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An Ecology of Transformation: The Experience of Nature and the Nature of Experience in the Songs of Shabkar

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AN ECOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION:
THE EXPERIENCE OF NATURE AND THE NATURE OF EXPERIENCE IN THE SONGS
OF SHABKAR

by

Jacob Dirnberger
B.A., Berry College, 2008

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Abstract

Dirnberger, Jacob (M.A., Religious Studies)

An Ecology of Transformation: The Experience of Nature and the Nature of Experience in the Songs of Shabkar

Thesis directed by Professor Holly Gayley

The songs of the 18-19th century Tibetan yogin Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol provide us an excellent window with which to view the relationship, the ecology, between the ideal of a Buddhist retreatant and his solitary mountainous surroundings. At the heart of this paper is a close analysis of this relationship between yogin and retreat, but also between the inner and outer subject and object worlds of Shabkar himself. I argue that we would be mistaken to view this relationship in an overly Cartesian way, i.e. as an immutable, static subject gaining an objectifying transcendence over society and nature. Upon adopting a more emic model of Tibetan yogic experience, we understand that such a relationship is one of mutual interdependence filled with back and forth exchanges between subject and object worlds, and that neither is in any way static but is instead active, transformative and utterly permeable to the other to the point where, at the highest level of yogic realization, all distinction between the two falls away and dissolves into what Shabkar himself calls *chos dbyings*, the expanse of reality free from illusions of duality.
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Part I: Tsogdruk Rangdrol, his world, his songs

Living in solitude I place my mind
with natural ease upon suchness --
this mind, as light as a wisp of cotton fluff.
The darkness of unknowing
recedes at its own pace,
and the vast sky of the infinite real
wakes with the light of dawn.
-Shabkar

Just as the water flows downwards, your being rises upwards. Just give it a chance --
give it solitude.
-Osho

In Tibet's snowy mountains and secluded caves, its dense, green forests and flowery meadows, there had been, from the rise of Buddhism in the middle-ages until modern times, a tradition of religious wanderers, monks and nuns, yogins and yoginīs, who sought to practice their doctrines and disciplines far from towns and villages. Such seekers, eschewing the obligations of the householder, were supported by both their monastic and lay communities, as well as by the land itself, taking shelter in caves and living off of such simple provisions as tsampa, nettles, wild garlic, sweet potatoes and other greens. They practiced many kinds of meditations, mantras and visualizations from many lineages and sects, but were united by the belief that such practices would flourish in isolation.

At the heart of this paper is the question of the relationship, the ecology, or the mutual interdependence that exists between practices of these yogins and their isolated retreat worlds. Undoubtedly, they assert a strong connection between inner and outer space, the objective,

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ordinary, natural world and the mind of subject that perceives it. That world, they claim, positively impacts their minds and gives rise to a transformation of being and vision, of subject and object. In order to understand this relationship, I will undertake a close examination of the songs of one of Tibet's most famous homeless wanderers and retreat dwellers, Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol (1781-1851), or "The White-Footed One, Natural Liberation of the Six Senses." This "songs of experience" provide us with a unique, subjective glimpse into such a world and the transformations it gives rise to and undergoes.

As we will see, these two poles, subject and object are utterly permeable to each other and are ultimately conjoined by the exalted meditative experiences these yogins seek. However, we should keep well in mind that such experiences utterly defy and transcend the boundaries of the Cartesian model of subject and object; there is no clear or self-evident relationship between these two to be found in Shabkar's songs, but rather a complex and nuanced ecology between that environment and its inhabitants that transforms both. Ultimately, the two collapse altogether, and the yogin or yoginī glimpses and is transformed in the expanse of reality, recognizes that the two were never anything but a dream, a trick played by the mind, and that all things inner and outer are part of the same vast, all embracing sky of emptiness. An experience such as this is not a vision viewed objectively by a stagnant and immutable subject, but is itself the bridge between the two, the primary catalyst in an ecology of transformation that leaves both worlds forever altered. With this paper, I will argue that the natural world of meadows, forests and mountains is, in the Tibetan episteme, far from being simply a "pure" space free from the hand of civilization, or simply a static background to meditation, is a space civilized and

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2 Wylie: zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol
colonized by meditative activity, a participatory space that spontaneously gives rise to happiness and joy, and allows realization to flourish.

I a) Songs of Experience

_The poetic vision crystallizes or condenses in a succinct and touching form what is taught in a didactic way._
- Thupten Jinpa³

_Prose simply says what it says; poetry says many things. Prose is needed in the day-to-day world, in the marketplace. But whenever something of the heart has to be said, prose is always found inadequate – one has to fall back to poetry._
- Osho⁴

In pre-modern Tibet, as in many other parts of the world, there are songs for all kinds of people and occasions; folk songs called _glu_ for harvests, holidays and work; royal songs which celebrate battle; victory and conquest denoted by the term _mgur_; and even ornate poetry, _snyan ngag_, composed and read by the scholarly Tibetan intelligentsia, which strictly adheres to Indian ideals of beauty and poetic form.⁵ However, one Tibetan genre cuts across and ultimately transcends these classifications: that is _nyams mgur_, "songs of experience." Such songs parallel _mgur_ (though by the time of _nyam mgur_’s inception _mgur_ had become more of a general term for songs which celebrate many kinds of positive personal experience⁶) in that they echo the celebration of conquest and victory. However, the victory here is not one won against external enemies, but against the internal enemies of mental delusion, and represents nothing less than freedom from all kinds of suffering and profound insight into the nature of reality, the victory of

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⁵ For a very thorough discussion of these genres, see Lhundup, Sopa, José Ignacio Cabezón, and Roger R. Jackson. _Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre._ Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1996. pg. 368-383.
the Buddha. Songs of experience are songs of *yogic* experience in meditation, and convey and perform the enlightened experiences achieved by devoted meditators celebrating liberation from the cycle of birth and death and leading the way for all others who would follow such a path.

Songs of experience, themselves a subset of *mgur*, cut across *glu* and *nyan ngag* by rooting themselves compositionally and rhythmically in Tibetan folk-forms, and also adopting Indian imagery and themes, casting the yogin as a warrior celebrating the victory of enlightenment. Genealogically, they claim descent from the Indian genre of *dohā*, which were also sung in by Tantric Buddhist yogins to express realization using the vernacular of their day. The exemplar of this genre is the Brahmin-born Buddhist Saraha who, like others of his day, began his religious vocation as a monastic but later forsook his vows in favor of the anti-intellectual and iconoclastic *siddha* tradition. Saraha spends a great deal of time critiquing all kinds of religious specialists and institutions, from Brahmins to Jainas to Buddhists. For instance, he sings,

> Oh! The long-haired ones who grasp at self and agent,
> The Brahmins, Jainas, Dagpas,
> The materialists who accept a real basis for things-
> Though they claim to be omniscient, they lack self-knowledge...
> Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas,
> Yogācārins and Mādhyamakas, etc.
> Criticize each other and argue.
> Ignorant of suchness, the space-like equality of appearance and emptiness,
> They turn their back on the innate nature.⁷

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⁷ Braitstein, pg. 45.
Here, we see him criticizing every type of outwardly religious person, and claiming that their "knowledge" is based on ignorance, ritual and logic, and not direct experience of suchness like his. Songs like this serve as the template for what would eventually become an iconic Tibetan hero, the wandering poet-yogin critical of all authority not derived from religious experience.

Saraha's dohā collection was, as documented by Kurtis Schaffer, transmitted no less than seventeen times, but the most important for our purposes is also the most mythical and, in Schaffer's words, "nebulous" of them all, Marpa the translator. Indeed, the semi-legendary Tibetan figure is said to have had a vision of Saraha on a pilgrimage to India, and returned with, among other things, a collection of his songs. However, as Mathew Kapstein tells us, though the songs of Marpa are clearly influenced by the Indian poetic genre of kāvyā, the songs of his disciple, Milarepa (1052-1135), are of, "...a decidedly Tibetan genre, drawing freely upon well-established [Tibetan] conventions of oratory and bardic recitation." Marpa then not such an important figure for his own sake, but for that of his disciple; these dohās undoubtedly served as the inspiration for the progenitor of the Tibetan genre songs of experience, and the model par excellence for solitary yogins, Jetsun Milarepa. Milrepa fused the Indian genre with Tibetan folk conventions and metrical schemes that ordinary people would find familiar. As Laura Beirstein says,

The result... of Marpa's successful transmission was twofold: not only did he bring a transmission of Saraha to Tibet; he also brought with him the tradition of singing spontaneous songs to express realization to his disciples. Singing songs as a form of expression and method of teaching was quickly absorbed into all

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Tibetan Buddhist traditions, and one would be hard-pressed to find teachings by or a biography of any renowned master that did not include a song of one sort or another.\(^\text{10}\)

The songs of experience in Milarepa's collection, which, while not collected in textual form until several centuries after his death, serve as a template for the entire genre.

These songs of experience were sung in many contexts and for many reasons, in critique or support of royal and ecclesiastical authority, to ordinary people asking for advice on merit-making, to close disciples asking for help in meditation or just, as many of these songs claim, in solitude to the yogin him or herself in order to generate the courage to practice overcome obstacles, or simply out of joy of their own experience. Always, these songs claim their authority in personal experience, and serve as very powerful tools for attracting patrons and disciples, forging lineages and challenging or reifying scholastic and monastic authority. This being the case, it is absolutely impossible to talk about songs of experience in terms of an individual isolated from society, because they are utterly and irrevocably bound up in the socio-cultural matrix of pre-modern Tibet. Such songs craft identities, tie individuals to communities and lineages, and allow others access to the interior and exterior worlds of virtuoso Buddhist meditators practicing in retreat. In this way, songs of experience serve as a way of bringing individual yogic realization with social space to share, to critique it and expand upon it.

I b) Tsogdruk Rangdrol

This paper will focus on the songs of the 18-19th century yogin Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol. Considered both a poetic-maestro and yogic-exemplar, Shabkar's temporal proximity to our own time frees him from the semi-legendary status of figures such as Milarepa, whose

\(^{10}\) Braitstein, pg. 121.
biography and song collections were not compiled until many centuries after his death, and as such lends credence to his authorship and claims to experience. He is considered by many an emanation of Milarepa himself, and with good reason; Shabkar not only emulates his poetic form, metaphor, rhythm, composition and themes, but also emulated his wandering life. Born in the late 18th century, as he says, "...neither in a rich family/ Nor in a poor one," in the northern province of Amdo, Shabkar took monastic vows at age twenty-one, and then he left home the next year to study under the Mongolian Dharma-king Chögyal Ngaki Wangpo. After three years with him, Shabkar set out pursue a homeless life, wandering to hundreds to wilderness retreats and sacred pilgrimage sites over the next thirty years. Over the course of his career, Shabkar composed hundreds of songs, attracted a multitude of patrons and disciples, organized and fund-raised for Buddhist building projects, tamed demons, performed tantric rituals and initiations, hiked through dense forests and over high mountains passes, glimpsed the nature of reality itself and otherwise raised the victory banner of the Buddha's teaching.

Shabkar's songs of experience, by allowing us a profoundly personal view of an ideal yogin's experiences in retreat, allow us to examine the intersection between internal and external space as both are transformed in passive and active ways. As we will see, some scholars question the importance of such experience at all in Buddhist traditions, while still others exaggerate its centrality in an attempt to secularize subjective inner space and obscure its outward social dimensions. However, these multivalent songs that oscillate between person, nature and society will demonstrate a vast and subtle web of connections in which those three kinds of spaces are

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11 Žabs-dkar, trans. Ricard, 2001, pg. 16
12 Wylie: cho rgyal ngag gi dbang po
inextricably bound. Because of their focus on so called "subjective" experience in a mountain retreat, these songs are ideal for us to examine why Tibetan yogins are strongly drawn to isolation and what kinds of experiences are claimed to occur in that very solitary space.

As for his lineage, Shabkar received Dzogchen teachings from his *rnying ma* master, Chögyal Ngakgi Wangpo, but nevertheless frequently asserts an anti-sectarian sentiment throughout his songs, favoring solitary retreat and meditation experience over any particular kind of teaching. Shabkar's Tibet, after all, is many centuries removed from Milarepa's, wherein Buddhism was only beginning to establish itself as a new and powerful institutionalizing social force. Though Buddhism was technically introduced as early as the seventh century, it did not put down stable enough roots to save its fledgling institutions from imperial purge in 842. However, in the wake of the social chaos engendered by the decline of the old tribal warlords, Buddhism began to re-emerge two centuries later as a stabilizing agent for Tibetan society. Monks and other ritual specialists soon began to supplant the old aristocratic families for political power in a Tibet no longer bent on conquering Asia, and so the translation of Indian Buddhist texts once again assumed great importance. The *bka' brgyud* founder Marpa, in the eleventh century, was especially renowned for his efforts in translation, and though his disciple Milarepa had no such scholarly leanings, his own unique contributions are just as important to the tradition. Milarepa to this day serves as the model for yogins and retreatants who still serve as beacons of patronage and sing his songs to encourage themselves and foster a zeal for mountain practice.

I c) a note on terms and methods
My primary concern in this paper is with the nature of yogic experience occurring in the natural world. By "the natural world," I mean Shabkar's retreat environment which is celebrated and praised throughout his body of work. While oftentimes a yogin's retreat can be as proximal to a village as just a short walk's distance, some are located in stark isolation. We see this particularly when Shabkar stays for three years on Tsonying (Wylie: mtsho snying), an island in a sixty-five mile wide lake, a very isolated dwelling place. The qualifier "solitary" is, after all, less an absolute separation from society and more of a sliding scale (many practitioners in fact go on "retreat" in group settings, and rely heavily upon their communities for support in their practices). Nevertheless, the retreat Shabkar celebrates is one that is solitary (gcig bar) and absent of other humans (mi med), as well spaces with resplendent sights and sounds, e.g. streams, waterfalls, snowy peaks, bird songs, antelope and flowery meadows. Thus, the lack of people and the presence of beautiful "natural" phenomena such as these constitutes what I refer to as "retreat," "natural space," and sometimes just "nature."

Of course, I do not wish to use the semantically loaded word "nature" carelessly, because the dichotomy between "retreat" (marked by the terms ri khrod and dben pa\textsuperscript{14}) and "household" (\textit{khyim pa}) in Shabkar's episteme is quite a bit different than the western dichotomy between "nature" and "civilization." First and foremost, what we would call nature, e.g. mountains, valleys, forests and so forth, despite being un-peopled, are, for Shabkar, not considered to be free of human civilizing influence. Rather, such spaces are powerful and beneficial largely because they have been tamed and influenced by human, namely tantric, activity. The prime example of

\textsuperscript{14} These are in fact two distinct terms that Shabkar often uses in tandem. \textit{Ri khrod} refers specifically to mountainous terrain, the peaks of Tibet as opposed to the valleys in which villages are situated. \textit{Dben pa} on the other hand marks physical solitude, or a separation from other people. Taken together, we can see that Shabkar often takes to retreat in stark geographical isolation, in mountain solitudes.
this is the myth of Padmasambhava, who subdued the hostile local spirits who were obstructing the institutionalization of Buddhism in Tibet. In contrast to the Romantic notion that nature is powerful because it is uncivilized, and free from human impositions such as science, rationalism and progress, it is powerful to Tibetans because it has been civilized. Blessed and sanctified sites abound in spaces far from villages and monasteries, and the local spirits have been subdued by powerful tantrikas, and as a result will work to benefit and protect Buddhist practitioners. Thus, "nature" is not "natural" at all, but is a social space inhabited by yogins, tantric deities (yi dam), dharma protectors (chos skyong) and local gods (yul lha), and is in many ways more civilized than towns and villages which create the conditions for many kinds of suffering and mental dullnesses created by competition, anxiety, jealousy and stress.

The songs in this translated an analyzed in this thesis were taken from the first section of Shabkar's collection of songs, the composition of which is attributed to a retreat context, because the overall focus of my thesis falls on questions of retreat and the human relationship to the retreat environment. In crafting original translations, I have consulted two versions of his collection- one was the pecha, reproduced in 1983 from Eastern Tibetan blocks and published by lama Ngodrup in Paro, Bhutan. The second is from a book published in 1987 by the Qinghai Nationalities Language Press. There are, as one would expect, some minor discrepancies between the two due most likely to scribal errors, which are noted in my translations.

The nine songs I selected to read fall into two general categories: (1) songs explicitly about the benefits of retreat that portray his environment and the kinds of affects that it has on his interiority, and (2) songs that deal more directly with the basic nature of reality. The first category of songs demonstrate the outward, more obvious and "relative" effects that retreat has on the mind; in retreat, one becomes less stressed, anxious and fearful, has ample free time to
practice, learns lessons from natural phenomena and receives blessings from the residual meditative energy of past sages. In this way, space facilitates and creates the conditions for certain kinds of mental states to arise. This, I think, lays the groundwork for the second, more "absolute" stage in which the yogin begins to loosen the hold of the mind which differentiates between self and other, and has experiences which lead him or her into realization and an experience of the ultimate nature of reality. It is sufficient to say here that all songs I selected share a common theme- the permeability of inner and outer to each other.

Part II:

The Permeable Person: Theorizing Religious Experience and Subjectivity in Buddhist Studies

*Things seen and heard arise from mind, abide in the realm of the mind, and again, pass into the mind's expanse. Realize the faulty nature of those things!* -Shabkar

Walt Whitman once wrote, "The land and sea, the animals fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests mountains and rivers, are not small themes [in poetry]... but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than [just] the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects... they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls." Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: New York Univ., 1980. pg. 10.

For Whitman, poetry should not merely describe experience in a direct or objective manner, but instead must speak to the subject as well as its objects in such a way that each is perforated by the other. Indeed, encounters with the natural world in Whitman's Romantic poetry are rarely there just for the sake of a pretty picture, but almost invariably point to deeper understandings
and realizations about the nature of our being. For instance, in Whitman's famous poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, he paints a scene of a child, bringing him handfuls of grass and asking, "What is the grass? After some pondering, he answers:

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere;
The smallest sprout shows that there really is no death,
And if ever there was it lead forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward… and nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.¹⁷

In this poem, the leaves of grass are not portrayed simply for aesthetic effect, but are a sign for transformation, regeneration, continuity, and our own ultimate immortality. Death is not a termination of life but one aspect of a universal transformative process which should be celebrated and participated in rather than dreaded or resisted.

More than being just a sign for this kind of metaphysical principle though, the leaves of grass are themselves the very stuff of this process, and more than symbolizing, the experiential encounter with the grass itself *is* an encounter with this deeper process of reality. In this way, the poetic formulation of nature is neither purely aesthetic nor purely symbolic, but is both, and much more. Here, Whitman realizes and experiences an deeper truth about the nature of things

¹⁷ Ibid., pg. 30.
through very ordinary natural phenomena, and in doing so perforates the boundaries between the observer and the observed. Our own bodies and minds are eternally bound up in this ever-present cosmogenic process. This is not a kind of knowledge gleaned just from intellectual observation, but a personal realization drawn from one's own participation with such a reality.

II a) William James' Protestant model of Experience

Such is one particular intersection between what we might call "religious experience" and "nature" in poetry in the Western poetic tradition. Indeed, scholars of religion have long recognized the proclivity for such exalted states of experience and knowledge to occur when immersed in natural surroundings. In William James' collection of essays, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he notes just this, and provides several instance, all from Western poetic and autobiographical accounts, including some from Whitman himself, of "mystical experiences," that is, experiences of tremendous peacefulness, joy, assurance, beatitude and and/or palpably felt paranormal presence, that occur in nature. However, he does not spend much time speculating as to why the natural world has the proclivity to give rise to such experiences, just that it does. James cites the following passage from Whitman:

> I believe in you, my Soul...
> Loaf with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat;...
> Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.
> I mind how once we lay, such a transparent summer morning.
> Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the arguments of the earth,
> And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,

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And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers and the
women my sisters and lovers,
And that a keelson of the creation is love19

This passage in which Whitman in found in a field in a state a state of benediction that has arisen seemingly spontaneously importantly highlights the gnosis, the special state of knowledge that accompanies such a mystical state. Whilst Whitman sees a deep connection between inner and outer, James does not problemitize or explore the cause and effect relationship they share, but simply moves on to asserting the unreliability and transiency that accompanies the authority and knowledge of the impressions they leave.

For James as we will see, mystical experiences represent somewhat of a break with ordinary lived-experience, and thus are strictly individual and unassailable by external authority, and defy mapping and planning. That is to say, mystical experiences are primarily unmediated; they dawn spontaneously and through their own agency, though their arising may be facilitated by certain kinds of spaces and discipline. They are also self evident in that they cannot, and should not, according to Protestant concerns, be interpreted by others.20 For James, the natural world has the power to inspire and engender experiences like the ones we see in Whitman, as the leaves of grass reveal the deepest mysteries of reality, even though he declines to analyze why this is.

To clarify: I will be using James as a bit of a straw-man. I do not intend to eschew the multivalent depth of his writings on experience, but rather to address the way in which Jamesian

19 Ibid., pg. 389.
20 Perhaps this is also part of the reason that James declines to speculate on how the natural world affects mystical states.
"mystical experience" is used in a particular conversation within Buddhist studies. It is therefore not my intention to take on his writing as a whole, but to use his writings on mysticism as a reference point for how mystical and religious experiences are discussed in academic literature. Truly, William James deserves a far more thorough discussion than I will allot to him here, but it is nevertheless important that I establish the terms of the conversation upon which this paper is intended to be built.

James tells us that there are essentially four marks of a "mystical experience." The first is ineffability, or the tendency of such experiences to transcend and even defy language. As opposed to the everyday mundane experiences which can quite easily be put into words, such as meeting a friend for coffee, mystics struggle to adequately describe the quality of their enraptured states because they touch a level of being much deeper and more basic than words can ever hope to approach. In fact, James likens explaining mysticism to those without a direct experience themselves to explaining what music is to someone without hearing, or love to someone who's never felt it. Simply put, these experiences defy our ordinary sensory and mental faculties. Thus, the ground of religious authority is the individual and his or her extra-ordinary experience, rather than a society and its doctrines and rituals. This understanding comes directly out of his Protestant milieu which emphasizes the individual's direct encounter with the divine over and against an encounter mediated by ecclesiastic authorities with their privileged access to ritual and doctrinal knowledge. For James, what is truly salvific is the individual and his or her unmediated experience of trans-discursive truth. Such an experience simply cannot satisfactorily be externalized or made apparent through language because it is necessarily internal and utterly alien to the language of the everyday world.

Secondly, James tells us that there is a "noetic quality" to mystical states. That is to say,
that though they can never quite be put into words, mystical experiences nevertheless leave the residue of a truth to be taken away from the experience and utilized in normal life. Even if the experience defies words, it still produces a lasting, useful and authoritative impression which carries on and may even transform the whole of one's life. By placing the locus authority in individual experience, the mystic bypasses priestly or scholarly intermediaries to truth. Again, only the individual can have access to truth that is authoritative and unassailable by external forces like priests and politicians.

The transiency of these states is James' third mark of mysticism. It is important for James to note that mystical experiences do not last, but eventually, "...fade into the light of common day." Though James admits that, "...our normal waking consciousness... is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different," such normal consciousness remains one in which we are mired, even if it is occasionally punctuated by paranormal states of consciousness. Since mystical experiences, by virtue of their transiency, are detached from normal, everyday life, they cannot easily be discoursed about or mapped by conventional logic. These experiences, as James points out, "fail to give a map," of truth, and are thus unassailable by the scientific method, because they are so discontinuous with the kind of every-day consciousness capable of making maps.

Furthermore, the transient quality of mystical states points towards their impotence in affecting a lasting transformation of the subject. Because they pass, vanishing into sobriety and

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21 Ibid., pg. 372.
22 Ibid., pg. 378.
23 Ibid., pg. 379.
normality, they cannot permanently affect one's state of being. Though James does cite Buddhist and Hindu notions of lasting enlightenment, he makes no mention of how it is attained by virtue of Samādhi-experience, nor does he problematize the property of transiency which he argued for earlier.24

Finally, James identifies the fourth mark as "passivity." As he says,

Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set it, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and help by a superior power.25

That is to say, that though these experiences may be cultivated by specialists, once they arise the practitioner is swept away by an agency higher than his or her own. What is remarkable about this assertion is not James' theo-centric bend, but his assertion that religious disciplines (yoga, tai'chi, spiritual exercises and so on) are primarily meant to engender experience, rather than to cultivate qualities, create merit or serve some other social or ritual purpose. We will later see how questionable this assumption is for other traditions. What it tells us about Jamesian mystical experiences though is that they, besides being rooted in individual authority, are themselves the raison d'être of religious specialists. In other words, the goal of a religious person should be to have one's own experience of truth without input or interpretation by others. Even if that means learning the disciplines of monks and priests, the end goal is an unmediated individual authoritative experience.

James, I think, is absolutely correct in defending and attempting to define the importance

24 Ibid., pg. 392.
25 Ibid., pg. 372.
of religious experience for humans. Certainly, in his own modernist milieu, he had to reify the significance of such experiences against the accusations of scientific materialists, who saw them as merely irrational delusions and hallucinations. For James, it was important to assert the legitimacy of the subjective side of human experience over and against the purely materialist critiques of Enlightenment Rationality. However, in this attempt to defend experience from the outside, he defines it as being far too discontinuous with those outward things, and therefore does not see experience as able to mediate or be mediated by senses, by space, or by social spheres of life.

Other people in other times and places, as we will see, simply do not make such distinctions. Tibetans, for instance, conceive of experience as something that is fair game for external interpretation and transmission, and can itself mediate between the one's subjective experience and social worlds. Thus, this Protestant move to separate subject from object, church from state, individual from social is not appropriate in the case of Shabkar and others. Wayne Proudfoot makes this point in his chapter in William James and a Science of Religions, Reexperiencing the varieties of Religious Experience, called "Pragmatism and an 'Unseen Order' in Varieties." He writes,

The chief obstacle to an appreciation of Varieties today… is likely to be James's lack of attention to historical context. He juxtaposes material from biographies of Counter-Reformation saints with quotations from Tolstoy, Ramakrishna, and contemporary proponents of mind-cure… He lifts them out of their contexts because he wants to construct a composite portrait of types of religious experience that he takes to be the same across different historical and cultural settings.26

In other words, because James wants to create a science of religion that transcends history and

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can objectively understand subjective experience, he sees fit to remove individual subjective experiences from the power-knowledge of the societies that mold and interpret them. Proudfoot, rather, argues that,

…it is not possible to remove historic encrustations from dogma and worship and still understand, explain, and assess the consequences of those doctrines and practices… Nor is it possible to differentiate the common and essential from individual and local elements of religious beliefs. Such a differentiation always depends on the aims of a particular inquiry.\textsuperscript{27}

Proudfoot here denies the possibility of an objective science of religion to correctly assess individual experience as something trans-historical that stands apart from and is unmediated by social conditioning and interpretation. In our case, we should not read Shabkar's songs of experiences separately from their generic and performative dimensions, nor should we separate the experiences therein from social and spatial conditions such as lineage and retreat.

Grace Jantzen also takes on Jamesian models of mystical experience, but from a feminist perspective working with Christian mysticism. She argues that the concept of mysticism as described by James is harmful to women because it at once interiorizes and feminizes mystical experience, an otherwise embodied and socially recognized form of women's religious authority. That is to say, that a Jamesian model of mysticism and female spirituality severs any possible connection between personal mystical experience and outward socio-cultural agency that could be made. She writes,

By this privatization of spirituality, the relation between it and social justice cannot be addressed. The net result... is the reinforcement of the status quo, as intellectual and religious energy is poured into an exploration of private religiosity rather than into social and political action for change. And this in turn has the effect not only of turning the attention of those seeking deepened spirituality away from issues of

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., pg. 35.
justice, but also of leaving the efforts for justice to those who have abandoned concern with spirituality, seeing it as having nothing to offer in the work for structural change.\textsuperscript{28}

In other words, the privatization of religion in secular society utterly sunders personal experience from social authority. The separation of church and state is located in our governments as well as in our own subjectivities; inner cultivation and accomplishment must have nothing to do with actual physical or political agency in the world. Mind and matter are completely other to each other, just as church and states are held as separate.

As we can see, the Jamesian conception of mysticism is only marginally useful in theorizing the experiences formulated in the Tibetan songs of experience. Rather, personal and social dimension of Tibetan Buddhist life are intimately intertwined, and each cannot and should not be separated from the other. For Shabkar though, his "spirituality," far from being limited to the interior, is proclaimed loudly and celebrated by his community, and is itself the basis for social authority. Though personal experience is indeed important, it is not privileged as private, but must be engendered and interpreted by authority figures with their established lineages. In fact, singing songs of experience at all is a performance of religious authority that leaves open the possibility for the audience to judge its merits. Thus, such a heavy focus on the individual misses this important performative dimensions that are how these songs are actually encountered by Tibetans in historically situated contexts. Additionally, Shabkar's goal per se is not just to have visions of Buddhas, mandalas and emptiness, though these experiences are indeed important points along the path. What is a more important is cultivating a stable and long-lasting transformation of the individual into a powerful Bodhisattva and Tantric master who has not only attained a degree of realization for himself but also is capable of taming ghosts and demons as

well as conferring blessings and advice upon ordinary people. Religious experience for Shabkar, as I will argue, is not at all transient, passive or individual, but cuts through inter-personal boundaries, transforming people and the spaces they occupy in ways that are both active and lasting.

That being said, we should not altogether dismiss the Jamesian model of mystical experience. Indeed, in Shabkar's Tibet, the inner dimension of human life and subjective experiences played tremendously important roles in the lives of individuals and societies. From ineffable visions of emptiness (stong ba) and experiences of no-thought (mi rtog) to lush descriptions of the Tibetan wilderness, Shabkar's songs cast these experiences as something to be celebrated, transmitted and aspired to. Further, I think that both American Transcendentalists and Tibetan Buddhists have the notion of kind of experience that is unmediated, though in different manners. Whereas for James, mystical states are self-evident in that they appear directly to an autonomous individual, Tibetan Buddhist lineages seeks to cultivate, via-experiences and disciplines, a being with "direct perception," or in other words, someone that experiences reality directly without mediation by the conceptual mind. In that existential space beyond all mental constructs of perceiver and perceived, the delusions of subjectivity and objectivity part and reveal the true way of abiding of all reality. Though the experience itself is ineffable, defying complete capture by words, it can indeed be approached poetically through rhythm, metaphor and imagery.

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29 These direct perceivers are, “...by definition, knowers which are free from conceptuality and non-mistaken. To be free from conceptuality means that such a consciousness deals with its object directly without making use of an internal image”( pg.16). For these Tibetan thinkers, truth is not found in simply having the correct perception of something (that is only one part of it) but in realizing that the mind is, “…individual moments of knowing, the continuum of which makes up our sense of knowing.”(pg. 15) Lati, Rinbochay, Elizabeth Napper, and 'Jam-dpal-bsam-'phel. Mind in Tibetan Buddhism: Oral Commentary on Ge-shay Jam-bel-sam-pel's Presentation of Awareness and Knowledge, Composite of All the Important Points, Opener of the Eye of New Intelligence. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1986.
To put it another way, mystical experiences for James are unmediated because they appear directly to an individual, and are unmediated by doctrine, ritual and authority. For a Tibetan like Shabkar though, meditative experience can and should be mediated by the authority of a lama and a lineage, until one has gained such a degree of transformation and realization that he or she sees directly into the nature of reality and has become such an authority capable of interpreting and shaping the meditative and ritual experiences of others. Such a view, though arguably ineffable and noetic in important ways, is certainly not transient, and not at all limited by the bounds of individual, but instead spills back and forth between the individual and his or her world.

Thus, with this paper I would like to redeem a space for the study of subjective experience in Religious Studies as a discipline. Though we do not have direct access to a person's interiority, we can study and examine the ripples that such experiences creates as it penetrates the world, in this case through song, tradition and lineage. Because solitary yogic experience in the Tibetan Buddhist episteme is not restricted to the individual, but rather creates living oral and literary tradition and sacred sites in the landscape, and can be lived through participation in Shabkar's poet-yogin tradition, it is important that we cultivate an understanding of and respect for claims to special states of experience. In other words, because people and their worlds, perceivers and perceived, are not separate, but are instead permeable to each other, it is both possible and necessary for us to take such so called "personal" mystical experience as a serious object for study. Such an understanding also serves to move us farther away from Enlightenment, Cartesian notions of personhood and individuality, and more accurately reflects the epistemes of pre-modern societies.
II b) Robert Sharf's critique of meditative experience

William James puts experience front-and-center as the goal of religion, but that direct model of experience that seemed so obvious to him has been challenged seriously by others. Buddhist studies scholar Robert Sharf dismisses such claims of direct unmediated experience, and even goes so far as to question "experience" as an examinable category altogether. As he says,

…I would draw attention to a presupposition made by virtually all [modern scholars of religion], namely, that terms such as 'religious experience,' 'mystical experience,' and/or 'meditative experience' are primarily referential or denotative, i.e., that their signification lies in the signifieds to which they allegedly refer.\(^{30}\)

In other words, the various stages of meditation outlined in Buddhist texts, rather than referring to actual phenomenological states and concrete experiences, reflect doctrines and positions that are arrived at philosophically and scholastically, and not experientially.

Sharf argues that in traditional Buddhism, "truth" is not at all located in an individual's mystical meditation experiences, as James would say, but is instead constructed via logic and dogma. For instance, dialectical texts which posit the world as illusory are not realizations arrived at in meditation, but are the product of a long process of scholastic debate, and thus do not report actual lived experience. As he says,

In fact, it is difficult to imagine how anyone could mistake this genre of religious literature for the "expressions" or "reports" of personal experiences; they are first and foremost scholastic compendiums, compiled by monks of formidable learning who were attempting to systematize and schematic the confused and often conflicting descriptions of practices and stages found scattered throughout the cannon.\(^{31}\)

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\(^{31}\) Ibid., 238.
"Meditation manuals" then, such as Zen kōan collections, or tantras with visualizations of Buddhas and pure lands are primarily used not as manuals at all, but as liturgical texts whose purpose should be understood in a social and performative context—the training of bodily dispositions, textual memorization and recitation, performance of rituals and cultivating positive qualities, rather than as sets of instruction for engendering "mystical experience." As he says, "Very little time, if any, is allotted for assimilating the content of the texts, or for fixing an image of a deity in the mind. Instead, monks chant the texts in unison, hurrying through each section of the ritual in order to finish it in the time allotted." In this view, most Buddhists do not, as Westerners like William James would take for granted, themselves seek to achieve exalted states of consciousness, but are instead primarily occupied with academic and ritual pursuits, and the creation of merit and virtuous qualities.

Thus, the Jamesian focus on experience is, according to Sharf, entirely misplaced. He argues that this preoccupation with experience had its inception when Buddhist traditions encountered the West and its enlightenment rationalism, nostalgic romanticism, and Protestant critique of ritual and dogma. He explains, "By situating the locus of religious signification in phenomenological "inner space," religion is securely sequestered beyond the compass of empirical or social-scientific modes of inquiry" (229). This is why modern Buddhist movements and even secular scholars like James have supposed personal experience is at the core of that religion, because it is the only space it is allowed to exist (in modernity). Thus, Buddhism became construed as a kind of individualist, almost Protestant search for one's own salvation, rather than as an ecclesiastical body that authorizes disciplines, texts and rituals.

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32 Ibid., 246.
This authorizing body, for Sharf, relies on its own internal logic and cultivates knowledgeable, disciplined people who are important social performers. A Jamesian stance on religion presupposes the centrality of religious experience, which is for Sharf, simply not there, but is produced by and large by distinctly modern Buddhist movements and authors, such as D.T. Suzuki. He writes,

Proponents of Zen... [argued] that Zen is immune to Enlightenment critiques of religion precisely because it is not a religion in the institutional sense at all; it is, rather, an uncompromisingly empirical, rational, and scientific mode of inquiry into the true nature of things.³³

That is to say, though Zen is scientific and rational in its pursuit of knowledge, its field of that knowledge, individual subjective space, is unassailable by objectivist modes of inquiry. In this way, Suzuki can have his cake and eat it too; Zen is rational in the scientific sense, but at the same time it is, by its very nature, immune to any external critique by science. Sharf even goes on to argue that pre-modern Japanese Buddhists did not discuss experience much at all. He says,

One searches in vain for a premodern Chinese or Japanese equivalent to the phenomenological notion of experience. Nor is it legitimate to interpret such technical Zen terms as satori, or kensho, as denotation some species of “unmediated experience”... In traditional Chinese Buddhist literature, such terms are used to denote the full comprehension and appreciation of central Buddhist tenets such as emptiness, Buddha-nature, or dependent origination. There are simply no a priori grounds for conceiving such moments of insight in phenomenological terms.³⁴

Again, Sharf points out how the true "essence of Buddhism" is not at all individual or experiential, but is based in doctrine, scholasticism, ritual and discipline. The vast majority of monastics are more concerned with learning philosophy and ritual than they are with seeing

³³ Ibid., 248.
³⁴ Ibid., 249.
directly into the nature of things, and traditional lay-people's Buddhism mostly consists of supporting the monks who study and enact those rituals. As I will demonstrate though, there are pre-modern Buddhists for who experience is an important category.

In my opinion, it is in fact appropriate for Sharf to claim that the "heart" of Buddhism, that is, how it is experienced and affects people's lives, lies more in its doctrine, rituals and role in society than in an individual cultivation of an experience of truth. Furthermore, I think he is correct when he asserts that, "...the meaning of [terms for meditative states] must be sought in the polemic and ideological context in which Buddhism is carried out." Indeed, map is not territory, and direct, lived experience should not be conflated with the philosophies and terminologies used to distinguish the many different Buddhist lineages and identities.

However, this does not mean that individual lived experience is not important, even from a social or cultural perspective. In the songs of experience that take the subjective experience of virtuoso Tibetan Buddhist meditators as their subject, professional yogins like Shabkar celebrate the beautiful sights and sounds of retreat, the truth gleamed from the drops of dew on a flower, the anxiety over suffering and death, the joy and unbound yogic freedom in solitude, and his visions of the pure and empty expanse of reality, the dharmadhātu free from duality. Contrary to Sharf's assertion that personal experience is entirely eschewed in the construction of truth-claims, there is actually much dispute within Tibetan Buddhism as to whether scholasticism is more or less reliable than an individual's experience and practice, as we will soon see. Though, as Sharf says, revered dialectical scholars such as Candrakīrti and Dharmakīrti are indeed suspicious of individual experience, I would like to point out that yogins like Milarepa, in whose

36 Ibid., 238.
tradition Shabkar firmly locates himself, are just as suspicious of book learning. For instance, Mila sings,

My books, the natural existence of the phenomenal world,

Reveal understanding:

I never looked at the black letters of books.\(^{37}\)

In other words, Milarepa draws truth from his own experiential encounter with his outer and inner worlds, and not from logic and doctrine. This passage can in fact be read as an attack on scholasticism and its eschewal of the individual as a locus of authority. As we can see, the status of experience is not at all agreed upon in the Tibetan tradition; instead, different kinds of Buddhists hold to different kinds of authority. In fact, Milarepa is sometimes challenged directly by the scholar-tradition that tended to wield the social power in Tibet.

In one such story, he becomes quite popular with a the lay-people of Nya Non and as a result diverts offerings and praise from the scholar-monks. Those monks in turn decide to challenge his understanding of dharma (i.e. his authority) and humiliate him so he is forced to leave. When they come to Milarepa, they proudly proclaim their scholastic learning and accumulated merits. However, when they ask him on what grounds he is teaching and receiving offerings, he replies, "Having realized the Voidness of all things I am qualified to receive and enjoy the offering."\(^{38}\) These are two very distinct, though sometimes overlapping ways of locating authority in the Tibetan tradition. Rather than being humiliated, Milarepa ends up impressing them with his first-hand realization of truth, and converts a trio of scholars into becoming yogins themselves.


\(^{38}\) Ibid, pg. 376.
Outraged, their former monastic master Lodun challenges Milarepa himself. He accuses Mila as follows:

You are an extraordinary yogi, so you must have a sound knowledge of logic. Otherwise, acting like this, you will degrade the Dharma, ruin yourself and others, and disqualify yourself as a Dharma-practitioner. Therefore please give us a simple proposition in accordance with the rules of logic".  

This scholar seems to be in agreement with Sharf, arguing the heart of Buddhism is scholarship, and that inner experience is shallow and unreliable in comparison to scholastic accomplishment. But Mila just replies,

My dear scholar, you should try to rest yourself in the inborn Dharma-Essence instead of in words and talk. In daily life you should always attempt to subdue your desires. Correct understanding can only grow from within... I do not understand the logic of your School. My own 'logic' is that of the Guru, of the Pith-Instructions, of diligence and perseverance, of remaining in solitude, of meditating in the hermitage, of producing the Realizations and true understanding within... Being bound by the 'logic' of jealousy and evil cravings, one is liable to experience the 'logic' of Hell and suffer the 'logic' of pain.  

Milarepa's yogic tradition draws a clear line between book-learning and personal experience, unabashedly favoring the latter. In that yogic tradition embodied by him and later by Shabkar, it is direct experience, gleaned in retreat and put forth by poetic performance that holds the most authoritative weight, rather than academically polished works of doctrine and logic compiled in a monastery. Lodun and another master scholar Dhar Lho continue to challenge Milarepa's understanding of logic, insisting that this is where authority must be located. Milarepa though continues to emphasize renunciation, meditation and devotion to the guru. He says, "...whoever realizes the inborn illuminating-Void Mind becomes Buddha. I consider that the Ultimate Truth is no other than the realization of one's own mind, but you scholars have no faith in this."  

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39 Ibid. pg. 380.
40 Ibid., emphasis added.
41 Ibid. pg. 391.
goes on to insist that an obsession with book-learning inflates one's ego and evil desires.

Milarepa eventually wins over those watching the debate, driving home the point that it is one's meditative realization that holds the most weight.

Thus, Sharf's assertion that Buddhist discourses on meditative experience are always just scholastic and intellectual falls apart when applied to the yogic-poetic tradition, because one's individual experience of exalted, if not clearly mapped out, states of consciousness are themselves cultivated for the sake of understanding reality. However, we should be careful to not fall entirely back into James' unmediated model of religious experience, because we have also seen that such experiences are irrevocably tied to inter-personal poetic performance and very real social authority. With his songs, afterall, Milarepa and other uneducated yogins are able to effectively challenge the Tibetan intelligentsia for patronage.

Indeed, this kind of discourse is also polemical, but it is of a very different type than Milarepa's challengers are used to dealing with. Rather than demolishing their opponents' positions with pure logic, Milarepa and other poet-yogins vie for patronage *poetically*, and *performatively*, by singing songs of their personal experience and convincing others to take refuge in them as beacons of Buddhahood. Furthermore, such an understanding of truth is not revealed directly through single, distinct experiences, but instead must be cultivated, with the assistance of authorized lamas, over the course of many years of training, and must cultivate and incorporate these experiences in a guided and defined manner in certain specific kinds of spaces (retreat). Instead of seeing religious experience either as an unmediated individual affair, or just as a modern Western invention meant to deflect science, we should seek out a model of it that accounts for both aspects of experience, personal and social, interior and exterior. Sharf's strict framework ignores these important elements of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and thus also
misses everything that is going on between the yogin and his natural and social environments.

II c) Janet Gyatso's Mediating and Mediated Model of Experience

Such a model can, I believe, be found in Janet Gyatso's response to Sharf's argument, "Healing Burns With Fire: The Facilitations of Experience in Tibetan Buddhism." She insists that, contrary to the claims made by Sharf, experience is an important category in pre-modern Tibetan Buddhism. To counter Sharf's claims that personal experience is generally unimportant to Buddhists, she points out how many kinds of Tibetan autobiographical texts take individual experience as their focus, and as the foundation of their authenticity and power. Also on the ethnographic side of things, she argues that there are actually plenty of Buddhists in pre-modern Tibet for whom the structured cultivation of meditative experience is a central component of Buddhist life, with practice-academies and meditative retreat both being quite common.\(^{42}\) Not only is such individual experience central to Buddhist life, but is itself a way of locating social power, though it by no means stands by itself isolated from other aspects of life.

Gyatso however has no interest in merely pointing to how important or unimportant experience is (it clearly has a place), but instead is more concerned with that very interplay between personal and social worlds, and inner and outer dimensions of experience. "Experience" or nyams as it is called in Tibet, though an important sphere of Tibetan religious life, is not conceived of in a Cartesian kind of way that assumes that, "….our experience is known to us self-transparently."\(^{43}\) A subject is not just as passive recipient of outer experience; both are inextricably bound and pervade each other at every turn. As Gyatso says,

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\(^{43}\) Ibid., pg. 113.
...in the end there remains a vacillation in the conceptualization of *nyams* between aligning it with the subject of an experience and with an objective content. Such ambiguity issues out of the very nature of such experiences themselves: the subject of bliss is himself blissful, the subject of an experience of clarity is herself clear, and so on. We might say that experience bridges subject and object... Perhaps most importantly, the tendency for a subject and object to reflect each other and thereby to become blurred in salient, absorbed states of meditation serves to links *nyams* experiences with the highest goal of Tibetan Buddhist meditative traditions, namely, the collapse of all subject-object dualism altogether.44

I agree totally with Gyatso on this point- experience in meditation is not at all self-evident insofar as it grants individual glimpses of truth. Rather, it is *immediately transformative*, is not an object of perception but is a bridge between subject and object.

Though these experiences are not themselves perfect reflections of the nature of reality, they nevertheless serve as the basis for a re-ordering and re-constructing of those worlds, the end goal of which is an individual with "direct perception" who is him or herself capable of arbitrating truth, and thus may wield religio-social power in a community, as Milarepa was able to. Because individual experience is by its nature ambiguous and subject to the erroneous interpretations of the conceptual mind, one's meditation-experience must first pass through any number socially authorized intermediaries before the individual is capable of talking about any kind of absolute reality.

As Gyatso points out Tibetan Buddhists themselves draw a distinction between experience (*nyams*) and realization (*rtogs*), the latter being a kind of experience,45 but a kind of experience that is more lasting and stable, and more basic and in the background of all awareness. Though one may have many blissful and serene experiences (*nyams*) in meditation, they are considered fickle and are therefore not themselves the goal of practice. Rather, they

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44 Ibid., pg. 119.
45 Ibid., pg. 120.
must be used in order to affect a more permanent transformation of subject and object worlds. Again, experience, *nyams*, offers no self-evident truth without institutionally-authorized teachers and/or texts to construct them into realization, *rtogs*.

One example Gyatso gives of this is tantric sexual practices wherein the bliss (*bde*) of sexual contact is meditated on and is meant to be seen as empty. In this way, an experience caused by an agent external to the experiencing subject, by being perceived in an ritually arbitrated manner, has the power to transform the subject herself into a more realized being capable of seeing all kinds of phenomena and experiences as bliss-emptiness. Gyatso asserts, "...not only does [meditative experience] 1) bridge other things 2) need to be interpreted itself; 3) meditative experience must be cultivated in the first place."46 In direct contrast to Sharf, Gyatso is saying that it is the goal of certain practices to elicit experience, but contrary to the Jamesian subject's passivity to these experiences, they are not the end-goal of practice, but are to be used actively and in a defined manner as fuel for kindling a genuine realization of the nature of things. For her, experience is a means produced by discipline and ritual, but is not an end in itself.

Realization (*rtogs*) is far from transient. Though "mystical experiences" may arise in conjunction with such a meticulously cultivated transformation, they are meant to be "realized" as clear and empty, thus saving one from fixation on what is merely transient and unreliable, namely individual mystical experiences. Gyatso tells us that in the Mahāmudrā tradition, one is trained to recognize all types of experience, mundane and mystical, from this enlightened view (*lta*).47 Perfecting viewing all things in this way allows the viewer herself to be transformed by the experience; all things being bliss-emptiness, she understands her own being in the same way, not as a Kantian island isolated from an external material world, but instead as one of many pure

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46 Ibid., pg. 123.
47 Ibid., 127.
apparitions adrift in the ocean of the Dharmakāya of pure light (a'od gsal ba chos sku).

Gyatso agrees with Sharf's basic point that scholars of Buddhism in the West follow an overly Cartesian model of experience, insofar as they take individual, unmediated experience to be at the center of Buddhist soteriological pursuits. Though Sharf does not deny that mystical experiences are possible, and occur from time to time for dedicated yogins, what he does assert is that, "...the vast majority of Asian practitioners... simply do not aspire to such psychic feats. Ethnographic accounts strongly suggest that such practitioners are more concerned with ceremony and performance than with 'inner experience' per se."\(^{48}\) This is another major point where Gyatso departs from Sharf's claims about the status of experience. She argues instead that ceremony, performance and inner experience are not actually exclusive to each other. She says that,

…in contrast to the way that claims of private, unmediated religious experience have often served as a strategic device to preserve autonomy and immunity to scientific scrutiny, claims of experience in the Tibetan Buddhist context are mediated by a variety of signs, signs made possible precisely by experience's own mediated (and mediating) nature. Such signs and expressions render the virtuoso's experience subject not only to a kind of scrutiny but even to the participation of disciples, colleagues, and patrons."\(^{49}\)

We can see this point clearly indicated by the performative nature of the songs of experience. In singing about one's experiences and realizations in yogic training, ordinary people are made into disciples, scholars are made into yogins, and the experience of one person becomes the foundation for the devotion and patronage of many. It is not at all uncommon for a member of Milarepa or Shabkar's audience to be converted, have their faith and diligence strengthened, or even themselves have a mystical experience just from hearing the performance. Indeed,

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\(^{48}\) Sharf, pg. 246.

\(^{49}\) Gyatso, pg. 115.
religious experience in meditation is important to Tibetans, it is just not taken as objective and self-evident, or treated as a strictly private matter.

Because James' modernist milieu took religion to be such a private matter, cut off from the machinations of power, people like him saw Buddhism and meditative experience in the same way as they saw Christianity, as essentially focused on the individual, but historically mired in rituals and institutions. Sharf refutes James by pointing out that power and Buddhism have always been inseparable, and that their rituals and performances which James sees as being about experience are actually about discipline and performance. What Sharf doesn't see and what Gyatso corrects is that inner individual experience and outward social performance are not at all separate, but are intimately intertwined. Because people and their experiences are more permeable than someone like Descartes ever imagined, one's experience can be transformational, can be engendered and interpreted by others, and even transmitted to others, as in tantric initiations. Thus, individual and social worlds are bridged through formalized technologies of experience.

Something I would like to add to Gyatso's argument is that the natural world, the retreat environment of the yogin, is permeates and is permeable to personal experience in the same way that the social world does. As we have seen, scholars have had great difficulty locating and defining the role of paranormal personal experiences in religious traditions. Indeed, James and Sharf both say something right and something wrong. The nature of experience in these songs, I will argue, is neither personal and self-evident, nor pure social construction. Rather, Shabkar's

50 Wherein an experience of bliss-emptiness is transmitted through ritual action, through ingestion of bodily substances, and the sharing of consorts. Gyato's point here is that using seemingly mundane things in ways that are highly mediated has the result of duplicating the experience of the master in his or her disciple. For instance, the master's sexual fluids are sometimes understood as, "...the refined essence of all enlightened deities." (136) In this way, it is understood that the mind of the guru is being glimpsed by the disciple, who then must train in stabilizing that View for herself.
songs of experience are a sort of conduit for bringing yogic experience into the social sphere, allowing others to participate in, criticize and venerate such experiences. That same yogic experience though is by no means unmediated, but is a by-product of the interactions between the yogin and his or her external world of retreat, blessings, teachings, initiations, objects of meditation and so on. Thus, no experience is "self-evident" or "speaks for itself," especially to we who have only these songs of experience with which to work. The same is also true for the poet-yogin himself, who must at every turn question and qualify his or her meditative experience. Rather than being obvious, experience is at once obscurative and revelatory, and thus begs to be interpreted, transmitted and expanded upon.

Encounters with nature in Shabkar's songs should then be seen for their emphasis on the inner dimensions of human life, the personal experience of the yogin in meditation retreat, and how and why these experiences are important for Shabkar's social world. What is most interesting is not just that exalted states of experience exist for Buddhists, but in what ways Shabkar's retreat world evokes them, and how Buddhist discourses on renunciation and emptiness intersect with and portray these experiences, and subsequently construct a more lasting transformation and realization for the individual and his community. Throughout, I am guided by Gyatso's assertion that experience meditates and is mediated, but rather than look at rituals like initiations and Sādhanā, I will focus on Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol's relationship to his retreat environment, its sights, sounds and sensations conveyed in his songs of experiences, and more generally upon the yogin's poetic portrayal of his relationship with reality itself. Specifically, I wish to counter certain assertions about the relationship between these two poles, the subject and his objective, i.e. outer reality, that it is one simply of "transcendence" of external objects by a passive and detached subject. Because, as I will soon demonstrate, there is such a
myriad of exchanges and interactions between the two, it is more accurate to see them as being in a mutually beneficial symbiosis, than in a Cartesian relation of the subject dominating the object. More broadly, I hope to contribute to the discussion in Buddhist Studies about the status and nature of meditative experience, and its relationship to the retreat environment that both molds and is molded by meditation practice.

II d) Roger Jackson and the transcendence of nature in Tibetan and Japanese Buddhist poetry

Without an appreciation of the nuanced dimensions of experience in Tibetan Buddhism, very simplistic relationships between the individual and his or her world can mistakenly be presupposed. Such is what occurs in Roger Jackson's, "'Poetry' in Tibet: glu, mgur, snyan ngag and 'songs of experience'.” Though the majority of this article consists of a thorough and lucid exposition of Tibetan poetic genres, referenced earlier in this paper, I take disagreement with his short conclusion. In it, he playfully considers whether or not songs of experience, for their emphasis on the reporting of individual experience, could be considered equivalent to "poetry" in its Western sense. "Poetry," according to Webster's must be, "writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm." Certainly, the songs of experience engage the reader and convey experience through meaning, sound and rhythm, but Jackson wants to know what kinds of experiences are being formulated, and for what reasons.

Indeed, it seems to be a requirement for poetry to report the full range of human experience, from ecstasy and joy to sorrow and despair, but Tibetan songs of experience, when they describe directly a yogin's personal experience, tend to focus only on the milieu of
meditation retreat and the "religious" experiences it evokes. Thus, Jackson ponders, perhaps these experiences are more akin to what we would recognize as those in "religious poetry," which, "...places front and center the poet's relation to what we might call 'the transcendent.'"\textsuperscript{51}

That is to say, that because songs of experience focus on one type of experience, i.e. a religious experience which transcends more ordinary types, they must be one type of poetry, i.e. religious poetry.

As we have seen from the discussion of James, Sharf and Gyatso though, "religious experience" as a category is not a category that can be applied cross-culturally, as it is essentially nothing more than a cultural construction useful to Protestant West, a by-product of Cartesian models of self and other wherein a person passively encounters a divine other, and undergoes very marginal, if any, lasting transformation to the nature of his or her subjectivity. The specific experiences engendered by Tibetan Buddhist meditation fail to be neatly classed into such a model. Not only are there many different kinds of experiences and exchanges between the practitioner and his or her social world involved in the course of traditional yogic training, but these kinds of experiences also bridge and transform subject and object spaces that are mutually permeable to each other.\textsuperscript{52}

Additionally, Jackson brings into doubt the way in which the sights and sounds of the natural world are encountered in the songs of experience. For Jackson, because these poet-yogins like Milarepa and Shabkar practice so called "non-dualistic" meditations, wherein, all phenomena are equally empty, just waves on the same vast ocean of reality, this "... should open

\textsuperscript{51} Jackson, pg. 384.
\textsuperscript{52} My use of "permeability" here points to the tendency of the subject to be transformed by his or her experience (as opposed to passively glimpsing a fleeting vision of some transcendent other), as well as to the ability of subjective experience to effect the social world and religious cosmos of the subject.
their poetry to their reporting, without discrimination, of whatever appears—very much as in Zen poetry nonduality becomes the basis for the positive valuation of all experience and phenomena, no matter how conventionally insignificant.”\(^{53}\) Such meditative states may, as we see in Zen poetry, cause the author to take mundane phenomena as their main subject for reporting, because realization of their universally empty nature shines through them. Jackson wants the songs of experience to be open to all kinds of inner and outer phenomena and impressions in order to be classed as poetry.

Indeed the "mundane" surroundings of the natural world, trees, mountains, rivers, birds, fish, clouds and so on all are chronicled in the Tibetan Songs of Experience. Additionally, the authors do meditate upon emptiness, all relative phenomena being equal in their non-reality. Nevertheless, Jackson sees these authors as exalting the religious over the mundane. As he says, ...whatever thematic freedom might in principle be entailed by meditation on emptiness, virtually no pre-modern Tibetan poet has paid much attention to exalting conventionalities, a la Bashō or Williams—unless natural descriptions qualify, which is debatable, since *nature is seldom described for its own sake*...\(^{54}\)

The problem for him is that song of experience focuses on the "religious" sphere of life over and against the immediate and the mundane. His footnote to this point is as follows:

Though it would take a lengthy essay to demonstrate how and why, I would argue that there is a significant difference between Indo-Tibetan and Sino-Japanese Buddhist poetic treatments of the natural world. In the former, conditioned by a cosmology in which nature is a part of *samsāra*, and hence, finally to be transcended, mountains, rivers and animals all tend to be treated either as pleasant backdrops to meditation or as symbols for items of the Buddhist Dharma. In the latter, shaped by a cosmology in which nature

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\(^{53}\) Ibid., pg. 385.

\(^{54}\) Jackson, pg. 386, emphasis added.
defines our limits, and so cannot and should not be transcended, features of the non-human world tend to be regarded as valuable in and of themselves, or to serve as examples that humans ought to emulate.\textsuperscript{55}

The claim being made here is that the Tibetan Buddhist episteme of nature is markedly different than that of the Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen one. Jackson claims that the experience of nature in Tibetan songs of experience is religious, almost in a Jamesian sense, because nature is only an inconsequential aside to the experiences that yogins are endeavoring to evoke, and furthermore is part of a delusory world meant to be passed over by the subject in favor of an other-worldly experience, i.e. enlightenment. Nature is described, but only when it glamorizes renunciation or points to things other than itself (e.g. the "sky-like view"), and does not report immediate phenomena "for their own sake" or as important conduits of realization.

As we will soon see though, the resplendent retreat space of caves, mountains and waterfalls praised by Shabkar is more aligned with nirvāṇa than with saṃsāra, and play myriad important roles in positive yogic transformation. Though nature does often function as symbol or background in yogic songs, it serves as more than "pleasant backdrop." Moreover, in Shabkar, nature and the external environment are not portrayed as fundamentally deceitful and meant to be negated. Rather, it plays myriad active and important roles in the quest for enlightenment. As Gyatso has argued, and this paper will further demonstrate, yogic transformation and enlightenment are only possible as a result of interaction and communion with such a space, the tranquility and freedom that it engenders, the lessons it gives us and the enlightening blessings it contains.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. pg. 388.
Before further examining the songs of Shabkar, we should first look at that of China and Japan's, in order to text Jackson's assertions. For him, Zen poetry is poetry-proper, due to its leveling of religious and mundane worlds, its assertion that the ordinary mind is the Buddha-Nature and subsequent "unbiased" reporting of all kinds of inner and outer phenomena. Recall that Jackson asserts, that in Ch'an and Zen poetry, "...nature defines our limits, and so cannot and should not be transcended," and, "features of the non-human world tend to be regarded as valuable in and of themselves, or to serve as examples that humans ought to emulate."\(^{56}\)

Indeed, Steven Heine, in his book, The Zen Poetry of Dogen: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace, seems to argue just this when he writes that, in Dogen's view,

> ...ultimate reality is realized through everyday, concrete phenomena... Both Dogen and the literati inherited the Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy of nonduality, which suggests that the nothingness or emptiness of reality is not an abstract, idealized realm but is identical with the world of forms.\(^{57}\)

In other words, the encounter with nature is the encounter with the Buddha-Mind, with primordial emptiness and ultimate truth. Because there is nothing beyond what appears, we should search in the everyday world here and now rather than try to get in touch with a mystical reality that transcends it. In Dogen, the ideal meditative experience is not of something other, but with the basic continuity between ordinary and extra-ordinary.

Thus, the ordinary natural world is a common subject of Zen poets, who simply report "what is." Steven Heine also argues that, "…Dogen is not trying to highlight the attainment of an altered state of consciousness or extraordinary perception; he wants to point to the awareness of

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\(^{56}\) Ibid. pg. 388.

nature as it is in the naked or unadorned form." That is, nature that is "unadorned" by dualistic ideas of self and other. He tells us that, "The mind, therefore, must heed and identify the mountains and rivers that embody and reveal the Buddha-nature."\textsuperscript{58} Here, ordinary experiences of the natural world, rather than an other-worldly religious experience, is taken as the poetic-subject. In a manner reminiscent of Whitman and his leaves of grass, Dogen writes that, "a single blade of grass and a single tree are both the body-mind of all Buddhas."\textsuperscript{59} As in Whitman's case, the encounter with nature, viewed in the correct light, weaves together inner and outer realities by linking together the outer events (grass) with a subjective aesthetic response, i.e. sorrow at impermanence and the joy and freedom in accepting it and seeing its higher reality beyond the confines of the individual.

Jackson then is correct in saying that, in general, Zen poet-practitioners do not seek transcendence from the world. However, the assertion that Zen poetry simply aims to report "what is" in an unbiased way is not entirely appropriate. As others have pointed out, the relationship between subject and object worlds depicted by Zen poets is not one of a detached Cartesian subject, and so an objective "what is" cannot appear directly to and be subjugated and transcended by a detached observer. Rather, it would seem that in a manner similar to how Gyatso describes meditative experience in Tibet, the Zen poet him or herself is irrevocably bound up in a process of transformative communion with the world itself. In Zen poetry, the reports of nature may seem more direct and unmediated than Tibetan songs of experience, but they are grounded similar Mahāyāna Buddhist principles. For instance, Heine argues,

> The depiction of nature is at times so simple and direct that it appears to border on realism… Yet the intended effect is nearly opposite to realism in that nature depicted in its primordial state is meant to

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., pg. 54-55.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., pg. 26.
completely mirror the realization of authentic subjectivity with mind. The aim of yugen poetry is to overcome the gap between poet or subject and poetic object or topic in order to encounter and capture the essentially unified experience of primordial reality.\textsuperscript{60}

Heine argues that we should be careful not to take such stark and simple natural descriptions as simply being objective reporting by a static subject. Though Zen poetry might indeed feel stark, impersonal and objective, in actuality it is brimming with trans-personal types of meditation experience wherein perceiver and perceived utterly permeate each other.

Such is the case when Gyatso tells us that the subject of bliss is herself blissful, and so on. Peipei Qiu concurs on this point in the works of Bashō:

...when portraying the landscape, the identity of the poet is not absent, but has merged into the entity of nature; the poet's voice is evident, yet conveyed through harmony with the work of zoka.\textsuperscript{61} The following poem... is a good example of the amalgamation of the speaker's poetic self with the creation of zoka:

How tranquil it is!
Penetrating into the rocks
the sound of cicadas.

This poem appears to be strictly on nature: no trace of the man is found in the tableau to disturb the profound tranquility of the universe. Yet there is obviously a beholder through whose senses the eternal tranquility is apprehended, internalized, and expressed... Bashō expresses simultaneously the external world the speaker's internal feelings, presenting not only a picture of the landscape, but also an aesthetic

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., pg. 56.
\textsuperscript{61} Zoka is a Taoist term describing, "...the natural way in which all phenomena come into being and transform- and the accomplishment of Dao... The notion is used in Chinese literary theory to imply the natural and spontaneous creative process or the unsullied outcome of such a process" (Qui pg. 67). In other words, it is a term to express the totality of the processes that underlie our universe, and an individual's direct experience of it, not entirely unlike Tibetan conceptions of Dharmadhātu (chos dbyings).
evaluation of it... This aesthetic landscape embodies the beholder's attitude toward the world, and it is in this landscape that the poetic self merges into zoka.62

In this case, the experiencer of the world is him or herself the world. The silence and tranquility of the world is the silence and tranquility of the poet, each permeating the other, or perhaps more accurately, each existing originally as the other (the poet has only to realize this). Though formulations of nature in Zen poetry appear to be direct and without bias towards certain types of experiences, they are really just the opposite, conveying nuanced subjective states which blur the distinction between the poet and the world, thus opening up new existential and experiential spaces for their reader to dive into and be transformed. Thus, I do not believe Jackson's equation of Zen poetry with Western poetry is entirely appropriate, even if his brief summary of the Zen view of nature is. As we will soon see, Shabkar's songs have a tendency to blur the distinctions between perceiver and perceived in a manner similar to Dogen or Bashô.

I would also like to point out here how Jackson's argument is under-pinned by Jamesian conceptions of religious experience; that those experiences are unmediated by external events, are clearly identifiable against other types of saṃsāric experience, and thus live alone in their own separate, individual, unassailable sphere. Here, such a mistaken notion of experience leads one to the idea that the natural world is a kind of stepping stone towards transcendence over appearances, and that that Zen poetry on the other hand is hardly anything but poetic-realism. Indeed, Jackson eschews the many subtle connections between a Tibetan yogin's inner and outer worlds, and thus fails to see the symbiosis between yogic practice and the natural world. His tendency is to see both inner and outer worlds as oriented towards the "religious;" inner mental states and emotions are written about, but only in relation to the Buddhist path, and that outer

phenomena, e.g. the sights and sounds of the natural world, are written about only to romanticize retreat and talk about Dharma in metaphor. Though we do indeed see plenty of aesthetic retreat imagery and nature-metaphors in songs of experience, Jackson goes too far in suggesting that this means nature is, as a whole, supposed to be transcended.

In actuality (and this is the main thrust of my argument), the encounters with nature in Shabkar's songs reflect a multi-faceted and highly nuanced communion between inner and outer. As a transformative space, solitary retreat in those natural surroundings affects one's mind for the better; being away from society makes the yogin less jealous, greedy, angry, etc. The sights and sounds of nature evoke joy and tranquility, and one can learn lessons about impermanence from observing nature. Additionally, the various caves and mountains of the Tibetan retreat-world are saturated with and civilized by the activities and blessings of past meditators, and thus have a transformative effect on the yogin practicing at a previously inhabited retreat space. As a result of that same activity, benevolent (i.e., tamed or civilized) spirits will assist the yogin. Far from being just a pleasant backdrop, the yogin's external environment and the community of beings that inhabit it participates actively in the process of yogic transformation, just as the yogin's own meditative accomplishments can transform his or her environment reciprocally.

As a result of this, the yogin, over time, comes to see that, on an ultimate level, all appearances are primordially pure, absent of a distinction between self and other, and that most people are deluded into thinking of things in terms of subjects and objects, inner and outer. The world, then, does not have to be "transcended," just experienced free from contamination by mental constructs, and ultimately realized to be in continuity with the self. To do this, one has to discipline oneself and learn new strategies of mediating between inner and outer. By meditating on appearances in certain ways, as empty clouds in the sky for instance, realization about their
true way of abiding occurs. Experience of mundane appearances must be there in the first place, then one meditates on those experiences as empty, as clouds in the sky, never separate from the reality of the sky. Only then does that everyday experience reflect truth. In this way, the world itself is re-constituted and re-formulated through very mundane experience. Rather than being about transcendence, the relationship between the yogin and his or her world is one of reciprocal positive transformation.

Part III:
Relative and Ultimate Ecologies: a Close Reading of Shabkar's Songs of Experience

III a) The Experience of Nature: Shabkar and his Mountain Retreat

To understand the basic continuity between the yogin and his environment, we will begin by looking at the relative level of the senses and emotions, namely what kind of passive and active effects the retreat world has on the solitary yogin, or how retreat as a space conditions and shapes various kinds of personal experiences. As we will see, the importance of retreating from on type of space into another, the household into the mountains, cannot be understated in Shabkar's songs. Not only does retreat give rise to immediate happiness and freedom, but teaches lessons, gives and receives blessings, and provides a yogin with the ideal space in which to practice.

"The Mountain Retreat"63

Many of Shabkar's songs contain simple but beautiful descriptions of forest and mountain scenery. Jackson identifies these moments as "pleasant backdrops" that glamorize solitary

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63 The translation for this song can be found in the Translation Appendix, pg. 12, and the transcription in the Tibetan Appendix, pg. 1-5. The Tibetan versions that I consulted are: Shabkar 1987 (hardbound), pg. 42-45 and Shabkar 1983 (pecha), folio 40-42.
meditation. Though this is certainly one aspect of the appeal of his songs and perhaps what drew Shabkar into retreat, I will argue that there is something more subtle and far more important occurring here, something deeply related to meditative cultivation. The first of Shabkar’s songs I would like to introduce, "The Mountain Retreat," briefly lists the many different reasons that retreat is beneficial to one's mind and practice. This makes "The Mountain Retreat" the ideal point at which to begin our study of Shabkar’s songs of experience.

The song begins with a four-line supplication to Shabkar's lama, and then proceeds into thirteen parallel four-line stanzas. The lines themselves are divided rhythmically into a steady pattern of three-two-three. Each stanza ends with the line, "In the pleasant, solitary forest," then it spends two lines listing some positive benefit before ending with the fourth line, "These are the delights of dwelling in a mountain-retreat." There are then three more four line concluding stanzas that break the parallelism above, in which the song's reader is extolled to themselves take up the mountain retreat. A short single line colophon caps the songs off, saying simply, "This as well was spoken by Tsogdruk Rangdrol."

To begin, the song enumerates the pleasant sights and sounds of retreat- the valleys, woods and mountains, the songs of birds and streams, the plants and animals that keep him company in retreat. There is no explicit point made here, besides that the space is beautiful, the creatures that inhabit it are, like Shabkar himself, "carefree" and sound lovely, and that caves will protect the retreatant from the elements. By beginning in this manner we also are drawn into this spacious, lush and tranquil retreat atmosphere. Indeed, these stanzas serve to invite the listener into Shabkar's world poetically before he makes the offer explicit.

After this, Shabkar begins to link the outward space to its affects on his interiority. He sings, "not tied to anyone, friend or foe, the stains of love and hate naturally wane," and, "[By]
not moving among those who are [socially] higher or lower, mental fickleness and hypocrisy naturally wane," and, "without the distractions and diversions of this life, virtuous practice dawns naturally in isolation." Shabkar is telling us that these inner events occur naturally or naturally, or spontaneously (ngang gis) when immersed in natural surroundings isolated from other humans. We can conclude then that these are passive affects that occur more through an absence of people and social obligations than by an active cultivation of something else. He does not have to make any strong effort to rid himself of love, hate, hypocrisy, or grasping, but they simply disappear by their own accord as a condition of the solitary, authorized space which he occupies.

In the next stanza though, we see that the presence of natural surroundings have their own effects. He sings, as the four seasons successively change, [I] recall life's evanescence, [and] sadness dawn." Remarkably, this too is referred to as a delight, or a bliss of dwelling in retreat. In the world of Buddhist discourse, we are told that sorrow or revulsion (skyo ba) over impermanence helps one to sever clinging to deceptive appearances and see more directly into their impermanent nature. Though that impermanent nature is not discussed in this song, we can imagine that seeing one season transform into another without distraction evokes such a disinterest in individual objects, and adds fuel to the fire of Buddhist meditation practice.

What I would like to illustrate here is that these seasonal sights cause a certain mental reactions, sorrow/revulsion, that is used in this context to further one's realization of truth and transformation. More will be said on such sorrow-evoking sights later. Shabkar adds in the next stanza, "the intellect and senses totally cleansed, the qualities of realization appear naturally." Again, this realization is not something that Shabkar has to strive to create in himself, but is something that arises by itself as a result of his immersion in the solitary mountains and forests.
These are some of the most basic examples of what I refer to as yogic permeability to the world; there is no special effort towards self-cultivation or transcendence, just the ordinary mundane world of birds, streams, trees and caves that profoundly affect one's mind for the better.

In addition to what we would recognize as natural phenomena though, there are in the Tibetan landscape, contra the Romantic episteme which conceives of nature as a pure or "virgin" space, an array of supernatural beings and phenomena that inhabit and affect it. Shabkar notes that in addition to other virtuoso meditators who, "...sing hymns that ease the mind," also, "the master, the divine lama, grants blessings, the host of Ḍākinīs bestow siddhis," and, " Heroic dharma-protectors and protectresses, guard [against] obstacles, the gods on the side of good create favorable conditions." I will to go into this aspect of the natural world, its inhabitations by civilized beings, more deeply in my close reading of another song.

Again, I begin with this song because it demonstrates at once the first two aspects of my argument: that the natural world has effects that we might recognize as both mundane and super-mundane, but most importantly has effects that are immediate and leave real and lasting impressions on individuals that condition and create a positive transformation in such yogins who immerse themselves in it. Shabkar concludes this song by breaking the parallelism, saying,

I, the yogin, spend [my] time in the mountains.  
May those lucky [to be born] humans [come] to the mountains,  
at all times rely on the solitary mountain retreat,  
and in this life, go from bliss to bliss.

I, a beggar, without food or needs,  
without servants or masters, [am] alone.

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64 That is, beings who were once hostile to Buddha-dharma but have subsequently been subjugated by the activity of bodhisattvas and tantric masters.
Without humans or dogs in this empty valley,
I receive happiness that is imminent, immeasurable, boundless.

This song demonstrates that the natural world plays a tremendously important role in engendering religious experience. Such a beautiful, serene and isolated space creates *imminent* 
(*phral*) joy *65* by (1) removing the yogin from the demands and concerns of society, (2) by pointing out the evanescent nature of phenomena and thus causing one to stop fixating on things that are beyond human control, and (3) by exposing oneself to the blessings of past meditators localized at that site and of the beings who have been tamed by them. Conversely, from the final point we see that the yogin is understood have the same kind of positive impact on his environment that his environment has on him or her.

"The Dry Shore of Solitude" *66*

I would like to now look a little more closely at the first point from above, namely that the natural world is blissful for the yogin because one is removed one from society. Just as Shabkar exalts retreat and teaches that it passively affects one's mind for the better, he teaches that domestic space passively affects one's mind for the worse. The next two songs deal explicitly which this contrast and demonstrate just how people's minds are permeable to the kinds of spaces that they inhabit. Shabkar writes about this in order to encourage others to abandon the duties of a householder take up the exalted role of a retreatant living in solitude. Such an argument is grounded in the authority of his own experience as someone who has

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*65* This is one point, I think, where Shabkar and James line up quite well. James recognized the power of the natural world to evoke experiences of peace, joy and knowledge. However, Shabkar really takes his time here to go through, for him at least, why this is. Additionally, Shabkar's retreat is highly intentional and he aims very specifically at engendering certain kinds of mental states.

*66* The translation for this song can be found in the Translation Appendix, pg. 3-4, and the transcription in the Tibetan Appendix, pg. 6-9. The Tibetan versions that I consulted are: Shabkar 1987 (hardbound), pg. 109-111 and Shabkar 1983 (pecha), folio 100-104.
achieved results from retreat, e.g. equanimity, freedom and realization of the nature of things.

As such, this song begins with a supplication to retretants who practice fearlessly and without attachment in the mountains. In lines of seven syllables each, divided syllabically in a rhythm of two-two-three, Shabkar contrasts the suffering of domesticity with the joys of retreat. The overriding metaphor here is that of standing on the "dry shore," namely, retreat, above a torrential river (symbolized life in a village). Stanzas in this song are not clearly demarcated from each other, so I divide them semantically based on when Shabkar makes a complete point, or ends a parallel series of lines. There are a many moments of parallelism throughout the songs, i.e. a series of couplets wherein Shabkar tells us that certain things in retreat surpass their household equivalents, but, aside from the rhythm, there is no overriding parallel structure like in the previous song.

After the supplication, Shabkar begins with a list of metaphors tying a Tibetan householder's possessions to the mental states that domesticity engenders. He sings,

In the layman's village household,
anger burns like an oven's inner fire
desire boils like tea in a copper [pot]
delusions spread like smoke
miserliness tightens like a basket's mouth
envy barks like a guard-dog
pride groans like a domestic ox
suffering, like the food and drink, is plentiful.

This stanza gives us a poetic vision of a Tibetan household centered on the hearth and brewing tea while tying it to negative mental states. Shabkar believes to which these are the kinds of suffering and delusions that a household gives rise. The way he frames it makes the space inseparable from them. Calling such space an "ocean of suffering," Shabkar goes on to extol the
virtues of retreat. What follows is a short stanza that poetically establishes the atmosphere of his mountain retreat and contrasts it to the household space above:

If I go, like the excellent forefathers,
I will depart for the pleasant solitary forest;
amidst dancing trees
[to] a valley of rolling hills and dazzling flowers
[under] a canopy of bees buzzing about⁶⁷
[to] a land where many birds sing
[to] an abode where deer play and dance
[to] a mountain where streams flow and fall down through the rocks.

Again, we are drawn into the joyful and serene retreat space, this time in direct contrast to domestic space which is conversely portrayed as cramped, and riddled with affliction and sorrowful. As we will see, retreat space is irrevocably tied to the inverse mental states as a household is.

Shabkar goes on to allay our fears about retreat, telling us that our physical and aesthetic needs will be met by the local plants and wildlife. He then warns us that by staying in domestic space our minds will be dull, and that in retreat,

The afflictions of ignorance and the five poisons are scarcer than the household's gold and silver.

Daily virtuous practice is greater than the household's fall harvest.

Again, Shabkar implies that just changing one's location in space, one's mind will be greatly altered for the better. Retreat space simply lacks the distractions, cravings and competitions of village life. Comparing such village and town life to a deep torrential river, Shabkar says that we

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⁶⁷ Lang ling in the book, ling ling in the pecha. Both mean about the same thing—swaying about, or drifting.
must be crazy to stay there. If, on the other hand, "...you stand now, joyfully on the dry shore of the solitary mountain retreat, it is good." The song ends by imploring us, the audience, to take refuge from the river of saṃsāra on the dry shore of the mountain hermitage, again implying that it is the retreat space itself that has the most profound impact on one's mind. For my purposes here, this song demonstrates that, in the Tibetan Buddhist episteme, people's inner mental and emotional experiences are profoundly permeable to their immediate surroundings. More than just being a pleasant backdrop to meditation, the retreat space is of paramount importance to engendering experience and realization.

We can say that for Shabkar that experience of all types is conditioned by certain types of space, and by sensory experience, ordinary sights, sounds and sensations. In his view, domestic life inevitably forces one into competition with others for status, wealth and security, and consequently causes one to experience the sufferings of negative mental states like anger, jealousy, desire and miserliness. Retreat space, in contrast, is framed as an escape from such sufferings and as a gateway into immediate and imminent happiness and freedom, as well as experience and realization down the road, due in large part to the fact that it lacks the conditions that create anxiety, fear, anger and other negative mental states. Also, because the mountain retreat already has everything one needs to be content physically and emotionally, one has more time and space in which to practice. Songs like this make it abundantly clear that there are a wealth of exchanges that take place between one's mind and environment; experience within a person is always being conditioned by what is on the outside.

In the colophon, Shabkar wonders aloud whether his song will encourage people to leave their lives in the village and seek an escape from suffering. We can then say that the didactic
purpose of this song, for Shabkar, is to encourage others through sharing his experiences in retreat, both inner and outer.

"Flee to Solitude!"68

The next song I have selected, "Flee to Solitude!" is perhaps even more rhetorically powerful than the previous one in its disparaging of household life. This song further reinforces the points made in the above song, "The Dry Shore of Solitude," but goes into some more specific details on why retreat space induces joy.

This song features lines eight syllables each, divided into a rhythm of three-two-three, and, for roughly half the song, come in stanzas of four lines. The second stanza after the supplication ends all four lines in med, "to not have." These lines, as noted, break up after five sets and then are followed by a stanza ending its lines in onomatopoeic verbs, some of which I roughly translated and others of which I simply left in the Tibetan.69 The next large stanza ends all lines in bde, "blissful" or just "happy," and then the stanza following next all lines end in phro, translated here as an exhortation to "flee!" The overarching metaphor of this song, as we will see, is domestic life not as a torrential river as in the previous song, but as a prison of demons which one must break out of.

Beginning with a supplication to those learned and accomplished ones (mkhas grub) who have practiced in solitary retreat, Shabkar calls household space a "demonic prison" (bdud btson khang), and compares the mental states that it engenders, delusion, attachment and hatred, to a dark, putrid swamp. He even calls loved ones "merciless jailers" (presumably, the demons of the

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68 The translation for this song can be found in the Translation Appendix, pg. 5-7, and the transcription in the Tibetan Appendix, pg. 10-13. The Tibetan versions that I consulted are: Shabkar 1987 (hardbound), pg. 107-109 and Shabkar 1983 (pecha), folio 98-100.
69 For example, the beating of a vulture's wings is go ro ro (Wylie: sgo ro ro).
prison) and adds that, for anyone who stays there, "... mind’s bliss is ever unreachable." That being said, he implores us to,

*Turn* your backs to the girls who guard the prison. 70

To the pleasing solitary pleasure grove, *go forth!*

[To] the place where *Buddhas-victorious ones* of the past found purification

[in] the traces of the abodes of the learned and accomplished ones.

This kind of rhetoric, coupled with such vivid and contrasting imagery, emphasizes the kinds of inner impressions that simply changing one's outer environment has.

The following stanza contains another poetic formulation of the joyful sights and sounds of retreat, telling us of the fantastic, and even spectacular scenes (*ltad mo*): the clouds, streams and animals that one see and hear in solitary retreat. Once we are drawn into the serene and beautiful space of retreat, he tells us,

70 More precisely, *ltag pa* refers to the nape of the neck. I decided that "back" simply flows better in English.

71 Though it is not my place here to offer a social critique of medieval Tibet or accusations of misogyny, I would like to note that I believe there is sufficient evidence in Shabkar's other writings to say that the female gender as a whole is not *essentialized* as samsaric and binding. In “Charming Cadavars”, Liz Wilson writes about Theravada Buddhism that,

With one notable exception, the stories in which [women] appear are not their stories but those of the monks who apprehended them as objects of contemplation. These grotesquely transformed woes are merely objects of the male gaze, solutions to the male dilemma of how men may be liberated from the captivating charms of women (pg. 12).

In Theravada Buddhism at least, women are for the most part represented as objects upon which the male renunciant can deepen his own understanding of impermanence and detachment. Women are almost never treated as subject-practitioners themselves, but as impermanent objects. However, the Tibetan Buddhism portrayed in Shabkar’s *rnam thar* seems notably different. Rather than meditate on the emptiness of the female body itself, Shabkar meditates mostly upon the natural world, and at times his own body. At their worst, women are potential wives tying would-be renunciant to society, and therefore sexuality is not the issue so much as social protocol, women representing domestic space. In one instance in his *rnam mthar* though, Shabkar says that the greatest teacher of impermanence was his mother, as he held her bones in his hands. He tells himself, "I have no need to meditate any further on impermanence and death. My mother gave me these teachings and vanished. Now, if I don't practice the Dharma—what else is there?" (pg. 406). However, there is nothing at all *sexual* or objectifying in his realization of her nonexistence. He suffers because he loved her, not because he was drawn to her sexually. The examples Liz Wilson highlights on the other hand teem with the rhetoric of disgust at the body and its inevitable death. For example: “If her bowels and flesh were cut open, you would see what filth is covered by her white skin. If a fine crimson cloth covered a pile of foul dung, would anyone be foolish enough to love the dung because of it?” (pg. 77). There’s nothing at all like this in Shabkar. His meditations on impermanence are universal and aesthetically engaging, not gendered or sexual. In Shabkar's songs, it is *domesticity* and *social obligation* that are the real obstacles, and not sexual desire for the body of a woman.
When you go somewhere like that,
not supporting family, [you're] happy,
not worrying about what to eat, [you're] happy,
not burdened by watching your back, [you're] happy,
not needing to endeavor in commerce or farming, [you're] happy,
not suffering over guarding your wealth, [you're] happy,
not quarreling with enemies, [you're] happy,
gaining freedom to practice whatever dharma, [you're] happy,
accomplishing the eternal goal, [you're] happy,
in this life and the next, [you're] happy.

In addition to just being bucolic and serene, the physical escape from domestic space removes all kinds of mental and emotional suffering that are caused by social obligations and competition with others. By living alone in retreat, one is simply content, free, and utterly self-contained. Also important to note is that solitude is not cast as some kind of austerity; it is not at all unpleasant and the yogin does not have to wait for his or her next rebirth to reap its rewards. Rather, he or she is spontaneously happy and joyful in the moment of retreat. This happiness arises for natural and ordinary reasons: the sights and sounds are pretty and entertaining, and that kind of space lacks the causes of many negative inner states, namely, worry, anxiety, fear, anger, greed and lust.

This is one of the many ways that the natural world seems to engender and structure religious experience in Shabkar's songs; it removes one from the negative mental states that obstruct his meditation practice, and gives him the time and space to practice further and enrich the quality of his mind. Of course, such a space must be coupled with Buddhist meditation practice in order to create experience and realization, but we can see clearly how and why Shabkar believes natural space creates the conditions necessary for religious experience and
realization to arise, and serves as the soil that allows the seeds of meditation practice to flower.

Śāntideva, turning one's back on the world

Such beliefs though do not arise purely from personal experience, but are structured by a centuries old discursive tradition that valorizes retreat and eschews domesticity. This Tibetan tradition has an important Indian antecedent in the eighth century Indian Mādhyamakan Śāntideva and his seminal volume on Buddhist training, The Way of the Bodhisattva, (Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra) in which he discusses the transience and inevitable decay of the beautiful things human beings attach themselves to, and the subsequent need to renounce those things. What Śāntideva emphasizes in his chapter on meditation is that attachment to friends, family, lovers and other alluring objects causes one to become unfocused on meditation and obstruct one's view of the emptiness that underlies all such things. For instance, he says,

Through being unattached to living beings
I am completely obscured from the perfect reality,
My disillusion (with cyclic existence) perishes
And in the end I am tortured by sorrow.

By thinking only of them,
This life will pass without any meaning.
(Furthermore) impermanent friends and relatives
Will even destroy the Dharma (which leads to) permanent (liberation).72

For Śāntideva, an understanding of impermanence is important because without it we attach to unstable and unreliable material persons and objects and thus waste our lives and are prevented

from seeing the truth which releases one from death and rebirth. Sorrow, or *skyo ba*, is in this way a useful tool in the Buddhist emotional palette because it causes people to come out with a realization that all things change, and such a realization in turn encourages us to turn away from samsāra and, in this case, domestic life. Without such sorrow, and by attaching to what is transient, we suffer and are reborn into the lower realms. If however one is able to realize things as transient, then he or she no longer feels attachment and its fruits, fear and hope, and will have peace and equanimity of mind.

Śāntideva treats meditation in retreat as the penultimate practice of detachment; one leaves his or her friends, family and possessions in search of such an equanimity unconditioned by the power, wealth and prestige so valued by householders. He writes,

> It has been said by the Tathāgatas
> That one should not befriend the childish,
> Because unless they get their own way
> These children are never happy.

> When shall I come to dwell in forests
> Amongst the deer, the birds and the trees,
> That say nothing unpleasant
> And are delightful to associate with?

> When dwelling in caves,
> In empty shrines and at the foot of trees,
> Never look back --
> Cultivate detachment.

> When shall I come to dwell
In places not clung to as "mine"
Which are by nature wide and open
And where I may behave as I wish without
attachment?73

For Śāntideva, retreat space is one in which people can be free of the kinds of mental defilements that crop up in domestic life, e.g. fear, stress and the lust for power. In such a space, one can cultivate the detachment necessary to see all things as equally impermanent. This kind of sentiment is echoed loudly in Shabkar's songs, particularly the previous two songs, "The Dry Shore of Solitude," and "Flee into solitude!" wherein Shabkar's discusses retreat as a space free from the kinds of relationships that cause one to suffer and is ripe with those that lead with peace and realization, e.g. with benevolent spirits and other retreatants. It is not so much that one is alone, but that the yogin in retreat is not associating with deluded people, but is saturating himself in a space wherein detachment naturally flourishes.

Also, staying alone in retreat allows the meditating yogin to be undistracted and focused absolutely on his or her practices. Śāntideva writes,

Befriending no one and begrudging no one,
My body will dwell alone in solitude.
If I am already counted as a dead man,
When I die there will be no mourners.

And as there will be no one around
To disturb me with their mourning,
Thus there will be no one to distracted me
From my recollection of the Buddha.

73Ibid., pg. 42.
Therefore I shall dwell alone,
Happy and contented with few difficulties,
In very joyful and beautiful forests,
Pacifying all distractions.

Having given up all other intentions,
Being motivated by only one thought,
I shall strive to settle my mind in equipoise
(by means of calm abiding)
And to subdue it (with superior insight).

This sort of discourse too is found in Shabkar's songs, though at least in my own selection it is not so heavy-handed as is his rejection of domestic associations. Nevertheless, this increased focus and space for practice is an important consequence of staying in retreat, and is another way in which Śāntideva's influence carries forward many centuries into Shabkar's life and works. Thus we see how important is the discursively prescribed setting in which one chooses to practice.

"Manifestations of Transience"74

The next aspect of solitary retreat that I would like to touch on is how the sights and sounds of nature reveal deeper truths about the evanescence of human life. In "Manifestations of Transience," Shabkar sings about just this, recounting how the various sights and sounds of the

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74 The translation for this song can be found in the Translation Appendix, pg. 8-9, and the transcription in the Tibetan Appendix, pg. 14-16. The Tibetan versions that I consulted are: Shabkar 1987 (hardbound), pg. 77-78 and Shabkar 1983 (pecha), folio 71-74.
natural world remind him of the truth of transience, and thus impact his mind positively. Towards the end Shabkar refers to this song as a  *rgyang glu*, a "tune from afar," or in other words, a song sung in isolation, far from his lama, who he supplicates to in the opening to watch over him. This is significant because Shabkar is in isolation, and must *rely upon the natural world as a teacher* rather than his lama. The importance of this for my argument cannot be understated; the natural world of flowers, dewdrops and geese is itself an instructional text, is itself a lama who teaches the truth of transience and leads one into detachment, as it did for Milarepa before him.

This song consist of four line stanzas with lines of six syllables each whose rhythm is two-two-two. The majority, six of the stanzas themselves exhibit marked parallelism, each beginning with two lines describing something happening in nature, then comparing it to a change in Shabkar's own life, and completing the metaphor with the verbalizer *thal*, giving us a sense that such things are over and finished, already gone. The parallelism breaks for only four stanzas at the end, as the reader is exhorted to keep this song in mind as they themselves take to retreat.

Throughout the song, Shabkar enumerates how ordinary phenomena in the natural world provide corollaries for his own inevitable aging and death. For example:

Tormented again and again by frost,

Tormented again and again by frost,
the maroon meadow flowers,
having shown a manifestation
like youth changing, depart.

Frozen by bitter winds,
the grass of the mountains and plains,
having shown a manifestation
like the hair on one's head, gray.

Blistered by fall,
the various fruits on trees
having shown a manifestation
like teeth falling out, drop.

This is very clearly a song for Autumn. The sight of flowers dying slowly by the hand season change, their inevitable wilting before the winter, reminds Shabkar that his own human body is also subject to a decay far beyond his capacity to control. More imagery of transformation and decay permeate this song; frozen grass remind Shabkar of graying hair, the withering and dropping summer fruit remind him of rotting teeth, the autumnal leaves blown from their branches remind him of separation from friends and family, the evaporating dew drops show the fleeting-nature of wealth and security, and the geese departing for warmer weather call to mind that we will one day leave this life behind and be born in an entirely different body.

This song, perhaps more than any other in this selection, demonstrates how real physical events in the natural world profoundly and directly impact one's mind, tying together sensory and mental experience into a single continuum. Here, I am reminded of Milarepa's assertion that,

> My books, the natural existence of the phenomenal world,
> Reveal understanding:
> I never looked at the black letters of books.\(^{75}\)

Shabkar does not need to read a treaties on impermanence or a philosophical exposition of emptiness, but instead just looks to the flowers, trees and drops of dew in front of his own human

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\(^{75}\) Milarepa, pg. 206.
eyes. More than just making him sad and sorrowful though, such experiences generated by external events are utilized in a way that makes Shabkar more joyful and free. He sings,

    In the secluded mountains, all [things]
    show a manifestation of transience.
    You, a human being, should abandon non-virtue
    and maintain a virtuous human life.

    From the treasury of the songs in my throat
    this lament arose spontaneously.
    Whoever stores it in the treasury of the ear
    benefits their mind,

    External things reveal
    the manifestations of transience.

For Shabkar, external things directly show or teach\(^7\) transience, but we are left a little unclear just how and in what ways this benefits the mind.

    To fill this in, one might be tempted to turn to Śāntideva's discourse on impermanence and renunciation. He emphasizes the impermanence and decay of the body and the need to no longer associate with pleasant things people normally find desirable, particularly the female body and the subsequent need for the male renunciant to go into retreat and flee from it whilst meditating on the Dharma without distraction. For instance:

    Since I do not wish to touch
    A place that is smeared with excrement,

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\(^7\) The term *bstan* for which I use "show" has a bit of a double meaning in this song. It can, in addition to meaning "show" or "reveal" be used as in a less ocular sense as "to teach" or "demonstrate." This meaning further reinforces the sense of the retreat space being a teacher itself in lieu of an authorized lama. We see, thus, how space is authorized and exalted in the same way that people are in Shabkar's tradition.
Then why do I wish to touch the body
From which that (excrement) arose?

If I am not attached to what is unclean,
Why do I copulate with the lower parts of
others' bodies
Which arise from the unclean field (of a
womb)
And are produced by the seeds within it?

I have no wish for a small dirty maggot
Which has come from a pile of filth,
So why do I desire this body which by nature
is grossly unclean,
For it too was produced by filth?77

However, this song "Manifestations of Transience" is not so much about the impermanence of the things of householders as it is about particular instances in retreat wherein he experiences external things and himself as transient. This is not a song about an escape from the illusions cast by domestic space, but is essentially about specific experiences in retreat and how they work to expound and being Buddhist doctrines into one's experience. In other words, retreat is being valorized here for the presence of teachings on transience rather than for the absence of samsaric mental states (as was the case in the previous two songs).

Matsuo Bashō, a direct experience of transience

77 Śāntideva, pg. 45.
Thus, I think it may also be productive to compare "Manifestations of Transience" with the writings of the wandering Japanese poet-saint Matsuo Bashō, who also quite often takes the immediate sights and sounds of the natural world as his main focal point. For instance,

A cicada shell;

it sang itself

utterly away.

and

A caterpillar,

this deep in fall--

still not a butterfly.

This imagery is both seasonal and utterly ordinary, but it gets directly to the heart of the problem of transience in the same way Shabkar does, by exposing us to the raw, everyday experience of natural phenomena in a state of inexorable flux. Again, there is no escape from it in nature, only a deep, unavoidable embrace of it.

For both Buddhist wanderers, there is also a sorrowful and human note struck. This is not Śāntideva's ascetic renunciation, but is instead an acceptance of sensory experience and the ordinary human emotions it evokes. Rather than being implored to flee from what is transient, Bashō wants us look unflinchingly into the face of change. Indeed, in Buddhist discourse across Asia, the physical world that holds our lives is compared to a dream, ephemeral, fleeting, almost gossamer in nature. Nevertheless, humans become attached and involved in this dream-world, and with practice, may find peace and consolation amidst its non-substantial nature. Modern Zen-lineage holder Robert Aitken writes beautifully on this point when commenting on the following Bashō haiku:

Now being seen off,

Now seeing off- the outcome:
Autumn in Kiso.78

Exploring the existential anguish of impermanence in this haiku, Aitken tells us that Bashō captures more than just despair, but a palpable peace and acceptance beyond the turmoil. He writes,

Finding ease of the heart in prayer, acknowledging ease of the heart in daily affairs—these are the ways of religion and poetry. The way of prayer is clearly set forth for us... What is the way of acknowledging ease of the heart in daily affairs? It is just the autumn in Kiso. It is just the rain. It is just the gecko. We blink and miss the key word. It is just one, just two, just three, and so on as we count our breaths. Nothing is missing; nothing is left over.79

Though the external world is constantly in flux, we can nevertheless find tranquility in its midst. Bashō, here and in other haikus, conveys a profound trust for and acceptance of things by first conveying the instability and sorrow of the world, but then by turning towards inner realization and acceptance.

The song in question, "Manifestations of Transience," I think contains both elements of Śāntideva and Bashō; while we are implored to turn our backs on illusion, we are also told to see deeply into the nature of change. Shabkar ends with this stanza,

May all who hear this song
while they are still young this year
forsaking this life in attitude
wish to establish themselves in such a truth.

"Having turned away from this life" captures the essence of Śāntideva's rhetoric of the importance of retreat, of fleeing from the associations of a householder which cause anxiety, suffering and dullness, and dedicating oneself to detachment from the world and meditation on

79 Ibid., pg. 18.
the teaching the Buddha. However, the truth or teaching (*chos*) to practice is simply seeing the impermanence of things in nature, and of locating oneself *in* nature, like Bashō strived to do.

Taken together, these two point again the important passive affects that space has on the mind. In the household, one is entranced by hatred, sex, ambition and so on, and cannot see things for what they are- impermanent, fleeting. Once one has entered retreat though and is free of such delusions, he or she is able to see with more lucidity, and takes greater notice of the wilting flowers, the drops of dew on grass, the migrating geese.

The space simply evokes this, and frames such utterly ordinary occurrences in the light of transience. Shabkar refers to this song as a lament, but in, "The Mountain Retreat," we hear him say, "as the four seasons steadily progress, [I] recall life's evanescence, [and] sorrow swells. These are the delights of dwelling in a mountain-hermitage." The sorrow of this lament *is* its blessing, a *delight*, because it coaxes us to turn away from the illusion of permanence and find joy in meditation and inner tranquility amidst the outward flux of the seasons and our own bodies. Such a recognition of the world as flux and our selves as simple passers-by arises, in the lama's absence, out of the very space of retreat itself, and lays the groundwork for transformation by granting a new understanding of the relationship between our environments and bodies that are united in change.

"Setting Out" 80

In the next song I have selected, the mountain retreat is valorized mostly in connection with the activities of past meditators and the other benevolent beings who inhabit it. Apparently,

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80 The translation for this song can be found in the Translation Appendix, pg. 10-11, and the transcription in the Tibetan Appendix, pg. 17-19. The Tibetan versions that I consulted are: Shabkar 1987 (hardbound), pg. 42-43 and Shabkar 1983 (pecha), folio 20a-21b.
Shabkar sings it to encourage and remind himself of the virtues of retreat, but is hopeful that it will also encourage others to do so. It is in this selection in order to highlight how charged and active the natural world is for Shabkar. Rather than being simply a space absent of civilization or in some way "pure," as in Romantic literature, it is itself a kind of alternative and hyper-civilized society populated by supernatural beings and civilized by the activity of yogins.

This song is also clearly divided throughout into parallel four line stanzas, each line consisting of nine syllables, divided syllabically as two-two-two-three. Each stanza save this first (the supplication) and the last end in the same line- ri khrod dben pa'i dnas su bsgom du gshegs, or as I've translated it, "I'm setting out to meditate in the abode of the isolated mountain retreat." This relatively short songs ends the parallelism with a single stanza which explains the purpose behind the song, as is typical for songs from Amdo.  

Shabkar begins this song by paying homage to meditators of many different Buddhist traditions who have practiced in mountain retreats such as his. Here at least, it is not so much which tradition one practices, but where one practices it. As a result, the retreat space is, "blessed by the excellent sages of the past," and is, "similar to the celestial realms [of] happiness and joy." Until now I have been discussing how individual yogins are permeable to natural space, but this song also highlights how that space is reciprocally permeable to those same yogins and their meditative activities; it is powerful and transformative due in large part to the tradition of retreat, and its blessings and blessedness exist interlocked in mutual interdependence.

In the following stanza, Shabkar tells us that in his retreat there is bliss, happiness, joy and "... the inexpressible merits of a long and healthy life." His next several stanzas simply convey the sights, sounds, smells, feeling and tastes of this kind of space; birds and antelope, ice

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flowing from glacial lakes, the smell of flowers and fruit on the wind, the bees busily pollinating and gathering nectar, the coolness of summer shade, the sweet and delicious sweet potatoes, fruits and greens. If, "Manifestations of Transience" was a song for the fall, this one is very much for the summer, and this kind of raw sensory data demonstrates how important the ordinary natural world is in conditioning the individual's realization. I do not think this is very different at all from how Gyatso describes the role of sensory experience in tantric ritual; such conditions evoke experiences of joy and tranquility, and are encouraged and important because those experiences further one's realization, even if they do grant it all at once. Experience must be there in the first place, and so it is intentionally evoked through the technology of retreat.

A we have noted though, experience flows both ways, from outer to inner, and from inner to outer. Shabkar sings of,

The abode blessed by the great sages of the past
The abode where of the great sages of the present dwell
The abode of the emanations of heirs of the victorious ones who have yet to come
I'm setting out to meditate in the abode of the isolated mountain retreat.

The abode of a host of lamas, *yidams*, dākinīs,
The abode of the divine retinue protectors, protectresses and local gods.
The abode where many supreme and ordinary qualities arise.
I'm setting out to meditate in the abode of the isolated mountain retreat.

Indeed, Tibetans have always held that the land is in many ways *animate*, and is tied in deeply connected with the assimilation of Buddhism by society. In pre-Buddhist Tibet, the land was seen to be inhabited by many classes of local spirits and deities, and many rites existed (and still exist) that were aimed at appeasing them and focusing their intentions toward human benefit.

The myth of Buddhism's arrival in Tibet tells us that when monks and missionaries came from
India and China, and Buddhist temples were being built, the local spirits felt threatened by the new religion and acted out maliciously against such projects. Buddhism could not actually take root without the cooperation of these beings, so the famous tantric master Padmasambhava was called in to subdue them. The myth records many dramatic accounts of this master physically subduing these beings in combat, and transforming them into protectors and protectresses of the Buddha-dharma.\textsuperscript{82}

The trope of the tantric demon-conqueror carries on into the lives of other Buddhist saints, including Shabkar himself.\textsuperscript{83} Such masters not only tame wrathful spirits, but transform them into protectors and protectresses of the Buddha-dharma which saturate mountains and retreats with blessings that future yogins can capitalize on to further their own practice and realization. Thus, we can say that the Tibetan landscape occupied by Shabkar and his fellow Buddhists is, rather than being a wild space free from the hand of man, a space that has been civilized and transformed positively by human meditative activity which can reciprocally create positive experiences for others. The environment is permeable to its inhabitants just as much as its inhabitants are permeable to it.

\textit{"The Old Bum"}\textsuperscript{84}

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\textsuperscript{83} In one such instance, Shabkar stays in a cave haunted by a wrathful spirit who enters his body intent on destroying him, but it is Shabkar who winds up tormenting and subduing the demon, and finally reprimands it and makes certain it never attacks humans again (Zabs-dkar, trans. Ricard pg 164).
\textsuperscript{84} The translation for this song can be found in the Translation Appendix, pg. 12-13, and the transcription in the Tibetan Appendix, pg. 20-22. The Tibetan versions that I consulted are: Shabkar 1987 (hardbound), pg. 192-193 and Shabkar 1983 (pecha), folio 173-174.
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Before moving on to the songs that deal with the ultimate nature of reality, I would like to discuss one more song about the yogin's solitary nature and make the argument that Shabkar still, despite his rhetoric of renunciation, plays an important role in society as a religious authority.

This song's six syllable lines are divided into a simple rhythm of two-two-two, and in clearly divided into stanzas of four lines each. Such a relatively simple construction I think contributes to the grounded and humble feel of the song, which as we will see highlights Shabkar's humility in some interesting ways. Throughout, there are three parallel sets of stanzas. In the first three, Shabkar contrasts a vast or exalted phenomena with one that is small and humble. In the next three, he points out how those small and humble phenomena nevertheless give rise to great sounds, and in the final three propounds the lesson we should gain from this phenomena.

Specifically, throughout this song Shabkar compared himself with natural phenomena to make the point that even though his realization is small the wisdom that comes from his songs is nevertheless worth listening to. Just as the buzzing of bees and the babbling of streams create noise disproportionate to their small size, Shabkar's songs contain wisdom disproportionate to his meek realization. In setting himself up this way, Shabkar's rhetoric of humility deflects critiques of his ego being inflated from singing about himself all the time, whilst preserving his authoritative voice (of course, humility itself is an important part of the yogic identity, and is thus itself a part of his authority). What he tells us here is that the songs of his own experience are not for his ego, but exist for the benefit of his community. This short song concludes,

When vibrant rainbows in space
refract radiant colors,
if there is a viewer, look!
Certain it will dissolve into the pure and empty sky.
When the blue cuckoo, king of birds
speaks its many sweet sounds
if there is an audience, listen!
Certain that it will travel to other lands.

When I, the renunciant yogin
sing these melodious songs,
if there is an audience, listen!
Certain that I won't settle down, but move on.

Rhetoric such as this reveals Shabkar's idea of how the solitary yogin should relate to his community, like a bright rainbow or a migratory bird he proudly displays the beauty of his realization, but vanishes suddenly back into emptiness, into solitude. Indeed, the yogin's aloneness is an important part of his relatedness to society, because he plays an important role in orienting common people towards Buddha-dharma, but in doing so must practice in isolation. As I mentioned in the very beginning of this paper, solitary practice is a sliding scale, and we must be ever-cautious not to see the yogin as running from or transcending society, because he has an ever important role to play in it (he does practice apart from society, but also practices for it).

With regards to Robert Sharf's critiques of the category of experience in Buddhism, this song demonstrates how and why a yogin cultivating individual experience serves and grants him or her a role in society. Yogic songs are an important way in which experience in solitude is made social; by singing of those experiences cultivated in and caused by solitude, the yogin establishes very real social authority and respect, as was the case with Milarepa. What is interesting to point out here is the mutual interdependence of villages and solitude; without
solitude, the yogin could not accomplish his or her practice, but without those living in a village, that practice would have no meaning.

In the last six songs, we have seen the ways in which the solitary yogin interacts with and is impacted by the world of retreat. To summarize this portion of my argument, there are a number of important ways in which the yogin's environment positively impacts his mind. First and foremost, just being removed from domesticity means avoiding all kinds of mental states Shabkar sees as negative and running counter to the goal of realization and enlightenment. These states include the stress and anxiety of providing for a family, and the anger and jealousy of competing with others. By contrast, the mountain retreat offers not only an absence of states such as this, but also the presence of a variety of resplendent sights and sounds that offer entertainment, tranquility and point out lessons about transience. Also, besides just having more time and space to practice, one's practice is enhanced by the benevolent spirits and blessings of past meditators that permeate the landscape.

In other words, being in retreat creates new kinds of subjectivity by removing the yogin from one set of relationships, e.g. husband, father, householder, merchant, farmer and so on, and plants him or her, rather than in isolation, in a new of world of relationships, e.g. guru and disciple, and as a yogin inhabiting a landscape populated by supernatural beings and blessings. In this way, we see how solitary yogins, far from being anti-social or counter-cultural figures, are important members of both their human and non-human communities. Renunciants like Shabkar do not rebel from or go against society, nor can they even be said to be alone. Rather, they take up new, arguably more powerful roles in the world through a separation from domestic village life. It is through their profound personal experiences gleaned in retreat and expressed in song that they have such a role.
The songs so far have demonstrated Gyatso's argument about the nature of experience in Tibetan Buddhism in two ways. First, the experiences of yogins are mediated by theirs songs and role as performers in society; the songs inspire and teach to others, craft identities, attract patronage and reify and challenge social institutions. Contrary to Robert Sharf's claims that personal experience is unsought after and unimportant to Buddhist societies, Shabkar's songs of experience demonstrate how central it is in establishing the authenticity of teachers and lineages. Second, experience is mediated and conditioned by the authorized spaces people occupy. Retreat space is used in certain ways prescribed by the tradition to evoke certain types of mental states, e.g. happiness (bde) and sorrow (skyo ba). Thus, we can see how people are considered here to be utterly permeable to their surroundings; staying in a village spontaneously affects one for the worse, just as retreat has the inverse affect, and the tradition is perfectly aware of this. Recall that, In James' view, what he called mystical experiences were restricted to the individual's subjective space. That is, they can not or should not impose outward social authority in the world, or actively transform it in any way. As we have seen however, these claims to personal experience that others celebrate and aspire to function a locus of social authority. Rather than being merely authoritative for Shabkar himself, he sings songs in order to teach, critique, gain patronage and disciples. The performance of songs both assumes and creates outward religious authority grounded in personal experience.

Additionally, we have seen how personal experience is itself dependent upon space in very important ways. Though "passivity," the tendency for mystical experiences to dawn by their own accord, is important for James, Shabkar's experiences arise due in large part to the discursively authorized spaces which he occupies, possessing the express intent of cultivating particular affective states (such as joy [bde] and sorrow [skyo ba]) deemed soteriologically
significant by his tradition. Conversely, the world of retreat is itself permeable and open to the activities of the yogins who practice in it. Spaces become sanctified and authorized by the activities of the tradition's agents, perpetuating the cycle of blessings and the ecology of transformation. This demonstrates the open-ended nature of nature in Tibetan Buddhism; not only does the natural world transform its inhabitants but it is constantly being transformed by those rely upon it for practice.

III b) The Nature of Experience: The Subject of Emptiness

Having established these properties of retreat space, the subsequent section will look more at the nature of experience in meditative states. Though these songs do not deal explicitly with the retreat space per say, explicating instead upon the nature of mind and reality in Buddhist tantra, they are essential to our understanding of the relationship between internal and external worlds because they grant us a vision of Shabkar's experience of subject-object collapse.

We should continue then in our endeavor to understand the experiences formulated in Shabkar's songs in their own light, and see deeply into the nuanced exchange between inner and outer contained within. What James might refer to as mystical experience in Shabkar's songs is, from a more emic approach, not at all discontinuous with normal experience, nor is Shabkar himself a passive, agency-less recipient of it, and in its most ideal form, realization is not at all transient, but is lasting and of supreme soteriological significance to him and his tradition. That is to say, Jamesian mystical experiences, by virtue of their transiency, also cannot create a permanent transformation of inner subjective space. As we will see, this is another aspect that does not line up with the meditative experiences in the songs of Shabkar. As such, we will examine in what ways Shabkar's objective experiences are also profoundly transformative of subjective inner space. While, for James, profound, ecstatic and transcendent experiences leave
a lasting impression, they do not fundamentally reorient one's subjectivity in the same way that they do for Shabkar.

Let me be clear- I do not, with these songs, wish to resurrect a notion of "mystical experience" in Religious Studies. However, the experience of yogins in solitary meditation is demonstrably important to Tibetan Buddhism as an institution, and therefore we must endeavor to understand such experiences in their minutiae, and from their own side. For this section, the most important distinction I would like to make between a Jamesian "mystical experience" and those in Shabkar's songs is the permeability of outer and inner space to each other found in songs of experience, that the fundamental structure of the inner subject is deeply transformed by the his or her objects of perception. James rightly argues that there exist important paranormal types of experiences that can leave lasting authoritative impressions upon one's person and sense of the world, but the Cartesian model of experience employed in Varieties fails to account for the tendency of objective content, e.g. visions of emptiness, to spontaneously transform one's subjective content and sense of self. Furthermore Shabkar's meditations experience do not arise through their own agency or necessarily "fade into the light of common day." Rather, they arise through disciplined training as well as cause and effect interaction between perceiver and perceived, and though experience is transient, it can be worked with long after it has passed in order to restructure subject and object worlds in a manner aligned with Buddhist conceptions of the nature of reality.

"The Drunk Talk of a Yogin"85

85 The translation for this song can be found in the Translation Appendix, pg. 14-15, and the transcription in the Tibetan Appendix, pg. 23-26. The Tibetan versions that I consulted are: Shabkar 1987 (hardbound), pg. 95-96 and Shabkar 1983 (pecha), folio 87-88.
"The Drunk Talk of a Yogin" illustrates the permeable nature of inner subjectivity to outer objective content, and how such a transformation of self authorizes Shabkar to sing his songs. Yogic-drunkenness, as we will see, is an important kind of experiential claim for Shabkar, because it conveys the flavor and vastness (and so the authority) of his realization, while also allowing for some humor, humanity and humility.

This song's lines are set into seven syllables, except for the beginning line of the first four stanzas which are eight syllables each. The seven syllable lines come in two-two-three, and the either syllable lines in three-two-three. There is, in the first four stanzas a great deal of parallelism, with only a few sets of words being changed in each but adhering to the same form. Shabkar begins by singing,

As I take my stand in the view---
not dividing into positions and biases,
and, since an example is asked for,
it's like the vast, all-embracing sky.
Free of biases, this yogin is happy.

"The View," here refers to the yogic-vision of all-embracing universal emptiness, that existence has no center of circumference, inside or outside, coming or going and so on. Such a vision has an immediate transformative effect on the yogin, making him as vast and un-discriminating as the sky. Here I am reminded of Gyatso's assertion that there is no obvious subject-object dichotomy in Tibetan conceptualizations of experience. Rather, "... the subject of bliss is himself blissful, the subject of an experience of clarity is herself clear, and so on."86 Indeed, Shabkar's view of emptiness has an immediate transformative effect upon his interiority; the subject of the view is immediately attuned to its undifferentiated vastness. The pattern of the above stanza is

86 Gyatso, pg. 119.
paralleled thrice: like the sun, he and his mediation are ever-radiant, like the wind, he and his conduct are un-fixated upon particular forms, and like dwelling on a golden island, as a result of meditation practice, the world he experiences is like an isle of precious gold, so he is free from accepting and rejecting objects and experiences, all being equally precious. In each case, there is an immediate vacillation between inner and outer, between form and identity, objectivity and subjectivity.

This song demonstrates Gyatso’s point that experience bridges inner and outer worlds, and shows us how it is mediated by yogic activity and transforms identity. Subsequently, Shabkar implores us to,

...don the cloak of the sky-like view
load your shoulders- the sun and moon of meditation
ride upon the winds of practice
and dwell upon the precious golden isle of the result

Shabkar reminds his listeners here that the potential for self-transformation is not unique to him, but can be had by anyone who strives for it. He also tells us that this song is sung from his own experience, and from a state of yogic-drunkenedness. In the closing two stanzas, Shabkar makes it clear that he is singing this song so that his audience might be encouraged to take it into their own experience and find liberation for themselves.

This song also demonstrates the important social nature of individual realization; it is not just for oneself but is to be achieved and celebrated in the service of the Mahāyāna project of universal liberation for all beings. Shabkar sings,

I, the son of a pure lama,
When I sing a tune from experience, sing it like this--
[to] my cotton-clad heirs in the generations to come.
If you draw out a song from experience, draw it like this--
Drunk off the wine of reality itself.

Having spoken drunkenly,
setting sights into similes,
singing a tune of experience,
uttering oral instructions,
realizing the Dharmakāya for myself,
manifesting the Nirmanakāya for others,
[and] spontaneously accomplishing whatever I think.

The trope of yogic-drunkenness celebrated here, is connects Shabkar's subjective states to his relationships with others in society; he speaks from a non-sober, socially immodest state, proclaiming the authority to sing that realization grants him. This line recalls an assertion from James that, just as someone who has never consumed alcohol cannot understand drunkenness on more than an intellectual level, experience cannot properly be communicated to one without such an experience, save for that mind-level description. In this way Shabkar provides a similarity to a Jamesian mystic- that he is drunk and everyone else is sober, that his experience is privileged. However, in the same breath Shabkar is mentioning his exceptionally, he also reiterates the profoundly social nature of song, that he sings to his disciples, and as a commitment to his bodhisattva activity for all being in the world.

Indeed, the metaphor of drunkenness, besides adding a humorous and humble note to claims of privileged and authoritative experience, also helps to describe the haziness and crisscrossing nature of experience between the boundaries of inner and outer. In a mad, blissful visionary fervor, Shabkar tells us how he and his experience defy social and ontological boundaries. Grounded in the View, he has no concern for traditional partisan divides between

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87 James, pg. 394.
Buddhist schools. Grounded in yogic-conduct, he is not fixated upon outward forms, or how his actions appear to others. He himself knows what is right and what is wrong. Grounded in fruition, Shabkar is open to all types of objects and experiences that others would normally either fixate on or reject. In other words, his drunken yogic-subjectivity flies in the face of the conventional social norms of good and bad, us and them. But instead of rejecting society outright, Shabkar fulfills its highest aspirations and soteriological wishes, because only a yogin grounded in realization such as his can see and act upon the truths authorized by his own experience.

Yogic-drunkenness is at once a rejection of societal norms and also a social claim in itself because he demands authority for himself. Indeed, the metaphor in this song gives us a tremendous sense of the connection between a yogin's experiential world and his authority in society; his antinomian appearance and conduct are a reflection of his authoritative meditation experiences which allow him to transcend ordinary morality and defy social conventions. In this song, the mediating nature of experience is again revealed; Shabkar's experiences cross freely between inner and outer, defying Cartesian categorizations of subject and object, demonstrating that the observer is immediately transformed in the very act of observation. The metaphor is, in this regard, useful in conveying an experience wherein the lines between all things inner and outer are blurred by an immersion into emptiness. Here, it is used in relation to his singing; it gives us an impression of who he is, spontaneous and carefree, and from what kind of (privileged) state he is communicating to us.

Shabkar concludes with a message for his audience:

E ma! How wondrous, you fortunate ones!
Hearing this, may you be free from Samsāra.
Reciting this, may you purify the five heinous crimes.
Meditating upon this, may you rapidly attain the Dharmakāya.

Touching this, may you [achieve] ultimate purification.

The performance of song itself has the power to transform, and even more so when its advice is taken up. In fact, this is a remarkably clear step-by-step process towards incorporating this song into our experience. First, we hear it and decide to renounce the world, reciting it afterwards, it creates merit and cleanses the mind, meditating upon its contents, we experience pure awareness, the Dharmakāya, for ourselves, and finally upon that attainment, we achieve lasting transformation.

"The Wine of Emptiness"88

The next song I would like to discuss also illumines the nature of experience in the songs of Shabkar, but in a much more didactic and philosophical manner than the song above. As we have seen, the meditative experiences of Shabkar in his songs are not at all discontinuous with his world, nor can they be neatly separated from his ordinary physical or sensory realities. William James does not share this point of view, as we can see when he writes,

This incommunicableness of the transport [of consciousness into a mystical state] is the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else. In this, as I have said, it resembles the knowledge given to us in sensations more than that given by conceptual thought... But our immediate feelings have no content but what the five senses supply; and we have seen and shall see again that mystics may emphatically deny that the senses play any part in the very highest type of knowledge which their transports yield.89

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88 The translation for this song can be found in the Translation Appendix, pg. 16-17, and the transcription in the Tibetan Appendix, pg. 27-30. The Tibetan versions that I consulted are: Shabkar 1987 (hardbound), pg. 91-93 and Shabkar 1983 (pecha), folio 83-86.

89 James, pg. 397.
For James, the restriction of mystical experience to individual is deeply connected with the mystical experience's objective, trans-sensory reality. However, as we will see in the next song, the interactions between the yogin as a subject and his external world are, through a visceral analysis and deep meditation upon these two fundamental divisions, themselves able to provoke the experiences that are the seeds of lasting, positive realization. Because the experiences in this song are so deeply tied to the senses and the ordinary world, they can be transmitted and taught in song to other yogins.

I will read this song, "The Wine of Emptiness," didactically as a guided meditation on emptiness in song form; it reveals how Shabkar experiences his own subjectivity and its relationality to all things on the very most absolute level. Furthermore, it demonstrates how careful, analytical observations and experiences of inner and outer worlds can engender an ineffable, objectless experience. Thus it is important to keep in mind Gyatso's assertion that Tibetan Buddhist purposefully cultivate specific experiences in order to achieve soteriological and (thus) socially authoritative ends. Again, specific phenomenological experiences are not the end-goal, but are important stepping stones and building blocks for disciplining and transforming Buddhist subjects into powerful social agents.

From among all songs in this selection, this song has probably the least obvious stanza breaks; Shabkar sometimes begins an entirely new thought or section of the song in the middle of a line. However, even breaks in the line such as these follow the flow of the song's rhythm; its lines come in ten syllables and are set at a steady, flowing up and down pace of three-two-three-two. There is no real overall parallelism throughout to speak of here, so I divided the stanzas by when one thought or set of instructions had seemed to be completed, even though it meant breaking up sentences. However, some of these sets do contain parallel sets of lines. Perhaps,
owing to its overly didactic quality, the listener was meant to memorize and practice a single set of instructions at time, as so perhaps the moments of parallelism in this song function mnemonically to recall advice for future retreatants living alone. Thus, the feel of this song is more analytic than poetic; though poetic tropes and imaged are employed, the structure is very loose, and flows more according to semantic content than to imagery and parallelism.

Shabkar begins the song with a supplication to his guru and a standard presentation of his realization:

Realizing that the realities of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa [are], like dreams,
the play of mind, and resolving that mind itself
[is] insubstantial, empty, all of whose conceptions, without exception,
of entering and emerging from the with expanse of reality
that realizes unborn emptiness itself, the Dharmakāya, have vanished,
to the kind lama Chögyal, I bow.

Importantly, this is not so much experience (nyams), but realization (rtogs) being discussed here; Shabkar is making ontological statements about the nature of reality; all things in existence, including even its transcendence, are projections of the mind, which is itself an empty and fleeting phenomena. Inside and outside, both are illusion according to Shabkar, both are absolutely unreal. Also though, he is paying homage to his lama's subjective-synchronicity with reality which is the ground of his (and in effect Shabkar's) authority.

This song not only contains a set of instructions for evoking experiences, but also advice on how to carry them into the whole of life and preserve their presence. That being the case, we would be mistaken to read this as purely a scholastic compendium founded only on the basis of

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90 Of course it is important to keep in mind Janet Gyatso's assertion that realization (rtog) is a sort of experience (nyams), that is, a sort engendered by meditative experience as well as a trans-intellectual kind of insight. The point I wish to make here is that the guru does not understand this just from a state of trance of revelation, but has taken such an insight into his every-day perception of reality, into his very bones.
logic and reason, as Sharf sees many texts on the subject of emptiness and reality. Rather, this is a song of experience, grounded in the authority of both his lama's and of Shabkar's own meditative accomplishments. These truths about reality are also not presented at once like a divine revelation, but instruct the disciple to combine reasoning and focused meditative cultivation in order to produce a stable and lasting transformation of the inner and outer worlds of the yogin. As opposed to the Jamesian notion of mystical experience, Shabkar and the Tibetan tradition more broadly value stable and lasting transformations in subjectivity, *rtogs*, over single, fleeting moments of paranormal experiences, *nyams*. Furthermore, the framing of experience in song means that, rather than being entrapped in impregnable subjective space, such experiences are meant to be shared with and celebrated by others in Shabkar's community.

In the second stanza, Shabkar tells us to turn our gaze upon the objects in the immediate external world, instructing us to determine what they arise from, dwell in and ultimately dissolve into. Seeing the ephemeral nature of such things, that they are created, abide and then dissolve, we see that things are not *real* in the sense that they exist as independent, delimit-able or inherently *fixed* in the world. Rather, they exist in dependence upon everything else, particularly one’s own mind. Therefore their sense of realness is simply an illusion created by human perception. Shabkar sings

> Phenomena seen and heard arise from mind,
> abide within the mind, and again,
> pass into the mind’s expanse. Reflect upon he faulty nature of those things!

The world of independent objects, of here, there, up and down is actually a deception, a veil of illusion cast by our senses and our minds; true reality defies such an ordering and divisive mind. Thus, Shabkar tells us that such objects can be understood to be like the things perceived in dreams- unreal, gossamer and fleeting, existing in utter dependence upon our error-prone minds.
In this way, Shabkar has combined Buddhist reasoning with his immediate experience of the world to see things in such a way that an experience of things is evoked in which outer reality begins to be transformed into something else, something that defies ordinary sensory perception. Contra Sharf, scholastic reasoning and experiential cultivation are not exclusive, but are used in reliance upon each other.

Once we understand viscerally that external reality is like a dream, we are told to turn that same discriminating gaze upon our interior world:

When the sublime is uncovered, look to the inner mind itself which apprehends all of these so called "external objects."

As a gust of wind vanishes into space

know that the apprehender is like [this];

because it passes into emptiness, it's not inherently established.

Resolve [this] with certainty!

As the things of the world are in a constant state of transformation and flux, so too are our bodies and minds, and our identities along with them. With this conviction, we know that all things, inner and outer are conjoined through emptiness, through their lack of inherent reality.

Meditating on ordinary experiences in this way creates extra-ordinary experience, wherein

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91 Perhaps one might argue that this song is purely on an analytical, scholastic nature, and not so much a song of personal experience. That perspective however ignores the moments in which Shabkar directs us to look for ourselves at our physical and mental realities. For instance, "Look for yourself beyond at outer objects," and, "... look to the inner mind itself," and, look thoroughly to see whether that emptiness itself has a limit or boundary...” These lines are all capped by imperative grammar, imploring us to use reason and observation. I think that for Tibetan Buddhists, contrary to what Robert Sharf argues, there is less hard division between scholastic reasoning and personal experience. Instead, working through one's own experience with careful intellectual analysis actually has the power to affect experience. When we convince ourselves that things are empty, for instance, we begin to experience them in such a way.

92 bzang bo is a multivalent term, signifying what is true and correct, but also what is good and even "auspicious." Because of the overtly religious connotations of this word, I chose "sublime" as a means of capturing the parallel connotations of truth and beauty.

93 In Buddhist ontology, for an object to be "real," one must be able to demonstrate that it is permanent, and that its existence is not dependent on causes and conditions outside itself.
subjects and objects are emptied of their every-day identities, and upon directly seeing such emptiness, we see know there never were such a things as limit or boundary, inner or outer, coming or going.

There is nothing "mystical" about these experience; they arise following established, logical principles and simply require discipline and guidance on the part of the meditator. Reasoning and discipline ally themselves with ordinary human sensory experience, each pushing the other forward until an experience of nonduality arises. Shabkar puts it thusly:

As perceiver and perceived, that deep darkness is dispelled,
intrinsic awareness, luminous and empty, the Dharmakāya of pure light,
that vast all-embracing sky emerges.

Such a deeply ineffable, objectless and all-inclusive experience of the nature of reality, bright, pure and expansive, dawns upon the yogin who has undertaken a thorough examination of inner and outer worlds. Such an experience is also a realization; at our deepest-most core, beyond all conceptions of self and other, beyond every object fading into and out of existence, beyond the mind itself, our own basic, fundamental awareness, rang rig in this song, is celebrated as the very most basic level of reality itself. Such an unwavering confidence granted by the experience of the luminous and joyful reality beyond life and death grants a spontaneous transformation of one's being; seeing reality, one is united with it. The yogin's identity is turned so much on its head it is no longer in the body or even the ego and thoughts, but in something that far surpasses all of those things.

In Varieties, James says that, "Mystical states cannot be sustained for long... half and hour or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit... when faded, their quality can but
imperfectly be reproduced in memory." Though too Shabkar admits that singular experiences such as the one above do not last forever, he prescribes a technique for using them to re-orient one's everyday experience subject to object, to use it in the service of realization. Upon arising from ineffable objectless states, Shabkar implores us to decide based upon that experience's authority and the transformation it grants, that this world is like a dream, and that reality that is our true nature utterly surpasses that dream in every possible respect. There is an important difference, as Gyatso argued, between single, fleeting and unreliable experiences and realization which is stable and authentic. Shabkar does not want us to simply use the song's techniques to have transcendent glimpses of nondual emptiness, but wants us to use those glimpses to actively transform ourselves and reorient our fundamental relationality to all things. Neither does this discourse restrict experience to impregnable inner space, as Sharf criticized D.T. Suzuki for advocating. Rather, Shabkar's songs present a model of experience wherein the inner space of the subject can, aside from being transformed in a lasting and soteriological way, be made into something in which the rest of society can celebrate, share and participate.

In this song, we see how ordinary experience combined with prescribed reasoning and meditation can itself be the catalyst for so called exalted states of experience, states that neither dawn spontaneously nor speak for themselves, but are based upon a multitude of exchanges between one's inner and outer worlds that transform both, and beg to be celebrated and conveyed to others through song. The song ends with this colophon: "This as well was spoken by the aimless singer of the Rebkong, the carefree madman, the free and serene vagrant, having gotten drunk off the wine of emptiness remains in the bed of the expanse of reality, drunkenly speaking of whatever arose [in his experience] to himself." These lines key us in to the nature of the

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94 James, pg. 372.
yogin's identity transmuted by meditative realization, and again evoke the trope of yogic
drunkenness, used as well here to poetically convey the flavor or his realization and make a
claim to privileged and authoritative knowledge. Shabkar has become aimless, because here and
there are equally empty, and mad, because the every-day common-sense and socially acceptable
mind that divides between self and other has been utterly sundered. He is drunk off of
emptiness, and so the boundaries between objects and selves become so hazy and confused.
Also, his wandering in the world, is counter-balanced by his state rest in the fundamental
Dharmadhātu, the expanse of reality free from the delusion of individually fixed places and
things.

"Realize This!"95

The next song in this selection, "Realize This!" also deals with advanced yogic
realization, albeit in a less guided and didactic manner. The song's lines are in seven syllables
divided into a rhythm of two-two-three. For about the first half of the song, the stanzas come in
sets of six lines, then in the last half sets of four lines. The parallelism in the first half is quite
heavy, with each stanza only changing a few words. In the second half, the imperative at the end
changes from go, "understand," to rtogs, "realize," and the parallelism becomes less strict.

The change from go to rtogs in this song is, I think, rather significant. In the first half,
Shabkar seems to be singing about his own realization, and urging the listener to understand it, if
merely on an intellectual rather than experiential level. He claims that this song deals with the
"true way of abiding," or in other words with the true nature of things in reality. Furthermore, he
claims that he is qualified to sing it because he studied under a "kind and authentic lama," and

95 The translation for this song can be found in the Translation Appendix, pg. 18-19, and the transcription in the
Tibetan Appendix, pg. 31-33. The Tibetan versions that I consulted are: Shabkar 1987 (hardbound), pg. 95-96 and
Shabkar 1983 (pecha), folio 87-88.
that it therefore springs from his own personal realization. Such a direct understanding of reality
is stated thus:

Rainbows and clouds of Samsāra and Nirvāṇa appear
in the sky of the Dharmakāya of intrinsic awareness, so also,
as they have arisen, they have arisen from the sky of intrinsic awareness
as they abide, they abide in the sky of intrinsic awareness
[and] as they dissolves, they dissolve into the sky of intrinsic awareness.
Apart from [that sky], nothing has moved [even] a little…
Understand this!

As we can see, this song deals in similar metaphysical principles as "The Wine of Emptiness;"
individual objects have no intrinsic existence of their own, because they can be realized to be
ephemeral entities that depend upon the mind of the perceiver for their reality. Shabkar's main
point here though is that, even though objects put on a big colorful show, nothing has actually
occurred from the perspective of absolute reality; it has all been an illusion and nothing more, the
sky of awareness is absolutely unperturbed. His prompt for us, at least in this section of the
song, is to, "understand this!" or simply go, in the Tibetan, most likely refers to an intellectual
understanding, so this is something we should take based on our faith in Shabkar's realization
and lineage, rather than in our own experience. The pattern of the stanza above repeats itself
twice in the following two stanzas, with the metaphor of clouds in the sky being supplanted with
trees and grass in the earth, and with waves in the ocean, reiterating the point that the objects
which we take to be real are phantoms projected by and onto the screen of awareness.

However, it would be a mistake to see this song purely as a teaching on the nature of
reality from a privileged viewpoint, because it has a didactic element paralleled here by a
teaching song of Milarepa to his disciple Lady Paldarboom. Initially, Milarepa instructs her to
practice with a mind like the sky without limitation, clear and undistorted as the sun and moon, with the stability of mountain and the depth of an ocean. Lady Paldarboom does just this, but then comes back with questions about what to do with those things that arise from and accompany the mind in meditation—clouds, stars, flora and waves respectively. Milarepa in turn instructs her to simply let them be, and to recognize them as *manifestations* not at all discontinuous with their environments. He sings,

If you are happy practicing with the sky,
Clouds are the sky’s magical creations.
Be the sky itself.

If you are happy practicing with the sun and moon,
Planets and stars are their magical creations.
Be the sun and moon.

If you are happy practicing with the mountain,
Grass and trees are the mountain’s magical creations.
Be the mountain itself.

If you are happy practicing with the ocean,
Waves are the ocean’s magical creations.
Be the ocean itself.

Milarepa is talking about the thoughts, perceptions and sensations that arise naturally in our minds, rather than some mystical and transcendent level of reality. He sings next,

If you are happy practicing with mind,
Thoughts are the mind’s magical creations.
Be mind itself.
His point, paralleled in Shabkar, is that Buddhists practicing meditation should, rather than try to turn their minds off being subduing thoughts and external sensations, embrace the plethora of activity that arises with the mind, and recognize that those things are but temporary manifestations that will sure enough eventually subside and rise again, ebb and flow naturally. Thus, there is no reason to become disturbed by or involved in them.

Shabkar also in the second half of the song brings the metaphor closer to home, the ordinary human mind, by comparing the pain and pleasure experienced in saṃsāra and nirvāṇa to be on the same ontological level as the pain and pleasure experienced in dreams. In the same way that such sensations and impressions do not move anywhere in the world external to sleep, such sensations in waking life, whether that life is deluded or realized, do not move anywhere, "beyond intrinsic awareness," as they are simply the products and play of mind. He then sings,

Since the phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are gathered and collected in the great expanse of one's own awareness, the Dharmakāya, beyond [such] base-awareness, the Dharmakāya, nothing has moved [even] a little...

Realize this!

Presently, all phenomena seen and heard by those without realization appear as Saṃsāra I, a carefree and serene mendicant, realize that whatever appears is like an illusion.

In these stanzas though, Shabkar has stopped ending with go, "to understand," that is, on an intellectual level, and is now ending with rtogs, the imperative form of, "to realize," or to understand or recognize something to be the case as a result of one's own experience. I think this suggests that Shabkar wants us to now apply his understanding to our own experience,
recognizing things to be of the nature of dreams, and purifying them in the Dharmakāya that is our own basic awareness. Shabkar is imploring his disciples, just as Milarepa did, to recognize and realize the un-reality of things that appear, and their utter dependence upon the mind to create and sustain them.

Again, the transformative nature of Shabkar's vision of emptiness is demonstrated. Realizing that all possible inner and outer experiences, including Nirvāṇa, are like illusions, unreal, Shabkar becomes carefree and serene (gu yangs blo bde), free from all worries imposed by the external world. Shabkar goes on to tells us that,

- Just as the light of a crystal finally dissolves within [itself]
- The basis of appearances of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa is purified in the Dharmakāya.
- When the base, the Dharmakāya, becomes manifest actual fruition is attained…
- Realize this!

The Dharmakāya,chos sku, or body of reality has already been equated with one's own intrinsic awareness, rang rig. The metaphor here demonstrates how the reality of appearances fades when one is absolutely aware of awareness itself, when we practice as the mind itself, and importantly, that the results of such an experience are true and authentic.

I hope to have demonstrated several points through a reading of this particular song. Firstly, that external objects, including "natural phenomena," e.g. sights and sounds of retreat, are not meant to be "transcended," as Jackson argues. Instead, they are to be realized as part of a continuity with the inner mind; just as clouds emerge from the sky, trees from the earth, or waves from the ocean, appearances arise from the mind, and are essentially of the mind. This is not so much transcendence as transformation, an alchemy of vision that reveals the pure-light nature of mind as the foundation of all reality without actually negating appearances, but by purifying
them. Thus, inner and outer are revealed to be not separate at all but instead as two aspects of the same reality (hence their permeability to each other). Also in these songs, yogic experience is treated as a thing to be celebrated by and taught to others, and so plays a vital role in establishing authority rooted in experience. These points taken together support Gyatso's argument that experience mediates between inner and outer, both on subjective and social levels; not only is experience an important qualification for socially powerful individuals, but can itself unify subject and object, the mind of the subject with what it experiences as external to and separate from it, but what is actually just an aspect of itself.

Conclusion: Inner and Outer, The Play of Mind

The thinker is creative with his thoughts. This is one of the most fundamental truths to be understood. All that you experience is your creation. First you create it, then you experience it, and then you are caught in the experience—because you don’t know that the source of all exists in you.

-Osho\textsuperscript{96}

The crux of my paper has been the multiple levels of permeability between worlds, between society and retreat, between yogin and nature, between yogin and society, and ultimately between self and other. The songs of Shabkar amply demonstrate that, on all these levels, the perceived boundaries and barriers are simply not there, but are illusions that arise from the play of mind, the source of all bondage and transcendence. In the end, Shabkar and his Dzogchen tradition emphasize less a mystical transcendence by a detached subject and more a calm, stable recognition of the mind's powers, and a collapse of the duality to which it gives rise.

What I would like to emphasize in this conclusion is the role of experience in bridging these boundaries. Neither natural and self-evident nor merely a polemical, discursive

\textsuperscript{96} Osho, pg. 83.
construction, the true nature of experience for Shabkar is, more so, that of a gateway or a
threshold between worlds. Experience must, first of all, be cultivated and transformed by certain
kinds of space. For Shabkar, society creates binding and miserable conditions, but in an
authorized, natural retreat space, experiences of freedom and joy arise naturally. Here, certain
kinds of space bring about a transformation in minds of those who dwell in them, and create
experiences of mental stability, joy and freedom. The effects of retreat, of clouds, waterfall and
mountains on the interior mind is immediate and profound, the retreat world is transformed into a
realm of blessings as wrathful beings are tamed and mountains and caves are saturated by the
activity of meditators, just as the yogin's human community is transformed as he sings his songs
of experience before vanishing back into retreat.

In this way retreat space is an important component in a technology of the self. Positive
(and ultimately salvific) mental states are brought about by the retreat itself, through the lack of
society's stresses and obligations, and the presence of beautiful sights, sounds and blessings of
past meditators. In this kind of space, positive qualities and realizations can arise more easily
and with greater clarity. Such space also opens up new opportunities for realization. Not fixated
on or invested in individual objects as permanent, the retreatant is free to see into their intrinsic
emptiness. This is not an experience that arises without rhyme or reason, but is evoked very
intentionally and in a prescribed way, utilizing ordinary human senses and mental faculties to
structure and expand one's subjectivity. Furthermore, as a result of the transformation of vision
Shabkar undergoes a transformation of being; not fixated on objects, ideologies or conduct, he
becomes a carefree madman, a drunkard of emptiness with no home in saṃsāra, but perfectly at
ease in the Dharmadhātu, the expanse of reality free of all illusions of subject and object.
In the songs of Shabkar, not only is inner experience prescriptively evoked by outer events, but meditative, visionary experience also possesses the agency to transmute the yogin-subject himself. As we saw in "The Wine of Emptiness," certain kinds of meditative experiences can be cultivated by ordinary experience coupled with observation and reasoning. That song and others constantly vacillate between inner and outer, exposing the fragile nature of a boundary so easily crisscrossed by meditative experience. "Seeing" a vision of emptiness, no-thought and pure light, one is transformed like a mirror—utterly mutable by what is placed before it, and not at all detached or objective. The subject-object relationship, the bridge between inner and outer, the experience of nature in the songs of Shabkar give us a rare glimpse into a world beyond our own, a world where we are not limited to our bodies, our obligations, identities, or even our minds. It is a world in which we are free to soar in the vast and open expanse of reality, eternally joyful and free.

Further, I have argued for the importance of the category of experience in Religious Studies. Though we should, as Sharf points out, recognize that the foundation of many Buddhist truth-claims is built upon the ground of scholasticism and ritual, we should also recognize that many such claims, particularly those found in songs of experience, are grounded in claims of personal experience, and so have an important social, mediating role for religious authority and patronage. As such, instead of seeing experience as something self-evident, we should recognize and strive to understand its open-ended and multivalent nature; what causes experience to arise? What kinds of experiences are desired and why? How is it formulated and shared with others? Finally, what claims are made by the yogins themselves about its nature that conflict and align with Western schemas?
As we have seen, one goes into retreat to avoid certain kinds of mental states and to evoke others, and to learn from the natural world through observation whilst absorbing the blessings of previous retreatants. The kinds of experiences desired in this project are sorrow for impermanence and worldly life, and joy and happiness without a care for the world in open and bucolic surroundings. Shabkar himself understands the yogic attainment gleaned there to a joyful, drunken and expansive state; all appearances, all things self and other being pure apparitions of the Dharmakāya of pure light. Finally, this soteriological freedom is, once attained through a prescribed process of transformation, carried down from the peaks and sung drunkenly and joyfully. Such a world of mountains and freedom is in fact far from solitary, and is meant to be shared with others through the songs of experience as we are invited to ourselves renounce and come to Shabkar's world. In this way, songs of experience demonstrate the social nature of individual attainment. Contrary to James' view, experiences are not had for their own sake, but are ultimately salvific for the yogin and his community, and function as a locus of authority in the world. The yogin retreats from the village, but only to eventually return and lift its residents to the high peaks of his own realization.

Indeed, experience mediates and is mediated. It is mediated by the kinds of space one occupies, which provides the conditions for lasting happiness and freedom to arise, is mediated by songs, to Shabkar's community, and mediates between an utterly mutable subject and its outward visions of emptiness. At the end of this study, I can say with a great deal of certainty that Shabkar did not view the natural world as a pleasant but inconsequential backdrop, a dead and deceitful object meant to be negated by an immutable and detached perceiver-subject. Rather, he saw and experienced it as a reality to participate in and experience, a field of freedom,
happiness and blessings that represented the highest aspirations of his tradition- the realization of Buddhahood.
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