5 The afterlives of Tibetan Buddhist material objects

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Abstract How does the wear of materials affect the status, life trajectories and post-consumption destinies of Buddhist material objects? Based upon ethnographies of waste in India, Nepal and China, this chapter investigates the consumption of Buddhist material objects and their post-consumption afterlives. Its main argument is that the wear (the gradual physical deterioration of materials due to repeated use, time and environmental impact) that accompanies the consumption of religious objects is not only destructive, corroding their materials and utility value, but can also be productive. Taking the Tibetan prayer wheel and its component parts as an example, I show that the end of consumption is not always waste. The sacred does not necessarily expire with consumption. Wear can even give apparently mundane components, such as a worn-out washer, a new life, status and potency after their 'death' by transforming them into sacred objects or apotropaic and auspicious tools.

Keywords Afterlife, Buddhist materiality, consumption, object biography, prayer wheel, waste

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Introduction

Any material object that is being consumed is heading towards its end, towards its exhaustion and expiration. Historian of religion Kathryn Lofton (2017) points to the resulting loss, focusing on consumption as destruction—as the wearing away of utility, value and life.

> Consumption is loss. After consumption, something is gone: gone because of use, because of decay, or because it was destroyed. In economic terms, consumption describes the using up of goods or services having an exchangeable value. In pathology, consumption describes the progressive wasting of the body. (Lofton 2017: 1)

That objects are subject to decay is a fundamental problem with religious materiality (Kendall 2017). Objects that are essential to religious practice, identity and belonging in various ways will inevitably be consumed over time and with usage. Scriptures become tattered and unreadable, ritual tools break down, protective amulets disintegrate and monks' robes fray. While some Buddhist material objects have extremely ephemeral lives, such as sand mandalas and water votive images that are produced in order to be destroyed, others are made to be long-lasting supports of enlightened body (e.g., images), speech (books) and mind (reliquaries) (Bentor 1996: 290–1). In this chapter, I focus on the wear, i.e. the gradual physical deterioration of materials due to repeated use, time and environmental impact, which accompanies the consumption of religious materials. I show that although such wear corrodes their use value, it does not necessarily transform their status from sacred items to worthless waste. To the contrary, it can move some objects *into* the category of the sacred, affecting what we can call their 'afterlife'.

The concept of afterlife, as I have explained elsewhere (Brox 2022a), is relevant to the theorization of the wear of Buddhist material objects because it has to do with the meaning of things and the work that they do after their breakdown—how they are 'working beyond the utilitarian function for which they were designed' (Soto 2018: 2). As Michael B. Schiffer (2013: 2) notes, 'any entity—person, artefact, organization, or place—that has undergone a change from some sort of "life" to some sort of "death" may have an afterlife'. Afterlife objects have lost their use value: they are the non-functioning electronic gadget, the worn-out dress, the wrecked ship and the ruins of a building after a fire. When

these and other entities enter new relationships and perhaps secondary uses, their fates after their breakdown, wear, accidental damage or destruction can be seen as their afterlives. What is interesting is what is lost, what remains and what is gained after death. Does death include the total breakdown of an object's integrity? What connections are there between the original artifact and the afterlife artifact?

Based upon a multi-sited investigation in the Tibetan cultural sphere, I address these and related questions through a study of the prayer wheel, an iconic Tibetan Buddhist ritual tool and technology. I focus in particular on the handmade, handheld prayer wheel. Since it consists of several discrete components, which include sacred text but also far more mundane parts such as the washer, the Tibetan prayer wheel is a particularly complex and interesting object (or assemblage) to study. Often associated with the six-syllable mantra *om mani padme hum*, it is a device containing and enabling the rotation of sacred text, a practice considered to produce merit (*bsod nams*) and confer blessings (*byin rlabs*) and good fortune (*bkra shis*). Regular prayer wheel practice is most common among older Tibetans who take it up in their retirement years. The more labour they put into it, the more merit they produce, but also the more they wear the various prayer wheel components. According to these elders, Buddhist material objects like prayer wheels should not be thrown in the bin after their use value has been exhausted; they should not be treated like mundane, disposable commodities. Prompted by this observation, I ask how Tibetan Buddhists perceive the value and wear of prayer wheels and how they treat their various components when they are worn down.

This investigation into the post-consumption status of Buddhist material objects contributes to Tibetan studies and religious materiality studies an overall ignored but important aspect of object biographies. I agree with Irene Stengs (2014) that a general disregard for the destruction of objects in biographical approaches to material religion means that we lack knowledge about an important dimension of their lives. Whereas I am unaware of any such studies on Tibetan material culture, there are a number of insightful articles on people's destruction of and detachment from post-consumption Buddhist objects in Japan (Gould 2019; Gygi 2022; Rambelli 2007; Triplett 2017), the Global North (Gould 2022; Wilson 2022) and Vietnam, Korea, and Myanmar (Kendall 2017; Kendall, Tâm and Hu'o'ng 2010). Like these studies, the present chapter acknowledges destruction and detachment and thus the loss that consumption entails, but additionally deals with the productive potential of consumption and people's attachment to

post-consumption Buddhist material objects. It thus offers new insights about how the status and wear (consumption) of objects in their original lives relates to their afterlives, focusing on various prayer wheel components and the peculiar case of the prayer wheel washer (*dung*).

The chapter draws on data collected as part of a broader study of waste care practices and places across four sites in Asia. Following a research guide that I developed, I conducted fieldwork in Dharamshala, India (September 2018, 2019) and Chengdu, China (January 2019, 2020) and two research assistants collected data at other sites: Heng Peng worked in Lhasa, central Tibet (July 2018) and Kirsten Skov Vang in Kathmandu, Nepal (February-April 2019). In addition to observation of waste care practices and places, we collected interpretations of them through interviews with fifty Tibetans (both lay and monastic). Supplementing that research, this chapter additionally draws on observations documented through photography by Chaksham Tsering under my guidance at a fifth site, Repgong, in northeast Tibet (fall 2018–spring 2019), as well as conversations with Tibetan Buddhist teachers in Denmark and Germany.

I first dismantle the prayer wheel to explore its value and discuss the different ideas that our monastic and lay interlocutors had about what should happen to its different components when they reach the end of their lives. Can they simply be thrown away like worthless waste? I then turn to focus on the prayer wheel's washer, showing that as wear corrodes this object, decreasing its use value as a wear pad, another kind of value is simultaneously augmented that relates to its efficacy as a religious object.

The handheld prayer wheel, its value and its afterlives

The prayer wheel is an 'efficacious technology' (Brox 2022b), a device for ritually spinning a Buddhist scripture. Inside the prayer wheel drum is a tightly packed scroll (or several depending on the size of the drum), which is spun when the prayer wheel is rotated. The text often consists of mantras—sacred or magic sounds in the form of a series of syllables, which may not have semantic meaning but are considered by Buddhists to be powerful formulas (Buswell and Lopez 2014: 529). The most popular is the six-syllable mantra of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion: om mani padme hum. The drum can also contain *zung* (*gzungs*),

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 Handmade, handheld prayer wheel. Figure 5.1 shows the wheel assembled, ready for use. Figure 5.2 shows its component parts (bottom to top, left to right): washer, bamboo tube, drum with ball-and-chain governor, scroll, roof, pinnacle, and handle with a stick.

which are formulas expressed in longer phrases that convey the essence of lengthier texts or teachings and function as mnemonic devices (ibid.: 541). Nowadays, it is also possible to find prayer wheels containing many different scriptures and even the entire Buddhist canon.

The most common prayer wheel is the handheld wheel (*lag 'khor*), put into rotation by a slight movement of the wrist and kept in motion with very little effort.[1] It consists of a drum revolving around a fixed stick that is stuck into a handle (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2). Centrifugal momentum is incited by the so-called 'ball-and-chain governor' (Martin 1987), a heavy governor shaped like a globe or conch shell and attached to the side of the drum by a chain or a cord. Figure 5.1 shows a prayer wheel that has had further weight added to the chain to increase its momentum by the attachment of a worn-out washer and a mould for a miniature votive image (*tsha tsha*). The paper scroll is tightly wound around a 'life tree', letters facing outward, and then wrapped with cloth and placed inside the drum. As many mantras as possible are inserted by stacking and winding the scroll, which is measured to fit the drum's cavity. A prayer wheel's exterior is usually decorated with mantras or other Buddhist auspicious symbols and sometimes ornamented with silver, gold and precious stones. The roof is decorated with an eight-spoked wheel that signifies the Buddha's teachings and his eight-fold path. The base is usually decorated with a lotus. The top part of the wheel, the pinnacle (*stod*), functions like a nut that holds the components together: it screws on to the central stick where it emerges through the prayer wheel's roof. Attached to the base of the wheel is a bamboo tube (*snyug ma*) that rotates with the drum. Beneath this, separating the handle from the rotating part, is a washer (*dung*, *mani dung* or *dung rtse*).[2]

Some interlocutors talked about the prayer wheel as if it was a precious living entity with a body and limbs. They treated it carefully and

1 Although my focus here is on the handmade prayer wheel, it should be noted that there are many different types of prayer wheels, including the Chinese octagonal sutra library, Tibetan water, air, fire and earth prayer wheels, and contemporary optic discs, wheel apps, automated praying machines, mani fidget spinners and mani finger rings (Brox 2018).

2 There is usually a piece of sponge under the washer to stabilize it. Some Tibetans melt the sponge so that it glues the washer to the stick. Others use the sponge to fill the small cavity between the handle and the washer, which is not entirely flat but curves slightly towards the handle.

respectfully. As well as observing the rule that prayer wheels should be rotated clockwise so that the scripture can be 'read', older Tibetan practitioners followed a number of proscriptions (although not necessarily comprehensively). One should not turn the drum downwards because the prayer wheel body has an up and a down, lay it on the ground because the ground is dirty, twist the pinnacle because it is like 'pulling the prayer wheel's hair', nor place one's thumb on the washer while rotating the wheel because it is like 'choking the prayer wheel'. It is the sacred scroll that elevates the prayer wheel in a hierarchy of Buddhist material objects (Brox 2018) and causes its owner to treat it as a precious entity. In Tibet, Buddhist scriptures are not only read; they are produced, copied, translated, recited, paraded, worshipped, revered, circumambulated, rotated and also placed inside other Buddhist material objects to sacralize them, acts that are all perceived to be meritorious. We have here a 'cult of the book' (Schopen 2005: 348), within which Tibetan Buddhists' devotion to the teachings of the Buddha are expressed in a complex of religious rituals, faith and protocol (Brox 2018; Schaeffer 2009). Even a single syllable of Buddhist script is treated respectfully and worshipped, since it is believed to be able to transfer blessings and good luck to the person interacting with it as if it was the Buddha himself.

Some older interlocutors in Dharamshala, Kathmandu, Lhasa and Repgong owned prayer wheels that had survived two or three generations. The scrolls had taken little damage as they were usually wrapped in a cloth that was commonly replaced when old. However, at some point in the lives of such wheels, their most vulnerable body parts—the washer, bamboo tube and pinnacle—had to be repaired or replaced. In terms of how replacement parts should be handled, our lay interlocutors suggested purification by burning juniper branches or incense, and perhaps saying a mantra. They usually took new prayer wheels or scrolls to the local temple to be consecrated by monks.[3] However, they did not know of any disposal rituals for retired and replaced parts of old prayer wheels—even though they felt that these should never be thrown away. As in other Buddhist cultures (see Kendall 2017; Triplett 2017), burning is a common disposal method, at least for Buddhist scriptures. The disposal of retired scrolls by burning can be performed while reciting an appropriate passage from the sutras.

3 See Brox (2019: 118–19) for an example of a brief consecration ritual for prayer wheels.

One Geluk scholar (*dge bshes*) in Dharamshala suggested a passage spoken by the Buddha in the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*. During our talk in September 2018, he explained that one 'will not commit any negative actions' if a scripture is burned while reciting the following verse:

> Like a star, hallucination, candle
> Magical illusion, dewdrop, bubble
> Dream, lightning or cloud
> Know all compounded phenomena to be like this.[4]

However, none of the Tibetans who spoke with me or my research assistants in Tibet, China, India, Nepal or Europe—lay or monastic—knew of any written sources relating the 'correct' way for dealing with post-consumption Buddhist material objects.

Since authoritative (written) disposal practices and afterlife instructions were generally not known, it is perhaps unsurprising that perceptions of post-consumption prayer wheel components and their disposability varied among and between the laity and religious authorities. The Geluk scholar cited above thought that everything but the scroll could be thrown away like waste. Comparing the prayer wheel drum to a worn garment that can be disposed of with ease, he argued that when it is broken, one can throw it away (*g.yug*) as long as it contains no script. The mantras inside the wheel are the most important component, he said, and should be protected as a sacred object. If this is not possible, then it is appropriate to burn them in a clean place (*gtsang sa*) or to offer them in a reliquary (*mchod rten*). To this Geluk scholar, only the parts of the prayer wheel containing sacred writing were precious and thus valuable at the end of their life. Yet, it is clear that not all Tibetans deem other prayer wheel components, or other Buddhist material objects for that matter, worthless and therefore disposable when broken. Material evidence points to popular practices that indicate different waste conceptions and waste care among Tibetan Buddhists.

At each of the research sites in this study, prayer wheel drums, sticks, pinnacles and washers were not thrown in the bin to end up at dumpster sites. Instead, retired prayer wheels and their components spent their afterlives inside peoples' homes or in places considered pure and elevated, such as circumambulation routes and reliquaries.

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4 Translated by Tsering Norbu.

Observations from Dharamshala, Kathmandu and Lhasa suggest that these places are the most common afterlife abodes of Buddhist material objects.[5] Along the circumambulation routes around the Potala Palace and Ganden Monastery in Lhasa, Tibet, the residence and temple of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Dharamshala, India, and the Boudha Stupa in Boudhanath, Kathmandu, one can see an enormous quantity of post-consumption Buddhist material objects including votive images, frayed offering scarfs, statues, protection cords and amulets (see also Brox 2023; Brox, Vang and Heng 2023). In places where these circumambulation paths had a prayer wheel wall to the right of the path with a shelf above the prayer wheel drums, there were different kinds of Buddhist 'waste'. Some objects had been left there to rot and some placed there for storage, wrapped in plastic or kept in containers so that they did not decay but had enduring afterlives. Neither I nor my assistants saw any prayer wheels deposited in their entirety—complete with drum, handle and all. But on the circumambulation paths in Lhasa and Dharamshala there were many prayer wheel scrolls and washers. At times we also saw prayer wheel handles, pinnacles and roofs that had been worn down or broken, or (I was told) had belonged to people who had passed away.

Scrolls were usually placed on top of the large prayer wheel drums that bordered the circumambulation paths, some of them protected by a container made from a plastic water bottle or a tin jar and some wrapped in cloth and cling film. It was as if this type of 'waste' was so valuable that it had to be protected from its own decay. Four or five scrolls could be fitted on top of each prayer wheel. Their protective covers and conspicuous placement gave the scrolls a productive afterlife. They were not lying in their afterlife abodes to decompose. Instead, to borrow terminology from the natural sciences, they had become 'inquilines', a term usually applied to an animal that 'lives habitually in the nest or abode of some other species' without harming it.[6] The afterlives of such scrolls are dependent upon their 'host' prayer wheels, with which they live in symbiosis. Unlike parasites,

5 In Repgong, prayer wheel components were not commonly seen deposited in these sacred places, but one can find votive images, candy and fruit (usually after New Year), protection cords and wheat grains along circumambulation routes as is also common in Dharamshala, Kathmandu and Lhasa.

6 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inquiline (accessed 21 March 2025).

which harm their hosts, inquiline scrolls do not compromise the rotations of their host prayer wheel; they live commensally. Moreover, they increase the efficacy of prayer wheel practice. When people rotate the scrolls inside the prayer wheel on the circumambulation path, they simultaneously rotate the inquiline scrolls on top—all in one single rotation.[7] Their protective covers and conspicuous placement have enabled a productive afterlife for scrolls that were no longer spun by the owners of their original prayer wheels, perhaps because they had died. Instead, they were being rotated by the hands of thousands of strangers on their daily circumambulations—strangers who earned merit from turning prayer wheels and thus from the many inquiline scrolls. When post-consumption Buddhist material objects like these inquiline scrolls can serve meritorious purposes in their afterlives, we should perhaps not regard them as waste.

The other prayer wheel component that could be spotted in large quantities on the circumambulation paths in Lhasa and Dharamshala was the used washer. Washers were often tied together on a string that was suspended on the frame of the prayer wheel wall, lying on the shelf above the prayer wheels, threaded onto the bottom of the prayer wheel's axis, or tucked in between the stones of *mani* walls and cairns. The fact that washers, like scrolls, are kept in places that are considered proper for precious objects in their afterlife tells us that they are not considered worthless waste. In the case of scrolls, it seems that the script, which is considered sacred even before it is installed in a prayer wheel and consecrated, maintains its sacredness in its afterlife. The washer, however, has no sacrosanct status before it is used in a prayer wheel, so why does it enjoy its afterlife in places that are considered sacred or pure? As I will discuss in the next section, the answer to this question lies in Tibetan Buddhists' perceptions of the process of wear.

Wearing the washer

I visited Wangmo in her home in September 2018 to see her prayer wheels.[8] Wangmo lived in Dharamshala with her daughter and took care of her grandchildren. While we talked, she was constantly working—changing the gas tank of the stove and folding clothes—while all

7 I have also seen such inquiline scrolls on the roofs of handheld wheels.

8 All personal names are pseudonyms.


Figures 5.3 and 5.4 Prayer wheel washers. The washer in Figure 5.3 is new. The washer in Figure 5.4 has been worn down and split in two by the bamboo tube that rotates on top of it.

the time ensuring that my teacup was filled and that I enjoyed the biscuits that she had offered me. She said that she had only a little time for active prayer wheel practice. On her home shrine was a fire wheel (*me 'khor*) powered by the heat of a butter lamp sitting underneath the prayer wheel drum. 'I keep it alight in the offering bowl day and night without a break. The wheel cannot turn if I do not offer a butter lamp', Wangmo explained. When I asked why she was careful to keep the prayer wheel powered around the clock, she responded that it was so that she could 'take [merit] with me at the time of death'. 'Life is limited', she added. 'If we pause or do not offer butter lamps, we will not be free from the hell realms.' She also had a handheld wheel but had little time to turn it. She had started using it fifteen years ago but there was still 'no hole in the washer' because she had so many other things to do. 'When I turn it for a long time, I get pain over here', she said, pointing to her arm. 'Besides, I have to prepare food and pick up my grandson from school.' Wangmo knew that handheld prayer wheel practice would have the 'benefit [*phan yon*]' of avoiding 'taking rebirth in the hell realm', but lack of time and pain limited her engagement. Like many of our other lay interlocutors, she measured such practice by the (lack of) wear of her wheel's washer: 'If we turn [the wheel] swiftly, the washer is drilled [*rdol*] within one month. It also depends

on the thickness of the washer. If the washer is very thick, it does not drill a hole quickly.'

The washer, called *dung* in Tibetan, is the handmade handheld prayer wheel component that will be most frequently replaced because of wear.[9] It is a thin, slightly curved, disc-shaped plate that has a small perforation in the middle so that it can be threaded onto the central stick and fixed between the two joining surfaces of the handle and the short bamboo tube that rotates with the drum (see Figure 5.3). It needs to be replaced when the short bamboo tube, which moves on top of the dung, has consumed the dung and penetrated it. This 'wearing' is a major incentive for prayer wheel practice for some Tibetan elders. The washer functions as a wear pad preventing the erosion of the handle and enables frictionless high-speed rotations of the drum by insulating the wooden stick from the surface of the rolling bamboo tube. Yet as Wangmo's comments suggest, it also functions as a material measurement of what I call 'faith labour' (Brox 2019), that is the labour involved in interacting with an object with faith (*dad pa*) and conviction (*yid ches*) in its sacredness.

Wangmo explained that the benefit accumulated through prayer wheel practice was proportionate to the number of rotations made upon the dung. Most of our Tibetan interlocutors associated the washer's name—dung—with its materiality. The most common meaning of dung is 'shell' and they believed that prayer wheel washers were made of conch shells originating in sacred lakes in sacred lands (in practice, dung are also made from other materials such as plastic and cattle bone).[10] However, some (like Wangmo) associated dung with the number one hundred million (*dung phyur*), glossing the dung as a calculation device. A dung can only support one hundred million rotations, it is commonly said, before the rotating bamboo stick erodes it and splits it into two parts. The consumed dung is thus material proof of a great amount of faith labour, although (in practice) not necessarily

9 Only handmade handheld prayer wheels have externally visible dung; others have bearings rather than washers.

10 Interlocutors residing in Lhasa and Kathmandu thought dung came from Nepal or India, while interlocutors in Dharamshala and Chengdu thought they came from Tibet. In Tibetan, the word dung in the sense of a shell refers to three different things: the conch shell used as a Buddhist musical instrument, the washer with a perforation in the center used on prayer wheels, and the tube used as a hair decoration for women and men.

one hundred million rotations. As Wangmo pointed out, the number of rotations that a dung can endure (and thus how quickly it can be 'drilled') depends upon the material qualities of the dung; a thin dung will require less labour than a thick dung. It took older Tibetan interlocutors between two weeks and several years to make a hole in a dung, depending on the materiality of the dung and how much they used the prayer wheel.

According to the beliefs of our lay interlocutors, faith labour not only affects the owner of a prayer wheel, generating merit. It also affects the washer, charging the dung with sacredness and efficacy. In other words, wear enables a productive afterlife within which the dung enters into new relations, serves new purposes and affects people. A used dung, Wangmo explained, has apotropaic powers of protection (*srung*) comparable to that of protection cords given by lamas, transforming it into an amulet:

> It can protect us from any kind of obstacle [*gnod pa*]. By turning a wheel as much as we can, the dung absorbs blessings [*dung la byin rlabs zhugs*] and becomes sacred [*rtsa chen po*]. …We wear them around our necks, and we also use them for our children as a protection [*srung*]. It has great benefit [*phan thogs chen po*].

There are now many factory-made prayer wheels that have a washer made of metal or a metal bearing rather than a dung. As such, they cannot be used to make protective amulets. Wangmo explained: 'Metal used instead of a shell has no benefit. It can never become sacred [*rtsa chen po*].' She thus directly connected the sacred nature of the washer to the material manifestation of wear—of making a hole. She deemed this impossible in the case of metal due to its material properties, which resisted wear.[11]

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11 Despite Wangmo's claim that metal washers can never become sacred, it should be noted that in Amdo (northeast Tibet) traditional Chinese coins that have a square-shaped hole in the middle are often used as washers in handheld prayer wheels. Although metal, these washers, called *dung tsé* (*dung rtse*) in Tibetan, can be eroded and treated like other used dung. Chaksham Tsering saw such worn coins attached to the ball-and-chain governors of prayer wheels in Repgong, while Heng Peng saw them deposited along the Potala circumambulation route in Lhasa, probably carried there by pilgrims from Amdo.

In other words, for Wangmo, as well as for other interlocutors, it was not only faith labour but also the material properties and wear of the dung that were crucial to its potentiality as a sacred and efficacious object. The bamboo tube's erosion of the dung through prolonged prayer wheel practice forms a disc-shaped indentation the size of the touching surface of the bamboo tube and finally splits the washer into two parts: a small inner disc that can be separated from the dung, which I refer to as the dung bead; and a bigger outer disc with a large hole in it—what is left of the washer after the bead has been removed (Figure 5.4). During an interview in Kathmandu, one older woman, Dechen, explained the technique that she used to control the splitting of the dung into two. Once she had threaded a new dung onto the prayer wheel stick and secured it to the handle, she would take the dung bead from a previously finished dung or a piece of plastic of the same size and thread it onto the stick, on top of the new dung. This was to prevent the rotation of the bamboo tube on top of the new dung from being unbalanced. Dechen stressed the importance of making sure the bamboo had a precise circumference to ensure exact, smooth and balanced rotations. The auxiliary bead defined the precise outline for the bamboo tube to carve so that an almost identical dung bead would be produced once the new dung had worn down. Once the bamboo tube had made its mark on the dung through repeated rotations, she would take the small disk out and the bamboo tube would do the rest of the work. Dechen compared this technique to that of sawing a piece of wood. Before starting, it is helpful to mark the wood where one wants to saw. The auxiliary bead serves the same purpose, enabling precise wear that produces one small dung bead.

Data collected from Lhasa, Dharamshala, Kathmandu and Chengdu reveal that when the washer is worn out, these two parts—the outer disc and the dung bead—have different statuses and afterlives. Although some people kept an outer disc in their pocket as if it were an amulet, it is the dung bead that tends to be associated with the kinds of apotropaic powers that Wangmo referred to when she said that dung could 'protect us from any kind of obstacle'. This explains why Dechen paid so much attention to producing the perfect dung bead. The status of the outer disc is more ambiguous, as is evident in the different kinds of afterlife that such discs can end up living. If there is enough space, an outer disc can be reused. One can perforate a different place on the dung, thread it back onto the stick and churn out another dung bead. I have seen washers with two, three or even four big holes. Once its use value as a wear pad (and dung bead

manufacturer) has been completely exhausted, the used outer disc can be exchanged—this is the case in Kathmandu at least, where outer discs have monetary value. Our interlocutors there could receive one new dung in exchange for three to five used outer discs. Shops around the Boudhanath Stupa, situated in a predominantly Tibetan neighbourhood of the Kathmandu Valley, had such exchange schemes with Tibetans, but they also bought bags of conch remains by the kilo from India. One shop displayed baskets filled with different conch remains, among which were outer discs. Having once served in prayer wheels, they were now lying on the concrete floor in colourful plastic baskets, waiting to become something in the imagination of a customer who could see some kind of usage for round shells with big holes in them. Although such discs had not simply been thrown away like waste, they were not being treated in the same way as, for example, a fragment of sacred text.

However, in other cases, outer discs have afterlives that show that they can cross more clearly into the category of the sacred and/or have meritorious functions by being upcycled or deposited. They can be upcycled by being passed on to serve new purposes in other ritual practices. Interlocutors in both Europe and Asia said they gave used outer discs to their lama, the local monastery or tantric community, believing that they would serve as a sacred content of a stupa or be burnt in pyres to purify the smoke. One interlocutor in Lhasa explained that she donated the outer discs to tantrists, who could use them on the handles of their ritual implements to prevent the implements sliding in their hands during rituals. I have also seen them attached to the ball-and-chain governor of prayer wheels to add weight and thus increase centrifugal power (see Figure 5.1). As already discussed, outer discs can also be deposited in places considered pure or elevated—not only on circumambulation routes and in mani walls, but also on mountain tops and in temples where they are tucked in among the stones of a wall or cairn, or hung up in trees or on prayer wheel walls. They can also be stored at home above the door of the family shrine or offering room, in a cupboard on the house altar, or around the place for burning offerings. In Repgong, when people perform the ritual burial of 100,000 votive images (commonly in the family yard) they sometimes deposit outer discs along with the tablets.

As indicated above, the dung bead—called the small dung (*dung chung*) or baby dung (*dung phrug*)—has a different status and afterlives to those of the outer disc. Like many interlocutors, Dechen collected them to make prayer beads, often referred to by their Sanskrit name,

mala. Until she was able to collect 108 beads to complete a dung bead mala (*dung phreng*), she threaded them onto a piece of string. Some older Tibetans would hang these strings around their necks, believing that this served a protective function, or keep them in a cupboard on their home shrine. Others might keep a dung bead as an amulet in their shirt pocket. If she was able to produce more than 108 beads, Dechen related, she could make a chain of these dung beads to wear over one shoulder and across the chest. Our interlocutors not only used or wore these beads themselves as mala or amulets, but also—as Wangmo mentioned—gave them to their children and grandchildren 'as a protection'.

As long as the bead does not break when it is churned out of the dung, this part of the washer can thus have afterlives as an auxiliary practice object (a bead in a mala), an auspicious and apotropaic object (an amulet), and/or a representational object publicly displaying a person's faith and virtue (one or several beads on a string worn around the neck or across the shoulder and chest). Data confirms the intense prayer wheel practice of older Tibetans in both Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora who drilled one dung after another with the intention of producing such amulets and malas. These elders rotated their prayer wheels eagerly, diligently and with high intensity, as if it was their job. They were rewarded with merit, but their prayer wheel practice also produced transferable protective powers in the dung beads. While producing merit for herself, the practitioner was simultaneously charging the dung beads with apotropaic and auspicious powers that could be enjoyed by others.

Wear—and consumption more generally—should therefore not only be seen as a destructive process. In the case of the washer, it is also a manufacturing process during which the dung captures and stores powers from the script that rotates upon it. My specific focus here on 'wear' draws attention to the material effects of consumption—how usage causes the abrasion of the object so that it deteriorates and diminishes—but also to how consumption is perceived. Many interlocutors spoke about the material corrosion of the dung and the creation of a dung bead and hole, which they expressed as being due to *zé* (*zad*), an intransitive verb that means to finish, exhaust or wear out, in other words 'to consume' in the English sense of the verb. Yet they simultaneously spoke about this wear as sacralizing, relating how 'the dung absorbs blessings' (*dung la byin rlabs zhugs*) or 'becomes sacred' (*rtsa chen po chags*) because of the rotating script. These emic ways of speaking about the wearing of the washer show

that consumption (in this case at least) is not only destructive but also productive, transforming a washer into two objects that are understood by many Tibetans to have been blessed and to have become sacred, albeit to different degrees.

Conclusion

To conclude, the end of consumption is not necessarily waste. In order to understand the afterlives of prayer wheel components, we must not only look at the material evidence, technology and practice of functioning prayer wheels but also engage with the wear resulting from faith labour. To think about an object's afterlife is to consider what comes after consumption—after death—and the potential futures of significant objects that are broken or have expired. It is to acknowledge that these objects can enter into new relations that were not necessarily part of their intended, primary utility value during their original lives. Objects can have a life after death that does not necessarily characterize their present nature. As a washer, a dung is just a conch shell (or cattle bone) used as a wear pad.

Sacred materiality is destined to decay because of consumption, but in the case of handheld prayer wheel components this does not mean that their power and efficacy is lost. The sacred status and potency of the scroll did not expire with consumption. Moreover, the mundane washer absorbed sacredness and even power from the scroll through the rotations of the prayer wheel drum. The worn-out washer has some kind of value, for our older lay interlocutors at least. They will not discard outer discs and broken dung beads. They might deposit, burn, bury, recycle, exchange and repurpose them, but they do not sort them into the same category as the litter that ends up in a trash bin. Similar afterlives await the other components of the prayer wheel when the practitioner believes that these components have become sacralized through a rotating prayer wheel. Yet the dung beads have emerged as the most valuable product of consumption. They are material manifestations of an enormous number of merit-generating rotations. It seems to be this personal faith labour as much as the power of the sacred script that gives them their perceived potency.

The washer is not unique as a Buddhist material object in its potential to live a productive afterlife, the outer disc being reused, exchanged, upcycled or deposited and the inner disc repurposed as a precious dung bead. However, we can learn from the case of the dung

how the materiality of wear, as well as the original status of an object and the faith labour invested in its transformation, can affect the post-consumption, afterlife status, value and economies of Buddhist materiality. To determine the extent to which the dung is a peculiar case, we need further studies of the different meanings and statuses that Buddhists ascribe to the objects—and the different components of the objects—they consume in Buddhist practice and how this affects their diverse afterlife destinies as, among other things, worthless waste, sacred objects, or apotropaic and auspicious tools.

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