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**“This inferior female body:” Reflections
on life as a Tibetan visionary through
the autobiographical eyes of Se ra mkha’
’gro (Bde ba’i rdo rje, 1892–1940)¹**

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As Barbara Aziz informed us twenty years ago, the handful of accounts authored by women in pre-1959 Tibet detailing the “fabulous accomplishments of outstanding divine women” cannot provide an adequate basis for a sociology of women in Tibet.² However, the few extant auto/biographies written by or about women certainly provide a good starting point to gather information about women, their social contexts, and their religious opportunities.³ One such

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¹ This research could never have been undertaken without the support of Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje rin po che, who made Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s autobiography available to me, and Rgyal rong mkhan po thub bstan blo gros mtha’ yas (Mkhan po sangs rgyas), who tirelessly read it with me.

² Aziz 1987: 84–85.

³ For research on other early 20th-century Tibetan autobiographies and biographies about women, see Havnevik 1997, 1999 for a study of the autobiography of Rje btsun lo chen (also called Rig ’dzin chos nyid bzang mo, 1865–1951) and Rossi 2008a, 2008b for an introduction to the hagiography of Bde chen chos kyi dbang mo (1868–1927?) and a collection of religious biographies exclusively of women (Bde chen 1985) that she revealed. For research on earlier Tibetan-language auto/biographies about women, see Schaeffer 2004, 2005 for a study of the autobiography of the nun from Dolpo named O rgyan chos skyid (1675–1729) and Diemberger 2007 for a comprehensive study of the Bsam sding rdo rje phag mo female reincarnation lineage including a translation of the biography of the first in this lineage, Chos kyi sgron ma (1422–1455/6). Other pre-1959 Tibetan women who have biographies or autobiographies include Bsod nams dpal dren (1388?–1432?),

Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies
Volume 32 • Number 1–2 • 2009 (2010) pp. 115–150.

previously unexplored autobiography is that of Se ra mkha' 'gro (also called Bde ba'i rdo rje, Kun bzang bde skyong chos nyid dbang mo, and Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro, 1892–1940). Se ra mkha' 'gro is one of the most prolific female authors in Tibetan history. Her writings include four volumes of revealed Treasure teachings (*gter chos*), a commentary on *Buddhahood Without Meditation* (*Ma bsgom sangs rgyas*) by Bdud 'joms gling pa (1835–1904), a biography of her teacher and consort Dri med 'od zer (also known as Gsang sngags gling pa, 1881–1924), and her own autobiography.⁴ Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography is one of the only Tibetan autobiographies written by a woman who was both a Treasure revealer herself and a consort to male Treasure revealers.⁵ It is a long work

'Phrin las dbang mo (1585?-1668?), Lha 'dzin dbyangs can sgrol ma (17th century), Smin gling rje btsun mi 'gyur dpal sgron (1699–1769), Smin gling rje btsun 'gyur med phrin las chos sgron (early 19th century), Bsam sding rdo rje phag mo chos dbyings bde chen mtsho mo (19th century), and Rgya gar ri rdo rje phag mo bde skyong ye shes dbang mo (1886–1909). Additionally, there are biographies of the women who were part of the Gung ri mkha' 'gro female incarnation line from A mdo. There are also several *'das log* accounts about women in which they visit and return from the realm of the dead. For English sources, see Epstein 1982; Pommaret 1989; Delog Dawa Drolma 1995; Cuevas 2008. For hagiographies in English of important Tibetan female saints, see Nam-mkha'i snying-po 1983; Allione 1984; Dowman 1984; Edou 1996; Lama Chonam and Sangye Khandro 1998; Gyalwa Changchub and Namkai Nyingpo 2002; Harding 2003.

⁴ See Bde ba'i rdo rje 1978; Mkha' 'gro bde skyong dbang mo 1981; Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2002, 2009.

⁵ Treasure revelation is a system of on-going Buddhist revelation that traces much of its history to the religious activities of the eighth-century Indian Tantric master Padmasambhava, the figure who is credited with spreading Buddhism in Tibet. Padmasambhava gave teachings to be revealed in future times to incarnations of his twenty-five disciples, including his Tibetan consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal, who transcribed and concealed the Treasures. Treasures can be material or textual objects (*sa gter*, earth Treasures) discovered in the ground or they can be visionary revelations (*dgongs gter*, mind Treasures). There is a complex network of stages in the revelation process as well as conditions known as auspicious connections (*rten 'brel*) that must converge including finding the right time, place, doctrine holder, and consort for the prophesied Treasure revealer to successfully reveal his or her Treasures. See Tulku Thondup 1986; Gyatso 1986, 1993.

– more than 400 Tibetan folios – replete with Se ra mkha' 'gro's divinely inspired visions as well as her recollections of the difficulties of life as a female Treasure revealer who struggled to find her place amidst the religious encampments (*chos sgar*) of early twentieth-century Mgo log and Khams.⁶ Se ra mkha' 'gro's narrative is a first-person account of the life of a woman who renounced her wealthy Lhasa upbringing as the daughter of Mongolian nobility in order to pursue a religious life in Mgo log, fleeing from an imminent forced marriage to a Chinese official at the age of fourteen.⁷ En route to Mgo log, she recounts nearly starving and freezing to death in hopes of receiving Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) teachings from Dri med 'od zer, who was one of Bdud 'joms gling pa's eight sons. The text charts Se ra mkha' 'gro's transformation from being a central Tibetan noble girl to becoming a beggar in Mgo log and then a *dākinī* renowned for revealing textual and material Treasures (*dgongs gter* and *sa gter*). Not only did she teach her own Treasure teachings to monastics and devout laity in Eastern Tibet, but she also taught those of Bdud 'joms gling pa and Dri med 'od zer.

Se ra mkha' 'gro was not a nun; her life story includes reflections on the difficulties of living with her “life partner” (*tshengrog*) Rgyal sras, son of the late nineteenth-century Treasure revealer Mgar ra gter chen pad ma bdud 'dul dbang phyug gling pa

⁶ Se ra mkha' 'gro lived the majority of her life in what is today Gser rta County, Dkar mdzes Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan, and Pad ma County, Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai. The three main communities in which she lived were 1) Bdud 'joms gling pa's seat Zlar tshang dgon in Gser rta County (GPS N: 32 47.505 ft. E: 100 04.097 ft. elevation 13711 ft.), 2) Mgar ra gter chen pad ma bdud 'dul dbang phyug gling pa's seat Ban nag dgon in Pad ma County (GPS N: 32 54.129 ft. E: 100 46.338 ft. elevation 11,924 ft.), and 3) Se ra Monastery (Se ra theg chen chos 'khor gling) in Gser rta County (GPS N: 32 28.703 ft. E: 99 50.441 ft. elevation 13,407 ft.).

⁷ Se ra mkha' 'gro recorded her age according to the Tibetan system, which I have modified to accord with the international convention. Hence, when Se ra mkha' 'gro writes that she escaped from her family estate in Lhasa at the age of fifteen, I give the age as fourteen.

(1857–1910) from Pad ma County, Mgo log.⁸ But Rgyal sras, with whom she bore two children, was not the most significant man in her life. As is evident in both Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography and the 248-folio biography she wrote about her lama and prophesied consort (*thabs grogs*) Dri med 'od zer, her devotion and love for he whom she calls “Wish-fulfilling Jewel” (Yid bzhin nor bu) or “the Lord himself” (Rje de nyid) forms the backbone of her autobiographical narratives. Se ra mkha' 'gro's long separations from Dri med 'od zer and their ultimate reunion mirror her journey from suffering to realization, a Tantric journey symbolized by the union of method and wisdom in the form of predestined male and female partners.

Se ra mkha' 'gro's prolific writings record her extraordinary accomplishments amidst the vicissitudes of life in early twentieth-century Eastern Tibet, where she struggled to find a place for herself as an outsider from Central Tibet and as an unusual female agent in the largely male domain of being a Treasure revealer. Hindrances such as poverty, disease, and jealousy among competing female consorts threatened the fragile auspicious connections (*rten 'brel*) that Se ra mkha' 'gro sought in order to fulfil her life's purpose of revealing Treasures. Throughout her sorrowful tale of separation from loved ones, physical illness, and community conflicts, Se ra mkha' 'gro's main sources of unconditional support were the visionary *dākinīs* who appeared before her in waking and dreaming life. *Dākinīs* encouraged her to withstand the abuses of her quotidian world by reminding her of her divine origins and promising celestial respite in Ye shes mtsho rgyal's Buddhafield after she fulfilled her earthly duty of taming disciples.

This article aims to present some of the key elements of Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiographical narrative, focusing in particular on her portrayal of the female body. Se ra mkha' 'gro's writing is pervaded by references to her “inferior female body” (*skye lus dman*

⁸ Se ra mkha' 'gro never mentions Rgyal sras's full name in her writings, but it was most likely Pad ma rnam rgyal (1882/3-?). For references to him, see Mgar gter chen pad ma bdud 'dul dbang phyug gling pa 2005: 77, 103.

pa)⁹ at the same time as she asserts herself to be an incarnation of Ye shes mtsho rgyal and a divinely prophesied Treasure revealer. I suggest that Se ra mkha' 'gro's repeated negative comments about her female body reflect not only real societal restraints on the possibilities for Tibetan women in her milieu, but also serve the literary purpose of emphasizing her humility. The denigration with which she describes her femaleness neutralizes the radical implications of writing such a long autobiographical accolade, an endeavor typically assumed only by accomplished religious males. Laments about her lowly female form 'put her in her place' even as they allow her to articulate a convincing identity as a religious exemplar that is both sufficiently humble and spiritually superlative.¹⁰ Through the dialogical tone of her writing, Se ra mkha' 'gro transforms her female gender from being a potential problem for her acceptance as an authentic Treasure revealer to a boon. Her continual laments about how a lowly woman like herself couldn't possibly accomplish the Dharma have the subversive effect of eliciting responses from visionary *dākinīs* and *siddhas* as well as important male religious hierarchs that affirm the great potential of women and proclaim Se ra mkha' 'gro's true identity as a divinely prophesied Treasure revealer. Through these direct speech dialogues, Se ra mkha' 'gro contradicts her own negative valuation of being female. She conveys to her readers that she is Ye shes mtsho rgyal incarnate via the words of her interlocutors while rarely making lofty assertions about herself in her own voice. Visionary *dākinīs* take the lion's share of this supportive role, often appearing immediately after discouraging events in Se ra mkha' 'gro's life to reassure her of her sanctity and to counter the worldly forces that seemed determined to discredit her.

⁹ One could also translate this as 'inferior body,' but given that its short form '*skye dman*,' literally 'low-birth,' is a commonly used Tibetan word for 'woman' or 'wife,' its gendered connotations are quite overt. For a discussion of the term '*skye dman*,' see Aziz 1987: 79, Diemberger 2007: 10–13.

¹⁰ The dialectic between Se ra mkha' 'gro's gender-based self-denigration and her eloquent and loquacious depictions of her spiritual accomplishments formulate what Janet Gyatso has referred to as a "diffident autobiography," or one that bears a tension between humility and self-aggrandizement. See Gyatso 1998: 105.

Dākinīs' confidence-inspiring words are especially significant given that Se ra mkha' 'gro mentions only one other woman who gave religious teachings in her entire autobiography, an elderly incarnation of Ma cig lab sgron who was a nun named Lama A ne bzang mo.¹¹ With few other examples upon which to model her life as a female Treasure revealer, Se ra mkha' 'gro's main inspiration was clearly the paradigmatic female saint of Tibet, Ye shes mtsho rgyal. According to Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings, Ye shes mtsho rgyal was not only Padmasambhava's Tibetan consort who wrote down and concealed his religious teachings to be rediscovered in later times as Treasure texts (*gter ma*), but Se ra mkha' 'gro was also an emanation of her. I suggest that Ye shes mtsho rgyal was a model for Se ra mkha' 'gro in another sense as well: her extensive autobiography bears noticeable resemblances to Ye shes mtsho rgyal's hagiography.¹² The two texts also share common narrative elements including mothers from the powerful Tibetan Gnubs clan, fathers who were local political leaders, great beauty in youth, extreme repulsion from impending marriages, consort relationships with important male Buddhist teachers, resistance to unwanted male attention, and explicit use of male consorts to serve their own spiritual needs. Whether one interprets these similarities as indicative of Se ra mkha' 'gro's status as Ye shes mtsho rgyal's incarnation or as signs that Se ra mkha' 'gro shaped elements of her writing and even her life on Ye shes mtsho rgyal's hagiography, it is striking to note how few other precedents for human female sanctity Se ra mkha' 'gro found.¹³

¹¹ Bde ba'i rdo rje, *Dbus mo bde ba'i rdo rje'i rnam par thar pa*, fol. 122a3 (henceforth I refer to this text as Se ra mkha' 'gro's *Autobiography* because she is most widely known to English-language readers by her epithet Se ra mkha' 'gro rather than Bde ba'i rdo rje, which was her Treasure name or *gter ming*). Se ra mkha' 'gro writes that she never met A ne bzang mo, who died when Se ra mkha' 'gro was nineteen years old.

¹² Se ra mkha' 'gro never describes which version of Ye shes mtsho rgyal's biography she read or heard, but I have found at least three passages from her autobiography that are parallel to passages in the 17th-century Bstag sham nus ldan rdo rje edition.

¹³ Aside from A ne bzang mo and the hosts of celestial *dākinīs* who appear before her in her visions, the only other female religious adepts Se ra

Text description

Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography is titled *The Spiritual Biography of the Central Tibetan Woman Bde ba'i rdo rje: A Reliquary for Fortunate and Faithful Ones [Serving as] a Chariot Leading to Renunciation*.¹⁴ In the two-part colophon of the text, Se ra mkha' 'gro specifies that she completed the first segment of the text in 1927 at the age of thirty-five at Se ra Monastery in Gser rta County, and that this portion of the text was transcribed by her male disciple Tshul khrims rdo rje.¹⁵ Then, in the second part of the colophon, Se ra mkha' 'gro documents that she herself wrote down her life story from age thirty-five to forty-two.¹⁶ Se ra mkha' 'gro's disciple Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje rin po che describes the long version of her autobiography (*rnam thar rgyas pa*) quoted in this article as the outer, inner, and secret autobiography combined

mkha' 'gro references are Jo mo sman mo, Kun dga' 'bum ma, Ma gcig lab sgron, and Sa skya'i rta mgrin dbang mo. She also writes of two women she knew personally, Sngags btsun nyi ma sgron ma, partner of Mkhan po nor bu dbang rgyal from A bswe, and the *dākinī* from Khrom dge named Mkha' 'gro zla ba sgron ma, though she does not indicate whether or not these women had their own disciples.

¹⁴ Bde ba'i rdo rje, *Dbus mo bde ba'i rdo rje'i rnam par thar pa nges 'byung 'dren pa'i shing rta skal ldan dad pa'i mchod sdong*, unpublished manuscript, ca. 1934. The manuscript I quote in this article is 407 folios long and was lent to me by Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje rin po che in Pharping, Nepal. I have also found another 526-folio version of this manuscript that is privately owned in Gser rta County. The variation in length between these two manuscripts appears to be the result of different handwriting sizes as to date I have not found any differences in content. For a study of this autobiography and the biography Se ra mkha' 'gro wrote of Dri med 'od zer, see Jacoby 2007.

¹⁵ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 406a. The monk Tshul khrims rdo rje transcribed many of Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings. He was Se ra mkha' 'gro and Dri med 'od zer's close disciple and attendant, who travelled with Se ra mkha' 'gro after Dri med 'od zer's death along with her other monk attendant Thub bstan bzang po.

¹⁶ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 407a. Since she died at forty-eight, all but the final six years of her life are included in the autobiography.

into one.¹⁷ Additionally, there is a condensed fourteen-folio version published in Se ra mkha' 'gro's collected Treasure revelations (*gter chos*).¹⁸ Until recently, Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography was a rare text, unpublished in Tibetan or English.¹⁹ Se ra mkha' 'gro's writing style is influenced by Mgo log dialect Tibetan and the text includes some spelling and grammar variants which attest to its distance from standard classical literary Tibetan. The colloquial style of the text is highly oral in nature; the text reads like a conversation between Se ra mkha' 'gro and the plethora of divinities and humans who populate her narrative, written as direct speech. Interspersed in the dialogic prose are elaborate verse poems and songs that demonstrate Se ra mkha' 'gro's linguistic prowess and insight into Buddhist philosophy and praxis, insight that repeatedly surprised and inspired great faith in those around her who thought she was uneducated.²⁰ Approximately half of the text documents

¹⁷ Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje 1976: 5.

¹⁸ The condensed version of Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography is titled *Ku su lu'i nyams byung gi gnas tshul mdor bsodus rdo rje'i spun gyis dris lan mos pa'i lam bzang*, written in 1929, in Bde ba'i rdo rje 1978, vol. 4:103–129.

¹⁹ Reasons for the rarity of Se ra mkha' 'gro's *Autobiography* in Tibet include: (1) The lack of a blood lineage heir to carry on Se ra mkha' 'gro's teachings. Only one of Se ra mkha' 'gro's children lived beyond childhood, her daughter Chos dbyings sgron ma, who had a son fathered by Dri med 'od zer's son Bsod nam lde'u btsan named Mdo li nyi ma (or Dpal don 'grub 'phrin las rnam rgyal mchog), b. 1946, who was killed during the Cultural Revolution (Pad ma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2003: 71). (2) The esoteric content of her narrative, which includes many of her visions and accounts of consort practices. (3) Perhaps the insecure political and economic climate in the early-mid 20th c. in parts of Mgo log and Gser rta due to incursions by warlords followed by People's Liberation Army soldiers caused her lineage and manuscripts to become relatively obscure in Tibet aside from a few places in which her manuscripts have been preserved, notably Ri bo che in the Chab mdo Prefecture of the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Bkra legs and Se ra Monasteries in Dkar mdzes Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. However, Se ra mkha' 'gro's works will soon circulate more widely due to the recent Tibetan-language publication of her collected works compiled and edited by the Mgo log khul gna' rtsom bya ba'i 'go khrid tshan chung gzhung las khang (Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009).

²⁰ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 79a, 81b-82a, 88b, 111a, 126b.

Se ra mkha' 'gro's meditative experiences (*nyams snang*) during waking and dreaming life in which she travelled widely through Buddhafields and met many *dākinīs*, lamas, *siddhas*, and other divine beings who lavished prophesy and at times Treasures (*gter*) upon her. The other half chronicles Se ra mkha' 'gro's travels, teachings, thoughts, and human interactions.²¹

Life in Lhasa as a Chinese leader's daughter

A fascinating element of Se ra mkha' 'gro's liberation story is the way she describes the ethnicity of her family and the events surrounding her birth. She writes that she was born in an area of Lhasa west of the Jo khang Temple called Klu mo mthil in a palace called Rgya ra ga shar to a mother of the Tibetan Gnups clan named Tshe ring chos 'dzom and a father of royal Mongolian ancestry named Lha sras byams pa mgon po.²² Interestingly, she refers to her family as being a Chinese leader's family.²³ She describes her

²¹ Se ra mkha' 'gro's *Autobiography* contains 88 visions, which comprise 46% of the text. Out of the 88 visions she describes, 55% of them are visions of female divinities, 27% of them are male divinities, and 16% of them include both male and female divinities (or neither in the case of formless visions and visions of animals not distinctly gendered). This breakdown between visionary and worldly life is similar to that of the biography Se ra mkha' 'gro wrote of Dri med 'od zer in which visions comprise 52% of the text. Out of 80 different visions in his biography, 58% of them are of female divinities, 31% of them male divinities, and 10% of them include both male and female divinities (or are genderless, i.e., they are of animals or formless voices).

²² The palace name Rgya ra ga shar is similar to the name of the Lhasa noble family known as Mdo mkhar or Rag ga shag, whose palace was also to the West of the Jo khang. Another similarity between the Rag ga shag family and that of Se ra mkha' 'gro is an affiliation with Stag lung Monastery, in particular with the abbot Ma' rin po che. Despite these overlaps, I am not aware of any evidence suggesting that Se ra mkha' 'gro was connected to the Rag ga shag family.

²³ Se ra mkha' 'gro describes her father's race as *sog po dbang gi dung rgyud*, i.e., "royal Mongolian ancestry," and their family as *rgya dpon sang*, i.e., "Chinese leader's family." Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 7b, 17a. Se ra mkha' 'gro's description of her father as a "Chinese leader" probably means that he was a Qing official, not that he was ethnically Chinese, given

father as a man fluent in both Chinese (*rgya skad*) and Tibetan who wore Chinese attire (*cha lugs rgya nag*) but was a devout Tibetan Buddhist Seminal Heart practitioner (*chos lugs snying thig*).²⁴ Given that she mentions that the famous Rnying ma lama and descendent of Gushri Khan named Chos rgyal ngag kyi dbang po (1736–1807) was her father’s ancestor, it is likely that Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s father was descended from the Mongol Khans who settled in Lhasa. Se ra mkha’ ’gro recounts a dispute that emerged regarding her birth year between a Chinese group (*rgya sde rnam*) who argued that she was born in the Chinese male hare year (1891) since there were two 30th days at the end of the last month and a Tibetan group (*bod shog pa rnams*) who claimed that she was born on the first day of the first month of the Tibetan dragon year (1892).²⁵ While the birth year debate ended in favor of the Tibetan group’s perspective, Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s father insisted that she learn Chinese characters (*rgya yig*) before she was allowed to learn Tibetan.²⁶

that there were very few ethnically Han Chinese officials in Tibet until the twentieth century. According to Kolmas 1994: 456–57, out of the 135 Ambans or Assistant Ambans in Tibet from 1727–1912, only 7 were Chinese while the majority were Manchu or Mongolian. In Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s usage, the term *rgya nag*, “Chinese,” seems to refer to non-Tibetans affiliated with the Qing Empire and not to the Han Chinese ethnicity. In any case, Se ra mkha’ ’gro explains that her real father was none other than Gnyan chen thang lha, the pre-Buddhist land deity who Padmasambhava converted to Buddhism (Se ra mkha’ ’gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 17a, 19a). Because her real father was not the “Chinese leader,” she later concluded that she was free to pursue her religious aspirations following her true father’s footsteps. Incidentally, Gnyan chen thang lha is also said to be the father of Mdo mkhyen brtse ye shes rdo rje (1800–1866), who was from Mgo log. See Thondup 1999: 180.

²⁴ Se ra mkha’ ’gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 27b–28a.

²⁵ Se ra mkha’ ’gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 9a.

²⁶ Se ra mkha’ ’gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 12b, 36b–37a. There is precedence for Chinese language education and usage in Lhasa during the period in which Se ra mkha’ ’gro lived there [between 1892–ca.1906]. See Richardus 1998: 165, 168 for an autobiographical reference to Chinese literacy in Lhasa at the time: Ts’an-chih Chen (b. 1893) recounts being educated in a Chinese school in Lhasa in preparation for work in the *Amban*’s office while his sisters received Chinese language education privately at home, as did Se ra mkha’ ’gro. Thanks to Gray Tuttle for directing me to this reference.

Despite her father's resistance to her religious yearnings, Se ra mkha' 'gro represents her childhood as one of sanctity in which she continually recited the six-syllable *ma ni* prayer instead of playing games with other children. Despairing at the thought of never having a chance to practice Buddhism because she was being groomed to become a leader (*dpon mo*), she writes that when she was seven years old, she threw her schoolbooks into the river. At the same time, she contemplated suicide, making the first of many prayers lamenting her female body:

Alas, I pray to the Lotus Born One from O rgyan, all refuges condensed into one,
To Mother Mtsho rgyal, and to the Venerable Noble Lady Tārā –
Look upon me with compassion!

This female body (*skye dman*) of mine is the foundation of cyclic existence.
Having thrown away this contaminated, unclean, negative body,
Bless me with attaining a body replete with the freedoms and advantages.

As soon as I am born, having met with the dharma,
May I have the freedom to practice properly.²⁷

Just as she was about to throw herself into the water along with her books, a terrifyingly ugly woman brandishing a sword appeared before her and threatened to kill her. This *ḍākinī* vision is the first of many in her autobiography, all of which serve to protect her and encourage her religious yearnings.

Premonitions of her future as a Treasure revealer also began at the age of seven when she pulled a ritual dagger (*phur bu*) part-way out of a rock at Brag yer pa near Lhasa. However, from the beginning, important people in Se ra mkha' 'gro's life rejected the possibility that there could be a female Treasure revealer. When she was eight years old, she and her mother went on pilgrimage to 'On phu stag tshang in Lho kha where Ye shes mtsho rgyal had received Vajrakīlaya empowerments from Padmasambhava. Remembering her former karmic connections to the place, Se ra mkha' 'gro told

²⁷ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 13b1–3.

her mother, “It seems like I have lived in this land in a previous life. I remember my former actions and my share of texts that are here.”²⁸ Her mother retorted,

“Don’t talk that way. From the time of your exalted paternal ancestors [such as] the Dharma King Ngag gi dbang po until now, there have been many who have gained spiritual accomplishment. Because it is impossible for a girl to take out Treasure texts, the king’s punishment will soon come. Be silent.”²⁹

Immediately after her mother’s harsh words, Se ra mkha’ ’gro had her first dream in which a *dākinī* came to her and gave her a share of the *dākinīs*’ feast, telling her that she was the *dākinīs*’ magical emanation and that they would meet again quickly. In this way, Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s vivid visionary experience belied the discouragement those in her human world repeatedly projected onto her. Many other visionary experiences soon followed in which she travelled to other realms, including many Buddhafields (*zhing khams*) and hells. After one such visionary encounter with a *dākinī* that occurred when she was ten years old, she amazed everyone by curing those stricken by a smallpox epidemic that raged through Lhasa just after the turn of the twentieth century by blowing on them and reciting special *mantras*.³⁰

Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s childhood world was shattered when her father began arranging her betrothal. Although requests for Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s hand in marriage came from Tibetan ministers including those from the Shar khra, Rdo ring, and Zur khang families, she writes that her father refused their offers and returned their gifts because those families were from the Tibetan group (*bod sde*). Instead, he chose a Chinese leader (*rgya sde’i dpon*) named Kru’u da lo yi from Skyid grong, whose clothing was Chinese but whose religious sect was Seminal Heart, just like that of Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s father.³¹ Depressed about her upcoming marriage, Se ra mkha’ ’gro

²⁸ Se ra mkha’ ’gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 17b.

²⁹ Se ra mkha’ ’gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 17b.

³⁰ Se ra mkha’ ’gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 31a1–6.

³¹ Se ra mkha’ ’gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 27b–28a: *de dag bod sde yin pas ma gngang nas rgyu rdzas thams cad phyir sprad / nub phyog skyid lung grong*

recalls that at the age of eleven, she attempted suicide by drinking a mixture of opium and alcohol only to be discovered and resuscitated by her father.³² Although her father tried to backtrack on his marriage promise in light of her despondency, the Skyid grong family threatened war if he broke their agreement.³³ Further adding to her sorrows, the following year Se ra mkha' 'gro's mother passed away and her father promptly remarried.

Unhappy at home and dreading her imminent marriage, the twelve-year-old Se ra mkha' 'gro's life transformed when Vajravārāhī appeared before her in a dream and empowered her in the two Treasure cycles that would be her life's main practice, *The Secret Treasury of Reality Dākinīs* (*Chos nyid mkha' 'gro'i gsang mdzod*) and *The Dākinīs' Heart Essence* (*Mkha' 'gro'i thugs thig*).³⁴ Despite Vajravārāhī's encouraging proclamations, this momentous vision is one more instance in which Se ra mkha' 'gro laments her "inferior female body." After receiving empowerment and instruction from Vajravārāhī, she writes,

chen zer ba rgya sde'i dpon kru'u da lo yi'i zhes pa cha lugs rgya nag dan / chos lugs snying thig pa nga rang tsho dang 'dra ba / bsod nams long spyod ldan pa zhig la bug cig pu las med pa / Da lo yi (Ch. *da lao ye*) is a Chinese honorific title meaning "great old gentleman." It was a very minor title meaning "your honor," given to local leaders as a polite way to refer to a Prefect, Department, or District magistrate. Sperling 1998: 331 translates it as "his honour" in the context of the title of a translator of the Qianlong emperor in the late 18th century.

³² Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 33b. Se ra mkha' 'gro writes that her father saved her by pouring seed oil down her throat through a straw and forcing her to regurgitate the poison she drank.

³³ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 33a.

³⁴ This is reminiscent of the life of another female Treasure revealer, the thirteenth-century Jo mo sman mo, who was also an incarnation of Ye shes mtsho rgyal who had a vision of Vajravārāhī when she was thirteen (i.e., twelve according to international convention) in which she empowered her in Treasures. One of the seven prophecies in the beginning of Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography is from Jo mo sman mo, who predicts her future rebirth as Se ra mkha' 'gro (*Autobiography*, fols. 6a6–6b2). For Jo mo sman mo's hagiography, see 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 2004: 379–380.

“You are extremely kind to bestow empowerment and instruction upon me. Because I am one with an inferior female body (*skye lus dman pa*), it is difficult to accomplish the Dharma and [benefit] beings. However I can do this, how great! Why do I have the karmic connection to be empowered in these two profound Treasures?”

The *ḍākinī* answered, “Noble woman, you are not one with an inferior female body (*lus dman pa*). Before, in response to Mtsho rgyal’s inquiry, Guru [Padmasambhava] proclaimed:

‘The body of a female *bodhisattva* is a supreme body without [karmic] remainder;
It is the mother [who gives birth to] the great assembly of primordially perfected Ones Gone to Bliss (Skt. *sugata*).
Generate the aspiration to attain a supreme body like
The Great Vajra Queen with the knowledge of the expanse of emptiness.

The beneficial deeds of the Buddhas of the three times, a dance of the moon [reflecting] in water,
Arise in physical form on account of disciple’s devotion.
Their source, the lotus mouth of the Vajra Queen,
Is the foundation of the Buddha’s teaching, like a ripening bud.
This female body (*bud med lus*) is not inferior; this body is good.
Mtsho rgyal, you must generate the pure aspiration
Never to part with this [female] body.’

Because [the Guru] spoke like this, [your body] is not inferior.”³⁵

This is one of the many instances in which Se ra mkha’ ’gro interweaves her own biography with the sacred history of the Treasure tradition in the form of the divine couple Ye shes mtsho rgyal and Padmasambhava, thereby emphasizing her genealogical relationship to them. If Padmasambhava proclaimed that Ye shes mtsho rgyal’s female body was not inferior, then, as her emissary, Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s female body must also not be inferior. The dual tone of Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s gender-based self-denigration emerges in passages such as this; thematizing her “inferior female body” is more than an internalization of the misogynist views of her social milieu because it has the subversive effect of occasioning responses from

³⁵ Se ra mkha’ ’gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 50a1–50b2.

others that articulate highly positive views of women. I suggest that this dual tone of Se ra mkha' 'gro's repeated laments about her female body was intentional; by drawing attention to her "inferior" status as a woman, she both mitigated others' potential criticism and defended herself in writing from the charge of overestimating her social status and religious authority.

In the midst of these transformative *ḍākinī* visions and oppressive marriage preparations, the lama who would change Se ra mkha' 'gro's life, Dri med 'od zer, arrived from Mgo log along with his group of travelling pilgrims in search of shelter at her family's Lhasa residence. Instantly, tears flowed from her eyes and goose bumps rose on her flesh as she prayed in all her lifetimes never to separate from him. Intrigued by Dri med 'od zer and drawn to the life of a religious devotee free from the constraints of worldly attachments, Se ra mkha' 'gro caused a sensation when she sneaked out of her Lhasa home at the age of fourteen in about 1906 to follow Dri med 'od zer to Eastern Tibet, where she lived for the rest of her life.

A new life unfolds in Mgo log

The few snacks Se ra mkha' 'gro carried and the refined Lhasa clothing she wore quickly proved insufficient for the rigors of life as a wandering religious mendicant. Se ra mkha' 'gro recounts the shock she faced acclimating to her new rough circumstances outside of the wealth and privilege of her family's protection. Starving and in search of food, at first she mistook a nomad's tent for a wild yak. When she put the barley flour nomads gave her into her shoe because she didn't have a bag for it, the nomads laughed at her.³⁶ She had no idea how to make tea, and when she learned, she felt as though her eyes, which had never before felt the sting of wood fire smoke, would go blind.³⁷ She nearly froze to death on the road

³⁶ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 74a–74b.

³⁷ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 76a–76b.

due to inadequate clothing, and as a result, sores erupted all over her body.³⁸

When she caught up with Dri med 'od zer's group at Mtshur phu, her presence was met with hostility from Dri med 'od zer's encampment members (*sgar pa*) who viewed her suspiciously as an outsider to their religious community.³⁹ As a Central Tibetan amidst Mgo log people whose speech she initially describes as that of "savage barbarians" (*mtha' 'khob pa kla klo*) and as a young unattached female, Se ra mkha' 'gro's presence threatened many around her who feared she would become their lama's consort.⁴⁰ Once they arrived at Dri med 'od zer's homeland in the high pasture land of Zlar tshang in Gser rta, Dri med 'od zer's travelling pilgrims all returned to their homes while Se ra mkha' 'gro was left alone in a foreign land where she couldn't understand the dialect, was illiterate in Tibetan, and had no work experience. Initially, she tried to rent a room at Dri med 'od zer's household (*bla brang*), but others forced her to leave out of concern that Dri med 'od zer's consort A skyong bza' wouldn't return to the household unless Se ra mkha' 'gro left. Expelled from another home, Se ra mkha' 'gro managed to learn how to be a servant in a nearby nomadic household while she began religious practices under the tutelage of Dri med 'od zer and several of his brothers.⁴¹ Her devotion to her lamas, ascetic perseverance in completing her preliminary religious practices, and eloquent and poetic religious songs quickly demonstrated that she was no ordinary laywoman.

³⁸ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 78a.

³⁹ Se ra mkha' 'gro's identity as a Central Tibetan woman and not an insider to the Mgo log religious encampments (*chos sgar*) in which she lived remained salient throughout her life and beyond, as is evident by the name still used in Mgo log today to refer to her, Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro, "The *Ḍākinī* Lady from Central Tibet."

⁴⁰ I follow Se ra mkha' 'gro's lead of describing Dri med 'od zer and his companions as people from Mgo log, but more specifically they were people from an area neighboring what is now called Mgo log that during Se ra mkha' 'gro's day was controlled by the Dbal shul tribal group.

⁴¹ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 87a.

Despite this, as one with no biological family relations nearby, no monastic vows, and no husband, Se ra mkha' 'gro didn't easily fit into any community in Mgo log. Jealous consorts made life difficult in the non-celibate religious communities (*chos sgar*) that were often centered around Treasure revealers (*gter ston*). When the seventeen-year-old Se ra mkha' 'gro received a letter summoning her to the presence of a prominent Treasure revealer named Mgar ra gter chen pad ma bdud 'dul dbang phyug gling pa of Ban nag Monastery in what is today Pad ma County, Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, she yearned to leave her post as a servant girl to attend to the lama's needs. However, before she began her journey, she received a message from Mgar ra gter ston's consort Yag shul bza' threatening her with harsh words and warning her not to come near the lama. Yag shul bza' knew that Mgar ra gter ston had received a prophecy from the *dākinīs* indicating that Se ra mkha' 'gro could help remove the obstacles to his life and cure his worsening illness by acting as the lama's consort, but she didn't have any interest in competing for her partner's attentions with the young, beautiful, and increasingly renowned *dākinī* from Central Tibet. When Mgar ra gter ston was on the verge of death, Yag shul bza' finally relented. But since Se ra mkha' 'gro arrived too late, the auspicious connection (*rten 'brel*) her presence could have brought to preserve the lama's life did not occur and he died.⁴²

⁴² In addition to Se ra mkha' 'gro's *Autobiography*, at least two other publications mention this incident including 1) the *Dar thang dgon pa'i gdan rabs* and 2) Mgar ra gter ston's autobiography titled *Mgar gter chen pad ma bdud 'dul dbang phyug gling pa'i rang rnam*. Mgar ra gter ston's short biography in *Dar thang dgon pa'i gdan rabs* (O rgyan brtson 'grus 1999: 379) states that Mgar ra gter ston died after "the auspicious connections of the supreme consort in the *dākinī* prophecies named the Central Tibetan Lady mkha' 'gro chos nyid bde skyong dbang mo [i.e., Se ra mkha' 'gro] were confused." Secondly, Mgar ra gter ston's disciple named Thub bstan chos 'phel concludes Mgar ra gter ston's autobiography by giving a detailed account of how his consort Yag bza' was a bad person who "wanted him to die" (*zhing khams la 'dun pa gtod rgyu yin*) and did whatever she could to harm him such as preventing Se ra mkha' 'gro from dispelling the obstacles to his life (Mgar gter chen pad ma bdud 'dul dbang phyug gling pa 2005: 161–170).

Immediately afterwards, Se ra mkha' 'gro had a visionary experience in which the newly departed Mgar ra gter ston empowered her in his Treasure cycles and designated her as the appropriate person to maintain and protect his teachings. Se ra mkha' 'gro describes the following interaction she had with his visionary form after he empowered her:

“Because of my inferior female body (*lus dman*), it is difficult for me to benefit beings in the world. Hence, having abandoned this body, if I try to attain a man's body, I wonder if I will benefit beings?”

The lama said, “Don't think like this. This body you have is that of a great female *bodhisattva*, the mother who gave rise to all the Buddhas. It is the chariot that traverses the grounds and paths, the foundation that propagates men who adhere to Sūtra and Tantra. Like snow comes from water, the expansive space of the greatly secret empty realm of the mother [i.e., the womb], the space (*mkha'*) of reality itself in which the energy of compassion goes (*'gro*), is the source of both *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Hence, this body of yours is the superior [way to] benefit beings. If you wonder how it is that it is superior, before, during the time of the previous Buddha Kāśyapa, when you were the daughter of a Brahmin named Nam mkha' sgron ma, based on your pure aspiration to generate the supreme awakening and by the power of your prayers to the Lady Mtsho rgyal, you dispelled all manifest and unmanifest negative obstacles to the life forces of men who adhered to the teachings. You raised the victory banner of the teachings. Via skillful means (*thabs*) and auspicious connections (*rten 'brel*), you propagated the happiness of beings and established them in bliss. In particular, be like a mother to exhausted sentient beings and it is certain that inconceivable benefit for beings will gradually arise.⁴³

Mgar ra gter ston's response to Se ra mkha' 'gro's despair transforms her negative valuation of her female body by honoring its extraordinary qualities, qualities that reflect a Tantric perception of the female body's virtues centered on the womb. The womb is the source of the Buddhas, which Mgar ra gter ston metaphorically links to the Tibetan word for *ḍākinī* (*mkha' 'gro*), or sky-goer. He specifies that Se ra mkha' 'gro's previous incarnation Nam mkha' sgron ma dispelled obstacles to the life force of religious men, an

⁴³ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 105a6–106a2.

ability which refers to her capacity to engage in consort practices. This equation between sexuality and longevity that Mgar ra gter ston's comment and the stories surrounding his death evokes persists in Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings as one of the main purposes for consort practices.⁴⁴

Despite the unfriendly welcome Se ra mkha' 'gro initially received at Ban nag Monastery, she soon settled with Mgar ra gter ston's son named Rgyal sras because she received a prophecy indicating that she should do so for the sake of preserving Mgar ra gter ston's Treasure teachings. By the time she was nineteen in approximately 1911, Se ra mkha' 'gro's extraordinary abilities as a *dākinī* including curing people of sickness, performing divinations, and experiencing many divine visions earned her increasing acclaim in the wider community around Ban nag Monastery. Nevertheless, her former nemesis Yag shul bza', who was now effectively her mother-in-law, strove to expel her from the community. Rgyal sras was soon influenced by Yag shul bza's antipathy towards Se ra mkha' 'gro. He belittled her religious understanding, saying she was unfit to receive esoteric instructions. He rejected her claim to be a Treasure revealer as her own mother had earlier, stating that,

Before, during the time when there were one hundred great Treasure revealers, two of them actually manifested as female Treasure revealers (*gter mo*). These days in this Degenerate Age, [we] don't see the existence of female Treasure revealers.⁴⁵

After this, Se ra mkha' 'gro writes that, "From that time forward, I wrote my Treasures down secretly."⁴⁶ Soon, Se ra mkha' 'gro became pregnant with Rgyal sras's child, who she intuited was an

⁴⁴ See Chapter Four of Jacoby 2007 for a discussion of consort practices in Se ra mkha' 'gro's auto/biographical writings. I have delineated three major purposes for consort practices including soteriological, pragmatic, and hermeneutical, but pragmatic purposes such as prolonging life and curing illness are the most common.

⁴⁵ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 141a3–4. The two female Treasure revealers he refers to here are Jo mo sman mo and Kun dga' 'bum ma, both mentioned in 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas's (1813–1899) *Gter ston brgya rtsa (The One Hundred Treasure Revealers)*.

⁴⁶ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 141a5.

incarnation of his father Mgar ra gter ston. However, Se ra mkha' 'gro records that the child's fate changed when he transformed from a boy into a girl in utero:

That year in the first month of fall when it became time to see the face of my child, I went to collect firewood near a man named Chos lhun who Mgar ra gter chen previously [said was] one who adhered to demonic scriptures. Because he called out in a fierce voice and performed curses and so forth, the protection of my child was reversed and he became a girl. At that time Rgyal sras felt great regret. Saying, "If this girl dies I'll be happy," he treated her really badly. Although I wasn't pleased with this, I didn't say anything.⁴⁷

The opinion of Se ra mkha' 'gro's milieu about having a female child is clear, given that Se ra mkha' 'gro attributes the birth of a daughter to demonic intervention. After the child's inauspicious sex transformation, there is no more discussion that the child might be Mgar ra gter ston's incarnation. Despite this, still feeling that her daughter was extraordinary, Se ra mkha' 'gro took the baby to a lama who said the child had great merit and named her Dbyangs can sgron ma.⁴⁸ After Se ra mkha' 'gro gave birth to her daughter, she writes that a Ma gcig lab sgron Accomplishment Practice (Skt. *sādhana*) came to her as a Treasure, but because she secretly taught it to some monks, Rgyal sras scolded her. She writes that she felt extremely sad and then supplicated the heroes and *dākinīs* of the three realms with the following prayer:

In the unmanifest land of the Glorious Copper-coloured Mountain,
Omniscient Mother Ye shes mtsho rgyal and Heroes and Heroines,
consider this!

I, this messenger sent by the mother *dākinīs*,
Was born in an impure body as a woman (*za ma mo*).
My impure action is that I maintain a household.
My impure land is the demonic land of Mgo log.
My impure deed is that I continually stay with a negative community.
From what causes and conditions did this karma originate? ...⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 146a5–146b2.

⁴⁸ Se ra mkha' 'gro refers to her daughter more commonly as *Chos dbying sgron ma*.

⁴⁹ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 147b6–148a2.

In response to her song of lamentation, Se ra mkha' 'gro heard a voice with no physical form coming from the sky saying,

Alas, alas *yoginī* –
 Is the great self-emergent primordial wisdom
 Free from exertion?
 Is the unborn self-emergent spontaneous presence
 The ground of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*?
 Are the appearances of good and bad, happiness and sorrow
 The play of reality itself?
 Is the poisonous water-lily which is the eight worldly dharmas⁵⁰
 Something to be abandoned quickly?
 Your wealth of the *ḍākinī*'s heart essence –
 Will you take it out in due time?
 Will benefit for both the teachings and sentient beings
 Come from the south?
 You don't need to be displeased and weary
 On account of the illusory emanations of this world.
 The Lotus [Born One's] testament is changeless;
 It is certain that in time the aspiration prayers will come together.⁵¹

In this way divine voices weave their words of encouragement through Se ra mkha' 'gro's narrative; they provided support and consolation just when her mundane circumstances seemed to overwhelm her with obstacles and difficulties. Despite her best efforts to “take a low place and write down the profound Treasures that came to me extremely secretly,”⁵² living with her “life partner” (*tshe grogs*) Rgyal sras proved to be at loggerheads with her main purpose of revealing Treasures.

To Rgyal sras's chagrin, by 1915 the twenty-three-year-old Se ra mkha' 'gro began to receive broader acclaim as a Treasure revealer and as a *ḍākinī*. The prominent lama from Dpal yul dar thang Monastery in Mgo log named Sgo sprul rin po che ('Jigs bral chos

⁵⁰ The eight worldly *dharmas* refer to ordinary human reactions to 1) gain and loss, 2) fame and infamy, 3) praise and blame, and 4) happiness and sadness.

⁵¹ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 148b5–149a3.

⁵² Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 144a4.

kyi blo gros) was one of the first people to recognize Se ra mkha' 'gro as an incarnation of Ye shes mtsho rgyal and to encourage her to reveal Treasures. Se ra mkha' 'gro portrays their first interaction in the following passage:

Then, I gave [Sgo sprul rin po che] a high quality turquoise wrapped in five-coloured silk along with a silk scarf with auspicious symbols on it as offerings and I prostrated to him. When I asked him, “How are you?” the incarnate himself got up from the middle of the assembly and offered me silver and a silk scarf. The lamas, monks, and laymen and women gathered there all didn't know what was going on. Each one looking at the other, they didn't say anything.

Again, the incarnate said, “You all don't need to have doubt. I think this *ḍākinī* is certainly the speech incarnation of Ye shes mtsho rgyal. You all abandon your wrong views and be faithful. This is not a deception; it is real.”

I thought, “Before [now] he has never met me or those affiliated with me, so how can he know that I am Mtsho rgyal? Not only that, how is it possible for someone like me – who has an inferior female body (*lus dman*), who on the outside has little learning and on the inside is ignorant with regard to generation and perfection stage practice, and who cannot move beyond saṃsāric work no matter what activity I begin – to be a *ḍākinī*?”

When I wondered this, he said, “Not needing to exert yourself in learning and training, you fully comprehend all the paths of generation and perfection. Not needing to learn how to write and recite texts, [you know] from the awakening of the residual karma of having learned [before]. Nevertheless, not letting your own Treasures go, you must write and propagate them or the *ḍākinīs*' punishment will quickly come.”

I said, “I am not a Treasure revealer. I have never attained even one type of dharma teaching and I don't know about generation and perfection [stage practices].”⁵³

Se ra mkha' 'gro thus vociferously denies his lauding words, maintaining her characteristic humility through reference to her “inferior body,” at the same time as her autobiography proclaims

⁵³ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 162a5–163a4.

her extraordinary status through Sgo sprul rin po che's voice. Nevertheless, after denying her abilities, Se ra mkha' 'gro hints that this was not the only outcome of their meeting by writing, "Not keeping anything that I knew secret, I spoke to him and we nurtured each other's practices."⁵⁴

Another turning point occurred in Se ra mkha' 'gro's twenty-third year when Rgyal sras, herself, and the first object of her devotion Dri med 'od zer met at a consecration ceremony for a new prayer wheel sponsored by a lama named Hor 'od chung in A mdo. Se ra mkha' 'gro writes that at the ceremony, a beautiful bejewelled woman saying she was Rdo rje gyu sgron ma appeared before her and gave her a prophecy and a white crystal vessel. Before she could hide the Treasure vessel, Dri med 'od zer saw it and insisted that she give it to him. Although she received many signs and prophecies indicating that her choice to maintain a contentious relationship with Rgyal sras instead of living with Dri med 'od zer was like choosing brass over gold, and although she recounts that she "... wanted to see him [Dri med 'od zer] like a person suffering from thirst wants water,"⁵⁵ it was Rgyal sras who decided her future. Se ra mkha' 'gro explains that in conversation with Dri med 'od zer, Rgyal sras offered her to be his consort, saying:

"... she is in a relationship with me [Rgyal sras] because of my father's former aspiration prayers – she is not one who is prophesied for me. Perhaps she is your prophesied consort. She constantly and single-mindedly prays to you and your father [Bdud 'joms gling pa]. In particular, when she hears your name tears flow uncontrollably from her eyes and, with goose bumps on her body, she prays in a loud voice and sings hymns of sadness. In any case, if [you] do a retreat [with her], perhaps obstacles [regarding] your retinue and life force will be dispelled. I offer you this consort (*mkha' 'gro*) of mine – aside from you, she has no husband.⁵⁶ She has a gentle disposition, a lucid intellect,

⁵⁴ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 163b4–5.

⁵⁵ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 155b3–4.

⁵⁶ The multiple meanings of the word I translate here as "husband," Tib. *bdag po*, include "owner, lord, master, boss, husband, and guardian." Hence, the word implies that she is now under Dri med 'od zer's control, although Se ra mkha' 'gro does not mention any formal marriage rite aside from this

and she doesn't associate with other men."⁵⁷

At first, Dri med 'od zer responded to Rgyal sras's offer hesitantly, mentioning concern over whether his other consorts would accept Se ra mkha' 'gro's presence at his household, which had already been a problem when she first arrived there at the age of fourteen. Additionally, he wondered whether having another consort was in accord with his intention to enter strict retreat for a few years. Rgyal sras insisted, and thus Se ra mkha' 'gro was exchanged between two powerful male lamas without having a say in the matter. Despite Se ra mkha' 'gro's devotion to Dri med 'od zer, she writes of her dismay at being given away. Indeed, she did not leave Rgyal sras for another six years, during which time troubles pervaded her life at Ban nag Monastery. Her *ḍākinī* visions and several visits on horseback over the mountain passes and valleys separating Ban nag from Zlar tshang to see Dri med 'od zer were her only consolations during this turbulent time. For example, when she was twenty-four in 1916, Se ra mkha' 'gro had a vision in which *ḍākinīs* transported her to Padmasambhava's Buddhafield, the Copper-coloured Mountain. There Se ra mkha' 'gro lamented her fate to be born in a female body again, telling a *ḍākinī*,

I abide in an inferior corporal body.
 Although I have good intentions, it is difficult to tame beings in this
 negative time.
 I have met with Treasures, yet the auspicious connections of skillful
 means are bad.
 Because of my limited knowledge, it is difficult to understand the
 meaning of the symbols.
 This inferior female body (*skye lus dman pa*) cannot get free from the
 mouth of my husband;
 When I wander about this country, it can't get free from the mouth of
 dogs.
 Whatever I do, people don't like me.
 When things like these occur, I am one who must abandon this body.

agreement between the two men.

⁵⁷ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 164a5–164b3.

Even though there is no difference in the mind of enlightenment (Skt. *bodhicitta*) between men and women,
 In the perspective of disciples, my body is inferior.
 I think that if I were to transform into a hero with a supreme body,
 I certainly will accomplish the great purpose of benefiting [all] beings
 who have been my mother.

Without this, how will this body
 Have a way to accomplish great benefit for the teachings and sentient
 beings?
 Lady, give me advice.⁵⁸

In response, the *dākinī* gave her a detailed prophecy in which she taught her about types of *dākinī* script and foretold her future doctrine holders, consorts, and teachings.

Nevertheless, in her quotidian life, Se ra mkha' 'gro had good reason to perceive her female body to be a source of suffering. In 1918 when she was twenty-six years old and still living with Rgyal sras, community tensions at Ban nag Monastery had escalated. Rgyal sras had taken on a second wife named Gsal sgron, about whom Se ra mkha' 'gro writes nothing positive. Not only were Rgyal sras and Se ra mkha' 'gro quarrelling, but two factions of the religious community at Ban nag were disputing about land rights, which was a common source of strife in the nomadic pasture lands of Mgo log. Se ra mkha' 'gro records that as a result of this social tension, her unborn child, who was an incarnation of Rgya rong gter smyon, died and she gave birth in great pain to a stillborn son. Aside from three members of Rgyal sras's family who liked her, she writes that her detractors headed by Yag bza' were happy and said,

“The Central Tibetan girl's merit is exhausted and her son died. Still what misery doesn't she give to the Mgo log Lady⁵⁹ and Rgyal sras? All that she says about her son dying in her stomach and giving birth to the corpse with its head and feet un-reversed (i.e., breech) is certainly lies. Whenever a calf dies in a female yak's stomach [everyone] can see that both mother and baby die. Her son was not a corpse in

⁵⁸ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 174b5–175a4.

⁵⁹ “Mgo log Lady” probably refers to Rgyal sras's new spouse Gsal sgron.

his mother's stomach; he didn't die [in the womb]. Because she didn't die, there is absolutely no way she could have gotten the baby's corpse out."⁶⁰

Yag bza' and her cohorts essentially accused Se ra mkha' 'gro of murdering her son because they could not believe she could have given birth to a stillborn child without dying herself. Only one year later, she became pregnant again and gave birth to a son named Rig 'dzin 'gyur med rdo rje, who she describes as an incarnation of Sgo sprul rin po che, the Dpal yul dar thang lama who recognized her a few years earlier as a *ḍākinī* incarnation of Ye shes mtsho rgyal. But her troubles only grew worse. Her infant son became ill and Se ra mkha' 'gro was increasingly afflicted with an arthritic condition causing swelling in her legs (*'bam*) that left her with greater and greater difficulty walking. In 1921 when she was twenty-nine years old, Se ra mkha' 'gro's social world was also affected by another crisis: the "northern Chinese" (*byang rgya*) were creating havoc (*'ur 'ur zing zing byed*), causing both Dri med 'od zer's and Rgyal sras's religious encampments to move repeatedly in order to avoid battles.⁶¹

With all this internal physical and external social commotion swirling around her, Se ra mkha' 'gro still returned to Rgyal sras's community after her pilgrimage journeys to see Dri med 'od zer, even though she knew that Dri med 'od zer was the prophesied consort she needed to reveal her Treasures. *Ḍākinīs* who manifested before Se ra mkha' 'gro made this imminently clear, such as the *ḍākinī* who appeared in a dream and pronounced in no uncertain terms that her time with Rgyal sras was over when she was en-route returning to him:

"Why are you going towards those with deteriorated commitment vows? It is as if you have mistaken brass for gold, water for wine. You throw away your destined *bodhisattva* as unnecessary. You toss be-

⁶⁰ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 215a4–215b2.

⁶¹ The "northern Chinese" (*byang rgya*) refers to the Hui Chinese Ma family warlords who were active in Northwestern China during the Republic of China era including Ma Qi (1869–1931), Ma Lin (1873–1945), and Ma Bufang (1903–1975). For more detail on this 1921 invasion of Mgo log by the Ma warlords, see Don grub dbang rgyal/Nor sde 1991: 156–158.

hind you [the responsibility of] maintaining your profound Treasure. You are distracted holding on to cyclic existence. From the time you were young until now, I have given you honest advice. I have given you the quintessence of the profound Dharma Treasures. Although I have reared you like a mother who loves her child, repelling negative conditions, outer and inner obstacles, and so forth, still you are unable to be independent and you need to be under the power of another. What is the meaning of this?"⁶²

Although Se ra mkha' 'gro replied that she was only returning to Rgyal sras because she was trying to fulfil her obligations to maintain Mgar ra gter ston's Treasure teachings, the fierce *ḍākinī* would have nothing of this and pronounced, "From this year forward, you belong to us. The time for you to live with Mgar ra is finished."⁶³ As the *ḍākinī* predicted, after returning to Rgyal sras, the twenty-nine-year-old Se ra mkha' 'gro's arthritic illness became severe and when she was completely unable to walk and on the verge of death, her disciples could bear it no longer. Everyone, including Rgyal sras, agreed that Se ra mkha' 'gro along with her young daughter and son should be sent to live with Dri med 'od zer.

Having been carried on horseback by her disciples, Se ra mkha' 'gro was finally reunited with Dri med 'od zer in 1921 at a place called Nyi ma lung in the Zlar tshang region where her life in Mgo log had begun fifteen years earlier. Dri med 'od zer, who himself had become increasingly ill, treated her illness by performing blessing rituals. After several months of strict retreat, she gradually regained her physical strength. Se ra mkha' 'gro describes amazing outer and inner signs of realization that emerged during this time of intense practice in retreat with Dri med 'od zer:

At that time, the signs in the outer environment were that day and night the mountains spoke, the earth quaked, a roaring was heard, the sound of a flute and cymbals came forth, a fragrant smell spread, and so forth. The whole group of fortunate disciples actually saw this.

The inner signs that the domains of the channels, winds, and seminal essence were becoming purified were that the knots of my head and

⁶² Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 254a6–254b6.

⁶³ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 255a5.

throat became liberated. Not needing to train in and traverse the path, I understood all the Dharma vehicles completely. The essential meaning of the symbols of all the teachings in accordance with the disposition and devotion of beings from the hidden vessel of the intention of the profound Treasures became self-liberated. The ten winds became pliant and our bodies had youthful flesh and were light like cotton-wool. When I spoke spontaneously-uttered hymns of vajra words, the seeds of the first concentration were planted in the mind-streams of those who heard them. By many small deeds such as this, benefit for sentient beings arose. In particular, the inexpressible understanding of awareness and emptiness that is the primordial wisdom of great bliss and emptiness without elaboration endowed with the three liberations⁶⁴ manifested [in me]. The minds of both of us, method and wisdom, actually merged into one taste.⁶⁵

Se ra mkha' 'gro thus describes the moment of her spiritual liberation as one in which method and wisdom, Dri med 'od zer and herself, became utterly inseparable. Not only was her body cured from illness as realization dawned, but she and Dri med 'od zer "became extremely quick in decoding each other's Treasures."⁶⁶ Thus, Se ra mkha' 'gro portrays her relationship with her lama and prophesied consort Dri med 'od zer as one of mutual benefit in which both male and female partners relied on each other to reveal and decode Treasures, cure illness, and dispel obstructions.

Tragedy struck when Se ra mkha' 'gro and Dri med 'od zer had lived happily together for only a few years. A plague swept through Dri med 'od zer's religious encampment in 1924, killing both Dri med 'od zer and Se ra mkha' 'gro's five-year-old son 'Gyur med rdo rje within the same week. She writes that Dri med 'od zer "put his hands on my head, stared into space, and having prayed [for us] to arise as Vajradhara in the [form of] the non-dual union of method and wisdom, his form body departed for the expanse of reality."⁶⁷ Devastated with grief, Se ra mkha' 'gro was again utterly homeless when Dri med 'od zer's other consorts expelled her from his

⁶⁴ The three liberations are emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness.

⁶⁵ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fols. 262b4–263a6.

⁶⁶ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 264a2.

⁶⁷ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 295a2–4.

household (*bla brang*) before the embers of his funeral pyre had grown cold.

Dri med 'od zer's close disciple Bsod sprul sna tshogs rang grol, the incarnate lama from Se ra theg chen chos 'khor gling Monastery of Gser rta County, kindly invited Se ra mkha' 'gro and her entourage including her daughter Chos dbyings sgron ma, her attendant Thub bstan bzang po, and her scribe Tshul khriims rdo rje to live at Se ra Monastery. They stayed there for several years, earning Se ra mkha' 'gro her nickname "the *Dākinī* of Se ra." In the years following Dri med 'od zer's death when Se ra mkha' 'gro was living at Se ra, she wrote first Dri med 'od zer's biography, which she explains came to her from *dākinīs* as self-emergent symbols, and then her own long autobiography, which she authored as her own composition. She frequently travelled from Se ra Monastery around Mgo log and Khams with her attendants, empowering monastics and lay people in the Treasure teachings of Bdud 'joms gling pa, Dri med 'od zer, and her own Treasures. During this time, she continued to encounter visionary *dākinīs* who urged her on with prophetic encouragement to accomplish her life's purpose of revealing Treasures. When she was forty-one, she spent several months gathering and editing Bdud 'joms gling pa and Dri med 'od zer's entire collection of Treasures (*gter chos*) that totalled forty volumes by themselves and forty-four volumes with the inclusion of her own revelations.⁶⁸ Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography ends when she was forty-two in 1934, six years before her death in 1940. She died in Ri bo che at the estate of her disciple, the Ri bo che Zhabs drung Tshe dbang grags pa.⁶⁹ Her disciple Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje adds that when they brought her body out to the cremation site, "Her body had dissolved into light and all that remained was about the size of an eight-year-old child."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Se ra m kha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 388b4–6.

⁶⁹ A first-hand account of her death can be found in Tshul khriims rdo rje 1948: 9–12. See Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009 (vol. 1): 538–547 for a published version of this text.

⁷⁰ Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje 1976: 15a5–15b4. This would be seven years old according to international convention.

Conclusion

That Se ra mkha' 'gro's female gender was a salient issue for her and others in her communities is clear by the frequency with which she mentions her "inferior female body," only a few examples of which I depict in this article. I suggest that we can interpret the more than thirty instances in which Se ra mkha' 'gro describes herself as "an inferior woman" in two ways: both as a very literal internalization of misogynist views regarding women's religious aptitude and as a rhetorical device that enabled her to make extraordinary claims about herself. Through harping on her "inferior female body," Se ra mkha' 'gro successfully composed an autobiography that was both humble enough to be accepted by many in her androcentric religious milieu, yet assertive and confident enough to confirm her status as a woman with religious authority. This feature of Se ra mkha' 'gro's writing bears resemblance to some female Medieval Christian mystics' writings in which female authors had a general tendency to use their femaleness as a way to accentuate their humility. For example, Hildegard of Bingen describes herself as "a weak and fragile rib;" Clare of Siena as "a useless handmaid and unworthy servant;" and Julian of Norwich as "a woman ignorant, weak, and frail."⁷¹ Monica Furlong attributes this "ritual obeisance" of gender-based self-denigration in Medieval women mystics' writings as a reflection of a socially imposed sense of inferiority as much as it was a literary device that helped their divine mystical visions to be heard, an interpretation I suggest can be applied to Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings as well.

Closer to home in Tibetan Buddhist literature, we can also find precedence for the way in which Se ra mkha' 'gro expressed humility through referring to her female form. For example, Kurtis Schaeffer finds a strong connection between suffering and the female body in the autobiography of a nun from Dolpo, Nepal named O rgyan chos skyid (1675–1729). Just as O rgyan chos skyid prayed to be reborn as a man and never again as a woman because "This female body is itself *samsāra* – the round of existence," Se ra

⁷¹ Furlong 1996: 14.

mkha' 'gro described her female body as a "contaminated, unclean, negative body" that was "the foundation of cyclic existence."⁷² This association between suffering, *samsāra*, and the female body has ancient Buddhist roots that hardly served the interests of women, but both O rgyan chos skyid and Se ra mkha' 'gro managed to turn this negative valuation of the female body from a vice to a virtue.⁷³ Orgyan chos skyid's analogy between *samsāra* and her female body put her in a very good position to claim direct experience of the Buddhist truth of suffering.⁷⁴ Se ra mkha' 'gro's descriptions of herself as an unlearned woman, as a tramp expelled from empowerment lines, and as an unhappy wife subservient to Rgyal sras had the subversive effect of occasioning others' powerful praise.

In particular, the authoritative others who respond to Se ra mkha' 'gro's laments are often *ḍākinīs*. *Ḍākinīs* unapologetically assert what Se ra mkha' 'gro herself cannot, that she is an emissary of Ye shes mtsho rgyal working for the benefit of sentient beings by revealing and teaching Padmasambhava's Treasure teachings. However ephemeral their appearances may be, *ḍākinīs* provide direction and protection for Se ra mkha' 'gro just when she needs it most. *Ḍākinīs* do not try to destabilize her sense of self, as they do in at least one male-authored Tibetan autobiography.⁷⁵ More than being "a powerful representation of the repressed feminine aspects of the male psyche," as some Western scholars interpret them,

⁷² Schaeffer 2004: 143; Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 13b2. It is important to note, however, that not all Tibetan women's autobiographies reference the female body in the same way. For example, the autobiography of the nun and Abbess Rje btsun lo chen rin po che (Rig 'dzin chos nyid bzang mo, 1865–1951) of Shug gseb Nunnery does not emphasize her humility through repeated references to her female body. See Havnevik 1999 for an English translation and study of this autobiography.

⁷³ See Wilson 1996 for a study on the ways in which the female body has been portrayed as horrific in early Indian Buddhist scriptures written by and for monks.

⁷⁴ Schaeffer 2004: 103.

⁷⁵ Gyatso finds that in the context of the 18th-century 'Jigs med gling pa's autobiographical writings, *ḍākinīs*' words bolster his sense of himself at the same time as they destabilize it, contributing to the ultimate undecidability of his experience (Gyatso 1998: 254).

dākinīs act as enlightened female role models whose main function is to encourage Se ra mkha' 'gro's religious yearnings.⁷⁶ For O rgyan chos skyid as well, *dākinīs* are a major source of encouragement; *dākinīs* even over-ride her master's refusal to help her write by bestowing literacy upon her.⁷⁷ Perhaps we can conclude that marshalling the *dākinīs*' support was especially important for female autobiographers in the Tibetan Buddhist world who had so few human female role models from whom to derive inspiration.

Despite the potentially subversive elements of Se ra mkha' 'gro's treatment of her "inferior female body," we must ask ourselves what effect if any this subversion had for those who inherited her religious lineage and/or copies of her manuscripts? I suggest that the long list of women in Mgo log and beyond who have been recognized as incarnations of Se ra mkha' 'gro including Rdzong sprul rin po che's daughter Lha lcam chos kyi sgron ma, Tā re lha mo (1938–2002), and Mkha' 'gro rin po che (b. 1954) demonstrates that Se ra mkha' 'gro's example did help pave the way for women who came after her to claim religious authority.⁷⁸ After all, *dākinīs* supportive words spoke not only to Se ra mkha' 'gro, but to all female and male disciples who read her autobiography, exhorting them to see the female body as "the mother [who gives birth to] the great assembly of primordially perfected Ones Gone to Bliss."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Sponberg 1992: 28. See Herrmann-Pfandt 1990, 1992–93 and Simmer-Brown 2001 for comprehensive studies on the significance of *dākinīs* in Tibetan Buddhism as well as interpretations of the diverse ways in which Western scholars have analyzed them. In the case of Se ra mkha' 'gro, her writing affirms that *dākinīs* are far more than symbols serving the needs of the male yogic subject. On the other hand, the prevalence of *dākinīs* in Se ra mkha' 'gro's writing does not imply that human women had an exalted status in communities practicing Tantric Buddhism.

⁷⁷ Schaeffer 2004: 132.

⁷⁸ Pad ma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2003: 73 and 1997: 110. Outside of Mgo log, the daughter of Bya bral sangs rgas rdo rje rin po che of Pharping, Nepal named Saraswatī is widely thought to be an incarnation of Se ra mkha' 'gro.

⁷⁹ Se ra mkha' 'gro, *Autobiography*, fol. 50a4–5.

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