

Against Pilgrimage: Materiality, Place, and Ambivalence in Tibetan Pilgrimage Literature

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There will be great torment during your pilgrimage to meditation regions! Beware your virtuous practice being destroyed by these conditions! You come having awakened a hurricane of bad karma... As soon as you embark on your lengthy path, you will kill beings so you can go, primarily by killing [insects] under your feet. [On the journey,] bandits and battles will blaze with hatred, the armor of patience will be cast to the wind, robbers and hustlers will steal, [and pilgrims] will resort to theft. Your travel companions won't keep their vows, and similarly, they'll commit ethical transgressions. They will adopt the three non-virtuous bodily actions, stop performing prostrations and circumambulations, and tell lies to benefit themselves. They will pull you into divisive speech with dice games. They will spread harsh speech on treacherous paths both wide and narrow and will defile the hardship of the lengthy path with foolish chatter. They will perform "mantra recitation" in the form of the four non-virtuous speech acts. They muddy, chip away at, and break mantra recitation and dharma practice, and they diligently twist [everything] towards perversion. When they see the temple and the three supports, they spread covetous attitude towards the ornamented images and substances offered and spread harm through harsh words about the caretaker. When the hurricane of bad karma arises, in the form of blizzards on the travel path, disputes with enemies, sickness, demons, robbers, and so forth, they walk off into the abyss of wrong view. They are disappointed with the three jewels and dharma protectors. The three non-virtuous mental actions rob them of their thinking, and they arrive at the opposite of concentration and wisdom. Thus, denigrating the six perfections, [those pilgrims are really] on the ten-fold path of non-virtuous action.

— Jigmé Lingpa (1729-1798),

"Letter of Advice Sent to Pilgrims: A Bouquet of Sincere Wishes"¹

Pilgrimage seems by all accounts to have been widely practiced across Tibet, but that does not mean that Tibetans unanimously approved of it.² Throughout the written record, and across a variety of textual genres, writers highlight the dangers of pilgrimage, argue that it is pointless, or suggest that *real* practice does not require travel to faraway places. Critics of pilgrimage justify their skepticism or rejection of pilgrimage with a variety of arguments, which cite concerns that pilgrims will exaggerate the power of holy places, will overly rely on external places, will miss better opportunities for spiritual progress, or will fall into sin while travelling.

¹ 'Jigs med gling pa Mkhyen brtse 'od zer, *Gnas bskor ba la spring ba'i gtam*. In *The Collected Works of 'Jigs med gling pa Mkhyen brtse 'od zer*. TBRC W27300. 4: 575-9. Gangtok: No Publisher, 1985, 576.

² For those seeking more information on the basic structure of Tibetan pilgrimage, see Toni Huber, *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Little has been written about any of these Tibetan critiques of pilgrimage, and scholars to date have not attempted to gather these various critiques together and understand them as a collective whole. However, understanding these critiques and the concerns motivating them is essential for understanding the broader phenomenon of Tibetan pilgrimage. That is, by understanding these concerns, and the various ways Tibetan authors thought pilgrimage could go *wrong*, we will better understand the constellation of features that must be present for pilgrimage to go *right*. In addition, examining these various critiques can point to attitudes towards place, pilgrimage, and the material world that can illuminate general outlooks structuring Tibetan religious practice. For instance, are practices that engage the external, material landscape worthwhile, or is it better to focus on internally directed practices like meditation or philosophy? Can encountering special places transform people, and if so, do these powers reside in the places themselves, or in the mind of the practitioner?

In this article, I analyze critiques of pilgrimage from across the Tibetan tradition, and draw out several different arguments against pilgrimage that recur across the literature. I argue that many of these critiques are motivated by similar concerns about the qualities of the material world itself. In particular, they demonstrate a fundamental ambivalence towards the material that stems from its uncontrollable nature. Pilgrimage could benefit the pilgrim, but the material and therefore uncontrollable nature of places (and of journeys to those places), can thwart the pilgrim's original intention. This makes pilgrimage pointless or even dangerous. Some skeptics thought that the inherent uncontrollability of the material aspects of pilgrimage could be managed if the pilgrim maintained a proper mindset, but others rejected pilgrimage entirely.

The sources for this article will be eclectic and will include songs and letters of advice written to pilgrims, monastic guidelines advising whether and how monks should go on pilgrimage, tantric texts and commentaries discussing pilgrimage to tantric sites, characterizations of pilgrimage from biographical literature, and eulogies to holy places. It goes without saying that the selections examined here do not represent an exhaustive account of Tibetan critiques of pilgrimage, but they are representative of key themes and arguments that recur across various texts.

It is important to say at the outset that these critiques almost never foreground the categories of place and materiality as such, probably because these categories were not explicit subjects of Buddhist philosophical reflection. Nevertheless, as scholars such as Fabio Rambelli have pointed out, Buddhist thinkers were very frequently concerned with the nature of material objects and the role they play in practice,

and scholars neglect this important strand of Buddhist thinking to their detriment.³ By attending carefully to the roles place and materiality play in discussions about pilgrimage, for example, we can see that these categories, while not explicitly subjects of discussion, are nonetheless highly influential to Buddhist thought.

It is also worth noting that many of the sources that we will examine do not reject pilgrimage outright—although some certainly do. Rather, they critique certain ways of performing pilgrimage or highlight the potential dangers of pilgrimage before ultimately (if sometimes seemingly reluctantly) endorsing it. Many of these critiques thus reflect anxieties or concerns about pilgrimage, but seem to hold out the possibility that correctly performed pilgrimage can and should be part of successful practice.

The article will be structured thematically, outlining four major arguments against pilgrimage. That is: a rejection of the automatic benefits of pilgrimage, concerns about reification of the external world, concerns about the moral difficulties arising from travel, and an emphasis on mental cultivation rather than physical travel.

From these, I argue that we can see that concern about the dangers of pilgrimage arose from concerns about over-fixation the material world, concerns that the friction inherent in travel over material landscapes would thwart even well-intentioned practitioners, and a recurring desire to emphasize the importance of mental cultivation over external material engagement. I draw out the ways the material dimensions of pilgrimage factor into each of these critiques, and suggest that this recurrent ambivalence about the material world stems from concern that the material world is fundamentally uncontrollable. I then use this account to propose a model for how Tibetans thinkers thought that pilgrimage could go right.

Rejection of Automatic Benefits

Emaho! This wondrous holy place!... If you pray there, you'll accomplish all aims. If you circumambulate there, you'll purify bad karma. If you can prostrate there, you'll clear away obstacles. If you offer a scarf there, you'll turn back cloudy skies. If you make a sang offering there, you'll have good crops and if you make a sang (Tib. gsang) offering there, you'll have good crops and cattle!

— Guide to Drak Karpo⁴

³ Rambelli, Fabio. *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism*. Asian Religions & Cultures. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007.

⁴ *E ma ho/ ngo mtshar che ba'i gnas/ ... (S129, 4a) smon lam btab na ci bsam 'grub/ bskor ba mdzad na las sgrib dag/ phyag 'tshal nus na bar chad sel/ dar mchod phul na mkha' dman bzlog/ bsangs mchod phul na lo phyugs legs.* "Brag dkar po'i gnas yig dkod pa rgya mtsho'i sprin phung," in Tshe ring dpal 'byor, ed., *Bod kyi gnas yig bdams bsgrigs* (Lhasa: bod ljongs bod yig dpe nying dpe skrun khang, 2012), 381.

The first set of critiques about pilgrimage are directed against claims that pilgrimage will automatically benefit pilgrims. Tibetan pilgrimage guide texts (*gnas yig*) describe the benefits of pilgrimage to certain sites in bold terms: they declare that visitors to the site may clear away obstacles, gain material benefits, obtain good rebirths, or gain large amounts of merit. They sometimes even describe certain features as “liberating upon seeing” (*mthong 'grol*), meaning that whoever sees this object will be immediately and automatically liberated from bad rebirths.⁵ Such claims are an important function of the entire genre of pilgrimage guides, which aim both to describe the particular features of a site that pilgrims will encounter, but also to promote the site by describing the benefits of visiting there. According to the picture these guides paint, the site is so powerful that merely seeing it or touching it is enough to offer powerful merit and blessings. The implication is often that pilgrims need only show up to gain benefits, implying that the benefits reside in the site itself, and are independent of the qualities or intentions of the pilgrim themselves.

But while pilgrimage guides may make strong claims about the potency of pilgrimage places, many Tibetan authors explicitly rejected the notion that merely visiting a physical place could *automatically* grant benefits regardless of the intention or qualities of the pilgrim.

Several of these authors make the same *reductio ad absurdum* argument, suggesting that if it *were* the case that pilgrimage places grant automatic benefits, then it would have to be the case that whatever shepherds, nomads, or barbarians that wander there would already be enlightened. Since this is assumed not to be the case, it cannot be true that pilgrimage sites automatically grant benefits to those who encounter them. Jigmé Lingpa (1730-1798), for example, poked fun at those who assumed that certain material places automatically provide benefits, writing that if this were the case, shepherds living near holy places would be close to attaining the rainbow body, a very high level of accomplishment.⁶ Drakpa Gyeltsen (1147-1216) notes that Bodhgaya, Kailash, and Tsari are all filled with unsavory people like heretics, nomads, and barbarians.⁷ His nephew Sakya Pandita (1182-1251) makes a similar critique by writing that “Uddiyana, Jalandhara, Himavat,

⁵ For more on the phenomenon of objects that are attributed liberative powers, see James Gentry, *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism*. New York: Brill, 2016.

⁶ *Dur khrod du nyal bas sangs rgya na/ mi tsher ri stongs su nyal byed pa'i rdzi bo rnams 'ja' lus 'grub ba la nye/ de kun glen pa'i brtul zhugs yin*. 'Jigs med gling pa, *Gnas bskor ba la spring ba'i gtam*. In *The Collected Works of 'Jigs med gling pa Mkhyen brtse 'od zer*. TBRC W27300. 4: 575-9. Gangtok: No Publisher, 1985.

⁷ *Grag pa rgyal mtshan, Gnas bstod kyi nyams dbyangs*, In *Sa skya gong ma rnam lnga'i gsung 'bum dpe bsdur ma las grags pa rgyal mtshan gyi gsung*, TBRC W2DB4569, 5: 344-7 (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2007), 346.

Devikota, and other sites are filled with Indian non-Buddhist sectarians, barbarians, ignorant people, and nomads, but do they attain realizations?"⁸ The implication is clearly barbarians and nomads do *not* attain realizations at such places, and therefore pilgrimage sites do not automatically benefit people who go there.

Tibetan thinkers who reject the notion of automatic blessings are rejecting the notion that a material place can transform a person independent of that person's qualities or mental state. They are not necessarily rejecting the institution of pilgrimage. However, they are claiming that if there are benefits to pilgrimage, they cannot be entirely located in the physical place. Instead, they must be based to some degree on the qualities or mental state of the pilgrim.

In so doing, critics of pilgrimage are expressing clear discomfort with the notion that material objects or places have independent agency or potency, and discomfort with the notion that naïve pilgrims will assume that they do not have to do any work in order to reap the benefits of pilgrimage. They seem to be worried that pilgrims who think that material places are strong enough to grant automatic blessings will be less inclined to focus on what these critics believe to be more important aspects of practice; namely, avoiding sin and cultivating virtue.

These authors are not denying that material places have *any* power, but rather that this power does not work *automatically* or outside the pilgrim's intention. This leaves open the possibility that these places do have benefits, but that the pilgrim must undertake a particular set of practices or mental outlooks in order to access these benefits.

Concerns about Reifying the Material

Another set of critiques of pilgrimage is grounded in the concern that Tibetan pilgrims will be overly focused on or reify the material world. This set of critiques allows for possibility that material places can grant benefits to pilgrims, but is concerned to ensure that pilgrims recognize that practices engaging material places are subordinate to other, higher forms of practice. In other words, these critiques do not entail the wholesale rejection of pilgrimage, but rather placing pilgrimage in a hierarchy of possible practices.

This argument takes two particular forms: one dealing with exoteric

⁸ *U rgyan dzA lendha ra dang/ gangs can de bl ko Ta sogs/ kla klo blan po mu stengs byed/ 'brogs pa rnams kyis gang mod kyang/ de dag grub pa thob bam ci.* Sakya Pandita, *Sdom gsum rab dbye*. Edition contained in Jared Rhoton, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes: Essential Distinctions among the Individual Liberation, Great Vehicle, and Tantric Systems: The Sdom Gsum Rab Dbye and Six Letters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 310.

pilgrimage practice, and one dealing with tantric pilgrimage practice. In both forms, the fact that pilgrims are focused on particular physical places is taken as useful for immature practitioners, but ultimately inferior to a mental outlook which recognizes the fundamental equality of all places.

Exoteric Pilgrimage: No One Place is Holier Than Any Other

To begin with the exoteric variety of this argument, some Tibetan authors critiqued pilgrimage on the grounds that no one area is any more sacred than any other.⁹ These authors did not reject religious interaction with the external material world, but instead insisted that it is an inferior form of practice insofar as it identifies any one place as more special than other places. They suggested that the notion that some places are inherently special (with other places therefore less special), inadvertently reproduces fundamentally erroneous dualistic thinking, thus undermining the entire Buddhist project.

To these writers, the best form of pilgrimage is aimless wandering across the land rather than visiting specific sites. We might wonder whether such wandering should be called pilgrimage, but several Tibetan authors deliberately connect directionless wandering the landscape with the directed activities of pilgrims insofar as both involve leaving home to engage with the material landscape.

Articulating this point of view in a poem of advice, Kathog Situ (1880-1925)¹⁰ writes:

Without attachment or desire, without fixed or certain plans,
Without selfishness, wandering freely through the country
Without bias, helping all living beings to be trained—
These are the activities of the best kind of pilgrim.

Following holy masters without bias or fault,
Requesting holy teachings without preference or contradiction,
Gathering merit at holy places without partiality or grasping—

⁹ There is a parallel debate in Christian discussions of pilgrimage. That is, if God is omnipresent, how can one place be holier than any other? See, for example, R.A. Markus, "How on Earth Could Places Become Holy?: Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, no. 3 (1994): 257–71. "and Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred. The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

¹⁰ Kathog Situ Chökyi Gyatso is known in contemporary scholarship primarily for his authorship of two accounts of pilgrimages, one to central Tibet and another to Amdo and Kham. So as is the case with many of the authors surveyed here, Kathog Situ is not rejecting the practice of pilgrimage wholesale, but is rather lamenting the way in which it is practiced by some pilgrims.

These too are the activities of the best pilgrim.¹¹

Kathog Situ goes on to contrast this best sort of pilgrim with lesser pilgrims who fail to follow their example, but for now we will focus on the ideal of the pilgrim who wanders the land without having a fixed itinerary. Kathog Situ ties the lack of fixed plans or set destinations with an admirable lack of selfish grasping or partiality, suggesting that pilgrims who have specific destinations may be motivated by selfishness ego, or attachment. They may be going to a particular place in order to get merit to benefit themselves, rather than thinking of others. They may also harbor biases about one site being better than another or one school as being better than another. All of this, Kathog Situ suggests, only furthers dualistic thinking, which perpetuates all the problems Buddhist practice is trying to address.¹²

Other writers echo the notion that pilgrimage to particular places is connected in some way with dualistic thinking. Jamgön Kongtrül, for example, warns pilgrims against committing this error when he writes, “The thought ‘this is a sacred place, this is not a sacred place’ is the misconception of an impure mind.”¹³ In other words, the impure mind imposes these dualities of sacred/not sacred on the landscape even when these dualities are not ultimately justified.

By contrast, the practitioner who has an “eye free of dust,” he suggests, recognizes that *wherever he is* is a pure land.¹⁴ On this understanding, the notion that some places are particularly special is not something that helps the pilgrim to see better, but rather dust that further occludes their vision. On this line of thinking, it is a good thing to wander the landscape, but there is no inherent quality of any place that makes it more holy than anywhere else. The extent to which a pilgrim thinks there is a difference, moreover, reflects their own dualistic thinking rather than inherent qualities of the land.

¹¹ *Chags med zhen med gtaḍ med nges med gnas/ rang 'khris med pas gdul bya ris med la/ phan byed 'gro don rgyal khams phyogs med byed/ gnas skor rab kyi nram thar pa'o// dam pa phyogs med sel med bsten pa dang/ dam chos ris med 'gal med zhu ba dang/ sgrub gnas phyogs med 'dzin med tshogs bsags pa/ 'di yang gnas skor rab kyi nram thar ro. KaH thog si tu chos kyi rgya mtsho “Gnas skor pa rab 'bring mtha' gsum gyi nram dbye,” in *Gnas yig phyogs bsgrigs*, 1-2.*

¹² It is worth mentioning here that Kathog Situ is part of the so-called Non-sectarian (*ris med*, pronounced Rimé) movement, which holds up the ideal that Buddhist practitioners expose themselves to teachings from a variety of schools, and that the language of impartiality in this poem has much to do with the sort of language used by Rimé figures.

¹³ ‘Di ni gnas yin no/ ‘di ni gnas ma yin no snyam pa ni rang blo ma dag pa’i log rtog yin la. ‘Jam mgon kong sprul, TsA ‘dra rin chen brag gi rtog pa brjod pa yid kyi rgya mtsho’i rol mo, 487.2.

¹⁴ *Su zhig rdul dang bral ba’i mig thob pa/ de yi gang na rgyal ba’i zhing bkod se. Ibid.*, 545.

As such while writers like Kathog Situ and Jamgon Kongtul endorse wandering the land, they criticize the idea that any place is any different from any other. They valorize the perspective of the best pilgrim who can see all places as equally holy, and consider pilgrims who focus on particular places to be immature in their practice and understanding.

This is still an endorsement of engaging the external material world as a religious practice. Though we might take the argument that all places are fundamentally the same to mean that there is no need to leave home, that is not what Kathog Situ and Jamgön Kongtrül are saying. Leaving home to wander the land is meaningfully different from staying home. Here, the pilgrim is still giving up the comforts of home to wander in unfamiliar and potentially inhospitable lands. It recalls the classic formula in which the Buddha calls disciples to go forth from home life into homelessness. In abandoning the comforts and predictability of home life, the wandering pilgrim is committing to see something new every day, without the routines or preoccupations of home and family life.

However, this valorization of aimless wandering does seem to invest more significance in the pilgrim's *perspective* than in the material qualities of holy places. That the pilgrim is traversing the landscape matters, because they are extracting themselves from the familiarity of home life to embrace what we might call the wild. Nevertheless, they are not visiting particular places believed to have special transformative powers or blessings external to the pilgrim. They may end up visiting the same special places that the ordinary pilgrim visits, but they regard such sites as fundamentally equal to others.

Kongtrul and Kathog Situ do ultimately endorse pilgrimage to particular places, but they also see the valorization of places as potentially dangerous. Ordinary pilgrimage is acceptable, or even good, but not as good as aimless wandering. Further, it is good only insofar as pilgrims know the dangers of focusing on particular places and try to emulate the aimless pilgrim who regards all places equally.

As such, the question of the power of individual material places drops out of the equation almost entirely. Material places are regarded as useful for immature beings, but irrelevant to more advanced practitioners with the proper mental outlook.

*Esoteric Pilgrimage: Only Childish People Consider
External Pilgrimage Places Important*

Similar concerns about the overreliance on or reification of external, material places also arose in discussions of tantric pilgrimage. Tantric commentators—both Indian authors commentating on Tantric texts

and later Tibetan authors commenting on tantras or on tantric commentaries—often went out of their way to assert that advanced tantric practitioners should regard all external, material places as fundamentally equal rather than regarding certain places as more special than others.

Before elaborating on this argument, however, it is worth giving some background on tantric forms of pilgrimage for those who are unfamiliar. In most scholarship on Tibetan pilgrimage, writers have been primarily concerned with general pilgrimage practices undertaken by people of all levels of society. Such pilgrimage practices took place in a conceptual universe governed by tantric Buddhism, but did not require explicit empowerment in particular tantric lineages. However, pilgrimage was also an important part of lineage-based tantric practice. Many important tantric texts, including the *Kalacakra*, *Hevajra*, and *Cakrasamvara Tantras*, include pilgrimage to specific sites as part of the set of practices they prescribe. Some texts list twenty-four sacred places (Skt. *pīṭha*, Tib. *gnas chen*), whereas others have differing numbers, such as thirty-six, thirty-nine, or forty-eight,¹⁵ but in each case, these external pilgrimage places are also held to correspond with the bodily components of the individual. By going to these pilgrimage places, the tantric initiate can manipulate his own subtle body, speeding along the process of self-transformation and, ultimately, enlightenment.¹⁶ These practices, however, are regarded as potentially dangerous, and thus are limited to those who are working closely with a qualified tantric master and have the appropriate initiations and realizations.¹⁷

¹⁵ The exact number of tantric *pīṭhas* and their precise locations was a source of much controversy. See, for example, David Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra*, 69-70, note 2. Note, however, that his references to the Narthang Kangyur are slightly incorrect: the *Vajrapādasārasamgraha* is in Volume 18 and not Volume 17. For more information about the tantric *pīṭhas* and their locations, see David Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra* (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2007), 330-3 and Vesna A. Wallace, *The Inner Kalacakra Tantra*, 78-9.

¹⁶ These texts outline systems in which places in the external world are categorized and mapped onto locations in the human body. For more information see Vesna Wallace, *The Inner Kalacakra*, 77-86. See also David Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra*, 68-70, especially 69, no. 2.

¹⁷ Note that Sakya Pandita in particular is concerned that pilgrims without the proper qualifications and empowerments will attempt tantric pilgrimage. See Rhoton, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes*, 136-7. Sakya Pandita wrote that sutras do not describe pilgrimage to the great places, but he also writes that “The Buddha did not teach that the thirty seven major sites are to be visited if one is not performing the meditations of both processes” (*Yul chen sum cu so bdun du/ 'gro ba sangs rgyas kyis ma gsungs. Ibid.*, 310, verse 301.) That is, the exoteric Buddhist tradition as contained in the sutras does not describe rituals of visiting the great places (*yul chen*), and to the extent that the Buddha does recommend visiting those sites in the tan-

While pilgrimage was thus prescribed as part of advanced tantric practice, various scholars seem wary that tantric practitioners might mistakenly over-rely on these external places. For instance, many later tantric commentaries, both Sanskrit and Tibetan, argue that these external pilgrimage places are taught for the sake of childish people (*byis pa rnams*).¹⁸ The implication here is that the wise should recognize that the set of external pilgrimage places is a way of talking about the internal landscape of one's own body.

As one commentary on the *Hevajra Tantra* states, "Externally, there are goddesses that chase after blood and flesh and live in towns who dwell in external holy places. [However] it is taught, 'As [it is] externally, so [it is] internally,' and so internal holy places are taught exist in the body in the form of the channels. Do not look elsewhere for them!"¹⁹ On this interpretation, the internal holy places are just as important—if not more important—than the external holy places. The commentator wants to ensure that readers do not mistakenly focus on the external pilgrimage places to the detriment of the internal physiology.²⁰

tras, he does so only if practitioners are doing so after having practiced the generation and completion stage meditations. As such, the general practice of pilgrimage to places like Tsari and Kailash is just "a sham observance of this mantric tradition" (*sngags kyi lugs su 'chos pa mthong*, *Ibid.*, 310, verse 301) and is not a legitimate practice.

¹⁸ "These places, Jalendara and so on, are mentioned for the benefit of simple fools who wander about the country": 'Dir thun mong gis byis pa rnams yul du 'khyam pa'i don du dzA landara la sogs pa'i gnas la sogs par gsungs te. Naropa, *Rdo rje'i tshig gi snying po bsdus pa'i dka' 'grel* (Skt. *Vajrapādasārasaṅgraha*), 979.

¹⁹ *De bas na phyi rol du ni sha dang khrag la rgyug par byed pa grong la brten pa'i lha mo rnams ni phyi'i gnas pa yin la/ ji ltar phyi rol de bzhin nang/ zhes gsungs pa'i phyir nang gi gnas ni lus la rtsa'i gzugs kyi gnas par gsungs te de las gzhan du mi bla'o*. Vajragarbha, *Rdo rje snying po'i 'grel pa* (Skt. *Hevajrapinḍārthaṭīkā*), 918.

²⁰ We should note that some commentators interpret these same passages about how external pilgrimage places are taught for the sake of foolish or childish people (*byis pa rnams*) in precisely the opposite way: to justify pilgrimage practice. Kunkhyen Pema Karpo (1527–92), for example, makes this approach explicit in his *Guidebook to Tsari*; he directly addresses those who reject tantric pilgrimage for non-initiates and refutes them in order to argue that tantric pilgrimage is open to all. Quoting the *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kalacakra Tantra*, Pema Karpo argues that "Commonly, the holy places such as Jalendra are taught so that childish beings (*byis pa*) may wander to the [24 sacred] areas." ('Dir thun mong du byis pa rnams yul du khyam pa'i don du dzA landha ra la sogs pa'i gnas rnams gsungs shing/ zhes 'byung la. 'Brug chen Kun mkhyen Pad+ma dkar po, *Gnas chen tsa ri tra'i ngo mtshar snang ba pad dkar legs bshad*, 271. This quotation can be found in Rigs Idan Pad+ma dkar po (Skt. *Puṇḍarīka*), *Bsdus pa'i rgyud kyi rgyal po dus kyi 'khor lo'i 'grel bshad rtsa ba'i rgyud kyi rjes su 'jug pa stong phrag bcu gnyis pa dri ma med pa'i 'od* (Skt. *Vimalaprabhā*), in *Bstan 'gyur (dpe bsdur ma)*, TBRC W1PD95844, 6: 706 - 1482 (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 1994-2008), 1079.) He also cites Naropa's commentary on the *Hevajra Tantra* making the same point. (*Khyam pa zhes*

Tantric texts and commentators also emphasized that the set of external pilgrimage places is a movable framework that can be mapped onto any location. As such, there is not *one physical location* (such as Jalendra, for instance) that is itself inherently important. Rather, they describe “Jalendra” as a relative point in a conceptual schema that can be mapped onto many different locations.²¹ The *Vimalaprabhā*, for example, states that the entire set of external pilgrimage sites exists in Tibet, China, and other countries.²² Naropa’s commentary on the *Hevajra Tantra* argues that they are present even in a single city.²³ According to these texts, while the childish practitioner reifies the set of external pilgrimage places and takes them to exist in a particular place, the advanced practitioner recognizes the inherent non-duality of all places, and recognizes the entire world—including the practitioner’s own body—as a holy site. These texts and authors seem particularly concerned about the possibility that practitioners will forget this, and treat particular physical locations as inherently special.

Tantric commentators also sometimes try to de-emphasize the importance of pilgrimage by arguing that it is secondary to the important task of attaining stability in meditation. For instance, in the *Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows* (*sdom gsum rab dbye*), Sakya Pandita argues that to correctly perform tantric pilgrimage, the aspiring pilgrim must first obtain the four initiations into the practice and then attain stability in the meditations of the generation and completion stage. Sakya Pandita stresses that this stability must be obtained in one’s own home.²⁴

yang/ nA ro 'grel chen du/ spyir btang du/ byis pa rnam kyis bskor ba'i don du dzA landha ra la sogs pa'i gnas gsungs pa zhes 'byung bas so. Pad+ma dkar po, "Pad dkar legs bshad," 271. Original quote from Naropa, Rdo rje'i tshig gi snying po bsdus pa'i dka' 'grel, 1079.) In each case, he takes the term “childish beings” (*byis pa*) to refer to ordinary people without high levels of spiritual realization, and thus for these texts to be advocating pilgrimage for precisely those beings. Against those who understood the notion that pilgrimage is “taught for the sake of childish beings” to indicate that it is a lower level of practice to be discarded, Pema Karpo takes “childish beings” to refer to ordinary, non-tantric initiates and thus sees tantric pilgrimage places as open to everyone. Further, he does not take external pilgrimage’s association with “childish beings” as a negative mark on external pilgrimage places, but rather a reason that everyone should go to these places.

²¹ Scholars have noted the way in which, as Buddhism moved to areas outside India, sacred landscapes were re-mapped onto new geographical areas. For a nuanced discussion of the transposition of Buddhist sacred geography into other areas that focuses particularly on China, see James Robson, “Buddhist Sacred Geography,” in *Early Chinese Religion, Part Two: The Period of Division (220-589 AD)*, ed. John Lagerwey and Lü Pengzhi, vol. 21/2, *Early Chinese Religion* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 1353–98.

²² See Vesna A. Wallace. *The Inner Kalacakra Tantra*, 76-77.

²³ *Rnal 'byor ma rnam kyis rigs sum cu rtsa drug ni grong khyer gcig tu yang gnas*. Nāropa, *Rdo rje'i tshig gi snying po bsdus pa'i dka' 'grel*, 979.

²⁴ *Dang por rang gi khyim du bsgom*. *Ibid.*, 310, verse 297.

The implication is that it is relatively easier to practice these meditations in the comfort of one's own home, and that practice in pilgrimage is a more advanced stage that should only be approached once the basic mental training has been mastered.

None of these tantric sources *reject* pilgrimage to tantric pilgrimage sites. However, they do also seem to reflect some discomfort with the entire notion of external pilgrimage. They express concern that careless tantric practitioners will reify external pilgrimage places while forgetting that they are meant to correspond to an internal system, and ultimately to an internal transformation. The fact of material pilgrimage places represents a potential distraction from this internally-directed work.

It is important not to overstate this discomfort with the material. Tantric practice frequently makes use of material objects and implements, and is certainly not solely internally-focused. Most of these commentators would probably agree that engaging the material world, whether through ritual implements, images, consecrated substances, or physical landscapes, is a valuable means for advancing one's practice. With regard to pilgrimage in particular, many tantric commentators spent a great deal of time and energy writing polemics about the correct list of tantric pilgrimage places, indicating that they did care deeply about getting that right.

However, there is certainly a desire, at least among some commentators to try and limit the position of the material, to domesticate it within a system that recognizes internal transformation as the highest goal. If not properly located and contextualized in this way, material places might become attractions in their own right, and not sites granted legitimacy within the confines of a particular practice lineage.

Concerns about Material Friction

Another set of concerns expressed by critics of pilgrimage focuses less on pilgrimage places themselves and more on the journey associated with visiting these places.

These critics point to the fact that the material world is not smooth or frictionless, particularly for those traveling by foot to distant pilgrimage places. Instead, it introduces difficulties and discomforts that shape the practice of pilgrimage. For instance, going to a place like Kailash or Tsari involves long travel over difficult terrain in desolate conditions, with pilgrims eating only what they could carry or beg. For some writers, this difficulty is integral to the practice of pilgrimage, because that difficult journey facilitates the desired experience. Others, however, regarded the difficulty of pilgrimage practice as a negative that potentially leads to physical and moral harms.

Again, this general theme of concern takes multiple forms. So, in order to illuminate this set of arguments, it is worth delving deeper into some representative sources.

Physical Danger

Some writers, for instance, highlighted the physical dangers of pilgrimage. Whereas staying at home allows for comfort and safety, travel is inherently dangerous. This is bad because of the direct harm potentially caused, and also because it represents a missed opportunity to practice in physical comfort. Arguing that pilgrimage was pointless or even actively harmful, these critics of pilgrimage maintained that Buddhist practice consists in personal transformation cultivated in a relationship with a teacher. They portrayed travel to an external pilgrimage place, on the other hand, as at best irrelevant to that practice and at worst actively harmful to it.

For instance, the Sakya hierarch Drakpa Gyeltsen (1147-1216) wrote an ironically-titled “Song of Experience in Praise of the Holy Place” rejecting pilgrimage as a worthwhile practice. Instead, he exhorted would-be pilgrims to stay at home and cultivate a teacher. Part of this song is as follows:

Some go to Vajrāsana (Bodhgāya), but there are many heretics there; they have no accomplishment. There are many terrifying bandits on the way—when they cut your throat, you’ll repent of having come, dead by a knife.

Others go to the ice field of Tise (Kailāsa), but there are many nomads there. Nomads do all sorts of bad stuff. Having been killed by the glacier of your own perverse views, you’ll repent of having come, dead by a knife.

Others go to Tsari Tsagong, but that area is filled with barbarian Lalo Monpas. You won’t hear the sound of dharma there are all! Having been killed by your own demons, you’ll repent of having come, dead by a knife.

There are so many spots like that, so don’t go running to all the “places of accomplishment.” But in a secluded retreat of conducive conditions, with the raised [banners of] the two meditative processes, engage your discipline.

Then wherever you are is Akanistha, keeping as company your selected divinity, whatever you eat or drink is nectar. Not to go searching for some external “place of accomplishment” is the vow of the deep secret spells. So don’t take up this pilgrimage song, but stay where you

are and plow the field!

— Drakpa Gyeltsen (1147-1216)²⁵

This song contains elements of arguments we have already seen. Like Sakya Pandita and Jigme Lingpa, Drakpa Gyeltsen implicitly rejects the idea that a pilgrimage place might grant automatic benefits to those who visit (“there are many heretics there”). Like Kathog Situ, he suggests that pilgrims should consider all places as fundamentally equal (“wherever you are is Akanistha”). And like many tantric commentators, he implicitly criticizes those who search externally for what should be explored internally (“Not to go searching for some external ‘place of accomplishment’...”). Each of these plays a role in Drakpa Gyeltsen’s overall argument that pilgrimage is a waste of time.

His central argument, however, rests on the dangers of pilgrimage. He points out that travel to distant pilgrimage places may bring the pilgrim into contact with unsavory people such as barbarians, heretics, or bandits. In the process of travelling across the landscape, the pilgrim is by definition leaving the safety and comfort of home, and thereby exposing themselves to the unruly world outside that known space. It is worth pointing out that these dangers are not abstract for Drakpa Gyeltsen, whose older brother died while on pilgrimage to India.²⁶ Driving the reality of these dangers home for listeners, he thrice repeats the line that Ronald Davidson memorably translates as “having been killed [by dangers particular to each place], you’ll regret having come, dead by a knife!”²⁷ Given all of this, Drakpa Gyeltsen argues that the pilgrim is better off staying at home.

For Drakpa Gyeltsen, his home of Sakya is the perfect place for practice, so why leave it? He contrasts the difficulties of the road with the comforts of his homeland. Proper practice, he suggests, requires favorable conditions (*dal ’byor*, literally meaning leisure and wealth). It is difficult to study the dharma when one is tired from the road, lacking adequate food, and tempted into wrongdoing by the frustrations of travel. Rather, would-be pilgrims should stay where they know they can find all the resources necessary for successful practice. Drakpa

²⁵ Grags pa rgyal mtshan, *Gnas bstod kyi nyams dbyangs*, In *Sa skya gong ma rnam lnga’i gsung ’bum dpe bsdur ma las grags pa rgyal mtshan gyi gsung*, TBRC W2DB4569, 5: 344-7 (Beijing: Krung go’i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2007), 346. Translation altered from Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 323.

²⁶ See Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 338.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 323. Tib. *La la rdo rje gdan du ’gro/ rdo rje gdan du mu stegs mang/ de dag la yang grub pa med/ lam khar mi rkun ’jigs pa mang/ ol pa bcad nas ’gyod grir ’chi/ la la ti se’i gangs la ’gro/ ti se’i gangs la ’brog pa mang/ ’brog pas mi dge na tshogs byed/ rang gangs log gis bsad nas ’gyod grir ’chi*. Grags pa rgyal mtshan, *Gnas bstod kyi nyams dbyangs*, 345-6.

Gyeltsen writes, “Don’t go wandering all over the country! Don’t throw away favorable conditions for nothing! Don’t risk life and limb for nothing! If you have enough realizations, stay in solitude! If you don’t have enough realizations, cultivate a lama!”²⁸ Thus far from understanding difficulty as part of what makes pilgrimage valuable, Drakpa Gyeltsen sees it as pointlessly squandering one’s time and resources.

This does underscore one point on which Drakpa Gyeltsen disagrees with authors like Kathog Situ and Jamgön Kongtrül, who valorize aimless wandering across the landscape. He does agree with them the best sort of practitioner is one who is able to regard whatever place they are at as a pure land. Where Drakpa Gyeltsen disagrees with them, however, is that they want pilgrims to leave home in order to wander the landscape, whereas Drakpa Gyeltsen regards one’s homeland as the best place to maximize time and resources. The former see wandering the landscape as successfully eliminating attachments to the comforts of home, whereas the latter sees the comforts of home as enabling successful practice.

We should also note that Drakpa Gyeltsen points to solitary retreat practice as having value, as indicated when he says “If you have enough realizations, stay in solitude!”²⁹ That is, he suggests that if the would-be pilgrim has some experience in practice and some level of spiritual realization, they can benefit from solitary retreat practice. These retreats are often located high in the mountains away from human settlements, and so do represent a particular way of engaging the landscape, but Drakpa Gyeltsen clearly thinks that this sort of practice is distinct from pilgrimage, perhaps because it is still relatively close to home and therefore less subject to the vagaries of travel to unfamiliar places. Even that practice, moreover, is not suitable for those who lack the proper training. In order to be able to engage the landscape fruitfully, the practitioner must first train with a qualified teacher and develop experience in practice.

Moral Danger

In highlighting the material dangers of pilgrimage, Drakpa Gyeltsen makes it clear that pilgrimage can threaten the health and safety of the pilgrim. Other writers, however, describe the physical difficulties of pilgrimage as threatening the ethical discipline of the pilgrim.

²⁸ *Yul kun tu 'khyams shing ma 'gro bar/ dal 'byor don med ma btang zhing/ lus srog don med du ma btang bar/ rang rtogs tshad yod na dben par sdod/ rtogs tshad med na bla ma bsten. Ibid., 347.*

²⁹ *Rang rtogs tshad yod na dben par sdod. Ibid., 347.*

For instance, Jigmé Lingpa (1729-1798), whose warnings about pilgrimage supplied the epigraph for this essay, extensively details the moral hazards of pilgrimage when writing a letter of advice to pilgrims.³⁰ The karmic perils start from the first step—Jigmé Lingpa notes that travel necessarily involves killing insects under one's feet³¹—and continue over the long and arduous pilgrimage trail. Dealing with these dangers and difficulties leads to the negative emotions of fear and anger, and hungry pilgrims may be tempted to turn to theft themselves. Travel companions, too, can lead the careless pilgrim into idle and foolish chatter or into anger and harsh speech.³² Jigmé Lingpa mentions what seems to be a dice game³³ that can lead to division among the group of pilgrims.

Even when the pilgrims arrive at their destination and see the images, they may admire the fine work with a covetous rather than a pious eye, and carefully note and exaggerate every fault among the monks and caretaker.³⁴ Jigmé Lingpa notes that while pilgrims *should* interpret hardships experienced on the pilgrimage trail as the inevitable ripening of negative karma, weary pilgrims instead take such hardships as reasons to be disappointed with and lose faith in the three jewels. In Jigmé Lingpa's telling, the various misdeeds of pilgrims exactly matches the ten non-virtuous actions³⁵ and pilgrimage contributes to sin rather than to enlightenment.

Some of these are almost comic—the pilgrim becomes a murderer by stepping on bugs along the path!—and seem intended to undermine the naïve notion that pilgrimage automatically generates good karma. But the overall theme seems to be that pilgrims will find that negative emotions such as anger, greed, and disrespect increase as they travel away from home. This increase in the turmoil of negative emotions is what results in the non-virtuous actions that Jigmé Lingpa warns about. Pilgrims are not necessarily *choosing* to act non-virtuously; rather, they allow their guard down and their pure intention to wane, and so end up committing sins they might never have committed had they not left home.

Jigmé Lingpa's point here is echoed by multiple critics of pilgrimage who worry that the difficulties of pilgrimage will lead pilgrims to wrongdoing. Kathog Situ, for instance, notes that even those pilgrims

³⁰ 'Jigs med gling pa Mkhyen brtse 'od zer, *Gnas bskor ba la spring ba'i gtam*, 574-580.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 576.

³² *Ibid.*, 576. See also Tāranātha, *Las stod kyi gnas skor ba 'dra la gdams pa*, 48. *Zhing gnas chen rnams su 'gro ba na/ tho co dang 'khrug long mi 'tshal zhing/ nyams len gyi rtel 'brel sgrig pa zhu*.

³³ *Sho sna sda*. Jigs med gling pa, *Gnas bskor ba la spring ba'i gtam*, 576.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 576.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 575-6.

who start with good intentions (*dang po khas len steng skor na bsam*) will, once they are tired, will develop wrong view towards the holy place (*dka' chad byung dus gnas la log lta byas*).³⁶ He specifically mentions the uphill (*gyen*) climbs that pilgrims will have to undertake as leading to laziness and disengagement. In other words, the difficulties of pilgrimage—and the bodily fatigue they engender, are enough to thwart pilgrims' good intentions.

Kathog Situ and Jigmé Lingpa both use this picture of the tired and sinful pilgrim to argue that pilgrims need to cultivate a pure and stable intention. Only then can the pilgrim rightfully place mind over body, and not give in to the weariness of travel. But both seem concerned nonetheless that the physical hardships of pilgrimage can outweigh even the best intentions of many would-be pilgrims. They worry, in effect, that good, ethical behavior is something that requires the comfort and order of regular sleep, warm meals, and a non-exhausted body.

Danger of Disorder

This concern that pilgrimage journeys represent a potential ethical danger is not merely a concern of individual thinkers—it is also institutional policy. Monastic guidelines (*bca' yig* or *bca' khrims*) often prohibit monks from going on pilgrimage. These monastic guidelines, also called monastic charters or monastic constitutions,³⁷ outline the rules and regulations governing the often-complex life in the monastery and functioned as a kind of extension of the *vinaya* for a particular monastery.³⁸

³⁶ Kah thog si tu 03 chos kyi rgya mtsho. "gNas skor pa rab 'bring mtha' gsum gyi rnam dbye." *gNas yig phyogs bsgrigs*, Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1998, pp. 19–20. *Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC)*, purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW20828_CAABC8, 1-2.

³⁷ As Jansen points out, they have also been written in non-monastic contexts such as hermitages, communities of tantric practitioners, and village communities. See Berthe Jansen, "How to Tame a Wild Monastic Elephant: Drepung Monastery According to the Great Fifth" In *Tibetans Who Escaped the Historian's Net: Studies in the Social History of Tibetan Societies*, edited by Charles Ramble, Peter Schwieger, and Alice Travers (Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2013), 111–139, particularly 112. See also Berthe Jansen, *The Monastery Rules: Buddhist Monastic Organization in Pre-Modern Tibet* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

³⁸ They have been studied first by Ter Ellingson in "Tibetan Monastic Constitutions: The bCa' Yig." In *Reflections on Tibetan Culture: Essays in Memory of Turrell V. Wylie*, edited by Lawrence Epstein and Richard F. Sherburne (Lewiston, NY: Edward Mellen Press, 1990) 205–29, and more recently by Berthe Jansen, in *The Monastery Rules: Buddhist Monastic Organization in Pre-Modern Tibet*. I am greatly indebted to Berthe Jansen, who first told me that monastic guidelines discouraged pilgrimage for monks.

It is worth noting at the outset that most of the monastic guidelines discouraging pilgrimage are from Gelukpa monasteries; monastic guidelines from Kagyu monasteries generally either mention pilgrimage in a somewhat more favorable light or do not mention it at all.³⁹ This may be due to the emphasis Gelukpa schools place on monastic discipline and philosophical study, as well as the fact that pilgrimage places that are often predominantly associated with Kagyu figures such as Milarepa.

It is also important to recognize that these monastic guidelines do not necessarily describe what is actually happening in monasteries. Rather, they spell out a set of ideals and fears that can suggest why and how monastic guidelines saw pilgrimage as a potential danger.

These monastic guidelines have multiple concerns about pilgrimage. The first and most basic—which be explored at greater length in a later section—is that pilgrimage takes monks away from their primary goal of intellectual and spiritual development. One monastic guideline for Sera Monastery, for instance, writes, “[Leaving] scholastic monasteries to exert oneself on pilgrimage to the holy places harms the intellect and studies. So, for a monk engaged in monastic study, there is nowhere else to go!”⁴⁰ According to the author of this text, the aim of living in a monastery such as Sera is sustained philosophical inquiry aimed at sharpening the mind so as to develop penetrating insight into emptiness. Insofar as pilgrimage takes time away from this project, it is potentially damaging.

However, in addition to hindering the goal of intellectual development, another underlying concern seems to be the loss of order and ethical discipline that could occur as a result of pilgrimage. In other words, monastic guidelines seem to fear that pilgrimage leads to opportunities for monks to break their vows.

These concerns are visible in the regulations monastic guidelines seek to place on pilgrimage. Incidentally, these regulations also suggest that, despite official prohibitions against pilgrimage, monastic guidelines anticipated that monks would go on pilgrimage anyway. The sense one gets from reading these guidelines is that even when pilgrimage is officially discouraged, it is clearly still a part of monks' lives. Monastic guidelines thus implicitly recognize that monks are going on pilgrimage insofar as they give regulations and guidance about *how* to travel.

One such regulation is that monks should never engage in travel

³⁹ Many of these are collected in *Bca' yig phyogs bsgrigs*, ed. Bod rang skyong ljongs yig tshangs khang, TBRC W21612 (Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2001).

⁴⁰ *Mtshan nyid grwa sa nas gnas skor la rtsol ba byas na blo lad dang slob gnyer pas chos grwa ba rnams 'gro sa med. Bca' yig phyogs bsgrigs*, 89.

with women, unless it becomes necessary while visiting a lama or going on pilgrimage (*gnas mjal*).⁴¹ Even as pilgrimage is recognized as a legitimate reason the monk might need to travel with women, there is still a concern that this interaction with members of the opposite sex can lead to violations of monastic vows of celibacy. Another monastic guideline worries that monks will use “going on pilgrimage” as an excuse to dawdle pointlessly at a pilgrimage place or their home village’s monastery.⁴² In both cases, pilgrimage is recognized as a legitimate excuse to travel, but one that opens the doors to sexual misconduct, general laziness, or other subversions of monastic discipline.

Monastic guidelines also insist that if monks are leaving the monastery to go on pilgrimage to holy places or travel to charnel grounds, he still must ask the monastic officials for permission and a leave of absence. He will also not receive his daily ration of food and the share of donations until he gives receipts for his travels.⁴³ Pilgrimage is again cast as a potential disruption to the life of the monastery. The monk is part of a community, and as such leaving raises the question of the monk’s standing in the community. In addition, it is an opportunity for monks to step outside of the view of monastic authorities. This regulation attempts to ensure that monks notify monastic authorities of their actions, and thus place the action of pilgrimage within the overall structure of monastic discipline. But because pilgrimage involves the monk leaving the monastery, it involves a certain degree of loss of control.

Pilgrimage also represented a threat to monastic discipline insofar as pilgrimage brought laypeople into the monastery. For instance, on holy days or festival days, monks may go out into villages or lay people may come onto monastery grounds, thus allowing for intermingling between monks and lay pilgrims. This intermingling, particularly with women, seems to have been a source of concern and motivation for additional regulation in monastic guidelines. Multiple guidelines note that female pilgrims who come to the monastery for the day should not be allowed to stay longer than a day, that they

⁴¹ *Gzhan yang bla ma mjal ba/ gnas mjal/ 'u lag lta bu'i dmigs bsal gtong dgos kyi rigs ma gtogs bud med kyi 'grim 'grul gtan nas byed mi 'jug.* From *Rgyal mchos bdun pa chen pos chos sde chen po se ra theg chen gling la btsal ba'i khrims su bca' ba'i yi ge rab gsal nor bu'i me long*, in *Bca' yig phyogs bsgrigs*, 111.

⁴² *Yul grwa rigs 'ga' zhig yul dang gnas skor du bskyod pa gzhis dgon gtong las/ tsha chu sogs la khag dkris kyis gzhis dgon yul sogs phyogs mthar don med du yun rung bsdad de.* *Ibid.*, 279:

⁴³ *Gal te dmigs bsal gyi brel ba yod nges dang gzugs gzhi ma bde ba bcas kyis yong ma thub pa sogs nas dgongs zhu ring thung bla ma dang dbu mdzad gnyis cha la zhu zhing sku gnyer la brda spyor/ de min gnas skor dang gnyan khrod 'grin pa sogs don che na angl rgyal dbang kun dga' dpal 'byor kyis/ khyod yang na tshe dang sgrub pa snyoms/ yang na phyogs med kyis ldum bu gyis/ zla 'ga' zas 'tshol gyis gnas skor te.* *Ibid.*, 199.

should get permission from a monastic administrator, and that they are not allowed to stay in the temple or in the monks' quarters.⁴⁴ In either case, the function of the monastery as a place to get away from householder life and gender mixing can be undermined by pilgrimage.

Finally, there seems to be a concern about mixing across sectarian lines. The monastic guidelines for Drepung written by the Fifth Dalai Lama follow the admonition against pilgrimage by saying, "For those residents who want to go [on pilgrimage]: there are nearby places which are important sites for us (*rang phyogs*), such as Lhasa and Reting. There are no connections for pilgrimage to other places such as Tsari. So do not go [to them]."⁴⁵ The passage seems to anticipate that many monks will want to go on pilgrimage. It further anticipates that it will not be able to dissuade such aspiring pilgrims, and it seems instead to try to steer them to places associated with "us." Places like Lhasa and Reting, which the guideline lists, are strongholds of the Gelukpa school, whereas mountains like Kailash and Tsari are associated with the Kagyu school. So, the "us" (*rang phyogs*, literally our side) in question seems to have something to do with sectarian affiliation. It could also, however, simply indicate the area around the monastery, since *rang phyogs* can mean "our area," and Lhasa and Reting are closer to Drepung than Tsari. These pilgrimage places are not purely sectarian places, and certainly many pilgrims went to places associated with various schools indiscriminately. Nevertheless, we see the monastic guidelines at least making a distinction between different types of places, with some pilgrimage places being less problematic than others, whether by virtue of proximity or sectarian affiliation.

All of this seems to show that pilgrimage held an ambiguous position in the view of monastic institutions (or at least scholastic monasteries) insofar as it represented a potential disruption to the scholastic and communal life of the monastery, and opportunity for monks to skirt the regulations governing monastic life. Inside the monastery, there are certain rules and regulations that govern monks' behavior and ideals focuses their attention on religious practice. However, the physical distance required by pilgrimage involves leaving this well-regulated place for one that is outside the watchful eyes of the monastic community. It therefore represents a prime opportunity for monks

⁴⁴ *Gnas skor ba sogs bud med rnam nyin mo dgon nang du bskyod dgos rigs skabs so sor chos khrims par gnang ba zhu sprod kyis gtong ba las/ dgon nang dang/ grwa zhag la zhabs sdod mi chog. Ibid., 565-6.*

⁴⁵ *Gzhi ba 'gro 'dod yod pa rnam kyang lha sa dang ra sgrenng sogs rang phyogs kyi skor yul 'gangs can thag nye sar yod bzhin du tsa ri sogs gzhan bskor ba'am [reading 'ang] 'brel chags mdog ma kha bas mi byed. From Chos sde chen po dpal ldan 'bras dkar spungs pa' dgon gyi bca' yig, in Bod kyi snga rabs khrims srol yig cha bdams bsgrigs, 313. Many thanks to Liz Angowski for helping me parse this line.*

to give into temptations towards sexual misconduct, laziness, or all variety of bad behavior.

Emphasis on Mental Cultivation over Material

Another theme that emerges from discussions about the value of pilgrimage is that many critics of pilgrimage want practitioners to emphasize mental cultivation over physical travel to pilgrimage places. This line of argument is clearly related to the above concern about reifying external places, but differs insofar as it does not focus on the harm of pilgrimage itself, but rather on the greater importance of mental cultivation. The implication is that pilgrimage is not necessary for such practices, which are better accomplished at home or at the monastery. As such, pilgrimage is a distraction or a missed opportunity because it is not as helpful mental cultivation. We can divide these arguments into a few subtypes based on the particular point of emphasis.

Focus on intellectual development

This concern is evident in the same monastic guidelines discussed above. As we have seen, these guidelines demonstrate fear that pilgrimage will disrupt orderly monastic life, but they also demonstrate fear that it will disrupt monks' intellectual lives as well. In other words, pilgrimage is not just a threat for the general upheaval of order and possibility of mixing with the lay community, but specifically a threat to mental cultivation that is supposed to lead to awakening.

One monastic guideline for Sera Monastery, for instance, writes, "[Leaving] scholastic monasteries to exert oneself on pilgrimage to the holy places harms the intellect and studies. So, for a monk engaged in monastic study, there is nowhere else to go! (i.e. there is no need to go anywhere else)."⁴⁶ A similarly worded⁴⁷ monastic guideline written by the Fifth Dalai Lama discourages pilgrimage on the grounds that "it seems to cause the blunting of the intellect."⁴⁸ Another states that "If one goes from the monastery's philosophical [education] and exerts oneself in pilgrimage, it blunts the intellect (*blo lad*) and harms your

⁴⁶ *Mtshan nyid grwa sa nas gnas skor la rtsol ba byas na blo lad dang slob gnyer pas chos grwa ba rnam's gro sa med. Bca' yig phyogs bsgrigs*, 89.

⁴⁷ Many of these guidelines contain strikingly similar language, suggesting that these guidelines are not entirely independent creations but rather share a general source or have influenced one another over time.

⁴⁸ *Mtshan nyid kyi grwa sa nas gnas skor la rtsol 'dod byed pa blo lad kyi rgyu yin 'dug gshis chos grwa ba 'gro sa med cing*. From *Chos sde chen po dpal ldan 'bras dkar spungs pa'i dgon gyi bca' yig tshul 'chal sa srung 'dul ba'i lcags kyo kun sel me long*, in *Bod kyi snga rabs khrims srol yig cha bdams bsgrigs* (Lhasa: bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang, 1989), 313.

studies (*slob gnyer la gnod pa*), so there is no place [other than the monastery] where monks should go."⁴⁹ While the guidelines do not elaborate further, the general point is clear: the aim of living in a monastery such as Sera or Drepung—at least according to those who wrote these guidelines—is sustained philosophical inquiry aimed at sharpening the mind so as to develop penetrating insight into emptiness. Insofar as pilgrimage takes time away from this project, it is potentially damaging. But reading between the lines, the suggestion seems to be not merely that pilgrimage takes time away from philosophical study, such that the activity of pilgrimage is itself just an otherwise neutral waste of time, but rather that pilgrimage somehow *blunts* the intellect. Multiple sources use the term *blo lad*, which seems to draw on the term *lad pa*, which can be used as a non-transitive verb or adjective meaning “weak, faint, exhausted, blunt, dull, rotten, decayed.” Thus, the *blo*, a term that can be translated as mind but here seems to mean the intellect or conceptual mind in particular, is somehow made weak, dull, or rotten by pilgrimage.

In the eyes of those writing monastic guidelines, pilgrimage may be exciting and emotionally compelling, but it does not help develop the capacity to understand the nature of reality. Worse, it harms the very tools by which one develops that capacity. Pilgrimage may therefore be a perfectly legitimate activity for laypeople, but is superseded in importance by the type of mental cultivation that is supposed to be the purview of scholarly monks. For them, pilgrimage represents a missed opportunity to spend time doing something that *matters*.

Focus on abandoning self and cultivating compassion

While monastic guidelines reject pilgrimage for monks specifically on the grounds that they should be focusing on mental cultivation, other critics of pilgrimage emphasize mental cultivation for practitioners more generally. For these authors, it is not only monks who should be focusing on mental cultivation, but lay people as well. Insofar as they do not see pilgrimage as furthering this goal, they think that pilgrimage is a waste of time.

For example, several Sakya commentators make this point when fleshing out Sakya Pandita's critiques of pilgrimage. In a broader text about the three vows, Sakya Pandita writes, “The sutras explain no rituals of going to the great places (*yul chen*).”⁵⁰ Because Sakya Pandita

⁴⁹ *Bca' yig phyogs bsgrigs*, 89.

⁵⁰ *Mdo las yul chen de dag tul 'gro ba'i cho ga bshad pa med*. Sakya Pandita, *Sdom gsum rab dbye*. Edition contained in Jared Rhoton, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes: Essential Distinctions among the Individual Liberation, Great Vehicle, and*

makes this statement in the context of talking about tantric pilgrimage, it is unclear whether he means to say that the sutras do not describe to tantric pilgrimage to the tantric *pīthas* (*gnas*) and great places (*yul chen*) or whether he is saying that the sutras do not prescribe any pilgrimage practices at all. It may very well be the case that Sakya Pandita would feel differently about people visiting pilgrimage sites in India such as Bodhgaya or Kapilavastu. It is difficult to know for sure, because Sakya Pandita neither explicitly makes a distinction of tantric and non-tantric pilgrimage places, nor admits that there are any kinds of pilgrimage that are legitimate.

Most of his commentators, however, both those who agree with him and those who disagree with him, take him to be rejecting pilgrimage more generally.⁵¹ The Sakya scholar Pökhangpa, for example, comments on this verse and elaborates on what he takes to be Sakya Pandita's point. He writes that the exoteric path prescribed in the sutras is simply that of abandoning self and cultivating compassion, and that there is no practice of pilgrimage which is prescribed in addition to that. He allows that the sutras describe practices of solitude (*dben par*) in the forest (*nags khrod*) but argues that this is entirely separate from travel to a specific location.⁵² In other words, Buddhist practitioners should focus on the goals of abandoning self and cultivating compassion, and because practices of pilgrimage do not help with that, they should be rejected.

Tantric Systems: The Sdom Gsum Rab Dbye and Six Letters (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 310.

⁵¹ Khatag Zamyak (1896-1961), a merchant who traveled across Tibet in the 1940s, says that Sakya Pandita's arguments "have no point beyond refuting the virtues of pilgrimage to holy places." *Sa skya'i rjes 'jug 'ga' res rmongs pa'i zhen tshig gis dgag pa 'o tshod smra bar de gnas skor ba'i dge dgag las don tshan gang yang med cing*. Kha stag 'dzam yag, *Bod dang bal po rgya gar bcas la gnas bskor bskyod pa'i nin deb*, 170. Drikung Chungtsang Chökyi Drakpa (1595-1659), quotes Sakya Pandita's rejection of pilgrimage for those who have not obtained the correct tantric initiations, which he declares "just incorrect. It [pilgrimage to Kailash] is appropriate regardless of whether one has fully obtained the four initiations or not." *Yul chen bgrod pa don med yin/ zhes pa'i bar 'di mi 'thad pa 'ba' zhig ste/ dbang bzhi rdzogs kyang rung la ma rdzogs kyang rung*. Chos kyi grags pa, *Gzhan gyi rgo! ngal 'joms pa'i legs bshad lung rigs smra ba'i mgul rgyan*, in *Collected Works of Chos kyi grags pa*, TBRC W22082 (Kulkhan: Drikung Kagyu Institute, 1999), 387.

⁵² *Des nags khrod du dben par nyams su len pa'i tshul mdo las/ bdag 'dzin spong ba dang snying rje chen po bsgom pa'i 'du shes kyis rkyen lam du slongs tshul gsungs pa bzhin byed na tshul dang mthun cing de las lhag pa'i gnas chen 'grim tshul mtshan nyid theg pa las gsungs pa med do*. Spos khang pa Rin chen rgyal mtshan, *Sdom pa gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba'i gzhung lugs legs par bshad pa*, in *Dpal sa skya'i sdom gsum phyogs bsgrigs*, ed. Si khron bod yig dpe rnying bsdu sgrig khang TBRC W3CN5910. (Chengdu: Rgyal khab dpe mdzod khang dpe skrun khang, 2015), 322.

Focus on Meditation

Finally, Jigmé Lingpa makes a similar point, but focused on meditation. He argues that Buddhist practice should consist in meditation practice that can be done at home. He writes, “pure dharma consists in the conjunction of the generation stage, which understands the essentials of what is to be purified and the action of purification, and the completion stage which knows what is to be realized and what is to be renounced along the ten stages.⁵³ If you do that, you’ll get enlightened from your own bed, because the buddha exists in oneself.”⁵⁴ Jigmé Lingpa thus prioritizes the inner work of generation and completion stage meditative practice over the search for any external pilgrimage place. If the pilgrim properly performs Buddhist practice, he suggests, there is no need to go anywhere else.

Ambivalence about the Material

Now that we have reviewed the various types of arguments against pilgrimage, we can ask: what do these various concerns about pilgrimage tell us about the pilgrimage in Tibet?

First, a general point about the status of practices like pilgrimage in religious traditions. These arguments demonstrate the sometimes-overlooked fact that pilgrimage was not an unquestioned practice in Tibet. Scholars have often noted the importance of pilgrimage to Tibetan religious culture, and it would be easy to assume that pilgrimage was universally seen as a beneficial practice. Instead, as we have seen here, Tibetan thinkers disagreed about whether and how to engage the external world on pilgrimage. Indeed, there seem to be different ideas about how pilgrimage “worked,” if it worked at all.

While the implicit assumption of much scholarship is that religious practices are undergirded by a stable, coherent, and preexisting set of beliefs, more often, the case seems to be that practices develop, and that these practices prompt thought, reflection, and contestation. Practices such as pilgrimage rarely have a single meaning—instead they are the object of competing claims by various members of the religious community, and are subject to ongoing debate about whether and how they should be performed.

Second, a specific point rising from these materials. I suggest that

⁵³ This refers to the ten *bhūmis*, or stages, which describe the progression of the practitioner on the path to enlightenment.

⁵⁴ *Chos dag sbyang gzhi spyod byed kyil/ gnad don go ba'i bskyed rim dang/ sa bcu'i spangs rtogs la rig pa'i rdzogs rim zung du 'brel 'gyur nal sangs rgyas rang la yod pa'i phyir/ byang chub mal gyi nang nas thob.* 'Jigs med gling pa Mkhyen brtse 'od zer, *Gnas bskor ba la spring ba'i gtam*, 578.5-6.

each of these critiques relates to the necessarily *material* dimensions of pilgrimage, and conveys a fundamental ambivalence about that materiality. Specifically, I understand critics of pilgrimage to be concerned that pilgrimage's necessary engagement with the material world because it introduces an uncontrollable dynamic to pilgrimage. This uncontrollability threatens the efficacy of the whole endeavor, and made critics wonder if pilgrimage was a worthwhile practice at all.

I am not here suggesting that we should uncritically reproduce a mind-matter distinction. That Tibetans continued to embrace pilgrimage—as well as countless other practices that engage material places and objects—should demonstrate that these worries about pilgrimage could be overcome. Nevertheless, we see a clear thread of anxiety about the material in almost all these critiques about pilgrimage.

For instance, we have seen that critics of pilgrimage were concerned that pilgrims might assume that material places grant benefits automatically, that pilgrims might reify external places, that pilgrims would unwittingly expose themselves to increased danger or opportunities for wrongdoing, or that pilgrims might neglect mental cultivation. I suggest that these different critiques share a fundamental concern about the uncontrollability of the material.

In order to unpack what I mean by this, it will be helpful to introduce Bruno Latour's distinction between mediators and intermediaries. Latour imagines human and non-human actors (actants, in his terminology) connected in networks of inter-relations. In the case of pilgrimage, we might imagine a relatively simple network of a pilgrim connected to a material place connected to a benefit that arises from successful pilgrimage. Latour notes that many people in this situation would think of the material place as an *intermediary*—something which “transports meaning or force without transformation.”⁵⁵ The pilgrim intends to get a benefit, and so goes to the place, which transmits the benefit to the pilgrim. In this situation, all is well and good. But according to Latour, many of the material things we take to be intermediaries are actually *mediators*.

Mediators, in contrast to intermediaries, do not transmit meaning or force without transformation, but instead “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry.”⁵⁶ They may transmit the intended meaning, or they may transform it so that the intended meaning or power is not conveyed in the same way. In the case of the intermediary, the intermediary can easily be ignored, because it introduces no change to the transfer of meaning

⁵⁵ Bruno Latour. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. New York (Oxford University Press), 39.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

or power, but in the case of the meditator, one has to pay attention to the possible changes introduced. And indeed, what seemed like a simple mediator might turn out to involve several possible mediators, all of which *make a difference* to the outcome.

In the case of our example of the pilgrim, the pilgrim intends to go to the material place intending to get a benefit. If the material place were a simple intermediary, this will always go off without a hitch. But if the material place is a mediator, it may introduce transformations or distortions that affect whether the pilgrim gets the benefit. First of all, the pilgrim may mistakenly focus on the place, rather than recognizing that the place is embedded in a network of relations. Or perhaps the difficulty of the material journey wears down the pilgrim's resolve such that they fall into sin and do not gain any benefit from pilgrimage. Or perhaps the pilgrim maintains a devoted attitude and does gain benefit from the pilgrimage. The fact that the material world is the mediator between the pilgrim and their intended goal of gaining some benefit from pilgrimage introduces possible distortions, and renders the situation more complicated than if the pilgrimage place had been a simple intermediary. The pilgrim's intention no longer entirely dictates the outcome of the pilgrimage, because the materiality of the place is always going to introduce possible distortion.

In arguing that critics of pilgrimage have a fundamental ambivalence towards the material, I am suggesting that they see the material dimensions of pilgrimage as introducing possible distortions.

For instance, engaging the material world introduces *friction*. That is, in traveling across the mountainous Tibetan landscape to get to holy places, pilgrims could expect to face cold, hunger, danger from bandits, group squabbles, and all variety of unpleasant circumstances. Moving across the landscape is difficult, these authors asserted, and while we might tend to focus on the destination rather than the journey, they did not want anyone to forget these difficulties. Nor did they necessarily assume that these difficulties redounded to the benefit of the pilgrim. As Drakpa Gyeltsen suggests, dharma practice is already difficult enough, so why make it more so? He echoes the Buddhist idea that to be born a human in a Buddhist country is a rare gift and seems incredulous at the notion that some might throw away that precious gift on a dangerous path with no real benefits.

This friction and difficulty also has moral dimensions, because it can thwart the good intentions of the pilgrim. Jigmé Lingpa also highlights that the travails of the pilgrimage route make it more difficult to behave correctly. He sees the material difficulties of pilgrimage as making it more likely rather than less likely that the pilgrim will engage in sin. Monastic guidelines think that the disorder introduced by pilgrim-

age will disrupt monastic life and study, and possibly lead to wrongdoing on the part of monks.

The material world is also *particular*. While I have been speaking in relatively general terms in this article, each place is different, with a specific history, location, and set of circumstances. This particularity also introduces possible distortions, because each place mediates the pilgrimage encounter in a different way. This thwarts any attempt to standardize pilgrimage. It also threatens to undermine the goal of developing equanimity and equal regard for all places.

These aspects of materiality—and its resulting status as mediator rather than simple intermediary—render the process of pilgrimage complex and vulnerable to distortion. Pilgrims cannot expect benefits to accrue automatically, because the materiality of pilgrimage has a meaningful effect on the process.

This view, I argue, helps us to understand some of the underlying concerns that connect seemingly disparate critiques of pilgrimage that exist in the Tibetan record.

When Pilgrimage Goes Well

This analysis of how pilgrimage can go wrong can also help us to construct a picture of what happens when pilgrimage goes well. That is, by seeing the common concern that the material world might thwart pilgrimage, we can see the ways that Tibetan thinkers sought to ensure successful pilgrimage.

The primary way that Tibetan thinkers try to counteract the potentially disruptive materiality of pilgrimage is to emphasize the pilgrim's *mental state*. By attempting to ensure a particular mental state on the part of the pilgrim, critics of pilgrimage sought to limit the variability and potential harm that the material dimensions of pilgrimage could introduce. These critics tried to undermine any notion that the pilgrimage place itself offers automatic blessings, and instead tried to locate the material place in a broader project of self-cultivation.

For while some critics rejected pilgrimage entirely, most critics who emphasize the importance of mental state seem to admit that there is some use for pilgrimage. For these authors, however, the potential benefits of pilgrimage depend not solely on the material objects or landscape, but on the pilgrim's mental state. They think that the pilgrimage place has power and blessings that can benefit the pilgrim, but that the wrong mental state on the part of the pilgrim can block any access to these power and blessings.

See, for example, Jigme Lingpa, who—after critiquing pilgrimage—somewhat grudgingly admits that the practice has value. He writes: “By all means, if you are settled on your desire [to go on pilgrimage],

do extensive prostrations, circumambulations, and prayers in the three great holy mountains... Even for the beings who do not enter the path, this [practice of pilgrimage], which must be done conscientiously (*bag yod*), purifies the obscurations and collects the accumulations—it is profound."⁵⁷

Ultimately, it seems that what Jigme Lingpa is pointing towards, albeit indirectly, is a situation in which neither the pilgrim nor the pilgrimage place *alone* has the power to grant blessings. To the extent that pilgrimage places are able to *do* something to the pilgrim, it is but only insofar as the pilgrim has the proper mental engagement with place.

This, then seems to be the most broadly representative picture of Tibetan pilgrimage gone well. There are certainly some thinkers and texts that claim that pilgrimage places can be entirely efficacious on their own. And there are thinkers who think that the mental aspect of pilgrimage is *so* important as to render the pilgrimage place—and travel to external places entirely—useless. But for most of the thinkers who write about pilgrimage, the physical pilgrimage place plays some role (how the pilgrimage derives the power to affect pilgrims is outside the scope of the present article). However, to access the power and blessings inherent in the place, the pilgrim must maintain a particular kind of affective engagement with the place.

Such a mental state structures the encounter with the pilgrimage place in such a way that whatever qualities inherent in the pilgrimage site can benefit the pilgrim. It should, ideally, be characterized by devotion (*dad pa*) and a commitment to upholding moral discipline.

Maintaining this mental state also prevents a major concern that appears in critiques of pilgrimage: the danger that the pilgrim will fall into sin on their pilgrimage journey. Critics of pilgrimage seem highly aware that pilgrimage disrupts the everyday life of the pilgrim. It is physically difficult, which reduces mental fortitude, and exposes the pilgrim to new environments that offer opportunities for wrongdoing. In such a variable environment, it is highly important that the pilgrim maintain a steady and devoted mental state.

In effect, pilgrimage goes well when the pilgrim cultivates devotion that keeps body, speech, and mind in alignment. This allows for the pilgrim to establish positive karmic connections with the pilgrimage place, and tap into the blessings held there. This minimizes potential distortions introduced by the materiality of pilgrimage. By contrast, if the pilgrim does not maintain the correct mental state, their body goes on the pilgrimage journey while their mind falls into sin and distraction, rendering the whole effort pointless.

⁵⁷ *Lam ma zhugs kyi skye bo la'ang/ bag yod shugs la brten dgos pa'i/ tshogs gsog sgrib sbyong 'di nyid zab. 'Jigs med gling pa, Gnas bskor ba la spring ba'i gtam, 579.2.*

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