

Tears like fluttering leaves: karmic resentment and the senses in Gesar's journey through hell

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Beloved author Ursula K. LeGuin—who is absolutely on par with any great philosopher of the twentieth century—once stated that “the story—from Rumpelstiltskin to *War and Peace*—is one of the basic tools invented by the mind of man, for the purpose of gaining understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.”¹ Stories, like wheels, are fundamentally tools; they are discursive technologies of the mind through which a variety of Buddhists think, reason, and make religious doctrine. Some of the narratives Buddhists tell themselves have become a focus of academic interest in recent years as increased attention has been afforded to *rnam thar* and other personal histories. And yet, scholars generally overlook the potential for personal transformation afforded by stories like these to consider their more publicly-oriented uses—advertisement for a particular individual’s religious import or garnish on what we can say *actually* happened. We generally do not take stories seriously as tools of empathetic contemplation—particularly if the story in question, as the Gesar epic does, involves a fabled king, a talking horse, and the sort of swashbuckling we expect only in our children’s comic books. In short, we don’t take stories seriously *as stories*.

This article aims to offer a different possibility for this trend, one which demonstrates the veracity behind LeGuin’s sentiment that stories are tools aiding understanding and achieving real, intellectual effects in the world. To do this, we must take them seriously as emotionally affecting, individually transformative pieces of work and consider the intellectual mechanics by which this transformation comes about. This article argues for how one particular story—that of King Gesar journeying through hell to save his mother in the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*²—both imitates and enhances the work

¹ Le Guin 1979: 31.

² The final episode of the Gesar, the *dMyal gling* exists as both a published literary text and an oral text recited by bards. In its literary format, the most prevalent

of Nyingma preliminary meditations called *sngon 'gro* and their associated commentaries. Like a *sngon 'gro* commentary, the story of King Gesar in hell makes emphatically real the religious doctrine of karma through both religious instruction and a graphic exploration of netherworld tortures. Indeed, analyzing King Gesar's pedagogical songs in the first third of the *dMyal gling* makes evident that the *sngon 'gro* commentary *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*,³ known popularly in its English translation *Words of my Perfect Teacher*,⁴ was a direct influence on the text as a whole. However, unlike these Nyingma *sngon 'gro* commentaries, the narrative frame of the *dMyal gling* provides the conceptual space to experience the complex and complicated emotions that arise from witnessing karma's horrifying results firsthand. Considering Martha Nussbaum's work on the role of narrative in teaching appropriate emotional responses and developing compassion, this article demonstrates how the narrative frame of King Gesar's journey enhances the goals of Nyingma *sngon 'gro* commentaries.⁵ The reader's imaginative identification with Gesar as he becomes resentful of the tortures of hell provides a unique context to experience, articulate, and resolve institutionally-inappropriate emotional responses to karmic systems. In this way, the *dMyal gling* allows for a consideration of how the imaginative faculty underlying narrative produces an embodied experience that aids in the construction of ethical agents sensitive to Buddhist karma.

1. An Introduction to the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*

Gesar's journey to hell is related in the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*, a relatively late Gesar narrative published as a woodblock at Wara monastery in Chab mdo prefecture.⁶ Sponsored by retreatant Dam

and influential version of the *dMyal gling* is the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po* blockprint produced at Wara monastery and supposedly authored by epic character Chos kyi dbang phyug. This paper will rely on the 1984 edition of this text, edited by Lopon Pemala and published in Bhutan as part of their authoritative 34 volume edition of the Gesar epic.

³ O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po 2003.

⁴ Patrul Rinpoche 1994.

⁵ This is not to say that *sngon 'gro* commentaries are unique in their goals of forming Buddhist ethical agents and that the *dMyal gling* may not be drawing on other ethically-oriented Buddhist literature. Rather, a variety of literature likely influenced this text, though this paper will only discuss the apparent influence of *sngon 'gro* commentaries.

⁶ As noted previously, this version of the *dMyal gling* episode is the most common basis for contemporary published versions of the epic, though few copies remain extant. One is housed at the Nationalities University of Beijing and a handful of photographic reproductions of the original text float among Tibetan communities

chos bstan pa (d.1946), the text was published sometime in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, prior to the sponsor's death. Dam chos bstan pa was apparently quite involved with publishing, though Wara monastery's print house remained small. In addition to the *dMyal gling*, he also sponsored the publication of half-size xylographs of the entire Kangyur and a quarter of the Tengyur before he died, and it is possible that the *dMyal gling* was a preliminary project to begin collecting the necessary craftsmen to initiate the larger publishing endeavor of a full canon. Matthew Kapstein notes that the publication of the *dMyal gling* reflects the text's participation in the larger Gesar-related activity of late nineteenth-century Kham,⁷ and it is likely the Sakya monastery had close ties to other non-Geluk monasteries in the area.⁸

Unlike the majority of other Gesar literature, the text is authored and identifies itself as an explicitly Buddhist treasure text, or *gter ma*. The text purports to be the composition of 'Dan Lama Chos kyi dbang phyug, whose title indicates that he either hails from the region of 'Dan ma north of sDe dge, is the personal lama serving King Gesar's most-trusted warrior—the archer 'Dan ma—or both. Indeed, in the narrative itself, it is 'Dan ma who requests the text be written in order to preserve the memory of Gesar's kingdom as he leaves for India. Appearing as a character several times throughout the text, Chos kyi dbang phyug hid his composition in the Red Water Lake (dMar chu rdzing bu) in Northern mGo log. It was then later recovered by the Gling tshang *gter ston* Drag rtsal rdo rje (dates unknown), though historical records of the region make no mention of the *gter ston*. It seems that excepting his revelation of the *dMyal gling*, he had relatively little impact as a *gter ston* or as a religious practitioner; it is even possible that he was the creation of Dam chos bstan pa himself to imbue the text with an explicitly Buddhist significance. As more information comes to light, a clearer picture on the exact origin of our lost *gter ston* will hopefully develop.

Turning to the narrative itself, the text breaks down into roughly three sections. The first third of the text features King Gesar's elevation to Dzogchen master through initiations by

in India, China, and Nepal. Beyond these reproductions, an interview with contemporary Tibetan scholar at the Southwest University for Nationalities Thub bstan phun tshogs revealed that several manuscript copies were produced during the Cultural Revolution via hand copying the blockprint. Based on bibliographic data given in the PL480 prefaces, it seems these manuscripts often served as the source for the contemporary publications, particularly in Delhi 1971, Delhi 1973, and Dehra Dun 1977. No exact date for publication is given for the Wara monastery blockprint.

⁷ Kapstein 2007: 345–377.

⁸ Gruschke 2004: 59–62.

Padmasambhava, as well as his tenure as Dzogchen teacher for the citizens of his empire. During this time, he sings several songs of religious instruction for the various peoples of Ling. Song 2.1—the longest song in the narrative—in particular provides an overview of one’s responsibilities as an ethical agent and the netherworld fate that awaits you if you misstep.⁹ This song will be discussed in greater detail below. The second third features Gesar’s retreat to India, during which time his mother dies. Through a divination he discovers that she has been reborn in hell, initiating his journey to save her and confront the torturous realities of karma. Indeed, Gesar and the reader together discover that she has been reborn there as a result of Gesar’s own bad karma, arising from his violent nature and martial sins.¹⁰ This article will explore the relationship between this section with the one before it to consider Gesar’s reaction to the “result” of the karma system he previously-preached. The final third presents the glorious deaths of Gesar and his court of heroes. While inherently interesting for how they explicitly mimic the marvelous signs and the leaving of relics found in traditional Buddhist *rnam thar*, this particular section will not feature prominently in this paper.

It is unknown whether the narrative detailed in the *dMyal gling* was circulating as an oral composition prior to its publication, or if it achieved secondary orality. Regardless, the particular Wara monastery version of the narrative has remained the dominant form of the story—leading to at least six differing editions re-published in both China and the Tibetan diaspora.¹¹ The narrative of King Gesar’s conquering of hell also remains a popular source of Gesar-related local belief. As uncovered in recent fieldwork with bards living in Qinghai, a bard singing the *dMyal gling* story becomes a topic of significant gossip in the community, as it is said he will die within two years of receiving that particular episode to sing. One local bard explained it as “the epic is finished, so his life is then finished too.”¹² The life of the bard, therefore, is tied up with the story itself. Regardless of the rarity of these public performances by bards, the *dMyal gling* is particularly popular in its textual version. Indeed, it is likely that the text is now more popular than ever in light of the

⁹ Song 2.1 refers to the first song of the second chapter. I will continue to use this naming convention throughout the article, as well as providing the page numbers after a colon. Song 2.1: 92–107.

¹⁰ For further information on this aspect, see Mikles 2016: 231–246.

¹¹ Listed chronologically and denoted by publication location, the editions are as follows: Delhi 1971; Delhi 1973; Dehra Dun 1977; Thimphu 1979; Thimphu 1984; Chengdu 1986.

¹² Gyur med rab rten (Gesar bard in Yushu), personal interview by author, Jyekundo, Qinghai, July 18, 2015.

contemporary Gesar publishing boom in China and the impulse to read, rather than hear, the epic.¹³ This blossoming reputation turns our attention to the text itself and to how the narrative shapes the reader into an ethical agent; it is to this phenomenon we now turn.

2. *The Influence of sNgon 'gro on the dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*

As a whole, the *dMyal gling* is markedly different than other Gesar literature. While most of the action in Gesar episodes focuses on the warrior-king fighting, tricking, or conniving various demon kings, the *dMyal gling* features little violence and no single enemy to destroy in an overarching plot. Instead, the majority of the text features lengthy songs of religious instruction on the importance of karma and dedicated Buddhist practice. These songs mirror very closely the sentiments found in traditional Nyingma *sngon 'gro* commentaries popular during the *dMyal gling's* publication in early twentieth century eastern Tibet.

Simply put, *sngon 'gro* are preliminary practices in which one engages before continuing on to more advanced forms of Buddhist practice. They generally seek to establish within the individual an understanding of the workings of karma, the value of a human life, and devotional feelings for the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and one's own teacher. Some systems divide the practices into "outer" and "inner" preliminaries—the former focusing on understanding Buddhist cosmology, while the latter initiates the practitioner towards tantric practices by purifying prior bad karma. Within these classificatory systems, outer preliminaries in particular rely heavily on visualization to create an understanding of the cosmological systems that surround the practitioner. As found in the *Klong chen snying thig* practice cycle discussed below, the "outer" form of these *sngon 'gro* leads the individual through a series of narrative visualizations that highlight foundational Buddhist concepts like karma, the six realms of existence, suffering, and proper ethical behavior. Sam van Schaik writes that these practices are "causal, in that they are supposed to cause a certain state of mind to arise, and antidotal, in that they are intended to combat undesirable states of mind."¹⁴ These practices aim to form an ethical agent sensitive to the Buddhist cosmology and karmic system prior to initiating more advanced Buddhist practices.

¹³ Shakya 2004 claims that over three million Gesar texts have been printed and sold since 1980.

¹⁴ van Schaik 2004: 95.

Preliminary practices are generally undertaken under the eye of a teacher, so the actual practice of the *sngon 'gro* may not match the textual ideal, and a teacher may elect to shorten, lengthen, or repeat *sngon 'gro* practices for students.¹⁵

While preliminary practices have been commonly done throughout Tibetan Buddhist and Bön communities, *sngon 'gro* became particularly systematized within Nyingma circles beginning in the eighteenth century. In particular, 'Jigs med gling pa's (d. 1798) revelation of the *Klong chen snying thig* cycle of practices helped to standardize Nyingma *sngon 'gro* as a necessary component of Buddhist practice. Building on Klong chen pa's (d. 1364) earlier systemization of Dzogchen thought,¹⁶ 'Jigs med gling pa attempted to consolidate the Great Perfection teachings into not only a holistic discursive system—like Klong chen pa did before him—but into a singular path of practice that began with *sngon 'gro* practices. The *Klong chen snying thig* practice cycle gained particular popularity in the Nyingma milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—a period which has been called the “Nyingma Renaissance”¹⁷—and ultimately became the defining practice of the school in eastern Tibet.¹⁸ As a result, *sngon 'gro* practices became increasingly popular within nineteenth and twentieth century Nyingma Buddhist communities.

As the *Klong chen snying thig* practices spread, 'Jigs med gling pa's *sngon 'gro* inspired an extensive commentarial tradition that developed the texts into readable and accessible programs for practice. Perhaps chief among these is the *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* (*The Words of My Perfect Teacher*), written by dPal sprul rin po che (d. 1887) in an isolated hermitage near rDzogs chen monastery in the eastern regions of Tibet. Like all *sngon 'gro* commentaries, this text served as a guideline to foundational practices with the goal of developing ethical sensitivities and became popular throughout Buddhist monasteries in eastern Tibet. The popularity of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* in the environment contemporary to the *dMyal gling's* publication is especially demonstrated through its apparent influence on Song 2.1 of the *dMyal gling*.

As explained in the brief synopsis above, Song 2.1 takes place after King Gesar has traveled to the Copper-Colored Mountain and received Dzogchen initiations from Padmasambhava himself. He returns to Ling and begins giving all of the peoples in his empire

¹⁵ Dahl 2009: 1–40.

¹⁶ Germano 1992.

¹⁷ The term was coined by Karma Phuntsho as a more accurate description of the so-called Non-Sectarian Movement. Phuntsho 2010: 50.

¹⁸ Gyatso 1998: 3.

Dzogchen teachings. As seen in Figure 1, the teachings themselves read like a veritable canon of important Nyingma and Dzogchen practices, and each community under his dominion receives their own unique teaching, initiation, and guidance, followed by a summarizing song. These songs do not go into the details of the teachings that would only be available to those with the necessary initiations—which the reader might not have—but rather repeat generic Dzogchen metaphors focusing on the luminosity of one's own mind and the importance of recognizing one's natural face. As an example of the former, King Gesar states in his song to the Nepalis and central Tibetans:

The foundational nature of the mind
is like the depths of the great ocean—
free from the agitated waves of thought.¹⁹

A similar expression on the theme of the luminosity of one's own mind is found in Gesar's song to the delegation from Hor:

Meet with the natural face of the Dharmakāya,
[which is] the unique sphere of one's own mind!
Without effort, special insight itself arises.
If you see it, it is none other than a buddha.
It is self-arising, self-released, and a great joy.
It is beyond words.
Its nature is birthless, unobstructed, and self-luminous.²⁰

After receiving these teachings, each people return to their own land, invigorated in their Buddhist practice.

Song 2.1 takes place prior to these individual teachings, however, and represents something of an introductory course in karma aimed at forming ethical agents; this instruction mimics *sngon 'gro* commentaries both in general tone and in specific metaphor. It is also the longest song in the *dMyal gling*, totaling 361 lines. The song is entirely in line with other ethical treatises in Tibetan Buddhist literature—compelling listeners to pay attention to their karma, disavow violence, and to remember the preciousness of a human life. While the ethical instruction touches briefly on the activities of monks and nuns, the majority is more generalized, and could as

¹⁹ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 2.3, 115: *gzhi rgya mtsho nang la rba rlabs 'phyol rgya mtsho gting mtha' bral ba la/*

²⁰ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 2.5, 122: *rang sems thig le nyag gcig de/ chos sku'i rang zhal mjal bar gyis/ rtsol med shugs byung lnyag mthong nyid/ mthong na sangs rgyas gzhan na med/ rang byung rang grol bde ba che/ sgra tshad bgro gleng zer ba med/ skyed med 'gags med rang gsal ngang/*

easily be applied to a lay person as to one ordained. Throughout the song, however, is the theme that life is inherently an experience of suffering and change, and that one must engage in religious practice in order to attain serenity and realization. After explaining how to prepare oneself to be the appropriate student of the Dharma, Gesar explains the rarity of a human life and the importance of engaging in Buddhist practice:

Although you obtain a human body in this world,
Practicing religion is as rare as the *udumbara* flower...
Mindful of the causes of this moment arising,
make effort diligently in the Dharma.²¹

Gesar later uses a variety of nature-related metaphors to repeatedly emphasize that death comes suddenly and without warning:

In the ancestral burial ground of your family's home
the generations buzz like bees [always changing and
never resting].
Like the shooting star that appears without warning, the
causes of death are uncertain ...
Wild men, poisonous snakes, carnivorous animals, and
so forth—
the causes of death are many
and the causes of life are few.²²

Song 2.1 of the *dMyal gling* mimics familiar themes of *sngon 'gro* literature concerning the importance of religious practice and the preciousness of a human life.

While Song 2.1's concern with instilling ethics certainly demonstrates the influence of *sngon 'gro* practices and perhaps other Buddhist ethical literature on the text, a close reading reveals that it is specifically the *sngon 'gro* commentary *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* that the *dMyal gling's* author used as inspiration. Figure 2 demonstrates a chart comparing literary images and metaphors between the first two chapters of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*—The Difficulty of Finding the Freedoms and Advantages and The Impermanence of Life—and the *dMyal gling's* Song 2.1. As is evident, a considerable number of metaphors appear in both texts; due to the

²¹ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 2.1, 96: *rdzam gling mi lus thob srid kyang/ chos byed u dum war a ltar/ ... 'phral 'byung rkyen gyi mi khom pa'i/ le lo med pa chos la brtson/*

²² Chos kyi dbang phyug, 1984, Song 2.1, 97: *pha khang pha mes dur khrod la/ bu rgyud sd+rang ba'i leb bzhin rjes/ 'chi kyin nges med skar zla ltar/ ... mi rgod dug sbrul gcan gzan sogs/ 'chi rkyen mang zhing 'tsho rkyen nyung/*

significant amount of overlap, I will offer only a few specific examples to illustrate further.

At lines 133–138 of the *dMyal gling's* Song 2.1, Gesar states, “Attendants and luxuries, family and friends, the activities of this life—all are meaningless. This precious body carried a mala and a bowl, [but in death] you will be powerless [to do so]. Like pulling hair from butter, you will be without friends; alone you will wander the bardo.”²³ In comparison, *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* states, “Unbearable though it might be to part with your money, your cherished possessions, your friends, loved ones, attendants, disciples, country, lands, subjects, property, food, drink and comforts, you just have to leave everything behind, like a hair behind pulled out of a slab of butter.”²⁴ The butter metaphor in both is used after a long illustrative list of particular items that will be left behind. Similarly, Gesar sings at line 77 of the *dMyal gling's* Song 2.1 that “Obtaining a human body is as rare as seeing a star in the daytime.”²⁵ *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* states that “if there were as many animals as stars at night, there would only be as many gods and humans as stars in the daytime.”²⁶ Both utilize the same metaphor concerning the rarity of seeing a star in the daytime as a means to discuss the rarity of a human rebirth.

Metaphors like these are well-known and popular in other Buddhist teaching environments besides *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, so their appearance in the *dMyal gling* is not in and of itself proof of causation or influence. However, returning to Figure 2 and tracing the page and line numbers, it becomes apparent that the *dMyal gling* not only includes a substantial number of metaphors from *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, but places them in the exact same order within the song itself, something which no other Nyingma *sngon 'gro* commentary I have examined thus far does.²⁷ This confluence suggests both causation and intent. When composing the *dMyal gling*

²³ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 98: 'khor dang longs spyod nye 'brel grogs/ tshe 'di'i bya ba don med pa'i/ kha phor bgrang phreng gces pa'i lus/khyer med par thams cad lus/ mar gyi nang nas spu jag bzhin/ rogs med gcig por gar do 'grim/

²⁴ O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po (dPal sprul rin po che) 2003: 87: rgyu nor rdzas gnyen nye 'brel 'khor slob ma sde mang' ris bza' btung longs spyod thams cad 'bral mi phod bzhin du shul du bskyr te mar gyi dkyil nas spu bton pa bzhin du 'gro

²⁵ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 95.

²⁶ O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po (dPal sprul rin po che) 2003: 63–64: dud 'gro mtshan mo'i skar ma tsam la bde 'gro nyin mo'i skar ma tsam las med par gsungs pa dang/

²⁷ Among the many *sngon 'gro* commentaries available, I have currently examined the following: 'Jigs bral ye shes rdo rje 1946 (Available in English as Dudjom Rinpoche 2011); Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo 2009; and Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche 2009.

rdzogs pa chen po, the author modeled Song 2.1 on the first two chapters of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*.

The goal of Song 2.1, and indeed perhaps of the entire chapter, seems to be the formation of ethical agents prepared and inspired to continue on to more advanced Dzogchen practices; as noted above, the songs that follow it build on this ethical foundation to hint at advanced Dzogchen practice. The whole section works, therefore, as a mini-version of the *Klong chen snying thig* through laying the ethical groundwork necessary for future practice, then leading the practitioner—albeit with limited hints and metaphors—towards more advanced stages of initiated practice. While certainly not a substitute or a complete version of the *Klong chen snying thig*, the influence of the practice cycle and its associated materials—both directly as in the first two chapters and indirectly—suggest a common goal. This particular goal is not unique to *sngon 'gro* or *Klong chen snying thig* practices, and—while perhaps mimicking the specific vehicle of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*—the *dMyal gling* is surely relying on a variety of Buddhist ethical literature. It is unique, however, to see such Buddhist normative ethics tied so closely to King Gesar. Like the classic fairy tale where jewels unexpectedly fall out of a girl's mouth whenever she tries to speak, the first third of the *dMyal gling* sees the martial, tantric hero King Gesar opening his mouth and normative, non-tantric Buddhist ethics dropping out. Sharing in the goals of *sngon 'gro* practices and commentaries, the *dMyal gling's* Song 2.1 introduces Buddhist cosmologies and forms practitioners sensitive to karmic realities. These ethical endeavors, however, get challenged and complicated when the narrative's source of teachings, King Gesar himself, journeys to hell and is forced to confront the realities of karma.

3. Gesar in Hell and the Imagined Experience of Karma

The subsequent chapters of the *dMyal gling* focus on King Gesar's journey through hell. After his period of Dzogchen instruction, Gesar goes on meditation retreat in India. His mother begs him not to go, convinced that she will die in his absence. Her death does indeed come to pass, and Gesar is immediately notified by a messenger. After performing divinations that reveal his mother's rebirth in the hell realm, Gesar flies away on his horse Kyangbu to appear before Yama's throne and demand his mother's return. Eventually Gesar is bested by King Yama in a battle of both song and swords, but is taken by Yama's servants on a tour of hell as he locates his mother in the Avīci hell. This provides the opportunity for Gesar to witness the

real-time effects of karma and receive instruction on the karmic missteps of individuals during their lives from both Yama and his netherworld colleagues. While the first two chapters of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* were used as a primer to compose Song 2.1, chapters three and four—the Defects of Samsara and the Principles of Cause and Effect—are underscored in the narrative of Gesar's journey to hell. The influence, however, is not as explicitly apparent and the text seems to draw more inspiration from popular 'das log narratives.²⁸ King Gesar's journey through hell becomes the principal moment in which the reader witnesses the actual effects of the karmic system.

Although portrayed in the beginning chapters of the *dMyal gling* as a model Buddhist teacher and practitioner who understands the full implications of karma, Gesar balks at the brutal—but karmically-just—torments he witnesses while traveling in hell. Gesar observes numerous scenes of torture, all described in the intense, gory immediacy that has often defined Buddhist depictions of hell: the adulterous couple climbing the tree with leaves like knives, molten metal poured by Yama's workers into various facial and genital orifices, tongues stretched for miles while individuals cry for mercy. At each gruesome visage he encounters, Gesar cries tears that are described as fluttering down his cheeks "like resplendent leaves" (*lo zil ltar*) and asks his guide "how are the servants without mercy for this suffering?"²⁹ The servants then patiently describe the sins that land one there, often decrying Gesar's own Buddhist knowledge and understanding in the process. After explaining that one group of individuals are being grasped by iron hooks and pliers for their mistreatment of animals, the servant of Yama states, "You who are called King Gesar of Ling say you have clairvoyance, but it is false!"³⁰ Gesar goes on to call the servants heartless, before using the ritual of 'pho ba transference bestowed on him by Yama himself to free the suffering beings. Despite being informed of the specific sins committed to warrant assignment to each hell realm—and often having detailed such sins himself just a few pages prior—Gesar denies the justice of their torture and seeks to circumvent the karmic system.

Indeed, the overall tenor of King Gesar's response to the suffering he witnesses is not to mournfully or compassionately acknowledge the workings of karma, but rather to assume negligence and antagonism on the part of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other spiritual

²⁸ Cuevas 2008.

²⁹ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 202: *snying rje med pa'i las mkhan tsho/ las 'di yi sdug bsngal ci 'dra red*

³⁰ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 196: *khyod gling rje ge sar rgyal po zer ba la mngon shes yod zer ba rdzun red mod*

figures. Notwithstanding his former role teaching about karma to the peoples of Ling, when faced with the reality of the tortures, Gesar becomes angry and claims they are unjust. This is particularly evident in Song 4.7, where King Gesar—having just accused Amitābha Buddha of turning a blind eye to those in hell—confronts the netherworld servants for their lack of compassion:

You executioners without mercy!
 Why do you give useless suffering like this to samsaric
 beings?
 You executioners say it is because you are buddhas.
 On the path and tradition of demonic buddhas [like
 yourselves],
 the business is but three—killing, cutting, and
 tormenting.
 [You have] the body of a demon without compassion,
 [You have] the body of a demon without kindness.
 Never have I seen a buddha like this!³¹

Typical of the violent warrior-king, Gesar follows this challenge with a threat to lead an army of buddhas to destroy hell itself:

From the mandala of the Conqueror's own body,
 I will lead an army of the Supreme One Hundred
 Families.
 The Father Primordial Buddha will act as general.
 His retinue of the Supreme One Hundred Families will
 build a military camp.
 Emanations upon emanations
 —so many that one cannot conceive it—
 will build military camps in the deathly land of hell.
 By the peaceful and wrathful sword of compassion,
 all the executioners and sentient beings of hell will
 become joyous!³²

Despite the karmic justifications for their suffering offered by Yama's servants and Gesar's own prior knowledge of its functioning, the

³¹ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 4.7: 213: *khyod snying rje med pa'i las mkhan tsho/ don med 'khor ba'i sems can la/ sdug bsngal 'di 'dra ci la btang/ khyed las mkhan sangs rgyas yin pas zer/ sangs rgyas bdud kyi lam lugs la/ bsad bcad mnar gsum so nam red/ snying rje med pa bdud kyi lus/ byams sems med pa 'dre'i lus ngas 'di sangs rgyas mthong ma myong*

³² Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 4.7: 215–216: *rang lus rgyal ba'i skyil 'khor nas/ lha dam pa rigs brgya'i dmags gcig drangs/ pha gdod ma'I mgon pos dmag dpon mdzod/ 'khor dam pa rigs brgyas dmag sgar thob/ sprul pa yang sprul bsam mi khyab/ shi dmyal ba'i yul la dmag sgar rgyab/ zhi drag thugs rje'i mtshon cha des/ las mkhan dang dmyal ba'i sems can rnams/ thams cad bde bat hob par shog*

warrior-king reacts to the grotesque tortures with resounding anger and resentment.

King Gesar's balking and palpable resentment at the tortures of hell is anomalous in light of his earlier role as the religious teacher of what appears to be a modified form of a Nyingma *sngon 'gro* text. The narrative points to a fundamental epistemological disconnect: that there is a difference between knowing something intellectually and seeing something with your own eyes. While Song 2.1 and the large teaching section of the *dMyal gling* are likely inspired by *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* and other normative Buddhist ethical literature, Gesar's experience in hell is different. It is possible that Gesar's journey through hell is intended to imitate chapters three and four of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*—which offer a detailed description of hell, as well as instruction on the law of karma—though the literary evidence of imitated metaphors is not quite so clear as with the first two chapters. More importantly, the tone of Gesar's journey through hell and the experience of King Gesar as a Buddhist figure observing the effects of karma represents a remarkable departure from the earlier section. He rages, he is angry, he expresses deep resentment—above all, he does not act like the wise teacher of karmic realities he was only a few moments prior or that we might see in *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*. Two questions naturally arise, therefore: 1. What is the relationship of Gesar's karmic resentment in hell with his prior role as a Buddhist teacher? and 2. How does this narrative as a whole enhance or further the goals of Buddhist ethical literature and *sngon 'gro* commentaries like *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*? Is the narrative doing something special, and, if it is, how does it differ from the narratives already present in the *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*?

4. Making Sense of Gesar's Challenge to Hell

As detailed above, the *dMyal gling* presents us with an epistemological bifurcation—what is the difference between knowing something and seeing something? And how does the structure of narrative help to first highlight, then potentially resolve this distinction? The *dMyal gling's* first third demonstrates that Gesar knows how the karmic system works; he can detail the causal relationship between inappropriate deeds and punishments at great length and possesses the initiatory authority of Padmasambhava. But he balks with resentment when confronted with the reality of hell—the effects of the karmic system he so easily propounded earlier. Despite the seeming disconnect, I maintain that the author had a clear purpose in doing this. In the interest of taking *stories seriously as*

stories, I argue that Gesar's netherworld resentment in the *dMyal gling* is fundamentally enhancing the *sngon 'gro* goal of developing readers as ethically sensitive agents in a way that only a narrative like the Gesar epic can.

When considering how the *dMyal gling* can enhance the goals of traditional *sngon 'gro* texts like *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, Martha Nussbaum offers important insight into the relationship between narrative literature and ethical development. Foundational to Nussbaum's vision of ethical action is the use and action of emotion. She builds on a definition of "emotion" utilized by Greek Stoic philosophers to argue that emotions are not merely uncontrollable, irrational movements of energy, but rather evaluations of judgment "that ascribe to certain things and persons outside a person's own control great importance for the person's own flourishing."³³ These evaluative judgements have three fundamental parts—an object, a relationship, and a belief—such that they represent a way of interpreting what one senses about the world around them and the objects they value.³⁴ One's belief about the value of specific types of relationships with individuals and actions towards those individuals brings about the experience of emotions such that they are culturally-constructed and individually-specific.

Based on this model, narrative plays a crucial role in teaching people *how* to have emotions through cultivating an object's value and demonstrating appropriate actions towards that object. Stories like *Romeo and Juliet* teach us that the object of our romantic love is important above all other potential objects and that such love is its most real only when you are willing to die for its loss. The life story of the Buddha teaches readers to value mental equilibrium over hedonistic pleasure. Such evaluative judgements naturally lead to the creation of moral and ethical agents who value particular kinds of objects, relationships, and actions towards those objects. At the same time, through following the characters and participating in their inner world, narrative also develops a "potential space" in which the reader can imagine the experience and inner world of another person. J. Antunes da Silva notes that this faculty is crucial to the developing ethical agents in Buddhist worlds, writing that "imagination helps us to exchange our self for others and meditate on the practice of taking and giving. It helps the practitioner to visualize and, somehow, to recreate situations of sufferings and misery. Through this practice, one is able to attain solidarity with the

³³ Nussbaum 2001: 22.

³⁴ Nussbaum 2001: 28.

suffering of others.”³⁵ Returning to our example of the life story of the Buddha, the turmoil and sorrow of Siddhartha’s family at his sudden departure acknowledges the complex social entanglements in which one is enmeshed and allows the reader to contemplate the tension between those and one’s efforts to obtain enlightenment. The potentiality of narrative allows the reader to contemplate another’s structure of valued objects and consider how they might react when these objects are threatened. Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen have demonstrated how, when applied to Buddhist narratives, Nussbaum’s theories reveal a specific type of ethical agency based in constructing a relationality with other figures through the narrative form: “The ethics of language do not reside in the way *it* orients *us* towards or against certain values, but rather in the fact that language use itself requires certain recognitions and kinds of choices essential to ethics.”³⁶ Through its role developing emotions, teaching readers what to value, and providing the space to experience others’ emotional worlds, therefore, narrative contributes to the production of ethical agents.

Returning to our analysis of the *dMyal gling*, the figure of King Gesar serves as both a model of and mirror for the reader who imaginatively accompanies Gesar and also experiences vicariously the intense suffering of hell. Through their imaginative recreation while reading the *dMyal gling*, the reader experiences both the hell’s suffering and their own emotional reaction to its tortures. Gesar’s resentment and anger—despite his evident knowledge of the karmic system in the early parts of the *dMyal gling*—represents a very real reaction that allows people to themselves feel and express resentment. The explanation of karma and the ultimate justice of the punishments he (and the reader) witness do little to ameliorate his / their anger at viewing the netherworld tortures. Instead, by narratively acknowledging this epistemological bifurcation between rationally knowing that suffering in hell awaits those who commit certain actions and seeing it yourself, the *dMyal gling* provides something of a “narrative safe space” to experience these emotions without challenging the validity of the Buddhist doctrine itself. Such emotions of anger and resentment are institutionally-inappropriate, but, as presented in the *dMyal gling*, also normal. Similar to Elie Wiesel’s insight that Satan appears in midrash stories to express the human reactions to a cruel God that are unspeakable by the holy men of the Bible,³⁷ narrative allows characters to say and do things more

³⁵ da Silva 1996: 828.

³⁶ Hallisey and Hansen 1996: 308.

³⁷ Wiesel 1976: 69–97.

traditional doctrinal meditations do not. In this way, the *dMyal gling* is a sort of midrash on Buddhist doctrine. By experiencing within the narrative a shadow of anger and resentment at the karmic system through the character of King Gesar, the reader can work through or process these emotions without explicitly threatening his or her overall acceptance of the concept of karma.

It is in the creation of this intellectual potentiality to both imagine and work through difficult emotions that the *dMayl gling* goes beyond the work of Nyingma *sngon 'gro* commentaries like *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*. Such commentaries explain in detail the workings of karma and samsara with the goal of crafting Buddhist readers into moral agents; the *dMyal gling's* first third does just that. As Nussbaum illuminates, these texts use narrative to impress upon the reader certain structures of valued objects—the importance of Buddhist practice, of not wasting a human life, and so forth. The story of the *dMyal gling* does more, however, than the narratives in the *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* cannot. Placing these claims about the workings of karma in the framework of a story where the reader follows the protagonist moves beyond the commentary's efforts to construct systems of value; it allows readers to experience the effects of that particular system, to express uncomfortable emotions, and to think through that emotion via participating in the experience of the main character. While *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* does itself include a variety of narratives, the narrative of the *dMyal gling* is of a fundamentally different type; those narratives seldom describe what the protagonist is seeing or follow the protagonist for many pages on an intellectual and physical journey. The *dMyal gling* does just that—providing an immediacy that invites empathetic contemplation. Through modeling resentment and anger at the karmic system, the *dMyal gling* gives readers the freedom not afforded by more traditional Nyingma *sngon 'gro* literature to acknowledge and experience doctrinally-inappropriate emotional responses.

Gesar's challenge to the karmic system and his expressions of anger at its result also leave the reader with an unsettling complication: Gesar's mother's suffering *is* entirely undeserved. She suffers not for her own karmic sins, but for the sins of her son. Earlier in the hell journey, Yama explains to Gesar:

You, precious being of the world,
that desires to lead [your] mother Gokmo
on the path of liberation—
For the great sins of her son Gesar,
[she must] repay.
The kind mother is not without Dharma,
but it is the maturation of her son's great sins

that will mature in Gokmo's body.³⁸

As a result of this twist, Gesar's rage at karmic suffering is perhaps not as inappropriate as it appears; his mother does indeed suffer needlessly. The reader following Gesar on his journey is left discomfited—perhaps not all karmic results are as just as Yama's servants claim.

Why leave this seed of doubt about the justice of karma in a text imitating Nyingma ethical literature aiming to form a reader sensitive to karmic realities? While Gesar's mother suffering for her son's prior attempts to martially "liberate" demon kings makes a powerful argument undermining traditional tantric ideas of violence, her innocent suffering can also be read through the hermeneutics of producing ethical agents. Throughout Buddhist teachings, the answer to karmic suffering difficult to accept has been the development of compassion for such suffering beings. While Nussbaum identifies *undeserved* suffering as the critical component of compassion,³⁹ in most Buddhist formulations, compassion should arise in the face of both deserved and undeserved suffering. What the *dMyal gling* reveals is that the entire notion of "undeserved" suffering necessitates a dualistic understanding of the boundary between "self" and "other." The suffering of Gesar's mother in the *dMyal gling* reveals that such boundaries are fictitious, as Gesar's karma is not his own, but hers as well. Anyone's suffering, therefore—whether karmically-just or not—affects oneself and one's own happiness. In this way, the *dMyal gling* highlights what is perhaps the ultimate goal of such Nyingma *sngon 'gro* texts: to produce Buddhist ethical agents who desire to end the suffering of others as their primary goal. What appears to be a discomfiting karmic mistake of Gesar's mother suffering for her son's sin ultimately focuses the reader's attention on their own relationship to other's suffering.

5. Conclusions

The radical distinction and dissonant relationship between philosophical works and popular narrative is not a doxography necessarily indigenous to Tibetans. As seen in the use and arrangement of metaphors in Song 2.1, the *dMyal gling* was deeply influenced by the *sngon 'gro* work *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*.

³⁸ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 4.74: 181: *khyod 'dzam gling/ ma 'gogs mo thar lam 'dren chog ste/ bu ge sar sdiq pa che bas lan/ drin a ma chos med ma red del bus dig pa che ba'i rnam smin red/ ma 'gogs mo'i lus la smin le red/*

³⁹ Nussbaum 2001: 301.

Indeed, the entire first third of the text with its introductory Dzogchen teachings and reference to the canon of advanced Nyingma practice reflects the obvious influence of the *Klong chen snying thig*. The *dMyal gling*, however, was intended neither to replace the ordinary preliminaries from the *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* nor to do better than it. The metaphors found in the *dMyal gling's* songs represent a brief, summarized version of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*—referencing and reminding someone what happened in that other text, but not truly replacing it. The *dMyal gling* is not a substitute for a *sngon 'gro* text, but rather a supporting narrative that deepens, elucidates, and recollects its themes in new ways—a Buddhist midrash, if you will. Popular narratives like the Gesar epic, therefore, have an important role in reinforcing and supporting philosophical and meditation texts, a role that has too often been overlooked.

The epic narrative format of the *dMyal gling* goes further, however, to enhance the *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* as it allows for interpretative possibilities not afforded by more traditional Buddhist ethical literature. While the first third is a fairly straightforward recapitulation of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, Gesar's trip to hell represents a radical departure from institutionally-appropriate Buddhist expressions of the karmic system. Gesar proclaims the entire system of karma as unjust, challenges the executioners of Yama to martial combat, and demands retribution for the netherworld tortures. While seemingly at odds with Gesar's earlier role as religious teacher, Martha Nussbaum provides some insight into how these scenes actually contribute to the *sngon 'gro's* goal of producing Buddhist ethical agents sensitive to issues of karma. Through creating an intellectual space in which one can experience institutionally-inappropriate emotions of anger and resentment at the effects of karmic realities, the narrative frame of the *dMyal gling* allows both for their expression and, perhaps, their resolution. The narrative itself also works to generate this resolution through demonstrating the permeability of the self / other boundary via the karmic punishment of Gesar's mother for her son's sins. All karmic suffering—both “deserved” and “undeserved”—necessarily limits one's own prosperity and flourishing, so one should aim to ease all karmic suffering. In this way, the *dMyal gling* makes the sort of karmically-aware, compassionate agents that are the goal product of a *sngon 'gro* commentary.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the *dMyal gling* raises questions about the interaction of narrative, doctrine, and the senses. It reveals a fundamental epistemological bifurcation, the difference between knowing something intellectually and experiencing it in

person—or, at least, through the lens of the narrative. Narratives like the *dMyal gling* provide an intellectual position of relative safety to experience uncomfortable frustrations and doubts. Through experiencing Gesar's own rage and frustration with the karmic system, the reader then has the opportunity to express their own uncomfortable emotions without explicitly rejecting the system as a whole. In fact, it reveals that having doubts or frustrations about the karmic system does not make you a bad Buddhist—it makes you more like King Gesar. Epic narratives are spaces of potentiality that allow for the safe manifestation of challenging ideas, as well as an opportunity for their resolution. Taking stories seriously as stories means understanding that stories offer contemplative tools working in coordination with meditative manuals, philosophical treatises, and commentaries. To neglect them lessens deeply our own hermeneutical breadth as scholars.

FIGURE 1	
Peoples	Teachings
India; (<i>rgya gar</i>)	<i>Bla ma gsang 'dus</i>
Nepalis, U, Tsang, Lhasans (<i>pal po, dbus, lha sa, gtsang</i>)	<i>Bla ma dgongs pa 'dus pa</i>
Khampas (<i>kham</i> s)	<i>Zhi khro bka' brgyad</i>
Hor (<i>hor</i>)	<i>Mkha' 'gro snying thig</i>
Mon, Jang (<i>mon, 'jang</i>)	<i>Bla ma yang tig</i>
Menyak (<i>me nyag</i>)	<i>Bla ma 'jam dpal</i>
Ling (<i>gling</i>)	No teaching given

FIGURE 2		
Metaphor / Literary Image	dMyal gling, Song 2.1 line / page numbers (1984 edition)	Kun zang bla ma'i zhal lung (2003 edition)—with Padmakara translation
Three purities— place, teacher, assembly	L: 16-25, p.93	p.9-11; PK: p.8-9
Three defects of the pot	L: 42-48, p.94	p.13-14; PK: p.10-11
Six defilements	L: 49-50, p.94	p.16-17; PK: p.12-15
Five non-apprehensions	L: 51-52, p.94	p.23; PK: p.15
Lama as a physician	L: 53-55, p.94	p.24; PK: p.16
Preparing to listen	L: 60-64, p.94	p.30-31; PK: p.18-19
Eight unfavorable conditions	L: 65-67, p.95	p.31-32; PK: p.19-20
18 freedoms and advantages	L: 71-73, p.95	p.35-43; PK: p.22-29
Human body = rare as star during the daytime	L: 77, p.95	p.63-64; PK: p.34
Beings numerous as dust particles	L: 76, p.95	p.64; PK: p.34
Returning empty from land of jewels	L: 78-80, p.95	p.65; PK: p.35
Impermanence of Four seasons	L: 99-101, p.96	p.85-86; PK: p.45-46
Only names remain	L: 106-111, p.96-97	p.86-87; PK: p.46
Many causes of death	L: 118-120, p.97	p.102; PK: p.53
Death like pulling hair from butter	L: 133-138, p.98	p.87; PK: p.47

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