RELS 340.001: Advanced Topics in Tibetan Religions (Fall 2011 Tues/Thurs 12:15-1:30)

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RELS 340 is a seminar that will explore a number of thematic topics in the religions of Tibet from the 8th century to the present. The course will begin with a close reading of a famous work on Tibetan Buddhist practice called *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. This text introduces us systematically to Buddhist theories and practices from India (“Hinayana,” Mahayana, and Tantra) that hold an important place in the Tibetan tradition. Then we will turn to the transmission of Buddhism and Bon to Tibet and examine some of its unique developments, including the propitiation of demons, the genre of mystical revelation called “treasure texts,” the role of oracles and protector deities, and the discovery of enlightened boys. Next we will explore debates over Buddhist orthodoxy vs. heresy, and investigate how the Dalai Lama institution functions in Tibet, a unique institution designed to unite ultimate religious and political authority in a single figure. In modern times, the course examines the Tibetan confrontation with Chinese colonialism, the development of Tibetan Buddhism in exile, and the current Dalai Lama’s modernized Buddhism. The course concludes with a consideration of the recent popularity of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, and especially in the popular media. The Apple Computer advertisement that featured the Dalai Lama tells us to “Think Different.” Here you will be encouraged to “think differently” about Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama.

The course assumes some previous experience in a Religious Studies course and a basic familiarity with Buddhism. It also has as a prerequisite the desire to read challenging materials about Tibetan religions and to engage in conversation about these readings. One of the fun things about this course is that we get to do some “traveling” to Tibet and to exile communities in India through documentary films. These films illustrate how religious ideas and practices are woven into many aspects of everyday life in Tibet. You should consider these films as “texts,” for their content will be integrated into essay exams and paper topics.

Goals for students enrolled in this course are: 1) to acquire knowledge of the key ideas and practices of Tibetan Buddhism; 2) to become aware of the dynamic process of borrowing, conflict, and interaction between religions in Tibet; 3) to develop a reflexive awareness of how scholars’ (and your own) religious, cultural, and personal presuppositions may distort how Tibetan texts are interpreted; 4) to improve the clarity of your spoken and written expression.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

• Completion of required reading assignments prior to seminar
It is strongly recommended that you read the assignment before we study the topic in class. This will help you participate in the seminars and understand the lectures. When there is an assignment from an Electronic Reading (ER) you should bring it to class with you.

• Participation in class discussions and regular attendance (15%)
Attendance records will be kept for each class. There will be 3 allowed absences; 4 or more absences will negatively affect your grade. After 8 absences a student will be dropped and earn a WA grade for excessive absences. Asking questions, raising concerns, and offering your own ideas during seminar discussions are a crucial part of this course. You are expected to be an active and informed participant in seminar discussions. Grades for class participation will be assigned on the basis of the quality and consistency of your involvement in class discussions.
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- **Weekly Reflection Cards (15%)**
  There will be weekly homework assignments based upon the assigned readings. Every Thursday (or day marked on syllabus with RC due) you are to bring to class a thoughtful, written reflection or question related to the assigned reading for that week. The reflection should be written on a 3x5 card, and be based on an issue that you have found puzzling, thought provoking, or interesting. Questions should not simply ask for factual information but raise significant issues or express concerns about the topic that you find important.

- **Two short essays of 2 pages each (7.5% each, for 15% of grade)**
  These two critical essays will be based upon assigned topics and they may not exceed two pages each. The first essay will address the topic of karma as presented in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*; the second will be based upon an analysis of the narratives of the Buddhist “taming” and “civilizing” of Tibet’s indigenous female demon. *Late essays will not be accepted* since the topic will be discussed the day it is due in class.

- **Midterm Exam (15% of grade)**
  The midterm is a take-home exam in response to three essay questions based on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. The exam is due without fail on Friday October 7 by 4 pm.

- **7-8 page Essay (20% of grade)**
  The essay will be based on an assigned topic due on November 22.

- **Final Exam (20%)**
  The Final Exam will respond to two essay questions based on topics explored in Part II of the class. It will be a take-home exam and it is due on or before December 13 @ 3 pm.

There are **Two Required** and **One Recommended Texts** available at the C of C Bookstore:

1) Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* ($27.95) **required**
2) Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism in the West* ($18) **required**
3) Donald Lopez, *The Madman’s Middle Way: Reflections on Reality of the Tibetan Monk Gendun Chophel* ($15) **recommended**

There are also **Required Electronic Readings**, articles and selections from sacred scriptures in pdf format. They are available on OAKS under RELS 340, which registered students can access after they login to MyCharleston ([http://my.cofc.edu](http://my.cofc.edu)). Please **print out each article** and bring it to class on the day that it will be discussed.

**Grading Scale:**

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**Academic Integrity:** There is a zero-tolerance policy toward plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty in this course. This means that anyone caught taking credit for work that is not his or her own, or cheating in any way, will receive a **failing grade** for the **entire course**. A student found responsible for academic dishonesty will receive a **XF** in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. Students are expected to uphold the College’s **Honor Code** in class and during written take home exams.

**SNAP students:** If you have a disability that qualifies you for academic accommodation, please present a letter to me from the Center for Disability Services at the beginning of the semester. For more information on the SNAP program: [http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu](http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/)
Lecture Topics and Reading Assignments

The following abbreviations are used below: selections from Patrul’s *Words of my Perfect Teacher* are identified by WMPT, and chapters from *Prisoners of Shangri-la* appear as PS. Pdf articles on OAKS for download are labeled “electronic readings” or ER#. the day that reflection cards are due are marked by RC#. Over the course of the semester there are 15 reflection cards due at the beginning of class.

**Week 1**

8/23 **Introduction: Tibetan Buddhism Through a Glass Darkly**

8/25 **Viewing Buddhism as an “Insider” or an “Outsider”**

(PS: “Introduction;” ER#1: “Identity and the Work of the Scholar of Religion” RC#1 due)

**Discussion topics:** Lopez writes that representations of Tibetan Buddhism reveal a “play of opposites” that includes “the authentic and the derivative.” How does this “play of opposites” work? How does concern about “authenticity” inform Cabezón’s analysis of scholars’ identities and authority (in ER#1)? Do you agree with Cabezón that no aspect of anyone’s identity privileges or undermines their authority as a scholar?

**Part I**

**Buddhist Teachings in The Words of My Perfect Teacher**

**Week 2**

8/30 **The Structure of Samsara: Buddhist Concepts of Time and Space**


**Discussion topics:** How does the emergence of Tibetan Buddhism as a field of study in the US illustrate a Buddhist preoccupation with the preservation of “purity?” How does reading about impermanence and the inevitability of death affect you? What does Patrul prescribe as an antidote to impermanence? Does his message resonate with the need to create the “field” of Tibetan Buddhist studies in America?

9/1 **Samsara’s Spinning Wheel and the Six Rebirth Realms: Is Buddhism scientific?**

(WMPT: 61-99 and ER#2: “The Universe: Mind and Matter” RC#2)

**Discussion topics:** While reading about the harrowing hell and preta realms, how would you characterize Patrul’s “agenda” here? Is this a Buddhist “fire and brimstone” sermon about the suffering of samsara? What might be the psychological, social, and religious effects of this message? Does the interview with the Dalai Lama on the Buddhist universe sound scientific, compatible with biological evolution or with the social science of psychology?

**Week 3**

**Buddhist Ethics and the Role of the Teacher as Spiritual Guide**

9/6 **Karmic Calculations: Is karmic ethics based on spiritual & economic self-interest?**

(WMPT: 101-131 and ER#3: “Karmic Calculations”) Essay #1 due in class

**Essay topic:** In chapter 4 Patrul carefully enumerates the different types of negative and positive actions (karma), and he explains that one of the worst kinds of lies and one of the greatest heresies (or “wrong views”) is to deny the effects of karma. As you read the chapter consider how karma and its results are evaluated, and how the effects of certain deeds are calculated in terms of the actor’s motivation. Are karmic calculations different from business calculations? Can karmic calculations transcend a motivation based in economic or spiritual self-interest?

9/8 **On Lamas: Is the Buddhism of Tibet aptly called “Lamaism?”**

(WMPT: 137-149 and PS Chapter 1: “The Name” RC#3)

**Discussion topics:** In chapter 6 Patrul begins by rejecting the possibility of solitary self-enlightenment, for everyone needs a “spiritual friend” (or Lama) to guide one on the path to enlightenment. While one must cultivate faith and confidence in the Lama’s authority, he also tells readers that the student must assess whether the Lama is qualified. How can a novice student, whose knowledge of the Dharma is limited, assess the teacher’s qualifications? —>
If Tibetan Buddhists place special authority on the Lama (as the 4th refuge), why is the label “Lamaism” so problematic? How is “Lamaism” connected to western Protestant critiques of Roman Catholicism?

Week 4 Setting out on the Path to Become a Buddhist

9/13 Taking Refuge: What is the role of faith in Buddhism?  
(WMPT: 171-192 and ER#4: “Words for the West”)  
**Discussion topics:** Does this chapter on “faith” challenge your previous ideas about Buddhist thought? How does Patrul understand the relationship between “faith” and “blessings?” How do we interpret the parable of the faithful old woman and the dog’s tooth that she thinks is a Buddha relic? According to Thinley Norbu (in ER#4), why is it so difficult for Americans today to surrender spiritually to a teacher? Does unconditional surrender to a Lama reinforce Buddhist patriarchy?

9/15 Cultivating Compassion: What is the Mind of Enlightenment?  
(WMPT: 195-234 and ER#5: “The Value of Religion for Society” RC#4)  
**Discussion topics:** Why does Patrul use the model of family relationships in this chapter to discuss love and compassion, even towards beasts of burden and harmful spirits? And what exactly is the status of these spirits: are they real agents that affect others or imaginary projections? Why are both wisdom and compassion necessary for developing bodhicitta? Do you agree with the Dalai Lama (in ER#5) that compassion is the essence of Buddhism and of all religions?

Week 5 Becoming a Monk, Becoming a Nun: Two Views from the Inside by Westerners

9/20 Tibet’s Mass Monasticism and Memories of a Western Monk  
(ER#6: “Introduction” “Tibetan Monasticism” and “Becoming a Monk”) clips: monks debating  
**Discussion topics:** Georges Dreyfus is the first westerner to earn a Geshe degree after years of study as a Buddhist monk in India. How would you characterize Dreyfus’ position in relation to Buddhism and Tibetan monastic life? What are the main differences between two types of monks: the ascetic spiritual virtuoso and the priestly ritual specialist? What kind of monk is Patrul? What is the purpose of spiritual discipline and punishment of a monk?

9/22 Gendering Monasticism: Why Can’t Nuns be Monks?  
(ER#7: “Gendering Monasticism” & “Why Nuns Cannot Be Monks” RC#5)  
**Discussion topics:** Kim Gutschow is a feminist anthropologist who studies Buddhist nuns living in Ladakh. How does her perspective on nuns complement but also challenge what we learned about monks from Dreyfus? How does her focus on nuns enrich our understanding of how Buddhism is practiced “on the ground?” Why do nuns in Ladakh “misrecognize” the social and economic factors that Gutschow sees so clearly? How does “gendering monasticism” challenge Patrul’s presentation of Buddhism?

Week 6 Becoming a Buddha, Becoming a King: Magic and Make Believe in Tibetan Tantra

9/27 Muttering Mantras, Becoming a Buddha: The Baroque Visualizations of Guru Yoga  
(WMPT: 263-280; 309-332) Film: Mandala: The Sacred Circle of Vajrabhairava  
**Discussion topics:** How does Patrul change gears as he moves into topics on Tantra? Do confession rituals undermine the belief in karma? What does Patrul mean by the “power of support” and how might this work? If the mind is intrinsically pure, like a mirror, then what need is there for ritual and “supports?”

9/29 Mandalas of the Mind: Archetypes of Consciousness or Imagined Projections?  
(WMPT: 283-295; ER#8: “Mandalas, Monarchs & Mortuary Magic” RC#6) Film: Wheel of Time  
**Discussion topics:** According to ER#8 by yours truly, what’s the relationship between mandalas and the imaginary cityscape of Eudoxia described in Calvino’s Invisible Cities? What are some of the primary functions of mandalas? How were mandala “maps” used to reorganize the sacred spaces of Tibet and reinforce the power and authority of kings? How do mandalas magically transform the dead?
Week 7  Death Denying Feats Described by Patrul and Alexandra David-Neel

10/4  Dismembering the Body for Demons: The Dreadful Mystic Banquet
     (WMPT: 297-307 and ER#9: “Dealing with Ghosts and Demons”)

**Discussion topics:** The practice of *chö* (“cutting” the body into offerings) is a very dramatic Tantric practice that features “transgressive sacrality,” and this practice is described very differently by Patrul and David-Neel (in ER#9). What are some of Patrul’s criticisms of the “false lamas” who mispractice *chö*? Are the harmful spirits and demons he describes real or imaginary? How would you characterize David-Neel’s attitude towards ghosts and demons? What role does desire play in this ritual?

10/6  Transferring Consciousness with Hiccups: Can Death be Cheated?
     (WMPT: 351-374 and ER#10: “Tibet and the Lamas” RC#7)

**Discussion topics:** The practice of transference of consciousness (*phowa*) is another dramatic Tantric practice that can cheat death. Why would Patrul recommend that one wait until late in life to train for this practice? Does this practice weaken the value of karma? How does David-Neel (in ER#10) reinforce her own authority to her western readers when she describes various Tibetan death rituals?

10/7  Take-home midterm exam due by 4 pm in my mailbox or office!

Week 8  The Liminal State of Consciousness: In the “Between” (*Bardo*)

10/11 Reincarnations of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in the West

**Discussion topics:** How have modern interpreters used the notion of spiritual “science” and especially Darwinian evolution to explain the content of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*? How are the doctrines of karma, samsara, and rebirth reinterpreted by modern western readers? What Theosophical ideas are projected into the text?

10/13 The Visionary “Geography” of the Bardo in Text & in Film
     (ER#10.5: “Final Emergency Reading” RC#8) film: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead pt. II*

**Discussion topics:** How does the Buddhist prepare for death with this text? Who is the real audience for the recitation of the text? How should we understand the relationship between the faithful Buddhist’s study of death, visualizing the various realms of the afterlife, and seeing the sacred images described in the *TBOD*? Does it create a “fictive world” in startling detail before pointing out that the whole scene must be recognized as hallucinatory?

Part II  Buddhist Innovations in Tibet

Week 9  Buddhism Comes to the Land of Snows

10/18 Fall Break

10/20 Analyzing Tibet’s earliest sacred stories: Is the religion of Bon pre-Buddhist?
     (ER#11-12: “Subduing the Demons of Tibet” and “Prehistory and Early Legends” RC#9)

**Discussion topics:** In the story that tells of the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet (ER#11), how is Buddhism located in magical, material, institutional, and textual forms? How do the sacred narratives (ER#12) about Tibet’s first kings serve to legitimize the royal authority of the king? Is Tibet’s pre-Buddhist religion aptly called “Bon?”

Week 10  “Reading” and “Taming” Tibet’s Landscape and Recovering It’s Treasure

10/25 The Buddhist Missionary Position in Tibet: Pinning Down Demons
     (ER#13-14: “Down with the Demoness” & “Civilising Woman the Demon”) Essay #2 due
Essay #2 topic: The narratives of the subjugation of the Tibetan demoness (srin mo) embodied in the Tibetan landscape have been interpreted as a charter myth for introducing and building Buddhist temples, monasteries, and even a Buddhist State in Tibet. Buddhists in Tibet have regarded such stories in a positive light, as the “taming” and “conversion” of the wild indigenous religious forces in the pre-Buddhist land to the civilized structures of Buddhism. Janet Gyatso and Ani Marko offer different critical readings of these stories that reveal new spiritual, social, and ideological meanings. Write an essay on the stories about the suppression of the demoness (srin mo) in Tibet that compares and contrasts the two interpretations offered by Gyatso and Marko (in ER#13-14).

What religious (or spiritual), social and political purpose(s) might be served by the demoness being subdued, yet still “kept alive and well” (ER #13:50) in these stories? Do the stories hint at any liberating power for the female (as “earth mother”) or is the demoness’ body a site for violent conquest by Buddhist patriarchs?

10/27  Assaying the Value of Textual Treasures (Terma): Pure Gold or Dross?  
(ER #15: “Hidden Teachings of Tibet;” RC#10)

Discussion topics: What are some of the strategies used by Tibetan “treasure seekers” and subsequent terma apologists to legitimize the authenticity of “treasure texts” as revelations? How are they different from traditional texts attributed to a Buddha? Do you suppose that treasure texts could be discovered accidentally? How much suspicion is warranted when reading about this literature? Are they mystical revelations or works of mystification?

Week 11  Tibetan Oracles and Tulkus: Divining the Future in Modern Times

11/1  Oracles in Modern Tibet: Why are so many spirit mediums female?  
(ER #16: “Female Oracles in Modern Tibet”)

Discussion topics: Why are so many Tibetan mediums women? Is there a specific female competence connected with being a medium? What are some of the social and environmental functions of oracles in Tibet? If protector spirits are believed to speak for the collective interests of the Tibetans, how plausible is it that the mediums are channeling the social interests of the community?

11/3  Tulkus as Missionaries who Take the Dharma Outside Tibet: The Story of the Telo Tulku  
(ER#17-18: “Introduction” and “Telo Rinpoche’s Story”)  
film: The Trials of Telo Rinpoche

Discussion topics: The discovery of tulkus originates in the 13th century: what are its unique features? The tulku is understood to be the product of (an always-already enlightened) “nature” but also of “nurture,” made to assume his (previous) religious identity. What parallels can you see between the discovery and recognition of “treasure texts,” oracles, and tulkus? What can we learn about the tulku in modern times from the poignant story of Telo Rinpoche: born into a Mongolian-American working class family in Philadelphia, recognized as a tulku, yet who struggled to come to terms with his destiny and fulfill the expectations of the people of Kalmykia, who see him as their Messiah?

Week 12  Defining Buddhist Orthodoxy vs. Heresy: Two Types of Modernists

11/8  Opening the Third Eye or Unmasking the Masquerade: Is Lobsang Rampa really Tibetan?  
(PS Chapter 3: “The Eye”)

Discussion topics: What gave “Lobsang Rampa” his authority and legitimacy? Why do you suppose scholars of Tibet were so enraged by The Third Eye? What distinguishes scholarly from popular books on Tibet? According to Lopez, what must a scholar “renounce” in order to maintain credibility? How might a pious Tibetan Buddhist interpret The Third Eye charitably as “authentic Dharma?”

11/10  Gendun Chophel: Radical Renegade or Modernist Monk?  
(ER #19: “The Life of Gendun Chophel” RC#12) film: Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet

Discussion topics: In what ways does Gendun Chophel remain a Buddhist “insider” who is respectful of tradition? How is he an iconoclast like a Tantric siddha? Does he lose or gain his Tibetan identity when he leaves Tibet and travels through India for ten years?
Week 13  The Dalai Lama as an Institution and Charismatic Leader: Critics and Caretakers

11/15   Tibetan Protective Deities: The Controversy over Dorje Shugden and the Limits of “Tolerance” (ER #20: “Deity or Demon?”)
Discussion topics: What exactly are the Dalai Lama’s objections to Dorje Shugden? What religious authority does the Dalai Lama invoke when he asks Tibetans not to propitiate Shugden? Are these objections religious or political? What are the consequences of him rejecting the teachings of his own teacher, Trijang Rinpoche? Is it preposterous to accuse the Dalai Lama, who so often preaches religious tolerance, of being intolerant of a traditional Tibetan practice? Can the Dalai Lama tolerate (without condoning) the religious exclusivism within his own sect?

Discussion topics: What are the primary criticisms of Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama institution made by the anonymous author of ER#22? In what way is the Dalai Lama both a traditionalist and a modernist? How do Buddhists maintain a cohesive Tibetan national identity and still accept the doctrine of selflessness?

Week 14: The Dalai Lama as Nobel Peace Prize Winner and Apostle of Non-Violence

Term paper due! Film: Compassion in Exile
Discussion topics: How does the Dalai Lama take Buddhist themes and adapt them for a modern western audience? Is his vision of a future Tibet as a “Zone of Non-Violence” another version of the Shangri-La utopia? His Nobel Prize acceptance speech pays homage to Gandhi for his non-violent politics; what qualities does Jamyang Norbu admire about Gandhi (in ER#24) that he claims are absent in the Tibetan leader in exile?

11/24   Turkey Day: Give Thanks, Eat Turkey, Take a Nap…and Dream of Shangri-la

Week 15  Tibetan Buddhism in the West

11/29   Dreams of Tibet: from Shangri-la to Virtual Tibet Film: Dreams of Tibet (ER#25: Selections from Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-La)
Discussion topics: What problems arise when Tibetans in exile put their faith in entertainers and in the power of Hollywood movies to bring Chinese repression in Tibet to the world's attention? How is the boundary between illusion and reality made fuzzy by the commodification of Tibetan Buddhism for the west? How have Tibetans responded to the western idealizations of their country and Buddhism? According to Schell (in ER#25), who are the “real Tibetans” or where is the “real” Tibet?

12/1    Who are the “Prisoners” of Shangri-la? Is some kind of liberation (or jail break) possible? (PS Chapter 7: “The Prison” RC#15)
Discussion topics: After reading Prisoners of Shangri-la, what examples can you cite in support of the provocative idea that Tibet is a “work of art” (in Oscar Wilde’s sense)? Is romanticizing Tibet and its Buddhism as “Shangri-la” dangerous to Tibetans? Who are the “prisoners” mentioned in the title? Is there a “file” (p. 13) in this book that will help liberate us from the “prison”? If popular works about Tibet by Lobsang Rampa, Alexandra David-Neel, and Robert Thurman only distort Tibetan Buddhism, then what kind of scholarship will enable us to understand Tibet more accurately?

12/13 Take Home Final Exam Due at 3 pm
Bibliography of ER Articles on OAKS

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: The Structure of Samsara: Buddhist Concepts of Time and Space

Week 3: Buddhist Ethics and the Role of the Teacher as Spiritual Guide

Week 4: Setting Out on the Path to Become a Buddhist

Week 5: Becoming a Monk, Becoming a Nun

Week 6: Becoming a Buddha: Magic and Make Believe in Tibetan Tantra

Week 7: Death Denying Feats

Week 8: The Liminal State of Consciousness: In the “Between” (*Bardo*)

Week 9: Buddhism Comes to the Land of Snows

**Week 10: “Reading” and “Taming Tibet’s Landscape and Recovering It’s Treasure**

**Week 11: Tibetan Oracles and Tulkus**

**Week 12: Defining Tibetan Buddhist Orthodoxy: Two Modern Controversies**

**Week 13: The Dalai Lama Institution, Past and Present**

**Week 14: The Dalai Lama as Nobel Peace Prize Winner**

**Week 15: Tibetan Buddhism in the West**

**Term Paper Resources**
28. The Worship of Shugden: Documents Related to a Tibetan Controversy (Dharamsala: Department of Religion and Culture, Central Tibetan Administration, undated [post 1998]).