

TO BE OR NOT TO BE CELIBATE: MORALITY AND CONSORT
PRACTICES ACCORDING TO THE TREASURE REVEALER SE
RA MKHA' 'GRO'S (1892–1940) AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL
WRITINGS¹

SARAH JACOBY

At least since the time of the eleventh-century Indian Buddhist master Atiśa, tensions have simmered within Tibetan Buddhist religious communities between the competing religious dictums of celibacy and religiously sanctioned forms of sexuality.² Whereas Tibetan monastic apologists have attempted to aestheticise explicit mention of sexuality in Tantric scriptures and initiations by metaphorically or symbolically interpreting their erotic content, non-celibate religious practitioners including Treasure revealers (*gter ston*) have maintained vestiges of a more literal interpretation of practices involving sexuality.³

While the dividing lines between celibate and non-celibate Tibetan religious specialists may initially appear clear, the borders between the two have often been far from it. On the one hand, there are certain instances when celibate monastics from the Rnying ma School may engage in sexuality. For example, according to Bdud 'joms 'jigs bral ye shes rdo rje's (1904–1988) commentary on Mnga' ri pan chen padma dbang gi rgyal po's (1487–1542) *Ascertaining the Three Vows* (*Sdom gsum rnam nges*), if a monk has sexual intercourse that is

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² See Davidson 1995 for a translation of Atiśa's *A Lamp for the Path to Awakening* in which Atiśa addresses these issues.

³ Treasure revealers (*gter ston*) are religious specialists thought to be incarnations of the eighth-century Indian Tantric master Padmasambhava's original twenty-five disciples. They discover religious Treasures (*gter*) thought to be hidden in the earth and sky of Tibet by Padmasambhava and occasionally other imperial Tibetan personages. These Treasures include sacred substances called earth Treasures (*sa gter*) such as scriptures, statues, ritual objects, and vessels containing scriptures and mind Treasures (*dgongs gter*), which are visions in which *bodhisattvas* bestow teachings upon the Treasure revealer. For more information on Treasures and the complex processes involved in their revelation, see Thondup 1986 and Gyatso 1993; 1996.

unstained by desire in which he is able to perceive both subject and object as male and female wisdom deities, to transform his desire into the recognition of great bliss, and to transform his loss of seminal fluid and his attachment into primordial wisdom awareness, then his act is not a violation of any of his vows.⁴ On the other hand, there are several instances of Treasure revealers who chose to be celibate monastics despite the strong connection between successful Treasure revelation and engaging with the appropriate prophesied consort—three recent examples of celibate Treasure revealers from Eastern Tibet are A 'dzoms rgyal sras pad ma dbang rgyal (b. 1971) of Re khe dgon chen o rgyan bsam gtan gling in the Chab mdo region, Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs (1933–2004) of Bla rung sgar in Gser rta County, and Se ra yang sprul (1925–1988) of Se ra theg chen chos 'khor gling, also in Gser rta.⁵

The purpose of this article is to explore this tension between celibate and non-celibate interpretations of ideal Tibetan religious conduct through the biographical and autobiographical writings of the most prolific female author and Treasure revealer in Tibetan history, Se ra mkha' 'gro (1892–1940).⁶ In her 400-plus Tibetan folio-page autobiography and her 248 folio-page biography of her teacher and male partner Dri med 'od zer (1881–1924), one of the eight sons of the prominent nineteenth-century Treasure revealer Bdud 'joms gling pa, Se ra mkha' 'gro grapples with questions as relevant in today's Tibet as in centuries past such as: 1) What is the relative value of the moral superiority of celibacy and the expedient means of religious practices involving sexuality? 2) Under what circumstances, if any, is it acceptable for a celibate monastic to participate in consort practices? 3) How can the dividing line between conventional lust and spiritually-beneficial sexuality be distinguished? And finally, a question that has received far less attention in the predominantly male-authored Tibetan Treasure literature: 4) Should a female Treasure revealer engage with multiple partners as many male Treasure

⁴ Bdud 'joms rin po che 1996 [date of Tibetan authorship 1984]: 142, 144.

⁵ See Germano 1998 for a description of Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshog and Bsod nams nyi ma 1994 for a detailed biography of Se ra yang sprul.

⁶ Se ra mkha' 'gro signed her Treasure revelations (*gter chos*) and her autobiography using her Treasure name (*gter ming*) Bde ba'i rdo rje. She also sometimes used the name Chos nyid kun bzang bde skyong dbang mo. The epithet 'Se ra mkha' 'gro' ('The *Dākinī* of Se ra') derives from the time she spent later in her life at Se ra theg chen chos 'khor gling in Gser rta County, Mgo log. In the Tibetan diaspora, many people know Se ra mkha' 'gro by this name, although in Mgo log another epithet, Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro ('The *Dākinī* Princess from Central Tibet'), is more common.

revealers did for the sake of their revelations or should she live as a nun?

Se ra mkha' 'gro was an exceptional woman in many ways, not the least of which was her authorship of one of the few and longest female-authored autobiographies in Tibetan literature.⁷ However, we can read the tensions her biographical writing exhibits between celibate and non-celibate interpretations of religious conduct as indicative of broader tensions in her early twentieth-century religious communities in the Mgo log region of Eastern Tibet. In Se ra mkha' 'gro's day the Mgo log religious landscape was comprised primarily of two types of communities: 1) religious encampments (*chos sgar*) centred on charismatic Treasure revealers who lived in yak hair tents and often travelled together on pilgrimage and on alms-seeking journeys and 2) monasteries (*dgon*), which were sedentary institutions housing celibate monks and nuns. Both *sgar* and *dgon* competed with each other for the patronage of the nomadic laity of Mgo log, offering ritual services in exchange for resources such as silver coins, butter, barley, milk, yogurt, and animal hides. However, monasteries and religious encampments centred on Treasure revealers were not separate religious spheres, but rather overlapping ones. Charismatic non-celibate Treasure revealers were sometimes abbots of monasteries housing celibate monks, and the mobile religious encampments affiliated with them included not only non-celibate practitioners, but also monastics.⁸ The proximity and differing codes of conduct of these two forms of religious community inform the tensions regarding

⁷ Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography, which she completed in approximately 1934, is titled *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* (*The 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*), henceforth abbreviated as DDNT. The manuscript is unpublished and the 407 folio-page version I quote in this paper was lent to me by Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje in Pharping, Nepal. I have also found another 526 folio-page version of the unpublished manuscript (written on smaller pages) in Gser rta County, Dkar mdzes Prefecture, which is written in different handwriting although to date I have noticed no differences in content. Up to now, Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography has been a rare document, preserved only by her lineage holders and their descendants in Ri bo che, Dkar mdzes, Gser rta, and in the Tibetan diaspora. The autobiography will soon be more accessible, as 'Ju skal bzang intends to publish the Dkar mdzes manuscript version of Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography under the name *Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro ma'i rnam thar* as part of the Mgo log dpe rnying dpe tshogs series produced by the Mgo log khul mi rigs skad yig bya ba'i gzhung las khang.

⁸ For further information on Treasure revealers and their roles in the social landscape of early-twentieth-century Mgo log, see Jacoby 2007: 109-29 and Jacoby forthcoming.

whether or not to be celibate apparent in both Se ra mkha' 'gro's rendition of her own life and that of Dri med 'od zer.

One factor that strengthens our ability to read Se ra mkha' 'gro's auto/biographical writing as a resource for a social history of the early twentieth-century Eastern Tibetan religious encampments in which she lived is the dialogical style of her writing. She expresses the story of her own and Dri med 'od zer's spiritual liberation through direct-speech interactions with members of their communities and with a host of supermundane beings who appeared before them in their visions (*nyams snang*). We can conclude that the subjects about which Se ra mkha' 'gro's interlocutors frequently debated—such as whether or not to engage in consort practices, whether or not to take monastic vows, and whether or not monks could have secret relations with consorts—were subjects of broader import beyond the pages of Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings and in the communities about and for which she wrote, which were primarily Zlar tshang and Se ra Monastery in Gser rta County, Dkar mdzes Autonomous Prefecture, and Ban nag in Padma County, Mgo log Autonomous Prefecture.⁹

The most prominent voices pressing their injunctions upon Se ra mkha' 'gro and Dri med 'od zer were those of the *ḍākinīs* that appeared before them in their visions, whose prophecies urged them to seek the appropriate consorts necessary for their revelations regardless of their misgivings. Both Se ra mkha' 'gro and Dri med 'od zer (in Se ra mkha' 'gro's rendition of his life) yearned to become celibate monastics at various times, but both of them were rebuffed by the zealous *ḍākinīs* who insisted they stay true to the more complicated path of being non-celibate Treasure revealers. *Ḍākinīs* thus provided the divine backing that allowed Se ra mkha' 'gro to represent herself as morally upright and non-celibate at the same time as they insisted that Dri med 'od zer's role in the Mgo log religious landscape was to be a non-celibate Treasure revealer. Although *ḍākinīs* exhorted Se ra mkha' 'gro to engage with the appropriate consorts to fulfil her spiritual purposes, Se ra mkha' 'gro's writing makes it clear that not everyone in her quotidian world shared their lofty point of view. The

⁹ The terrain in which Se ra mkha' 'gro lived the majority of her life straddles the border between the Eastern Tibetan regions of A mdo and Khams, or the contemporary border between the northern part of Sichuan Province and the southern part of Qinghai Province, PRC. The three main communities in which she lived were 1) Dri med 'od zer's father 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 13,711 ft.), 2) Mgar ra gter ston bdud 'dul dbang phyug gling pa's seat Ban nag dgon in Padma County (GPS N: 32 54.129 ft. E: 100 46.338 ft. elevation 11,924 ft.), and 3) Se ra theg chen chos 'khor gling in Gser rta (GPS N: 32 28.703 ft. E: 99 50.441 ft. elevation 13,407 ft.).

many altercations she recounts between herself and those in her communities who doubted her intentions for not being a nun, as well as the negative gossip she repeatedly mentions swirling around her and her activities in and around monasteries and monks, highlights that her social position as “neither a nun nor a laywoman” (*jo min nag min*) was at times a controversial one.

Though monks can technically engage in sexual intercourse as a part of meditation practice as long as it is unstained by desire according to Bdud 'joms rin po che's interpretation of Mnga' ri pan chen's Three Vow (*dom gsum*) literature, Se ra mkha' 'gro most often recounts being solicited by monks not for the purpose of their spiritual enlightenment but for the sake of removing obstacles to their health and longevity. Thus, the moral superiority of monastics' maintaining pure celibacy vows sometimes contradicted the perceived benefits of consort practices, which most often pertained to curing illness. In Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiographical writing, the onus often fell upon her, with the aid of prophecies, to determine who was and was not an appropriate consort. When potential male consorts were monks, Se ra mkha' 'gro invariably rejected the possibility that they could be appropriate consorts for her. However, *dākinīs* and male ecclesiastic hierarchs whose voices interweave with her own had other ideas about the relative balance between maintaining monks' celibacy and gathering the auspicious connections necessary for Se ra mkha' 'gro's successful Treasure revelation. We can read this dual motion in Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography between her adamant refusals to have consort relationships with monks and the repeated prophecies that seem to call for just that as Se ra mkha' 'gro's way of striking a careful balance between representing herself as morally virtuous and as a woman who engaged in the esoteric consort practices to which Bdud 'joms rin po che's commentary alludes. Though there may have been scriptural precedence for monks with high levels of spiritual realisation to engage with female consorts, from Se ra mkha' 'gro's writing we see that at least equally important to the participants' inner motivations was the way in which their actions were perceived by their communities, whose judgments were vital to the success and propagation of religious lineages such as that of Se ra mkha' 'gro. I suggest that Se ra mkha' 'gro was acutely aware of her audience, whom she describes as her disciples and those who would become disciples in the future, and it is for their benefit that we read about her refusal to break monks' vows and about the tenuous balance she

struck between upholding the virtue of celibacy and the efficacy of religiously sanctioned sexuality.

PART I: TO BE OR NOT TO BE A NUN

Se ra mkha' 'gro recounts wanting to renounce the world and live as a religious hermit from her earliest childhood. But her religious inspirations were almost immediately at loggerheads with her family's plans for her to follow in her father's footsteps as a political leader (*dpon mo*). Se ra mkha' 'gro was born in Lhasa in 1892 to a Mongolian father of royal ancestry named Lha sras Byams pa mgon po who was a Qing official¹⁰ in Lhasa and a Tibetan mother of the Gnubs clan named Tshe ring chos 'dzom. Though her parents were devoted lay Buddhists, Se ra mkha' 'gro's devotion reached a deeper level. She writes that from the age of seven, after she failed to convince her fellow childhood playmates to recite *maṇi* prayers,

From that time forward I renounced my attachment to my neighbours and relatives and although I had a great aspiration to go only to a secluded mountain, since I was young, aside from just going to the top and bottom of the house, I didn't dare go.¹¹

After begging her mother to let her renounce the world, her mother agreed to ask her father if she was allowed to become a nun. Her father replied,

In the astrological calculations pertaining to your former lives, it seemed as if it was unacceptable for you to be a shaven-headed nun, hence I am not sure. Let's request a divination and have a detailed conversation with Lcang grong grub thob rin po che¹² regarding what to do and we'll know.¹³

¹⁰ Se ra mkha' 'gro describes her father's political position as '*rgya dpon*', which I am translating as 'Qing official' because the 'Chinese' political influence in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Lhasa would most likely have been Manchu Qing and not Han Chinese, although there were some Han Chinese working in the Qing *amban* offices in Lhasa at this time (see Richardus 1998: 161–208). That Se ra mkha' 'gro's father was not Han Chinese is supported by the fact that she refers to him as of royal Mongolian ancestry (*sog po dbang gi gdung rgyud*).

¹¹ DDNT f. 11a.4–5.

¹² Se ra mkha' 'gro describes Lcang grong grub thob rin po che as the head lama of the group of 18 Qing leaders (*rgya shog dpon khag bco brgyad kyi dbu bla*) who was renowned as an incarnation of Thang stong rgyal po.

¹³ DDNT f. 11b.1–2.

When the family arrived before Lcang grong grub thob rin po che and requested his guidance, the lama replied,

Because this girl is without mistake an incarnation of Sa skya Rta mgrin dbang mo, it is not suitable for her to live either as a householder or as a nun. When the time comes, her heritage will awaken. Until then, let her reside however she is comfortable.¹⁴

This in-between status Lcang grong grub thob rin po che prescribed for Se ra mkha' 'gro as one who was neither householder nor nun characterised the remainder of her life, even after her heritage as a *dākinī* had awakened.

Although she experienced many extraordinary religious signs as a child including revealing Treasures from Brag yer pa, visions of *dākinīs*, and the spontaneous ability to cure those stricken by the smallpox epidemic that struck Lhasa in approximately 1903, these did nothing to stop Se ra mkha' 'gro's father from arranging a politically advantageous marriage for her when she was a young teenager to the son of another Qing leader. Despairing at the idea of being forced to marry and take on a political role and devastated by the death of her mother when she was thirteen, Se ra mkha' 'gro hatched a plan to escape from the oppressive confines of her upper-class Lhasa family, never to see them again. After spying a group of travelling pilgrims from the widow of her family's home when she was fifteen, she surreptitiously escaped from her home at night and followed the group of wild-looking pilgrims from Mgo log led by the charismatic Treasure revealer Dri med 'od zer, who would soon become the object of her greatest devotion. The pilgrimage she embarked upon with this Mgo log religious encampment (*chos sgar*) from Central Tibet to their homeland in the nomadic highlands of the Gser rta region of Mgo log brought Se ra mkha' 'gro near to dying of starvation and hypothermia. Her childhood as a member of Lhasa's nobility had scarcely prepared her for the rough existence of road travel on foot and begging for meagre sustenance, not to mention the unenthusiastic welcome that she received from her newly adopted religious community as an outsider girl from Central Tibet.¹⁵

¹⁴ DDNT ff. 11b.6–12a.1.

¹⁵ The fact that in Mgo log she was and still is called Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro, 'The *Dākinī* Princess from Central Tibet', highlights the salience of her outsider status as a foreign, Central Tibetan-born woman in the Eastern terrain of Mgo log, which was a semi-independent tribal area that was never under the sovereignty of the Central Tibetan government.

Her difficulties did not end when the pilgrims reached their destination in Dri med 'od zer's homeland of Zlar tshang in Gser rta, the main seat of his late father Bdud 'joms gling pa. No sooner had Se ra mkha' 'gro arrived in Zlar tshang and sought shelter at Dri med 'od zer's residence (*bla brang*) than those affiliated with Dri med 'od zer's consort, a local Mgo log woman named A skyong bza', refused Se ra mkha' 'gro shelter. This was the first of a long refrain in Se ra mkha' 'gro's life of other women being jealous of her and excluding her from their religious communities. It seems that the young, unattached, beautiful, spiritually gifted, and ambitious Se ra mkha' 'gro posed a threat to other women with whom she vied for the attentions of powerful male religious hierarchs and scarce economic resources.

This tension between women was not only evident between competing female consorts of important Treasure revealers, but also between Se ra mkha' 'gro and some of the nuns with whom she interacted. For example, when Se ra mkha' 'gro was seventeen years old and trying to extricate herself from a temporary stint as a servant girl in a Mgo log household where she ended up after being expelled from Dri med 'od zer's residence, her employers introduced her to their relative, the nun Tshul sgron, and suggested that living with her would be conducive to Se ra mkha' 'gro's religious aspirations. She writes,

[her employer said]...At the religious encampment, since our nun Tshul sgron is there, go and live there and don't lose our horse."

I did what he said and went to Tshul sgron's place.

[Tshul sgron] said, "Now you need to go before Sprul sku mu ra sang and cut your hair and request vows. Otherwise, you certainly won't live at my place."

I thought that since there was a rich household of the man named Bsod bkra sang whose household didn't belittle me and who always gave me non-meat foods from time to time whenever they had them such as rice and wild sweet potatoes and so forth, it seemed that Tshul sgron got jealous thinking that I would live with the Bsod bkra household.

I said the following: "It is okay if I don't cut my hair and take vows. It won't harm your purity. Even when I think of the conduct of you completely pure nuns, someone like me who is young and without wealth would surely not make it on my own as a nun."

She got mad and stood up. Having grabbed my shoulder, she led me before Mu ra sang and said “Sir, Sprul sku, please take a tuft of her hair [i.e., make her a nun]. She has gone astray from the middle [way] and although she has a pure mind, she doesn’t listen to anybody and I don’t know what to do with her.”

The attendant said, “Wait here for a moment. Speak to him after he eats his food.”

[...*Tshul sgron* departs, leaving *Se ra mkha’ ’gro* by herself in front of *Sprul sku mu ra sang*...]

I waited and after the lama had his food, I said this:

“Sir, from the time I was fifteen years old, I wondered if I could accomplish the genuine Dharma. Hence, don’t lessen your attention to [helping me] go on this path. Because I have a great purpose, it seems that it doesn’t matter whether I cut or don’t cut my hair. It was Tshul sgron’s idea. If this body of mine doesn’t go under the strong power of another, I will not have relationships with religious people, lay householders, and so forth if I think there’s no purpose. At all times, I will see if I can accomplish benefit for myself and others. Not becoming attached to food, clothing, or wealth, I will try to accomplish pure divine Dharma. If, on account of having an inferior [female] body¹⁶ I do not follow the path I intend to, since I am not in opposition to you, please understand my viewpoint.”

Lovingly, the lama replied, “Oh, yes, not getting attached to food, clothing, and wealth and wondering if you will accomplish the pure Dharma is the same as accomplishing the Dharma. Having great attachment to cyclic existence is the same as not accomplishing the Dharma. These days religious people haven’t banished cyclic existence from their minds. In the summer, they delight in butter, in the winter, they beg for barley, and at all times they are the same as those who carry pieces of a dead corpse around.¹⁷”

He spoke about many religious topics such as this and having put a golden statue on my head, he prayed. He gave me one of seven powdered pills made from Dpal sprul rin po che’s forehead and other

¹⁶ *Lus dman*, or its longer form *skye lus dman pa*, can translate literally as ‘inferior birth body’, but given that its most common abbreviation, *skye dman*, is a prevalent word for ‘woman’ its gendered connotations are overt.

¹⁷ *Dus rgyum du gshin po’i ro dum khur*. Tulku Thondup (interview, 5/10/08) explains this reference to “people who carry pieces of a dead corpse around” as a reference to those religious specialists who perform funerary rituals for the purposes of financial gain.

religious medicine pills, juniper powder [blessed with] mantra, protection cords, and so forth and he gave me advice.

Then, I came back and told Tshul sgron, "I promised not to have a physical relationship with lay people or with religious people without a purpose. Otherwise, I will not be a nun."

She said, "Wow—it is as if you wear wild yak hide on your face [i.e., you have no shame]. Who would dare say dirty words such as these to a great lama like him?", and she pinched my cheeks.

I replied, "Since I spoke about things that I am able to do, there is no 'not daring'. I wouldn't dare let my vows and precepts secretly deteriorate."

She didn't say anything.¹⁸

This tension-filled exchange between Se ra mkha' 'gro and her would-be nun housemate Tshul sgron exemplifies the difficulties Se ra mkha' 'gro faced as an outsider with no source of income who was neither a nun with celibacy vows nor a laywoman willing to marry and be a householder. Se ra mkha' 'gro outlines multiple reasons for not being a nun in the passage above that portray both pragmatic and esoteric dimensions of her choice. On one level, Se ra mkha' 'gro worried that, "someone like me who is young and without wealth would surely not make it on my own as a nun". This in combination with her description of Tshul sgron's fear that she would steal the patronage offered by Bsod bkra sang's wealthy household demonstrate that the friction between the two women regarding the merits of celibate versus non-celibate religious life concerned not only morality, but economics.

On a more esoteric level, Se ra mkha' 'gro's promise not to "have relationships with religious people, lay householders, and so forth if I think there's no purpose", suggests that she would engage in consort relationships that did have a purpose, which for Se ra mkha' 'gro always meant a religious purpose. Though Tshul sgron criticised Se ra mkha' 'gro for saying such "dirty words" to a great lama, Se ra mkha' 'gro effectively silenced her by retorting that what is truly shameful is secretly transgressing one's vows, hinting that perhaps Tshul sgron was less morally superior than her shaved head and maroon robes suggested.

¹⁸ DDNT ff. 93a.4–94a.1; 94b.3–95b.4.

Thus, through passages such as this interaction between Se ra mkha' 'gro and Tshul sgron we see that the message Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography conveys about the relative virtues of being a nun or a non-celibate *mantrin*, as Se ra mkha' 'gro could be described, is a nuanced one. Though in her childhood she had yearned to be a nun, by the time she was seventeen, she had integrated Lcang grong grub thob rin po che's advice to her that her destiny was to be neither householder nor nun. Nevertheless, her indeterminate status as beholden to neither household nor nunnery was a lifelong source of tension. As Se ra mkha' 'gro expressed to a beautiful visionary woman who appeared before her when she was forty,

I am called neither nun nor wife.
 I am not a nun, but I am as disciplined as a nun.
 My vows regarding the three trainings on the path¹⁹ are without
 deterioration.
 Without being impure (*nag med*), I am given the name 'wife' (*nag
 mo*).
 As if I were impure (*nag can*), [others] expel me from the land and see
 me as something to abandon.
 But I don't remember having a hair's breadth of impure fault (*nag
 nyes pa*).²⁰

Se ra mkha' 'gro's verse is a play on the deliberately parallel words for 'laywoman' (*nag mo*) and impure or negative (*nag*). She figuratively places herself in both categories of being a nun and a laywoman; she is a nun in the sense of being disciplined and she is a laywoman in the sense that others misperceive her as an impure person for having male consorts. But despite the fact that she laments the difficulties this indeterminate status brings upon her, Se ra mkha' 'gro refuses to be denigrated by others; in her autobiographical annals she staunchly admits no trace of fault.

PART II: *DĀKINĪ* VISIONS PROPHECY THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSORTS

A substantial aid to the confidence that Se ra mkha' 'gro felt later in life in her path as a non-celibate Treasure revealer came from the powerful and persistent presence of celestial female divinities known

¹⁹ The three trainings on the path are discipline, concentration, and knowledge.

²⁰ DDNT f. 376b.1-3.

as *dākinīs* (*mkha' 'gro ma*) who pervade her autobiographical account. Beyond Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings, *dākinīs* play many important roles in the Treasure revelation process. According to Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer's thirteenth-century *Zangs gling ma* and 'O rgyan gling pa's fourteenth-century *Padma bka' thang*, the paradigmatic female saint of Tibet, the *Dākinī* Ye shes mtsho rgyal, was one "who had attained perfect recall" and who hid Padmasambhava's teachings for the sake of future generations.²¹ Beyond Ye shes mtsho rgyal's memory, scribal efforts, and Treasure hiding activities, *dākinīs* have become increasingly closely associated with multiple aspects of the Treasure revelation process. *Dākinīs* often serve as Treasure guardians who protect Treasures until their designated revealer reclaims them. The scripts in which revelations appear are often special symbolic scripts called *dākinī* script, illegible to Treasure revealers without the aid of *dākinīs* to decode them. One reason why male Treasure revealers rely on female consorts who are embodiments of *dākinīs* is to arouse the spontaneously arisen bliss (*lhan skyes kyi dga' ba*) necessary to decode symbolic Treasure scriptures.²² *Dākinīs* in the form of spiritual consorts are not the only necessary condition for a Treasure revealer to successfully reveal Treasures. Other essential conditions called 'auspicious connections' (*rten 'brel*) include being the right Treasure revealer for a particular Treasure and finding the proper time, place, and disciple (*chos bdag*) who will transmit the teaching in the future.

In Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings, *dākinīs* play an important role in helping to bring these tenuous conditions together because they continually provide Se ra mkha' 'gro and Dri med 'od zer with prophecies inspiring them and aiding them in gathering the requisite auspicious connections. *Dākinī* prophecies appear to Se ra mkha' 'gro and Dri med 'od zer in their waking and dreaming visionary life, encouraging them relentlessly to comply with Padmasambhava's command to reveal his hidden teachings. Visionary encounters with *dākinīs*, *bodhisattvas*, *siddhas*, and autochthonous Tibetan spirits comprise about half of both Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiography and Dri med 'od zer's biography, but the key bearers of prophecy are *dākinīs*.²³ *Dākinīs* articulate in no uncertain terms that Se ra mkha'

²¹ Tsogyal 1993: 209; Tsogyal 1978: 746.

²² Thondup 1986: 107; 130.

²³ DDNT 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% include both male and female divinities (or neither in the case of formless visions and visions of animals not distinctly gendered).

'gro and Dri med 'od zer alike are not meant for celibate monasticism but rather must occupy the less clear-cut position of being non-celibate Treasure revealers. *Ḍākinīs*' voices regularly appear to quell their attractions to the celibate life and to urge them towards cultivating consort relationships. The dialectic between *Ḍākinīs*' injunctions to engage in consort practices and Se ra mkha' 'gro's (and sometimes Dri med 'od zer's) hesitancy in doing so that pervades Se ra mkha' 'gro's writing hints that their decision to be non-celibate religious specialists was a controversial one that needed authorisation by reliable religious sources, the lion's share of which were the celestial *Ḍākinīs* whose intentions and admonitions animate the pages of Se ra mkha' 'gro's works.

Dri med 'od zer's Dilemma

Dri med 'od zer's young life was significantly less traumatic than that of Se ra mkha' 'gro, given that he was raised lovingly by a large family of illustrious religious personalities, both monastic and non-celibate. In particular, he was under the tutelage of his famous father Bdud 'joms gling pa (1835–1904), who was renowned throughout Mgo log for his Treasure revelations. Dri med 'od zer also spent several of his childhood years being educated by his older brother, the Third Rdo grub rin po che named 'Jigs med bstan pa'i nyi ma (1865–1926), in his monastery Rdo grub dgon pa in Padma County, Mgo log. As a young man, he returned to his father in Zlar tshang, Gser rta County, in order to receive teachings from him. Se ra mkha' 'gro writes that when he was seventeen years old, Dri med 'od zer felt the urge to become a monk:

Then, one day when he went to rest, he thought that it would be good if he were a monk. After a few days had passed, he went to see a great monastic *mkhan po* named Bla ma Chos rgyal who had ordained the Lord's [Dri med 'od zer's] holy direct disciple Bsod sprul rin po che, who was a disciple prophesied by the Precious Lama [Bdud 'joms gling pa] when he was in retreat. When he thought that he needed to become a novice monk, that night in his dream there was a woman with an ugly body who said, "Your behaviour in this degenerate age is wretched!" Saying this, she beat her chest and cried intensively.

This breakdown is similar to Dri med 'od zer's biography (SLNT), in which visions comprise 52% of the text. Out of 80 different visions, 58% of them are of female divinities, 31% male divinities, and 10% include both male and female divinities (or are genderless, i.e., animals or formless voices).

The Lord asked, “What made you so miserable?”

She answered, “What’s wrong with me crying? Look at the way people behave these days! Not only me, this old woman, but the *ḍākinīs* of sacred places and lands are displeased.”

Again, the Lord asked, “Why are the *ḍākinīs* of sacred places and lands disturbed?”

She replied, “If I explain [it to you], it is as if there is no limit to what there is to explain. But if I tell you just a bit, you will come to understand your fault.”

The Lord said, “What fault of mine has affected you?”

She said, “It’s good if I am not affected by [your] faults. Look at the signs of this negative degenerate era—not protecting your vows to be a *mantrin* (*sngags pa*), you shave your head. Saying you are a fully ordained monk endowed with the three [vows], you enter into mantra. Although you are empowered in profound Treasures, on account of bad people, you have little courage and you let them go. These are the faults to your life as a Treasure revealer.”

The Lord answered, “Even if Treasure revealers enter monastic training, how does that harm Treasures? Before, even the Lotus Guru took monastic ordination before Kun dga’ bo. Having received the name Shakya seng ge, he became one with a shaved head and bare feet. Despite this, later, he guided all in the land of Tibet with Treasures.”

She replied, “I know the Lotus Guru’s situation. You don’t. Before, when the Guru resided in the Unsurpassed [Buddhafiield], I worked [for him]. From the South Western Milky [Lake], having merged with the mind of the Buddhas, he came as a self-arisen emanation body. Not relying on the gradual grounds and paths, he had all the knowledge of what to reject and accept. As a sign that he had attained mastery over all the knowledge of supernatural perception and primordial wisdom, he became sovereign as the King of O rgyan and then he took the noble ’Od ’chang lha mo as his wife. Having collected all the heroes and heroines of the sacred places and lands under his power, he overpowered the three realms of existence. Then, he resided as a *yogi* who behaved as an ascetic. Having practised asceticism in eight charnel grounds including the Cool Grove charnel ground and so forth, it is true that he collected everyone—the three gods, demons, and men, the eight classes of *nāga* spirits, *gnyan* spirits, and land deities, and formless beings such as ghosts and so forth—under his power and established them in Dharma. If you become a shaven-headed monastic, I don’t know if you will be able to be an ascetic.”

Saying this, she disappeared.

Early the next morning when he was having breakfast, the body of the Lord became uncomfortable and he felt greater and greater pain. He thought that he had gotten a cold, but he kept it secret. After several days had passed, when the Lord got better from his cold, in the area near him a contagious disease arose and many people got sick. In particular, the Lord's middle sister named Dpal mtshe and her spouse became afflicted with illness and were nearing death. Two people from their locality came to summon the Lord and when he went there together with his attendants, his sister and her husband were on the verge of death. Hence, the Lord gave precious substances and having given the Precious Lama's [Bdud 'joms gling pa's] outer garment, he performed a body offering ritual [i.e., *gcod* practice] and a ritual for exorcising negative influences. The husband could not be saved from death and passed away. His sister was cured from illness. Having given her worldly advice, the Lord himself came home. He performed a [ritual that] remedied the *dākinīs*' agitation and an offering ritual and so forth and then all the sickness in the land dissipated.²⁴

This passage exemplifies the associations in Se ra mkha' 'gro's writing between the *dākinīs*' exhortations to pursue the non-celibate religious path, the protection of physical health, and the general well-being of the social and environmental surroundings. The enraged *dākinī* chastises Dri med 'od zer for thinking that he could practise Secret Mantra as a celibate monk, implying that this path was less efficacious. She rules out the possibility that he could have the capacity to reveal Treasures as a celibate monk and blames his idea to do this on the influence of bad people, possibly indicating that Dri med 'od zer experienced social pressure to conform to monastic discipline. Although he marshals the example of Padmasambhava to his defence, the *dākinī* makes short work of this, driving the point home that Dri med 'od zer has nowhere near the power that Padmasambhava had to establish all beings in the Dharma; unlike Padmasambhava, Dri med 'od zer needs the power he will derive from consort practices. The sickness that affects Dri med 'od zer, his sister, and her unfortunate husband can only be cured by appeasing the angry *dākinīs*, whose intentions overpower his youthful inclinations towards celibate monasticism.

According to Dri med 'od zer's biography, being a Treasure revealer with multiple female consorts was not always an easy situation nor was it conducive to strict retreat. On several occasions Dri med 'od zer yearned to renounce the busyness of his social world by living in isolation. Yet each time he sought to become a monk,

²⁴ SLNT ff. 32b.6–35a.3.

visionary *dākinīs* prevented him by whatever drastic measures necessary. For example, towards the end of his life when he was thirty-eight years old, as a result of a social disturbance in his community, Dri med 'od zer again yearned for the peace of monastic life:

At that time because a liar said a lot of annoying things to the Lord [Dri med 'od zer], he set his mind on one aspiration and thought that in his subsequent lifetimes he should be a monk. When he thought that he needed to be a monk, one day in his dream he saw a gathering of many women.

When he wondered what this was, they said, "You don't know us?"

He answered, "I don't know you."

They said, "We are messengers of the mantra protectors. Since you are acting as a monk, because your head and limbs belong to us, it's okay if we cut them."

They aimed a knife at his head and were about to cut him and they displayed much other cruelty. They disturbed the channels [in his body] and not giving him a chance to be comfortable, he awoke from sleep.²⁵

Through including *dākinī* visions such as these in Dri med 'od zer's biography, Se ra mkha' 'gro underlines the point that regardless of Dri med 'od zer's wishes, *dākinīs'* injunctions to live as a non-celibate religious practitioner were non-negotiable.

Se ra mkha' 'gro's Resistance

Although Se ra mkha' 'gro expresses doubts, hesitations, and misgivings about following the non-celibate path of a Treasure revealer, *dākinīs* give her constant reminders that having male consorts is not optional for her physical health and spiritual productivity. When she was nineteen years old and living at Ban nag Monastery with the man who would become the father of her two children named Mgar ra Rgyal sras, son of the prominent nineteenth-century Treasure revealer Mgar ra gter ston Bdud 'dul dbang phyug gling pa, Se ra mkha' 'gro recounts that she had the following interaction with the *Dākinī* Rdo rje gzungs ma:

²⁵ SLNT f. 160a.1–160b.1.

One day a vision arose in which I arrived at the feast row of the *dākinīs* of the three realms. Although it seemed as if I had a vision like this, I didn't have the capacity to distinguish [what it was]. All the channels in my body were numb and it was as if my mind had suddenly become dark. I asked someone who said she was Rdo rje gzungs ma, "Although I have come to the *dākinīs*' feast row since I was young, I have never experienced anything like this before. My body is uncomfortable and it is as if my mind is shrouded in darkness—why is this?"

She answered, "This is because you are of a Treasure lineage and the time has come that you need to rely on a method consort. It is important to establish a noble man in ripening and liberation [instructions] and to rely on him as a consort. Because your channels are disturbed, likewise your perception is also disturbed."

Again I said, "In this area of Mdo smad mgo log, it seems that [men] are of poor ancestry with a ghostly pallor. They are ash-coloured without food or clothes and have rude, thorn-like personalities. Thinking that adhering to them would not bring the perfect realisation of liberation via skilful means, I let it go. Although a man of good lineage is like a winter flower, some have already gone under others' influence, some hesitated because of the [*Vinaya*] rules regarding what to do and not to do, and since some were rich, they seemed not to want me because I was poor. Now, whatever you say, needing a consort does not arise in me. Although there are method consorts superior to them who possess the secret esoteric instructions of the quick path on whom I could rely to bring me to actually realise the holy primordial wisdom of the self-liberation of lustful desire, I have no ability to attain them. If I meet with a man who is an unsuitable receptacle, it will be seen as a perversion of the path of mantra and will certainly be the cause for myself and others to go to the lower realms. Hence, I think I will make a pledge to live alone."

When I said this, she responded,

"Enchanting woman who desires desirelessness—
Associate with a method consort and
The primordial wisdom of great bliss will manifest.

Through your pure karma and aspiration prayers, you are
empowered in Treasures.
If auspicious connections do not arise, the two benefits [of
self and other] will be difficult.
If the excellent method and wisdom, prayers, and [the
right] time come together,
Abandon lazy people and those who save face.

You must be careful regarding finding a way for the
 auspicious connections to arise.
 Since you are not one who can live alone,
 Energise all men with bliss and
 Show those with desire the desireless clear light.
 Find a way to bring [men] to the ground of union.
 By this, the two benefits will arise, *yoginī*.

Although primordial wisdom free from desire manifests
 [in you],
 If you don't separate from a consort of noble lineage,
 Having excellently attained the perfecting teachings,
 The [energy] knots at the wheels of the five abodes will
 liberate.

All appearances will arise as the wheels with letters.²⁶
 In this life you will attain the awareness body in union.
 This is the dharma of great yogis of mantra.
 There is nothing more profound than this quick path.

Seal it in the expanse of your heart.
 Show this path to those with the karma.
 It is certain that [they] will attain the union body of no
 more learning.²⁷
 Keep it secret from those who are not receptacles [of this
 teaching].

Don't show it to the wind²⁸—
 This is the chariot [leading] to wandering in the lower
 realms.
 Your domain is marvellous.
 It is certain that whoever you connect with, it will be
 meaningful.²⁹

Se ra mkha' 'gro's response to the *Ḍākinī* Rdo rje gzungs ma's
 exhortation to rely on a male consort in order to augment her visionary
 capacity is telling; she doesn't simply negate the necessity of her
 engaging with a consort, but rather complains that she cannot find a
 suitable candidate, for men of good lineage are as rare as winter
 flowers and seem either to be attached to someone else, to be bound
 by celibacy vows, or to be above her social standing. Exasperated with

²⁶ The wheels or *cakras* of the body each have letters (*yi ge*), or Sanskrit syllables, associated with them.

²⁷ "No more learning" (*mi slob*) is the fifth and final of the five paths of a *bodhisattva* equal to the realisation of Buddhahood.

²⁸ *Rlung phyogs tsam yang ma ston cig*, i.e., don't even breathe a word of this.

²⁹ DDNT ff. 108b.1–10a.4.

her failure to attract the right man, she laments that, “If I meet with a man who is an unsuitable receptacle, it will be seen as a perversion of the path of mantra...”. Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s concern is essentially a social one, rather than a strictly ethical one. It is a concern that others will judge her actions negatively if she engages in consort practices. Although she acknowledges to the visionary *ḍākinī* that there are supreme consorts whom she could rely on to bring her to “actually realise the holy primordial wisdom of the self-liberation of lustful desire”, she asserts that she will choose the path that cannot be misperceived by others’ watchful eyes, the “pledge to live alone”. Rdo rje gzungs ma rejects her attempt to avoid the complexities of consort practices, predicting that she is not one who will live alone but rather has a responsibility to “energise all men with bliss and/ Show those who have desire the desireless clear light”. While the *ḍākinīs*’ words initially emphasise her duty to help men attain liberation, it becomes clear that this is not simply a *bodhisattva* act. Se ra mkha’ ’gro must perform for the benefit of others, but also part of her path to liberation. Hence, Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s writings portray consort practices as neither misogynist, focused entirely on the male partner’s benefit, nor gynocentric, focused primarily on the needs of the female partner, two extreme arguments that have been put forth by Western interpreters of Buddhist consort practices.³⁰

The following passage underlines this point that according to Se ra mkha’ ’gro, engaging with the appropriate prophesied consort was not only an obligation to serve the needs of men, but was essential for her own physical as well as spiritual well-being. She writes the following about an interaction she had with an unnamed *ḍākinī* when she was thirty-five years old after Dri med ’od zer’s death in approximately 1927:

Then, in the tenth month of that year, I was oppressed with a terrible illness and was nearing death. At that time, on the night of the twenty-second day of the twelfth month, in my illusory perception an old wretched woman with an unappealing body and great lustful desire but with faultless sense faculties like those of a young woman came and said the following:

³⁰ I am thinking in particular of Shaw (1994: 69) who suggests that Tantric gender ideology is gynocentric (in the context of Indian Buddhism) and Young (2004: 168) who argues the opposite view, claiming that “Tantra is a practice in which men sexually utilize women for their own spiritual benefit”. Campbell 1996 also supports this latter view.

“Ya, ya—girlfriend, what sickness do you have?
 Tell me the symptoms of your sickness.
 If you are sick with lustful desire that is the cause of existence
 I know a good cure.”

To that, I replied,

“Older sister who is neither an old woman nor a young girl,
 I, neither a nun nor a wife, will explain the manner of my
 sickness.

From the time I was young, lamas took care of me.
 They blessed my mind stream with both ripening and liberation
 [instructions].

I am expert in the essential points of enhancement and
 liberation via skilful means.
 I don't need to be bound by the noose of lustful desire.

By the kindness of my consort Wish-fulfilling Jewel [Dri med
 'od zer],
 The three types of karmic propensities [of body, speech, and
 mind] are liberated from their root;
Saṃsāra and *nirvāṇa* are equal in their awareness and
 emptiness.

I have seen the unsurpassed meaning
 Of primordial wisdom without desire and freed from desire
 In which bliss and emptiness are inseparable.

I am not sick with the cause of existence.
 My lust has been purified into great bliss.
 Grasping onto the cause of manifest co-emergent primordial
 wisdom
 Has ripened into the self-empty Truth Body.
 I am not bothered by this sickness of lustful desire.

I am tormented by a sickness that is a combination of illnesses:
 My heart is uncomfortable as if it is a large drum beating.
 My lungs are uncomfortable like bellows being blown.
 My gall bladder and spleen feel like putting wild horses in
 order.
 The nerves of my two eyeballs feel as if they are about to be
 cut.
 I can't hold up my head—it is heavier than a diamond.
 Blood and bile pervade all my channels like water.
 My wind is not harmonious as if quarrelling with an enemy
 opponent.
 Long and short sighs emerge from both my mouth and nose.

This collection of elements that is my body is like inanimate matter.

This collection of various illnesses has gathered together.
This mass of light that is the primordial wisdom of mind
Is on the verge of going out via the path of the white silk channel.

The manner in which I am sick is like this.
If you know how to diagnose, then diagnose this.”

She said:

“You, *yoginī* who are a doctor of channels and winds—
One with a beautiful face whose body liberates into light,
The origin of these various illnesses is
Obscuration by the *sapta* [demons]³¹ regarding method
and auspicious connections.

You abandoned the youth who sustained your body,
Brought on conditions involving [those with] perverted
vows, and so forth.
When these things occur, many negative conditions
afflict your body.

Although you see the meaning of not staying in [cyclic]
existence,
You have not purified subtle karmic propensities.
On account of the mental illusions of hopes and fears,
You didn't act in accordance with the prophecies.
You abandoned [engaging with] a *bodhisattva* who
adheres to the Dharma.

Why do you behave in the manner of the doctrine of the
lesser vehicle
With your three doors (body, speech, and mind)?
You don't see attaining the result
Of the extraordinary Dharma of the quick path of
mantra?”

Again, I said,

“Listen older sister of compatible lineage:
I have no doubt that the nature of
Practising the extraordinary Dharma of Secret Mantra
Is quick self-fruition.
I pray that in this and all my lives

³¹ *Sapta* demons refer to hindrances and obstacles along the religious path according to Se ra mkha' 'gro's direct disciple Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje rin po che.

I meet with this quick path.
 Nevertheless, these days in the Degenerate Age
 Peoples' lust burns like fire.
 Under the pretence of being *mantrins*, they practise non-
 virtue.
 They assemble false Treasures, which are the ruin of
 themselves and others.
 They throw away their seminal fluid through fornication
 like spit in the dust.

Practising in accordance with mantra is next to
 impossible.
 Because of this, thinking that my female body
 Would become the basis for my own and others' ruin,
 I entered the path of monastic discipline.

Thinking I would be able to abandon having negative
 thoughts and negative rebirths,
 I cast wrongdoing and negative consorts far away.
 How could it harm anyone if I delight in
 Entering into the path of the two truths?"³²

Though Se ra mkha' 'gro avidly rejects the unusual old woman's insinuation that her physical ailments were the product of her celibacy, the woman accuses Se ra mkha' 'gro of acting according to a lesser standard of behaviour, that of the slower Hinayāna. Having cast away her prophesied male consort who was "the youth who sustained her body" and "the *bodhisattva* adhering to the Dharma", the old woman asserts that she has controverted the *ḍākinīs*' prophecies and spurned the quick path of Secret Mantra in favour of a safer, less-efficacious path. But Se ra mkha' 'gro responds to the old woman with a lament about the next-to-impossible difficulty of adhering properly to the path of Secret Mantra, not an outright rejection of it.

The danger Se ra mkha' 'gro articulates of engaging in lustful behaviour under the pretence of being a non-celibate *mantrin* alludes to the prevalence of this type of perverse behaviour in Se ra mkha' 'gro's milieu. Nevertheless, the old woman with keen senses responds to Se ra mkha' 'gro's fears with an exhortation to accept the risk of the quick path by giving her an elusive prophecy foretelling the places and the key figures who will aid her in accomplishing her divine purpose of revealing Treasures. She, like the other *ḍākinīs* whose divine missives pervade Se ra mkha' 'gro and Dri med 'od zer's

³² DDNT 335a.1–37a.1.

biographical accounts, refuses to accept anything other than the non-celibate conduct befitting of a Treasure revealer.

PART III: CAN MONKS BE CONSORTS?

If the import of *ḍākinīs*' injunctions to Se ra mkha' 'gro and Dri med 'od zer to engage with consorts was indelibly clear, the dilemma Se ra mkha' 'gro repeatedly faced in determining who was and was not an appropriate prophesied consort was consistently murky. Her difficulty actualising the *ḍākinīs*' prophecies became even more complicated in the many instances when her prospective male consorts were ostensibly celibate monks. In both her autobiographical representations of her quotidian and visionary life, Se ra mkha' 'gro resisted monks who insisted that they were meant to be her consorts.

While Se ra mkha' 'gro's repeated rejections of monks' requests for her longevity-inspiring services would seem to emphasise the priority of upholding vows of celibate monasticism just as her hesitancy to fulfil *ḍākinīs*' prophecies to take on consorts seemed to do, in fact the interactions Se ra mkha' 'gro depicts portray a far more nuanced message. Se ra mkha' 'gro represents herself as both having the power to veto untoward monks' illicit propositions and as being urged by her teachers and other divine interlocutors to engage with monastics for a variety of reasons, usually relating to enhancing (both their and her own) longevity and curing illness. Though there may have been some religiously sanctioned reasons in Se ra mkha' 'gro's milieu for monks to cross the line between celibacy and sexuality, that this was controversial is evident from the careful hesitation with which Se ra mkha' 'gro describes these incidents.

Just as Se ra mkha' 'gro represents herself as firmly rejecting *ḍākinīs*' calls to engage with consorts in favour of a simpler life of celibacy, so too she did not hesitate to shame monks whose lustful desire overcame their religious aspirations. The vehemence with which she did so manifests itself in the following interaction that occurred when Se ra mkha' 'gro was twenty-five years old, unhappily married to Rgyal sras, and caring for their young daughter at the same time as she was revealing new Treasures:

At that time, one day a man named Mgar ra rgyal mtshan came and said again and again, "Since I have received permission from Rgyal sras, we need to make a physical connection."

I thought that it was as if his mind had been inspired by demons. I said many times that from whichever of the two perspectives [religious or worldly], according to pure ethics one must accumulate the collections [of merit and wisdom] by means of the six perfections including generosity and so forth and that it was unacceptable to waste a human body endowed with the [eight] freedoms.³³ But because lust had arisen in his mind-stream, he ignored [my] meaning. He said many things that undermined cause and effect and related to mistaken behaviour.

I was extremely depressed and feeling sad about [people's] attitude in the degenerate era, I said the following:

“Lotus Born One, protector and refuge of the world,
Dākki Mtsho rgyal of the changeless dimension, think of me!
 Look upon me, this vagabond Bde ba'i rdo rje, with
 compassion!
 Bestow blessings that will dispel negative conditions and
 obstacles!

Listen you who are losing the Sūtric teachings on physical
 discipline,
 Send this thought from your mind!
 Examine your body, speech, and mind:

On the outside, your attire is that of [a monk's] three robes.
 On the inside, you have great lust equal to that of a bird.³⁴
 The thought in your mind is like that of a petty thief or a bandit.
 At all times, you enjoy consuming the negative offerings [given
 to monastics]

I don't desire someone like you with a negative body.
 Even though I am an ordinary person with an inferior [female]
 body,
 If you look at my face, I am of a beautiful *dākinī* lineage.

Although I appear like a woman with childish intellect,
 My mind sees the essence of the birthless three bodies.³⁵
 Although I labour as a householder,

³³ The eight freedoms include freedom from being born in the hells, in the hungry ghost realm, as an animal, a long-lived god, or a barbarian, freedom from having wrong views, from being born where there is no Buddha, and freedom from being born deaf and mute. See Patrul Rinpoche 1994: 20.

³⁴ This association between lust and a bird relates to a common depiction of the three poisons (hatred, ignorance, and lust) in the central part of the Wheel of Existence (*srid pa'i 'khor lo*) in which the bird (in particular the rooster) symbolises lust, the pig symbolises ignorance, and the snake symbolises hatred.

³⁵ The three bodies or *kāyas* are *Dharmakāya*, *Sāṃbhogakāya*, and *Nirmāṇakāya*.

I do not need to separate from the primordial wisdom of equality.

Having mastered the ten winds,
Everything that appears [exists] in the dimension of great bliss
[And] is liberated in the expanse of evenly extensive primordial wisdom.

I don't need somebody with a body like yours.
I won't make myself miserable in both this and the next life.
You, imprudent one, consider this well:
Don't exchange your body endowed with a purpose for one with little purpose.

When the fruits of karma undeceivingly ripen,
You will be one who has done worthless things like this.
Now, consider this meaning."

Having said this, I was freed from obstacles.³⁶

Se ra mkha' 'gro thus adamantly rejects the sexual advances of a monk whom she perceives to act out of lust. Passages such as this one have a pedagogical purpose in Se ra mkha' 'gro's narrative—they serve as a message to her readership that unethical monastics must not engage in consort practices out of lust while abandoning the spiritual potential that makes their precious human births sacred. Her response to the wayward monk is strong and uncompromising: she may be a householder, but underneath her humble countenance lies the insight of a wisdom *dākinī*. She may be an inferior woman, but no permission from her partner Rgyal sras will trump her determination to decide for herself who is and is not a worthy consort.

And yet, although this passage seems to set an uncompromising boundary between proper ethical behaviour for monastics and non-celibate *mantrins*, it is not without ambiguity. Immediately after she recounts ridding herself of this lewd monk, she writes that in the tenth month of the same year she became very ill. When she pondered that it wouldn't be so bad if she died, a terrifying woman who had visited her in the past when she had suicidal thoughts appeared before her carrying a knife and a red noose and chastised her, saying,

From the time you were young, I have lovingly raised you as if you were my one child. Now, on the basis of one small circumstance, you

³⁶ DDNT ff. 172b.6–73b.6.

abandon your *bodhicitta* intention to benefit others. What is the meaning of your putting forth this selfish mental confusion?³⁷

Se ra mkha' 'gro responds to the terrifying apparitional woman with a lament about the difficulties of being a lowly woman tied to a husband in a world in which disciples view women as inferior to men, leaving them with little prospect of actualising the *ḍākinīs'* prophecies. In response, the terrifying woman infuses Se ra mkha' 'gro with an elaborate vote of confidence through prophesying the many disciples, consorts, and Treasures that will come to her. We could read Se ra mkha' 'gro's encounter with the perverse monk and the illness that then befalls her as two proximate yet unrelated autobiographical vignettes. However, given the connection that appears repeatedly elsewhere in her autobiography between eschewing prophesied male consorts and becoming physically ill, one may also read the sudden illness that befalls her in this case as the *ḍākinīs'* reprimand for insisting on the supremacy of the monk's monastic vows over her own *ḍākinī* prophecies. Read in this way, the *ḍākinīs'* reproof and subsequent elaborate prophecy cast doubt on the propriety of Se ra mkha' 'gro's unequivocal rejection of the monk's advance.

The monk named Mgar ra Rgyal mtshan is not the only one who presses Se ra mkha' 'gro to engage in consort practices against her better judgment. Se ra mkha' 'gro describes a fascinating conversation that took place a few years later when she was twenty-seven with one of her teachers named 'Jigs bral chos kyi blo gros, a prominent nineteenth-century lama from Dpal yul dar thang dgon pa in Gcig sgril County, Mgo log.³⁸ 'Jigs bral chos kyi blo gros, whom Se ra mkha' 'gro always refers to as Sgo sprul rin po che, plays an important, if complicated, role in Se ra mkha' 'gro's life as the first person to recognise her as an emanation of Ye shes mtsho rgyal when she was twenty-four. He was one of the strongest supporters of her Treasure revelation activities during the time when she lived with Rgyal sras at Ban nag Monastery in Pad ma County, a time when her detractors among Rgyal sras's relatives far outweighed her supporters. Se ra mkha' 'gro hints that she and Sgo sprul rin po che were more than just teacher and disciple through comments about fearing that her visits would bring gossip (*mo kha*) upon the revered lama and her mention of Rgyal sras's jealousy of him, though she never overtly claims that she was his consort. In the following interaction, Sgo sprul rin po che

³⁷ DDNT 174a.3–5.

³⁸ See *Dar thang dgon pa'i gdan rabs* pp. 392–93 for a brief biography of 'Jigs bral chos kyi blo gros.

used his influence over Se ra mkha' 'gro to try to convince her to serve as a consort to a monk she didn't know in order to dispel obstacles to his longevity:

At that time, Rti bir rtug rtsa sprul sku was doing a retreat in the area along with a few of his attendants. Sgo sprul said to me, "Now since you have the auspicious connections to be able to dispel the obstacles to Rti sprul's longevity, don't err in finding the best possible way to help do this. He is dressed as a monk—last year he requested full ordination vows from Rdo grub rin po che. The astrological signs were extremely disturbed. In particular, the prophecies of Rdzogs chen rin po che and many other great masters proclaim that for the sake of sustaining his longevity, he needs to secretly have a liaison with a wisdom lady of a good lineage.³⁹ Not only that, even though he is also a Treasure revealer, since he is the leader of a big monastery, he didn't behave as a *mantrin* but as a venerable monk engaging only in meditation practice. Because there is no one better than you to sustain his longevity, don't err in doing this."

Again I said, "If he is without mistake a Treasure revealer, why does he need to be a hypocrite? The abbot of O rgyan smin gling is of course very famous for being a Treasure revealer. Hence, I don't know if it is certain that if one is not a monk, one cannot be the abbot of a monastery. I will not be his method for dispelling obstacles to his longevity. From one perspective, I have a husband. Moreover, because stealing the vows of a monastic is the cause for a great offence, I certainly will not do that."

Again, Sgo sprul said, "For what reason do you have to be restricted about [offering] your body [to] him? You have mastered the esoteric precepts of the channels, seminal nuclei, and wind and you do not engage in perverse behaviour. Moreover, aside from [acting] for the benefit of another person, if you are without any negative thoughts regarding your own desire, how could it be an offence? Since I am certain that Rgyal sras has decided [that it is okay], from that perspective, I will be responsible for your not being affected by defilement. Now if we don't do something, it is certain that Rti sprul will not live beyond thirty-eight or thirty-nine years old."

Again I said, "Even if Rgyal sras is agreeable, more important than him, I have an extraordinary root consort [Dri med 'od zer]. If he does not agree, I will not embark upon an important undertaking. Is it okay if I help him by just reciting a feast offering? Even if it isn't okay, I can't

³⁹ DDNT 222b.6 actually reads *shes rab ma rig can*, which would translate as 'intelligent wisdom lady', but I think this is a misspelling that should read *shes rab ma rigs can*, 'wisdom lady of a good lineage'.

do anything about it—I will not make public and secret promises (*dam tshig*).”

He replied, “Now go together with one of my monks to Rti sprul and it will be beneficial for both of you.”

Then, I went according to his order.⁴⁰

Se ra mkha’ ’gro then describes the teachings and precious gifts that Rti sprul gave her during their visit. She concludes her account of the visit with the statement that they “left the actual auspicious connection for later,”⁴¹ an elusive phrase that could mean that she did not actually act as his consort but instead established a connection with him through other means. Though her explanation of her encounter with Rti sprul is evasive regarding the exact nature of their exchange, she writes that when she returned to Sgo sprul after the visit, he was delighted and said, “Being unaware that formerly [i.e., in a former life] he was your extraordinary consort, now your taking him on is greatly amazing!”⁴² Thus, the take-home message of this passage is characteristically ambiguous: Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s initial powerful refusal to be the ‘wisdom lady’ or spiritual consort of Rti sprul ends in her going to visit him, thereby at least partially fulfilling Sgo sprul’s command. Through this conversation, we see that in Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s milieu it was not unheard of for monks to take on consorts in order to increase their longevity or dispel unfavourable prophecies. Her reticence to “steal the vows of a monk” demonstrates the dilemma that she and others faced between privileging the moral superiority of celibacy or engaging in the efficacious means of sexual practices in order to ensure the monk’s (and her own) physical health and long life. The tension between these two competing demands at times created situations where those of high ecclesiastic ranks such as Rti sprul, the abbot of a large monastery, engaged in secret consort practices while maintaining the public appearance of being celibate monks.

Although Se ra mkha’ ’gro marshals the example of the famous non-celibate Treasure revealer abbot of O rgyan smin grol gling Monastery in Central Tibet to prove that not all monastery abbots had to be monks, and although she vows that she will not take part in others’ or her own hypocritical behaviour, the force of Se ra mkha’

⁴⁰ DDNT ff. 222b.2–24a.2.

⁴¹ DDNT f. 224a.4.

⁴² DDNT f. 224a.5–6.

'gro's refusal to act in this way is mitigated by her ultimate compliance with Sgo sprul rin po che's command for her to go to Rti sprul. The narrative value of her initial adamant rejection is that it presents her as strong-willed and seriously against monks engaging in consort practices at the same time as it presents her as a virtuoso consort, prophesied by the likes of Rdzogs chen rin po che and Sgo sprul rin po che. Interestingly, she emphasises that her alliance is not primarily to her partner Rgyal sras but to her root consort Dri med 'od zer, thus emphasising the supremacy of Tantric commitments over secular bonds. Through passages like this one, we see the care with which Se ra mkha' 'gro negotiated between the sometimes competing ideals of monastic celibacy and religiously sanctioned sexuality.

Not only in her waking reality, but also in her dream life Se ra mkha' 'gro recounts struggling to reject monks' unwanted sexual advances while at the same time struggling to ascertain whether or not the monks were in fact prophesied consorts necessary for her Treasure revelations. When Se ra mkha' 'gro was thirty-six years old and was actively travelling around Mgo log and upper Khams giving teachings, she received signs that there was a Treasure she needed to reveal. However, she writes that because she didn't have a consort, she had to let the Treasure go. Immediately after this, she writes:

That night in a dream, two monks⁴³ travelling as mendicants, one big and one small, came to my place after sunset.

They said, "How are you?"

I answered, "I'm fine. Are you two tired?"

The big monk replied, "Although we are not tired, for a long distance we didn't find much to eat on the road. Nevertheless, we have come before you because we need to receive a teaching. Hence, we both offer our bodies to you. We need you to first give us food to fill us and later Dharma to liberate us."

I said, "If you two only stay on a remote mountain practising completely pure dharma, I will give you as much food and clothing resources as possible. Otherwise, although you give me your bodies,

⁴³ The term I am translating in this passage as 'monk' is '*dge sbyong*', which usually refers to monks or nuns but also can refer to a wider category of ascetics or mendicants. I have chosen to translate it as 'monk' here because Se ra mkha' 'gro implies that their offering of themselves to her as potential consorts was a deterioration of their vows.

you don't need to entrust yourselves [to me] as servants. It is alright if you assiduously practise on a remote mountain."

When I said this, the mendicant answered, "The meaning of our offering our bodies to you is not to think of a way to be your servant or to reside like a sage in rock caverns and mountain slopes! Because you are a Treasure revealer, for the purpose of being your consorts we thought we would stay [with you]."

Feeling great fear, I said, "Precious Lama think of me! Kind One, think of me!"

He said over and over again, "Although you don't desire me, in any case, you need to take this small monk under your care."

I responded by saying, "I am not even a Treasure revealer. I don't need a consort. In the past, I never had disciples with deteriorated vows like you two. Still now I won't take you on. You two, wherever you go, go away. Don't stay in this land. Even if I have to kill you both, I won't consider engaging [with you]."

Again, he said, "I know whether or not you are a Treasure revealer. Look in your [Treasure] registry—among your five main method consorts, one is this small monk. If you don't rely on him as a consort, you won't be able to decode your Treasures as well. Hence, consider this."

I became a bit confused and asked, "What land are you two from?"

He replied, "We are from Nyag khog. The small monk's name is X.⁴⁴ Hence, because the Lotus Guru's prophecies are undecieving, [his] prayers and the [proper] time have gathered together."

Again, I said, "Although the Guru's prophecies are undecieving, because I am of bad ancestry, I didn't find a way to act in accordance with the prophecies. From one perspective, since I am a woman (*skye lus dman pa*), even though I met with doctrine holders and method consorts, I didn't dare recognise them [as such]. From another perspective, thinking that I would offend the one with the attributes of a great *bodhisattva* whose body had received mantra, who exerted himself in unsurpassed practice, and who had relied on the path of enhancement, liberation via skilful means, and union without depending on successively traversing grounds and paths to attain an awareness body, I guard my commitment vows like the eyes in my forehead. Until I attain permission from this consort [i.e., Dri med 'od zer], even though it is in accordance with my Treasure prophecy, my mind is decided and I don't think about associating with a single consort. Even

⁴⁴ The small monk's name is written as a symbol in DDNT f. 353b.1.

still, despite the fact that I am not a Treasure revealer, I will certainly abide by commitments without having public and secret [versions]. Hence, from whatever perspective, you two go home.” Then, the bigger mendicant having dissolved into the smaller one, both of their bodies disappeared and their voices spoke the following:

“Young ravishing beauty,
Insatiable to look at, one with the body of supreme great bliss,
One who speaks the truth, whose mind has abandoned
deception,
Greatly loving, powerful *dākkī*, you I praise.

The supreme excellent path of accomplishing Buddhahood in
one lifetime,
[Is] adhering to the Vajra that accomplishes the two benefits [of
self and other] at one time.
Engage with a consort who arouses co-emergent bliss and
emptiness and
May you stay together without separating for an instant.”

Having said this, they disappeared into a red light in the direction of the sunset.

Then, an old woman came and asked, “Did you know those two monks?”

I replied, “Although I don’t know them, I wonder why they spoke about various strange things?”

When I asked this, she answered, “The small monk was sent to you by your method consort [named] Akā ra. The big monk is called Bswa rgyal. Hence, since you have a bit of obscuration between method and wisdom [i.e., between consorts and yourself], you need to be careful.” As soon as she said this, I awoke from sleep.⁴⁵

Once again in this dream, Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s adamant rejection of the monks’ advances may initially seem like the only moral response to the monks’ licentious behaviour, but this is not the only way to interpret their actions. The monk’s claims that one of them has been prophesied by Padmasambhava as a consort necessary for Se ra mkha’ ’gro to decode her Treasure revelations coupled with the *dākinī*’s validation of the monk’s unsullied credentials expose the truth behind the apparitional monks’ genuine intentions. Once again, Se ra mkha’ ’gro’s refusal to engage with the monks has the heuristic value of

⁴⁵ DDNT ff. 352a.4–54b.4.

upholding the sacrality of monastic celibacy vows while it portrays her humility in the face of her great devotion to her consort, the great *bodhisattva* Dri med 'od zer. At the same time, the import of this dream is far from clear regarding the appropriateness of monks' involvement with consort practices, for if anything the ephemeral monks' parting verses and the *ḍākinī's* warning of obscurations between male and female consorts indicates that Se ra mkha' 'gro chose the safer, though less efficacious path by rejecting the other-worldly monks. In this instance, that which Se ra mkha' 'gro needed for her Treasure revelations and that which upheld conventional morality were in direct contradiction.

PART IV: CONCLUSIONS

The rich dialogues in Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings expose a religious world in which both celibate monastic and non-celibate Tantric religious practitioners held valued and at times overlapping social and religious roles. In their youth and periodically throughout their adult life as well, both Se ra mkha' 'gro and Dri med 'od zer seem to have at least rhetorically idealised the celibate life of a wandering ascetic as a pinnacle of religious purity. Yet Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings emphasise that the *ḍākinīs'* involvement with every level of their waking and dreaming psyche turned them away from these longings to be alone and towards the more complicated path of the non-celibate Treasure revealer. Despite both of their resistance, the *ḍākinī* prophecies in Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings unhesitatingly asserted the necessity of both male and female Treasure revealers living as non-celibate religious specialists, regardless of the added moral and social difficulties this sometimes invited. But navigating the fault lines between celibate and non-celibate life was even more fraught with tensions in the case of a female Treasure revealer such as Se ra mkha' 'gro, whose very identity as a non-celibate Tibetan woman and a revered Treasure revealer flouted conventional Tibetan moral distinctions between inferior female laywomen and superior, by and large male, religious hierarchs.

The path of a non-celibate Treasure revealer was complicated not only by the difficulty in ascertaining who was and was not a suitable Tantric consort, but also by the fact that others in their social milieu at times had difficulty distinguishing between religiously sanctioned consort relationships and the impure sexual relations of lay householders. Though Bdud 'joms rin po che's Three Vow

commentary articulates a religiously sanctioned space for spiritually advanced monks to engage in consort practices, Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings are as concerned with social sanction as they are doctrinal precedent. The nun Tshul sgron's horror at Se ra mkha' 'gro's non-celibate status, Se ra mkha' 'gro's repeated mentions of the gossip that swirled around her each time she got anywhere near a celibate monk, and her defiant refusals to engage in sexual interactions with monks regardless of their realisation level indicate that some members of Se ra mkha' 'gro's communities disapproved quite strongly of any overlap in the ostensibly separate spheres of celibate and non-celibate religious life. In writing so much about *ḍākinīs*' exhortations to take on male consorts and her resistance to do so, Se ra mkha' 'gro was very aware of her readership, who were her faithful disciples and broader religious communities. Putting the onus on *ḍākinīs*' prophecies both absolved Se ra mkha' 'gro of moral culpability at the same time as it accentuated her divinely inspired authority to engage in the highest, most esoteric Tantric practices. Thus, the *ḍākinīs*' voices that permeated Se ra mkha' 'gro's autobiographical account allowed her to carve out a morally respectable place for herself in the midst of a religious tradition and a socio-historical context in which human women's voices were rarely authoritative.

Se ra mkha' 'gro never indicates anything but strong respect for celibate monastics of both sexes, and indeed some of her teachers and disciples were celibate monastics. Nevertheless, after Se ra mkha' 'gro praises the purity of celibacy, in fact the authoritative voices in her auto/biographical narratives consistently privilege the expedient means of sexuality over the moral superiority of celibacy. Just as the *ḍākinī* asks, "Why do you behave in the manner of the doctrine of the lesser vehicle/ with your three doors (of body, speech, and mind)?/ You don't see attaining the result/ of the extraordinary Dharma of the quick path of mantra?", likewise Se ra mkha' 'gro's writings advocate overcoming the urge to maintain the safety of acting in accordance with the lesser vehicle. Instead, they call upon Se ra mkha' 'gro and those who follow her to take the risk of "practising in accordance with mantra", even if this path, which involves bringing together the auspicious connections of method and wisdom, is "next to impossible".

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- DDNT *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* by Bde ba'i rdo rje (a.k.a. Se ra mkha' 'gro)
- SLNT *Skyabs rje thams cad mkhyen pa grub pa'i dbang phyug zab gter rgya mtsho'i mnga' bdag rin po che padma 'gro 'dul gsang sngags gling pa'i rnam par thar pa snying gi mun sel dad pa'i shing rta ratna'i chun 'phyan utpala'i 'phreng ba by Mkha' 'gro bde skyong dbang mo* (a.k.a. Se ra mkha' 'gro)

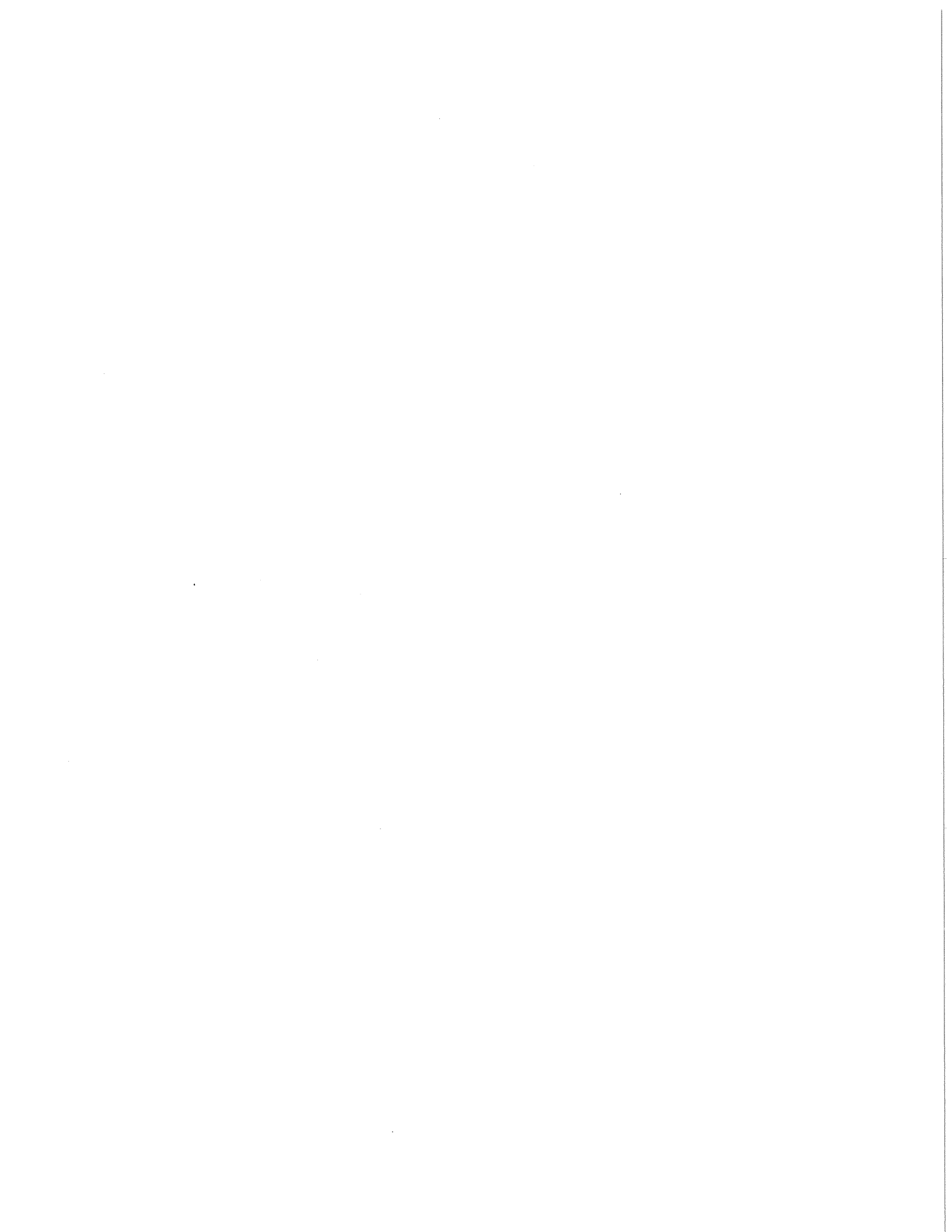
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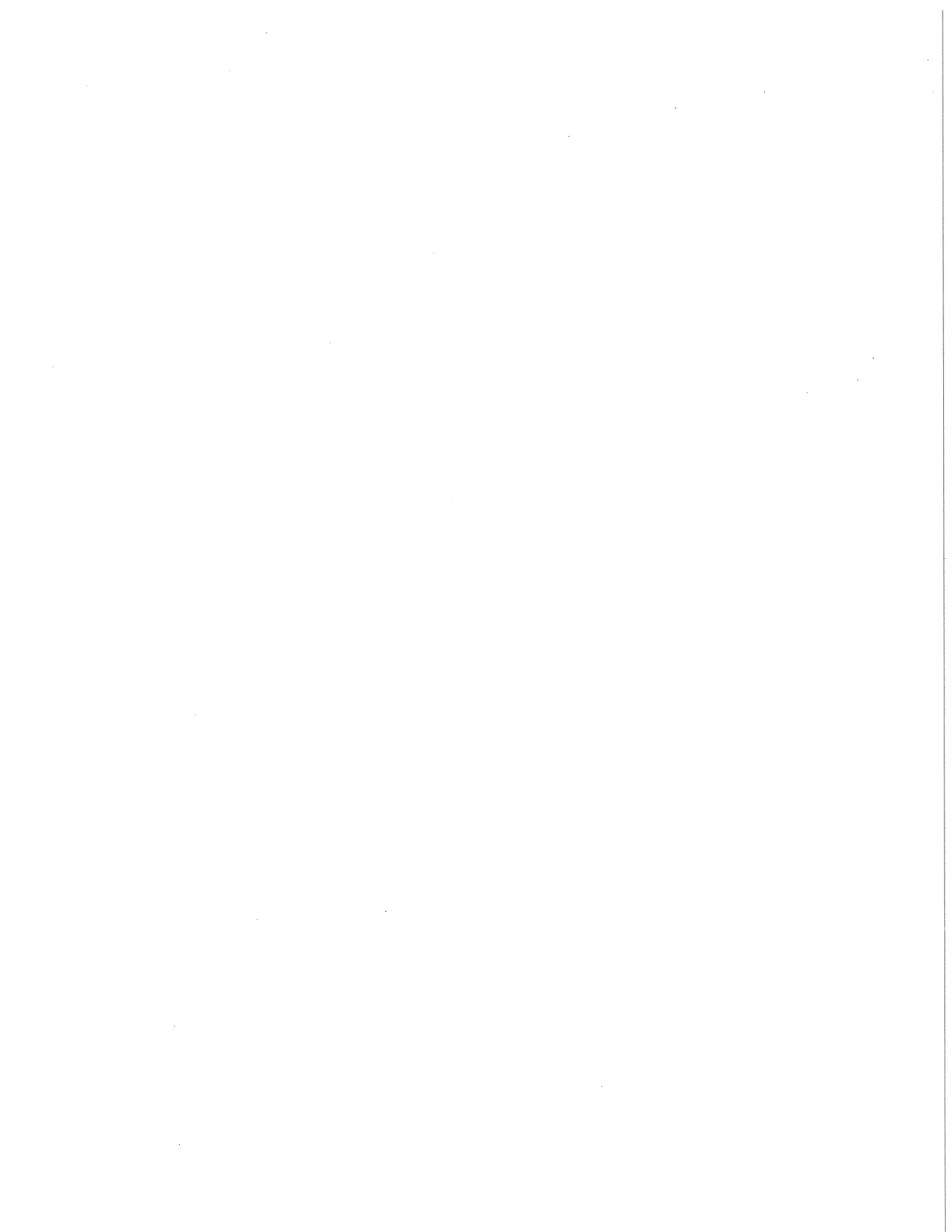
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