

Supplemental Material

Note: This supplemental material is the full transcripts of the commentaries and debates in the article entitled “Indigenous Dialogic Teaching: Orality in a Tibetan School in China”.

Commentary 01

Lobsang (teacher): Why does Drimed Kuenden decide to give his eyes to the elders?

Lhak: Because he wants the elders to see the light again. He is a selfless and kind person.

Penpa: He cannot stand the suffering of others. Even if he is unjustly blamed by his people, he still helps others generously.

(Some other students also expressed the same views as above. Omitted here.)

Lobsang: You all agreed that he did it because of his own personality. He is a kind, selfless, warm-hearted person. Is that right?

Students: (together) Yes!

Lobsang: Now, think about it. If you were him, would you do that? Will you give your eyes, treasures, and even your children and wife to others?

Wangdrak: I think I will give away everything I have. Because this old story aims to teach us to contribute selflessly to others. Dedication is also a virtue advocated by Buddhism, my teachers, and my parents since I was a child. If I can save many people only by sacrificing myself, I think it is worth doing.

Lobsang: But you also need to sacrifice your family. Are you willing to do so?

Wangdrak: Um, if I can really save many people, I will. Because I believe in the theory of "Cause and Effect (Sanskrit: hetu-phala; Chinese: 因果论)" in Buddhism, I don't want to suffer from reincarnation. If I haven't done good things in my life, how can I achieve good results in my next life?

Lobsang: I'm glad you deeply understand "Cause and Effect" and have a noble morality. Anybody else?

Tse: It seems that the action of Drimed Kuenden is very contradictory. While he has loving-kindness, he is also a selfish person. He sent his wife and children to others without considering their feelings. He is selfless to his people but selfish to his family.

Lobsang: That is a very interesting comment. Anybody else?

(Some other students also expressed the same views as Tse. Omitted here.)

Sonam: I agreed with Tse and disagreed with Wangdrak. It seems that you sacrifice yourself just because you want to benefit yourself from reincarnation and get a good fate in your next life. Isn't this another kind of selfishness? I think you have to figure out what your sacrifice is really for if you are Drimed Kuenden.

Lobsang: Your opinion makes sense. Many of you disagree with the prince's action of sacrificing the minority for the prosperity of the majority. This is an interesting topic that deserves our attention. Then, are you willing to sacrifice yourself?

Sonam: I am not sure. I dare not say I will become such a kind and selfless person. But if the minister hurts my family, then I will make a desperate attempt to save my family without considering my own life.

Lobsang (teacher): Thanks for your honesty. It seems that everyone has different views on the meaning of dedication and selflessness. Now, thinking about your own particular examples, for those of you who are willing to dedicate yourself to others, what did it make you feel like when you give away the precious things in your life? What was your reaction? Tashi.

Tashi (student): I think I'll be miserable. Although I saved others, I lost my eyes and the most important person in my life. At that time, I will be totally a wreck and a loser and have no hope of living.

Lobsang (teacher): Ok. Gyatso.

Gyatso (student): If I lose everything I cherish, I will no longer be happy even if I am greatly admired or respected by thousands of people.

Lobsang (teacher): Understand. Yonten.

Yonten (student): Actually, I think Drimed Kuenden is very lucky, because he was protected and saved by the crane fairy. Eventually, he got everything he lost back, including his eyes, wife, children, and even he got the throne. However, this is a fairy tale and this will not happen in real life. In real society, if I have to sacrifice everything I cherish for the happiness of others, maybe I will do it. However, to be honest, I'll be sad, too.

(Some other students also expressed the same views as Tashi, Gyatso, and Yonten. Omitted here.)

Lobsang (teacher): Thanks for sharing. Ngak.

Ngak (student): Well, in my case, actually, I think I am half satisfied. On the one hand, I will be honored for saving so many people. After all, I am a prince and I have an obligation to protect my people. I mean, it's my duty and I must do this. On the other hand, I think I will cry secretly at night and leave the sadness to myself. On the surface, I will be very strong and act like a prince. But I will suffer in silence.

Lobsang (teacher): That sounds pathetic. Why would you do that?

Ngak (student): Um, like, when I was a little kid, my father sacrificed a lot silently for our family. He is the only source of income in our family. He worked hard from dawn to dusk all year round to earn money. He taught me what love really is. I think love is more about dedication. We can't only think for ourselves. More often, you just need more patience and endurance.

Lobsang (teacher): So it seems that your decision depends on your personal experience. Is that right?

Ngak (student): Yes.

Lobsang (teacher): Very impressive. Now, everyone, think about it. If selflessness causes so much sadness, why is it so difficult to give up the idea of helping others and ignore their feelings?

Nyima (student): I agreed with Ngak. Everyone has his own responsibility. We can't live in the world just for our own happiness. If you don't help others just to keep yourself from being hurt, you won't be really happy.

(Some other students also expressed the same views as Ngak and Nyima. Omitted here.)

Lobsang (teacher): Good. Kealdrup.

Kealdrup (student): I agreed with Nyima. Because Drimed Kuenden is a prince, he must think for his people. If I were the prince of a country, I think I would also devote myself to others. I have the duty to protect my people. Protecting them is also the meaning of my existence. Helping others can also make us happy and satisfied. But if we don't care about others and let them die without saving their lives, guilt will always accompany us and keep torturing us.

Lobsang (teacher): A very nice answer. Anyone else? Tashi.

Tashi (student): I agreed with Kealdrup. Actually, I want to share my experience with you guys. Once, a friend of mine asked me to lend him a few bucks, but I didn't lend it to him. At noon that day, I saw him sitting alone in the classroom because he didn't bring money for lunch. It made me feel very guilty and sad because I didn't help him. In fact, he wasn't the kind of person who frequently bothered others. I felt terrible seeing him hungry and so poor. This kind of guilt can really mess with your head. From then on, I told myself not to be so selfish anymore.

Lobsang (teacher): Thanks for you sharing. Now, some of you agree that we will feel bad if we stop helping others. Meanwhile, it will also make us feel sad if we give all our precious things to others. Then, how should we define selflessness or dedication? Dorga.

Dorga (student): I think there is no absolute selflessness and selfishness in real life. Society is a complex place. The environment in which we live changes at any time and nothing is invariable. I think it depends. Selflessness doesn't mean giving up all of yours for the sake of others. I think trying to satisfy everyone and respond to everyone's requests is a foolish act. We should decide whether to help others according to the actual situation.

Lobsang (teacher): A very good answer. Lhakpa.

Lhakpa (student): Sometimes excessive selflessness is actually an act of flattery and timidity. Always unilaterally contributing to others, regardless of our own feelings and interests, may not make things better. Such selflessness may not be in exchange for understanding and respect from others.

(Some other students also expressed the same views as Dorga and Lhakpa. Omitted here.)

Lobsang (teacher): OK, nice. I see what you guys mean. Sometimes dedication is a duty. If you are a policeman, you have to risk your life to save others. But

sometimes, giving up all of your cherished things for the sake of others is not necessarily right or worthwhile. It depends on the real situation. Is that right?

Students: (said together) Yes!

Lobsang (teacher): Now, what can you tell about Drimed Kuenden's character from the text? Penpa.

Penpa (student): For his people, he will be a good king. Because he is willing to sacrifice everything he possesses for the people. However, he gave away his family to others without caring about their feelings. In this light, he is a selfish person.

Lobsang (teacher): Thank you. Dhaga.

Dhaga (student): I agreed with Penpa. He is a selfless, kind-hearted, and generous person. Meanwhile, being selfless to his people but selfish to his family makes me feel that he is not really a kind person.

(Some other students also expressed the same views as Penpa and Dhaga. Omitted here.)

Lobsang (teacher): OK, anyone else? Phurbu.

Phurbu (student): I think people are complicated creatures. Actually, there is no description of his feelings about how he felt after giving away all of his precious things to others in the text. So we can't judge what kind of person he really is. But just from what is described in the text, I agree with Dhaga's opinion.

Lobsang (teacher): That's a very good point.

Commentary 02

Ms. Cui (teacher): How do you feel after watching this documentary?

Norbu: It was a very enlightening video. In the past, I always believed that human beings could protect the environment as long as they left the grassland and no longer pollute it. But in fact, this video shows that if herdsmen abandon their nomadic lifestyle and leave the grassland, it actually would harm the ecosystem.

Ms. Cui (teacher): Very good. Lhathon.

Lhathon: This documentary shows that human beings and the environment are inextricably linked. Sometimes, the best way to protect the ecology is not to keep a distance from it, but to learn how to coexist friendly with the environment. Learning how to coexist with the surrounding environment is the long-term solution.

Ms. Cui (teacher): OK. Gyatso.

Gyatso: The documentary shows that herding is crucial to the protection of grassland. One of the reasons for grassland degeneration and ecological deterioration is that herdsmen give up their nomadic life. They were forbidden to herd on the grassland for the sake of environmental protection. They moved to towns or fixed grazing zones. However, settled grazing actually destroyed the grassland and even made their economy and life worse.

Ms. Cui (teacher): That's a very good summary. Tashi.

Tashi: If we want to protect the environment, I don't think it's an effective way to just call on people not to litter or not to pollute water. Environmental protection is not just about leaving the grassland or building more garbage dumps. The video told us that the relationship between people and their surroundings is more symbiotic than hostile.

(Some other students also expressed the same views as above. Omitted here.)

Ms. Cui (teacher): Well done. I guess you all understand what this documentary is trying to deliver. Let me make a summary. The departure of herdsmen led to the decline of nomadic culture and the deterioration of grassland ecology. As our world rapidly became modern, this is an inevitable phenomenon in many Tibetan pasturing areas. Some of you mentioned that this video calls on us to learn to coexist with the environment instead of being separated from the environment. This is a good point. This film shows us the relationship between the environment and people from a very unique perspective. Its concept of ecological protection is also very different from many films we have seen in the past. Let me ask you guys, how is it different from the many "ecological films" we have seen before?

Pehma: I think many ecological films only emphasize human damage to the environment, which seems to set human beings against the environment. For example, 《Godzilla》 is such a movie. It tells the story that after a nuclear test explosion, a lizard was exposed to nuclear radiation and became a monster, which brought a great disaster to mankind. This film shows that human beings, for their own interests, have made the environment extremely deteriorated. It only shows the conflict between people and the environment. It only calls on us to protect the environment, but it doesn't tell us how to live in harmony with the environment.

Ms. Cui (teacher): Precisely. This documentary provides us with a special perspective to understand environmental issues. Sam.

Sam: I agree with Pehma. Many ecological films we have seen before are mainly mainstream commercial films produced by western developed countries. Most of these films show the audience the results of ecological deterioration with dazzling special effects. For example, the film entitled 《the day after tomorrow》 depicts that the greenhouse effect caused the melting of icebergs, which plunged the earth into the ice age and caused many disasters. Different from these ecological films, this documentary does not set people against their environment. It emphasizes the symbiosis between people and the environment. This is what makes it different from other ecological films.

Ms. Cui (teacher): Very good. Anyone else?

Tentso: Many ecological films tell stories only from the perspective of human beings. For example, those mutant animals often accuse humans of destroying their living environment. They often said to humans, "it is all about the greed of your humans that makes us lose our home!" I think what's special about this documentary is that it not only emphasizes the importance of environmental protection to people but also reflects the importance of people to the natural environment. It has made me fully aware of the root of ecological problems in Tibetan areas.

(Some other students also expressed the same views as above. Omitted here.)

Ms. Cui (teacher): Alright, you all made a great point. For a long time, most mainstream ecological films believe that the "human-centered" value system is the cause of ecological deterioration. Such films show the contemporary ecological crisis, but they tell the story in a human-oriented way. The concept of these films is still based on traditional dualism in western philosophy. They cannot surpass the binary opposition between human beings and nature. Indeed, these kinds of ecological films have limited ability to arouse audiences' ecological awareness. However, this documentary offers us a very different perspective on ecological protection in Tibetan areas. According to this video, I want to ask you guys: how should we understand the relationship between the environment and ourselves? This is also the most important question I hope you can think about in this class. Please talk about it based on your own experiences.

Lhathon: As shown in the video, the natural environment in the pastoral areas of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is very special. I grew up here and know more about the ecosystem here. In order to protect the ecosystem of grassland, many herdsmen in my hometown have also moved to towns under the request of the government. As a result, they have to give up their nomadic life to find a job in towns or herding in settled areas. The herdsmen settled down, their grassland became narrower and smaller, and the traditional nomadic mode of production was eliminated. Actually, when I was a child, I often grazed on the grassland. Grass, livestock, and humans are interdependent and indivisible in the grassland ecosystem. If grassland is not properly utilized or if we keep herding in a fixed place, it will cause vegetation degradation and grassland desertification after a certain period of time. Therefore, the long-term grazing prohibition policy is not a suitable plan for ecosystem protection. From herdsmen's experiences, the environment and people are interdependent. We Tibetans need to understand our relationship with the environment from our own experiences.

Ms. Cui (teacher): Thanks for you sharing. Anyone else? Dhala.

Dhala: I spent most of my childhood herding on the grassland with my grandpa. When I was very young, my grandpa told me that herding in a fixed place is destructive to the grassland ecosystem. A herd of horses staying in a fixed place all the time will turn the grassland into sand; the cattle like to walk in line and the grassland will be trampled into sandy ditches in a few days; and a flock of sheep can ruin the grassland in just a few hours if we fenced them in pens. Excessive trampling by livestock will compact the soil, reduce the breathability of the soil, make it impossible for plants to absorb rich nutrients from the soil, and thus reduce the productivity of the soil. The occurrence of natural disasters such as sandstorms is closely related to this. It can be seen that letting herdsmen give up nomadic life will actually damage the environment of their settlement. On the contrary, the grassland can not be well protected without people and their livestock. During the nomadic process, livestock will automatically walk away when they eat a few bites of grass. They won't eat all the grass. Moderate eating and trampling by livestock can also loosen the soil, promote the growth of grass,

and improve the quality of grassland. Meanwhile, the excreta of livestock is the timely fertilizer of grassland. Cow dung, in particular, can provide convenient and environmentally friendly fuel for herdsman, and its burned ash can also fertilize grass. Anyhow, nomadic lifestyle can effectively alleviate the pressure of pasture and ensure the recovery of grassland plants. Therefore, I think people and the environment are interdependent and inseparable. We can't live longer and better without each other.

Ms. Cui (teacher): Thank you. You know the herdsman's lifestyle and the grassland better than I do. I learned a lot from your sharing. Dekyi.

Dekyi: There used to be a beautiful wetland in my hometown. Every year, some black-necked cranes fly there to breed. Once, someone shot two cranes. Fortunately, they were not hurt, but they never came again. Gradually, other animals in the wetland also disappeared and the wetland dried up in the end. Most people tend to believe that the drying up of the wetland leads to the departure of the black-necked cranes. However, many elders in our village believe that without cranes living there, the wetland loses its vitality and dries up eventually. They said that the relationship between life and environment is interdependent in our Tibetan culture. Without the existence of the environment, there is no life. On the contrary, there exists a suitable environment because of the arrival of lives. Life is a consequence of the environment, and also one of its causes. The two interact as both cause and effect in Tibetan culture.

(Some other students also shared their own experiences on the relationship between the environment and humans. Omitted here.)

Ms. Cui (teacher): Thank you all for sharing your experiences. From the perspective of Tibetan culture, life and environment depend on each other. Then, let's summarize what we have talked about today. What enlightenment or contribution can Tibetan nomadic culture bring to the global ecological crisis? If I asked you to make an ecological film, how would you do that?

Namgyal: I think Tibetan people hold a holistic view of humans and nature. Everything is interrelated and inseparable. I think this documentary inspired us to reflect on the relationship between life and the environment in Tibetan pastoral areas. The discussion expanded my horizon. If I'm going to make an ecological film, I think I will no longer emphasize the opposition between people and the environment. Instead, I will explore the relationship between people and the environment based on local experiences.

Ms. Cui (teacher): Good point. Pehma.

Pehma: Tibetan Buddhist culture emphasizes viewing the relationship between things dialectically. Among everything is a relationship of dialectical unity. The traditional Tibetan lifestyle emphasizes the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, low energy consumption, recyclability, and sustainable living. Therefore, I think Tibetan culture can be used as a reference for the global ecological crisis. Not all environmental crises can be solved by isolating people and the environment. We should consider how to coexist with the environment and learn from Tibetan folk wisdom.

Ms. Cui (teacher): Very good idea. Thank you.

Jampan: I agree with Pehma. If I'm going to make an ecological film, I will use the traditional wisdom of Tibetans to explore the relationship between humans and their surrounding environment. In fact, some Tibetan folk activities often contain Tibetan people's philosophy about the relationship between the environment and people. I think I may go to shoot some Tibetan folk environmental protection activities in the future.

Ms. Cui (teacher): That's interesting. It's a great idea. Many folk rituals, daily practices, and folk environmental protection activities are rich in traditional Tibetan ecological wisdom. They are good shooting materials. Indeed, the ecological crisis is global, interregional, and cross-cultural. The solution to it must go beyond ethnicity and region. Solving problems based on local experience is better than using the same solution.

Debate 01

Challenger: Some people think that “wet and flowing” is the definition of water. Is that right?

Defender: Yes, I agree.

Challenger: Anything “wet and flowing” is water. Is that right?

Defender: Yes, I agree. Is this not the consequence?

Challenger: Milk is water because it is wet and flowing. Do you agree?

Defender: The answer is not established (I disagree). Milk contains only part of water because milk also contains protein and other substances.

Challenger: Don't you think water is “wet and flowing?” Milk is sometimes “wet and flowing,” isn't it?

Defender: The answer is not established. We can pour milk into a cup; then it won't flow (The defender disagrees that milk is water, and he believes that sometimes milk is not flowing).

Challenger: You just said there is water in milk, and you also agreed that anything “wet and flowing” is water. Now you say that milk is not necessarily flowing. Isn't it a contradiction? Your answer is inconsistent.

Defender: Um...

Challenger: What is the consequence?

Defender: (Silence)

Challenger: Answer the question! Come on! (accompanied by the shouting, clapping, and stamping of the challenger)

Defender: I agree with you. I was wrong. “Wet and flowing” is not the definition of water. (So far, the defender abandoned his original proposition)

Challenger: What is water, then?

Defender: I think “wet and flowing” is not the definition of water. If water is poured into a cup or frozen, then it is not “flowing.” If the water evaporates into steam, it is not “flowing” either.

Challenger: You didn’t answer my question. What is water? What is the consequence of that?

Defender: Um... Water is a liquid at normal temperature (So far, the defender has concluded a part of the definition of water).

Challenger: Is milk water? Is tea water? Is yogurt water?

Defender: They are not entirely water. They also contain other substances.

Challenger: What is water, then? What is the difference between water and these things (i.e., milk, tea, yogurt)?

Defender: They (i.e., milk, tea, and yogurt) all have a taste.

Challenger: Yes. Anything else?

Defender: (Silence)

Challenger: Do milk, tea, and yogurt all have colors?

Defender: Yes, they are.

Challenger: What color is water?

Defender: Water has no color.

Challenger: What is water, then?

Defender: Water is a colorless and tasteless liquid at normal temperature (The defender has concluded the definition of water).

Challenger: We also must consider the change in air pressure. In fact, water is a colorless and tasteless transparent liquid under normal temperature and pressure.

Debate 02

Challenger: How to say "ཁྱིམ" (Tibetan; Chinese: 家) in English? Please spell it.

Defender: "family (f-a-m-i-l-y)" or "home (h-o-m-e)".

Challenger: What is the difference among "family", "home", and "house"?

Defender: I think "family" and "home" have similar meanings. They both have the meaning of "household", a place composed of parents and their children. But "house" only refers to a building in which someone lives, not necessarily a family.

Challenger: Not really. There are some differences between "family" and "home". Tell me the answer.

Defender: There are several members in a "family". I think "family" puts more emphasis on people who are related to each other by blood. Well, I think "home" may not necessarily refer to the place where a household lives, but also a person.

Challenger: You still haven't made it clear what "home" means. What is the biggest difference between "family" and "home"? Tell me the answer. Hurry up!

Defender: I have told you! The word "home" may only mean the place where just a person lives.

Challenger: Not really! Don't you even know that? The word "family" emphasizes more on the members who dwell in it. But "home" carries more emotional attachment.

Defender: The answer is not established (I don't agree). Please give me an example to convince me.

Challenger: For example, we might say "the school is more like our home" to express our feelings of belonging to school instead of "the school is more like our house".

Defender: The answer is not established. I think what you said is not entirely true. We also can say "the school is more like a family to us". Doesn't the word "family" carry any emotional attachment?

Challenger: I told you "family" emphasizes more on the members. This word has no emotional attachment.

Defender: The answer is not established. If we want to emphasize more on the close relationship between us or with our teachers, then we can also say "the school is more like a family to us".

Challenger: OK, I agree (so far, the defender and the challenger reached a consensus). Repeat the whole thing to me so that I know you understand.

Defender: (Repeat)

Debate 03

Challenger: What is superstition?

Defender: Belief in immortals, ghosts, witches, and other non-existent things is superstition.

Challenger: Some people think that Buddhism is superstitious. Is that right?

Defender: I don't agree.

Challenger: But Buddhism also believes in the existence of Buddha, which is non-existent and superstitious in many others' views. Is this not the consequence (Isn't that right)?

Defender: The answer is not established (I don't agree). Although both religion and superstition believe in "theism" and worship gods or magical/supernatural forces, Buddhism is not superstitious.

Challenger: Do you believe that Buddha really exists?

Defender: I'm not sure. But we should not regard Buddhism as superstition just because others say that Buddha does not exist.

Challenger: You just said that superstition is believing in non-existent things. However, you are not sure if Buddha exists. If Buddha does not exist, then Buddhism is superstitious. But you don't agree that Buddhism is superstitious. Isn't it a contradiction? Your answer is inconsistent!

Defender: (silence)

Challenger: I think Buddhism itself is not superstitious. Instead, people who blindly/mindlessly believe in Buddhism are superstitious. Is this not the consequence (Isn't that right)?

Defender: Um... I agree.

Challenger: If we believe in Buddha just because we want the Buddha to protect us when we do bad things, then we fall into superstition. Is this not the consequence (Isn't that right)?

Defender: I agree.

Challenger: Superstition refers to the blind obedience of people who do not know the truth and can not distinguish between good and evil. Is this not the consequence (Isn't that right)?

(At this time, Tsechi heard their dialogue and said)

Tsechi (mentor): I think what you said is reasonable. If we kill people to sacrifice Buddha, bribe Buddha with gold and silver to pray for wealth, worship Buddha to harm others or seek personal interests, then these personal behaviors can be called superstition. So, what is superstition?

Challenger: I agree. Buddhism itself is not superstitious. People who blindly/mindlessly believe in Buddhism and people who use Buddhism to do bad things are superstitious.

Tsechi (mentor): Is science superstitious?

Challenger: No, it isn't. Science is the result of precise experiments.

Tsechi (mentor): A lot of scientific research is believed to be true today, but it may be overthrown tomorrow. Are those devout believers who are crazy about science not superstitious?

Defender: I get it. Science itself is not superstitious. If someone thinks that science is omnipotent, science can explain everything, and we can rely almost exclusively on science, then it is a kind of superstition.

Tsechi (mentor): So, what is superstition?

Challenger: Superstition is an attitude of blindly believing in something.

Defender: It's more about people's attitudes than things themselves.

Tsechi (mentor): Yes. You two made a good point. Superstition is a kind of mindset that never truly understands, thinks or questions.