

25. The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems: A Tibetan Study of Asian Religious Thought  
Thuken Chökyi Nyima (1737–1802)

Translated by Geshe Lhundub Sopa et al.; edited by Roger Jackson

The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems (*Grub mtha' shel gyi me long*), by Thuken Losang Chökyi Nyima (1737–1802) is probably the widest-ranging account of religious philosophies ever written in pre-modern Tibet. Thuken was a cosmopolitan Buddhist monk from Amdo, Mongol by heritage, Tibetan in education, and equally comfortable in a central Tibetan monastery or at the imperial court in Beijing. Like most texts on philosophical systems, his Crystal Mirror covers the major schools of India, both non-Buddhist and Buddhist, but then goes on to discuss in detail the entire range of Tibetan traditions as well, with separate chapters on the Nyingma, Kadam, Kagyü, Shijé, Sakya, Jonang, Geluk, and Bön. Not resting there, Thuken goes on to describe the major traditions of China—Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist—as well as those of Mongolia, Khotan, and Shambhala. The Crystal Mirror is unusual, too, in its concern not just to describe and analyze doctrines, but to trace the historical development of the various traditions. In evaluating philosophical systems, Thuken does favor his own Geluk school, but he treats the views of other traditions with considerable sympathy and respect as well—sometimes even defending them against criticisms from his own tradition. All this makes the Crystal Mirror an eloquent, erudite, and informative textbook on the religious history and philosophical systems of an array of Asian cultures—and provides evidence that serious and sympathetic study of the history of religions has not been a monopoly of Western scholarship.

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