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## **Tibetan Storytime as a New Pedagogy**

At the University of Colorado, Boulder, we are pioneering a new pedagogy to bridge the gap between reading skills and listening comprehension in Tibetan language study. Typically, Tibetan language instruction is bifurcated into separate classes on classical Tibetan and colloquial Tibetan. The first delves into dense religious, philosophical, and historical texts, and the second focuses on general conversational skills related to everyday activities while traveling, such as ordering at a restaurant, asking for directions, or visiting a temple. But how does one learn to speak about texts in Tibetan? This is a crucial skill for any graduate student who seeks to combine textual and ethnographic research, or to work with Tibetan informants to clarify difficult points in textual sources. A language class that fosters listening comprehension and conversation skills about Tibetan literature is a distinctive approach, one that attempts to model a central activity in students' future scholarly pursuits.

To bridge the gap between literary and spoken Tibetan, I designed a format for language classes taught by a native Tibetan speaker and longtime instructor, Lhoppon Rechung of the Mipham Shedra in Boulder, Colorado. The format is called, quite simply, "Tibetan Storytime." Each semester, I select a set of readings according to the abilities and interests of the students, who already have some background in Tibetan literature but not strong colloquial language skills. These are primarily graduate students in our stand-alone Masters program in religious studies as well as PhD students in anthropology and geography, studying with my Tibetologist colleagues Carole McGranahan and Emily Yeh. I select from authentic materials for the readings, such as children's books, collections of proverbs and folk tales, contemporary writings on Tibetan culture, guidebooks to religious sites, short biographies, and Tibetan songs. Each semester includes a range of topics and genres, increasing in difficulty and length as the weeks

progress.

The format for each class meeting has several basic elements. To begin, Lhoppon Rechung reads the selection for the day, first slowly and then more quickly. This is recorded so that students can go back and review. Next, he goes through the text line by line, explaining it in colloquial Tibetan. This mimics the traditional Tibetan pedagogy of providing a commentary to religious texts, and Tibetan instructors — particularly those with a monastic background — are quite comfortable teaching this way. Depending on the level of the students, sometimes Lhoppon Rechung mixes in a bit of English to explain a challenging term, but otherwise the explanation takes place in Tibetan. During this part of the process, students have the opportunity to ask about the meaning of words or for clarification in his explanation (in Tibetan, of course). After the explanation is complete, students work in dyads on study questions to discuss what they have read. This provides a bridge between listening to a native speaker and formulating conversation, based on a shared lexicon from the reading. To conclude, Lhoppon Rechung retells the story in colloquial Tibetan. By this point, the students have already mastered the lexicon and have heard a colloquial explanation, so they can, by and large, understand his retelling and also begin to notice differences in the colloquial and literary versions of the story.

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