WINDHORSES AND DHARMA WARRIORS:  
THE RELIGIOUS, HISTORICAL, AND CULTURAL RELEVANCE 
OF HORSE PROTECTION RITUALS IN MUSTANG, NEPAL 

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Abstract 

Mustang, Nepal, encompasses many cultural and ecological worlds and is inhabited by people who epitomize the Indo-Tibetan interface. Mustang’s northern region is home to culturally and linguistically Tibetan villages, and encompasses a kingdom that dates to the 15th century. Mustang has been a locus of trans-Himalayan exchange of material goods and culture for centuries. Tibetan Buddhism and pre-Buddhist Bon traditions define Mustang’s spiritual heritage; horses as well as other animals occupy important places among local belief systems. The horse confers economic and symbolic capital within Mustang’s agro-pastoral communities. Protection rituals for the well being of horses are performed throughout the Tibetan cultural sphere, including Mustang. This paper uses a protection ritual text, given to the author by a traditional doctor from Mustang, as an axis from which to view the religious, historical, and socio-economic roles horses play in Mustang. The paper presents some background on Mustang and its horses before delving into a translation of the aforementioned horse protection ritual. A commentary elucidates the ritual significance of this text and places it within the social milieu in which it is recited. To understand the nature of horse-human relationship in the culturally Tibetan context, the commentary describes connections between the divine representation of horses described by the text and local religious practices, which include the propitiation of horse deities (lha rta) among a pantheon of place and household gods. 

Mustang and its Horses: An Introduction 

"Come up to the roof," said the old doctor. "I have something to show you." With that, Tashi Chusang ascended a ladder - no more than foot holes carved into a plank of wood - and seemed to disappear into the sunlight. This wiry Tibetan doctor (amchi) was the royal astrologer of Lo, an ancient, culturally Tibetan kingdom in Nepal’s Mustang District. Lo’s lineage of kings dates to the early 15th century; the twenty-fifth monarch, Jigme Palbar Bista, still makes his home in the walled city of Monthang - a labyrinth of adobe, whitewash, and dust just south of the Nepal/China border. 

At nearly eighty years old, Tashi Chusang’s body had been failing for some time, but his mind remained quick. On quiet afternoons in Monthang, after the morning rush of patients and other visitors filed out, I would prompt Tashi Chusang to talk about his trade. He spoke about collecting herbs on the hillsides and plateaus of Lo during the lush months of summer, about grinding herbs into medicine come fall, and about imparting the amchi tradition to his two sons, now grown. He would tell me stories of his younger days, when he traveled to Tibet to collect herbal ingredients and medical texts, and about the mendicants and holy men, as well as the esteemed amchi he would meet on these travels. When I was lucky, Tashi Chusang would talk with me about animals.
I had been living in Monthang, the "capital" of Mustang, for several months, and I had come to Mustang to learn about local people’s relationship with horses. What roles did these animals play in the social structure, religious rituals, and economy of this ancient kingdom in the rain shadow of the Himalaya?

"I'm not much of a veterinarian," Tashi Chusang wheezed through his wispy moustache. He sat down on his pounded adobe roof and began to talk with me about such matters. The midday sun soaked through us, a cerulean sky overhead.

"The king knows much more than I do about curing horses. But there are many ways to heal and protect animals." As he spoke, the doctor thumbed his woolen garment. The home-spun cloak was much too warm for this Himalayan heat, and was streaked with tea stains, remnants of the morning meal. Yet somehow it belied the harshness of winters it and the doctor had endured. On the contrary, Tashi Chusang’s face and hands revealed more age and hardship than I could fathom. For a moment, I wished that the afflicted doctor had remained near the family hearth, so his weakness might be masked by the semi-darkness of his home’s interior. The old man would not live to see another year and everyone saw death in him these days.

But for now, the doctor was alive, and, as ever, teaching. Tashi Chusang reached into the folds of his cloak and pulled out a thin, unbound religious text (T. dpe-ca), written in Tibetan. "This is a rta gzungs, a horse protection ritual," he explained. "I've read it many times. I make protection charms for horses, too.” The old man was known not only for his medical skills, but also for his pure mind and dexterous fingers. He was adept at fashioning "spirit catchers" – woolen yarn wrapped around sheep skulls and placed over doorways to ward off harmful spirits – as well as other such amulets and charms (T. srung ba).

Tashi Chusang began to read. The hum of mantra centered me. I closed my eyes. Beyond the lilt of local Tibetan, I could hear the faint jingle of horse bells. Perhaps the king was riding home. I imagined Mustang’s stocky, sturdy horses grazing near the walls of this medieval city, safe from wolves and snow leopards, released temporarily from their duty as mounts and beasts of burden.

When the doctor finished reading the first folio, he waved the text at me. "Take it. We've got a copy somewhere," he said, motioning toward his private chapel and library. "Maybe it will be useful to you.”

Tashi Chusang handed me a treasure, a responsibility, and a puzzle in the form of the horse text.

Horses within Tibetan Culture and Mustang Society

Horses and horse symbolism permeate the Tibetan cultural world – a place of nomads, agro-pastoralists, and traders, of Buddhism and indigenous animistic belief. From a functional perspective, horses are less economical than sheep, goat, yak and their crossbreeds, or even mules – animals critical to the pastoral and agro-pastoral production systems of the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalaya. These domestic animals provide transport, wool, milk, meat, and draught labor. They can be transformed into cash or kind when sold or bartered at market. Horses, particularly fine riding mounts, are valued on a different scale. Of course, horses provide people with a means of transporting themselves and their goods across a vast and rugged landscape. But horses are more costly to maintain than other domestic species, and they require far greater initial investments by the owner.
But horses embody social capital and material wealth: they confer prestige. Moreover, as in the frontier days of the American West, horses epitomize freedom, strength, swiftness, and beauty to their culturally Tibetan caretakers.

It is not surprising, then, that Tibetan tradition is filled with images of the horse: *rlung rta*, the wispy prayer flags ubiquitous to Tibetan culture, are embossed with an image of a horse on whose back the jewels of Buddha’s teaching are delicately balanced. Often translated as “windhorse,” these squares of paper are released from summits and the saddle of mountain passes, marking physical and spiritual journeys, giving form to the ethereal strength of the wind. This horse, often riderless, is said to move like the wind across the heavens and is associated with life energy (T. *srog*), personal power (T. *dbang thang*), and success (T. *rlung rta*). Taken together, the windhorse is the distillation of all these positive categories – a vehicle on which the mind can ride toward liberation. Not surprisingly, *rlung rta* also connote a body of Tibetan Buddhist teachings. This same *rlung rta* image can be found on roadside cairns and reliquaries (T. *chos ten*, Skt. *stupa*).

Horses are likewise associated with the mythic king, Gesar of Ling. Horse races and information about horse trading, training, even horse raids are peppered throughout the stories. Gesar’s mount, Kyang Gö Karkar, is said to be a *tulku*, or reincarnate lama (T. *sprul sku*) – a deity who incarnates as a horse in order to aid Gesar in his battles against ignorance, demons, and delusion. Tibetans maintain that Gesar hailed from eastern Tibet, yet this character to whom volumes of poetry, song, and much folklore is dedicated is invoked from the Himalaya to Mongolia. Today Gesar of Ling is also an alternative symbol of Tibetan nationalism to many Tibetans-in-exile as well as those still living on the Tibetan Plateau – alternative, that is, to Tibet’s image as a Buddhist theocracy, embodied in the figure of the Dalai Lama.

On a more temporal level, Tibetan tradition also includes a corpus of texts devoted to horse care and pedigree. Many of these texts were among the treasures found in the Dunhuang caves in China, and believed to have been written in at least the 10th – 11th century (Blondeau 1972; Mauer 1997; von den Driesch and Mauer this volume). Such texts are also extant in Mustang, although scholars speculate that these documents date to about the 17th century and are facsimiles of earlier Dunhuang treatises. Other horse texts were translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit, such as the work of the Indian mythic Shalihotra. In addition to remedies for colic, pre-natal advice, and cures for colds, these Tibetan veterinary texts include information on how to classify and rank horses according to the color of their coats, the shape and location of cowlicks, and other more typical markings such as socks and stars. Some of these narratives even include lore on divination and origin myths about the horse.

Mustang’s horsemen and local veterinarians cherish these texts - even if horse healers are illiterate in Tibetan, and although they are rarely consulted when a horse is actually ill. As I have detailed elsewhere, to some local veterinarians and herders, simply possessing such a text is blessing and grants them expertise and legitimacy as healers in the eyes of local horse owners (Craig 1996, 1998). That being said, many of the treatments discussed in the horse texts are practiced in some form by local healers. It is likely that these texts have been read aloud by healers in Mustang’s recent history, thereby transforming this literary tradition into an oral praxis (von den Driesch and Mauer, this volume). Local healing techniques include moxibustion, bloodletting, fumigation treatments, and the administration of herbal remedies, in addition to more overtly religious acts such as the performance of horse protection rituals similar to the one discussed below (Craig 1996, 1998; Heffernan 1997). All of these techniques are also discussed at length in the horse books.
Ritual texts, such as the one I have translated below, are related to though distinct from these volumes devoted to hippiatry and hippology. Unlike the veterinary manuscripts, these horse protection rituals are read regularly by householder-priests in Mustang. Tandrin (T. rta mgrin, Skt. Hayagriva), the wrathful, horse-headed dharma warrior central to this ritual text, is often invoked when a horse falls ill or is about to embark on a journey. Likewise, Mustang’s inhabitants pay homage to horses by performing seasonal rites to ensure the health and well being of their mounts. Mustang is also a place where lha rta, or “god horses” inhabit hills and household guardian deities can incarnate in equine form. One of the king of Lo’s protectors is not only represented by a rooftop shrine of wild ungulate horns, but also embodied by a horse. I will take up this particular example again in my conclusion.

Still, the life of a Mustang horse is hard. These animals labor up rocky inclines and scree slopes above 4,000 meters. Each year, horses and other livestock are swept away by the current of Mustang’s rivers, swollen by glacial melt and monsoon rains. During the frigid winter months, when fodder is scarce, they subsist on thorny shrubs and agricultural stubble; only the finest mounts are apportioned what little grain or grass has been stored since fall harvest. Yet horses and mules have been the vehicles of trans-Himalayan trade through Mustang for at least six centuries and remain an integral part of the present-day economy throughout this region, particularly along the Annapurna trekking circuit which hosts about 30,000 foreign visitors each year. Local horses carry everything from Buddhist lama (religious teachers) to rotund and awkward tourists, from jerry cans brimming with locally distilled liquor to bottles of Coca-Cola.

Thus, Mustang’s inhabitants have reason to harbor their horses from illness, harm, and misfortune. In caring for their horses, the people of Mustang are safeguarding more than economic investment: they are preserving, protecting, and producing Mustang’s culture.

The Context of Translation

One early spring morning, my Tibetan teacher, Ven. Tenzin Gephel, and I begin our translation of the rta gzungs text. I look across the table at this Tibetan-in-exile, a senior monk from the Dalai Lama’s monastery in Dharamsala, India, who has been living and teaching at Namgyal Monastery in Ithaca, New York, for several years. Has Gephel ever ridden a horse? No, he says. This middle-aged monk is a child of the Tibetan Diaspora. What he knows of the Tibetan landscape – its suede-colored hills and yak wool tents, its poplar trees and herds of horses – exists somewhere between dreams and photographs, perhaps even in the snapshots his parents carried over the Himalaya and into exile. Still, without his guidance, the nuances of this text and the subtleties of translation would be lost on me; I am a novice when it comes to literary Tibetan. Yet I carry memories of gallops through Mustang and across the Tibetan Plateau, of a room filled with horsemen bantering about the price of hay, comparing mounts, reciting old Tibetan proverbs about horses – lively expressions of a culture in its place.

The exercise of translation crosses more than cultural and linguistic borders; it is also corporeal and geographic. As we work, Gephel and I conjure up what we can of Tibet and Nepal. This shared vision is limited. Yet we find commonalty in the pages of this protection ritual – an invoked locale where horses of the world meet those of the heavens.

In the following section, I present a draft translation of the horse protection ritual given to me by Tashi Chusang before his death in 1996. Although I have attempted to keep close to the original Tibetan, I have edited and condensed some passages. Commentary is reserved for sections of the paper following the translation. My purpose in drawing on this ritual
text is twofold. Both the liturgical contents of this ritual invocation and the text itself – as a material object and a ritual practice – are poetic illustrations of horse and human relationship in Tibetan culture.

The Translation:
"Entering into the Horse Protection Ritual: A Text in five Sections"

In the language of India, protection mantra are spoken to the Buddha and Sublime Ones ('phags pa, Skt. Arya). Such mantras are also spoken in Tibetan, in order that the diseases of all horses will completely cease. I prostrate to the Three Jewels. The deity of horses, Tandrin, protects horses from sickness, injury, and other obstacles. If propitiated, this deity will ensure the firm life vitality of all horses, guarding them from the ones who harm.

If an enemy takes control (of a sentient being such as a horse), it can be very difficult. Likewise, if a horse eats green grass, spilled grains, or any other food that has been polluted on the ground, it can cause intestinal problems. Rheumatism or lameness can also occur. In order for all horses to be well and these problems to cease there are no other mantras in the Three Realms to protect them, except the following:

I ask the majestic god Tandrin to protect the four legs of all horses and shelter them from all diseases. I request that the Buddha of the lotus flower (padma) lineage protect all horses. I give praise to the Buddha through these verses. Buddha Tandrin is the perfect protector. This dharma warrior has traveled the Path of the Buddhas to a blissful state. This supreme wrathful god is the son of the Buddha Shakyamuni. I prostrate to the splendid deity. Through the power of compassion, this deity liberates sentient beings and removes all enemies and obstacles of the (Eight-Fold) Path.

There are many kinds of domestic animals in the world, including the horse. I ask this deity to please increase the numbers and health of these animals, for the god of gods has this power. I prostrate to you, young Tandrin, that you will be victorious over enemies and in overcoming fears that harm horses along the Path. Please help me realize the attainment of wealth. The mantra to Tandrin that removes diseases of all horses has now been dispersed to the wind.

This deity (Tandrin) is the morning sun as it rises. He is the perfect protector who holds supreme attainment. The king of the Path, this deity dwells in ultimate happiness, as other Buddhas have done. Through his effort he achieved the Buddha's life state, the state of omniscience and no more learning. He is the exquisite guardian, this son of the Buddha. Oh, splendid and magnificent one, I bow down to you!

Through the power of compassion you have the control to become a protector. Please remove enemies and fear on the Path, all the obstacles and harm facing horses. Please increase their numbers and the wealth that arises through them. May my faith and hope be supreme for many lifetimes. I request that you, son of the Buddha, compassionate one, protect all sentient beings.

The above verses have been said to the son of the Buddha so that delusions and ignorance - the source of suffering - will be overcome. I prostrate to this young deity. Before the enemies have opportunity to cause harm, this deity will be victorious, spreading out protection for one dpag tshad (4000 fathoms, one geographical mile) in all directions. This mantra is the essence of the deity called Tandrin. If this is said with concentration seven times as one embarks on the Path, then all horses will be healthy, protected. If one family has many horses and they perform this ritual, they will have good fortune. It is the
wisdom of cyclic existence and cessation⁴⁰ that Tandrin removes all that obstructs omniscience like the sun removing darkness.

Now we will discuss the ornaments that Tandrin bears, his appearance. This deity is surrounded by five hundred attendants and rides a blue horse whose coat is marked with four black fish designs and an image of a cascading waterfall. Two snow lions follow proudly behind him and two tigers walk ahead of him. At the center of his head is a flying garuda.¹¹ He has two iron birds hovering near his shoulders. In one hand he wields a bow and arrow. He also carries a spear and sword, and guards his body with a golden shield made of rhinoceros skin. He also carries a victory banner and a five-pointed rdo rje.¹² This deity is one of the six different kinds of Gombo Nagpo (T. mgon po nag po, Skt. Mahakala), or wrathful "black" protector deities.

I prostrate to all the Supreme Ones, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Please accept this offering. Oh Buddha who sits near the bodhi¹³ tree, this mantra is the main essence of your wisdom. As I recite this mantra, please think of me with delight. Conquer the angry, vindictive enemies of the Path, and dissipate all the forces of harm, diseases, and fears of the horse. I dream that all horses will be surrounded by a retinue of caretakers and that all harm will be eliminated by the leader of gods, this Gompo Nagpo. This deity rides a black horse with four white socks, and he emanates light like the sun, the moon, and the galaxies. He is capable of destroying all the demons of Purang¹⁴ and forcing all the demon gods to abandon this city.

I, the Exalted Gompo Nagpo, pay homage to the Buddha so that all harm and negative actions and their causal consequences¹⁵ facing humans and horses will be eliminated, as will the fears that mire those on the Path. I recite this protection mantra before dawn so this fear will never be actualized. I, Gompo Nagpo offer this to you, Buddha, to bestowed the benefits of this protection mantra on all domesticated animals, including the horse. The mantra is now finished.¹⁶

This impressive Gonpo Nagpo is included in the Three Realms, and can conquer the forces of evil and mischief. I, Kungwa Sangbo, prostrate to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and to the deity of wealth. I bend my body down in respect, and bring Chana Dorje’s (T. phyag na rdo rje, Skt. Vajrapani) foot to the top of my head.

I, Chana Dorje am the deity who cares for all sentient beings and horses with love and fierce compassion. I have the capacity to increase and perfect wealth through tantric practice.

I, Kungwa Sangbo, make a three-fold mandala offering to the rdo rje bearer, this principal spirit and holder of tantric practice, Chana Dorje. I respectfully circumambulate the deity three times, with folded hands, before I come to sit. Chana Dorje, please preserve and defend the wealth and well being of all horses. I supplicate your body, speech, and mind so that all severe diseases that affect horses will be subdued. Visualize these great wrathful deities as you say these mantra and tie a protection cord and charm around the animal’s neck.

Chana Dorje is seated atop Mt. Meru when the god of wealth, Gyalpo Namdö presents himself to this miraculous, unthinkable deity of confounding ability.

I, Gyalpo Namdö, come kneel before you. I smile and place my hands together in respect as I make this offering. I am fortunate in that I hail from the lineage of the Buddhas. As I recite these prayers each day, the essence of knowledge and the lineage of the Buddha will
naturally increase. Merits will also increase and become very firm.

Then, Chana Dorje offers Gyalpo Namdö a sign of himself and he gives praise to Gyalpo Namdö. For all who make such offerings, Gyalpo Namdö and Chana Dorje are one, and will appear riding on a golden snow lion. In order to protect and eliminate fear, the deity is holding a mongoose. When Chana Dorje and the god of wealth, Gyalpo Namdö, are working together they are the hundred-eyed king of the world, and will work in consort to increase the strength and numbers of horses. Such an attainment is a precious gold and turquoise treasure house.

This mantra for the cessation of all sicknesses of the horse is said in offering to the Sublime One, the powerful Tandrin. I prostrate to you, god of horses, that you will protect all such animals. You are an intense flame igniting the mandala. Tandrin, you are Pema Heruka, the lotus deity. Now, the Heruka lineage of Tandrin and the deity’s physical characteristics are described.

Supreme red tendrils of fire emanate from Tandrin’s body. His hands and feet are spread apart. His right hand grasps a rdo rje and is positioned in the thunderbolt hand gesture (Skt. Mudra). In his left hand he holds a chain. His mouth is open, revealing his rolled up tongue and fangs. From this wrathful face comes compassion. His three eyes are open and his vision emanates in all ten directions. From the center of his head emerges the green head of a horse, which neighs and whinnies to scatter the enemies of the horse in all directions, eliminating obstacles.

Anyone who performs this ritual should visualize Tandrin in such a way. Even in this small moment, as you say this mantra, Tandrin will protect the horse and bolster its life forces, controlling adventitious enemies. If the horse eats greens, rice or other spoiled grains, he can suffer from hot or cold intestines. He can also ail from rheumatism, lameness, or the stagers. He might even have worms or be crazy. But this mantra will help stop all these problems. Except this, there is no other mantra for the protection of horses in the Three Realms. Therefore, it is worthwhile to put effort into saying this mantra. The powerful destroyer, the Buddha Tandrin will help create peace. Request that Tandrin safeguard all the domestic animals from harm and from hail, but particularly that the four legs of the horse remain protected. If this mantra is said, than the horse will be liberated from all that harms.

Make ritual offerings of barley flour, decorated with butter ornaments (T. torma), and place them in a remote area. Offer the deity new, clean barley beer, sprinkling it as a blessing in the western direction. When disease controls horses, we perform this ritual in the hopes that we will be victorious. Once the mantra is recited, we tie a red string is around the neck of the horse. This horse protection mantra to Tandrin is a Guru Rimpoche treasure scripture that was revealed at Lho dPal, a place in the south of the country.

When the sun rises in the eastern direction, the Sublime One, this white protector and king of the horse will emerge, riding a red horse and carrying a dharma victory banner in his hand. He also bears a religious spear and wields a bow. This son of the Buddha carries a shield made of rhinoceros skin and wears a golden helmet. On his head rests a white conch shell. He is indeed the deity of wealth, truly the vision of the honor of horses, called Kumbera. Tandrin’s mount is blue with a black back, and the protector and his horse is encircled by a retinue of eight gate keeping deities.

I request that you protect all horses. Increase the number of mares. For from the mother of the horse many supreme horses will be born. Please disperse the obstacles on the Path
and reveal the right direction.

Now this ritual has been completed.

**The rta gzungs Ritual Text in religious and historical Context**

Ritual spent, I flip up the last folio, delicate as butterfly wings. It joins the stack of unbound parchment block prints. The back cover of this text is made of a thicker material, more reminiscent of bark than paper. The texture feels like Braille to my fingers, reminding me of all I do not understand.

Before delving into the cultural significance of this protection ritual as it is performed in Mustang, I place this ritual within a greater historical and religious context. In particular, I provide a thumbnail sketch of Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhism. Likewise, I situate this *rta gzungs* text within the specific Tibetan tradition from which it emerges, namely the Nyingma or "Old" school of Tibetan Buddhism and pre-Buddhist Bon practices. I also examine Tandrin, the horse-headed god so prevalent throughout the ritual text, in relation to the dissemination of Buddhism from India to Tibet, and as a representative of the relationship between horses and humans that exists on epistemological and theological levels within Tibetan tradition.

**Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: A brief historical Overview**

The corpus of philosophical traditions that emerged from India during and after the life of the historical Buddha approximately 2500 years ago are generally divided into two schools of thought and practice, namely Hinayana and Mahayana. Hinayana or Theravada Buddhism is often called the "Lesser" or "Individual" Vehicle, and is distinguished in several ways from Mahayana, the tradition from which this horse protection ritual emerges. The Hinayana method of cultivating Buddha-nature focuses on individual freedom from samsara, cyclic existence. Hinayana teachings emphasize the monastic life as a means of realizing Emptiness (T. *stong pa nyid*, Skt. sunyata) – the ultimate nature of reality – which is the total absence of inherent existence and self-identity, with respect to all phenomena. This Vehicle gained prominence during the first five-hundred-year period following the death of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. Buddhists throughout South and Southeast Asia – from Sri Lanka to Burma and Vietnam – practice according to the Hinayana tradition.

Mahayana is often translated as the "Great" or "Universal" Vehicle. Building on the Four Noble Truths – the truth of suffering, the truth of its origins in ignorance, the truth of cessation of suffering, and the truth of the Eight-Fold Path leading to such cessation - Mahayana focuses on the liberation of all sentient beings from the realm of samsara by emphasizing altruism. Those who cultivate such a resolve are known as *bodhisattva*, realized beings that vow to remain in the world to help others on the path to nirvana. For a *bodhisattva*, realizing Buddha-nature is an individual as well as a collective transformation. Mahayana teachings took hold throughout India during the second five-hundred-year period after the historical Buddha's life, and spread from India across Central Asia and China, including Tibet, as well as Japan and some Southeast Asian states (Thurman 1991: 24).

Vajrayana, the "Diamond Wisdom" Vehicle, is the esoteric aspect of the greater Mahayana tradition, often referred to as *tantra*. Simply, tantric teachings shift the practitioner’s focus away from gross perceptions of the universe toward a more subtle, sublime reality wherein matter can be instantaneously reshaped by imagination (Thurman 1991: 25). However,
tantric teachings fall within the larger Buddhist ethos of cyclic rebirth and *karma*, the doctrine of actions and their consequences. Like Hinayana and Mahayana teachings, Vajrayana is concerned with the cultivation of wisdom (T. *shes rab*, Skt. *prajna*) and compassion (T. *snying rje*, Skt. *karuna*) within the minds of all practitioners. In Tibetan, *tantra* is translated as *rgyud*, which means "continuum" or "lineage," and is invoked in reference to the path from ignorance to enlightenment. The tantras developed into an impressive literature in India, including many scriptures that were thought to be the revelatory teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. Vajrayana teachings took hold strongly throughout Tibet during the first (8th – 9th century) and second (11th century) transmission of Buddhism from India, and today remain an important component of all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Much Indo-Tibetan art is connected to the Vajrayana tradition, as tantra often involves complex visualization techniques in which artistic representations of deities are used as meditation tools.

Vajrayana teachings concern me here for two reasons: first, this horse protection ritual includes tantric language and invocations; and second, the religious practitioners from Mustang who recite this protection ritual are often tantric householder priests (T. *sngags pa*) and lineage holders in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

Tibetan religious tradition encompasses five schools – Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyud, Gelug, and Bön. Although each these schools is associated with distinct philosophical traditions, founding figures, and collections of teachings, they are also the products of the intellectual consolidation that occurs as people construct and shape historical narrative. Their differences have been highlighted for political as well as liturgical reasons throughout the span of Tibetan Buddhist tradition and the history of the Tibetan nation. For example, each of these schools is represented, to a greater or lesser degree, within the religious life of Mustang’s inhabitants. A married Nyingma *lama* might also be initiated into a branch of Sakya or Kagyud teachings. Mustang’s communities make offerings to local animistic gods – the epitome, some would say, of Bön tradition – while simultaneously cherishing His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tibet’s exiled spiritual and temporal leader and a member of the Gelug school. One must remember that the Tibetan cultural world can be considered a tribal landscape of local allegiances into which Buddhism has been infused (see Ramble 1993, 1997; and Shakya 1999).

The dynastic period of Tibetan history (7th - 9th century) encompassed the first dissemination of Buddhism from India to Tibet. This dissemination includes both historical and mythic elements. Tibet’s kings orchestrated the creation of written Tibetan language, invited great Indian Buddhist scholars to Tibet, and encouraged the translation of Sanskrit *sutra* (teachings of the Buddha) and their commentaries into Tibetan. Although not without their adversaries, several generations of kings succeeded in transforming the vast and heterogeneous Tibetan world into a Buddhist theocracy - at least in theory. Yet many local elements of Tibetan religious tradition were incorporated within and subsumed under a more orthodox Buddhist pantheon.

The transmission of Buddhism to Tibet is also attributed to Guru Rimpoche (Skt. Padmasambhava), an 8th century adept who is credited with the "taming" of indigenous Tibet – principally, its local gods and demons – through Buddhist instruction. Mustang is implicated in Guru Rimpoche's mytho-history, for he is said to have flown through Mustang on his way to Tibet, meditating in Mustang's caves and subduing wrathful local gods along the way. Tandrin, the horse-headed deity invoked in the protection ritual, is also said to be a fierce incarnation of Guru Rimpoche. Nyingma teachings are also closely associated with Guru Rimpoche.

The term "Bön" has been used by Westener and Tibetan scholars alike to describe the pre-
Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements of Tibetan religion, including folk-religious cults of local deities (Samuel 1993: 11-12). Now recognized by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile as the “fifth school” of Tibetan Buddhism, Bön connotes an amalgamation of diverse pre-Buddhist Tibetan traditions and a systematized religion with a corpus of scripture and Buddha-like figure of its own. Many rituals labeled “bönpo” reveal strong animistic and shamanistic tendencies, are deeply rooted within specific geographies, and are virtually synonymous with ritual practice in honor of local gods, household protectors, and other deities of place. This bears on my interpretation of the horse protection ritual. Such traditions – which can include the veneration of wild yak or Tibetan antelope, the release of domestic horses as offering into the realm of the wild, or in rare cases animal sacrifice – exemplify a crossroads between animals as metaphors for the divine, and animals that are in themselves considered sacred.

In order to comprehensively explore the horse-human relationships implicated in this protection ritual, as well as to expand queries about the relationship between horse as divine and horse as a symbol for the divine, I now turn to a discussion of tantra and Tandrin.

**Tantra and Tandrin: The Horse Protection Ritual in religious Context**

Unearthing tantric wisdom is a bit like peeling the proverbial onion. Outer, inner, and secret levels of knowledge are said to exist within all Vajrayana teachings, and are revealed to initiates when teachers deem them ready to receive such knowledge. It is not surprising, then, that the horse protection ritual begins as a series of requests made about food, shelter, and other earthly concerns by the horse-owning practitioner to the deity Tandrin and eventually transforms into a series of prayers and their commentary, which have profound ritual significance. Literary shifts in point-of-view are symbolic of a deeper shift in consciousness within the officiant – a hallmark of tantric practice. For example, Kungwa Sangbo’s identity is somewhat ambiguous, lexically speaking. His name is prefaced with a title that is often translated as “demon.” As such, he could be considered one of the many fierce local deities indigenous to Tibet, transformed into a dharma warrior – a wrathful protector deity – by the persuasive power of Buddhism, symbolized in this instance by Chana Dorje. Kungwa Sangbo could also be considered a highly realized bodhisattva that has chosen to take wrathful form. In essence, both explanations are valid, exist simultaneously, and are being actualized through the ritual officiant. This relationship exemplifies the confounding essence of Vajrayana Buddhism.

At this level, the distinction between the protector deity Tandrin and the Buddha also evanescences. These subtle lexical and grammatical shifts are critical in that signifier and signified conjoin, moving beyond the mundane toward a deeper understanding of the relationship between sentient concerns and transcendent wisdom. And as the object of the ritual remains, to a large extent, the domestic horse, this tantric text suggests a very compelling relationship between horses, humans, and divinity in Tibetan tradition.

So who is this horse-headed deity Tandrin? What is this simulacrum that has galloped forth from India, across the Himalaya, and rooted itself in Tibetan Buddhist doctrine? Known in Sanskrit as Hayagriva or the “Horse-Kneed One,” Tandrin is one of the many tantric deities found within Indo-Tibetan Buddhism as well as Hinduism and early Vedic literature. A detailed discussion of the images, myths, and stories related to divine stallions, demonic mares, and powerful horse-heads in Vedic and post-Vedic times lies outside the bounds of this paper; but I will recount some relevant details regarding Hayagriva’s place within the retinue of Indic mythology.

The image of a horse-headed protector deity, and the powerful implications of horse’s
heads in ritual, dates to Vedic times, if not much earlier. In the Vedas the horse’s head is, according to Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, “connected with the myths of the search for lost fire and stolen Soma (divine substance) perhaps because of the natural image of swift flight that the horse suggests” (1980: 218). Likewise, the god Indra concentrates power and multiplies his military success through Dadhyanc, the sacrificial stallion with whom he is associated. As early as the Mahabharata, the god Visnu takes the form of Hayagriva, waging battles in order to save the Vedas – a logical extension of the myths of Dadhyanc, the sacrificial stallion who is said to contain the Vedas in his head. In his Vedic incarnation, Hayagriva was a slayer of demons, a dharma warrior and protective presence extraordinaire (Doniger O’Flaherty 1980: 223).

But Hayagriva’s virulence and power was ambiguous. This deity could also be considered a negative equine image. The nature of and reasons for Visnu’s beheading varied tremendously across the Vedic mythic landscape and affected how Visnu’s adoption of the horse head and assumption of the Hayagriva identity was read. In some cases, Hayagriva was considered a fierce ally to Visnu, while at other times he was distinguished as a demon in need of “taming” by the Great Preserver, Visnu. Other interpretations position Hayagriva as Visnu’s most destructive avatar, or incarnation (ibid.: 225). At times, Hayagriva is a trouble-making presence, decidedly local and possessed of demonic tendencies; at other moments he is Supreme, an exemplar of spiritual realization.

In the Tibetan context, Tandrin is considered a yidam – a patron or archetypal deity. Yidam are the central symbols of tantric meditation and are forms that the practitioner learns to assume deliberately and consciously through ritual (Samuel 1993: 163). Tandrin has been a favorite yidam within the Nyingma order from its earliest days. Although Tandrin takes a variety of forms, the most famous of which is a terrific being of three faces, six arms, and four legs, he is always distinguished by a horse head that sprouts from his primary anthropomorphic crown (Thurman 1991: 189). ”The horse’s head neighs loudly, and the sound is said to pierce all false appearances of substantiality, revealing the shining reality of freedom” (ibid.).

In his exhaustive study of Tibetan esoteric art, Rob Linrothe defines fierce protectors of the dharma as those who embody wrathfulness (Skt. krodha) and are destroyers of obstacles (Skt. vighnantaka). Although such deities, including Tandrin, bear resemblance to other guardians and protectors in Indo-Tibetan esoteric Buddhism, these wrathful obstacle destroyers tend to be afforded a higher status. They are associated with ”inner and outer practices” aimed at destroying psychological obstacles to enlightenment (such as greed and anger) as well as demonic projections that attack the practitioner with diseases of mind and body (Linrothe 1999: 12).

”What is rather unique to these wrathful deities,” Linrothe writes, ”is that Esoteric Buddhism has infused forms which are expressly violent and threatening (and, at least to the unfamiliar, troubling and offensive) with divine rather demonic significance. They do not represent merely the darker, destructive side of nature. Instead, by fusing an outer expression of malevolence with an inner valency of compassion, they enfold chaos into the sacred” (1999: 11).

In Tibetan tradition yidam such as Tandrin are contrasted to worldly gods and spirits: those deities associated with water, earth, air, mountains, and charnel grounds that are closely linked to local and regional gods of place, territory, and household. These worldly deities can be malevolent or benevolent; they are associated with particular deeds and misdeeds of sentient beings, and are not removed from the world of samsara. The horse text refers to a number of such worldly gods, among them the rgyal po, or ”king-spirits.”
Worldly deities are also distinguished from gods of the Buddhist heavens who play a less significant role in lay practice and folk religion, but are important protector deities nonetheless. Confoundingly, the term lha, simply translated as "deity," is used for all three categories. Furthermore, the realm of protector deities can simultaneously include orthodox yidam (in this case, Tandrin), wrathful manifestations of sublime bodhisattva (such as Gompo Ngagpo), and local, worldly gods (illustrated in the rta gzungs by Kungwa Sangbo and Gyalpo Namdö). This suggests a sacred hierarchy that includes local gods and Buddhist imports, as well as a blurring of boundaries between and among forms of divinity within the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon – a blurring of boundaries that links divine and terrestrial realms, that ties gods to earth and its creatures.

According to Geoffrey Samuel in his book Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies, there are two aspects of the performance of tantric rituals that emerge from the Indian Buddhist traditions. The first is toward the specifically Buddhist goal of enlightenment, and survives within and outside monasteries. The second aspect is the performance of such tantric rituals for purposes other than enlightenment (Samuel 1993: 246). These two forms of worship have evolved into a suite of important practices for Tibetan Buddhists, which are classified into four Indian-derived subdivisions: calming or pacifying; increasing (wealth, etc.); empowering; and destroying or overcoming (T. bzhi gyi dbang skrag). Rituals of this kind are common within Tibetan communities, and are performed by householder priests and celibate monks alike. Given the emphasis on destroying obstacles and ensuring wealth associated with horses found within this rta gzungs text, it can be included in this category of protection ritual.

Yet a significant distinction exists between ritual-as-text and ritual-as-performance, between gods that take equine form and horses that are treated as gods, between spiritual aspirations and earthly desires. What might Tandrin, and this protection ritual as a whole, reveal about the nature of Buddhist practice within a world of horses and horsemen? Why is this ritual important to Mustang?

Winhorses and Dharma Warriors: The Horse Protection Ritual in Mustang

In the weeks before his death, Tashi Chusang could not sleep, and had instead taken to sitting by the family hearth, unmoving, through the night. He could not eat, for ulcers and stomach cancer gnawed at him relentlessly. Even drinking tea was a chore. But unlike the rest of him, his hands were not ossified, his mind remained open and attentive to other people’s suffering, and his services, religious and medical both, were sought after by his fellow villagers, travelers, even the King and Queen of Lo. During these last weeks of Tashi Chusang’s life, his two grown sons, a householder priest named Gyatso and a monk named Tenzin, both amchi, served their father with more attentiveness and devotion than they had since they were novices.

Despite his pain, and the frailty that inevitably grows out of a slow death, Tashi Chusang longed to be a part of conversations. The old physician could do little more to heal himself than keep thoughtfully engaged. When Tashi Chusang’s pain became extreme, the Crown Prince of Lo, a businessman who lives most of the year in Kathmandu, arranged for a helicopter to take the amchi to the capital for biomedical treatment. The Nepali doctors at Om’s Nursing Home did what they could, moved by this withering man who smelled like the mountains and sat, poised and sagacious, thumbing his prayer beads as they deciphered x-rays and doled out pills. Neither his own herbal medicines nor the tests and treatments administered to him in a modern hospital could allay his ache.

I visited Tashi Chusang at the Crown Prince’s home in Kathmandu. He sat upright in bed, making protection charms. Even though it was summer – monsoon clouds billowing above
a city of red brick and verdant patches of paddy – Tashi Chusang remained enveloped in wool. Spread out before him were strips of Nepali paper, on which were printed mantra. Squares of brightly colored cloth rested in lap and he was busy: folding the strips of printed prayers into neat packages, wrapping them in cloth, sewing these charms into squares and triangles, and affixing a red protection cord to each one. As he worked, the old amchi recited mantra. He did the same to his medicines. It is said in Tibetan that the purity of intent, the steadfastness with which one imbues these charms with meaning, is directly correlated to their efficacy. As one scholar of classical Tibetan explains, "(In) Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism especially...it is not the lexical meaning of a mantra but its sound that has power" (Wilson 1992, 85).

"For horses, too," Tashi Chusang said as I sat watching him, paying my respects. "If they are sick...The rta gzungs, remember." Selective words, these – words given new meaning now that I have read and begun to understand this horse protection ritual myself. When Tashi Chusang and I first met, I had told him I was learning about horses and local veterinary medicine. He had replied, "Good. Without out animals, we could not survive in Mustang. It is our duty to protect them." I recalled that comment as I watched Tashi Chusang spend the reserves of his life force making sure other beings would be protected once he was gone.

When it became obvious that the doctor would only live for a matter of days or weeks, he was helicoptered back to Lo Monthang. He died among family as the buckwheat flowers were blooming pink, the barley was ripening, and the horses were being turned out to pasture for a mid-summer's rest.

I returned to Mustang later that summer, particularly to attend a ritual bloodletting and bathing of Mustang’s riding horses that occurs at a particular juncture in the Tibetan lunar calendar. When I arrived in Monthang, Gyatso, Tashi Chusang’s eldest son, was in a state. He had recently bought a new horse from a Tibetan nomad just north of the Mustang border. The chestnut had four white socks and a quick, steady pace – auspicious. The horse was to be Gyatso’s transport when he went on "house calls," journeys that could take up to several days in Mustang. But these days the young gelding was lethargic and had stopped eating. Although Gyatso had had some veterinary experience, he called on the king, an expert equestrian, to help heal his horse. The king bled the horse from the underside of its tongue and rubbed coarse Tibetan salt over the inside of its mouth. Gyatso retrieved one of his late father’s protection charms and tied it around the horse’s neck. Tandrin was summoned to duty. The gelding began nibbling hay and sipping water in a matter of hours. In a few days, Gyatso loaded up his saddlebags with herbal pills and powders and set off toward another village in which someone was sick.

Had the horse died, Gyatso would have lost not only an investment, but also a vehicle in a corporal and spiritual sense – the being on whose back and by whose swift legs Gyatso’s medical practice was made possible. Just as rlung rta bears the jewels (T. norbu) of Buddha’s teachings, traveling with speed, grace, and utility, so to this little Himalayan mount, a windhorse in its own right, transported Gyatso so that he might do his job - and live up to his father’s reputation.

The precious gems that the emblematic "windhorse" carries on its back are metaphors for the dharma as much as they are representative of material prosperity. It is rather obvious that horses are economically valuable. Their loss at the hands of disease or old age, wildlife attacks or carelessness, causes owners financial hardship. As such, the recitation of
protection rituals for horses can be seen as a pragmatic, even preventative, gesture on the part of Mustang’s agro-pastoralists and traders. This ritual guards their investment. Practically speaking, this is the purpose of such religious activity in Mustang.

But the distinctions between economic pragmatism, social responsibility, and spiritual practice are not so clear-cut. According to Tibetan folk traditions, when a fine riding horse dies, its skull is sometimes placed on the roof of the owner's house to ensure that the wealth of the household does not disappear with the loss of the animal itself. This action gives popular expression to the idea that a horse – and in particular, a horse’s head – embodies wealth, power, and even spiritual attainment. Likewise, when a horse dies in Mustang, its skull is invariably crushed with a rock. This act releases the horse’s consciousness so that it may be reborn, and invites vultures to feed on the corpse. The fact that a simplified form of the ”sky burial” ritual performed for humans in Tibetan society is also enacted for horses indicates, in the words of another amchi from Mustang, that "horses and humans are very close. Even their medicines are similar. We should treat them similarly, with compassion."27 To give the old Lévi-Straussian adage a particularly Tibetan bent, ”horses are good mind practice.” They are also good to ride – a potent expression of status, authority, and cultural identity.

The Wild and the Tame: Some concluding Remarks

It is not surprising that when the physical environment in which one lives can be exacting, unpredictable, and harsh, people draw social and ritualistic distinctions between the wild and the tame. As Geoffrey Samuel writes, "It is understandable that Tibetans are particularly concerned with such matters, and that a major focus of their concerns is the activities of the ‘gods’ (lha) associated with the natural environment. The gods of the high mountains in particular are capricious and dangerous figures, associated with wild animals such as the argali, onager, and wild yak” (1993, 161). Indeed, locals in Mustang speak of such traditions. (These creatures are contrasted to other wild animals such as wolves and snow leopards who are viewed primarily in a negative light, as livestock predators.) The king of Lo's household protector deity I mentioned earlier, known as Dungmar, is located within this rooftop shrine - a tangle of wild yak, Tibetan antelope, and blue sheep horns, among others perhaps.

As we have seen through the equine imagery associated with Tandrin/Hayagriva - particularly as the deity is associated with Vishnu and Guru Rimpoche, both “taming” forces - the horse also plays an important role within this "wild-tame" continuum and metaphor. The more general descriptions of rlung rta I mentioned at the beginning of this paper further exemplify this relationship. The most interesting illustration, however, can be seen in the equine manifestation of Dungmar, the king’s protector deity. Here, the horse is, spiritually speaking, guarding the human, although the human is obviously obliged to care for the horse. Yet the equine Dungmar, carefully chosen for markings and confirmation, is never ridden, for he is said to be the mount of the deity Dungmar in its most esoteric form. The wild-tame logic varies here, in that it is not a wild animal who invokes and embodies divinity, but a domestic creature that requires protection, has little utilitarian use (since it is not ridden), and can symbolize the grace wisdom of spiritual attainment – a decidedly human goal.

There is a quirky ambivalence to this picture. As Elizabeth Atwood-Lawrence has pointed out in relation to horses in the Western imagination and Rodeo culture, wild horses are valued symbolically precisely for their wildness (Lawrence 1990). In her example, the feral Mustangs are simultaneously an embodiment of the rugged individualism and freedom of the West, and nuisance to be reckoned with - a demon of sorts. Yet this same wildness is
recreated in the "tamed" rodeo bronco. Human control - whether ideological or physical - sets the parameters for wildness.

I believe a similar logic is at work in the case of the equine Dungmar. This horse is set apart from the king's other horses. Each time Dungmar is called to ritual duty, the young stallion must be re-tamed, in a sense. Unlike the king's mounts, Dungmar must be coaxed and cajoled into human contact. This example also bears on the variance presented in the early Vedic descriptions of Hayagriva - an issue that is not necessarily resolved, but further complicated by the ways Tibetan tantric practice "enfolds chaos into the sacred," as mentioned above (Linrothe 1999). The example of Dungmar is even more interesting in that the deity is represented three-fold: as a horse, a cluster of wild animal horns, and a local protector god.28

For most people in Mustang, though, these questions of wildness and tameness are not questions at all. This is not to say that they are not reflexive, curious, and concerned about horses - both sacred and profane varieties. Quite the contrary. Horses and the way of life they represent are very much on the minds of Mustang's inhabitants: as tourists come and go through this Himalayan kingdom; as a motor road extends south from the Nepal/China border, bringing with it great cultural, political, economic, and ecological implications; as young people migrate out of Mustang in search of work and adventure; and as local knowledge, particularly religious and medical expertise, transforms in the process. People in Mustang perform rta gzungs rituals because they see the value – in a material and spiritual sense – in doing so; just as they see power and divinity in their mountains, lakes, and grasslands as well as in the animals that inhabit these environments. Theirs is a difficult landscape as much as it is sacred terrain - one traversed and transformed by the horse.

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1 The Tibetan word *rta* means horse; *gzungs* literally means "that which seizes or holds" and can imply a spell or a mystic charm (Das 1902 (1995), 1107).

2 The word "mantra" has become familiar to many in the West, and is used colloquially in a variety of contexts today. *Mantra* (*T. sngags*) is composed of two syllables, *mana* and *tara*, which together mean ‘protection of the mind’ – protection, in a Buddhist sense, from the overwhelming influence of ordinary perceptions and delusions which hinder the full expression of Buddha-nature. Specifically, *mantra* refers to the pure sound which is the perfected speech of an enlightened being (Coleman 1994, 342).

3 See the collected works of Namkhai Norbu Rimpoché for more on this topic.
Note on the translation: shifts in point of view in the above paragraph indicate that the practitioner making protection requests to Gombo Nagpo has begun to visualize himself as the deity, in typical tantric fashion—as will be explained in more detail in the following section of this paper. In the following paragraphs, the point of view alternates between the perspectives of one Kungwa Sangbo and his invocation of Chana Dorje, the wrathful tantric deity, known as Vajrapani in Sanskrit, who is the embodiment of power and skillful means (Skt. upaya).

A mandala (T. *dkyil ’khor*) is a circle or wheel; it also means totality, assembly, or literary corpus. In Tibetan, *dkyil ’khor* indicates the central and peripheral deities, respectively, as they are described in tantric texts. These deities reside within a celestial palace, which is represented by symmetrical designs that are often rendered in sand or as frescoes, scroll paintings, or tapestries.

A mudra is a hand gesture associated with tantric practice


19 Amchi Tshampang Ngawang of Drumpa, Mustang District, Nepal, had a copy of Shalihotra’s manuscript that had been translated into Tibetan and published in India. During my tenure in Mustang, several other local physicians and veterinarians purchased this text from Tibetan bookstores in Kathmandu. Wendy Doniger will discuss Shalihotra in a forthcoming book about the horse in Indic traditions (Doniger, pers. com. 1999).

20 The Sanskrit word “dharma” (T. *chos*) is a very broad term with a wide range of usage: knowable phenomenon, path, nirvana, and doctrinal or religious tradition, to name a few (Coleman 1994: 298). In Tibetan, *chos* literally means “change” or “transformation” in the spiritual sense. In this paper I use dharma as synonyms for Buddhism and realization.

21 I have chosen not to include in the translation the lengthy Sanskrit mantra which begin each of the five sections of text; the same information is imparted in the Tibetan which follows. However, each invocation begins with the phrase “In the language of India it is said…” and is followed with the phrase “In Tibetan it is also said…” This literary formula is quite common throughout the corpus of Tibetan Buddhism to have come out of India, and reflects the Tibetan and Buddhist sentiment that newness is not necessarily advantageous. Innovation receives less attention than well-grounded, creative explications of previous works. These invocations in Sanskrit, transiterated into Tibetan, lend texts a greater legitimacy in Tibetan eyes. They remind the reader that Tibetans are the stewards of the "pure" tradition of Indian Buddhism. Furthermore, it is notable that the phrase “In Indian language…” is used over the phrase *leks sbyar gyi skad*, Tibetan for "Sanskrit". The latter is less common throughout Tibetan literature and liturgy. For Tibetans, scholarly legitimacy and spiritual authority is rooted in the physical place of India, as much as it is grounded in Sanskrit terms (C. Preston, pers. com. 2000).

22 The *Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha* are the Three Jewels, an expression of the ultimate nature, the true path, and the ideal spiritual community, respectively (Coleman 1994, 397).

23 Shakyamuni is the historical Buddha who was born as prince Siddhartha in present-day Nepal, and became the fully enlightened Buddha while meditating under the *bhodi* tree in Bodhgaya, India.

24 The Eightfold Path encompasses the means and methods by which suffering is destroyed, the path by which the enlightened mind is cultivated. The Path comprises correct view, analysis, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and contemplation (Coleman 1994, 303).

25 Cyclic existence is known in Sanskrit as “samsara”, while “nirvana” is cessation, the awakening that is enlightenment.

26 A Garuda (T. khyung/mkha’ lding) is a mythical bird with an owl-like sharp beak and large, powerful wings. Garudas are often depicted holding a snake and can be found in both Hindu and tantric Buddhist traditions, in which this creature is associated with wrathful forms of protector deities, such as Tandin.

27 Pronounced "dorje" in Tibetan and known as "vajra" in Sanskrit, this term means the diamond, the ‘sovereign among all stones’. It is also a Buddhist symbol of the indestructible reality of buddhahood, and is manifest as a scepter-like tantric ritual object, that is often coupled with a bell. These two instruments, in turn, symbolize skillful means and discriminative awareness.

28 The tree of enlightenment, under which Shakyamuni sat.

29 Purang is a town in Ngari Prefecture, western Tibet, not far from Mustang’s northern borders.

30 The doctrine of actions and their causal consequences is known as karma in Sanskrit and las in Tibetan.

31 Note on the translation: shifts in point-of-view in the above paragraph indicate that the practitioner making protection requests to Gombo Nagpo has begun to visualize himself as the deity, in typical tantric fashion—as will be explained in more detail in the following section of this paper. In the following paragraphs, the point-of-view alternates between the perspectives of one Kungwa Sangbo and his invocation of Chana Dorje, the wrathful tantric deity, known as Vajrapani in Sanskrit, who is the embodiment of power and skillful means (Skt. upaya).

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33 A mudra is a hand gesture associated with tantric practice

34 Forma are ritual offering cakes made of barley flour; they can be seen as Buddhist substitutions for blood sacrifice.
“Treasure scriptures” are known as gter ma in Tibetan, and are particularly associated with Guru Rimpoche, discussed at length below, and other "treasure revealers”, particularly those of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.

According to Chandra Das’s Tibetan-English Dictionary, the rta mchog is the "best” or supreme horse "which makes its possessor a wealthy man.” Das goes on to say this animal is the mythical horse of Indra, the Hindu god of war, and is considered the “prince of horses” (Das 1902 (1995), 531).

For more on each of these schools, see Samuel 1993 and Thurman 1991.

According to Ven. Tenzin Gephel, with whom I worked on this translation, the literary form of this passage in the text is comparable to the Heart Sutra (T. phar phyin, Skt. Prajnaparamita) and its commentaries, a fundamental Buddhist teaching.

Tandrin is also considered a wrathful emanation of Chenresig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion of which the Dalai Lama is an incarnation. Tandrin is a gatekeeper, in the literal and figurative sense of the term. Images of this wrathful deity are placed at the entrance to monasteries and mandala alike.

Linrothe traces three phases in tantric Buddhism, as illustrated by three periods of esoteric art. Phase one wrathful deities are subordinated to bodhisattva worshipped for specific ends such as the removal of misfortune. Phase two deities become independent images and either appear with a retinue of their own or within a mandala; these deities perform the tasks of conversion, aversion of misfortune, and destruction of obstacles. Phase three images place the wrathful protectors on the same plane as the Buddha. At this stage, deities such as Hayagriva are considered a form of the Buddha and can appear at the center of a mandala, supplanting the Buddha or other bodhisattva as the primary yidam deity.

I have written about this ritual elsewhere (Craig 1998).

Tshampa Ngawang, pers. com. Mustang, Nepal 1996. Dungmar also plays an important part in a mid-summer harvest ritual that is still practiced in the Muktinath Valley of Mustang and that was, until recently, practiced in Lo Monthang. See Ramble 1987 for more information on this ritual.
The ritual invocation of the wind horse usually happens in the morning and during the growing moon. The flags themselves are commonly known as windhorse. They flutter in the wind, and carry the prayers to heaven like the horse flying in the wind. The garuda and the dragon have their origin in Indian (both Buddhist and Hindu) and Chinese mythology, respectively. The windhorse ceremonies are usually conducted in conjunction with the lhásang (Wylie: lha bsang "smoke offering to the gods") ritual,[9] in which juniper branches are burned to create thick and fragrant smoke. This is believed to increase the strength in the supplicator of the four nag rtsis elements mentioned above.