RULES AND REGULATIONS OF THE REB KONG TANTRIC COMMUNITY

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Introduction

Most of the tantric practitioners from Reb kong belong to the Rnying ma tradition. This tradition was revived in Reb kong in the seventeenth century and is represented by some small yet renowned monasteries (Dhondup, 2013). These monasteries might not have been able to compete in size and stature with their Dge lugs counterparts, but they were nevertheless important places of worship. Founded by some leading figures of the Reb kong tantric community, they provided a site and space for the tantric practitioners to practice their own tradition. The importance of these monasteries is thus not only their historical pre-eminence, but also the clues they provide in terms of understanding the culture and tradition of the tantric practitioners. We know little about the Rnying ma monasteries in Reb kong—when they were founded, the different traditions within the Rnying ma community, the relationship between the monasteries and the tantric practitioners, whether its members took the vow of celibacy, and so forth. In this essay, some of these issues will be explored by examining the rules and regulations of these monasteries as well as that of other minor communities belonging to the Reb kong tantric community. I demonstrate that the rules of some Rnying ma monasteries were considerably less strict than that of other monasteries elsewhere because of one main reason: its members were predominantly lay tantric practitioners. It is this “lay” component that not only explains the differences in their rules and monastic duties, but constitutes one of the main elements of their identity.

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1 There are also tantric practitioners who belong to the Bon or Sa skya tradition. See for example Tsering Thar’s article, “Bonpo Tantrics in Kokonor Area.” Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines, no. 15 (November 2008).

2 The term “monastery” is usually understood as a site where a community of celibate monks reside. Here, I loosely use the term monastery to refer to a place of residence and practice for celibate and non-celibate practitioners.
Scholars analysing the classical Vinaya texts—the monastic codes in early Buddhism—have worked on different issues within monastic discipline, ranging from the daily monastic routines to the violation of rules, the consequences of not obeying certain laws, and so forth (Voyce, 2008; Clarke, 2009a; Clarke 2009b; Schopen 2010). We have therefore sufficient material about the history and culture of early Buddhist religious life. By looking at the monastic constitution of the Rnying ma monasteries in Reb kong, some light can similarly be shed on the tradition and culture of the tantric practitioners.

I begin by examining the life of Nam mkha’ ’jigs med, who was one of the initiators of new regulations within the Reb kong tantric community. His monastic seat, Khyung mgon, counts as one of the main six Rnying ma monasteries in Reb kong. I then turn to the six major Rnying ma monasteries and answer the following questions: When did these monasteries emerge? Who were the founding figures? Which tradition did they follow? Who were the members of their community? Next, I discuss the structure and organisation of the lay tantric community and the relationship between the Rnying ma monasteries and the lay tantric practitioners. Finally, I analyse the monastic constitution of the different Rnying ma monasteries as well as those of minor tantric communities. Obviously, lay tantric practitioners were not bound by the same vows as the ordained monks whose monastic duties and rules are clearly prescribed in the Vinaya. What follows first is an introduction to Nam mkha’ ’jigs med’s life, the teachers he met, and the teachings he received from them.

Spyang lung dpal chen nam mkha’ ’jigs med (1757–1821)

Spyang lung dpal chen nam mkha’ ’jigs med was undoubtedly one of the leading charismatic personalities within Reb kong’s tantric community, the Reb kong sngags mang, as it is known. Not only was his birth said to have been prophesied by the 8th century Indian master Padmasambhava, but Rig ’dzin dpal ldan bkra shis (1688–1743), the “founder” of the Reb kong sngags mang, also predicted the birth of this adept master (Lce nag tshang hūṃ chen and Ye shes ’od zer sgrol ma, 2004: 705–706; Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje, 2006: 158). Referred to as a Grub dbang or great siddha, Nam mkha’ ’jigs med was an accomplished practitioner who underwent many meditative retreats. In his youth, he was courageous and bold, challenging even a group of bandits who robbed the horses of his family (Lce nag tshang hūṃ chen and Ye shes ’od zer sgrol