

Article

Performative Framing: Dza Patrul Rinpoche's Performative Pedagogy

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Abstract: This essay explores the pedagogy of Dza Patrul Rinpoche (1808–1887), a well-respected Buddhist teacher from Eastern Tibet, by considering examples where Patrul frames his teachings as oratorical performances. Patrul operates under the guiding pedagogical principle that self-promoting performance is good teaching. The term “performance” describes the competitive exchanges that appear in certain of Patrul’s writings, where the quality of the sermons in question is at issue. Patrul habitually directs focus to his teachings’ delivery, including instances where his lessons emerge out of conversations between invented characters. Patrul puts the oratorical capacity of his protagonists under a microscope and accentuates the artistry of their teachings. In so doing, he draws attention back to his own mastery, prolixity, cunning, and wordplay. His style allows him to communicate content while demonstrating competence and creativity. By telegraphing these qualities, he interests students in aspiring to similar expertise and provides them with opportunities to generate devotion towards him. According to Patrul, devotion is a crucial mechanism for learning, as it transforms and empowers each step of students’ progress along the path to awakening.

Keywords: Tibet; Buddhism; pedagogy; performance; devotion

1. Introduction

When I had the flesh and blood of youth, I was handsomer than you.
When my tongue, eyes, and senses were clear, I was brighter than you.
When I had my own home and country, I was more distinguished than you.
I am from Do Kham province.
This morning I have come from the city of samsara.
Tonight I am going to the island of liberation.
(Tulku Thondup 1997, p.24; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 410)¹

Thus boasts Dza Patrul Rinpoche at the outset of a set ethical instructions entitled *Advice to the Boy Loden* (*Gzhon nu blo ldan gyi dris lan*) (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 409–34).² The didactic work opens with a short narrative. An old man (speaking above) meets an ill-mannered boy. The old man trades insults with the disrespectful young man and thereby earns his respect. The boy recognizes that his elder is no fool and requests some wisdom from him. The old man then delivers an ethical sermon that constitutes the body of the text.

¹ *gzhon nu sha rgyas khrag rgyas dus/ khyod las yag cig nga yang yin/kha mig dbang po gsal ba'i dus/ khyod las mkhas shig nga yang yin/ rang yul pha khyim yod pa'i dus/khyod las drag cig nga yang yin/ nga sa cha mdo khams sgang gi yin/ da nangs 'khor ba'i gnas nas 'ong/ do dgong thar pa'i gling du 'gro/* (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 410). English translation by Tulku Thondup (1997, p.24).

² The full title of the work is *Gzhon nu blo ldan gyi dris lan legs bshad blo gros snying po*.

Dza Patrul was a well-respected Buddhist teacher from Eastern Tibet, famous for his humility.³ So why would he open a composition about ethical behavior by having his hero brag about having once been better looking, smarter, and more distinguished than the boy that he is supposed to be teaching? What is Patrul's purpose for introducing an immodest protagonist with a biting wit?

This essay investigates this funny moment in Patrul's *oeuvre* and introduces select others in order to showcase Patrul's "performative pedagogy" and to explore how it functions. Patrul opens the compositions in question with narrative framing devices that lead into instructions on ethics and practice.⁴ Patrul's characters engage in competitive conversations that present opportunities to show off how capable they are of delivering meaningful sermons. For example, *Advice to the Boy Loden* flaunts the old man's quick-wittedness (his boasts) and his wisdom (his preaching about worldly ethics). The essay, by interpreting several such exchanges, will consider why Patrul would want to frame his teachings as performances. It pays particularly close attention to three short works within the author's six-volume collected works while also touching upon two of his better-known long-form compositions.⁵

Unpacking Patrul's performance-oriented pedagogy will take a number of steps. First, I establish Patrul's curiosity about skillful teaching and pedagogy. Examples include passages where Patrul discusses the qualities of a trustworthy teacher, and others where he reflects on the benefits and risks of different teaching styles (humorous, critical, wonder-inducing and otherwise).

Second, I clarify what "performance" means in the context of Patrul's fascinating experiments with authorial voice, where he adopts a multiplicity of speaking positions. Patrul is always conscious of how he presents himself within his texts, and he frequently goes out of his way to call attention either to himself as author or to whomever is doing the talking. After introducing some pronounced examples of this phenomenon, I explore a smaller set of Patrul's attention-grabbing authorial moves, focusing on moments where Patrul invents characters who must deliver sermons in response to challenges from their interlocutors. The term "performance" describes the competitive exchanges within which these sermons are conveyed, where the quality and competence of their delivery is at issue for the characters. This consideration of performance stands in contrast to other common uses of the critical category in Religious Studies projects. It does not take up performance in relationship to ritual theory (as in Victor Turner's writings). Nor does it play on theories of performative language (as in J.L. Austin's philosophy of language) or performative social roles and subjectivities (as in Judith Butler's work). Rather, it builds on ideas from the field of anthropology about how certain cultural performances call attention to themselves as special speech in order to provoke appraisal from their audiences.

Third, I offer an interpretation of why Patrul's performances constitute good teaching. Patrul models an approach to teaching that celebrates self-promotion. This style permits him to communicate content while simultaneously demonstrating competence and creativity. One outcome is that Patrul is particularly capable of inspiring devotion, itself a key ingredient in his students'

³ For example, the Dalai Lama repeats the common refrain that Patrul was "loved for his humility" in a forward to Matthieu Ricard's compendium of Patrul Rinpoche stories, recently published by Shambhala Publications (Ricard 2017, p. xvii). One commonly repeated story tells of Patrul traveling incognito among nomads when visiting to perform a religious ceremony, not even telling his hosts who he was while those around them were furiously preparing for the famous lama's visit (Tulku 1996, pp. 209–10).

⁴ Patrul is by no means the only Tibetan Buddhist teacher to surround his sermons with narratives. Prior models by Longchenpa (Klong chen rab 'byams pa, 1308–1364) and Do Khyenste Yeshe Dorje (Mdo mkhyen brtse Ye shes rdo rje, 1800–1866) may have influenced Patrul, to name two possible templates (Longchenpa 1989, Gayley 2017). This essay does not attempt to argue that Patrul is groundbreaking in his writing form. Rather, the essay strives to articulate the logic of his pedagogical style—a style undoubtedly grounded in the tradition of religious instruction that he has inherited. Patrul's creativity emerges, nonetheless, in his playful execution.

⁵ Patrul's writings now fit into eight paperback book volumes. Schapiro (Schapiro 2012, pp. 52–57) offers a survey of Patrul's compositions. Patrul's collected works contain Ju Mipam's (Ju Mi pham, 1846–1912) analysis of the subject matter of Patrul's compositions (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 88–114). Contemporary Tibetan scholar Paldor Zagtsa prepared a remarkably helpful, thematic table of contents for the 2009 edition of Patrul's collected works (Patrul 2009, vol. 8, pp. 515–43). The three texts that I analyze in depth in the latter half of the essay all appear in the miscellaneous advice (*gtam tshogs*) section of Patrul's writings, alongside other compositions that showcase Patrul's literary style.

learning. Unpacking this argument requires explaining the self-reflexive dynamic at play in his sermon performances. It also demands excavating some of the criteria that appear in Patrul's talk about elite teachers and the path to awakening. Ultimately, this paper proceeds on the assumption that there is an intimate relationship between Patrul's interest in the qualities of a good teacher, his self-awareness with respect to authorial voice in his didactic writings, and his penchant for presenting his teachings as performances that should be judged and revered.

2. Dza Patrul on Teaching

Dza Patrul was a Tibetan Buddhist teacher of great influence. He held teaching and leadership roles throughout Eastern Tibet: at Dzagyal monastery and Gemang monastery in his home region of Dzachuka, at Dzogchen monastery and its monastic college Śrī Seng in the Degé region, and at Yarlung Pemakö near Serta. Contemporary practitioners consider him to be one of his generation's two most important proponents of the Longchen Nyingtik practice cycle (Nyoshul 2005, p. 224), itself a widely-practiced collection of liturgy, ritual, and meditations for awakening to liberation in contemporary Nyingma communities. His anecdote-filled *Words of My Perfect Teacher* (*Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*) (Patrul 2009, vol. 7; Patrul 1998) is still used today at Nyingma monasteries as an introduction to the preliminary practices that one must perform before receiving instructions on the Longchen Nyingtik. Untold numbers of stories circulate in contemporary Nyingma circles that speak to his reputation for delivering witty, charming, compassionate, and arresting spiritual lessons.⁶

Patrul's writings display an undeniable interest in how to identify a trustworthy Buddhist teacher, called a "spiritual friend" (*dge ba'i bshes gnyen*) or a lama (*bla ma*). In *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul devotes an entire section to coaching his audience in how to choose a proper teacher, to whom committed practitioners will need to devote themselves wholeheartedly. He lists the requisite qualities of such lamas, such as upholding ethical vows, being knowledgeable and qualified, having experience and success with Buddhist practices, being exceedingly compassionate to all, and prioritizing others' needs. The passage includes traditional rubrics, such as the importance of teachers manifesting the four techniques for attracting students (*bsdu ba'i dngos po bzhi*): being generous, speaking with pleasant language, matching lessons to the needs of students, and living in accord with what they teacher (Patrul 2009, vol. 7, p. 212; Patrul 1998, p. 138). Ill-suited teachers, in contrast, think that they are superior because of their familial relationships to accomplished lamas, though they have yet to show any of the positive qualities that emerge from study and practice. Nor do they have the proper intention to benefit others (or themselves in their future rebirths). Though bad teachers may think that they are special, they have no perspective on how good teachers actually act (Patrul 2009, vol. 7, pp. 214–16; Patrul 1998, pp. 139–40).

Patrul returns to this material in his versified instructions *The Low-born Sage's Speech: The Ladder to Liberation* (*Gdol pa'i drang srong gi gtam thar pa'i them skas*) (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 391–408; Schapiro 2017).⁷ Patrul remarks that true lamas act according to others' needs, benefit whomever they encounter, and are compassionate. They apply themselves to virtuous behavior and introduce others to virtue. They teach the mechanisms for achieving liberation and train students' minds (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 402–3; Schapiro 2017, pp. 66–67). Patrul applies a similar strategy in both readings, portraying good lamas and dangerous lamas side by side. By contrasting the two sets, Patrul implies that there are plenty of teachers in his community that lack the requisite qualities and qualifications to be good teachers. While Patrul expresses concern that his students choose carefully

⁶ Published versions of such stories in English appear in (Das 1992; Smith and Rice Schaeffer 2001; Ricard 2017). The full Tibetan title of *Words of My Perfect Teacher* is *Rdzogs pa chen po klong chen snying tig gi sngon 'gro'i khrid yig kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*.

⁷ The full title of the text in the 2009 edition of Patrul's collected works is *Chos dang 'jig rten shes pa'i bstan bcos gdol pa'i drang srong gi gtam thar pa'i them skas*.

whom they study and practice with, his interest in the distinguishing characteristics of a good teacher is broader still.

Patrul is also motivated to clarify which verbal approaches and performative styles characterize exceptional teachers. His fascination with teaching thus extends to questioning the nature of didactic speech. So, for example, in an introduction to a short history of Buddhism in Tibet entitled *A Short Discourse on the Origin of the Dharma* (*Chos 'byung 'bel gtam nyung ngu*), we find Patrul discussing the principles behind different teaching objectives (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 435–37). He separates out speech that teaches worldly ethics, from instructions on how to achieve liberation, from discourses about history; he remarks upon talk intended to increase feelings of wonder and devotion in students, teaching that generates confidence in students' apprehension of the nature of reality, and speech that is primarily humorous. Patrul attends to a variety of aspects of these teaching styles. For example, when teaching students how to behave ethically, he advises that teachers should speak powerfully, incorporate a sense of humor, but generate certainty in the audience (p. 435). He thereby pays attention to how teachers sound (powerful), their rhetorical tone (humorous), and their goals (establishing confidence).

As was the case when comparing good teachers with bad, Patrul is also concerned with pedagogical misfires. He warns that egotistic scholars might include too much material, use superfluous examples and contradictory points, but also fail to connect the content that they introduce to their students' goals. Other poor teachers are likely to give sermons with no perceivable structure or talk on and on without offering any practical instruction. Patrul playfully calls these faulty lessons speech of "stubborn old folks."⁸ In cases where teachers are insufficiently knowledgeable, they will not be able to cover enough ground and, just as importantly, they will prove unable to answer questions (pp. 435–36). Patrul's pedagogical concerns are, once again, diverse. He addresses teachers' preparation, their verbal performance, their rhetorical choices, their lesson structure, and their curricula. The passages from *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, *The Low-Born Sage's Speech*, and *A Short Discourse on the Origin of the Dharma* all evidence the significant energy that Patrul invests in thinking about how effective teachers function.

3. Dza Patrul the Author

Patrul's careful attention to teaching style manifests in the ways that he presents himself in his own writings. In the examples that follow, Patrul delivers Buddhist instructions from dramatically different author positions. In some instances, Patrul composes his works in his own name yet makes a point of qualifying his status as author. In others, he frames his speech as intimate conversations with himself. In still others, he creates narratives with characters that do the teaching for him. The common thread in these works is the effort that Patrul expends to make authorship, and authorial voice, a creative variable in his compositions.

Perhaps Patrul's best known work in contemporary times is his *Words of My Perfect Teacher*. In the volume-long text, Patrul acts as a ventriloquist for his root-lama Jikme Gyalwe Nyugu,⁹ his "perfect teacher" (*kun bzang bla ma*). Patrul opens the work by claiming to be simply passing on the teachings that he received from his guru, ones that his biographers specify that he heard twenty-five times (Kunzang 2009, p. 9). He closes his opening dedicatory verses with the following:

May the Buddhas and the teachers bless me
That I may explain definitively as I have remembered them,
Wonderfully profound, yet clear and easy to understand—
The unerring words of my perfect teacher.

⁸ *rgan po u tshug can*.

⁹ 'Jigs med rgyal ba'i myu gu (1765–1842).

This faithful record of my peerless teacher’s instructions on the general outer an inner preliminaries... is divided into three parts. (Patrul 1998, p. 4; Patrul 2009, vol. 7, p. 4)

And he mentions the following in the conclusion to the work:

In writing down these instructions I have not been guided primarily by aesthetic or literary considerations. My main aim has simply been to faithfully record the oral instructions of my revered teacher in a way that is easy to understand and useful for the mind. I have done my best not to spoil them by mixing in my own words or ideas (Patrul 1998, p. 369; Patrul 2009, vol. 7, p. 553).

Tibetan Buddhist literature is full of such self-effacing statements, where an author claims to be only passing on what he himself has heard. In this instance, Patrul presents himself as modest—claiming not to have done the work of composing the instructions—and as trustworthy—dutifully passing on reputable teachings from a legitimate source.

Patrul’s choice to disclaim authorship also brings the very acts of teaching and writing to the audience’s attention. Before instructing his audience on the preliminary practices, he welcomes them to first consider the persons delivering the instructions: himself and Jikme Gyalwe Nyugu. One can easily imagine audience members visualizing a younger Patrul respectfully sitting at his teacher’s feet listening to the instructions in question, time after time. Patrul thus models dedication to his guru—an essential practice that he later elaborates upon. He shows his audience what it looks like for an advanced practitioner (himself) to manifest total devotion to his primary teacher (Gyalwe Nyugu). Patrul habitually carves out space in his writings to direct focus to the person delivering teachings, an inclination that will appear in all of the examples to come in this essay.

Patrul sometimes composes works of practice-advice where he calls into question whether his speech is even intended for his audience. His *Advice to Abu Śri* (*A bu shri snying dang ‘dra ba la gdams pa*) is a short diatribe directed at himself (Patrul 2009, vol. 8, pp. 160–63; Ricard 2013, pp. 246–49).¹⁰ The appellation *Abu Śri* is a name that Patrul sometimes uses for himself in the colophons to his writings. The colorful *Advice to Abu Śri* finds Patrul calling himself names and pointing out his own faults. He chastises himself for developing bad karma, being overly worried about plans to accomplish, being deceptive and distracting himself with ideas, listening to hundreds of teachings without understanding any of them, talking too much, teaching without having the requisite experience, and flattering those whom he speaks with. Of course, Patrul knows that the work will circulate—his decision to frame the advice as self-directed is rhetorical. By claiming to be talking to himself, Patrul frees himself to use harsh language and dramatic exhortations without offending or scaring off others who read or listen to his pleas. As was the case in *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul also directs attention to his act of authorship, here imagined as a pep talk that he is giving himself.

In his *Discourse Good in the Beginning, Middle and End* (*Thog mtha’ bar gsum du dge’ ba’i gtam*) (Patrul 2009, vol. 8, pp. 146–59), Patrul again presents his writing as self-directed.¹¹ This time he frames his verses as personal reflections and exhortations written for himself:

The first part: my sorrowful discourse about the activity of the degenerate age
This discourse was counsel from myself to myself
These words of lamentation affected my heart deeply

¹⁰ The full Tibetan title in the 2009 edition of Patrul’s collected works is *Rang gi blo gros kyis rang la gdams pa’i brdar brtags pa byar med rdzogs chen gyi nang sgom nyal chog gi gdams pa glang nyal ma*.

¹¹ The full Tibetan title of *Discourse Good in the Beginning, Middle, and End* is *Thog mtha’ bar gsum du dge’ ba’i gtam lta sgom spyod gsum nyams len dam pa’i snying nor*. (Khyentse 1992) includes an English translation.

I am offering them to you, as well, wondering if you will feel the same. (Patrul 2009, vol. 8, pp. 158–59)¹²

Patrul claims to be sharing something personal with his audience members. He calls attention to himself and his own feelings: “these words of lamentation affected my heart deeply.” Patrul positions himself as a vulnerable friend rather than an authoritative expert. His authorial positioning—his claim that he was writing for himself and only later chose to share his feelings—is a way for him to connect with his audience members as equals. By talking about his own feelings, he establishes a common ground with anyone who might read or listen to his composition. As with prior examples, Patrul invites his audience to consider the act of composition—here imagined as a personal expression of grief—and think about the human being doing the authoring.

Thus far, we have looked at instances where Patrul denies authorship of his own work (*Words of My Perfect Teacher*) and twice frames his writings as conversations with himself. The remaining examples in this essay are narratives, sometimes elaborate, sometimes brief, that Patrul uses as vehicles for delivering ethical and practice advice. They are not morality tales, however. To the contrary, they are episodes where characters give each other long lectures about Buddhism. By using characters to speak his teachings for him, Patrul dramatizes the process of delivering Buddhist instructions.

Our first example, and by far the most thoroughly plotted, is Patrul’s *Drama in a Lotus Garden* (*Padma tshal kyi zlo gar*) (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 301–55).¹³ He famously composed the narrative as a vehicle for delivering advice to a heartbroken aristocrat whose wife had died. In the work, we meet two bees, in-love. After a terrible storm, one of the bees gets stuck in a flower that has shut its petals in order to shield itself from the rain. By the time the flower re-opens, the bee has died and her companion is heartbroken. The sorrowful survivor eventually receives ethics and practice instructions from various exemplary characters. The text is a wonderful example of Patrul experimenting with different ways to frame dharmic advice. By inserting his instructions into a story filled with emotionally wrenching passages, Patrul raises the stakes for his advice. The dharma lessons that his characters transmit are presented as resources for the distraught bee to use to cope with his intense suffering, just as the same dharma lessons might help Patrul’s audience members cope with their own.

The balance of this essay will explore, in far closer detail, three further instances where Patrul delivers teachings that emerge out of conversations between invented characters. In all three, Patrul’s protagonist and primary speaker responds to some form of challenge from his interlocutors. The first example is *Advice to the Boy Loden*, which I introduced at the outset, with an old man passing on ethical guidance to a boy after the two trade witty insults. The second example, *The Low-Born Sage’s Speech*, opens with a description of a hermit who receives visitors at his practice cave. The hermit responds to two sets of questions from these visitors. His answers, in the form of the interwoven practice instructions that follow, make up the body of the composition (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 391–408; Schapiro 2017, pp. 55–72). The third example is a humorous work called *The Explanation of Chudrulü* (*Chu gru lus kyi rnam bshad*). Here, a group of old men engage a group of young men who pass by them on the road. Instead of the elders delivering advice to the younger men, as one might expect from Tibetan didactic writings like *Advice to the Boy Loden*, it is the youths who give a profound lesson to the older men, later identified as monks (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 489–98; Schapiro 2017, pp. 73–81).

Patrul exhibits a clear pattern in all of the texts mentioned thus far. In each case, he might have simply jumped right to the content of his instructions, without bothering to claim to be speaking for his root lama, without qualifying that he is primarily speaking to himself, without introducing human or

¹² *dang por snyigs ma’i spyod la skyo ba’i gtam/ gtam ’di rang gis rang la gdams pa ste/ rang blo gting nas ’gyur ba’i smre sngags tshig/ khyed la’ang ’dra’am snyam nas phul ba lags/* (Patrul 2009, vol. 8, pp. 158–59). The English translation is slightly modified from (Khyentse 1992).

¹³ The full title of the text is *Lha chos dang mthun pa’i gtam padma’i tshal gyi zlos gar*. English translations appear in (Tulku 1997) and (Patrul 2006). The Tibetan text is also included in multiple anthologies of exemplary Tibetan writing (Blo bzang chos grags and Bsod nams rtse mo 1988–1989; Lha mkhar tsho ring 2008).

animal characters to do the speaking for him. But Patrul wants his audience to notice who is speaking. He wants his audience to focus on the speaker, as much as the speech. The remaining analysis will explore how this works and speculate about why it is a productive pedagogical strategy.

4. Competitive Framing: *Advice to the Boy Loden*

In *Advice to the Boy Loden*, *The Low-Born Sage's Speech*, and *The Explanation of Chudrulü*, Patrul voices his teachings by way of characters who must prove to their interlocutors that they are capable of delivering potent advice. These compositions frame the delivery of their content as a performance, or a show, that is to be evaluated by the protagonists' interlocutors. By signaling to their respective audiences that a special verbal performance is taking place, each of the three texts welcomes its audience to evaluate the craft of the skillful preaching that occurs in the works. Patrul thereby puts the skillfulness and oratorical capacity of his protagonists under a microscope and accentuates the artistry of their teachings.

In the narrative that opens *Advice to the Boy Loden*, an old man meets an ill-mannered young man, trades insults with him, and thereby earns the youth's respect. After the youth requests some wisdom from the old man, the old man delivers an ethical sermon. The following is a translation of a passage where the two characters trade insults upon meeting one another. The boy begins:

Ha ha! There's no winter frost, so you don't have to put on a lambskin hat! There's no fierce dog, so you don't have to carry a willow stick! There's no place to dance here, so you don't have to take tottering steps! Old man, which place do you belong to? Where are you coming from this morning? Where are you going tonight? (Tulku 1997, p. 23; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 409–10)¹⁴

The boy taunts the old man for being old: teasing him for bundling up and for struggling to walk with a cane. The boy communicates these barbs with sufficient cleverness to both impress and concern the old man.

The old man retorts:

Ha ha! From the way you strut scornfully, you seem to be young and proud. Your witty style of joking and boasting makes you out to be clever but ill-mannered. From your sarcasm towards an old man, it seems you have no parents, only bad friends. Old age comes even to solid rocks. Even the glossy fur of the youthful tiger fades. There are good and bad sons of the same father. When I had the flesh and blood of youth, I was handsomer than you. When my tongue, eyes, and senses were clearer, I was brighter than you. When I had my own home and country, I was more distinguished than you. I am from Do Kham province. This morning I have come from the city of samsara. Tonight I am going to the island of liberation. (Tulku 1997, p. 24; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 410)¹⁵

The old man recognizes the youth's wit, but responds with his own biting wisdom. He dispels the boy's insults with poetic illustrations of impermanence ("old age comes even to solid rocks") and proves his own superior understanding by reframing the youth's question about where he came from in Buddhist terms ("I have come from the city of samsara. I am going to the island of liberation"). These two responses mark the old man as an educated, insightful Buddhist. But, importantly, between

¹⁴ *ha ha/ mgo la tshar dkar ma gyon rung/ dgun 'khyag ba mo 'di na med/ lcang dkar dbyug pa ma bzung yang/ sgo khyi btsan po 'di na med/ ldem ldem gom pa ma spos na/ bro gar 'gran ya 'di na med/ rgan po sa cha gang gi yin/ da nang gang nas 'ong ni yin/ do dgong gang du 'gro ni yin/ (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 409–10).*

¹⁵ *a ho/ gyon pa yag por dga' lugs la/ lo chung cor mgo can zhiig 'dra/ kha bryag rtsom la mkhas lugs la/ ma rabs blo rig can zhiig 'dra/ mgo dkar rgan po 'phyag lugs la/ pha med grogs ngan can zhiig 'dra/ rgas pa rdo rje'i brag la yod/ gra rgas dmar yag stag la yod/ bzang ngan pha gcig spun la yod/ gzhon nu sha rgyas khrag rgyas dus/ khyod las yag cig nga yang yin/ kha mig dbang po gsal ba'i dus/ khyod las mkhas shig nga yang yin/ rang yul pha khyim yod pa'i dus/ khyod las drag cig nga yang yin/ nga sa cha mdo kham sgang gi yin/ da nang 'khor ba'i gnas nas 'ong/ do dgong thar pa'i gling du 'gro/ (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 410).*

his two wise retorts he takes time to boast and belittle the proud boy (“When I had the flesh and blood of youth, I was handsomer than you . . .”). The old man recognizes that his interlocutor is challenging him, and he accepts the challenge by giving it right back. In effect, he shows the boy that he is not only wiser than him, but sharper, too. He wins with wisdom (an old man’s game) and he wins with confidence (a young man’s game).

The old man’s ploy works. Reflecting on the old man’s rebuke, the boy thinks to himself “To hear him talk this way, he must be learned.” So he turns to his elder and says, “Old man, please sit and teach me something.” The old man agrees and delivers a long sermon about worldly ethics, including advising the boy to respect his elders.

Patrul frames this opening dialogue as an interaction built on a challenge. The youth challenges the old man by wittily insulting him, poking fun at him for hobbling on a cane. But the old man is up to the youth’s disrespectful challenge and responds in kind. He essentially says, “You think that you can insult me . . . I can insult you even better!” The character recognizes the boy’s confidence and matches it with his own brashness and swagger. He thus claims the right to preach by showing off his self-assured verbal skill and proving his mettle. *Advice to the Boy Loden* exemplifies Patrul’s tendency to spotlight the style with which his didactic content is delivered (in addition to the content itself).

The text’s opening dialogue is a perfect instance of what Barbara Babcock calls “metacommunication”: elements in discourse that call attention to speech events as performance (Babcock 1984). These elements mark the discourse as something special and out of the ordinary. Typical examples of metacommunication, what anthropologist Richard Bauman calls “keys,” are the use of figurative language, the use of archaic language, formulas that mark genres (“once upon a time . . .”) and disclaimers by a performer of her own inadequacy (Bauman 1984). Metacommunication functions to call attention to the responsibilities between performer and audience. By reminding audience members that verbal performances are occurring, keys cue audiences to hold speakers accountable for skillful communication. Audience members expect performers to communicate artfully and subsequently subject their performances to evaluation.

By labeling teachings such as *Advice to the Boy Loden* as performances, I suggest that they are examples of what Bauman terms “verbal art.” In his book *Verbal Art as Performance*, Bauman explains that “verbal art” describes modes of speaking within any given culture where there is “a concern with the form of expression, over and above the needs of communication.” Verbal art uses “the devices of language in such a way that this use itself attracts attention” (Bauman 1984, p. 7).¹⁶

The trading of insults at the opening of *Advice to the Boy Loden* calls attention to the wittiness of the characters. Once the old man begins to give his advice to the boy, Patrul’s audience is already tuned in to the old man’s skill with language. Framing the encounter between the boy and the old man as an adversarial challenge is an example of Patrul, using metacommunication. The competitive opening dialogue marks the text as performative speech.

As both Babcock and Baumann mention, performative speech welcomes judgment and evaluation from its audience. This observation applies well to *Advice to the Boy Loden*. Within the story, both the young man and the old man pass judgment on each other’s speech. The old man acknowledges the youth’s prideful talk and his wit, while the young man identifies the old man as learned. Outside of the story, audience members are silently invited to pass judgment on the old man’s wit, as well. Patrul telegraphs his desire to get his audience to listen to the old man’s teachings with a critical ear. By framing the interactions of his characters as competitive, Patrul sets up his audience to continue judging the intelligence of the ethical advice that the old man delivers in the remaining pages of text. Patrul thereby directs his audience’s attention towards the manner of delivery of the teachings to come.

¹⁶ There are plenty of instances in the Tibetan historical record of verbal competitions. R.A. Stein (Stein 1972, p. 255) notes the mention of “talking matches” that occurred in the ninth century at Samye monastery, for example. Dan Martin (Martin 2008) lists competitive talking as one of nine Tibetan “sports” (“nine different games for men,” *pho rtsed sna dgu*). Numerous studies explore the competitive enactment of monastic debate at Geluk monasteries (Dreyfus 2003; Perdue 1992).

5. Competitive Framing: *The Low-Born Sage's Speech*

Our second example of competitive framing, *The Low-Born Sage's Speech*, again finds Patrul framing teachings within a challenge narrative. In the short work, a hermit explains a series of basic Buddhist categories and practices, such as the three baskets of Buddha's teachings, the three objects of refuge, the three forms of Buddhist training, devotion to one's guru, and mindfulness meditation. The hermit speaks in simple verses that form short sentences. In this respect, the text is suitable for beginners—novice monks or laypeople. Still, the hermit's technique of interweaving disparate ideas and simplifying a multiplicity of elements of Buddhist training is quite sophisticated. The work also prescribes advanced meditation practices, signaling that Patrul's intended audience might also include his more advanced students.

At the outset, Patrul offers a poetic description of the hermit sage who will eventually deliver these teachings. He introduces the sage as follows:

There stays the low-born sage
whose name is known as Sri,
wild, yet feigning discipline
ablaze, presenting himself at peace.

He has no good acts to offer
but he has good speech to speak.
So everyone comes to ask him questions
and to them he counsels properly. (Schapiro 2017, p. 55; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 391)¹⁷

Patrul states that his sage pretends to be disciplined and peaceful and only has words to give. The sage has no good acts or material goods to offer, depending on how you interpret the line (he has nothing that is "good to use").¹⁸ Patrul makes use of the rhetorical device and metacommunicatory "key" of false modesty, an approach ubiquitous in his writings.¹⁹ As the colophon at the conclusion of the composition suggests, Patrul's hermit sage is a representation of himself. His depiction of the sage as unaccomplished (undisciplined, desirous, all talk) is a form of self-deprecation that puts his audience on notice that a verbal performance is coming.

By opening the work with descriptions of the sage's qualifications, Patrul is inviting his audience to judge his main character, just as he is judging him. The invitation to judgment continues in the subsequent lines. Twice visitors to the hermit dare him to answer questions about the dharma. At first, they call on the hermit to distinguish good religious lineages from bad ones. Later, they demand that he consolidate all of Buddha's teachings down to a single point. The visitors challenge the sage to speak intelligently and make sense of the diversity of ways to practice Buddhism:

Hey! Great sage!
Dharma traditions—what are they?
Dharma traditions—how do you split them up?
Dharma traditions—which do you cast aside?
Dharma traditions—which do you accept? (Schapiro 2017, pp. 55–56; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 391)²⁰

¹⁷ *gtum po dul ba'i tshul 'dzin cing/ 'bar ba zhi ba'i mnam pa can/ gdol ba'i drang srong de gnas te/ de yi ming ni shrī shes grags/ de la legs par spyod pa med na yang/ de la legs par smra ba yod pa ste/ de phyir de la kun gyis don 'dri zhing/ des kyang de la tshul bzhin 'doms par byed/ (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 391).*

¹⁸ *de la legs par spyod pa med na yang (p. 391).*

¹⁹ Patrul periodically signs his works with the name "old dog" (*khyi rgan*), exemplifying his false modesty. He signs *Words of My Perfect Teacher* by claiming himself to be "Crude Abu" (*a bu hral po*) "burning with the five poisons" (*don du dug lnga me 'bar*) (Patrul 2009, vol. 7, p. 560).

²⁰ *kye drang srong chen po chos dang lugs zhes bya ba ci/ chos dang lugs kyi dbye ba gang/ chos dang lugs la gang dag spang/ chos dang lugs la gang dang blang/ (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 391).*

The three objects of refuge, the three vows,
 the three vehicles: speak to me about these categories.
 Explain how to condense each set of three categories into one.
 Show me how each one can be sewn up into an essential point.
 (Schapiro 2017, p. 60; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 396–97)²¹

The sage's responses to these two sets of questions make up the entire body of the versified treatise. By way of answering these questions, he verbally enacts a series of substitutions and equations ultimately reducing all of the categories at play down to one single, essential practice (that contains all others): training one's thoughts.²² By responding to his visitors' challenges with confident, impeccably ordered answers, the sage shows them what a great teacher is capable of. He performs mastery.

The Low-Born Sage's Speech thereby frames its instructions as a performance within a competitive context, just as does *Advice to the Boy Loden*. Patrul cues his audience to engage with the sage's dharma-advice as a form of verbal art. First, he invites his audience to judge the hermit by disparaging his authenticity as an accomplished practitioner. Second, he calls attention to the hermit's verbal skills by forcing him to impress his visitors with his words, setting up the audience to evaluate how well the hermit meets the challenge.

The low-born sage's actual teaching—the answers that he gives to his visitors' questions—is also performative in style. It exhibits showmanship and bravado, despite its deceptively simple language. For example, the sage's responses incorporate numerous plays on words that show off his linguistic ingenuity.²³ The sage masterfully interweaves a wide range of Buddhist teachings and reduces all of the myriad Buddhist practices to one simply activity, claiming to capture the entire field of Buddhist knowledge in his presentation.²⁴ The sage shows his visitors what it looks like to command and control Buddhist knowledge.

The text implicitly establishes the delivery of an eloquent sermon as the primary criteria by which one should be considered a skilled teacher. Patrul hints at this conclusion in his introduction of the hermit sage: "he has good speech to speak. So everyone comes to ask him questions, and to them he counsels properly." Patrul's sage is someone whose only meaningful contribution is his capacity to answer questions appropriately, or skillfully (*tshul bzhin*). The sage then proves himself through the proficient discourse that he delivers, performing his status as a skilled teacher through his answers.

In *The Low-Born Sage's Speech*, Patrul could easily have dispensed with his narrative frame and simply listed questions and answers. There is a long-standing tradition in Tibet of circulating texts that do just that, called "responses to questions" (*dris lan*). Instead, Patrul prefers to create a character whose defining quality is his skillful performance. His sage does not depend on an elevated social status to justify his teachings—he is a lowly outcast (*gdol pa*). He does not belong to a religious community—he lives alone in his cave. His actions do not even matter—he is without good acts (*legs par spyod pa med*). What matters to Patrul is the quality of his verbal art.

6. Competitive Framing: *The Explanation of Chudrulü*

In our final example of competitive framing, Patrul's heroes are a group of young men. The young folk unexpectedly give a profound lesson to a group of old monks, flipping the expectations set by *Advice to the Boy Loden* and standard Tibetan didactic works like it. The explicitly humorous

²¹ *skyabs gsum dang ni sdom pa gsum/ theg pa gsum gyi rnam bzhag gsungs/ gsum re'ang gcig tu bsdu la shod/ gcig po'ang gnad du dril la ston* (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 396–97).

²² Training thoughts (*rnam rtog 'dul ba*) incorporates supporting practices such as looking at the mind (*sems la blta ba*), devoting oneself to one's guru (*mos gos*) and mindfulness (*dran pa*), among other sub-themes of the two sermons.

²³ (Schapiro 2017, p. 51) explains an example of Patrul punning.

²⁴ Patrul points out that by looking at one's thoughts and experiencing the suchness of the mind or the empty nature of the mind, one knows the nature of all things. Experiencing mind's nature is thereby a shortcut to understanding the entirety of "dharma," which Patrul defines as "everything to be known" (Schapiro 2017, pp. 56, 60, 70; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 391, 396, 406).

Explanation of Chudrulü is a short narrative, running nine pages in length. Like our prior examples, Patrul structures the composition around a teaching performance instigated by interlocutors posing challenge questions. The difference is the heightened degree of reflexive self-awareness that Patrul displays in this fascinating work. The text is a teaching about teaching and a performance about performance.²⁵

The titular “explanation of *chudrulü*” takes the form of the youths answering a question posed by the elders about the meaning of the colloquial term *chudrulü*, which the elders do not understand. The term is a colloquialism from the Degé (Sde dge) region of eastern Tibet that means something like “nothing much.” The youths deliver a funny yet profound allegorical sermon in response to the elders’ question by offering a multifaceted explanation of the term’s meaning, delivering multiple rounds of interpretation. They do so by providing a false etymology of *chudrulü* (an oral colloquialism with no true spelling), treating each of its three syllables as independent words: *chu* (*chu*), meaning “water,” *dru* (*gru*), meaning “boat,” and *lü* (*lus*), meaning “body.” The youths show off their interpretive prowess by way of their long response, even bragging about their unlimited capacity to riff on this term:

If you were to try to write down the meaning of *chudrulü*
 you could use up all of the paper that you could find at the store
 and all of the ink that a scholar possesses,
 but you would never deplete our intelligence.
 Nor would you use up the meaning of *chudrulü*. (Schapiro 2017, p. 77; Patrul 2009,
 vol. 1, p. 495)²⁶

This boast is one moment of many where the text calls attention to the youths’ interpretive skill.

Once the youths finish, the monks respond by debating the quality of the sermon that they have just heard. The elders find the youths’ creative etymology to be too unorthodox. They argue that the explanation that the youths have provided does not meet the scholastic standards of a commentary that one might find written about a work of scripture. The youths’ creative etymology provokes their audience, the old monks, to respond with an adversarial critique, just as verbal performances key their audiences to enter into an evaluative mode of reception. The elders might easily have taken a different tact. They could have expanded upon the youths’ interpretation with their own insights or asked follow up questions. Their attitude suggests that the youths’ discourse is primarily a performance to be judged.

The youths then poetically rebut each of the old men’s points of contention, often humorously, even aping the metered verse that the elders use for their critique. For example, the elders open their response with “*Om Mani Padme Hum*,” the famous mantra associated with the bodhisattva of compassion. The youths later tease the monks by suggesting that even though everyone knows this mantra, including children, scholars have no appreciation for it. The elders complain that the youths’ creative etymological sermon is untrustworthy because it has never been subjected to monastic debate. The youths, in turn, boast that the originator of the *chudrulü* teaching is so well studied and brilliant that he could never lose in a debate. In this fashion, the youths combat the elders’ critique of their first performance with yet another confident, immodest performance.

In *The Explanation of Chudrulü*, Patrul leaves no question that the teaching should be judged as a performance. The monks challenge the youths to create a teaching—a confrontation that acts as metacommunication to cue audience members to pay attention to the skillfulness of the youths’ answer. The monks evaluate the sermon that they have just heard, before the young men out-argue them by showing the various reasons that, in fact, the *chudrulü* performance was brilliant. The youths even add that the originator of the teaching is also brilliant, which they demonstrate for an additional page

²⁵ (Schapiro 2011; Schapiro 2012) expand upon this argument.

²⁶ *chu gru lus kyi don ‘di bri na yang/ tshong khang ji snyed shog bu zad ‘gyur zhing/ mkhan po ji snyed snag tsha zad ‘gyur gyi/ kho bo’i blo gros zad par mi ‘gyur te/ chu gru lus kyi don kyang mi zad do/* (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 495).

of text. The text explicitly calls attention to the performance as a performance and welcomes our judgment of it by offering its own evaluations.

The youths not only perform their interpretive capacity but also show off their confidence and command of language. Patrul subtly frames the entire text as a discourse on the qualities of speech that bodhisattvas perfect in their quest to help all beings. Patrul alludes to these four oratory proficiencies in the opening lines of *The Explanation of Chudrulü*, skills that include “confident eloquence” (Sanskrit: *pratibhāna*, Tibetan: *spobs pa*).²⁷ The entirety of the youths’ sermon is a performance of confident eloquence (Schapiro 2011). So too is it a tongue-in-cheek exemplification of the fourth proficiency: skill in “etymology” (Sanskrit: *nirukti*, Tibetan: *nges pa’i tshig*). The youths perform their homiletic proficiency by delivering an etymology of the colloquial phrase *chudrulü*.

Of course, part of the charm of this profound, provocative, and surprising short work is its humor. The text is labeled a “humorous discourse” (*bzhad gad kyi gtam*) in Patrul’s collected works, after all. The youths’ performance of their mastery of “etymology” is itself a joke. Rather than explaining the meaning of a term from Buddha’s teachings, they choose to offer an expansive analysis of a colloquialism. They are applying their interpretive and rhetorical skills to something of seemingly no import. The colloquial meaning of *chudrulü* is “nothing,” or “nothing much.” So the unstated punch line is that the youths are preaching brilliantly about “nothing.” As they boast, their intelligence can never be depleted, even when teaching about “nothing!”

Some background might help to further bring out the humor and playfulness of Patrul’s composition. Patrul apparently wrote the piece in response to hearing a story about a meditation practitioner who was in retreat in a local cave.²⁸ Whenever his attendant would come to visit him with provisions, the meditator would ask him incessantly about what he was missing back home. To each question that the meditator asked, the young attendant would respond: “nothing,” using the expression *chudrulü*. We might therefore understand the youths’ expansive “nothing” sermon as a way to poke fun at those of his peers who, like the inquisitive meditator, are unduly obsessed with talking. Within the text, Patrul’s critique targets a group of old monks who are fixated on formal discourse, harping as they do on the proper ways to compose scriptural commentary. While the sermon at the center of *The Explanation of Chudrulü* showcases the youths’ sophisticated performance of skillful speech, the text as a whole also functions as farce, teasing those who take the rules of speech too seriously.

This tongue-in-cheek playfulness includes a curious moment in the work when the youths defend their sermon on the basis that it was actually written by a great meditator, scholar and debater:

The composer, named Gewai Pal,
is one whose intelligence gained from meditation is entirely lucid. . .
It is not possible that he would be without confidence,
knowing as he does that he can never be trampled in debate.
Nor is it possible that he would ever speak nonsense.
The composer of the commentary, Palgi Gewa,
has the understanding gained from opening hundreds of texts,
and has the confident eloquence from publically speaking hundreds of words. (Schapiro
2017, pp. 78–79; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 496)²⁹

²⁷ Confident eloquence is one of the four “thorough, perfect knowledges” (Sanskrit: *pratisaṃvid*; Tibetan: *so so yang dag par rig pa*), skills that contribute to the pedagogical and communicatory excellence required of advanced bodhisattvas on the Mahāyāna path, according to Sanskrit theorizations from the first millennium of the common era. (Dayal 1970, pp. 260–67) and (Nance 2012, pp. 49ff.) address the thorough, perfect knowledges.

²⁸ Ringu Tulku shared this story at the “Translating Buddhist Luminaries” conference in Boulder, CO in 2013.

²⁹ *gzhung bshad dge ba’i dpal ba khong/ bsgom pa’i blo gros gting na gsal/ . . . nam phug rgol bas mi brdzi ba’i/ gdengs shig sems la ma thob par/ ma brtags ca cor gsung mi srid/ ’grel byed dpal gyi dbe ga de/ gzhung brgya ’byed pa’i nman dpyod yod/ tshig brgya smra ba’i spobs pa yod/* (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 496).

This Gewai Pal, or Palgi Gewa, is none other than Dza Patrul himself, whose appellation *Patrul* is short for Palge Tulku, which can be expanded to Palgi Gewai Tulku (*Dpal gi'i dge ba'i sprul sku*). Patrul is having fun here, bragging about his own talents through the words of his characters. Patrul's playful self-aggrandizement is enjoyable for its own sake. It is also part of a broader strategy to incorporate self-reflexivity into his teachings, enacted to different degrees in all three of the works that we have just discussed.

7. Reflexivity: Redirecting Attention

Patrul repeatedly sends messages to his audiences that serve to redirect their attention away from the mere content of his teachings towards the manner of the teachings' delivery. In so doing, he draws attention back to his own mastery, prolixity, cunning, and wordplay. His skillful works are, in this sense, reflexive—pointing back to themselves as skillful works. Examples of reflexivity are plentiful among the compositions introduced in this essay:

- Patrul calls attention to his authorship in *Words of My Perfect Teacher* and advertises the sincerity and authority of the teachings by claiming to be merely repeating what he received from his guru, Jikme Gyalwe Nyugu:

My main aim has simply been to faithfully record the oral instructions of my revered teacher . . . I have done my best not to spoil them by mixing in my own words or ideas. (Patrul 1998, p. 369; Patrul 2009, vol. 7, p. 553)

- Patrul levels strikingly pointed condemnations at himself in *Advice to Abu Śri*, language sure to capture the attention of audience members who might be surprised that a lama would speak this way and cause them to consider Patrul's dramatic use of language:

Think how you've been fooled again and again by mistake after mistake. . .
Stop living a false and empty life.
Drop those deceptions of your own mind
And endless projects that you don't need. . .
You've listened to hundreds of teachings
Without understanding any. . .
You can't do without eating, sleeping, and shitting;
Don't bother with the rest. It's not your business. . .
Just drop everything. That is the essence! (Ricard 2013, pp. 246, 247, 249; Patrul 2009, vol. 8, pp. 160, 163)³⁰

- Patrul suggests that his "words of lamentation" in *Discourse Good in the Beginning, Middle and End* were originally exhortations he was directing to himself, bringing his own mood to the attention of his audience:

Alas! How depressing to see the beings of this degenerate age!
Alas! Can anyone trust what anyone says? . . .

Being learned these days doesn't help the teachings—
It just leads to more debate.
Being realized these days doesn't help others—it just
Leads to more criticism. . .

³⁰ *sngar 'khrul 'khrul bas bslus bslus.../stong zob mi tshe ma bskyal rang sems skor dang/ dgos med bya blo mang po da ni skyur thong/. . . brgya thos gcig kyang ma zin thos pa.../za nyal bshang gci 'dor 'di mi byed kha med/ bya byed de las ma mang khyod kyi yul min/. . . thams cad thams cad skyur na mdo don de yin/ (Patrul 2009, vol. 8, pp. 160, 163).*

Think about these times with sorrow and disgust...
 These words of lamentation affected my heart deeply
 I am offering them to you, as well, wondering
 if you will feel the same. (Khyentse 1992, pp. 173, 175, 209; Patrul 2009, vol. 8, pp. 147–48, 158–59)³¹

- The old man calls attention to his own verbal dexterity by trading barbs with the youth in *Advice to the Boy Loden*, only for the youth to acknowledge the intelligence of the old man, setting expectations for the wisdom and wit of the instructions to come:

The young boy thought, “To hear him talk this way, he seems like a learned man.” He said to him “Hey, old man, sit here awhile and tell me something” (Tulku Thondup 1997, p. 24; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 410–11).³²

- Patrul’s opening statements about the hermit sage in *The Low-Born Sage’s Speech* portray him to be capable of offering advice. Visitors twice challenge him to answer their questions, drawing attention to his expertise in meeting their demands. The sage even closes his second sermon by complementing himself on his own kindness:

A work that brings together scripture and pith instruction—
 Know such speech to be the kindness of your guru. (Schapiro 2017, p. 72; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 408)³³

- Patrul opens *The Explanation of Chudrulü* by referencing the fourfold oratorical expertise of bodhisattvas, proficiency that the youths show off in their creative etymology of “chudrulü.” The old men critique the youths, shifting attention back onto the form of their speech. In the text’s most explicitly reflexive moment, the youths credit Dza Patrul himself with being the originator of the “explanation of chudrulü”—which had until that point seemed to be a spontaneous improvisation—and they lavish him with praise. Each of these reflexive layers reminds the audience to consider the qualities of skillful teaching: bodhisattvas’ proficient teaching, the youths’ creative teaching, and finally Patrul’s capable teaching.

All of these reflexive moments bring the manner in which content is communicated to the forefront of our awareness—even if temporarily—and invite judgment about the tone, technique, quality and expertise of the communications in question.

8. Conclusions

What conclusions should we draw from the ubiquity of performative sermons, competitively framed discourses, and reflexive references to his own authorship in Patrul’s compositions? We might start with a surface level inference: Patrul cares a good amount about the art of homiletics and skillful speech. All of the evidence in this essay points to Patrul being self-aware about his own craft as a master speaker and composer. As *The Explanation of Chudrulü* proves, Patrul is interested in how his own teachings embody the communicative brilliance of bodhisattvas.

When Patrul positions himself as an exceptional performer, verbal artist, and showman, he helps us to understand how Tibetan lamas have historically understood their vocation as Dharma teachers. Future research might consider other historical instances in the massive Tibetan archive where

³¹ Translation modified slightly from Dilgo Khyentse (Khyentse 2012). *kyi hud snyigs 'gro mthong nas blo 'di rmongs/ kye ma su yi ngag la su yid rton/... mkhas kyang bstan don mi 'grub rtsod pa 'phel/ grub kyang gzhan don mi 'byung sgro skur mang/... da lta'i dus 'di dgongs la skyo bar mdzod/... rang blo gting nas 'gyur ba'i smre sngags tshig/ khyed la'ang 'dra'am snyam nas phul ba lags/ (Patrul 2009, vol. 8, pp. 147–48, 158–59).*

³² *gzhon nu 'di'i bshad lugs la bltas na mkhas pa zhig red snyam nas/ kye/ rgan po dar zhig sdod la gtam zhig shod dang zer ba la/ (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 410–11)*

³³ *gzhung dang man ngag kun bsdu nas/ 'di ltar smra shes bla ma'i drin/ (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 408).*

lamas position themselves as verbal exemplars who willingly compete for approval by subjecting themselves to scrutiny and evaluation. Have Tibetan teachers always conceived of themselves as performers? Do the theatrical teachings of nineteenth-century eastern Tibet, with master performers like Dza Patrul and his eccentric teacher Do Khyentse, represent an aberration in the history of Tibetan pedagogy?³⁴ Is oral performative virtuosity understood and valued equivalently to written virtuosity? Has performative posturing, as we find in some of Patrul's works, provoked complaint or critique in Tibetan literary history?

Patrul's fondness for reflexive, performative instructions also raises formal questions about Tibetan didactic literature. Are framing narratives the most common mechanism for keying audiences to recognize a given written or spoken discourse as performance? What other strategies have Tibetan teachers used to call attention to their communication skills? What other devices appear in the Tibetan metacommunication tool bag?

There is no denying the enormity of the Tibetan Buddhist didactic archive, nor the work left to be done to situate Patrul's considerable output within the veritable ocean of Tibetan literary instructions. Still, I am comfortable proposing a bolder set of claims about Patrul and his creative agenda. In works like *Advice to the Boy Loden*, *The Low-Born Sage's Speech*, and *The Explanation of Chudrulü*, Patrul bestows upon us subtle commentaries about how to teach well. He does so both by making explicit claims about good teaching and by modeling confident performance. These three works spend considerable time bringing attention to the skillfulness of the pedagogical performances that they feature. They thereby make a case that it is valuable for teachers to show off their mastery, wit, and intelligence when delivering instructions.

What is the value of showing off? By repeatedly calling attention to the skillfulness of his teaching performances, Patrul communicates three things at once. First, he voices the content that he wants to transmit: dharma instructions, ethical lessons, and allegorical teachings about the nature of the mind. Second, by having his characters successfully respond to questions and challenges, Patrul conveys his own competence as an orator. He makes it perfectly clear how well he can handle the job of transmitting a vast array of Buddhist teachings. Finally, he displays his creativity as an interpreter of the tradition: showcasing his wit in the service of ethical advice in *Advice to the Boy Loden*, weaving tapestries out of interlocking categorizations of the Buddhist path in *The Low-Born Sage's Speech*, and cooking up multivalent etymological allegories in *The Explanation of Chudrulü*.

Take the example of *The Low-born Sage's Speech*. Like any didactic text, it delivers content. Audience members hear about the relationship between scripture and practice and then about the three objects of refuge, three vows, and three vehicles (commonplace categories in Tibetan forms of Buddhism and beyond). Audience members—primed to judge the sage's responses given the text's introductory setup—also observe the sage's competence at work. He wields a variety of Buddhist terminology with confidence, shows off his facility with puns and meter, and impeccably organizes his presentation—neatly tying up all of his loose ends by the end of his two-part presentation. The sage weaves his answers together with ease, always bringing diverse ideas together to form a single point.³⁵ Finally, audience members may well notice the creativity of the presentation. The opening narrative implies that the sage's two sermons are improvised responses to questions (even if we suspect that Patrul, as author of the composition, likely edited the composition over time). The sage's competence and the structure of his responses are all the more impressive when his speech is experienced as an impromptu performance.

Patrul intentionally shines a spotlight on the competence and creativity of his teachings. By doing so, Patrul operates under the guiding pedagogical principle that self-promoting performance makes for good teaching. This principle makes sense for two reasons. First, by telegraphing his competence

³⁴ Holly Gayley investigates a wonderful example of Do Khyentse's performative teaching (Gayley 2017).

³⁵ (Schapiro 2012, pp. 75–83, 120–65) presents a longer discussion of Patrul's affinity for expositions that condense many topics down to an "essential point" (*gnad*).

and creativity, he is more likely to interest students in aspiring to similar expertise. His performative pedagogy models the mastery that he wishes to establish as the objective for his students. Learning about Buddhist ideas and practices is not enough. To the contrary, Patrul sets ambitious standards: mastery of content, mastery of form, mastery of creativity. Patrul identifies these very requirements elsewhere in his writing. In his *Short Discourse on the Origin of the Dharma*, he points out how important it is for teachers to know their subject material completely (mastery of content) and to carefully organize their discourses (mastery of form). He also suggests that improvisatory creativity is ideal (mastery of creativity) (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, pp. 435–36).³⁶

Second, performative teaching lends itself to devotion. Tibetan teachers often mention that the goal of reading or listening to biographies of Buddhist heroes (*rnam thar*) is to inspire faith (*dad pa*) by calling attention to their heroes' miraculous accomplishments along the path to awakening.³⁷ We might read Patrul's works in a parallel way. By repeatedly calling attention to his skillful mastery, Patrul provides his audience with opportunities to generate faith and devotion towards him and his characters. Such devotion can be an exceptionally potent catalyst for students. Patrul frequently speaks about the centrality of devotion on the path:

It unlocks the door to all Dharma.
It clears the obstacles to all practice.
It brings out the benefits of all oral instructions.
It is devotion, and should be known as such. (Schapiro 2017, p. 67; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 403)

For Patrul, devotion is a crucial mechanism for learning, as it transforms and empowers each step of students' progress along the path to awakening. Given how important it is for students to generate devotion, it makes perfect sense that Patrul wants to inspire his audience with his own accomplishments at that the same time as he instructs them. By facilitating his students' enthusiasm and appreciation for their teacher, Patrul is actually facilitating their progress.

Inspiring devotion is also connected to modeling expertise. Proper devotion, after all, entails students intimately modeling themselves on their teachers, thereby slowly taking on their virtues and their accomplishments.

[Devotion] raises thoughts to the status of virtuous mental states.
It grows in the context of realizing the stages and the paths. (Schapiro 2017, p. 68; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 404)

Taking Patrul's instructions to heart means learning the content that he is transmitting. But it also demands aspiring to his (pedagogical) virtues and achievements: working towards the competence necessary to confidently, convincingly, engagingly, and creatively repackage dharma lessons for others.

In Patrul's Nyingma lineage, complete devotion culminates in the intimate recognition that student and teacher share boundless awakened awareness. In Nyingma parlance:

It ultimately causes your mind to mix with the guru's.
It is devotion, and should be known as such. (Schapiro 2017, p. 68; Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 404)

Mixing one's mind with the guru's means experiencing the awakened nature of mind of both student and teacher. In the context of Patrul's performative pedagogy, mixing one's mind with the guru's means opening oneself to one's own mind's capacity for spontaneous skillful teaching. Patrul thus calls on his audiences to aspire to the ultimate goal of the bodhisattva path: an awakened mind that is capable of creative and spontaneous communication for others.

³⁶ Patrul introduces the idea of speech that is put together "naturally" (*rang la gshis kyis yod pas bskyed pa*), though it becomes clear that such teaching is only possible for those who have mastered content and form (Patrul 2009, vol. 1, p. 436).

³⁷ A dramatic exemplification of this process appears in the opening to Milarepa's famous lifestory, where his disciple Rechungpa dreams of hearing the Buddha Akṣobhya tell the life stories of Milarepa's spiritual predecessors in the Kagyü lineage. The result is that the "entire assembly" is "completely overcome with faith" (Tsangnyön 2010, p. 10).

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