

From Sacred Commodity to Religio-Economic Conundrum: Tracing the Tibetan Term *dkor*

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This article discusses the Tibetan term *dkor*, a concept that appears to have become increasingly complex as it developed over the last millennium up until this day. The most basic connotation of the word *dkor* is “wealth” or “possession”, something rather concrete indeed. In contradistinction with what is often called the “commodification of religion”, that is to say, “the process of transforming goods, services, ideas, and [...] religion into something that can be bought and sold”,¹ I argue in this article that, as time passed, a gradual shift from the material to the immaterial has taken place. In other words, a shift from something that can be bought and sold to something that is intangible yet is thought to have an (invisible) effect on this life and the next. While, at first glance, the word *dkor*, in particular in combination with *nor*—indicating wealth—suggests nothing but positive connotations (except for perhaps the world-renouncing ascetic recluse), this article also hypothesises that the general connotation of the term *dkor* has shifted from a neutral or even positive association to an unmistakably negative one. The very process of tracing the development of this term reveals how Tibetans thought—and still think—about certain aspects of religio-economic transactions, such as what belongs to the (sacred) community and on what terms, the karmic debts incurred by members of that community and those surrounding it, and what we ourselves may be owing to society and how to repay that debt.

The development of the word dkor

Jäschke’s dictionary translates *dkor* as: “wealth, riches”, but then names a few related expressions current in Central Tibet, namely *mithil dkor*, *yang dkor*, and *sa dkor*, which he “could not get sufficiently explained”.² The latter terms are given by Das as “foundation, endowment of a monastery”, “additional or occasional gifts for the support

¹ Brox and Williams-Oerberg (2015: 6).

² Jäschke ([1881] 1995: 11).

of a religious institution”, and “landed endowment of a monastery or religious institution” respectively.³ The *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, while usually very instructive, does not give much information beyond what Jäschke’s dictionary states: *dkor* is 1) a word for wealth in general (*nor spyi’i ming*) or could indicate 2) the materials of the faithful (*dad pa’i rdzas*). It gives as an example *dge ’dun gyi dkor*: the Sangha’s wealth.⁴

Goldstein’s dictionary, that uses mostly modern Tibetan literature as its basis, gives two glosses, the second of which is similar to Jäschke’s, while the first translation of *dkor* reads: “wealth or property given out of religious belief.” A derived expression “*dkor gyis ’tshig/’tshigs*” is given on the same page, which is glossed as “to be corrupted by wealth (for monks—e.g. a monk lives off of alms but doesn’t act as a proper monk) [Lit. to be burned by wealth generated from religion]”.⁵ From the above we can glean that the most elementary meaning of the word is wealth, commodity, or material goods. This is further emphasised in compound words such as *dkor mdzod*, meaning treasury, and *sde dkor*, indicating the wealth of the king. In Dunhuang materials, we find *dkor* often combined with *nor* (“cattle”) to indicate someone’s possessions, for example in Pt 1285 in the context of funerary rites.⁶ Later on, *dkor nor* came to mean “general wealth”. In another fragmentary legal record that deals with theft (ITJ 753), the term also denotes something material of some value.⁷ However, the other—slightly more complicated—gloss of *dkor* already occurs in these early Tibetan works, namely as the wealth of the Three Jewels (*dkon mchog gsum gyi dkor* and *bkon chogi dkor*, ITJ 740).⁸

While occurring in a legal text of sorts, this phrase clearly reflects the Tibetan usage found in translations of Indic Buddhist texts—mostly *sūtra* and Vinaya works. In these Buddhist materials we find *dkor* mostly in three ways: 1) the possession of the Three Jewels (*dkon mchog gsum gyi dkor*); 2) the possessions of the stūpa (*mchod rten gyi dkor*); and 3) the possessions of the Sangha (*dge ’dun gyi dkor*).⁹ The Sanskrit terms that *dkor* translates in this context are relatively simple and non-descript words such as *sva*, *dravya*, or *vasu*, again referring to

³ Das *et al.* (1970: 55).

⁴ Zhang (1993: 62).

⁵ Goldstein (2001: 22).

⁶ Stein (2010: 267).

⁷ Dotson (2011: 82).

⁸ Dotson (2011: 85, 86). This work’s title has been translated by Dotson as “Replies concerning the dice statutes from the tiger year dice edict” (*stagI lo’I bka’I sho byung be’i sho tshigs gyi zhus lan*).

⁹ Alternatively, *dge ’dun phyogs bcu’i dkor*. See for example, Silk (2008: 251; 286–288), and Schopen (1996: 109), citing the *Kṣudrakavastu* (Tog ’dul ba Ta 343a.2–344b.1): “Thieves stole the riches of the Three Jewels” (*dkon mchog gsum gyi dkor*).

material goods. A verse in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, for example, notes that if one steals the wealth of the Three Jewels (*ratnatrayasvam*), one will be reborn in the Avīci hell.¹⁰

A Tibetan interpretation: wealth with a negative connotation

While in later Tibetan Buddhist literature *dkor* maintains the meaning of wealth, a different connotation gains ground, namely that of material good that in some way or another carries karmic weight or implication. The term acquires a complexity that is difficult to encapsulate in a translation, and as I shall point out later on in this article, has been mistranslated or poorly translated on account of this. It is a broad concept used mostly to criticise behaviour conducted by monks, while lay practitioners are not exempt from condemnation. According to *Blazing Splendor: The Memoirs of Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche* (1920–1996), *dkor* “refers to material things offered out of faith to a monastic community or an individual lama for the benefit of a living or deceased person, which—when used for another purpose than the intended—have dire karmic consequences”.¹¹ The term is often used within a monastic setting, in which monks tend to depend greatly on such offerings. In a previous work, I have glossed *dkor* in a monastic context as referring to “monastic wealth”, which often has a negative connotation: “For example, someone who ‘eats *dkor*’ (*dkor bza’ mkhan*) in colloquial (and written) Tibetan is someone who sponges off the monastic amenities without doing anything in return”.¹²

During a period of fieldwork in North India, I asked a senior monk belonging to a rNying ma monastery about managerial and economic issues to do with his monastery. Instead, he vented his frustrations and said:

There are some things seriously wrong these days. Take for example the fact that if one out of two sons becomes a monk, it is often him and not the lay son who is able to support his family. But this is not the task of the monk! It is really not supposed to be like this! Still this happens and many people say that one cannot criticise a son taking [financial] care of his family. So, I cannot voice my feelings about this without getting disliked by others. Nonetheless, doing this is *dkor*, which is said to be like an iron ball: to eat it one needs iron cheeks.¹³

He then continued by telling me a story about a monk who took from

¹⁰ See Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, v. 123/ 53.

¹¹ Ugyen and Kunsang (2005: 384 n. 128).

¹² Jansen (2018: 226 n. 164).

¹³ Interview with a senior monk who chose not to be named, India 2012.

the Sangha and who was reborn as this very strange fishlike creature. Upon finding him, the Buddha explained why he was reborn that way.¹⁴ The dire karmic consequences of misusing that which belongs to the Sangha is also emphasised in an account found in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* (*Khrid yig kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*)—Patrul Rinpoche's (rDza dPal sprul Rin po che, 1808–1887) work that contains many mentions of *dkor*. In the context of his explanation of how karma works, the author describes an incident involving the great abbot (*mkhan chen*) of Ngor monastery, dPal ldan chos skyong. During a visit to sDe dge, he asked a number of monks to be on the look-out for something unusual along the banks of the Ngulda river (*rngul mda'i chu*). At the very end of the day the monks spotted a large tree-trunk in the water, which they took to the abbot.

“That must be it”, he said. “Split it open.” Inside they found a big frog being eaten alive by a mass of insects. After doing a purification ritual, the Abbot said that the frog had been a treasurer of Derge named Pogye. Today they might seem all-powerful, but all those chiefs and high dignitaries who dip into the public purse should think about the ephemeral hells and be careful.¹⁵

While in this specific instance, the author does not use the phrase *dkor za ba*, but the less common *sde za ba* (here translated as “dip into the public purse”), both the meaning “to misuse the Sangha’s wealth” and the karmic consequences of doing so are similar to what the interviewed monk related. This monk further mentioned that one needs iron cheeks in order to eat *dkor*. This is referring to the related Tibetan proverb (*gtam dpe*): *dkor zas za la lcags kyi 'gram pa dgos*. In his book *Buddhism of Tibet*, Laurence Waddell gives a slightly misspelled version of this proverb at the start of a chapter on the daily life and routine of monks—“Lāmas” in his parlance. He glosses this as: “He who eats Lāmas’ food, wants iron jaws”, but does not elaborate on its meaning.¹⁶

It is clear that to partake unlawfully in what belongs to the Sangha is associated with ingesting something red hot and potentially painful. This is by no means a Tibetan invention, but rather a reference to the

¹⁴ While I have not been able to find said story, there are many similar accounts that are told in various Tibetan texts, on which more below.

¹⁵ Patrul Rinpoche *et al.* (1998: 70). *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*: 65: *de yin/ sdong dum de gshogs dang gsungs/ sdong dum de gshags pa'i nang na sbal pa chen po zhiig la srog chags mang pos za gin 'dug pa de le khrus chog sogs mdzad/ sde dge gnyer pa bo rgyas bya ba zhiig gi skye ba yin gsung/ des na mi dpon khe drag sde za ba rnams kyang da lta dbang che yang dnyal gnas 'di dag la bsams nas stabs gzab byed dgos par 'dug/*

¹⁶ Waddell (2015 [1895]: 212). A related proverb, *mi rgyu za bar lcags kyi 'gram pa dgos* (“To eat the wealth of others, one needs cheeks of iron”), can be found in Cüppers and Sørensen (1998: 185).

Vinayavibhaṅga (D003), an Indic work on monastic discipline found in the bKa' 'gyur. The set of monastic guidelines for bKra shis lhun po monastery written in 1876 by the 8th Panchen Lama, for example, refers to *dkor* and its likeness to eating hot iron and cites this work:

Those who use the food of the faithful (*dad zas*) but do not have ethical discipline have faults that are incredible. The *Vinayavibhaṅga* says: "As it would be better to eat flaming balls of metal, someone with faulty discipline and without vows is not to eat the offerings from his surroundings."¹⁷

The very same citation is used frequently in similar contexts. The 7th Dalai Lama, for instance, utilises it in his 1726 monastic guidelines for rNam rgyal monastery. He further elaborates on these words by saying:

Those who are not ordained and those who have faulty discipline and use the facilities (*dkor*) of the Sangha without restraint destroy themselves, which is very serious. They also defile other members of the Sangha and so are said to be like the frogs with sores. Therefore, once one has become ordained it is important to have pure ethical discipline and restraint.¹⁸

The 5th Dalai Lama equally employs this quote from the *Vinayavibhaṅga* in his monastic guidelines for 'Bras spungs monastery and explains that there will be serious karmic results when someone does not keep his vows or a when layperson uses *dkor*.¹⁹ He again cites canonical material, this time the *Sūryagarbhasūtra*, which warns that for those who have become householders, it would be easier to take on fire equal in size to Mount Meru, than to consume that which is the

¹⁷ *Bkra shis lhun po bca' yig*: 64: *gzhan yang tshul khrims dang mi ldan pas dad zas la spyod pa ni nyes pa dpag tu med pa dang ldan te/ lung rnam 'byed las/ lcags gong me lce 'bar ba dag/ zos par gyur pa mchog yin gyi/ tshul 'chal yang dag mi sdom pas/ yul 'khor bsod snyoms za ba min/*

¹⁸ *Rnam rgyal grwa tshang bca' yig*: 67: *tshul 'chal dang bslab sdom la bag med pa'i rigs dge 'dun gyi dkor la spyod pa rang nyid 'phung 'tshabs shin tu che shing/ dge 'dun gzhan rnams kyang sbags nas sbal pa rma can bzhin 'gyur bar gsungs pas rab tu byung nas tshul khrims dag pa dang bag yod pa gal che/* The same author cites the same source and gives the same explanation save for part of the wording in his monastic guidelines for the Tantric college of sKu 'bum monastery, *Sku 'bum rgyud pa grwa tshang bca' yig*: 13a) *dge 'dun 'bags pa sogs sbal pa rma can bzhin 'gyur bas legs par brtags pa gal che/*. Also see Jansen (2018: 120; 222 n. 35) for this Vinaya citation.

¹⁹ *'Bras spungs bca' yig*: 299: [...] *bslab pa dang mi ldan pa'i gang zag gis dkor la longs spyod pa dang der ma zad khyim pas spyad kyang de dang cha 'dra ba'i nyes dmigs bzod par dka' zhing [...]*

Sangha's.²⁰ In a previous article on these guidelines and 'Bras spungs monastery in the mid-17th century in general, I commented upon the above cited excerpts:

Out of context, what the Fifth Dalai Lama addresses here may be read as a discussion on Buddhist ethics. However, it is clear that what is addressed and carefully supported by canonical quotations is a very topical and local problem, namely the exponential growth of the monastic population and the questionable motives and behaviour of some of the inhabitants of Drepung monastery during the late 17th century.²¹

It was clear to the 5th Dalai Lama that there were people in and around 'Bras spungs who were partaking in the sudden riches the monastery had to offer, without being a monk or without behaving sufficiently monk-ish. The problem lay therefore not just with protecting these persons against the negative karma they would otherwise incur but also with preventing the successful religious institution from becoming a magnet for unwanted elements.

With regard to laypeople consuming *dkor*, the consequences were said to be dire indeed. One genre of Tibetan literature in which the karmic results of abusing the Sangha's wealth is a common trope is that of the biographies of the "Death-returners" (*das log*). In the account of the netherworld as told by the female death-returner Karma dbang 'dzin, which was partially translated by Bryan Cuevas, an old woman she meets in the afterlife tells her how she never returned the possessions (*dkor*) that the monks left in her care, which is one of the reasons why she was reborn in hell.²² There are many more such accounts, which have not yet been explored or translated, but I expect this theme to be a common one, especially since the target audience of these stories were ordinary laypeople.

It is not just in a monastic setting that *dkor* is thought to be an issue for would-be "professional" religious practitioners. The non-sectarian yogin Zhabs dkar (Tshogs drug rang grol) famously stayed away from institutional religion and is known to have been critical of monks who lived a comfortable life in their monasteries. In one of his sermons, called *The Sharp Needle* (*rgya khab rnon po*), which is embedded in his autobiography, he admonishes his disciples:

Not only do you stuff your mouth with the live coals of food offered on behalf of the living and the dead; not only do you misappropriate the belongings and wealth of the guru, the Three Jewels, and the

²⁰ 'Bras spungs bca' yig: 299: *nyi ma'i snying po'i mdor/ lhun po dang ni 'dra ba'i me/ blang bar bya ste bzod pa sla'i/ khyim par gyur pas dge 'dun gyil longs spyad par ni mi bya'o/*

²¹ Jansen (2018: 116).

²² Cuevas (2012: 89).

sangha, which you gather from all sides, but you also put these coals into the mouths of your friends and relatives, thus burning everyone—yourself and others. How dare you!

The Buddha said, “It is worse to swallow religious wealth [*dkor zas*] than to swallow eggs made of burning iron.” Are you so self-assured that you can think these words of the Buddha to be untrue and that you don't need to take them into account?²³

What is here translated as “live coals” (*me ma mur = me mar mur*), can also refer to one of the “neighbouring hells” (*nye ba'i dmyal ba*) of the Avīci hell (*mnar med*), and is a translation of Sanskrit *Kukūla* (or *Kukula*), meaning “[the hell] pit of embers”. It appears that this ambiguous reference to the karmic results of abusing *dkor* is not a coincidence. Rather, references to pieces of hot iron or metal are regularly made when discussing the Avīci hell and it is something we see in the *sūtras* as well.²⁴ In the Tibetan context, we have seen that this is connected to the abuse of *dkor*. It is noteworthy here that Zhabs dkar expresses a similar concern to that of my monk interviewee, namely that by feeding your friends and relatives with offerings meant for the Sangha or otherwise, one harms them rather than helping them. This brings up the issue of whether an awareness of actually consuming *dkor*, that is to say a sense of complicity or the more Buddhist notion of “intention”, is necessary to bear the negative karmic consequences—something which I will discuss later on in this article.

Another aspect that further complicates the gloss of *dkor* is that, according to some, it does not just have to do with *who* uses the donations, but whether the donations are used the way they are intended by the donor. This is expressed in a short Tibetan blog post by someone with the pen-name Khyung thog rgod (“Garuḍa Thunderclap”), who explains the idea of *dkor* with the help of the twelve-volume Bon work

²³ Shabkar (2001: 381–382). Ricard's translation is not entirely precise but captures the message perfectly. *Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol gyi rnam thar*: 781: *bla ma dkon mchog gi rdzas/ dge 'dun pa'i dkor gshin zas dad zas kyi me ma mur thams cad phyogs phyogs nas bsdus te rang gi kha la brgyab pas mi chog gnyen nye ba thams cad kyi kha nang du brgyab nas rang gzhan thams cad kyi rgyud bsreg phod dam/ sangs rgyas kyi bka' las/ dkor zas 'di lcags gong me 'bar ba khar bcug pa las nyes pa che bar gsungs pas/ khyod la sangs rgyas kyi gsung de mi bden pa'i khungs dang/ brtsi mi dgos pa'i gdeng zhig yod dam/*

²⁴ For example in the *Sūryagarbhasūtra* ('Phags pa shin tu rgyas pa chen po'i sde nyi ma'i snying po zhes bya ba'i mdo D257): 99b: *gang dge slong chos kyis gnas pa rnams la bsnogs pa'i longspyod dang / nye bar spyod pa dang / nor gyi yo byad 'phrog par byed cing / bdag nyid kyis kyang (100a) yongs su spyod par byed pa de 'chi ba'i dus byas nas sems can dmyal ba chen po mnar med par skye bar 'gyur rol/ de der yang tshe bskal par lcags dang zangs bzhun 'thung bar 'gyur zhing / lcags kyi thu lum za bar 'gyur la/ me'i gos dang / longspyod dang / nye bar spyod pa spyod par byed cing gnod pa mi bzad pa chen po rnam pa sna tshogs nyams su myong bar 'gyur ba yin no/ For a further Tibetan reference, see: *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*: 59; 66.*

on the life of gShen rab Mi bo, the *Mdo dri med gzi brjid*, which was uncovered in the second half of the 14th century by Blo ldan snying po (b. 1360). The author of the blog defines the consumption of *dkor* as “consuming material goods that do not belong to one or not directing the offerings of the faithful toward their intended purpose”.²⁵ He then cites the *Gzi brjid*, which defines the term *dkor* itself succinctly: “that which is offered with a certain purpose, but which is not directed toward that purpose, but instead used without purpose, is what is called *dkor*”.²⁶ This interpretation, which was first put forward in the second half of the 14th century, leaves the object of the offering open. In other words, one could, as this blogger indeed continues to point out, see the act of consuming *dkor* as something not necessarily connected to the sacred—and, as I will demonstrate in more detail below, *dkor* can indeed also be seen in a more secular context.

To return to the issue of the consumption of *dkor*, we find it often brought up in criticisms of professional religious practitioners. In his short poetical work, *A Three-versed Speech in which the Profound Dharma is Taken up as a Song* (*Chos zab mo glu ru blangs pa'i gtam tshig gsum*), dKkon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me (1762–1823), admonishes his audience:

You, stubborn one, who utilises evil *dkor* (*dkor nag*) of plentiful tasty and sweet foods without restraint, are you really able to drink the broth of molten copper for many hundreds of thousands of years on end?²⁷

Once again, we come across a reference to the consumption of some kind of metal, but here the act is of drinking, rather than eating, the substance. It also needs to be noted that the phrase “evil *dkor*” (*dkor nag*) is common in texts that are critical of the behaviour of others. In several works, the consumption of *dkor* is shown to be more akin to imbibing than to ingesting. The rNying ma master rTsa gsum gTer bdag gling pa (also known as gNam lcags rTsa gsum gling pa, 1694–1738) records his ailing mother’s last words (*zhal chems*), in which she convinces him to leave the monastery, where he had been living since

²⁵ Khyung thog rgod (2015). *rang nyid la mi dbang ba'i nor rdzas la 'bags pa'am yang na dad rdzas dmigs yul du ma things pa*.

²⁶ Khyung thog rgod (2015). *mdo dri med las/ gang dag dmigs pas 'bul byed pa/ de nyid dmigs par ma things zhing/ mi dmigs pa ru spyod 'jug nal/ de la dkor zhes bya ba ste/* The citation as found in the *Mdo dri med gzi brjid* published in the Bon po bka' 'gyur (vol. 25) differs only slightly: 28: *gang dag dmigs pas dbul byed pa/ de nyid dmigs par ma thing cing/ mi dmigs yul la spyod byed nal/ de las dkor zhes bya ba ste*. I am grateful to Kalsang Norbu Gurung for finding the correct location of this citation.

²⁷ *Chos zab mo glu ru blangs pa'i gtam tshig gsum*: 259: *zas zhim mngar 'dzom pa'i dkor nag la/ 'dzem med du spyod pa'i dred po khyod/ lo bye ba 'bum phrag stong gi bar/ zangs zhun gyi khu ba 'thung nus sam/*

childhood:

Son, you should abandon your post at your home monastery
 Evil *dkor*, non-virtuous food [gained from] snatching and robbing
 Is the poison water of the afflicted ones
 Son, you should abandon self-destructive non-virtuous food
 Wandering aimlessly among mountain ranges
 Is the mountainous solitude where you purify karmic imprints
 Son, you should wander the good sites of the Exalted One
 Taking contentment as your livelihood
 Is the wealth enjoyed through the kindness of the Jewels.²⁸

Staying in the monastery and living a comfortable life, subsisting on donations, is here compared to drinking poisoned water. Zhabs dkar equally compares “religious wealth misused” to poisoned water (Shabkar 2001: 376).²⁹ Interestingly, ‘Jig rten mgon po (1143–1217) asserts that the obstacles that *dkor* can create may be avoided by practicing the “yoga of eating” (*zas kyi rnal ’byor*).³⁰ This seems to pertain to the practice of eating as a “post-meditative observance”, in which one visualises oneself as the deity and in that state the food one eats is offered to that enlightened being.³¹ In other words, by sacralising the food one has received from donors one avoids defiling oneself by those very gifts.

dkor, intention, and purification

Regardless of whether one ends up drinking or eating *dkor*, the question of intention remains a pertinent one: if one unknowingly uses that which belongs to the Sangha, does it still have negative consequences? Sarah Jacoby, in her gloss of the term *dkor nag* seems to suggest that intention is leading, for the term means: “negative offerings, offered by the faithful that become negative with self-interest when their recipients consume them *without the proper intention and ability* to benefit others”.³² Similarly, in the glossary of the French translation of the

²⁸ *Bla ma o rgyan rtsa gsum gling pa chos kyo rgya mtsho'i 'khrungs rabs rnam thar gsal ba'i phreng ba thugs rje rlabs po che'i mchod sdong*: 114–115: *Bu khyed gzhis dgon las 'dzin spongs/ 'phrog bcom sdig zas dkar nag/ nyon mong can gyi dug chu yin/ bu khyod sdig zas rang phung spongs/ phyogs med ri khrod 'grims pa de/ bag chags sbyong ba'i dben ri yin/ bu khyod 'phags pa'i gnas bzang 'grim/ 'tsho ba chog shes slong ba de/ dkon mchog drin gyis long spyod yin.*

²⁹ For the Tibetan see: Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol gyi rnam thar: 329a.

³⁰ *Khams gsum chos kyi rgyal po thub dbang ratna shri'i phyi yi bka' 'bun nor bu'i bang mdzod kyi kha skong*. In ‘Jig rten mgon po'i gsung skor vol. 13, 20: *dkor zas kyi gegs la rdugs na kha zas kyi rnal 'byor bsgom/*

³¹ Bentor (2000: 602–603).

³² Jacoby (2014: 279).

Patrul Rinpoche's *Words of my Perfect Teacher (Le Chemin de la grande perfection)* by the Padmakara translation group, the same term is explained to be "offering that one receives without either a pure attitude or the required qualities".³³ In this gain, intention seems to have something to do with it. There are numerous occasions, however, that suggest the negative consequences can occur without being aware of "consuming *dkor*". Alex John Catanese, whose work investigates the practices and ethics of selling Buddhist objects in the Tibetan context, relates the account of dBon ston sKyer sgang pa chos kyi seng ge (1154–1217, Kyergangpa), as found in this treasure revealer's (*gter ston*) hagiography written by dNgul chu Dharmabhadra (1772–1851):

According to one version of the story, one of Kyergangpa's patrons became poor and sold a *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* in one hundred thousand lines. With the proceeds he prepared a lavish meal and invited Kyergangpa and three other monks to partake in the meal in order to expunge the sin from selling the text. After consuming the food, Kyergangpa fell violently ill and called upon Avalokiteśvara who then revealed to him the true reason for his illness as well as a *torma* (*gtor ma*) ritual to remove the bad karma incurred from eating food paid for with the money earned from the sale of a Dharma text.³⁴

In another version, this story continues with the other monks being reborn in one of the hells on account of not purifying their *dkor*. The point of this account is that while ill, sKyer sgang pa meets with Avalokiteśvara, who explains the cause of his pains and gives him a purification ritual, called *brul gtor*, that serves to remedy the results of ingesting *dkor*.³⁵ The issue that I want to highlight here is that poor sKyer sgang pa used the proceeds of a holy *sūtra* unknowingly and in good faith. Still, he suffered the consequences. If indeed using offerings at any point in time has the potential to bring about negative results for the receiver, it would seem necessary to occasionally perform such a ritual—just in case. This perhaps explains the fact that we have access to a fair number of the—admittedly obscure—subgenre of *brul gtor* ritual texts: the BDRC repository alone contains around twenty of them. According to Catanese, dNgul chu Dharmabhadra draws upon the work by the 4th Panchen Lama, Blo bzang Chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1570–1662), which is focused on this particular ritual, but which does not include the account given above. This very practical ritual text of just four folios has been briefly described as a "Scattering offering to

³³ Patrul Rinpoche *et al.* (1987: 483). *Offrande noire - dkor nag po*, offrande qu'on obtient sans avoir une attitude pure ni les qualités requises.

³⁴ Catanese (2019: 42). See also p. 249, n. 14 for various other sources that recount this story.

³⁵ Catanese (2019: 43).

remove moral defilements".³⁶ It recommends carrying out the ritual because:

Conducting the highly praised *brul gtor* [ritual] has been established to purify the obscurations (*sgrib*) [incurred by] such things as using the possession (*dkor*) of the gurus and the Three Jewels and exhausting (*'bags*) them and in particular by accepting payment for the religious images of the gurus and the Three Jewels.³⁷

Again, Catanese, citing 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899), similarly states that misusing *dkor* and the like, just as transgressions of one's tantric vows do, "obscure earlier meditative experiences", and they also prevent new ones from arising.³⁸ The remedy to purify accumulated *dkor* is to recite the 100-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva. Among confession prayers (*bshags pa*), it is also common to list *dkor* as something that needs to be confessed and subsequently purified (often with as an example the buying and selling of religious images).

Clearly, contrary to what other authors and translators have asserted previously, whether one incurs *dkor* or not is not solely reliant upon one's "intention". Rather, *dkor* is contagious, corrupting, and even the cause of obstacles in one's practice, and one is in continuous danger of incurring it. What is more, several Tibetan works confirm that *dkor* is something that someone who "lives off religion" simply cannot avoid. The monastic guidelines written in 1900 for Dung dkar bkra shis chos rdzong monastery, for example, exhort the monks to behave in a virtuous way, so that by being worthy of offerings they can purify their *dkor*.³⁹ In a similar vein, the 13th Dalai Lama describes in a set of guidelines for bKra shis dga' ldan chos 'phel gling the materials given by the sponsors out of faith as a kind of debt that is to be repaid by being a good monk.⁴⁰ In yet another such work—the

³⁶ Wilhelm and Panglung (1979: 53). Hs. or. 1257. SB Berlin. T: *brul gtor dkor sgrib dag byed zla shal chu rgyun*, Streuopfer zur Beseitigung moralischer Befleckung.

³⁷ Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan. *Brul gtor dkor sgrib dag byed zla shel chu rgyun*: 10b: *bla ma dang dkon mchog gsum gyi dkor la spyad cing 'bags pa dangl khyad par bla ma dkon mchog gi sku blus zos pa sogs kyi sgrib pa 'dag pa la mchog tu bsnags pa brul gtor gtong bar 'dod pas*. Here *sku blus zos* is translated as "to accept payment for a religious image", but it literally means "to eat the body's ransom".

³⁸ Catanese (2019: 59). *Nges don sgron me*: 30a–30b: *nyams myong sngar yod 'grib/ gsar ba mi skye ba'i gegs byed bas*. Catanese neglected to translate the latter phrase.

³⁹ *Dung dkar bkra shis chos rdzong bca' yig*: 408: *sbyin bdag dad can mi bslu ba'i skor sbyong yin pas mchod 'os 'bad dgos/* Literally, "because the faithful sponsor is [the way] to definitely purify *skor* [sic: *dkor*], one needs to strive to become worthy of offerings (*mchod 'os*)."⁴⁰ Also see Jansen (2018: 137–139), for more on monk-sponsor relations.

⁴⁰ *Bkra shis dga' ldan chos 'phel gling bca' yig*, 498: *sbyin bdag khag gi dad rdzas bu lon lta bur* [...]. This has also been noted in Jansen (2018: 226, n. 164).

monastic guidelines for 'Bri gung byang chub gling—it is stated that one of the reasons monks go to do prayers (in the assembly hall) is to purify one's own *dkor*.⁴¹ This corroborates the idea that—perhaps regardless of how good a monk or practitioner one is—*dkor* always needs to be purified. A more contemporary, but not substantially different view, is found in the verses written by Ye shes rgya mtsho (b. 1958), a monk from Amdo currently living in Dharamsala, India:

In the past, under the spell of afflictions and due to carelessness
I have committed faults and downfalls of which I am remorseful
Vowing to not commit them again, I myself have confessed them and
so should you.
Having been ordained, *the way we make a living is dkor*:
The gifts offered to save sick men and women;
The gifts offered for the dedication of merit for dead men and women.
I myself have purified them and so should you.⁴²

This notion challenges the previously held understandings of the terms *dkor* and *dkor sgrib*, namely that its consumption necessarily needs to involve conscious and negative activities of any kind. José Cabezón, for example, states: “Prohibitions against selling teachings, religious objects, and religious services is an idea that, although of Indian origin, becomes institutionalised in Tibet in the notion of *dkor sgrib*, literally ‘the pollution that comes from [stealing] the wealth [that belongs to the three jewels]’.”⁴³ It may be more appropriate to see *dkor sgrib* as some kind of karmic debt incurred by simply engaging with the sacred economy. It is for this reason, I believe, that *dkor sgrib* is often seen in conjunction with the word *lan chags*, which sometimes gets translated as “karmic indebtedness”.⁴⁴ The phrase *dkor sgrib lan chags* is seen, for example, in rTsa gsum gling pa's earlier cited work.⁴⁵

The same phrase also turns up in a practice text, recently discussed by James Gentry, written by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–

⁴¹ 'Bri gung byang chub gling bca' yig: 402: rang nyid dkor byang phyir chos spyod 'gro gang che dgos/

⁴² 'Phags yul gnas mchog d+ha ram sa la'i dben gnas kyi dge sbyong bse ru'i kher gnam: 270: nyon mongs dbang song bag med pas/ nyes ltung sngar bsags 'gyod pa dang/ phyis 'byung rab tu sdom sems ngang/ ngas kyang bshag la khyed kyang shogs/ rab tu byung nas 'tsho ba'i thabs/ nad pa nad ma'i skyabs rten dang/ shi bo shi mo bsngo rten dkor/ ngas kyang sbyang la khyed kyang sbyongs/ Italics added.

⁴³ Cabezón (2013: 10, n. 21).

⁴⁴ As Dan Martin elegantly puts it, in his vocabulary list, this is “a particular type of generalized karma which designates a relationship across lives in which the roles of the parties are reversed (a former master becomes the servant to his former servant, etc.)” See “Tibetan Vocabulary by Dan Martin”.

⁴⁵ Bla ma o rgyan rtsa gsum gling pa chos kyo rgya mtsho'i 'khrungs rabs rnam thar gsal ba'i phreng ba thugs rje rlabs po che'i mchod sdong: 113.

1899), *An Astonishing Ocean: An Explication on the Practice of Eleven Liberations, the Ritual Sequence of the Samboghakāya Tamer of Beings* (Longs sku 'gro 'dul gyi las rim grol ba bcu gcig gi lag len gsal byed ngo mtshar rgya mtsho). Gentry, however, translates *dkor sgrib lan chags* as two separate concepts: "The obscuration of consuming offerings given by the faithful (*dkor sgrib*) and negative karmic debt".⁴⁶ It appears more likely that the author intended to treat one single issue. The phrase signifies the notion of debt, something that has been hinted at in the monastic guidelines that were previously cited. This again highlights the idea that *dkor* deals with economics on both religious and down-to-earth levels.

While it is perhaps unavoidable for the "professional" religious practitioner to accrue *dkor*, fortunately there are ways to purify these obscurations, one of which involves the *brul gtor* ritual mentioned earlier. While there are numerous texts that contain these rituals, I cannot do them justice in this article. A study of this subgenre along with its contemporary practice would be advantageous.⁴⁷

Criticising dkor: the lay-monk divide and the tantrika-monk divide

As has been briefly indicated previously, it is not uncommon to criticise others for consuming *dkor*. We find examples of monks accusing other monks, laypeople accusing monks, but also monks and/or laypeople accusing practitioners of tantra from taking sacred economic

⁴⁶ Gentry (2019: 217). *dkor sgrib lan chags ngan pa sbyong*.

⁴⁷ Another such ritual is dNgul chu Dharmabhadra's *Brul gtor dkor sgrib dag byed zla shel chu rgyun gyi 'khrid yig gnad kyi don gsal* (*Gsung 'bum* vol. 3, 450–464). This text also briefly narrates the sKyer sgang pa story. A very simple ritual that lacks the above narrative contextualisation can be found in the Van Manen collection Leiden, entitled *Thugs rje chen po'i brul gtor lan chag dag byed* (2740/M46, 6 fols.). Another similar but very brief text is *'Brul gtor cha lnga'i rim pa* (in *Kam tshang chos spyod sogs kha ton gces btus*, vol. 1: 68–69, TBRC W00EGS1016759). A ritual that seems to derive from a different tradition is that found in the *Compendium of Sādhanās* (*Grub thabs kun btus*, vol. 11) in a text called *Khro phu brgya rtsa las byung ba'i man ngag nyer mkho 'ga' zhig*. In it, supplication is made to the great compassionate Buddha Vajraprasphotaka (rDo je rab 'joms). The text specifies that it contains instructions specifically intended to purify the obscurations caused by things like the selling of images of the Three Jewels, misusing the wealth of the gurus and the Three Jewels, and particularly the wealth of the Sangha, the changing of one's dedications, covetousness, and consuming after extortion. See p. 140: *thugs rje chen po rdo rje rab 'joms kyi sgo nas dkor sgrib sbyong ba'i man ngag 1 de bzhin gshegs pa rdo rje rab 'joms la phyag 'tshal lo/ sku gsung thugs kyi rten gyi glud zos pa dang/ bla ma dkon mchog gi dkor la 'bags pa dang/ khyad par dge 'dun gyi dkor dang/ bsngos pa bsgyur ba dang/ brnab sems dang/ nan bitsir du longspyad pa la sogs pa las kyi sgrib pa thams cad sbyong ba'i man ngag dam pa yin no/* According to the (brief) colophon, the text was written down as per Chos rje lo tsā ba's instruction, referring, in all likelihood, to Chos rje khro phu lo tsā ba (1172–1236).

property without providing sufficient religious compensation. As Jane Caple has noted in this context, criticism of the reliance of monks on offerings can be found in dGe 'dun chos 'phel's work, while there are earlier figures who "were critical of the propensity for spiritual corruption and materialism amongst religious practitioners and their dependency on the wealth and labour of pious nomads and farmers", such as Mi la ras pa (1040–1123), 'Brug pa kun legs (1455–1529), and the previously cited Zhabs dkar (1781–1850/1).⁴⁸ In a monastic context, the ones who are most at risk of getting criticised for this are the monks entrusted with financial duties, e.g. the "treasurer" (*phyag mdzod*) but also the "monastic maintenance staff" (*dkon gnyer / dkor gnyer*). Dagyab mentions the monk entrusted with the upkeep of Dolma Lhakang (sGrol ma lha khang) in the Jokhang in Lhasa:

The work in Lhasa's city temple Jokhang did not have a mere financial or organizational character. In this context the concept of *dkor* is mentioned. Counted among *dkor* are all the possessions that belong to the Three Jewels, which includes objects on the altar, offering substances, monastic property, and the food in the monastery. Monks may use *dkor*. They compensate this with their own spiritual service in the monastery. To receive *dkor* without suitably compensating it, is seen as a non-virtuous act. Since it is believed that the work in Dolma Lhakang is not a sufficient spiritual service, there is talk that the temple's keeper accepts *dkor* over the fees [he receives]. And based on this, the temple surveyor's life is shortened. The dependence between *dkor* and appropriate recompense is still part of Tibetan beliefs.⁴⁹

Similarly, Jann Ronis translates a section of Tshe dbang nor bu's *Chag shog khag* (*Collected Letters*), in which a monk in charge of collecting donations to renovate Kaḥ tog monastery stood accused of using the money to support his family. Since there was a danger that the laypeople would completely stop contributing toward the renovation, the

⁴⁸ Caple (2019: 64).

⁴⁹ Dagyab (2009: 278). Die Arbeit in Lhasas Stadttempel Jokhang hatte nicht nur finanziellen und organisatorischen Charakter. In diesem Zusammenhang fällt der Begriff des *dkor*. Zum *dkor* werden alle Besitztümer gezählt, die zu den drei Juwelen [Buddha (Lehrer), Dharma (Lehre), Sangha (Mönchs- und Nonnengemeinschaft)] gehören, so auch Altargegenstände, Opfersubstanzen, Klosterbesitz, Essen im Kloster. Mönche dürfen das *dkor* nutzen. Die Gegenleistung erbringen sie mit ihrer eigenen spirituellen Leistung im Kloster. Das *dkor* ohne entsprechende Gegenleistung entgegenzunehmen, gilt als unheilsame Handlung. Da man glaubt, dass die Arbeit im Dolma Lhakang eine zu geringe spirituelle Leistung darstellt, ist die Rede davon, dass der Tempelaufseher über Gebühr *dkor* entgegennimmt. Und aufgrund dessen verkürzt sich die Lebensspanne eines Tempelaufsehers. Die Abhängigkeit zwischen *dkor* und angemessener Gegenleistung ist immer noch Bestandteil tibetischer Glaubensvorstellungen.

monastic authorities decided to dispossess the monk in question.⁵⁰

Even incarnated lamas occasionally stand accused of accumulating *dkor*, but it takes a high religious authority to do so. Lama Jabb, in discussing the 5th Dalai Lama's criticisms of the reincarnation system, paraphrases him and writes that he would be glad to see a stop being put to the "stream of dubiously-obtained material offerings (*dkor nag*) that have been flowing uninterruptedly into the Lama's coffers".⁵¹ Much more recently, the 14th Dalai Lama, while giving a teaching on *The Great Stages of the Path* (*Lam rim chen mo*) criticised those teachers of the Dharma who collect donations and use those to buy fancy cars and the like and give nothing back to society. In his words: "This is *dkor!* *dkor*, *dkor nag!*"⁵²

Connected to this is another reason for calling monks eaters of *dkor*, namely when they do very little indeed. According to one of Ben Joffe's informants from Amdo, "young, poorly trained novitiates were routinely derided as 'little donation eaters', i.e. *dkor za mkhan* [...]", exactly because they could not religiously compensate what they received.⁵³ Caple, in her research on contemporary monasteries in Amdo, has noted the same thing, with the term *dkor zas za mkhan* used to indicate those who rely upon offerings, in juxtaposition to those who are "self-reliant".⁵⁴ In a monastic context then, there was, and still is, some self-awareness that certain monks live in the monasteries simply for the material gain. As the 5th Dalai Lama stated in his monastic guidelines for 'Bras spungs monastery with regard to the issue of farming:

If among the residents (*gzhi ba*), there are those without vows and who are after *dkor* who want to do this, then they need to be given lay-clothes for which the permission of the disciplinarian (*dge skos*) has been asked. They are not allowed to do this in monastic robes.⁵⁵

Occasionally, similar wordings are used self-deprecatingly, such as Sog zlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552–1624), describing himself as:

⁵⁰ Ronis (2009: 112). Tshe dbang nor bu, *Chag shog khag*: 771: [...] *dkor rdzas bag med khyim gyi gso sbran la gtang zhing* [...]. Ronis writes "the practice by lamas of supporting their extended families with monastic funds was not unheard of, but it was considered a serious wrongdoing that resulted in defilement (*dkor sgrub*)" (2009: 113).

⁵¹ Jabb (2015: 243), citing *Du k̄a la'i gos bzang* 1984: 248.

⁵² See "Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho (The 14th Dalai Lama) on *dkor*." Since this is just an audio-fragment it is unclear when and where the speech was given.

⁵³ Joffe (2019: 144).

⁵⁴ Caple (2019: 64).

⁵⁵ 'Bras spungs bca' yig: 312: *gzhi ba'i khrod nas sdom ldan min pa'i dkor phyir 'brang mkhan gyis byed pa shar na dge skos la gnang ba zhus pa'i skya chas sprad nas byed pa ma gtogs btsun chas kyis byas mi chog*. Also see Jansen (2018: 116, 7).

“a sloth who consumes *dkor* from the faithful while named ‘lama’”.⁵⁶

We have seen that institutionalised monasticism is critiqued for facilitating the accumulation of *dkor* among monks. Conversely, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries were and still are subject to scrutiny when it comes to their accrual of wealth. In the Tibetan exile communities, some people voice their unease with regard to the pomp and splendour these institutions sometimes display and with the monasteries’ apparent unwillingness to help out those Tibetan settlements that still live in poverty. A very recent anonymous opinion piece, published online in *The Tibet Express* (*Bod kyi bang chen*) maintains that it is likely that with the hardships that Tibetan communities are set to experience on account of the crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic there will be people who will criticise not just the Tibetan government but also the monasteries for not providing (sufficient) financial aid. The authors proceed to explain why monasteries cannot help their surroundings and their main argument is the issue of *dkor*: only monks are to benefit directly from the monastic economy. They repeat the classic arguments presenter earlier, namely that this kind of proceeds (*dkor*) is like iron balls—to eat it one needs “bronze cheeks” (*khro yi ’gram pa*). The authors also claim that only few Tibetan laypeople are aware of and fully understand the ramifications of requesting and taking financial aid from the monasteries, which is why these institutions are still heavily criticised. They conclude with the following:

As mentioned above, the possessions of the Sangha (*dge ’dun pa’i dkor*) cannot be consumed at will by us male and female laypersons. Therefore, it is not right to criticise the progress made by the monasteries. Rather, [that progress] is solely the result of the great efforts made by the monk officials involved. Even if the monasteries were to make donations, we need to think about whether it is proper to accept them or not. It is definitely not the case that everybody, both poor and rich, can just reach out to the monasteries.⁵⁷

This piece expresses the authors’ apprehension that laypeople, not sufficiently aware of the concept and dangers of *dkor*, have started seeing the wealthy monasteries as having the (moral) obligation to help their community out. While monasteries regularly do exactly that—as was

⁵⁶ Gentry (2017: 153–154): *bla ma’i ming thog dkor zan snyoms las mkhan*. The translation has been slightly adapted.

⁵⁷ *Bod kyi bang chen* issue 798, 15 April 2020: *gong du rjod pa bzhin dge ’dun pa’i dkor ni rang re mi skya pho mo dag gis ji dgar za rung ba zhig min la/ dgon pa dag yar rgyas song ba der yang kha rdung gtong ’os pa zhig kyang min par/ ’brel yod las sne dag gis ’bad brtson chen po byas pa’i bras bu nyag gcig tu gyur yod/ dgon sde dag gis mar gnang yod na’ang len rung dang mi rung bsam blo gtong dgos pa las/ dgon sde khag la dbul phyug tshang mas lag pa ’dzed chog chog gcig gtan nas min/ The Tibet Express on *dkor* (2020).*

once again seen during the COVID-19 pandemic in India and Nepal⁵⁸—the authors argue that it cannot be expected of them and that one should have reservations with regard to accepting aid from monastic institutions. All, of course, for reasons of *dkor*.

Another type of criticism still heard today comes from monks who disparage those entirely outside of the monastic setting: the tantric practitioners. Tibetan doctor Nida Chenaktsang defends these mantraholders in a recent book, cited and translated by Joffe. Tantric practitioners (*sngags pa*) are maligned by some monks by saying that:

They are village ritualists who chase after payments of food and money for religious services (*lto dang dkor*). In this [these monks] are just digging up dirt on other people without acknowledging their own faults. What person [alive] does not chase after food (*lto*) for the sake of survival? There cannot possibly be any difference between staying in a monastery and having “black” donations (*dkor nag*) just be handed to you and receiving offerings of money after you have gone to [sic] the difficulty of going out [to people’s homes to get it, so in other words these monks have nothing to complain about].⁵⁹

Interestingly, both groups accuse each other of misusing donations in some way or the other. Because *dkor* is a doctrinally “fuzzy” concept these mutual misgivings will likely remain in place. The main concern remains the entanglement of economics with religion. Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams–Oerberg have noted that “the mix of money and monks, of business and Buddhism, seems to unsettle modern sensibilities”.⁶⁰ I would argue, taking the above into consideration, that it has always been thus.

“Secular” usage and Indo-Tibetan resonances of dkor

An equally complex question is: how and when do laypeople—in this context, non-religious specialists—engage in the consumption of *dkor*? Naturally, when they steal from the Sangha, it is—in addition to being a criminal offense—also *dkor*. While reflections on the behaviour of ordinary laypeople are not exactly common in pre-modern Tibetan sources, contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teachers occasionally do warn their lay disciples of the dangers of *dkor*.⁶¹ Additionally, in my

⁵⁸ See for example Phayul.com (2020).

⁵⁹ Joffe (2019: 142). Joffe cites Nyi zla he ru ka and Ye shes sgrol ma (2015: 109). The translation has been slightly adapted for reasons of style and readability.

⁶⁰ Brox and Williams-Oerberg (2015: 12).

⁶¹ Interestingly, in a note in the French translation of Patrul Rinpoche’s *Kun bzang bla ma’i zhal lung*, the word *dkor* is glossed in the following way: “*dkor za ba* veut dire, en général, utiliser les biens et les richesses offerts par les fidèles, et surtout en

time living among Tibetans in McLeodganj, whenever a case came to light in which someone had taken community money to use for his personal gain, this person would invariably be accused of consuming *dkor*.⁶² Indulging in *dkor* then could be any of the following things: fraud, embezzlement, tax evasion, being on welfare while able to work, and so on. In other words, using the (greater) community's property without having a (moral) right to do so. This is also the position of Geshe Sonam Gyaltzen (*dge bshes bSod nams rgyal mtshan*), a highly respected geshe who teaches at a Dharma centre in the Netherlands. Having had the honour of studying and working with him, I heard him speak of this concept frequently. He expressed his worry about erstwhile volunteers at the Dharma centre, who received either disability allowance or welfare from the Dutch government, but devoted all their time and energy to working at the centre as volunteers—Geshe Sonam Gyaltzen said that this amounted to *dkor* and that any Buddhist institution should have a moral obligation to turn such people away. His view is also communicated in his commentary on a text commonly known as *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons* (*Mtshon cha 'khor lo*). This work, ascribed to the 9th-century Indian master Dharmarakṣita, is one of the few “Indo-Tibetan” texts that utilise the term *dkor* in more morally judgmental ways. While we will return to this work below, this is what Geshe Sonam Gyaltzen's commentary has to say about *dkor*:

Furthermore, with regard to unlawfully using *dkor* and the way one uses *dkor* unconscientiously: when a monk who has been stained by any of the four root downfalls and is knowingly guilty of this, partakes in monastic tea-sessions, then—while he uses *dkor* unlawfully—he does not do so unconscientiously. And so, when he is, as stated above, knowingly stained with the downfalls, and still thinks nothing of it, he is someone who uses *dkor* while thinking that a monk can digest *dkor*, like a peacock digests poison.

Usually, in the context of what is called *dkor*, one may think that it is only something for the monks and that laypeople have no *dkor*. This is not so: while laypeople do also take the wealth of the Sangha (*dge 'dun gyi dkor*), consuming laypeople's communal property (*spyi rdzas*) that

abuser. *Il désigne parfois l'usage abusif des bien collectifs, des richesses d'un pays, etc., par des personnes en position de pouvoir. (dkor za ba generally means to use the goods and the wealth offered by the faithful, and above all to misuse them. It sometimes refers to the wrong usage of public goods, of the wealth of a country etc., by people in a position of power)* (Patrul Rinpoche: 1997: 441, n. 58, italics added).

⁶² I lived in McLeodganj between 2000 and 2005. This article would have benefitted from fieldwork but due to the COVID-19 situation I was not able to travel, which is why this article suffers from a potential overdose of textual materials and possibly outdated information.

one does not own or living one's life receiving a large salary for work that one does not genuinely carry out is also *dkor*: one should be careful of these things.⁶³

The second paragraph proposes the idea that receiving any kind of income or wealth, while not being deserving of it, constitutes as *dkor*, regardless whether there is the involvement of the sacred or not. This is a position that is not dealt with in earlier textual sources, while—as I mentioned previously—it does conform with the contemporary notions of *dkor* among exile Tibetans that I have observed. The first paragraph of the citation comments directly on the following verse of *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons*:

When I am sick with a chronic ulcer or edema,
It is the weapon of evil karma turning upon me
For wrongfully and with no conscience using others' possessions;
From now on I will renounce acts such as plundering others' possessions.⁶⁴

Thubten Jinpa here translates the term *dkor* in a rather neutral manner as “other's possessions”. While this particular work attributed to Dharmarakṣita knows various, at times rather distinct versions, the term *dkor* features in all of them. Although the length of this article does not allow for an extensive treatment of the origins and authorship of this text, there are reservations about the transmission of this work. Tradition teaches us that Atiśa, once Dharmarakṣita's disciple,

⁶³ *Theg pa chen po'i blo sbyong mtshon cha 'khor lo'i 'grel pa don ldan lam bzang*, Gajang Tsawa Geshe Sonam Gyaltzen 2003: 32–33: *de yang khrims med kyis dkor la 'bags pa dang bag med kyis dkor la 'bags tshul ni/ de yang grwa pa gang zhig rang la pham pa bzhi pa gang rung gis gos pa shes bzhin du 'gyod pa dang bcas grwa ja mang ja 'gyed la sogs pa la longs spyad na khrims med kyis dkor la 'bags pa yin kyang bag med kyis 'bags pa ma yin la/ rang nyid gong bshad pa ltar gyi ltung bas gos pa shes bzhin du da du'ang ji mi snyam par/ grwa pas dkor 'ju rma byas dug 'ju zer ba yin snyam pa'i sgo nas dkor la 'bag pa yin no/ rgyun ldan dkor zer ba'i tshe grwa pa la ma gtogs khyim par dkor med snyam pa 'dug rung de ltar ma yin te/ khyim pa rnams la'ang dge 'dun gyi dkor za rgyu yod la/ dge 'dun gyi dkor min yang khyim pa'i spyi rdzas lta bu rang la mi dbang bzhin du longs spyad pa dang/ ming don mtshungs pa'i las ka mi [33] byed par phog chen po zhig blangs nas mi tshe bskyal nas bsdad pa rnams kyang dkor zas pa yin pas 'di dag zab dgos so/*

⁶⁴ Translation by Jinpa (2006: 137). The text itself has a rather wide variety of versions that contain large discrepancies. Jinpa used, among others, the version and the notes by Blo bzang rTa mgrin (1867–1937). There the verse is presented as follows: *bar gcod nad dang dmu chus na ba'i tshe/ khrims med dkor la bag med 'bags pa yig/ las ngang mtshon cha 'khor lo rang la 'khor ba yin/ dan ni dkor 'phrog la sogs spang bar byal/ (Blo sbyong mtshon cha'i 'khor lo zhes bya ba mchan dang bcas pa: 329)*. Geshe Sonam Gyaltzen's version reads: *bad gcong skran dang rma chu ngan pa'i tshe/ khrims med dkor la bag med 'bags pa yis/ las ngang mtshon cha 'khor lo rang la 'khor ba yin / da ni sgo 'phrog la sogs spang bar byal/ (Theg pa chen po'i blo sbyong mtshon cha 'khor lo'i 'grel pa don ldan lam bzang: 32 (verse 25))*

transmitted this text to 'Brom ston pa. The various colophons, however, cast doubt upon the authorship of this text. Furthermore, the work is not included in today's *bsTan 'gyur*, nor can it be found in the list of texts in the translation of which Atiśa participated.⁶⁵ More significant perhaps is the presence of numerous "un-Indic" elements, some of which are mentioned by Michael Sweet and colleagues, who give examples of references to (Tibetan) divination (*mo*, v. 70) and native demons (*'gong po*, v. 51; 91).

Much is made of what could be seen as the central trope of the work: the peacock's ability to eat and digest poison. Unlike other animals, it thrives and grows lustrous through eating poison, just as the bodhisattva is not harmed by the delusions (*nyon mongs*). Sweet and colleagues claim that this particular simile "appears to be entirely foreign to the Sanskrit literary tradition, as well as to Indian folk traditions".⁶⁶ The same trope also occurs in a common proverb, of which there are several slightly divergent versions, connecting the peacock to the concept of *dKor*: "The monk can digest *dKor* [like] the peacock digests poison".⁶⁷ While it is unclear whether the proverb is somehow derived from the peacock simile found in *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons* or whether the figure of speech precedes the text, what it suggests is that only (good) monks can somehow transform *dKor*. Regarding the origins of the text, I am of the opinion that the occurrence of the word *dKor*, and more particularly that of the phrase *dKor la 'bags pa*, is yet another indication that the work is likely to have been composed, or put to paper, in Tibetan and not in any Indic language.

As far as I am aware, the only case in which the term *dKor* is used in the sense of the act of misusing the donations of the faithful in the *bsTan 'gyur*, as opposed to the initial meaning of "wealth", is found in Ratnarākṣita's (c. 1150–1250) **Gaṇācakravādhicintāmaṇi* (*Tshogs kyi 'khor lo'i cho ga yid bzhin nor bu*).⁶⁸ In a treatment of the various different kinds of (suitable) masters (*ācārya*) with whom to study tantric rituals, this text also discusses who *should not be one*:

⁶⁵ Sweet *et al.* (2001: 8).

⁶⁶ Sweet *et al.* (2001: 11). While indeed the exact simile does not seem to occur in Indic literature, the story of one of the previous lives of the Buddha, in which he, reborn as "the king of peacocks" *Suvarṇabhāsa*, grew even more beautiful and lustrous upon being given poison is well-known in Buddhist literature, for example in the *Āryaśṛīgūptanāmasūtra* (*phags pa dpal sbas zhes bya ba'i mdo*, D217) and known as the *Mayūtrajātaka* in various *jātaka* compilations. See Straube (2009: 316–319). I am thankful to Péter-Dániel Szántó for referring me to this *jātaka*.

⁶⁷ Cüppers and Sørensen (1998: 48). *grwa pas dKor 'ju / rna byas dug 'ju*. Also see Jabb (2015: 238 n. 28): "The monk digests material offerings. The peacock digests poison. *dKor* denotes material offerings made to individual Lamas and monks or to their institutions. It usually carries a negative connotation because such wealth has been offered on the behalf of the dead."

⁶⁸ Tōh. 2494: 249a1–254a7. A diplomatic edition can be found in Shizuka (2012).

Particularly, with regard to lay *ācāryas*, someone who has a woman and consumes *dkor*, who has servants to work the fields and who conducts business and who is ignorant [but] teaches the Dharma for the sake of gifts, is not an *ācārya* of the people (*gaṇācārya*).⁶⁹

The work does not further elaborate what to consume *dkor* means exactly, but it is definitely meant to be pejorative. More significant here is that it appears to be the only “translated” text in which this particular gloss of *dkor* occurs. As with a few of Ratnarakṣita’s works, there is doubt as to whether he initially wrote them in an Indic language, or whether they were “translated” into Tibetan on the spot. The colophon of this text states that it was translated by Zhang Lo tsā ba (?–1236, Zhang grub pa dpal bzang po) with oral guidance from the author himself. This, in addition to the fact that this consumption of *dkor* seems to be exclusively Tibetan, displays some of the workings of cultural translation that occurred in addition to the word-by-word translation process.

A treatise on dkor

To my knowledge the only work that deals with *dkor* as its main topic was written by the rNying ma master Rig ’dzin Gar gyi dbang phyug (1858–1930).⁷⁰ Daniel Berounsky writes that he was born in Khams and that “he was the author of a number of didactic texts on various ‘evils’ (*nyes dmigs*), among them texts on the evils of hunting, eating meat, blood offerings, drinking alcohol and a very sexist text on the evil of women”.⁷¹ The title page of the 26 folio-long work on the evils of *dkor* reads as follows: *Kimpāka Fruit: The Faults of Consuming dkor, which is Pleasant in the Short Term and Unpleasant in the Long Term (Phral dga’ phugs sdug dkor la ’bags pa’i nyes pa kimpa’i ’bras bu zhes bya ba bzhugs so, henceforth The Faults of dKor, Dkor nyes)*. *Kimpāka* (*trichosanthes palmata*) is used as a metaphor for *dkor*: a fruit found in South Asia, that, contrary to its deceptively appetising aspect, once opened looks dirty and tastes bad. This text is valuable for its extensive usage of citations

⁶⁹ *Tshogs kyi ’khor lo’i cho ga yid bzhin nor bu*: 250a2: *khyad par khyim pa’i slob dpon nil bud med bcas shing dkor zas dang/ zhing las g.yog dang tshong ba dang/ rmongs pa rnyed phyir chos smra ba/ ’di ni tshogs kyi slob dpon min/ I have benefitted from a discussion with Péter-Dániel Szántó on the context of this text and author.*

⁷⁰ Little else is known about this person, but he is said to have been a direct student of renowned teachers such as ’Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo bros mtha’ yas (1813–1900), ’Jam dbyangs mKhyen rtse dbang po (1820–1892), Mi pham rGya mtsho (1846–1912), and Patrul Rinpoche (1808–1887).

⁷¹ Berounsky (2013: 16).

from both Indic⁷² and Tibetan literature. Unfortunately, space does not permit an extensive treatment of it here, so a brief outline should suffice. Many of the references to Tibetan works are well-known to us, but there are some that are difficult to place or trace. The work furthermore attempts to systematise the topic of *dKor*—perhaps for the first time ever. *The Faults of dKor* also recounts the various karmic results of indulging in *dKor*, some of which are—even when one is reborn as a human—to be the parent of many children and to be infested with lice and fleas.⁷³ The work confirms what has been already indicated earlier: that the eaters of *dKor* often come back as semi-magical miserable reptilian or amphibian creatures, that can be perceived and made to appear (often from large boulders) only by highly realised beings. These creatures are invariably bug-ridden, for—it is argued—it is only natural that the eater eventually becomes the eaten.⁷⁴

The author of this text is not as fatalistic as to concede that the obscurations of *dKor* are unavoidable. He cites *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, in which it is suggested that *dKor* can even be “digested”, but only if one has attained a certain level, namely when “one possesses the bronze cheeks of the union of the generation and the completion stages, for if any ordinary person consumes [*dKor*] his innards will burn and he will be destroyed.”⁷⁵ It is further specified that monks—for they are his target audience—can use the offered possessions of the living and the dead when they have the right qualities (*yon tan dang ldan pa*). These twelve qualities are enumerated in four groups of three and refer to the upkeep of one’s vows, ethical discipline, and correct behaviour, among others.⁷⁶ The text further speaks of the importance of carrying out death rituals and other services for which religious practitioners are remunerated with sincerity and compassion. *The Faults of dKor* gives numerous quotations that emphasise the dangers of a pure economic exchange of rituals for donations—especially in the context of “village rituals” (*grong chog*), when *dKor* is never far away.

⁷² Among others from the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthisamādhisūtra*, the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, the *Vinayakārika*, the *Bhikṣupriyasūtra* and the *Buddhapitākaduḥśīlanigrahasūtra*.

⁷³ *Dkor nyes*: 6b: *de bzhin du mir skyes pa'i tshe na'ang bu rgyud mang po'i pha ma dang/ sbrang ma dang shig lji ba sogs kyis za 'dug pa 'di'ang dKor gyi lan chags te [...]*. This is interesting, since in many cultures to be a parent of many children is a blessing. In Tibetan regions, however, to have many offspring would constitute as a heavy economic burden. Additionally, the intended audience of this text is clearly monastic: having many children to take care of would be seen as off-putting for many monks.

⁷⁴ *Dkor nyes*: 6b: *khyed gshin zas dang dad zad za ring la/ de'i phyir khyed la za ba 'di chos nyid yin/*

⁷⁵ *Dkor nyes*: 7b: *dKor nag po 'di lcags bsregs kyi ril bu dang 'dra bas/ bskyed rdzogs zung 'jug gi khro'i 'gram pa dang ldan na ma gtogs/ tha mal pas zos na rgyud tshig cing brlag pa yin gsungs/* See Kun mkhyen bla ma'i zhal lung (2001: 133).

⁷⁶ *Dkor nyes*: 20b–22a.

Significantly, the work does not refer to specific practices or rituals to purify *dkor*, rather, it sets out to prevent its audience from engaging with *dkor*. A more in-depth study of this text along with the many works that are cited within it would be valuable since it is likely to offer a better idea of the pervasive (monastic) economic ideologies regarding the performance of religious services—something that is often seen to be deeply embedded within the rNying ma tradition. It is these religious services that still today in many places in Tibet and the Himalayas make up a large segment of the income of (rNying ma) religious specialists, so often pejoratively called village ritualists (*grong chog pa*).

Concluding remarks: what is dkor?

In tracing the term *dkor* we see a shift from the material to the immaterial, and from the sacred to the secular, and further from the neutral to the caustic. It is not the case that the gloss changes entirely, but rather that further dimensions are added onto the word itself. That is to say, *dkor* in later (non-canonical and post-Dunhuang) sources can still simply mean wealth, but it can also be so much more than that. While the concept of abusing the possessions of the Sangha (and the karmic consequences this entails) itself is far from foreign to Indic Buddhism, or indeed Buddhist cultures elsewhere,⁷⁷ it is apparent that the phrases “to eat *dkor*” (*dkor bza' ba*) and “to use up *dkor*” (*dkor la 'bag pa*) are specific to the Tibetan cultural realm, be it Buddhist or Bon.

Examining a multi-layered term such as *dkor* allows us to catch a glimpse of the complex nature of moral, religious, social, and economic indebtedness that Tibetans perceived to have had and to still have to the Three Jewels, one's teacher, one's sponsor, to the society as a whole, and even to the government—however malign or benign. While the term itself is untranslatable, I think that this is the most basic feature of *dkor*: indebtedness. *dkor* can thus mean: 1) wealth/ possessions/ material/ commodity (for example in Dunhuang texts); 2) the possessions of the Three Jewels, the Sangha or the stūpa (as featured in canonical sources); 3) negative offerings (*dkor nag*), in the sense that either the giver or the receiver is at fault in some way; 4) (spiritual) corruption, embezzlement, or even fraud.

The pervasiveness of this concept among Tibetan societies also demonstrates how seemingly simple economic or religious transactions can and do become quickly loaded with significance. This significance, when encountered in Tibetan writing, has been lost in translation in the past. Previously, scholars have inadvertently mistranslated and misrepresented it, mostly by disregarding the more metaphysical

⁷⁷ See for example Gernet ([1956] 1995: 73).

aspects of the word. Zahiruddin Ahmad, for example, in his translation of the autobiography of the 5th Dalai Lama renders the term *dkor zas* as “abstidential food”.⁷⁸ Per Kvaerne, in his rendition of a Bon practice text *Khro bo dbang chen gyi pho nya'i le 'u*, which describes the deity gTso mchog and which is part of the *Khro bo rgyud drug* (a work on significant Bonpo deities), translates: “Those who destroy the wealth of the holders of ritual drums.” This is a likely mistranslation of “*rnga thogs dkor la 'bag pa*”, which should be “the holders of ritual drums who use up *dkor*”, referring to those who use religious practice to enrich themselves.⁷⁹ In other works, such as in an insightful article on the ambiguous nature of the institution of *sprul skus* by Matthew Kapstein, the word *dkor* is translated simply as “wealth” or “religious wealth”.⁸⁰ While not wrong per se, it does not convey all that the Tibetan authors originally must have intended.

In other cases, the misunderstanding and subsequent mistranslation of *dkor* lead to a rather divergent interpretation of the text. One example is the translation of a verse written by Blo gsal bstan skyong (b. 1804), who shows himself to be extremely conscientious regarding the income derived from religious services and institutions. Benjamin Wood translates: “Although I’ve received a small amount of wealth from monasteries like Zha lu, there was never a time when I didn’t [somehow] pay back the [monasteries’] donations. In these circumstances, therefore, I used everything virtuously”.⁸¹ This should read: “Although I’ve received limited wealth (*dkor*) from monasteries like Zha lu, while I have not repaid that *dkor*, it is but a trifling matter since it was spent on virtuous things.”⁸² The main difference here is the

⁷⁸ Ahmad (1999: 37).

⁷⁹ Kvaerne (1989: 120; 124).

⁸⁰ Kapstein (2002: 106–108).

⁸¹ Wood (2013: 48).

⁸² *zha lu sogs dgon pa'i dkor ni phran tshogs [sic? tshegs] byung rung phar dkor lan bcal ba med pas 'dir kho bos dge phyogs su btang ba 'di dag shin tu snang chung rung*. This is from the author’s autobiography, *Rang gi rnam thar du byas pa shel dkar me long*: 620. Elsewhere in his article, Wood misses the point of the argument Blo bzang Bstan skyong makes. He translates: *ser snas dkor nor bsags kyang phung krol gzhi / sred pas zhim dgu gsol yang bshang lci'i son / de dag las ni dam chos thos pa'i nor / bsags pa don ldan rab kyi yang rtse yin / as*:

“Miserly hoarding religious donations is but the basis of a ruined destiny.

Desirously ingesting delicious food is but the cause of piss and shit.

Compared to those [worthless consumptions], an accumulation of the wealth of listening to the holy dharma,

Is the zenith of the most meaningful [holy activity]” (Wood 2013: 46).

In my opinion this should read something more along the lines of:

“The accumulation of wealth (*dkor*) out of greed is the basis for ruin

[Just like] Consuming all kinds of delicious thing out of craving, [leads to] shit and piss

Rather, the accumulation of the treasure of listening to the holy Dharma

understanding of *dkor* as some kind of debt, in this case to monasteries like Zha lu to which the author was affiliated. At the same time, it seems, Blo bzang bstan skyong asserts that that “debt” is only small, since he restored the balance by using whatever he owned and received toward what is good and virtuous. As stated earlier, there is no entirely satisfactory translation for this rather wide-ranging concept, which is why I have left this term largely untranslated in this article. It is my hope, however, that the contents of this article—while far from being comprehensive on the topic—will contribute to a better understanding of this term, which will lead to improved future translations.

At the beginning of this article I hinted at the notion that the historical development of *dkor* follows the reverse process of that of the commodification of Buddhism. This commodification is—as Brox and Williams–Oerberg theorise—not simply a negative development, but can also be understood as “a reaffirmation of the significant religious influence that Buddhism has amidst global market forces and the prominent place of religion, especially Buddhism, in people’s lives [...]”.⁸³ If indeed the reverse process holds true, we can perhaps view the transformation from the material to the immaterial in the meaning of *dkor* as the significant and persistent influence of economic transactions on Buddhism as lived and understood by Tibetans. It is probably more accurate, however, to speak of symbiosis—both organised and disorganised Buddhism and Buddhists and the economic spheres that make their religious practices possible are, and always have been, so thoroughly intertwined that to separate them would be as impossible a task as trying to come up with one correct and elegant translation for the term *dkor*.

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Is the absolute pinnacle of what is meaningful.”

Here the emphasis lies on not on actually possessing the donations or the wealth, as the translations suggests, but the fact that this is done *out of greed* (*ser snas* is by Wood erroneously translated as an adverb). In other words, there is not necessarily anything wrong with accumulating things, but with the motivation one has while collecting them.

⁸³ Brox and Williams-Oerberg (2015: 9).

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