank you to Huatse Gyal (Dpa' rtse rgyal) for sharing the link for this story and to Tsewang Dorjé (Tshe dbang rdo rje) for collaborating on the translation of and research about this short story, serving as the focal point of a presentation, “Black Yak: Narrating the Economic Toll of Buddhist Ethical Reform on Tibetan Nomads,” at Himalayan Studies Conference IV at the University of Texas, Austin on February 25–28, 2016.
70. Rno sbreng, 29 August 2013. Liberating lives (*tshe thar*) is a customary practice, whereby a fee (usually a lower price than the market value) is paid to the owner to ensure that the animal will never be sold for slaughter.
71. These are comments #58, #26 and #20 respectively.
72. 'Jam dpal rdo rje, 5 September 2013.
73. Ye shes don rtogs, 26 June 2012. It had 29 comments and an unknown number of readers.
74. Spobs pa mtha' yas, 1 September 2013.
75. Smyug rtse, 3 September 2013.
76. Interview with Tsultrim Lodrö in June 2014. Also in June 2014, the current heads of the Monastic Association, Khenpo Tsephun (Tshe phun) and Wangchuk Tsegyur (Dbang phyug tshe 'gyur), showed me sheets with the thumbprints of vow-takers for the thirty monasteries in Serta County.
77. Interview with Tsultrim Lodrö in May 2011.
78. Tsultrim Lodrö made the same point in an interview in June 2014: that there may well be shortcomings (*skyon cha*) with the implementation of ethical reform, with some monasteries doing it well and others being too extreme (*ha cang thal che*).
79. Sgo yon, 17 September 2013. It had 2681 readers and 43 comments as of May 2015.
80. Sgo yon, 17 September 2013. The Tibetan for this phrase reads: *spyi tshogs gyi dad mos la phog thug dang gtor bcom tshabs chen gtong*.
81. Sgo yon, 17 September 2013. The Tibetan for these phrases is: *dmar po'i dri ma, sger gcod dbang 'dzin gyi bstan pa spel mkhan, rig gsar gyi lhag ma skyong mkhan, and bod mi'i spyi tshogs la phung dkrugs dang 'tsho bar bar chad byas*.
82. Interview with Tsultrim Lodrö in June 2014. The Tibetan for this statement is: *kho rang tshos bya ba de la kha gtad gin mi 'dug/ mi la kha gtad byed gin 'dug*.
83. Interview with Tsultrim Lodrö in June 2014. The Tibetan for this statement is: *dra thog nas 'dra mi 'dra mang po bshad gin red/ des skyon brjod mang po byas/ dgag pa mang po brgyag*.
84. Interview with Tsultrim Lodrö in June 2014. The Tibetan for this statement is: *deng sang dper na dra ba'i thogs la gnas tshul ha ma go bar dgag pa brgyag mkhan mang po dug/ de khong tsho go tshad la zhib 'jug ma byas par bris nas dra thog la bzhang pa red*.
85. In an interview in June 2014, Tsultrim Lodrö was particularly animated when discussing a blog post by Jamyang Kyi on vegetarianism (Smin drug, 24 June 2013), which has been translated and discussed in Buffetrille 2015. The Khenpo pointed to specific passages in a collection of his speeches, *Healing Medicine for Our Times* (*Dus rabs kyi gsos sman*) in Mkhan po Tshul khirms blo gros c. 2012a, that contradict her presentation of his views.
86. For examples, see the Khenpo's speeches on “Monks, Won't you Consider Giving up Eating Meat?” (*Dge 'dun pas sha rtsa ba nas mi za rgyu e yong lta dgos*) in Mkhan po Tshul khirms blo gros c. 2012a, p. 306–7 and “The Need to Eat Less Meat” (*Sha nyung za dgos*) and “Request not to eat Meat at Certain Times” (*Dus tshigs la sha mi za bar skul ba*) in Mkhan po Tshul khirms blo gros c. 2012a, p. 190–1 and 218–9 respectively.
87. *Rgya bod dbyin gsum gsar byung rgyun bkol ris 'grel ming mdzod*. Chengdu: Sichuan Minorities Publishing House, 2007.
88. See Yeh 2013 on the fur-burning incidents across the Tibetan plateau in 2006.

89. See Gayley 2013 for more information about these efforts by Tsultrim Lodrö.

90. Works of advice to the laity by cleric-scholars at Larung Buddhist Academy that have a modernist bent include: 'Jigs med phun tshogs 'byung gnas, c. 1995; Rig 'dzin dar rgyas, c. 2004; Tshul khrims blo gros 2003–2004, and Tshul khrims blo gros c. 2012.

91. *Dus su bab pa'i gtam lugs gnyis gsal ba'i me long* in Mkhan po Tshul khrims blo gros 2003–2004.

92. For a robust discussion of religion and the secular by the Khenpo, see *An Examination of the Integration of Religion and Society (Chos srid zung 'jug la dpyod pa)* in Mkhan po Tshul khrims blo gros c. 2012b.

93. Tshul khrims blo gros, 26 January 2016. The content was emailed to one of the *Khabdha* editors for posting by someone signing as Khenchen Lama (Mkhan chen bla ma). My thanks to Padmatso for checking with Tsultrim Lodrö to verify that the post reflects his own oral remarks, even though they turn out to have been shared without his consent or knowledge.

94. I discuss the Khenpo's advocacy of compassion for animals in more detail in "The Compassionate Treatment of Animals: A Contemporary Buddhist Approach in Eastern Tibet," forthcoming in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*.

95. The traditional Tibetan practice of ransoming or liberating lives (*srog blu, tshe thar*), also mentioned in note 70 above, involves an animal being purchased and released from slaughter. For livestock, they are often left with their original owner but marked with a red ribbon to indicate their status as liberated. As a corollary, fish are released into a river or lake, a practice that has become particularly popular among Han Chinese disciples of Tibetan Buddhist teachers.

96. Pad ma tshe ring, 24 July 2015. A translation appeared on *High Peaks, Pure Earth* on 19 January 2016 <[highpeakspureearth.com/2016/a-reflection-on-the-so-called-ten-virtues-by-khenpo-pema-tsering](http://highpeakspureearth.com/2016/a-reflection-on-the-so-called-ten-virtues-by-khenpo-pema-tsering)> (accessed 27 January 2016).

97. Here I am quoting from the translation provided on *High Peaks, Pure Earth* by Palden Gyal (Dpal ldan rgyal).

98. While visiting the University of Colorado Boulder in April 2015, the Khenpo told me that he had liberated the lives of approximately ten thousand yaks during his lifetime.

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