

2. Playful Primers on the Path

Dza Patrul Rinpoché

Translated by Joshua Schapiro

Patrul Rinpoché's Wit at Work

This chapter presents two lighthearted sets of religious instructions by the famed nineteenth-century teacher Dza Patrul Orgyen Jikmé Chökyi Wangpo. The works showcase Patrul's compositional prowess, in particular his penchant for creating teachings that are accessible yet profound.¹ In both texts Patrul calls attention to his own virtuosity by framing his teachings as sermons performed in response to an interlocutor's challenge. These performances exemplify Patrul's theatrical style of pedagogy.

The first text is entitled *The Low-Born Sage Speaks: The Ladder to Liberation, a Treatise on Dharmic and Worldly Knowledge*. The text presents itself as a teaching given by a sage living in a retreat cave. When visitors to the cave ask the sage to answer questions about broad Buddhist categories, the sage responds with the verses that constitute the work. One of the visitors presents the following sets of questions and requests, which come across as challenges to the sage's purported knowledge:

Hey! Great sage!

Dharma traditions—what are they?

1. The third Dodrupchen incarnation, Jikmé Tenpai Nyima (1865–1926), praised Patrul for his skill in crafting teachings understandable to the average student yet filled with profound meaning. Those writing about Patrul thereafter often repeated this compliment.

Dharma traditions—how do you split them up?

Dharma traditions—which do you cast aside?

Dharma traditions—which do you accept?

The three objects of refuge, the three vows,
the three vehicles: speak to me about these categories.

Explain how to condense each set of three categories into one.

Show me how each one can be sewn up into an essential point.

The sage responds to these queries with a bevy of interlocking verses in a variety of meters. His method is to introduce new vocabulary, define his terms, and relate each defined term to the others. He thereby generates a maze-like network of Buddhist concepts and practices. Yet, miraculously, by the end of each of his two sermons, the sage has succeeded at reducing the entire Buddhist path down to one or two simple practices. The sage's performances function as a primer to Buddhism: introducing his audience to the most essential activities along the Buddhist path and justifying their importance. The sermons are likewise a virtuosic display of teaching competence on the part of the sage.

The composition is an impressive example of Patrul's pedagogical dexterity, particularly the ease with which he addresses multiple levels of audience simultaneously. Its short verses, nursery-rhyme rhythms, and introductory subject matter make the work an ideal introduction to the Buddhist path, appropriate for public audiences. Yet the seeming simplicity of Patrul's stanzas belies a sophisticated architecture that structures the composition at large. Each element that Patrul introduces fits into a larger, intricate plan. And the introductory content—three jewels, three vehicles, three vows—eventually make way for practice instructions that reach to the pinnacle of the Nyingma path—advice on how to reach liberation in every moment by facing the nature of one's own mind.

The second text, *The Explanation of Chudrulü*, is a nine-page-long joke, explicitly so. The editors of Patrul's *Collected Works* label it a humorous discourse (*shegé ki tam*). Some background is necessary for understanding the humor at play. In Patrul's time a story circulated around the region of Kham about a meditation practitioner who was in retreat in a local cave. Whenever his attendant would come to visit him with provisions, the meditator would pester his attendant with questions about what he was missing back home. "What's been happening at the monastery in my absence? What's new in our village? What do you have to tell me?" To each question the young attendant would respond in the same way. "Nothing." But instead of speaking the word *nothing*, the attendant would use a colloquial expression from the

Degé region, slang for “nothing, really,” or “nothing at all.” The expression in question is *chudrulü*.

Upon hearing this story, Patrul decided to compose a critique of those of his peers who were obsessed with talking (like the meditator in the story). His critique, *The Explanation of Chudrulü*, confronts Buddhist practitioners who are unduly devoted to religious talk, such as composing textual commentaries and engaging in monastic debate. As the text suggests, true practitioners can accomplish their goals without any need for superfluous chatter.

Patrul’s critique takes the form of a tongue-in-cheek etymology of the term *chudrulü*. Patrul introduces a group of protagonists—a collection of youth—who explain the meaning of the phrase *chudrulü* to a group of older monks. The youth offer a faux etymology of *chudrulü* (an oral colloquialism with no true spelling), splitting it up into three Tibetan words: *chu*, meaning “water,” *dru*, meaning “boat,” and *lü*, meaning “body.” They explain that water, boats, and bodies all travel to different places but never change, fundamentally. Water may flow from oceans to rivers and lakes, and may be used to drink or to bathe with, but it never fundamentally changes from being water. It always ends up back in the ocean, eventually. Boats may travel across rivers, and bodies may travel in those boats, but neither change during the trip. Bodies and boats just go and return. The youth compare water, boats, and bodies to themselves. The youth may travel to different places to accomplish different tasks, but they never really change. They never learn anything new that is worth reporting to the older monks. The implication is that the older monks should stop asking them to do so.

The youths’ analysis of *chudrulü* is highly suggestive and can be read on any number of levels. On the one hand, it is a joke, teasing the scholars (the elder monks in the story) for their constant thirst for new teachings and obsession with formal commentary. On another level, it defends creative and informal teachings, exemplified by the etymology of *chudrulü*. This explanation of *chudrulü* is itself a demonstration of the skill of “confident eloquence,” one of the four oratory proficiencies that bodhisattvas possess, to which Patrul alludes in the opening lines of *The Explanation of Chudrulü*.² Finally, one might even read the youths’ teaching as a subtle allegory about the nature of Buddhist practice, or perhaps the nature of the human mind.³

Just like *The Low-Born Sage Speaks*, *The Explanation of Chudrulü* frames itself as a performance. The elder monks challenge the youth to give them an

2. Confident eloquence (*popa*) is one of the four “thorough, perfect knowledges” (*so so yangdak par rikpa*).

3. For a discussion of such possibilities, see Schapiro 2011.

explanation of the phrase *chudrulü*, in response to which the youth deliver their dazzling deconstruction of the term. The youth eventually give credit for the *chudrulü* teaching to Patrul himself and subsequently list his many qualities as a superior teacher. Ultimately, *The Explanation of Chudrulü* proves Patrul to be capable of delivering a brilliant discourse about even the silliest topic. As the text boasts, Patrul's intelligence "can never be used up," even when he is teaching about "nothing"!

The two texts translated below well capture some of the most striking facets of Patrul's reputed personality. On the one hand, he was self-effacing, as when he compares himself in *The Low-Born Sage Speaks* to an outcast (or low-born, *dölpa*) hermit who only pretends to be "disciplined," when in fact he has no internal mastery over himself. There are any number of stories about Patrul hiding his identity, eschewing the royal treatment that might otherwise befit a teacher of his fame and stature. On the other hand, Patrul was a talented showman whose writings go out of their way to highlight their very status as eloquent speech. One might say that Patrul's writings call attention to themselves in ways that Patrul the human being often avoided doing. The two texts that appear here are a case in point, showcasing Patrul's deft manipulation of Buddhist categories in *The Low-Born Sage Speaks* and highlighting his creativity in *The Explanation of Chudrulü*.

The two works also support Patrul's reputation for giving teachings that are accessible yet profound. Patrul delivers short, digestible bits of teaching—compact, orderly, and playful. But these bits add up to wholes greater than their parts—multivalent, provocative, and speaking to a far-reaching Nyingma view of innate liberation. So, for example, *The Low-Born Sage Speaks* effectively reduces the entire path of awakening to a few simple practices. Yet these simple practices, such as "looking at your own mind" (*rangi sem la tawa*), have the power to lead practitioners to a realization about the nature of all things that appear in the world. *The Explanation of Chudrulü* is, on one level, an accessible joke, a way to tease scholastic monks that everyone can enjoy. On another level, it can be read as a cryptic allegory about how our minds are capable of interacting with the world yet remain eternally pure—unchanging in their emptiness. Both works are easy to understand, on the one hand, and densely packed with meaning on the other. For these reasons they are ideal representatives of witty Tibetan advice writing (*shaldam*).

Translating Patrul's Works

The most interesting features of these two works are the very aspects that make them challenging to translate. They contain numerous puns and are

humorous in ways not easily communicable in translation. They also utilize verse, compact in expression yet highly concentrated with significance. Communicating the semantic sense of these verses while simultaneously capturing their elliptical, choppy style is a challenge. So too is giving the reader a taste for the rhythm of the verses and their shifting meter. A few examples will hopefully suffice to introduce the kinds of puns, lively wordplay, and humor that appear in *The Low-Born Sage Speaks* and *The Explanation of Chudrulü*.

The following stanza uses double meanings in order to show how the guru's instructions capture the intent of all three baskets of the Buddha's teachings (a traditional way to organize the authoritative utterances of the historical Buddha and his close followers).

It principally trains your afflictive emotions.
 It gathers in brief only the most essential point of the entire Dharma.
 It demonstrates the way of being of suchness.
 The speech of the guru is the three baskets of Dharma.

The first line incorporates the phrase “trains” (*dulwa*), referring both to training one's emotions as well as to one basket of the Buddha's teachings: *dulwa* (better known as Vinaya, in Sanskrit). The second line uses the phrase “in brief” (*do*) to stand in for a second basket: *dodé* (Sūtra). Finally, the third line includes the verbal phrase “demonstrates” (*ngöndu tön*) using the verbal modifier *ngön*, alluding to the third basket of *ngönchö* (Abhidharma). Patrul thereby incorporates the names of all three baskets into his description of the qualities of a guru's speech.

The Explanation of Chudrulü also contains punning and creatively multi-valent turns of phrase. To cite one example, the youth brag that Patrul is capable of masterfully interpreting the meaning of words without needing to quote from scripture in order to lend authority to his interpretations.

The complete Kangyur and Tengyur are well known, like the wind.
 But knowledge is that which corrects scripture.
 It is well known to society's many scholars
 that there is no need for scriptural quotations over and above
 knowledge.

These lines appeal to a pun on Tibetan terms for the wind. The youth state that knowledge, which Patrul has in spades, is “that which corrects scripture.” This short phrase actually contains two puns on “the wind,” referenced in the prior sentence. The Tibetan term for “correct” or “edit” (*dakjé*), which

literally means “that which makes pure,” is a figurative term for “wind.” (It is likewise a figurative term for “water”—the subject of one third of *The Explanation of Chudrulü*.) The Tibetan term for “scripture” (*lung*) is also a homonym for “wind.” So the youth declare that if the Buddhist scriptures (the Kangyur and Tengyur) are like the wind, so too is knowledge. Knowledge is, on the semantic level of the sentence, “that which corrects scripture.” Knowledge is also “the wind,” insofar as the phrase *corrects scripture* contains a double pun on “wind.”

From one perspective, the entirety of *The Explanation of Chudrulü* is a grand play on words. The text opens by praising Mañjuśrī, crediting him with possessing the four thorough and perfect knowledges that all bodhisattvas achieve along the path to liberation—four ways of categorizing their capacity to teach the Buddha’s way to others.

Reverence to you, Gentle Protector, sun of the heart
 who possesses the thorough and perfect knowledges
 of phenomena and their meaning, confident eloquence, and the
 etymology of words.
 Reverence to you.

I would suggest thinking of the youth’s explanation of *chudrulü* as a humorous exemplification of these bodhisattva skills, invoked here in the introductory verse. The verse also suggests a larger play on words at work in the composition. The fourth perfect knowledge is usually understood to mean that advanced bodhisattvas know how to speak about all phenomena using human or nonhuman languages. The literal meaning of this term, *ngapai tsik*, is the knowledge of the “etymology of words.” Patrul humorously captures the flexibility in the meaning of this fourth knowledge. He has his text’s surprise bodhisattvas—the youth—show their understanding of all human language (including Degé dialect) by quite literally offering an etymology of *chudrulü*. Funny as it may sound, their capacity to spin a creative interpretation of the constituent syllables of *chu-dru-lü* is, in the broader scheme of the text, a demonstration of their bodhisattva skills.

Patrul and Rimé

While Patrul had relationships with Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo and Chokgyur Lingpa, two of the most celebrated masters associated with rimé in nineteenth-century Kham, he did not participate in the collection of visionary cycles and spiritual instructions that seemingly define the era. His primary

institutional affiliations were all Nyingma, including Dzokchen, Gemang, Yarlung Pemakö, and Dzagyäl monasteries. With that said, Patrul's biographers go out of their way to emphasize his ecumenical attitude. They note that he respected Longchenpa, Sakya Paṇḍita, and Tsongkhapa as equals, and that he had students from a variety of lineages and taught the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* using commentaries best suited to his specific audiences (a Sakya commentary for a Sakya audience, a Geluk commentary for a Geluk audience).

The two works that follow may offer some insight into the complexity of the issue of ecumenism in nineteenth-century Kham. *The Low-Born Sage Speaks* offers a playful take on the pettiness of sectarian competition, thereby displaying an ecumenical attitude toward all Buddhist lineages. The text opens with a visitor asking the sage to explain the differences between Dharma lineages (*chöluk*), wishing to know which ones are better and which worse. The sage artfully dodges the question by answering with reference to the entirety of the Buddha's teaching (*chö*) and tradition of practice (*luk*). While the questioner seemingly seeks a sectarian response, the sage treats it as an opportunity to speak about the practices that undergird all Buddhist teachings and practice, such as devotion to the guru and training one's mind through the discipline of mindfulness.

Patrul's refusal to play favorites among Tibetan Buddhist lineages calls to mind a hilarious story documented for posterity by E. Gene Smith.⁴ Like the sage of our text, Patrul was practicing in a retreat cave when visitors arrived to ask him questions. They tried to ascertain Patrul's lineage affiliation through various means, finally asking for his secret name—the name that Patrul would have received when he took tantric vows. Their hope was that this name would reveal his lineage affiliation. Much to their shock, Patrul exposed himself, playing on the Tibetan word for “secret name” (*sangtsen*), which colloquially means “penis.” This story speaks to Patrul's enjoyment of puns and wordplay. Such playfulness is in ample supply in his texts that appear in this volume.

A nonsectarian approach does not mean an uncritical acceptance of all Buddhists, however. *The Explanation of Chudrulü*, while also filled with punning and witty manipulation of language, shows a slightly different side of Patrul. It overtly criticizes an excessively scholastic approach to Buddhist training, one exemplified by the old men in the text. They are so singularly obsessed with the formal standards of textual commentary and monastic debate that they are blinded to the brilliance of the *chudrulü* teaching that

4. Smith 2001, 246. Sarah Harding also mentions this popular story in her contribution to this book.

they have just witnessed. The text is quite clear that these conservative monks are missing out on other expressions of the Buddha's teachings: teachings that are accessible to everyone, such as the six-syllable mantra (*om mani padme hūm*).

One could read the text as a sectarian joke about Geluk monastic scholars, who are famous for emphasizing scholastic study and monastic debate above meditation and retreat practice. Still, since the Geluk lineage is never named in *The Explanation of Chudrulü*, one could just as well interpret Patrul's critique as directed at monks from all different lineages. The nineteenth century did find a variety of lineages in Kham, including the Nyingma, developing scholastic curricula for their monks. Patrul himself composed influential and technical scriptural commentaries and served for a time as the abbot of Dzogchen Monastery's Śrī Siṃha monastic college. Surely, Patrul did value the activities of composition, exposition, and debate. The humor of *The Explanation of Chudrulü* makes more sense as a playful teasing than an outright rejection. Even when making a joke, it seems, Patrul could be both accessible and cryptic, straightforward and nuanced, simple and profound.

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