

# The Monstrous and the Moral: Interpreting King Yama's Narratological Arc in Returner Literature

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**D**espite increased focus on the importance and role of narrative literature in Tibetan Buddhist societies, exploring the narrative complexities of King Yama—the Lord, Ruler, and Judge of the Buddhist Underworld—has remained an underdeveloped project. Although appearing first in Vedic literature, King Yama as guard or master of the underworld enters into its fullest formation in Buddhist narratives, where he provides normative Buddhist ethical guidance and advice while embodying a terror-inspiring form.<sup>1</sup> Such narratives played an important role in expanding Yama's function from a spirit who takes away those who mistreat their parents and Buddhist ascetics in the Pali Canon<sup>2</sup> to the head of an expansive netherworld courtroom that often involves a considerable bureaucratic system.<sup>3</sup> Narratives and performances about Buddhist heroes who journey to hell and return—including Mulian, Phra Malai, and others<sup>4</sup>—also played an important role in

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<sup>1</sup> For a full review of the “evolutionary history” of Yama as a divine figure, see Siklós 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Devadūta Sutta 1995: 1029–1036; Messengers 36.6 2012: 332–343.

<sup>3</sup> One of the most complete elaborations of this phenomena is found in *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, where Yama is only one of ten netherworldly kings who must be propitiated with the help of Buddhist monasteries to secure a favorable rebirth for one's loved ones. For more information, see Teiser 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Mulian and Phra Malai are two of the most prominent Buddhist heroes whose narratives describe as descending to hell to save suffering beings. Most popular in China, Mulian—the Chinese rendering of the Buddha's disciple Maudgalyāyana—saves his mother from hell with the help of supernatural powers gained through his extensive meditative prowess and the Buddha himself. After his journey, the Buddha initiates the Chinese Ghost Festival, during which families make offerings to Buddhist monastics as a way to feed their own suffering ancestors. See further, Cole 1998 and Teiser 1988. In contrast, Phra Malai descends to hell repeatedly not to save a specific suffering being, but rather anyone who calls for his assistance. Although relatively unknown outside of Southeast Asia, his narrative has extensive ritual use at weddings, funerals, and other major life events. See further Brereton 1996.

making the narrative figure of King Yama both increasingly detailed and an increasingly important figure in the Buddhist imagination.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, one particular thread of post-mortem narratives—Tibetan Returner (*'das log*) literature—became especially popular throughout the Himalayan Plateau. In these stories, people die, receive judgment from King Yama, and then return to tell the tale to the living. While these narratives are inherently interesting and have been the subject of numerous recent studies,<sup>6</sup> they also provide the opportunity to consider the role Yama plays in the Buddhist popular imagination. Yama here appears exceedingly complex—a veritable Janus figure who inspires in the judged on one hand terror, but on the other offers detailed ethical instruction with prescient reminders of karmic morality.

When trying to make sense of the figure of Yama in the Buddhist imagination, however, scholars usually rely on one of two interpretations—first, an evaluation of his role that overlooks or otherwise obfuscates the terror he inspires in figures who meet him, or, second, a simplistic identification of Yama as somehow analogous to the figure of the Devil in Christian mythos. Turning to the first interpretation, many scholars and Buddhist thinkers have explained fearful evaluations of Asian deities, including King Yama, as largely foreign to the Asian tradition or as somehow a misunderstanding of the figure's deeper significance. This interpretation is in large part a reaction to the previous Euro-American cultural denigration of Asian religious figures for their terrifying visage. In the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship on Asian religions, the monstrous qualities of Hindu and Buddhist deities were highlighted to demonstrate their cultural and spiritual inferiority to (Protestant) Christianity. On his trip around the world described in *Following the Equator*, Mark Twain labeled the Hindu gods of Varanasi, "a wild mob of nightmares."<sup>7</sup> Twain's remarks were not especially unique for his time. Protestant assumptions about the appropriate nature, purpose, and appearance

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<sup>5</sup> These narratives typically divide protagonists into two categories, what I call "saviors" and "sojourners" in hell. Saviors are individuals who travel to hell of their own volition and their own agency to specifically free individuals suffering there. Among these saviors, Mulian looms large and potentially represents something of an urtext or originary text for Buddhist saviors in hell upon which local concerns and narrative tropes are written. For more information, see Berounský 2012; Brereton 1996; Kapstein 2007. In contrast, "sojourners" are revenants who die, visit hell, and then are specifically sent back. While this article discusses one such narrative in detail, further information can be found in Cuevas 2008; Grant and Idema 2011; Pommaret 1997.

<sup>6</sup> See especially Prude 2011, Pommaret 1989 & 1997, Cuevas 2008 & 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Twain 1898: 504.

of religion thread throughout late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship on Asian religions.

Contemporary scholars have sought, therefore, to salvage Asian religious traditions from these reductionistic critiques either by situating such critiques as entirely manifestations of culturally-specific realities or by dismissing them as misunderstandings of what are wholly psychological phenomena. Diana Eck deconstructs what she terms Twain's "Hebraic hostility" towards Hindu deities and links it to the suspicion of graven images found in some Jewish and early Christian sources.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, scholars of Tibetan religion frequently explain away the terrifying and bloody images of wrathful buddhas as psychological manifestations used to destroy one's own afflictive emotions. When a tantric figure possesses "long sharp fangs, rolling bloodshot eyes, clenched teeth, and terrifying weaponry," scholars like Judith Simmer-Brown emphasize that these traits are not an inherent feature of the figure, but rather are "a wrathful appearance to awaken the individual practitioner from arrogance, intellectual opinionatedness, or laziness."<sup>9</sup> Such grotesque images represent, therefore, nothing more than a transmutation of "the practitioner's emotional obscurations and thoughts in co-emergent wisdom."<sup>10</sup> This rhetorical move preserves the religious acceptability of the divine figures from a Protestant perspective, but at the cost of sanitizing their terrifying aspects.

In proving that these divine figures have substantial value as powerful religious entities, many scholars overlook not only that these figures *are* terrifying or grotesque, but also that the religious tradition's presentation of them as horrifying is intentional and, therefore, important. The potential for horror engendered within some Asian religious figures is especially apparent in the figure of Yama, who takes a particularly active role in a variety of popular journey-to-hell literature about Returners, Mulian, King Gesar, and others. Their stories demonstrate that while a psychological interpretation of King Yama is emic to these traditions, being scared of or horrified by the underworld king is as well.

When Euro-American interpreters do acknowledge Yama's frightening visage, however, there is frequently an unstated assumption that Yama's terror is a tactic intended to "scare straight" the reader or listener.<sup>11</sup> In this way, Yama becomes something closer to

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<sup>8</sup> Eck 1981: 18.

<sup>9</sup> Simmer-Brown 2002: 267.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*: 151.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the very idea of hell—Christian, Buddhist, or otherwise—does not strictly require a netherworld figure to scare a reader into moral action. The punishments of hell themselves generally suffice.

the Devil in Christian mythos—an otherworldly punisher who exists solely to terrify by representing the potential result of one's sins or ethical missteps. The "scared straight" assumption is not only overly simplistic, but also by its nature ethnocentric. Terror-inspiring figures in torturous afterlife regions are not the same the world over. Yama is certainly scary, but he acts very differently than the Devil. In Tibetan underworld narratives, King Yama discusses karmic realities, Buddhist practice, and dispenses ethical advice. He represents both the authority and reality of the Buddhist institution in the in-between state of *bar do*.

If Yama is to be interpreted as neither a purely psychoanalytical phenomenon nor the "Tibetan Devil," how ought we to proceed? This paper argues that there is an interconnected relationship in these stories between Yama's representation of Buddhist morality and his representation of netherworld terror—a relationship that fundamentally goes deeper than simply the fact that one may be more inclined to listen to moral instruction when one is scared. By using the burgeoning field of Monster Theory<sup>12</sup> to analyze Yama's portrayal as a "monster"—an etic, second-order category—who inspires terror while also representing the full authority of the Buddhist institution, this paper seeks to move beyond simply reducing Yama's fearsome appearance to a Euro-American misunderstanding or to something functionally analogous to the Devil. For the Returner—and through that, the individual reading or listening to the narrative—Yama's monstrosity causes a boundary-shattering destabilization of both self and society. This experience provides the opportunity to ultimately reform the observer through Yama's ethical instruction as an agent sensitive to the Buddhist ethical agenda.

The argument of this paper is not intended to be one based on psychology, but rather a narratological one; it investigates how the characters and plot structures of Returner narratives function to guide the reader towards specific conclusions and ideas. From a narratological perspective, the monstrosity and terror-inducing nature of Yama ultimately serves as a foil to reveal who stands outside the boundaries of the Buddhist ethical world. Because monstrosity is ultimately relative, the ability of Yama to inspire terror serves as a means to reveal who the true monster is—who fits and who does not fit in the Buddhist moral world, so to speak. By tracing the experience of fear in various individuals confronting King Yama, Returner narratives introduce the idea that perhaps it is the karmically-negligent observer, and not the apparently monstrous Yama, who is

<sup>12</sup> Monster Theory uses the category of "monsters" as a framework of analysis to study the nature and function of fantastic creatures in art, literature, and society. See further, Weinstock 2020, Halbertsam 1995, and Cohen 1996.

the one truly outside the boundaries of the Buddhist cosmological schema.

### 1. *Monster as an Analytical Category*

It is important to emphasize at this point that monsters—like the majority of conceptual tools scholars employ—are second-order categories. There is no clear Tibetan word that easily fits the classification of “monster,” though Tibetans certainly have had a variety of disturbing and discomfiting creatures that exist at the boundaries of “normative” human society.<sup>13</sup> Secondary-scholarship on the deployment of monsters as a category often does not define the term “monster.” This is due neither to intellectual laziness nor to ethnocentric blindness that assumes such a definition is both obvious and apparent. Rather, monsters represent a specific type of cultural deployment that is defined not by its essence, but by its relation. Judith Halbertsam has discussed monsters as “meaning machines” that fundamentally challenge the “divisions of identity” between humans.<sup>14</sup> W. Scott Poole explains that monsters “do not mean one thing, but a thousand”<sup>15</sup> and emphasizes the shared social history of monsters as:

Ciphers that reveal disturbing truths about everything from colonial settlement to the institution of slavery, from anti-immigrant movements to the rise of religious fundamentalism.<sup>16</sup>

In this, Poole is building on Douglas E. Cowan, who emphasizes horror and monstrosity as necessarily socially-constructed and, therefore, revealing more of the meaning structures of individual societies than of some sort of fundamental human substrate.<sup>17</sup>

Monsters, therefore, are a way to designate those creatures that—from the perspective of the speaker—incite fear, terror, and unease due to their being neither a part of society nor apart from it. Consequently, the deployment of the term “monster” is inherently subjective and the definitional boundaries between monster and deity or demon are

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<sup>13</sup> The closest Tibetan term that may fit the category of “monster” would likely be *gdon 'dre* which generally indicates a non-human entity causing evil. The term, however, largely lacks the linguistic variance we see with the term “monster” in English, as it is considered a thing unto itself and not a categorical term under which other types of monsters congregate.

<sup>14</sup> Halbertsam 1995: 22.

<sup>15</sup> Poole 2011: xiv.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: 18.

<sup>17</sup> Cowan 2016.

fuzzy at best. While employing this categorical analysis perhaps opens myself to a critique of importing Euro-American analytical terms to a Himalayan context, Jonathan Z. Smith has written eloquently on the scholarly usefulness of second-order categories and the resulting comparisons that can arise from their use.<sup>18</sup> By identifying King Yama as a monster, I am making a specific intellectual designation that will hopefully reveal something previously overlooked about the role Yama plays in the narrative. Thinking about Yama from the perspective of monster theory also represents a potential corrective to the two problematic interpretations identified earlier—one that attempts to remove the terror of the figure entirely by psychologizing it away and one that tacitly identifies him as a Devil-like bogeyman with no deeper significance in the narrative than to scare the reader into ethical action. Rather, applying the category of monster to Yama and considering him within the larger framework of monster theory, allows for new interpretations of Yama narratives in which Yama is understood as both a visibly terrifying figure and one of central doctrinal import.

## 2. *An Introduction to Returner ('Das log) Narratives*

As noted previously, Tibetan Returners are individuals who reportedly die and come back to life several days later, having had dark visions of both the tortures of hell and King Yama's courtroom. When considering Returner narratives, this paper is admittedly focusing on the written tradition, which deviates a great deal from the experience of contemporary living Returners. While the Returners featured in literary works have fairly equal representation in terms of gender, ordination, and social class, Alyson Prude and Françoise Pommaret have found that the majority of contemporary Returners are non-ordained women with limited education.<sup>19</sup> The potential reasons for this difference between lived and literary traditions are multifarious and complex, but outside the purview of the discussion here; with greater research into this topic, hopefully, more insights will come to light.

Like portrayals of heaven and hell in Euro-American media, Returner narratives are particularly interesting as windows into "popular" perceptions of the afterlife. Indeed, some scholars have linked the 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century rise in popularity of Returner narratives to growing Dge lugs institutionalization in central Tibetan

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<sup>18</sup> Smith 1982 & 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Pommaret 1997 and Prude 2011.

regions; this consolidation of power resulted in more localized, non-institutional practices like Returners being marginalized and pushed to border regions.<sup>20</sup> While potentially an accurate analysis that seems to reflect larger patterns of the increasing centralization of power in religious environments, Bryan J. Cuevas notes that such an analysis is based largely on speculation and has little concrete data.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, this particular line of argument has at its core certain assumptions about the types of religion practiced within monastic, institutional settings versus those practiced without. While the term “popular” can be problematic for its potential privileging of ordained, literary, or institutional viewpoints as the Buddhist “norm,” it can also designate widespread beliefs held by both ordained and non-ordained individuals that generally do not perfectly map onto larger institutional doctrines. Indeed, Cuevas and others have demonstrated that “popular” beliefs are often still as widespread within monastic environments, so to think of these beliefs as a phenomenon solely of the laity, the uneducated, or the enigmatic “folk” would be a mistake.<sup>22</sup>

Returner narratives are also important for their regional focus; such narratives often reference local landmarks and families, while giving in the process detailed personal information about the Returner’s upbringing and early life. These trends indicate that—at least initially—these narratives likely had a local readership and were quite possibly composed by someone who knew or saw the Returner personally.<sup>23</sup> Based on publication history, however, these narratives spread relatively rapidly to communities outside of their origin. Returner narratives frequently were tucked away into biographical collections of Buddhist men and women, gathered into small collections of three to four narratives, or even into larger publications like the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Ka shod mkhar kha* (“Castle of the Ka shod Clan”).<sup>24</sup>

Due at least in part to this rapid spread, Returner narratives as portrayed in literary outlets follow a remarkably standard structure,

<sup>20</sup> Pommaret 1989: 102 and Epstein 1982: 22–23.

<sup>21</sup> Cuevas 2008: 51.

<sup>22</sup> Cuevas 2008: 136–139 and Company 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Cuevas 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Possibly the largest collection of Returner narratives, the *Ka shod mkhar kha* (full title: *Bya bral pa kun dga’ rang grol dang sprang byang chub seng ges gcos chos kyi rgyal pos bka’ phrin lon pa sky abo pho mo’i rnam thar*), largely came to academic attention through Cuevas 2008, where it provided an important resource for evaluating the larger patterns prevalent in Returner narratives. A poorly preserved text, Cuevas notes that it is only held in three collections: one in Japan, one at the Collège de France and as microfilms at the University of Washington library. However, a recent 2002 edition was published in Lhasa under the name *Das log skor gyi chos skor phyogs sgrig thar* (“A Compilation of the Teachings of Returners”).

which Cuevas traces back to the narrative of returner Gling bza' chos skyid.<sup>25</sup> All Returner literature begins, unsurprisingly, with an introduction of the protagonist and their death. The individual remains ignorant of their newly post-mortem state and continues to try and interact with family members. During this period, they look back upon their corpse, but only see it as an animal—often a pig or a dog—dressed in their clothes. Eventually, the deceased begins to make their way towards King Yama's court by passing through a landscape that is bleak and uninviting. Along the way, a spirit guide often appears to lead them, and eventually, the Returner will have grotesque visions of hell and the judgments of King Yama. The scenes in front of Yama's throne will be explored in more detail in the following section, but they generally are terrifying, theatrical affairs, with detailed descriptions of King Yama's bull-headed form, as well as the plaintiff's flowing tears and pleas to take messages back to the living. In some narratives, there is a scale of justice upon which two spirits weigh the victim's good and bad deeds. Other times, Yama holds aloft a mirror or a book of judgment that displays one's misdeeds and subsequent fate. Once the Returner has their own judgment before King Yama, they are sent back to the living. Sometimes this is because the plaintiff's death was in error, but other times it is with the express purpose of communicating a message on the realities of Buddhist karma to their community.

### *3. Yama as Source of Terror in Returner Narratives*

As noted above, the Returner's trial before Yama represents a narrative peak generally flanked by terror and horror. While the outlines and plots of these narratives have been well explored in Cuevas' recent work on Returners,<sup>26</sup> I want to highlight the characters' fearful reactions to Yama to ground the discussion of Yama's persona as potentially "monstrous." Due to the structure of Returner narratives—where the individual observes numerous trials before they themselves are called before Yama's throne—the reader has ample opportunity to witness the terror Yama inspires. In the biography of Gling bza' chos skyid, we see several trial scenes where individuals express fear and cry before King Yama. In one particularly famous scene, a young woman who refused the tantric advances of a Lama Gzhon nu rgyal mtshan and subsequently gossiped with her girlfriends about the event is condemned to the Howling Hell. As her judgement is read,

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<sup>25</sup> Cuevas 2008: 17.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



the young lady loudly trembles with fear and tears fall down her face.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Yama's role as a source of terror is especially evident here when he uses the young woman's tears as inspiration for her placement in the Howling Hell (*dmyal ba ngu 'bod*), and his minions use their iron hooks to pierce the young woman and drag her away, all while screaming "Kill! Kill! Strike! Strike!"<sup>28</sup> An earlier trial sees a yogi who masqueraded as an accomplished Dharma practitioner while seducing a queen being sentenced to the Most Tortuous Hell (*avīci, mnar med pa*), where 1,000 iron hooks will pierce his body.<sup>29</sup> The yogi cries in contrition and begs all who watch to hold tight to their vows, but his fate is already sealed. Both scenes reveal that meeting Yama is a fundamentally frightening and distressing experience.

The terror that surrounds Yama is related not only to his own person, however, but also to his veritable army of animal-headed servants who do his bidding. In the narrative of *Kar ma dbang 'dzin*, the young female Returner encounters several people on her route to Yama, including an older woman being cruelly driven forward with spears by Yama's servants. In response to her treatment by Yama's entourage, the woman cries bitterly and beats herself.<sup>30</sup> Such a scene of fear before Yama's servants is repeated on a larger scale in the Returner narrative of *Byang chub seng ge*, where he sees sinners running from Yama's workers "like children being pursued by hawks," and he becomes extremely frightened in response.<sup>31</sup> During *Kar ma dbang 'dzin*'s trial itself, Yama himself acknowledges and celebrates the terror-inducing visage of his servants, asking her if she saw "the terror of my messengers?"<sup>32</sup>

While this article focuses exclusively on Returner narratives as a way to highlight widespread popular views of Yama, it should be noted that Yama's presentation as terrifying is not unique to this particular Tibetan genre. In the 15<sup>th</sup>-century *Bar do thos grol chen mo* ("Liberation through Hearing During the *Bar do*"), we see a vision of Yama's judgment, which describes "at that time [of judgement], you will be frightened and alarmed, shaking and trembling with fear."<sup>33</sup> While Returner narratives may highlight the terror of seeing Yama in particularly personal and evocative ways, this presentation of Yama is

<sup>27</sup> *pu mo 'dar khri li li mchi ma shar shar gtong* (Don 'grub rdo rje 1977a: 503–504).

<sup>28</sup> *sod sod/ rgob rgyob zer zhing/* (Ibid: 504).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid: 456–457.

<sup>30</sup> Skal bzang dbang phyug 1981: 61–62.

<sup>31</sup> *sdig can dpag tu med pa rnas ni byis chung khra rded pa ltar brded nas song ngo/ (Spyan ras gzigs kyi sprul pa 'das log byang chub seng ges* 1976: 44).

<sup>32</sup> *gshin rje'i pho nya'i 'jigs skrag yang mthong ngam* (Skal bzang dbang phyug 1981: 211).

<sup>33</sup> *de'i dus su khyod shin tu bred pa dang/ dangangs pa dang/ 'dar bar byas nas* (Mkhan po rdo je 2003: 108).

not unique to these stories, and Yama is seen as a figure of horror and fear throughout a variety of Tibetan Buddhist literature.

As noted above, the Returner narratives described in this section have all been well explored in other publications. The remainder of this paper, therefore, will examine Yama's monstrosity in a largely unexplored Returner narrative—that of Long wa Adrung found in *A Message from Dharma King Yama* (*Gshin rje chos kyi rgyal po'i gsung phrin*).<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that this is intended to serve as a preliminary exploration of the text with particular focus on the portrayal of the figure of Yama as both a source of terror and ethical guidance; it is not meant to represent the final scholarly word on the text, and it is my hope that this article encourages further study. That caveat aside, through this case study, this article will build on the prior observations of Yama's incitation of horror and terror in Returner narratives as a category, while also exploring how Yama's bifurcated roles as both a monster and as a representation of the Buddhist institution works together to instill in the Returner and the reader a greater sensitivity towards normative Buddhist ethics.

#### 4. *Yama in A Message from Dharma King Yama*

For unknown reasons, Adrung's Returner narrative has been included in few collections, having only one known manuscript production and one xylograph publication. The story, however, may have circulated orally; Lawrence Epstein notes that the last Shug gseb Rje btsun Rin po che claims to have heard about the Returner Adrung from the Royal Chaplain of Ladakh.<sup>35</sup> Until its purchase via the PL-480 text exchange program,<sup>36</sup> the manuscript was held at Gsang sngags chos gling, a 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud monastery in the Spiti Valley. It is unclear if that is where it was produced or if it came to the monastery by some other means. The manuscript colophon is rather sparse, but indicates that the text was made under the auspices of the Dharma king of Gung thang, Khri Bdud 'dul mgon po lde.<sup>37</sup> In his brief analysis of the text,

<sup>34</sup> A previous significant work on *A Message from Dharma King Yama* can be found in Epstein 1982, where he briefly examines the text as part of the arc of other Returner narratives.

<sup>35</sup> Epstein 1982: 65.

<sup>36</sup> Initiated in 1954 and amended in 1962, the PL-480 text exchange program allowed the American Library of Congress to collect books and periodicals from participating countries in exchange for food commodities. Through this program, many American universities developed extensive Tibetan-language collections. See further Canary 2018.

<sup>37</sup> O rgyan rdo rje 1975: 261.

Epstein uses this to trace the text to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, in 1533.<sup>38</sup> If true, this would make *A Message from Dharma King Yama* an especially early example of a Returner narrative. I have no reason to doubt Epstein's dating, though locating such an early example of a Returner narrative that has not undergone previous significant study is surprising.

The text had two Indian publications in the 1970s via two different PL-480 text exchange collections. First, the manuscript entitled "A Message from Dharma King Yama" was published in 1975 by O rgyan rdo rje. In this edition, it is published together with a biography of Mitrayogi also found in the Gsang sngags chos gling Monastery. Whether or not these texts had any relationship prior to their publication as PL-480 texts is unclear, but O rgyan rdo rje identifies both as "obscure texts of the Avalokiteśvara cult from Spiti."<sup>39</sup> While the Indian siddha Mitrayogi is indeed said to have received the Six Yogas from Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva does not make an explicit appearance in *A Message from Dharma King Yama*. Unsurprisingly, however, Avalokiteśvara's mantra is prevalent throughout the manuscript as an expression of praise, as a plea when facing the judgment of King Yama, and in Yama's own exposition on the Dharma. Additionally, when he returns from hell, the text's protagonist takes Avalokiteśvara as his tutelary deity and the colophon of the text claims that it was the power of Avalokiteśvara that led the Returner from Yama's palace. As a text, *A Message from Dharma King Yama* shows significant in-line corrections by what appear to be multiple hands, indicating a possible second copy which was used to correct the one now published in the 1975 edition. This 1975 PL-480 edition serves as the primary source used by this paper.

Beyond this publication in *Two Obscure Texts of the Avalokiteśvara Cult from Spiti*, Adrung's Returner narrative was published a second time in the 1977 collection *Three 'Das log Stories: Three Accounts of Visions of After Death by Bla ma Byams pa bde legs, Khams pa A krung, and Gling bza' Chos kyid*. Here the text appears to be a photographic reproduction of a xylograph, as indicated by the decorative woodcut pattern on the first page. Although the text in this collection is identified only by the name of the protagonist—Khams pa Adrung—it is an almost exact reproduction of *A Message from Dharma King Yama*. The preface of the publication identifies the manuscript as originating from the library of the Lha khang sprul sku. This second PL-480 publication demonstrates that at least two copies—one manuscript and one xylograph—of the text circulated among readers in Tibet.

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<sup>38</sup> Epstein 1982: 82.

<sup>39</sup> O rgyan rdo rje 1975: Preface.

Unlike other Returner narratives, which generally provide significant detail on the lives of the main character, the protagonist of *A Message from Dharma King Yama* is a bit of a mystery. Called Adrung—due to his work as a stable boy for a local lama—he was born in the village of Mda' phug, which editor O rgyan rdo rje places in western Tibet in a region called Gsang po che. Within the text, however, Adrung describes his home as located in Dmar 'khams zil. Adrung's given birthplace could potentially be a misspelling of Smar kham rdzong in Chab mdo and would link the Returner narrative to Kham.<sup>40</sup> This argument is supported by the identification of the Returner as "Khams pa A drung" in the title of the 1977 publication. Indeed, Returner narratives seem to be largely an eastern Tibetan phenomenon, lending credence to this particular theory. Epstein notes that local informants were themselves unable to identify the place of Adrung's birth and stated that it no longer existed.<sup>41</sup>

Providing the source for his name, Adrung works as a stable boy and is subsequently referred to throughout the text as Adrung even by King Yama himself. In an unspecified Male-Water-Dragon Year, when he was 16, he dies due to the obstruction of his five channels.<sup>42</sup> After his death, he encounters all the usual marks found in Returner literature of one who has died—seeing his body as a dog's corpse,<sup>43</sup> the rain of blood and pus,<sup>44</sup> the divine spirit guide,<sup>45</sup> and so forth—as well some post-mortem phenomena that appear unique to this text, including the earth becoming muddy and impossible for Adrung to move through.<sup>46</sup>

The text, however, gives prominence to King Yama. Almost a hundred pages of the text—more than 80 percent of the total length—is spent in Yama's palace, observing his judgments, his explanation of karmic sins, and visualizing the tortures of hell for those he condemns. Unlike other Returner texts, Adrung does not specifically travel through hell and all of the narrative action is centered directly on Yama's courtroom. Throughout the early portion of Adrung's post-mortem journey, therefore, Yama's power and prestige as a Buddhist deity are particularly highlighted. When Adrung enters the city of King Yama's palace complex, the first thing he sees is piles of wealth and offerings.<sup>47</sup> Good spiritual friends and guides are sitting on

<sup>40</sup> O rgyan rdo rje 1975: 153.

<sup>41</sup> Epstein 1982: 82.

<sup>42</sup> *rtsa lnga'i bkag thog* (O rgyan rdo rje 1975: 153).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid: 155.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid: 164–165.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid: 165.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid: 154.

<sup>47</sup> O rgyan rdo rje 1975: 163. For another depiction of Yama's realm using these particular human features of cities and towns, see the Returner narrative of Byams

thrones and conversing together as a divine Buddhist sangha, while men and women dressed in red, blue, and green robes form yogic postures in the courtyard as if they are dancing. While it was previously noted that this text follows other Returner literature closely, this scene seems to be very unique to this text, and I have not seen it in any other Returner narrative. Based on this entrance, however, the text clearly intends to portray King Yama as someone prominent, respected, and powerful within the Buddhist spiritual hierarchy.

As Adrung draws closer to his audience with King Yama, however, he moves through a land of growing unease and dread. Outside the entrance of Yama's palace, Adrung sees individuals undergoing torture and torment, which seems to escalate the closer he gets to Yama. One of the more interesting visions is where Adrung sees a yogin being repeatedly crushed by a mountain of *rtsam pa*,<sup>48</sup> as well as a man being ripped in two by bulls breathing flames, all while simultaneously being flattened by a religious book as large as a mountain.<sup>49</sup> Closer to the palace, Adrung sees the workers of Yama beating individuals with hammers (*thos bas brdung gin 'dug*), threatening them with axes and iron hooks (*lcags skyu dang sta ri thogs pa*), and cutting them with saws (*spu gri gzhor*) and razors (*sog le 'breg*).<sup>50</sup> Adrung frequently faints from fear at the sight of these and other tortures on his journey to Yama's throne; the text states, "[Adrung] fainted on account of his fear of that [of Yama], then revived and continued to tremble."<sup>51</sup> Along the way, he meets many of Yama's workers, who explain that it is not they, but rather King Yama who decides the punishments.<sup>52</sup> The realistic, geographical nature of the place is repeatedly emphasized with descriptions of Yama's iron palace and the various, physical paths by which petitioners are leaving.

As he approaches towards Yama's throne, Adrung describes the netherworld king's visage as terrifying to behold, literally calling him "Yama who is fearsome."<sup>53</sup> Despite Adrung's exclamations of fear, it is noteworthy that the presentation of Yama in *A Message from Dharma King Yama* does not include many of the more violent and non-human components often seen in iconographic portrayals of Yama:

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pa bde leg (Don 'grub rdo rje 1977c) or the English summary in Cuevas 2008: 55–70.

<sup>48</sup> O rgyan rdo rje 1975: 173.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid: 173.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid: 174.

<sup>51</sup> *de lta bu'i 'jigs pas brgyal bas dang/ dran pa rnyed nas 'dar bshin du* (Ibid: 174).

<sup>52</sup> *rgyal pos skos pa'i bar gyi khrims chung ba yin* (Ibid: 177).

<sup>53</sup> *'jigs su rung ba'i gshin rje* (Ibid: 174).

As for the Dharma King Yama, his body was as tall as three men, with a golden color that was inwardly and outwardly luminous. On his head was a great crest and his hands were held in meditative equipoise. His feet were in an indestructible cross-legged posture. His dharma robes were embroidered as if with the leaves of a tree and an umbrella made with a variety of precious stones was above him. In front of him, an inconceivable pile of offerings was arranged, and on either side of that two lion-headed men dressed in white stood.<sup>54</sup>

Here we see Yama portrayed as the full representation of Buddhist power and prestige. While the Yama of *A Message from Dharma King Yama* is not explicitly described in Adrung's first meeting with the bull's head and the necklace of skulls common to other representations of the figure,<sup>55</sup> the text highlights that Adrung is still frightened by this otherworldly visage and feels terror advancing towards Yama's throne. Adrung's fear at his approach is heightened by the netherworldly accoutrement and retinue that surrounds Yama. Around him are animal-headed workers carrying a veritable armory of polearms and swords, all of whom await Yama's command. Other animal-headed workers have vats of ink and pens the size of spears to write down his proclamations and punishments.<sup>56</sup> Before Yama there is an imposing scale described as "wide as 50 trees, with a weighing stone the size of a comet and balance pan as large as a field," where one's sins and virtues are weighed.<sup>57</sup> Upon seeing Yama, Adrung immediately faints from fright again, only to shake uncontrollably when he regains consciousness and awaits his judgment before the Lord of the Underworld.

Having beheld this terrifying visage of King Yama, Adrung remains to the sidelines to watch a stream of karmic judgments. Each case follows a roughly similar structure: first, the plaintiff comes forward—often trembling with fear and with a shaky voice—and makes three prostrations to King Yama. The actual judgement then follows, which proceeds along with a four-fold pattern:

1. The deceased gives a small statement of their failings and the good they tried to do.

<sup>54</sup> O rgyan rdo rje 1975: 179–180.

<sup>55</sup> This bovine head is most notably found in the representations of Yama from the Vajrabhairava tantra and associated artistic traditions. However, Siklós (1996) notes how the relationship between Yama and bulls has a long history spanning back into Vedic and related Iranian literature.

<sup>56</sup> *la las snag bum khal brgya tsam shong ba bkang nas/ snag por re re'i rtsar mi lus sprul gyi mgo can snyug gu mdung tshad re khyer nas las dge sdig gi yi ge 'bri yin 'dug* (O rgyan rdo rje 1975: 181).

<sup>57</sup> *rgya ma ni shing 'dom lnga bcu tsam la srang rdo phod tsam pa/ srang mthil zhing zho gcig gi rgya tsam* (Ibid: 181).

2. This is followed by a much longer analysis of the person's individual moral turpitude by the white and black spirit figures who analyzed the individual's actions throughout their life.
3. King Yama gazes into his mirror of deeds to confirm the tenor of the person's life himself.
4. Finally, King Yama passes his judgement on the deceased, generally accompanied by a lengthy discussion of Buddhist ethics and morality.

The narrative tension is high in these scenes, alternating between the good the plaintiff accomplished and detailed descriptions of the evils committed by the plaintiff. During these episodes, Yama either weighs on his scale the individual's good and bad deeds as represented by white and black stones or views their actions in his karmic mirror. While determining the plaintiff's fate, Yama's workers begin to circle around him or her, at the ready to rush in and grab the plaintiff if it goes poorly. Yama uses this opportunity to pontificate further on the karmic merits or demerits of the plaintiff, then finally gives his verdict by telling the individual what path they must go on for their future rebirth—the white, the black, or the variegated.

Adrung witnesses at least seven judgment cases in Yama's court, and, of those, a fair number go well for the plaintiff. It is the cases which go poorly, however, that take up the majority of narrative space and focus the reader's attention on Yama in his most terrifying role. If the plaintiff is condemned to hell, then the tortures they will soon experience are witnessed by everyone in the court, while Yama explains in detail the karmic sins committed by those individuals. During these scenes, the rampant fear affects everyone around the plaintiff. At one point, someone vomits, a surprisingly human acknowledgement of the horror being portrayed in the narrative. The ethical instruction Yama gives during these hell visions is fairly standard for non-tantric Buddhist texts—the importance of generosity, the importance of financially supporting the Buddhist sangha, the importance of human life, and so forth.

Eventually, Adrung himself goes forward, where he promptly faints from fear once more. After regaining consciousness, black and white spirits emerge from his body and argue about his post-mortem fate. It is here we learn that Adrung has not been a good servant to his lama, nor has he sufficiently engaged in merit-making activities like offering butter, reciting mantras, and contributing alms.<sup>58</sup> In the

<sup>58</sup> *'dis yar bla ma dkon mchog la mchod pa dang/ zhabs tog ma byas/ bar du phyag dang bskor ba sgom bzlas ma byas/ mar sdug phongs la sbyin pa ma btang/* (O rgyan rdo rje 1975: 233–234).

process of these proceedings, Adrung faints several times from fear, until his white spirit argues that Adrung's life was in fact not supposed to have run out quite yet and that he has more time allotted to him in the human realm.<sup>59</sup>

After deliberating, Yama decides to send Adrung back to the human realm, but not before giving a lengthy speech advocating for Buddhist moral and ethical conduct. This speech builds on the moments of karmic judgement spread previously throughout the narrative, in which Yama provides the voice of normative, non-tantric Buddhist ethical wisdom. Such wisdom includes admonishing people for not sufficiently supporting monks and lamas, not engaging in meditative and mantra practice, and living hedonistic lifestyles in unsavory professions. Here we see Yama also offering unique ethical advice to a variety of specific individuals—including those in power, tantric practitioners, and beggars—while also reminding everyone to remember the excellent Buddhist doctrine, to have compassion for all living beings, and to make significant offerings to buddha statues.<sup>60</sup> Adrung is then charged with telling everyone about the realities of Yama's court, the judgment that awaits them, and the precious opportunity of human rebirth. Upon waking, the authenticity of his hell journey is confirmed by a lama, and Adrung immediately rededicates himself to his Buddhist practice and communicating the realities of Yama's courtroom.

### 5. King Yama as a Monster and Moral Guide

Following closely the model found in other Returner literature, *A Message from Dharma King Yama* reveals the netherworld judge as a terrifying figure. With his larger-than-life visage, his army of sword-wielding half-animal workers, and his immense power to determine someone's next rebirth, plaintiffs come before him trembling with fear and fainting; in short, the text reveals what we can classify as a monster due to the terror he engenders. As noted earlier, monsters are a term defined not by their essence, but by their designation relative to other things. Monsters, therefore, are creatures largely found at the boundaries outside of what one identifies as "normative" society, creatures that push their way into one's habitual, everyday perception of society and force a reevaluation. As a result of this chaotic thrust into an ordered world and their uncertain status as both a part of and apart from society, monsters inspire terror and fear.

<sup>59</sup> *a drung bya ba 'dis mi yul brang ma khang nas tshe ma zad* (O rgyan rdo rje 1975: 234).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*: 234–245.



Because of their liminal formation at social and cultural boundaries, however, monsters reveal the unspoken or suppressed power structures that underlie social systems and, for this reason, represent anxieties we cannot express within the bounds of normal society. Through “monstrosizing” these anxieties, therefore, social communities reaffirm their own validity and sense of identity. As seen with Yama, however, boundaries are not only physical and social but temporal as well. His placement at the boundary of life and death undermines and challenges how karmically-negligent individuals imagine society to work. In the *bar do*, Yama erupts into one’s vision as a terrifying reminder that your actions in this life have very real effects and consequences on your next rebirth.

Despite Yama’s role as a monster, however, he is also a representative of the Buddhist institution. He instills terror, but does so not as an alien beast, but rather as, perhaps, the most complete representative of institutional karmic norms.<sup>61</sup> Through his judgments, Yama dispenses ethical instruction that is not radically different than that found in other Buddhist narratives.

While these stories of the afterlife surely add entertainment value to Yama’s otherwise normative ethical instruction, I maintain that Yama’s monstrosity fundamentally contributes to his moral aims. He is not simply a terrifying underworld being “scaring straight” Buddhist readers and listeners. In his book *Religion and its Monsters*, Timothy Beale identifies “deified monsters” who are

an envoy of the divine or the sacred as radically other than “our” established order of things. It is an invasion of what we might call *sacred chaos* and disorientation within self, society, and world. [...] it puts us in a world of religious disorientation and horror.<sup>62</sup>

While the specific terminology utilized by Beale belies his academic home in Old Testament and early Christian scholarship, reading Yama as a deified monster suggests a connection between his monstrosity and his moral instruction. It also demonstrates what makes these Tibetan narratives unique and *not* simply equivalent to similar hell journeys in Christian mythos, where individuals are threatened by the Devil. Through representing the reality of the Buddhist cosmology, the authority of the Buddhist institution, and the consequences of karma with a monstrous figure like Yama, it destroys Returners’ comfortable and complacent perception of how the human world works—of who has power, what has value, and what sort of life one should live. This

<sup>61</sup> This role as representative of karmic norms is seen in a variety of netherworld literature outside of Returner narratives. See further Mikles 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Beal 2002: 6.

terrifying destruction of complacency allows them to be rebuilt in line with the karmic vision of the Buddhist institution. Yama's monstrosity, therefore, destabilizes both the Returner and the reader, creating room for a different framework to guide one's life—a framework that puts Buddhist considerations of the reality of karma at the front and center.

This interpretation reveals the fundamental distinction between Yama and the figure of the Devil in Christian mythos. In the Christian worldview, the Devil is seen as a fundamental "other" to God—an adversary that must be challenged and who terrifies you into morality for fear of meeting him. Yama, instead, acts as the embodiment of the Buddhist institution and Buddhist ethical conduct and in this role is a source of transformative terror. To merely dismiss him as a means to "scare you straight" is to overlook how the narrative structure of Returner literature like that of *A Message from Dharma King Yama* works. Confronting the monstrous changes someone. In his work on rituals, Victor Turner writes about monstrous masks used by the Ndembu tribe of the Congo in an adolescent rite of passage that turned boys into men. Confronting these monstrous figures, he argues, facilitated the rite of passage not so much through fear but by forcing a re-assessment of the symbolic order.<sup>63</sup> When Yama gives extended moral instruction in the form of a monster, he is similarly forcing the Returner to transform their understandings of their human life and, through that, their worldview. The Returner, and through them the reader, then leaves as a fundamentally changed agent with a greater dedication to and sensitivity for the Buddhist ethical world.

However, Yama's monstrosity works in more ways as well. While previously stated that everyone approaches King Yama trembling with fear, it could perhaps be noted with greater accuracy that *almost* everyone does. *A Message from Dharma King Yama* spends most of its narrative energy on those whose lives do not warrant a good rebirth and are condemned to hell. Sandwiched within those cases of judgment are plaintiffs who are almost an afterthought, who approach Yama's throne without fear and who are quickly offered the white path to divine rebirths and realization. For them, Yama is not a monster and inspires no terror. Yama is monstrous only for those who themselves are monstrous—from a Buddhist perspective—those who exist outside the boundaries of the Buddhist world. Those who possess a true understanding of the centrality of karma and how a Buddhist world should function do not see a monster when they look at Yama. Rather, it is only those whose karmic failings have put their future rebirths in jeopardy that undergo the traumatic destabilization of the

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<sup>63</sup> Turner 1967: 106.

deified monster. They do not realize that they themselves have been outside the boundaries of an appropriate Buddhist society and karmically-sensitive worldview this whole time, and it takes confrontation with a monster to realize that they themselves were, we might say, karmic monsters. Perhaps in the end, therefore, it is only a monster that can reveal one's own monstrosity.

### 6. *Conclusions*

This paper uses the analytical category of the "monster" to evaluate the Tibetan Buddhist figure of King Yama and demonstrate how he, and the Tibetan narratives that feature him, are unique from other netherworld figures with which he is often compared. Through examining Yama as a figure that incites terror and fear while also representing the full power and weight of the Buddhist institution—what Timothy Beal calls a "deified monster"—we as scholars of Tibetan culture can understand how the internal structure of Returner narratives works to instill in the reader greater ethical sensitivity. This literature does not operate by merely presenting the punishments of hell as an ultimatum for the reader to consider in a "cost-benefit" analysis of ethical behavior. Rather, drawing the reader into a vicarious encounter with the terror of Yama appeals to a deeper stratum of thought in which one's entire life is re-evaluated. In this way, fear and the monstrous have a real and important role in creating new Buddhist agents.

But in the context of these Buddhist Returner narratives, the fear one experiences in front of Yama becomes a mark not of his monstrosity, but rather of the plaintiff's own. This transformation demonstrates the rhetorically-powerful nature of the category "monster." As discussed previously, "monsters" cannot be given a traditional definition because they are by essence relative, defined solely by the boundaries of social normalcy and the fears that arise when such boundaries are crossed. In the Returners' confrontations with Yama, therefore, the boundaries of the Buddhist ethical world are drawn and subsequently enforced through the emotion of fear—and it is those who are fearful before Yama that remain outside the boundary of appropriate Buddhist conduct.

Besides the construction of such boundaries, Yama also serves as a corrective to the interpretative move to psychologize away the fear and terror that are components of some Asian religious figures. Analyzing King Yama as a monster helps to interpret, rather than ignore, emotional reactions of anxiety that are entirely emic to the tradition. In fact, his ability to inspire terror is a foundational

component of his Buddhist instruction. It is not something that must be explained away or contextualized, but rather something that enhances and enriches the figure of King Yama. Contextualizing Yama as a monster allows us ultimately to move beyond the either/or paradigm that underlies much contemporary scholarship on Asian religions and replace it instead with a both/and paradigm, a “tradition of the more,” to use Robert Orsi’s term.<sup>64</sup> Yama is both a monster that terrifies the reader *and* a psychological representation to destroy afflictive emotions, is both a wild nightmare *and* a Buddhist figurehead. Becoming comfortable with the duality of the monster, the ontological ambivalence that is inherent to their very nature, will only enrich our academic and analytical frameworks.

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<sup>64</sup> Orsi 2011: 99–105.

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