

# “A Female Body is Fortunate” Comparing Kun tu bzang mo’s and gTsang smyon Heruka’s Songs\*

Stefan Larsson  
(Gävle University)

## 1. Introduction

**T**aking three short religious poems/songs (*mgur*) that the crazy yogi gTsang smyon Heruka (1452–1507) sang to his female partner and disciple Kun tu bzang mo (1464–1549) as a point of departure, this essay will offer a preliminary analysis and comparison of their respective songs.<sup>1</sup>

Kun tu bzang mo’s songs are included in a 72-folio manuscript biography (*rnam thar*) which was compiled by her disciple mKhyen rab dbang phyug in 1551, two years after her passing.<sup>2</sup> The title of the work is *The Treasury of Profound Meaning, which is Meaningful to Behold: The Liberation Account of Kun tu bzang mo, the Great Mother of All the Victorious Ones of the Three Times without Exception* (*dus gsum rgyal ba ma lus pa bskyed pa’i yum chen kun tu bzang mo’i rnam par thar pa zab don gter mdzod mthong ba don ldan*, henceforth *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*). The biography is framed around twenty-six terse, four-line verses of homage to Kun tu bzang mo, each line containing nine syllables. These eulogies summarize her life chronologically and are followed by accounts in prose which detail the contents of the verses. Inserted between the fourteenth and fifteenth verses of homage are twenty-five songs attributed to Kun tu bzang mo. The songs are surrounded by narrative frames in prose, which provide context to the songs. The

---

\* The research presented in this essay has been carried out thanks to a grant from Riksbankens jubileumsfond, grant number P19-0419:1. I presented a shorter version of it at the 16<sup>th</sup> Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies in Prague in July 2022. Many thanks to Lama Tsultrim Rinpoche and Johanna Jørgensen for assisting me when translating the songs analyzed in the essay.

<sup>1</sup> For more on this type of songs, see, for example, Larsson & Quintman 2015; Larsson 2021. For a famous compilation of songs of the bka’ brgyud tradition in English translation, see Nālandā Translation Committee 1989.

<sup>2</sup> For information about Kun tu bzang mo, see Diemberger 2016, 286–293; Larsson 2016, 322–326; Sernesi 2021, 139–144. Thanks are due to Hildegard Diemberger who kindly informed me about the existence of this unique text and provided me with a digital copy of the text when I visited Cambridge in 2013.

songs constitute a major part of the biography, and – as Kurtis Schaeffer aptly pointed out in his presentation of Kun tu bzang mo’s biography and its relation to places at the IATS seminar in Bergen in 2016 – this part of the biography changes character and resembles a song collection – a *mgur ’bum* – more than a biography.<sup>3</sup>

gTsang smyon’s songs were issued as a separate 28-folio collection in 1508, the year after his passing. The name of the collection is *The Collected Songs of the Venerable Heruka from gTsang: The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel Showing the Path of The All-Knowing One* (*rje btsun gtsang pa he ru ka’i mgur ’bum rin po che dbang gi rgyal po thams cad mkhyen pa’i lam ston*, henceforth *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*).<sup>4</sup> The song collection was compiled and printed by Kun tu bzang mo, rGod tshang ras pa (1482–1559) and some other close disciples of the crazy yogi, along with his biography and two other short texts.<sup>5</sup> gTsang smyon’s songs are also included in two of the three extant gTsang smyon-biographies that his disciples put together after his passing: rGod tshang ras pa’s *The Heart of the Sun* (*Nyi ma’i snying po*), which was compiled and printed at the request of Kun tu bzang mo and other disciples of gTsang smyon;<sup>6</sup> and lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal’s (1473–1557) *The Life of gTsang pa smyon pa* (*gTsang pa smyon pa’i rnam thar*).<sup>7</sup> rGod tshang ras pa includes all the songs in his gTsang smyon biography, and apart from his odd spellings, he renders the songs like the song collection does, and in a similar order. lHa btsun, on the other hand, leaves out several songs, sometimes provides verses that are not found in the other texts, and divides one song into two separate songs.<sup>8</sup> It is notable

<sup>3</sup> “The Places of Kun tu bzang mo (1464–1549),” paper presented at the 14<sup>th</sup> Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies in Bergen, June 2016.

<sup>4</sup> For a translation of gTsang smyon’s song collection into Swedish, see Larsson 2018. For a presentation of gTsang smyon’s songs focusing on his songs with parting instructions (*’gro chos kyi mgur*), see Larsson 2021.

<sup>5</sup> For more on these texts, see Ehrhard 2010, 154–158; Schuh 1981, 126–127; Sernesi 2011, 185–191; Sernesi 2021, 133–139; Larsson 2012, 42–47; Larsson 2016, 311–331; Larsson & Quintman 2015, 91–94.

<sup>6</sup> *The Heart of the Sun* was compiled and printed in 1512 (or perhaps 1524). See bibliography for full title and publication details. It is mentioned in *The Heart of the Sun* (p. 284) that Kun tu bzang mo and dBang phyug rgyal mtshan asked rGod tshang ras pa to write the biography. For more on this text, see Larsson 2012, 47–49; Sernesi 2021, 144, 194–197; Smith 1969, 5–16; Smith 2001, 62–70.

<sup>7</sup> *The Life of gTsang pa smyon pa* was compiled and printed 1543. See bibliography for full title and publication details. For more on the different gTsang smyon biographies, see DiValerio 2015b; Larsson 2012, 40–51; Sernesi 2021, 35–42.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the three songs to Kun tu bzang mo that are presented below are not included in lHa btsun’s gTsang smyon biography. In the song to rDo rje snying po (*The Life of gTsang pa smyon pa*, 66, cf. *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 10a–10b; *The Heart of the Sun*, 94), he inserts the phrase: *bar du gnas med rkyen gyis stong gin gda’*, a phrase that fits nicely into the song but is missing in the other versions.

that lHa btsun was not involved in printing the song collection, so it is not surprising that his versions of the songs differ. The differences indicate that lHa btsun had access to other versions of the same songs or that he changed the songs to fit better into his version of the biography.

When comparing the twenty-five songs found in Kun tu bzang mo's biography with the more than twenty-seven songs<sup>9</sup> in gTsang smyon's song collection, one notices many similarities, both regarding style and content. There are also some differences between their respective songs, and the present essay will investigate these similarities and differences. Moreover, it will explore whether the open environment of Kun tu bzang mo and gTsang smyon Heruka's yogic community allowed more leeway than other Buddhist groups at the time for female Buddhist practitioners.

Before comparing their songs and discussing these questions, let us have a look at the three songs that gTsang smyon sang to Kun tu bzang mo.

## 2. gTsang smyon's Songs to Kun tu bzang mo

Kun tu bzang mo met gTsang smyon for the first time when he was compiling the life story and song collection of Mi la ras pa (ca. 1040–1123). The meeting occurred at a place called Na zlum Shel phug in southern La stod when Kun tu bzang mo was in her mid-twenties and gTsang smyon in his late thirties.<sup>10</sup> rGod tshang ras pa mentions that gTsang smyon was accompanied by a large following, and he specifically mentions that about one hundred female Buddhist practitioners were present at the time of their initial meeting, thus indicating that gTsang smyon had many female followers. One of these female dharma practitioners had a dream the night before Kun tu bzang mo's arrival. She dreamt of a woman adorned with bone ornaments and dressed in silk clothes, who guided many people and brought along many precious offerings. gTsang smyon interpreted the dream as

---

The second song in gTsang smyon's song collection, a song with instructions to his heart-son Rin chen dpal bzang po (*The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 2a; cf. *The Heart of the Sun*, 58–59), is divided into two separate songs with different narrative frames in lHa btsun's biography of gTsang smyon. The first song is rendered on page 50.5–50.7 in *The Life of gTsang pa smyon pa*, and the second on page 51.1–51.4.

<sup>9</sup> The collection includes more than thirty songs, but the number provided in the collection's colophon is twenty-seven, twenty-one plus six major songs (*ngur chen*). The reason for the discrepancy is that some of the songs in the collection are attributed to other people, and some related songs are counted as one.

<sup>10</sup> Their meeting is depicted in *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 21a; *The Heart of the Sun*, 137–140; *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 16b–19b. For more information about Na zlum Shel phug, see Dawa 2016, 206–209.

follows: “The woman [in your dream] has the marks of a *ḍākinī* and the power to spread the essential doctrine. [A woman] that none of you will be able to match will come.”<sup>11</sup>

Kun tu bzang mo immediately became a close and devoted disciple of gTsang smyon, and eventually also his consort.<sup>12</sup> In one of the above-mentioned twenty-six verses of praise to Kun tu bzang mo’s life, mKhyen rab dbang phyug summarizes their meeting in the following way:

When [you] met the face, and heard the voice of the King of  
Blood Drinkers (gTsang smyon),  
the clouds of [your] ordinary delusions dissolved into space,  
and the sun of *mahāmudrā* realization naturally dawned.  
[I] bow down to you who awoke [your] good karmic propensi-  
ties!<sup>13</sup>

When the printing blocks of Mi la ras pa’s life story and song collection were completed, the blocks were brought to Grod phug in gNya’ nang, a place associated with Mi la ras pa.<sup>14</sup> gTsang smyon continued his travels and went on to Glo bo smon thang (Mustang),<sup>15</sup> while Kun tu bzang mo stayed in retreat in La phyi, an important hermitage not far from gNya’ nang. When gTsang smyon returned, he did a three-year retreat in La phyi. During that time Kun tu bzang mo requested instructions about how to practice meditation.<sup>16</sup>

Her first question concerned how to generate awareness. gTsang smyon replied with the following song:

If [you] want to bring forth awareness,  
remember that the time of death is uncertain.

<sup>11</sup> *The Heart of the Sun*, 141: *bud med mkha’ ’gro ma’i mtshan dang ldan pa snying po’i bstan pa dpel (spel) nus pa khyed tshos ’gran du med pa cig yong ba yin gsungs/*. Cf. *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 17a; Larsson 2016, 325.

<sup>12</sup> This is stated, for example, in one of the verses of homage to Kun tu bzang mo: “For the sake of making the life story and songs of Mi la and so forth, as well as the teachings of the aural transmission, disseminate, flourish, and expand, you became the consort (*yum du bzhes/gzhes*) of the great man of gTsang (gTsang smyon).” *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 22a–22b: *khyad rang mi la’i rnam mgur sogs//snyan rgyud bstan pa dar rgyas spel ba’i phyir//gtsang chen yum du gzhes (bzhes)*.

<sup>13</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 17b: *khrag ’thung rgyal po’i zhal ’jal (mjäl) gsung thos tshel//tha mal ’khrul pa’i sprin tshogs dbyings su dengs//phyag chen rtogs pa’i nyi ma ngang gis shar//bzang po’i las ’phro sad pa de la ’dud//*.

<sup>14</sup> Spelled Brod phug in *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 19b. A printing house was built in Grod phug for the purpose of storing blocks and printing texts belonging to the “school of gTsang smyon Heruka.” Kun tu bzang mo later renovated this printing house (*The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 43a; Sernesi 2021, 145–146).

<sup>15</sup> Spelled Blo’o smon thang in *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 19b.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 21a; *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 19b.

If [you] remember the unavailability of death,  
diligence comes naturally.

If [you] are carried away by inattentiveness and laziness,  
even the yellow robes become unwholesome.  
If you create [your] own suffering,  
[you] are instantly swept away into a fire.

If [you] want permanent happiness and well-being,  
accomplish the two-fold benefit in this very life.  
Recognize that to be deceived by the concerns of this life is the  
enemy!

This is your father's heart-advice, always keep it in mind!  
Keep it in mind at all times in this way, Sangmo!

Evam!<sup>17</sup>

In response Kun tu bzang mo asked him:<sup>18</sup>

Although the generation phase should be like a rainbow,  
[I] experience it as something concrete and substantial.  
Although meditation during the completion phase should be  
like the sky,  
[I] experience grasping and fixation on concreteness.  
Please give [me] instructions that help [me] counteract this.

In response the lord (gTsang smyon) sang:<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka, 21a–21b: dran pa'i lcag (G: lcags) 'debs (K: gsal 'debs) dgos na nam 'chi nges med bsgoms (G: sgoms)//nges par 'chi ba dran na brtson 'grus zhar (G: zhor) la yong//rnam g.yeng le los khyer na ser gzugs rang la sdig (G: bsdig)//rang sdug rang gis shom (G: bsham) na da lta me nang 'phyongs (mchongs; K: 'phyogs)//rtag tu bde skyid 'dod na (G: /) don gnyis tshe 'dir bsgrubs//tshe 'di'i bya bas slu bas dgra ru shes par gyis//a pha'i snying gtam yin no rgyun tu sems la zhog (K: chongs)//bzang mo'i sems la rtag tu de ltar zhog//e bam//. Cf. *The Heart of the Sun*, 159–160; *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 19b. When rendering variant spellings in the Tibetan sources in the notes, “G” indicates rGod tshang ras pa's biography of gTsang smyon and “L” indicates lHa btsun's (i.e. *The Heart of the Sun* and *The Life of gTsang pa smyon pa*). “K” indicates *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*. Corrections are inserted within parentheses.*

<sup>18</sup> According to *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, she sent the questions in a letter (*The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 19b).

<sup>19</sup> *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka, 21b: bskyed rim 'ja' tshon lta bur bsgoms lags kyang //phung po sdos (G: sdod) bcas (gdos bcas) gcig (K: shig) ka yong gin (G: zhing) gda' (G: brda')//rdzogs rims nam mkha' lta bur (G: lta bu) bsgoms lags kyang //dngos 'dzin a 'thas gcig (K: shig) ka yong gin (G: zhing) gda' (G: brda')//di la phan pa'i gdams ngag zhu zhus pa'i lan du/ rje'i zhal nas/. Cf. *The Heart of the Sun*, 160; *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 19b–20a.*

Namo guru!

In response to a question from a girl (*bu mo*), I would like to say the following:

The meditation deity is like a rainbow,  
but if [you] do not understand that the meditator is the deity,  
how could anything other than the concrete arise?

Appearances are empty form from the very beginning.  
If you want them to arise as the pristine deity,  
immediately crush the dualistic separation between appearances  
and emptiness!  
Then the deity will reveal its real face,  
and when you see its real face,  
there is nothing to meditate upon.

Moreover, by meditating on emptiness as being separate from  
appearances [and from] the illusory body of the deity,  
the perfection stage, which is like the sky, is mistaken.  
Regardless of what types of appearances arise due to circum-  
stances, stop rejecting and accepting,  
and see your own face!

Let meditation and meditator,  
as well as rejection and acceptance, merge together,  
and do not intellectualize!

It is also not about not meditating.  
Like the bliss of youth,  
it is something that cannot be grasped by words.  
Let the generation phase and the perfection phase be one.

Do not forget this, always keep it in mind!

Evam!<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 21b: *na mo gu ru//bu mo'i zhus lan 'di skad lo//ja' tshon lta bu'i lha sgoms (G: bsgoms) yang (K: kyang)//sgom (K: bsgom) mkhan lha ru ma shes na//sdos bcas (gdos bcas) dag las ga la 'byung//snang ba ye nas stong gzugs de (G: te)//dag pa'i lha skur (G, K: lha ru) 'char dgos na//da ni snang stong gnyis 'dzin shig//de nas lha (G: lhas) sku'i rang zhal ston//rang zhal mthong na (G, K: nas) sgom don bral//nam mkha' lta bu'i rdzogs rim (G: rims) yang (K: kyang)//snang ba sgyu (G: rgyu) ma'i lha sku las//gud du stong pa bsgoms pas gol//rkyen gyis snang ba ci byung yang//dgag sgrub spongs la rang zhal ltos//sgom dang sgom mkhan dgag sgrub rnamsgcig tu dril (G: sgril) la blo yis thong//mi sgom pa yang ma yin na (G, K: te) //tshig gis reg par mi nus pa'i (K: pas) //gzhon nu'i bde ba lta bu yi//bskyed (G, K: skyed) rdzogs gcig tu mngon du byed (K: gcig tu byed pa 'di)//ma rjed yid la rgyun tu chongs (G: 'chongs) //e bam//. Cf. *The Heart of the Sun*, 160; *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo* 20a.*

Kun tu bzang mo then asked gTsang smyon about cause and effect and about how to practice. In response gTsang smyon gave her the following instruction:

[I] bow down to the venerable lamas!

The authentic condition of mind  
is free from constructed limitations in its [very] origination.  
The various manifestations of the subject-object dichotomy  
appear, but they are empty by nature.

When [you] practice meditation,  
remain undistracted in a state of non-activity.  
When [you] apply [your practice] in post-meditation,  
it is important to recognize that appearances are empty.

Although karma and result are empty by nature,  
do not be deceived by the relative aspect of karma and result.  
At all times and on all occasions, it is very important to abandon  
unwholesome actions and to carry out wholesome actions.

It would be excellent if you were to practice like this.  
Let this clarify how to practice!

Evam!<sup>21</sup>

These three songs exemplify the contents and structure of gTsang smyon's songs and also shed some light on the way in which he instructed his female partner and disciple. Let us now turn our attention to her songs.

### 3. Kun tu bzang mo's Songs

*The Life of Kun tu bzang mo* describes how she received, understood, practiced, and eventually mastered gTsang smyon's teachings. It is also said that gTsang smyon appointed her as his successor:

<sup>21</sup> *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 21b–22a: rje bla ma rnam la phyag 'tshal lo//gnyug ma sems kyi rang bzhin (G, K: gnas lugs) 'di//gdod nas spros pa'i mtha' dang bral//gzung 'dzin sna tshogs snang ba 'di//snang zhing rang (K: rang rang) gi ngo bo stong//mnyam bzhag (G, K: gzhag) nyams su len pa na//spros med (G, K: byar med) ngang la yengs med gces (G, K: ces)//rjes thob lam du 'khyer ba na//snang stong dran pas 'dzin pa gces (G: ces; K: bces)//las 'bras ngo bo stong mod kyang //kun rdzob las 'bras slu ba (G: klu ba, K: bslu ba) med//dus dang rnam pa thams cad du//sdig spong dge ba sgrub pa gces (G: ces; K: bces)//'di rnam nyams su blangs na legs//'di la sgom pa'i gsal 'debs (G: bsal 'debs) gyis//e bam//. Cf. *The Heart of the Sun*, 160–161; *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 20a–20b.

“I am Mi la ras pa and you, lady, are called Kun tu bzang mo. [...] Since you will be appointed as regent of the father, your fortitude in benefiting the ordinary and extraordinary teachings and the beings must not be small!” In this way, the empire of the dharma of the Lord Heruka was excellently entrusted [to Kun tu bzang mo]. [She] was consecrated as regent, enthroned, graced, and honored.<sup>22</sup>

Having received the position of gTsang smyon’s regent and heir, Kun tu bzang mo became a master in her own right. She attracted her own disciples and began expressing her insight through her own songs of realization. This new chapter in her life is marked in her biography with the following verses of homage:

For the sake of benefiting all the beings and the teachings,  
[you] turned the wheel of the profound and vast dharma,  
placing the superior as well as the inferior beings to be tamed in  
the glory of prosperity and bliss.  
[I] bow down to you who spread the enlightened activities at the  
end of existence!<sup>23</sup>

The first song of Kun tu bzang mo is described in her biography as having been composed around the time of gTsang smyon’s passing. While she was staying in a place called rGyab ri, the profound meaning of the many instructions she had received from gTsang smyon dawned upon her, and she began expressing her realization through songs.<sup>24</sup> Having bestowed empowerments and instructions to her disciples, she sang the following song with *mahāmudrā* instructions:

Namo Guru Dewa Ḍākīṇī Ye!

Within the state of uncontaminated bliss,  
by means of [your] enlightened activities of limitless compassion,  
[you] dispel the darkness of ignorance.  
[I] bow down at your feet, dearest lama!

<sup>22</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 22b: *nga mi la ras pas/ nya ma khyod la/ ming kun tu bzang mo gyis gsung / [...] / a pa’i rgyal tshab tu bkos yod pas spyi dgos (sgos) kyi bstan pa dang / ‘gro phan la snying stobs ma chung zhig/ ces rje he ru ka’i chos kyi rgyal srid legs par btad de/ rgyal tshab tu dbang bskur zhing mnga’ gsol/ dbugs dbyung dang gzengs bstod mdzad pa yin no/.*

<sup>23</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 27a: *bstan dang ‘gro la rnam kun phan slad du//zab dang rgya che’i chos ‘khor bskor nas kyang//mchog dman gdul bya phan bde’i dpal la bkod//phrin las srid mthar spel ba de la ‘dud//.*

<sup>24</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 27a



The realization of *mahāmudrā* is highly reputed.  
 It depends upon the inseparability of appearance and emptiness.  
 I cannot see where the meditator has gone.  
 Although obtaining a human body with freedoms  
 and opportunities is of value,  
 a human body without dharma is of little use.  
 Therefore, all [you] fortunate children (*bu skal ldan*),  
 search for the holy sublime dharma!

The mind of the Buddha is highly reputed.  
 It depends upon the ordinary mind.  
 I cannot see where the longing has gone.  
 Although relying upon an authentic lama is of value,  
 a human body without dharma is of little use.  
 Therefore, all [you] fortunate children,  
 search for the holy sublime dharma!

The steadfast land of the innate nature is highly reputed.  
 It depends upon uncontaminated bliss.  
 I cannot see where the suffering has gone.  
 Although the vastness of the land of birth is of value,  
 a human body without dharma is of little use.  
 Therefore, all [you] fortunate children,  
 search for the holy sublime dharma!

Benefiting self and others is highly reputed.  
 It depends upon emptiness and compassion.  
 I cannot see where the lesser vehicle has gone.  
 Although letting go of worldly activities is of value,  
 a human body without dharma is of little use.  
 Therefore, all [you] fortunate children,  
 search for the holy sublime dharma!

The fruition of the three enlightened bodies is highly reputed.  
 It depends upon the ordinary body, speech, and mind.  
 I cannot see where all hopes and fears have gone.  
 Although carrying out the sublime dharma is of value,  
 a human body without dharma is of little use.  
 Therefore, all [you] fortunate children,  
 search for the holy sublime dharma!<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 27b–28a: *na mo gu ru de wa da ki ni ye//zag med bde chen pa'i ngang nyid nas//tshad med thugs rje'i phrin las kyis//ma rig mun pa sel mdzad pa//dran chog (mchog?) bla ma'i zhabs la 'dud//phyag chen gyi rtogs pa sgra bo che//snang stong dbyer med kyi stengs na 'dug//bsgom mkhan (sgom mkhan) gar song ngas ma mthong//dal 'byor gyi mi lus thob rin chog//lar chos med kyi mi lus don re chung//bu bskal ldan (skal ldan) kun dam pa'i lha chos mtshal ('tshol)//sangs rgyas kyi dgongs pa sgra bo*

Having heard the song, “the disciples became very devoted and filled with faith.”<sup>26</sup>

During this time, Kun tu bzang mo heard that gTsang smyon had passed away.<sup>27</sup> She was devastated and greatly saddened: “it was like her heart had been torn out, and she could not sleep the whole night.”<sup>28</sup> The following day, gTsang smyon appeared to her in a vision and comforted her: “You should not be sad. Rejoice! The love of your father will never leave you. Uphold and benefit the teachings and the beings in whatever ways you can!” As soon as he had said this he disappeared like a rainbow.<sup>29</sup> After the vision, Kun tu bzang mo’s meditation practice progressed, and her spiritual development was augmented tremendously.<sup>30</sup> She participated in gTsang smyon’s elaborate funerary ceremonies in various places and was actively involved in printing his biography and song collection.<sup>31</sup>

Kun tu bzang mo was now one of the main heirs of gTsang smyon, authorized to continue his activities and uphold his lineage.<sup>32</sup> She spent the rest of her long life practicing and propagating his teachings, instructing disciples, bestowing empowerments, inaugurating retreat centers, expressing her insight through songs, and doing other such things.

Before comparing Kun tu bzang mo’s songs with those of gTsang smyon and drawing some conclusions about them, I will provide yet

---

*che//tha mal gyi shes pa'i steng na 'dug//yid smon gar song ngas ma mthong//mtshan ldan bla ma rten rin chog//lar chos med kyi mi lus don re chung//bu bskal ldan (skal ldan) kun dam pa'i lha chos mtshal ('tshol)//g.nyug ma'i (snyug ma'i) brtan yul sgra bo che//zag med bde chen gyi steng na 'dug//sdug bsnag gar song ngas ma mthong//skyes pa'i pha yul yangs rin chog//lar chos med kyi mi lus don re chung//bu bskal ldan (skal ldan) kun dam pa'i lha chos mtshal ('tshol)//rang gzhan gyi don gnyis sgra bo che//stong nyid snying rje'i steng na 'dug//theg dman gar song ngas ma mthong//'jig rten bya ba btang rin chog//lar chos med kyi mi lus don re chung//bu bskal ldan (skal ldan) kun dam pa'i lha chos mtshal ('tshol)//sku gsum gyi 'bras bu sgra bo che//lus ngag yid gsum gyi steng na 'dug//re dogs kun gar song ngas ma mthong//dam pa'i lha chos byas rin chog//lar chos med kyi mi lus don re chung//bu bskal ldan (skal ldan) kun dam pa'i lha chos 'tshal ('tshol)//.*

<sup>26</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 28a: *bu slob rnams shin du dad cing mos par gyur to//.*

<sup>27</sup> gTsang smyon passed away in Ras chung phug, a hermitage associated with Mi la ras pa's illustrious disciple Ras chung pa. Ras chung phug is situated three kilometers south of the famous Khra 'brug temple in the Yar lung valley, far from the Chu bar area where Kun tu bzang mo resided at the time. gTsang smyon's passing is described in Larsson 2012, 184–188; Schaeffer 2007, 218–221.

<sup>28</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 28a: *thugs thon 'gro ba lta bu'i mtshan gang mnal ma byung.*

<sup>29</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 28a: *skyid pa skyid pa khyed rang sems sdug po ma byed/ a pas rtse bas nam yang mi 'dor ro/ bstan 'gro la phan gang thogs gyis shig/ go pe gsung de ma thag 'ja' ltar yal song/.*

<sup>30</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 28a.

<sup>31</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 28b.

<sup>32</sup> It is important to bear in mind that Kun tu bzang mo was not the only heir of gTsang smyon.

another of her songs in full.

Kun tu bzang mo sang this song many years after gTsang smyon's passing,<sup>33</sup> while staying in Brag stod monastery for the winter. At that time, the nun Chos kyi dpal mo requested clarifying instructions about practice. In response, Kun tu bzang mo sang this song:

Guru Namó!

[I] bow down at [your] feet, King of Blood Drinkers (Tsangnyön),  
compassionate dharma king,  
who cares for every being!

Female meditator (*bsgom ma*) Chos kyi dpal mo,  
[you] said that [you] needed instruction to clarify [your] practice.

In general,  
the preliminaries that are needed for the holy dharma are:  
freedoms and endowments, so hard to obtain;  
impermanence, the remembrance of death;  
trust in the teachings on cause and result;  
keeping the shortcomings of cyclic existence in mind, and so  
forth.

[However], without an understanding of the view, meditation,  
conduct, and fruition,  
[you] remain separated from the view and meditation of the ul-  
timate meaning.

[When] the view of non-view arises,  
look at the expanse of the sky, [that is] the view.  
The view is devoid of center and peripheries.

Meditation is like the course of a river.  
In a state of non-meditation,  
meditation is uninterrupted and undistracted.

Conduct is without aim.  
Like the conduct of a little child or a madman,  
it is effortless and natural.

Fruition is a state without hope and fear.  
Obtaining stability in this [state] is the fruition.

How wonderful it is [when] the view, meditation, conduct, and

<sup>33</sup> Very few dates are provided in Kun tu bzang mo's biography, but the life story and the songs are rendered chronologically. This song is the fifteenth of the twenty-five songs included in the biography.

fruition are spontaneously completed, regardless of what arises!  
 The summit of meditation is without any fixation whatsoever.  
 Remain within a state which is free from aims!

When this happens, it is perfect awakening.  
 Nevertheless, if [you] experience dullness and agitation:  
 At the time of dullness, rise like an elephant ascending from mud!  
 At the time of agitation, descend, like a small bird descending into a valley!

Remain in the expanse of the non-dual sky!  
 This completes the preliminaries and the main practice.  
 Afterwards, perform vast aspirations!

[Your] female body is fortunate.  
 In order to progress in your meditation, prolong [your] meditation!

May you obtain the auspiciousness of stability!

Evam!<sup>34</sup>

### 3. Comparing the Songs

Although these few examples offer just a small glimpse into their respective oeuvres, they provide us with some material that can be used as a starting point for comparing Kun tu bzang mo's and gTsang smyon's songs. As might be expected, there are many similarities between them. After all they stemmed from the same tradition, and gTsang smyon was Kun tu bzang mo's teacher. Their songs resemble

<sup>34</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 44b–45a: *gu ru na mol/chos kyi rgyal po thugs rje can//gro ba yongs la gzigs mdzad pa'i//khrag 'thung rgyal po'i zhabs la 'dud//bsgom ma chos kyi dpal mo yi//nyams len gsal 'debs dgos zhes pa//sngon 'gro dal 'byor rnyed dka' dang //mi rtag 'chi ba dran pa dang //rgyu 'bras chos la yid ches shing //khor ba'i nyes dmigs dran pa sogs//spyi la dgos pa'i dam chos yin//lta bsgom spyod 'bras mi shes na//mthar thug don la lta bsgom bral//lta med lta bar shar ba la//lta ba nam mkha'i dbyings la ltos//mtha' dbus bral ba lta ba yin//bsgom pa chu bo'i gzhung bzhin tu//bsgom med ngang la yengs med du//rgyun chad med pa bsgom pa yin//spyod pa bu chung smyon pa bzhin//'bad rtsol med par lhug pa tu//bza' btad med pa spyod pa yin//'bras bu re dogs med ngang nas//de la brtan thob 'bras bu yin//lta sgom (45a) spyod pa 'bra bu bzhi//gang shar lhun grub e ma 'tshar //bsgom rtse gang la'ang mi btod cing //bsgom yid btad med ngang la zhog//de ltar byung na rdzogs sangs rgyas//de yang bying rgod byung ba na//bying tshe glang po 'dam nas thon//rgod tshe byi'u klung su phob//gnyis med nam mkha'i dbying su zhog//di la sngon 'gro dngos gzhi tshang //rjes la smon lam rgya yis thob//bud med lus la skal ba bzang //drod pa skyed la bsgom yun bsrings//brtan pa thob pa'i bkra shis shog//e wam//. An almost identical, but ten lines shorter, song is rendered on folio 49b–50a in *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*.*

those of Mi la ras pa in many ways, both in terms of structure and contents. This is also logical; both were actively involved in disseminating Mi la ras pa's teachings, life story, and songs. They modeled their lifestyles on that of Mi la ras pa, meditated in the same caves, performed the same practices, promoted and followed the same wandering and ascetic lifestyle, and so forth. gTsang smyon was also seen as an emanation of Mi la ras pa and Kun tu bzang mo as an emanation of Mi la ras pa's female disciple Sa le 'od.<sup>35</sup>

Their respective songs vary in length, from just a few lines to spanning several folios. They usually have seven or nine syllables per line. gTsang smyon's songs are more elaborate and varied in terms of syllables per line, and they have a more complex structure. He was an authority and expert in the field of *mgur* composition and had compiled and printed many works containing *mgur*. Moreover, he had composed his own songs and a small treatise – a catalogue (*dkar chags*) – about songs.<sup>36</sup> Kun tu bzang mo seems to have been aware of her limitations when it comes to the technicalities of *mgur* composition. At the end of one of her songs she remarks, "I do not know much about the scholarly, poetic, compositions of the learned."<sup>37</sup> In the same song, Kun tu bzang mo also states that her songs, though not as well-composed as those of her teacher, are profound in terms of their contents. "When sincerely practiced, and not left as mere words and phrases, these instructions are utterly profound," she sings.<sup>38</sup>

As is customary in these types of songs, gTsang smyon's and Kun tu bzang mo's songs begin with a supplication to the lama. These initial verses of supplication usually begin with a few Sanskrit words, typically *namo guru* – "homage to the lama." These words have a vocative function, signaling the beginning of the song; the supplication invokes the previous lineage holders, especially one's own main teacher (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*), who represents, upholds, and transmits the profound teachings of the lineage to both the singer and the recipient/s of the song. gTsang smyon's initial supplications are usually shorter than Kun tu bzang mo's. Frequently he begins his songs

<sup>35</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo* 22a. Sa le 'od was one of Mi la ras pa's foremost female disciples. Their meeting, several songs attributed to her, and the songs Mi la ras pa sang in response, are rendered in Mi la ras pa's collected songs. For an English translation, see Chang 1989, 408–420; Stagg 2017, 431–444. For Tibetan, see gTsang smyon, *The Life and Songs of Mi la ras pa*, 565–577.

<sup>36</sup> *A Catalogue of Songs (mGur gyi dkar chags)*. For a study and translation of this text, see Larsson & Quintman 2015.

<sup>37</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo* 44a–44b: *mkhas mkhas sdebs sbyor mang po nga mi shes//*. This statement could, however, be an expression of her modesty rather than a declaration of facts.

<sup>38</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo* 44a: *kha tsam tshig tsam nyid du ma lus par//snying nas nyams blangs gdams pa ci yang zab//*.

directly after *namo guru*. Sometimes he supplicates the lamas of the bka' brgyud tradition in general, and five of his songs begin with a supplication to his main teacher, Sha ra rab byams pa Sangs rgyas seng ge (1427–1470).<sup>39</sup> Kun tu bzang mo's initial supplications are normally addressed to gTsang smyon, and they typically are two, three, or four lines long. The following supplication from the beginning of one of Kun tu bzang mo's songs may serve as a characteristic example of such a supplication:

Namo Guru!

I bow down at the feet of the Lord, the King of the Blood-drinkers (gTsang smyon),  
the Victorious Physician who dispels the diseases of the five poisons.  
Bless me and others, the beings who are afflicted by the five poisons,  
so that the five poisons dawn as wisdom!<sup>40</sup>

In gTsang smyon's catalogue of songs, he details the history, structure, and function of *mgur*. Additionally, he explains how a song should be composed and performed, and also how it should be received by the listener/s.<sup>41</sup> In this work, gTsang smyon stresses the importance of beginning the song with a supplication to one's lama. "If you don't offer supplications, you won't receive blessings," he writes.<sup>42</sup> "The lama is the highest and most excellent being embodying all those who are praiseworthy," he continues.<sup>43</sup>

Most of their songs ends with the Sanskrit syllables *evam*.<sup>44</sup> This Indo-Aryan word, meaning something like "this is how it is," marks the end of a song in a solemn manner.<sup>45</sup> According to Buddhist exegetes, the two syllables express the final goal in Buddhism, the

<sup>39</sup> *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 5a, 17b, 18b, 19b, 23b. There is a *rnam thar* about Sha ra rab byams pa Sangs rgyas seng ge compiled by Zla ba rgyal mtshan. See bibliography for title and publication details.

<sup>40</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 39a: *na mo gu ru/rje dug lnga'i nad sel sman pa'i rgyal/khrag 'thung rgyal po'i zhabs la 'dud//bdag sogs dug lngas gzir ba'i 'gro ba rnams//dug lnga ye shes su 'char bar byin rlobs//*.

<sup>41</sup> *A Catalogue of Songs*. Translated and studied in Larsson & Quintman 2015.

<sup>42</sup> *A Catalogue of Songs*, 4a: *gsol ba ma btab na byin brlabs mi 'byung*. Larsson & Quintman 2015, 117.

<sup>43</sup> *A Catalogue of Songs*, 5a: *bla ma mchod 'os kun 'dus pa'i bdag nyid rab dam pa lags so*. Larsson & Quintman, 2015, 119.

<sup>44</sup> The term is spelled *e waṃ* in *The Life of Kuntu Sangmo* and *e baṃ* in *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*.

<sup>45</sup> Jäschke translates the term as "yes," "certainly," "to be sure." (Jäschke 1977 [1881], 607).

inseparability between wisdom/emptiness (*e*) and method/great bliss (*vam*).<sup>46</sup>

Not only the structures of their respective songs are similar, but also the contents and message. Many of their songs focus on the cultivation of profound insight into the nature of the mind, and the term *mahāmudrā* (*phyag rgya chen po*) is often used for these types of practices.<sup>47</sup> The four thoughts that turn the mind [toward dharma] (*blo zlog rnam bzhi*) – the precious human body, impermanence, cause and effect, and the shortcomings of cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*) – also figure prominently in their songs. Moreover, they both point out that “self-clinging” (*bdag ’dzin*) and “subject-object dichotomy” (*gzung ’dzin*) give rise to *saṃsāra* and its sufferings. In one of his songs, gTsang smyon explains to his benefactor, the female ruler (*dpon mo*) bSod nams bzang mo, who has just lost her husband, that the only way to be free from *saṃsāra*’s suffering is to abandon its cause, self-clinging. “If you want to leave the battlefields of *saṃsāra*, defeat the armies of the enemy, self-clinging!” he sings.<sup>48</sup> In a similar but more elaborate manner, Kun tu bzang mo explains to her disciple sMin grol ras pa how to eliminate the five poisons – desire, anger, delusion, pride, and envy:

To overcome the enemy – the five poisons –  
gather an army and armaments!  
Urge the troops, the excellent remedial powers,  
to engage in warfare with the strong effort  
of remembering impermanence!  
Take hold of the weapon, naturally free awareness, the heroic  
awareness of death, penetrating your being!  
And kill the enemy – the five poisons!

Moreover, if you worry that the corpse will rise behind you,  
burn it in the fire of wisdom,  
throw its solid bones into the water,  
and let all its pulverized ashes be carried away by the wind!<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Zhang Yisun et al. 1985, 3141.

<sup>47</sup> In his catalogue of gTsang smyon’s songs, rGod tshang ras pa calls a sub-category of this type of songs “songs that introduce [the nature of the mind]” (*ngo sprod kyi mgur*). rGod tshang ras pa, *The Illuminating Sunlight Catalogue*; cf. Larsson 2021, 71. For more on *mahāmudrā*, see, for example, Roberts 2011.

<sup>48</sup> *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 12b: *’khor ba’i g.yul ngo zlog par ’dod na//bdag ’dzin dgra bo* (L: *dgra’o*) *dmangs su phob cig* (L: *shig*)//. Cf. *The Heart of the Sun*, 92–93; *The Life of gTsang pa smyon pa*, 87–89. See also Larsson 2021, 73.

<sup>49</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 43a–43b: *dug lnga’i dgra bo ’dul ba la//dpung dang cha lag ’dzoms pa ’tshal//gnyen stobs bzang po’i dmag dpung la//mi rtag dran pa’i dmag las kyis//brtson ’grus drag pos dmag bkul zhing//’chi bas snying zug dpa’ bo yi//dran pa rang grol* (43b) *mtshon thogs nas//dug lnga’i dgra bo bsod ’tshal lo//da dung ro langgs rgyab dogs pas//ye shes me la bsreg pa yi//rus pa yeags med chu la pho//thal ba btad med rlung la*

In these examples, Kun tu bzang mo and gTsang smyon use the analogy of defeating and killing an enemy in a war. This violent analogy likely mirrors the violent and war-ridden times during which they lived. The real enemy is not to be found outside, according to the songs, but rather it is the self-clinging and the five poisons that this self-clinging gives rise to that need to be uprooted and completely wiped out, if we want to obtain lasting and permanent peace.

Another common theme in their songs is the promotion of a wandering ascetic lifestyle. They both exhort their followers to follow in the footsteps of their bka' brgyud forefather Mi la ras pa, and abandon the so-called eight worldly concerns (*'jig rten chos brgyad*) as peripatetic yogis. A Buddhist practitioner should neither strive to attain victory, fame, praise, and happiness, nor strive to avoid defeat, obscurity, blame, and suffering. The yogi should not care about such worldly and selfish concerns, but devote his or her time and energy to "benefiting the [Buddhist] teachings and the sentient beings," they sing.<sup>50</sup>

In one of her songs Kun tu bzang mo instructs her disciple to let reflections on impermanence and the sufferings of cyclic existence contribute to letting go of the eight worldly concerns:

When, [you] remember death from the bottom of [your] heart,  
the eight worldly concerns are carried away by the wind.

When [you] know where [you] will be reborn after death, the  
eight worldly concerns are carried away by the wind.

When [you] reflect upon the suffering of cyclic existence, the  
eight worldly concerns are carried away by the wind.<sup>51</sup>

In a somewhat similar vein, gTsang smyon encourages the above mentioned bSod nams bzang mo to renounce her kingdom and become a wandering yoginī. "See how that which has been constructed falls apart, abandon houses made of earth and stone, give up attachment to cities and farmland, and wander in remote mountains," he sings.<sup>52</sup>

---

*bkur/*. This song resembles one of gTsang smyon's songs. For an English translation of the similar section, see Larsson 2021, 78–79.

<sup>50</sup> *bsTan pa dang sems can la phan pa*. This expression is repeated in both gTsang smyon's and Kun tu bzang mo's songs and life stories; see, for example, *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 5b, 18b, 27a, 43a; *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 25a.

<sup>51</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 43b: 'chi ba snying nas dran na chos brgyad rlung gis 'khyer/shi nas gar skye shes na chos brgyad rlung gis 'khyer//khor ba'i sduḡ bsngal bsams na chos brgyad rlung gis 'khyer//.

<sup>52</sup> *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 12b: rtsigs nas 'jig pa mthong bas//sa mkhar pe'u'i (G: spe'u'i) las dang//grong yul zhen pa bor la (L: spongs la)//gnyan sa ri khrod 'grims cig (L: shig)//. Cf. *The Heart of the Sun*, 92–93; *The Life of gTsang pa smyon pa*, 87–89. See also Larsson 2021, 73.



Kun tu bzang mo's and gTsang smyon's songs are mainly directed toward two categories of recipients: yogi-disciples and patrons. Since the patrons generally also were disciples, these two categories are often blurred. Their songs are usually directed to one specific person, who is named in the narrative frame introducing the song or in the song itself. Only on a few occasions do they sing songs to a group of people. About fifteen percent of gTsang smyon's songs are directed toward females, while about thirty percent of Kun tu bzang mo's songs are sung to females. Their songs thus reveal that they had both male and female followers.

Besides the three songs to Kun tu bzang mo which were translated above, songs to many other yogi-disciples are included in *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*. His earliest and closest disciple, Rin chen dpal bzang po, received five short songs, and Mon rdze rtogs ldan two songs, for example.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, he sang several songs to famous political leaders who were or became his patrons, both male and female. He sang songs to the king of Mang yul gung thang rNam rgyal sde (1422–1502) and to his sons, bSam grub sde (1459–1505) and Shes rab dpal bzang (n.d.).<sup>54</sup> Two songs directed to female leaders are also included in gTsang smyon's song collection, one to 'Dzam gling and mKha' 'gro bzang mo (i.e. mKha' 'gro rgyal mo), and one to the queen of rTen khebs (gTing khebs), the above mentioned, bSod nams bzang mo.<sup>55</sup> In one of the collection's last songs, gTsang smyon instructs the most powerful political leader at the time, Don yod rdo rje (1462–1512).<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> The songs to Rin chen dpal bzang po are found in *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 2a–3a, 20b–21a. The songs to Mon rdze rtogs ldan are found in *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 13a–14b, 23b–24b.

<sup>54</sup> They are all called kings (*rgyal po*) in the song collection. The song to rNam rgyal sde is found in *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 10b–11b. There are two songs addressed to bSam grub sde, *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 5a–9b; and one to Shes rab dpal bzang, *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 24b–25a. For an English translation of one of the songs to bSam grub sde, see Stearns 1985, 98–113.

<sup>55</sup> The song to lcam mo 'Dzam gling and mKha' 'gro bzang mo is rendered in *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 11b–12a. 'Dzam gling is better known as 'Dzam gling rgyal mo (see, for example, *The Heart of the Sun*, 88). She was the sister of the famous rDo rje phag mo incarnation Chos kyi sgron ma (1422–1455) and the daughter of king lHa dbang rgyal mtshan (1404–1464) (Diemberger 2007, 340, n. 18; Diemberger & Clemente 2013, 121). The title *lcam mo* usually means queen, but it could also mean sister. 'Dzam gling was not married, and she was half-sister to king rNam rgyal sde. Hildegard Diemberger identifies mKha' 'gro bzang mo as mKha' 'gro rgyal mo, daughter of king rNam rgyal sde and half-sister to Nor bu sde and bSam grub sde (Diemberger & Clemente 2013, 123; Diemberger 2016, 293). For the song to bSod nams bzang mo, see *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 12a–13a.

<sup>56</sup> *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 26b–27a.

Most of Kun tu bzang mo's songs are directed toward male and female Buddhist practitioners who are unknown today, and only a few of whom were leaders. A notable exception is a song to the crazy yogi 'Brug pa kun legs (1455–1529).<sup>57</sup> Although he was not a political leader, he was certainly famous. A song to the female ruler (*bdag mo*) mKha' 'gro rgyal mo, who, as mentioned above, had previously received a song from gTsang smyon, is also included in her biography.<sup>58</sup> mKha' 'gro rgyal mo asked Kun tu bzang mo to give her a teaching about death. In response she sang:

The elevated status you have attained now is the result of previous accumulations.  
However, if you do not act in a meaningful way now,  
this fortunate situation will not remain, it will last for only an instant.<sup>59</sup>

gTsang smyon and Kun tu bzang mo not only had different genders, but they also practiced Buddhism in disparate ways. gTsang smyon was a crazy yogi practicing “disciplined conduct” – *brtul bzhugs spyod pa* (Skr: *vratacaryā*) – while Kun tu bzang mo, though an upholder of the same tradition, practiced Buddhism in a less outrageous manner.<sup>60</sup> This is another difference between gTsang smyon and Kun tu bzang mo, and one that is reflected in their respective songs and biographies. gTsang smyon refers to himself as a “crazy yogi” (*rnal 'byor smyon pa*) in some of his songs,<sup>61</sup> and his biography contains many episodes which describe his transgressive and sometimes outright shocking behavior. He also received his moniker, “The Madman from gTsang,” (gTsang pa smyon pa/gTsang smyon) due to his bizarre and seemingly crazy behavior.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, although in one of her songs Kun tu bzang mo sings that one's conduct should be “effortless and natural like the conduct of a little child or a madman,”<sup>63</sup> she is never called crazy (*smyon ma*) by mKhyen rab dbang phyug. She does not refer to herself as crazy, and her behavior is not described as norm-breaking or transgressive.

<sup>57</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 51a–51b.

<sup>58</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 39b–41a.

<sup>59</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 40a: *sngon bsags 'bras bu'i da lta mngon mtho thob//di 'dra'i dus su don yod ma mdzad nal//di nyid rgyun du mi gnas yud tsam yin//*.

<sup>60</sup> For more on disciplined conduct and the crazy yogis of Tibet, see DiValerio 2015a; Larsson 2012; Larsson 2019.

<sup>61</sup> *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 5a, 8b, 9b, 15a, 15b.

<sup>62</sup> For a detailed study of gTsang smyon's life, focusing on how he became a crazy yogi, see Larsson 2012.

<sup>63</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 44b: *spyod pa bu chung smyon pa bzhin //bad rtsol med par lhug pa tu//bza' btad med pa spyod pa yin//*. The song is cited in full above.

### 3. Reflections and Conclusions

Rita Gross has noted that there are two radically different ideas about gender in Buddhism. One holds that gender is irrelevant because women and men can both discover the nature of the enlightened mind, “and that enlightened mind is not one iota different in women than it is in men.” The other is that it is more fortunate to be reborn as a man because of the privileges that go with a male birth.<sup>64</sup> Nancy Barnes claims that, doctrinally, Buddhism has been egalitarian from its beginnings: “the same teachings were given by the Buddha to his female and male disciples, the same spiritual path was opened to all, the same goal pointed out.”<sup>65</sup> But, as Barnes continues, when the monks’ and nuns’ orders were founded, “it was necessary to establish rules to regulate the daily lives of the ascetics; and in the heart of a religion which was free of any doctrines which fostered inequality a patriarchal structure arose.”<sup>66</sup> As described by Gross and Barnes, it thus appears that in Buddhism gender may not matter in theory, but it does matter in practice. Hanna Havnevik remarks that self-effacement is an integral part of the identity and self-presentation of Tibetan women and is “conditioned by misogynist views maintained by socio-cultural norms, indigenous as well as those transplanted to Tibet through Buddhist scriptures and monastic culture.”<sup>67</sup>

In contrast to these rather gloomy descriptions of women in Buddhism and Tibetan culture, Kun tu bzang mo is portrayed in her songs and biography as an influential and self-confident woman with much authority, and the yogic community to which she belonged seems to have been quite egalitarian. On a few occasions, however, the fact that Kun tu bzang mo was a woman is visible in her songs. In the following excerpt from a song directed to a fully ordained monk, she appears to be in a dilemma. On one hand, she needs to sing a song to him since he has requested one from her, but on the other hand, she seems aware of the inappropriateness of the situation, a woman who is not fully ordained giving teachings to a fully ordained monk:

[You] Changsempa, a fully ordained śākya monk,  
said that [you] needed a song which benefits the mind.  
It is inappropriate that someone like me,  
a woman (*skye dman*) with little learning,  
should give advice to a learned meditator like you.  
However, since your intention is pure,

---

<sup>64</sup> Gross 2005, 3331.

<sup>65</sup> Barnes 1987, 105.

<sup>66</sup> Barnes 1987, 106.

<sup>67</sup> Havnevik 1999, 47.

there might be some benefit [if I] give you detailed explanations with pure perception.<sup>68</sup>

It is noteworthy that Kun tu bzang mo uses the term *skye dman*, literally “inferior birth,” when referring to herself in this song. *skye dman* is the common colloquial Tibetan word for woman, and although it does not necessarily have a derogatory meaning, it can be used in a derogatory sense.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, *dman* can also mean “modest” or “low,” and to take a low and modest position (*dman sa bzung*) is regarded as praiseworthy in Buddhism, and is something both gTsang smyon and Kun tu bzang mo encouraged their disciples to do.<sup>70</sup> To refer to herself as inferior and uneducated could thus convince the receivers of her song that she was the very opposite, namely superior and learned.

In one of the above-quoted songs, Kun tu bzang mo sings to her disciple, the nun Chos kyi dpal mo, “[your] female body is fortunate” (*bud med lus la skal pa bzang*).<sup>71</sup> In this song Kun tu bzang mo displays an extraordinarily positive view of the female body, a view that contrasts with the way in which the female body is described in some other Buddhist scriptures and also by some other female Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. Se ra mkha’ ’gro (1892–1940), for instance, laments, “Even though there is no difference between men’s and women’s altruistic intention to become enlightened, in the perspective of disciples, my body is inferior.”<sup>72</sup> On another occasion she asks a lama, “Because I am an inferior woman (*lus dman*), it is difficult for me to benefit beings in the world. Hence, if I abandon this body and try to attain a man’s body, I wonder if I will benefit beings?”<sup>73</sup> An older, even more dramatic example is found in O rgyan chos skyid’s (1675–1729) autobiography:

This female body is itself samsara – the round of existence.  
May I attain a male body, and keep the vows,  
May I never again be born in the body of a woman!<sup>74</sup>

<sup>68</sup> *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 37a: *shākya dge slong byang sems pas//sems la phan pa’i mgur dgos gsungs//bdag ’dra skye dman thos chung gis//khyed thos sgom can la zhu mi rigs//gang na’ang thugs bsam dag pa yis//’on kyang cung zad phan pa’ang srid//dag snang ldan pa’i gzhig ’grel zhu//*.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Jacoby 2014, 133.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka*, 18b; *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 46a.

<sup>71</sup> This song is rendered twice in *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*. The second time, it is abbreviated and there are some different spellings, but the phrase saying that the female body is fortunate is included and is identical in both versions. Cf. *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo*, 44b–45a; 49b–50a.

<sup>72</sup> Jacoby 2014, 131.

<sup>73</sup> Jacoby 2014, 147.

<sup>74</sup> Schaeffer 2004, 143.

As noted above, the songs of Kun tu bzang mo and gTsang smyon Heruka, as well as their living examples, provide us with a quite different and more positive depiction of the female body and of female Buddhist practitioners' potentials. It did not seem to matter much to them whether their disciples were male or female, ordained or lay. What did matter appears to have been their disciples' capacity to practice in the footsteps of the great bka' brgyud yogis of the past and to benefit the teachings and sentient beings. Although this requires effort, it is something men, women, monks, nuns, and laypeople all can do, according to their songs and biographies. When gTsang smyon authorized Kun tu bzang mo to be his successor, he demonstrated that a woman could attain the highest possible position in his lineage.<sup>75</sup> Kun tu bzang mo's life story and the songs contained therein document a successful, influential, and independent female religious leader who was authorized by her male teacher and had both male and female disciples and patrons. These rare Tibetan texts thus reveal that female Buddhist practitioners seem to have been remarkably equal to men in this particular yogic community, during this particular historical period, and in the geographical areas where they were active.

Kun tu bzang mo's own biography was not printed, however. Instead it was written down by her male disciple mKhyen rab dbang phyug. So, while gTsang smyon and several other male figures in his tradition had their own song collections and life stories preserved in printed form for coming generations, Kun tu bzang mo's biography was preserved only in handwritten manuscripts, and therefore was never widely disseminated. Likewise, Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography (*rang nam*) remained unpublished, circulating only in manuscript form until more than a half century after her death, when it was finally published.<sup>76</sup> Kurtis Schaeffer writes that O rgyan chos skyid, who lived almost two hundred years after Kun tu bzang mo, was scolded when she asked her teacher if he could write down her life story. "There is no reason to write a *Life* for you – a woman. You must be silent," her teacher said.<sup>77</sup> This negative attitude toward recording the life story of a female Buddhist practitioner was probably also prevalent in Kun tu bzang mo's lifetime, and perhaps mKhyen rab dbang

<sup>75</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that neither lHa btsun Rin chen nam rgyal nor rGod tshang ras pa mentions that Kun tu bzang mo became gTsang smyon's successor in their respective gTsang smyon-biographies. gTsang smyon probably had several formal successors, and Kun tu bzang mo appears to have been one of them. Both lHa btsun and rGod tshang ras pa were likely also authorized as successors by gTsang smyon.

<sup>76</sup> Jacoby 2014, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Schaeffer 2004, 54.

phyug did something controversial when he wrote down her biography and songs. If so, it would have been even more controversial to make a printed edition of her life story. Printing a text involved editors, scribes, and carvers; it was a time consuming and costly enterprise that required expensive materials, such as paper and wood. A printed version could easily be reproduced and copied, and therefore was more likely to be preserved for coming generations.<sup>78</sup> The fact that Kun tu bzang mo's biography still exists is therefore quite remarkable. If her biography, which contains her songs, would have been lost, Kun tu bzang mo would have been remembered as a rather insignificant woman. She would have been mentioned in passing in some printed works about male figures in gTsang smyon's tradition and in the colophons of printed works she financed, but beside that she would be forgotten. Thanks to mKhyen rab dbang phyug's manuscript about her, which was recently found in Tibet, and if mKhyen rab dbang phyug provides accurate information, we can now conclude that her importance for gTsang smyon's tradition and for his legacy overall was much larger than previous studies suggest.

Finally, it is noteworthy that some of the messages that gTsang smyon and Kun tu bzang mo convey in their songs and biographies resemble more recent developments in Buddhism. By including women and laity, and by emphasizing meditation practice and deemphasizing monasticism, they present Buddhism in a way that – at least to some extent – bears a resemblance to what is nowadays referred to as “Buddhist modernism.”<sup>79</sup> However, by emphasizing an ascetic wandering lifestyle and encouraging their followers to give up worldly life, their songs and biographies also resemble texts depicting the early Indian followers of Buddha Śākyamuni. In addition, they resemble later reform movements such as the so-called “forest tradition” in Theravada Buddhism. The message contained in their songs and biographies thus appears to be both modern and traditional at the same time.

## Bibliography

### Tibetan Language References

mKhyen rab dbang phyug. *The Life of Kun tu bzang mo* (*Kun tu bzang mo'i rnam thar*, abbreviated as K). *Dus gsum rgyal ba ma lus par bskyed pa'i yum chen kun tu bzang mo'i rnam par thar pa zab don gter mdzod*

<sup>78</sup> For more on the history of printing and its importance in Tibet, see Diemberger et al. 2016.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Larsson 2019, 1243.

- thong ba don ldan*. In *Bod kyi lo rgyus rnam thar phyogs bsgrigs* (31–60). 2011. Vol. 27, 181–323 (page 20a is not reproduced in this edition). Zi ling: mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang. Manuscript, 72 folios. Written 1551.
- rGod tshang ras pa (1482–1559). *Illuminating Sunlight Catalogue*. dKar chags nyi 'od snang ba. "Sammlung Waddell." Wadd 120 h. Folio 9b–10b. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung. Printed 1508.
- *The Heart of the Sun* (Nyi ma'i snying po, abbreviated as G). gTsang smyon he ru ka phyogs thams cad las rnam par rgyal ba'i rnam thar rdo rje theg pa'i gsal byed nyi ma'i snying po. In: *The Life of the Saint of Gtsang*. New Delhi: Śata-piṭaka Series, vol. 69. Edited by L. Chandra. Preface by Gene Smith. New Delhi: Sharada Rani. 1969. First printed in 1512 (or perhaps 1524).
- gTsang smyon Heruka (1452–1507). *The Life and Songs of Mi la ras pa* (Mi la ras pa'i rnam mgur). rNal 'byor gyi dbang phyug chen po mi la ras pa'i rnam mgur. Zi ling: mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang. 1991 [1981]. First printed in 1488.
- *The Collected Songs of gTsang pa Heruka* (gTsang pa he ru ka'i mgur 'bum). rJe btsun gtsang pa he ru ka'i mgur 'bum rin po che dbang gi rgyal po thams cad mkhyen pa'i lam ston. Edited by rGod tshang ras pa et al. Printed 1508.
- *A Catalogue of Songs* (mGur gyi dkar chags). mGur gyi dkar chags ma rig mun sel dad pa'i mig 'byed. Sammlung Waddell. Wadd 120 h. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung. Written 1503, printed 1508.
- lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal (1473–1557). *The Life of gTsang pa smyon pa* (gTsang pa smyon pa'i rnam thar, abbreviated as L). Grub thob gtsang pa smyon pa'i rnam thar dad pa'i spu slong g.yo ba. In: *Bde mchog mkha' 'gro snyan rgyud* (Ras chung snyan rgyud): *Two manuscript collections of texts from the yig cha of Gtsang-smyon He-ru-ka*, vol. 1. Edited by S.W. Tashi gang pa, 1–129. Leh: Smarntsis shesrig spendzod. 1971. First printed in 1543.
- Zhang Yisun et al. 1985. *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, 2 vols. Peking: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Zla ba rgyal mtshan. *The Life of Sha ra rab 'byams pa* (Sha ra rab 'byams pa'i rnam thar). mKhas grub sha ra rab 'jam ('byams) pa sangs rgyas seng ge'i rnam thar mthong ba don ldan ngo mtshar nor bu'i phreng ba thar 'dod yid 'phrog blo gsal mgul brgyan. Printed by Byams pa phun tshogs. In: *Rare Dkar-brgyud-pa Texts from Himachal Pradesh*. Edited by Urgyan Dorje, 451–501. New Delhi. 1976. First printed in 1559.

### Other Language References

- Barnes, Nancy Schuster. 1987. "Buddhism." In: *Women in World Religions*. Edited by Arvind Sharma. Albany: State University of New York Press, 105–133.
- Chang, Garma C.C., trans. 1989 [1962]. *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. Compiled and printed by gTsang smyon Heruka in 1488. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
- Dawa, Porong. 2016. "New Discoveries in Early Tibetan Printing History." In: *Tibetan Printing: Comparison, Continuities, and Change*. Edited by Hildegard Diemberger, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, Peter Kornicki, 195–211. Leiden: Brill.
- Diemberger, Hildegard. 2007. *When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty: The Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 2016. "Tibetan Women as Patrons of Printing and Innovation." In: *Tibetan Printing: Comparison, Continuities, and Change*. Edited by Hildegard Diemberger, Franz-Karl Ehrhard & Peter Kornicki, 267–308. Leiden: Brill.
- Diemberger, Hildegard, Franz-Karl Ehrhard & Peter Kornicki (eds.) *Tibetan Printing: Comparison, Continuities, and Change*. Leiden: Brill.
- Diemberger, Hildegard & Michele Clemente. 2013. "Royal Kingship, Patronage and the Introduction of Printing in Gung thang: From Chos kyi sgron ma to lHa btsun Rin chen nam rgyal." In: *Nepalica-Tibetica Festgaber for Christoph Ciippers*, vol 1. Edited by Franz-Karl Ehrhard & Petra Maurer, 119–142. Andiast, International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies.
- DiValerio, David. 2015a. *The Holy Madmen of Tibet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2015b. "Reanimating the Great Yogin: On the Composition of the Biographies of the Madman of Tsang (1452–1507)." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 32, 2015, 25–49.
- Ehrhard, Franz-Karl. 2010. "Editing and Publishing the Master's Writings: The Early Years of rGod tshang ras chen (1482–1559)." In: *Edition, éditions: l'écrit au Tibet, évolution et devenir*, (Collectanea Himalayica, 3). Edited by Anne Chayet, Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, Françoise Robin, and Jean-Luc Achard, 129–161. München: Indus Verlag.
- Gross, Rita M. "Gender and Buddhism." 2005. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, second edition.
- Havnevik, Hanna. 1999. *The Life of Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche (1865–1951) as Told in her Autobiography*. Vol 1. PhD. diss., Oslo.
- Jacoby, H. Sarah. 2014. *Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of*



- the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jäschke, Heinrich August. 1977 [1881]. *A Tibetan English Dictionary*. London: Routledge.
- Larsson, Stefan. 2012. *Crazy for Wisdom: The Making of a Mad Yogin in Fifteenth-Century Tibet*. Leiden: Brill.
- 2016. "Prints about the Printer: Four Early Prints in Honour of the Mad Yogin of gTsang." In: *Tibetan Printing: Comparison, Continuities, and Change*. Edited by Hildegard Diemberger, Franz-Karl Ehrhard & Peter Kornicki, 309–331. Leiden: Brill.
- 2018. *Tsangnyön Herukas sånger: En studie och översättning av en tibetansk buddhistisk yogis religiösa poesi*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
- 2019. "The Crazy yogis of Tibet." In: *Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism. Volume Two: Lives*. Editor-in-Chief: Jonathan Silk. Leiden: Brill.
- 2021. "Milarepa Sings Again: Tsangnyön Heruka's 'Songs with parting Instructions'." In: *Songs on the Road: Wandering Religious Poets in India, Tibet, and Japan*. Edited by Stefan Larsson & Kristoffer af Edholm, 67–92. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press.
- Larsson, Stefan & Andrew Quintman. 2015. "Opening the Eyes of Faith: Constructing Tradition in a Sixteenth-Century Catalogue of Tibetan Religious Poetry." *Revue d'Études Tibétaines* 32, 87–151.
- Nālandā Translation Committee 1989. *The Rain of Wisdom*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
- Roberts, Peter Alan. 2011. *Mahāmudrā and Related Instructions: Core Teachings of the Kagyü Schools*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Schaeffer, Kurtis R. 2004. *Himalayan Hermitess: The Life of a Tibetan Buddhist Nun*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2007. "Dying like Milarépa: Death Accounts in a Tibetan Hagiographic Tradition." In: *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations*. Edited by Bryan Cuevas & Jacqueline Stone, 208–233. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Schuh, Dieter. 1981. *Tibetische Handschriften und Blockdrucke. Teil 8: Sammlung Waddell der Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz Berlin*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Sernesi, Marta. 2011. "A Continuous Stream of Merit: The Early Reprints of gTsang smyon Heruka's Hagiographical Works." *Zentral Asiatische Studien* 40, 179–237.
- 2021. *Re-enacting the Past: A Cultural History of the School of gTsang smyon Heruka*. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag.
- Smith, E. Gene. 1969. "Preface." In: *The Life of the Saint of Gtsang*, edited by Lokesh Chandra, 1–37 (reprinted in Smith 2001). New Delhi: Sharada Rani.
- 2001. *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau*. Edited by Kurtis R. Schaeffer. Boston: Wisdom

Publications.

Stagg, Christopher, trans. 2017. *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. Compiled and printed by gTsang smyon Heruka in 1488. Boulder: Shambhala Publications.

Stearns, Ilze Maruta. 1985. *The Life of Gtsang smyon Heruka: A Study of Divine Madness*. Master's Thesis, University of Washington.

