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Matthew T. Kapstein

TIBETAN BUDDHISM

A Very Short Introduction

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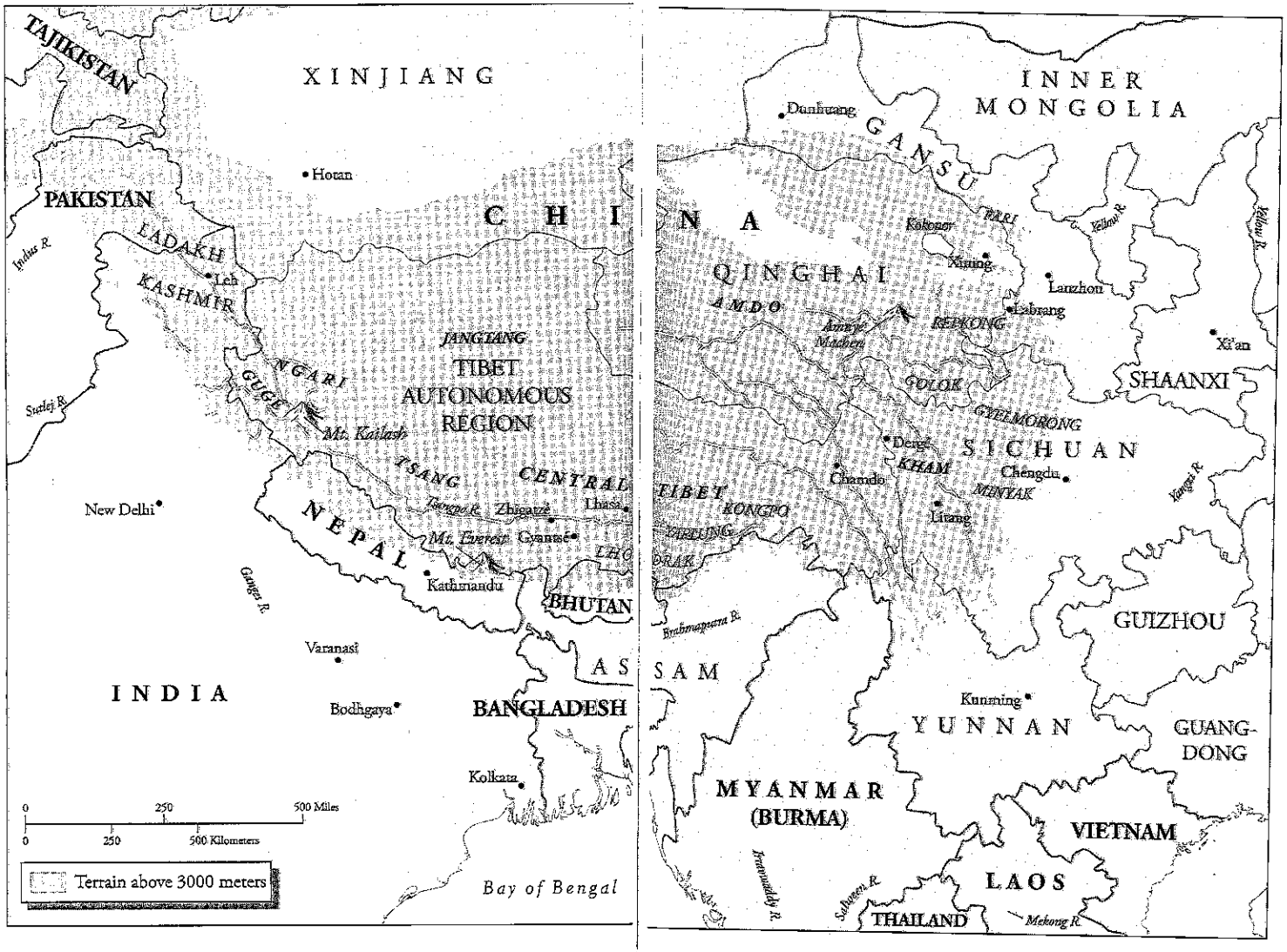
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Chapter 1
The world of gods, demons, and men

One early spring day in the mid-1970s, at the residence of a Tibetan lama in the remote mountains of Nepal, I was invited to take tea and to converse with my learned host on the challenging topic of the nature of consciousness in Buddhist philosophy. As we pondered a difficult passage from an eighth-century Indian text, asserting that the mind cannot be an object to itself, we were abruptly interrupted by the lama's servant. He whispered to the teacher that a local couple had arrived with urgent business; could he please usher them in? Consent was granted and the couple, peasants who had some herds that they tended in the pastures above the monastery, entered, pallid and visibly quaking with fear. The night before a demon had entered their cattle shed, kicking up sparks and crackling, and almost provoked a stampede. What evil deed had they committed to become the objects of such demonic fury? And now that the bane was upon them, how was it to be appeased? Prostrating themselves before the lama, they begged for his protection and placed a small handful of cash on his table as an offering, together with a bowl brimming with fresh curds from their cows.

The lama immediately sought to put their minds at ease; seating them, he called for tea and biscuits to be served. After having them repeat in detail what had transpired—and by now I thought I recognized within the demonic attack an occurrence of the strange

meteorological phenomenon sometimes called "ball lightning"—he took up his astrological almanac. Studying it for some minutes, he rolled the divination dice he always kept close at hand and counted off numerological combinations on his rosary. After what must have seemed an eternity to the terrified couple, he leaned forward and addressed them in the soothing tones of a parent comforting a frightened child: There are no indications that anything grave has occurred; your livestock will be fine, he explained, neither you nor your children will be afflicted with demon-borne sickness or similar ills. Only a passing disturbance of the elements, due to minor faults of past karma, is at stake. To purify your karma and to pacify these troubles, you must undertake to practice each day the rite of *sang*—incense fumigation dedicated to the spirits of the environment—and to recite *Oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ*, the mantra of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, one thousand times. Do this and your problems will vanish. Above all, do not be afraid. Keep faith. Adhere to compassion. You and those close to you will surely soon be free from all that has caused this distress.

The lama then gave them knotted "protection cords," some consecrated pills, a sip of perfumed water, and touching each on the crown of the head, recited some prayers on their behalf. The couple, still nervous but braving hopeful expressions, took their leave. The lama looked up, smiled gently, and said, "Where were we? 'Mind cannot see mind,' wasn't it?"

Religion's two ends

Tibetan Buddhism, as it is presented in the West, is often treated as an erudite spiritual discipline, a world of subtle philosophy and high-powered techniques of abstract meditation, dispensing a bounty of insight and compassion to all. Although this representation has its basis in the image that Tibetan Buddhism has carefully crafted of itself through the centuries, for Tibetans generally, including the social and religious elites, avoiding bad

karma and demonic disturbances, and undertaking meritorious rites and purifications were the fundamental objectives of religious life. Far from seeking to transcend the world in attainments of mystical contemplation, the day-to-day concerns that motivated the religious lives of most Tibetans—laymen and clergy alike—were the problems inherent in maintaining, not transcending, the order of the world by ensuring that harvests were plentiful, cattle productive, children sound, and enemies, whether demonic or human, impotent. Religious professionals, accordingly, were expected to minister to these and similar needs, whatever they might have to say about recondite topics like the nature of mind. Where the two ends of Tibetan religion—world-maintenance and world-transcendence—met was in the ideal of the *lama*, the spiritually accomplished teacher, often regarded as a bodhisattva who, in virtue of his superior compassion, learning, and ritual virtuosity, was both motivated and prepared to act in the service of the world at large. It goes without saying that not all who were titled *lama* in fact fulfilled this lofty ideal, though many surely strove to do so.

The bread-and-butter concerns of the Tibetan Buddhist clergy required that they devote considerable efforts to realizing the broad range of ritual demands for the protection, peace, and prosperity of their patrons, and to furnishing them with divinations and astrological consultations. In encountering Tibetan Buddhism as it is presented in many works on religious teaching, which tend to emphasize doctrines and contemplative practices, one rarely finds even oblique references to these ubiquitous aspects of Tibetan religion as it is lived. Not surprisingly, there has been a marked discrepancy between descriptions of Tibetan Buddhism based primarily on doctrinal texts and those derived from anthropological studies of life in traditional Tibetan and Himalayan communities. This introduction, though stressing the textual record of history, doctrine, and practice, nevertheless also attempts to recall pertinent "facts on the ground" as these are known from observing the actual religious life of Tibet.

Writings on Tibetan religion sometimes distinguish sharply between Buddhism, originally an Indian religion that came to dominate Tibetan culture from the late first millennium on, and Bön, described as the ancient, indigenous religion of Tibet. This characterization is not without its problems, however, and it will be one of the tasks for the chapters that follow to provide greater precision about this. For the moment, though, it should be noted that the canonical scriptures of the Bön religion, in contrast to those of mainstream Tibetan Buddhism, have much to say about the world-maintaining facets of Tibetan religious life as these have been in fact practiced. Accordingly, it is worthwhile to attend in brief to what Bön sources have to say about this. It must be constantly borne in mind that these matters are no less relevant to Tibetan Buddhism, despite the latter's relative theological silence about them. In practice, adherents of both Bön and Buddhism are equally concerned with maintaining harmony with local spirits and demons, with avoiding spiritual pollution and acquiring tokens imbued with blessings of auspicious good fortune, and with rites of passage that begin when a lama whispers a name into an infant's ear and conclude with one's departure at death.

1. A senior monk explains the results of a divination (*mo*), calculated on his rosary, to a young novice.

Between gods and demons

"In recognizing appearance to be a divinity (*lha*), and thus beneficent, or a demon (*dré*), and thus harmful, one comes to realize that all of birth and death are fashioned by divinities and demons (*lhadré*)." In these words, a twelfth-century Bön text summarizes the human predicament in its most essential features. We inhabit a world in which invisible powers, capable of helping or hurting us, are omnipresent. It is therefore imperative that we recognize these powers for what they are and learn how best to determine our own course in relation to them. The same work explains in brief how one deals with malefic spirits, which are regarded as perfectly analogous to the causes of disease.

Nor are the worldly divinities, in contrast to the implacable demons, considered as inherently well-disposed to human beings. They are characterized as often arrogant and vengeful but nevertheless "respectful of Bön and attached to the Shen [the Bön priesthood]." The relation the latter seek to form with these proud and powerful beings is therefore one of mastery and coercion, "for just as a master puts a slave to work, the practitioner, like the master, realizes [the deities] and their factotums to be like slaves and servants."

Despite the explicit mention of Bön and its priesthood here, these words may be applied in mainstream Buddhist contexts as well. Padmasambhava, the famed Indian master who visited Tibet during the eighth century and is believed to have played a cardinal role in the implantation there of Buddhism, legendarily converted many of the "arrogant" Tibetan divinities to Buddhism, coercing them to act as protectors of the foreign religion. Numbers of later Buddhist masters then followed his example. We read, for instance, of an eleventh-century adept, Zurchungpa, who vanquished the *lu* (nāgas, or serpent-demons) in the vicinity of his teacher Zurpoché's temple, forcing them to produce a tribute of *chang*, the rich barley ale that was a staple of the Tibetan diet:

On dealing with demons and disease

Living beings are subject to many sorts of affliction due to spirits and the like. One practices in order to remove these afflictions by means of divination and exorcism. Because beings are subject to many diseases of fever and chill, etc., one enters the way in order to alleviate those illnesses by medicine and treatment. When the effects of disease or afflicting spirits have appeared, one investigates what harm has occurred and what sort of disease or afflicting spirit is present. You diagnose a disease by examining pulse and urine, while afflicting spirits are investigated by means of divination and omens. Without halting the application of medicine and treatment to the effects of disease, you seek to bring about benefits; and without halting their application to the effects of afflicting spirits, you seek to bring about benefits through various divinations and exorcisms. This is the way of practical action. The view realized here resembles that of a scout on a mountain pass who spies out all enemies and dangers, and so brings about their avoidance or removal. Similarly, in this case you realize, with respect to disease, that it may be treated and cured, and with respect to afflicting spirits, that they may be impeded and deflected.

from *The Commentary of the Four Clever Men*

Zurchungpa intentionally summoned the sister of the nāga-demon who dwelt on the rock at Yazé Trakdzong. A thin snake appeared, which Zurchungpa turned into a fair lady by means of his gaze. At that Zurpoché said, "I want you to make the ale for the consecration of my temple."

The resulting ale was said to flow without limit.

Though few Tibetans presume to coerce the spirits in this way, to live, so far as is possible, in harmony with the "gods and demons" is nevertheless the concern of all. In one village I visited, I learned that several households had recently experienced a string of misfortunes, giving rise to collective worries in regard to the well-being of the village as a whole. When the leading lama in the region was consulted about it, he determined that the particular *lu* associated with the village spring was displeased, his shrine having been left to fall into disrepair and thus desecrated. The shrine of the *lu* was accordingly cleansed, refurbished, and consecrated anew, the rites being performed by Buddhist monks from the lama's monastery.

In short, without the cooperation of the local spirits, the community cannot hope to achieve prosperity; without the prosperity of the community, the material basis for religious achievement is lost; and without achievement in religious practice and learning, the cooperation of the local spirits cannot be won. This cycle of interdependence undergirds the religious life of Tibet in all its aspects, whether in settings denoted as Buddhist or Bön, whether on the level of the modest village or, in past times, of the Tibetan State under the leadership of the Dalai Lamas.

A rite of purification

The divine and demonic fauna of Tibet are remarkably diverse and prolific. One finds, accordingly, an abundant body of techniques—ritual and divinatory—deployed in the constant struggle required in order to sustain the balance of the spiritual ecology. Included here are practices as varied as pilgrimage, spirit-channeling, dramatic dances, and offerings of numerous kinds, and an elaborate material culture requiring the production of a great panoply of ritual objects including masks, prayer-flags, votive cakes, colorful thread-crosses, and much more. As an example of Tibet's "this worldly" religion, one specific, very common type of ritual may be considered: *sang*, or incense fumigation, the regular practice of which was urged upon the couple whose cattle fell victim to demonic attack.

2. A monk (*right*) and a layman perform *sang* on the Lamjura Pass in eastern Nepal.

Sang, literally "purification," is a ubiquitous Tibetan custom in which the fragrant smoke of juniper and other substances is offered to the gods and spirits pervading the land. The term *sang* may be etymologically related to another word, also pronounced *sang*, which forms part of the Tibetan term for the Enlightened One, the Buddha: *sang-gyé*. Here it refers to the Buddha's awakening as a sloughing off of the sleep of ignorance that characterizes the mundane world. *Sang* as fumigation, analogously, offers a cleansing fragrance to the spirits, purifying the taints of the environment that they find distasteful. The custom is almost certainly of indigenous origin in Tibet and adjacent regions, and is practiced in one form or another by virtually all Tibetans, monks and laypersons, men and women, rich and poor. One of the great annual festivals, *Dzamling chisang*, performed in the early summer on the full-moon day of the fifth lunar month, is its greatest elaboration, offering, literally, a "general fumigation (on behalf of all the spirits) of the world." In settled villages, many houses will have a special furnace, a *sangtab*, placed on the roof or in the courtyard for the regular performance of *sang*, while at long-term

nomadic encampments such a furnace may be constructed outside the tents. It is an offering that in its most basic form is barely a ritual at all: one burns a bit of juniper while reciting a formula such as *lha gyel lo*, "the gods are victorious!" and perhaps a few mantras, like the ubiquitous *Oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ*.

Tibetan understandings of *sang* cohere closely with beliefs regarding the character of the local divinities, particularly the mountain gods. These are beings of great power but also olfactory sensitivity; it is for this reason, for instance, that there is a widespread cultural ban on grilling or roasting meat, which may bring about spiritual pollution, or *drip*. Although the already limited Tibetan culinary arts thereby suffer for this reason, raw, dried, or boiled meat (as in a stew or soup) are de rigueur, for the gods frown upon those who offend them with the stench of burning flesh. Sweet juniper smoke, however, they find suitable. Moreover, one must offer a particular type of juniper that does not spark or pop when it burns. Explosions, bright flashes, and sharp sounds disrupt the dignified tranquility of the divinities no less, as we have seen, than they do the peace of cattle and men. When they are well pleased, the gods become propitious, and the human community thrives under the resulting favorable auspices (*trashi*). The gods, irascible though they may be, are drawn to virtue (*gewa*) and to the merit (*sonam*) thereby accumulated. They shun evil and pollution (*dik-drip*).

The practice of *sang*, like virtually all that touches upon the cults of the Tibetan indigenous deities, came within the orbit of tantric Buddhism no later than the twelfth century and perhaps much earlier. The esoteric ritual scriptures, or tantras, of Indian Buddhism provided the ritual technology for sublimating and organizing autochthonous beliefs and practices in regard to all manner of spirits, divine or demonic, and so quickly pervaded both Buddhist and Bön milieux. Formalized liturgies for the performance of popular rites such as *sang* appeared, in which they were elaborated beyond the simple customs described earlier. Part

of one such liturgy for the performance of *sang*, composed during the sixteenth century, reads as follows:

> In a great vessel of diverse precious gems,
> Are sacramental substances, worldly enjoyments,
> Consecrated as gnostic ambrosia by three mantra-syllables.
> This lively mix, an appealing offering, I dedicate
> To the gurus, divinities, goddesses, and protectors . . .,
> To the lords of our earth and the "guests" among the six classes to whom I'm indebted;
> In particular, to those who steal life and longevity,
> Elemental spirits bringing disease, demons, and obstacles,
> And all types of bad dreams, evil signs and omens,
> Irrascible spirits and lords of miraculous powers,
> Creditors seeking food, abode and wealth,
> Lords of pollution and madness, demons of death and their consorts,
> Vampires and spirits of plague, demonesses of town and country,
> As many as there are throughout the expanses of space.
> May my sins and obscurations, accumulated throughout the three times,
> My [illicit] enjoyment of the wealth of the saṅgha and of the deceased,
> Be purified by this fire-offering.
> May each particle of each flame, filling space,
> Become an inexhaustible mass of good offerings
> Pervading all the fields of the Buddhas.
> May the gift of this offering in the flames, gnostic light,
> Pervade the abodes of the six classes down to the lowest hell. . . .
> And may all beings awaken as Buddhas in the heart of enlightenment!

This text addresses Tibetan religious experience on several levels. It seeks to appease and restore order to the "elemental spirits bringing disease, demons, and obstacles," while at the same time conferring gnosis—the realization of the Buddha's

enlightenment—on all "abodes of the six classes"—gods, anti-gods, humans, animals, ghosts, and denizens of hell—inhabiting the round of rebirth, or *saṃsāra*. In its aspiration for the salvation of all beings, it adheres to the cardinal values of Mahāyāna Buddhism, while in its use of spell-like mantras to consecrate the juniper and other substances offered into the flames "as gnostic ambrosia" for the practice of *sang*, it adopts the ritual usages of Buddhist Tantra. It forms a tapestry of sorts, in which the Tibetan world of gods, demons, and men, the Mahāyāna Buddhist orientation to universal enlightenment, and the ritual technologies of Tantric esotericism are tightly interwoven. In actual practice, the varied themes that may be identified here are most often inseparable, forming for Tibetans a balanced whole, whose several parts, in both their historical and doctrinal aspects, are indissociable.

In thinking about other factions, [consider that] next to non-Buddhists and barbarians, with whom we share not even tokens and dress, and who are [as numerous] as nighttime stars, we, who are just a few, are like daytime stars and are approaching the completion of the teaching. While something of it remains, those who have entered into the domains of the teaching with common purpose ought to cultivate the perception that they are most closely related. Because mutual enmity will bring ruination, regard one another as does a mother her child, or as does a begger a treasure, and so cultivate a perception of joy.

from Mipam Namgyel (1846–1912), *Surprises Due to a Conversation with Friends*

Chapter 6
Enlightenment in this very body

What is "Tantric Buddhism"?

Tibetan Buddhism is often characterized as "tantric," though seldom with careful definition. In several spheres, including monastic discipline and philosophical education, non-tantric teachings and practices were generally privileged. Despite this, Tibetan Buddhism was indebted to tantric traditions in aspects of popular and monastic ritual, and yoga and meditation were most often tantric as well. But just how is "tantra" understood in Tibet? The question is not an easy one to answer and was much debated among Tibetan authorities themselves.

Though precise definition is elusive, some characteristics of Buddhist tantra are widespread. Peltrül Rinpoché (d. 1887), a famous Nyingmapa author, raises the issue while discussing how the disciple should attend to his teacher's lessons. According to the exoteric sūtras, he says, the student cultivates motivation, respectful comportment, careful memorization, and similar qualities. None of this is rejected by the tantras, but they add this difference: instead of regarding your teacher, yourself, and your classmates as ordinary human beings, you learn to perceive the learning environment as an awakened realm, in which the teacher *is* the Buddha or presiding divinity, and you and your classmates *are* the enlightened disciples, or the gods and goddesses, of the

retinue. The teaching itself, transcending the mundane here and now, is the perpetual flow of the Buddha's insight, continuously received by those receptive to it. In other words, in the way of the sūtras, one is to cultivate positive qualities as causes for future enlightenment, but in the tantras, the fruit of enlightenment is already here. The tantras teach us to perceive the ordinary world as a buddha-realm. Hence, Tibetan authorities often speak of the sūtras as teaching a *causal vehicle*, while the tantras present the *vehicle of fruition*.

Although this helps to introduce the general ethos of tantra, it remains still vague. Is the idea that buddhahood is ever-present sufficient to count as tantra? Few in the Tibetan traditions would agree. It is in seeking greater precision that the characterization of tantra becomes controversial. Without proposing a strict definition, a number of frequently invoked features merit consideration.

Mantra: The use of spell-like formulae, called *dhāraṇī*, or *mantra* (Tib. *ngak*) is pervasive in the tantras, so that their teaching is often called *mantrayāna*, the "mantra vehicle." While many non-tantric Buddhist sūtras employ *dhāraṇī*, particularly as mnemonic formulae, in tantric contexts mantras pervade all aspects of ritual and contemplation. Thus, the twelfth-century Sakyapa teacher, Sachen Künga Nyingpo, defines the word "mantra" as meaning "that which protects the mind," and further explains: "By being skilled in the stages of creation and perfection, sensory consciousness, and what flows from it, is protected from intellectual engagement in mundane discursive thought." (The terms "creation" and "perfection" refer here to the two major phases of tantric practice, the first emphasizing creative visualization and ritual, and the second involving the perfection of the adept's identification with the visualized deity through exercises of internal yoga.)

Maṇḍala: Though the term *maṇḍala* (Tib. *kyinkhor*) is current outside of tantric contexts to refer to ordered arrangements,

including the well-appointed array of a buddha and his divine and human disciples, in the tantras it designates specifically a type of diagram—usually either painted on cloth or made of colored powders sprinkled on a flat surface, and more rarely modeled three-dimensionally—that schematically represents the divine palace of a particular buddha, bodhisattva, or deity, accompanied by his or her divine circle of attendants. This is symbolically correlated, moreover, with the macrocosmic universe and with the microcosm of the individual. Thus, for instance, a maṇḍala of five deities may be taken to correspond to the five bundles, or *skandhas*, the basic elements of which a living being is formed, or to the five elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space—composing the material world as a whole.

Abhiṣeka: Entry into the tantras requires a particular consecration ritual, called *abhiṣeka* (Tib. *wangkur*), "aspersion," whereby the disciple is initiated by the guru into the maṇḍala of a particular buddha, bodhisattva, or deity. As Sachen Künga Nyingpo tells us, "one may practice after body, speech, and mind are consecrated as the indestructible reality (*vajra*) of buddha-body, -speech, and -mind." Without obtaining *abhiṣeka* and assenting to the special vows (Skt. *samaya*, Tib. *damtsik*) that this entails, one is not authorized to undertake the ritual or contemplative practices of the tantras.

Visualization, the creative use of the imagination, is employed in all branches of Buddhism, affording powerful means to further meditation. Tantric visualizations are related to the principle of the maṇḍala, often involving the meditator's imagined identification with its central divinity. As Sachen explains, "Concerning skill in the means of one's favored deity, one transforms oneself into that deity. All objects, form and so forth, that appear, are likewise made into the deity. Then, one's enjoyment [of objects] is like deity melting into deity. The beginner just practices self-identification [with the deity], and, attaining stability of mind, learns to make the features clear." Corresponding to the requirement

of clear visualization, one may note a degree of iconographic elaboration, involving divinities who may be male or female, benign or demonic, of any color, and often endowed with many legs, heads, and arms, wielding the weapons, ritual objects, and sacred substances with which they are associated, ritually and symbolically.

Ritual: Buddhist tantra is distinguished from other forms of Buddhism by the extreme elaboration of its rituals, which developed in India under the influence of the ancient traditions of the Vedas and of Hindu tantrism. Characteristic of tantric rituals are complex altar arrangements, involving manifold offerings, representations, and symbolic objects; intricate programs of liturgical chant, punctuated by use of mantras and special gestures (Skt. *mudrā*); and stipulations regarding concentration (Skt. *samādhi*) to engender a visualized ritual program corresponding to outer ritual performance. Specifications pertain to the practitioner's clothing and ornaments, and the details of instruments and implements including drums, horns, and the ubiquitous vajra and bell. (The *vajra* [Tib. *dorjé*], a type of scepter identified as both diamond and lightning bolt, is the most widespread symbol of esoteric Buddhism and represents the indestructibility and brilliance of the enlightened mind.)

Sensual pleasures are to be affirmed, not renounced. Sachen, like many authorities, proposes that this is a fundamental distinction between the exoteric Mahāyāna sūtras and the esoteric tantras: "The proclamation of two paths is intended for two types of individual. Some are unconcerned with sensual pleasures and so are able to abandon them. For them, the vehicle of the transcendent perfections [taught in the sūtras] was proclaimed. Others are greatly preoccupied by sensory pleasures and so unable to abandon them, and for them the vehicle of indestructible reality was proclaimed." However, the affirmation of the senses in tantric rituals is not an authorization of ordinary sensual indulgence. Tantric engagement in sensual phenomena is subservient not to whims and

desires but to precise ritual programs. Sachen's explanation thus continues: "Those who have entered the vehicle of secret mantra, being skilled in both the stage of creation and that of perfection, may rely upon sensual pleasures. For example, according to the tantras, the eye is made into [the bodhisattva] Kṣitigarbha, and all form is made into [the goddess] Rūpavajrā. One thereby enjoys [vision] in the manner of deity embracing deity, and similarly sound and smell, etc., are all enjoyed as is appropriate."

Yoga: In the highest practices of tantra, outer ritual receives less emphasis than the esoteric techniques of yoga (Tib. *neljor*). "Yoga" in this case is not the gymnastic yoga widely taught these days in health clubs. It refers, rather, to practices of meditation through which the adept may achieve union (Skt. *yoga*) with the highest reality. Tantric practices of creative visualization are thus thought of as "deity yoga" and the recitation of the deity's mantra as "recitation yoga." In the so-called perfection stage of tantric practice, the focus turns to the subtle energies of the body, conceived as a network of energy channels concentrated at vital points called "wheels" (Skt. *cakra*, Tib. *khorlo*). Whereas, among ordinary persons, these subtle energies are dispersed and uncoordinated, by means of tantric yoga they are united in the central channel, bringing about swift liberation. Because modern gymnastic yoga is ultimately derived from medieval Indian tantric systems, similar concepts remain familiar in the general milieu of contemporary yoga practice. However, in Buddhist tantra, the internal yogas are primarily contemplative techniques, corresponding to particular tantras with their specific maṇḍalas and deities.

Transgression is sometimes also regarded as characteristic of tantric practice. Adepts may indulge in what, in other contexts, is considered unclean or polluting, for instance, consuming excrement or forbidden meats, taking intoxicants, or seeking spiritual bliss through sexual enjoyment. Not all Buddhist tantras encourage such actions, and many Tibetan authorities shunned these aspects of the tantras altogether. Although Indian

understandings of tantric transgression have been disputed in recent scholarship, in Tibet there was broad consensus that the transgressions mentioned in the texts were usually to be treated symbolically, as their actual practice pertained only to small numbers of highly advanced adepts. Even among the latter, the transgressions were to be carefully constrained and limited to precise ritual contexts. Thus, for instance, at the tantric feasts—literally the "wheel of the assembly" (Skt. *gaṇacakra*, Tib. *tsokkhor*)—of the tenth and twenty-fifth days of the month, small morsels of meat and a few drops of alcohol may be served to participants as tokens of the transgressions whereby the great adepts of the past, such as Padmasambhava, transcended all dualistic bounds to attain supreme realization. Nevertheless, the ritual of the feast remains rigidly codified, so that even its "transgressions" conform to a perfectly orchestrated routine. Hence, tantric transgression, as understood in Tibet, is not at all antinomian, but is part of an ordered system.

Secrecy: The conception of the tantras as "esoteric" is directly related to the frequent ascription to them of secrecy. This may be taken literally to mean that their teachings and practices are to be concealed from the uninitiated, but often also allusively, indicating that only those who are suitably receptive can gain insight into the tantras, whether or not they are deliberately concealed.

Not all of these nine features are present whenever Tibetan Buddhists speak of tantra, though the first four generally are. Tantra is best thought of not as a fixed phenomenon but as a broad and complex category, whose constituents are linked by a range of properties that are variously shared and divided among them.

Stages of tantric practice

Leaving definition aside, tantra in Tibet is more a matter of practice than of theory and in practice is invariably transmitted directly from master to disciple. As the great yogi and poet

Four classes of tantras

In contrast to the Bönpo and Nyingmapa, who classify their tantric teachings variously within their systems of "nine vehicles," most of the other traditions of Tibetan Buddhism have adopted a system with four classes of tantras (*gyüdé zhi*):

1. Kriyātantra (Tib. *jawé gyü*, "tantras of ritual action") and (2) Caryātantra (Tib. *chöpé gyü*, "tantras of conduct") emphasize rituals for purification and protection, in which the adept enters into a temporary relationship with the divinity for the duration of the ritual performed. They differ in general in the degree of the elaboration of their consecrations and other rites.
3. Yogatantra (Tib. *neljor-gi gyü*, "tantras of yoga") further develops the practitioner's contemplative identification with the divinity, while in (4) Anuttara- (or Niruttara-) yogatantra (Tib. *neljor lamé gyü*, "unexcelled Yogatantra") a permanent identification is sought, and the accent shifts from ritual to internal disciplines of yoga.

The relationship between adept and deity in these four classes of practice is sometimes compared to that between lovers: first exchanging glances and smiles; then holding hands and playing innocent games; next hugs and kisses; finally the intimacy and bliss of union.

Milarepa is always considered the exemplary disciple, his story will help us to understand tantra as part of Tibetan religious experience.

After practicing sorcery during his youth in order to avenge the hardships inflicted on his family by a cruel uncle, Mila began to regret the sufferings he caused through his success in the black arts. Motivated to achieve liberation, he sought Buddhist teachings

from several masters, but little good came of it. Upon hearing the name of the translator Marpa, however, he was moved by great faith and so journeyed to meet him. Marpa, for his part, recognized Milarepa's potential as soon as he saw him but was careful not to let this be known. As a Tibetan proverb states, "the disciple's faith is the ring that catches the hook of the teacher's compassion." Tantric practice must be grounded in unswerving devotion to a qualified teacher; without this, only its outer forms survive.

But faith alone is not sufficient to ready the disciple for initiation. Marpa was aware of Milarepa's potential but saw too that, owing to past sins, he was not yet a fit vessel for the teaching. He therefore demanded that Milarepa undergo harsh trials, virtually serving as Marpa's slave, until, when all trace of pride was broken, he was at last purified and suitably prepared. Initiated into the maṇḍala of the deity Cakrasaṃvara, he was instructed in the corresponding esoteric yogas, derived from the "Six Teachings of Nāropa," above all the exercise of the subtle energies known as the "wild woman" (*tummo*), the inner heat, mastery of which allowed him to remain in the wilderness throughout the harsh Tibetan winter with only a light cotton robe. ("Repa," which became part of his name and was subsequently adopted by many of his disciples as well, literally means "cotton-clad.") Through years of privation in solitary retreat he strove to master this discipline, together with the remaining "Six Teachings," through which he came to realize the apparitional nature of existence and the visionary possibilities of lucid dreaming in relation to the radiance of the mind. In the end, he was believed to have become a buddha; he had succeeded in attaining the tantras' goal of enlightenment in "a single lifetime, a single body."

Adepts such as Milarepa are rare, and so too teachers such as Marpa, who perceive the specific needs of their disciples and instruct them accordingly. More often training in the tantras is practiced following well-established patterns, although the disciple's faith in a formally qualified master is always an essential prerequisite.

Instead of the trials that Milarepa endured, most disciples undertake the more predictable challenge of the preliminary practices (*ngöndro*). All tantric rituals involve preliminaries such as arranging the altar and the offerings, consecrating the ritual implements, and the first steps of the ritual itself, including the Buddhist refuge and the cultivation of *bodhicitta*, the compassionate spirit of enlightenment. In the present context, however, the preliminaries are obligatory spiritual exercises that may take anywhere from a few months to a year to complete. Typically, they commence with the contemplation of fundamental Buddhist themes: the unique opportunity of human existence; death and impermanence; the sufferings of beings in saṃsāra; and the operations of karma. A period of reflection, often in retreat, devoted to these is followed by a series of practices including the performance of one hundred thousand repetitions of the refuge, accompanied, with each repetition, by a full prostration, one hundred thousand repetitions of the vow of the bodhisattva, and, similarly, one hundred thousand repetitions each of the hundred-syllable purificatory mantra of the Buddha Vajrasattva, of the offering of the maṇḍala (here meaning a symbolic representation of the cosmos), and of the formula of *guruyoga*, the worship of the divinized guru. The qualities cultivated by these practices—renunciation, compassion, purity, and faith—qualify the student as a suitable candidate for the major tantric practices. Following his or her initiation into the maṇḍala of the deity—and the choice of deity depends above all on the specific lineage into which one is initiated—these begin with the creation stage, in which the visualization of the deity and recitation of its mantra are cultivated. This is usually to be practiced for a prolonged period in retreat, requiring the performance of a fixed number of repetitions of the mantra, together with a variety of rituals cementing one's relation with the deity. Mastery of the creation stage is the prerequisite for the perfection practices, as exemplified by the "Six Teachings of Nāropa."

At the culmination of the tantric path, elaborate ritual and the intricate disciplines of internal yoga give way to simplicity, as the

adept focuses upon the examination of the reality underlying all possible experiences. The subtle radiance of mind finds its ground in emptiness and is identified with the *dharmakāya*, the all-embracing "body of reality" of the buddhas. In the Kagyüpa and allied traditions, the contemplation of the ultimate at this stage of practice is the Mahāmudrā, the "Great Seal," while among the Nyingmapa and Bönpo it is the Dzokchen, or "Great Perfection." Though these approaches each have numerous particular features, according to the distinct tantric systems to which they appertain, they share a common outlook reflecting the preeminence of Madhyamaka thought in Mahāyāna Buddhist milieux. As summarized in a prayer by the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé:

> Free from intellectual contrivance,
> this is the Mahāmudrā;
> Without limiting parameters,
> it is the great Madhyamaka;
> As the gathering point of all,
> it's also called "Great Perfection"—
> With confidence may we realize
> the one knowledge embracing all!

Institutional and social entailments

Just as tantra is regularly taught through a progressed path involving well-defined stages of practice, so the circumstances for tantric teaching have come to be largely institutionalized. Most Tibetan Buddhist orders maintain a system of "tantric colleges" complementing the dialectical colleges in which philosophical subjects are taught. Among the Nyingmapa and Kagyüpa orders, for instance, training in the tantras is typically conducted in a center of retreat (*drupdra*), wherein the trainees are sequestered for a period of three years and three fortnights (*losum choksum*), during which they practice in turn, under the guidance of the retreat master, the preliminaries and the stages of creation and perfection, culminating with the teachings of the Mahāmudrā

or Dzokchen. Among the Gelukpa, however, the tantric college (*gyüdé dratsang*) has a more academic profile, combining training in ritual practice with progressive study of the tantric scriptures upon which Gelukpa ritual traditions are based. In either case, the collective retreat or tantric college is not seen as the end of training in the tantras but as a beginning: the most highly motivated disciples may go on to spend long years in solitary retreat, emulating past adepts such as Milarepa.

An important institution, too, is the Ngakpa Dratsang, the "College of Mantra-adepts (*ngakpa*)." The "mantra-adepts" here are ordained lay priests, often within the Nyingmapa order, who attend to a broad range of rituals required for the peace and prosperity of the surrounding community. In many cases, Ngakpa Tratsangs enjoy a relation of complementarity with a neighboring Gelukpa temple or monastery. This symbiosis of celibate monasticism and lay tantrism is a legacy of the fifth Dalai Lama, whose twin allegiances to the Gelukpa and Nyingmapa traditions resulted in his nurturing the latter, even as he promoted the former in tandem with the development of the Tibetan state.

In tantric Buddhism, the most crucial relationship is that between guru, or lama, and disciple. The disciple pledges body, speech, and mind to the teacher who bestows consecration upon him, and one's oath to the teacher is inviolable. By entering into a teacher's circle, you become similarly bound by oath to your fellow disciples, who thus become "vajra brothers and sisters." Although such relations could not be uniformly maintained, Tibetans traditionally took them very seriously, and few charges against a person were more damaging of reputation than that of being one who had violated *samaya*, the tantric vows.

The importance of oath-bound relations in tantric Buddhism had important social implications. One feature that Tibet shared with many feudal societies was the important role of sworn oaths and

8. A lay priest (*ngakpa*) at a Nyingmapa tantric college in Amdo. The structure to his *left* is the *sangtap* in the college's courtyard, the special furnace used for *sang*, the fumigation of the environment through the offering of aromatic substances.

the obligations that were derived from them. This was an essential characteristic of Tibetan culture quite apart from Buddhism and is much emphasized, for instance, in Tibetan epic literature. With the development of tantric Buddhism in Tibet, there emerged a degree of congruence between lamas and lords. Of course, not all who were respected as religious teachers held worldly rank, nor were more than a small proportion of the nobles ever regarded as spiritual masters as well. But in a significant number of cases lord and lama were one—the hierarchy of the Sakyapa order provides a clear instance. Under such circumstances, the tantric vow, binding master and disciples into a single spiritual family, served in effect to supercharge the relation of fealty, which was now reinforced not merely by the social approval or disapproval attached to it but by the menace of swift rebirth in the infernal realms to any who transgressed their commitments.

9. Dancers at a performance of *cham*, ritual masked dance, at the Tramdruk temple in Central Tibet. Although *cham* may have its origins in indigenous Tibetan cults of the local protective deities, its practice has been entirely reformulated over the centuries to conform with the ritual strictures of the tantras.

With the development of identified incarnation (*trülku*) as the means to ensure monastic succession, a process culminating in the transformation of Tibet itself into an ecclesiastical state headed by one such incarnation line, that of the Dalai Lamas, the tantric vow became a fundamental instrument binding Tibetan society as a whole. The great network of Gelukpa monasteries, and often establishments of other orders as well, was led by churchmen who were themselves bound to the Dalai Lamas by their vows. The system of recognized incarnation meant that the connections and obligations thereby created were maintained over the course of generations. In this way, the formerly exceptional relationship of tantric master and disciple became an instrument of social cohesion.

As tantrism suffused the social order, so too the very fabric of space and time. Thus the pilgrimage landscape of Tibet came to

be conceived in terms of the principle of the maṇḍala—Mount Kailash, for instance, was regarded as the palace of the great tantric deity Cakrasaṃvara, in the center of a maṇḍala inscribed in the lakes, rivers, mountains, and caves for hundreds of miles around. Indeed, those of "pure vision" might journey to hidden lands (*beyül*), where terrestrial paradises were to be found. And the rituals marking the festival cycles were also tantric in most cases; often these were accompanied by masked dances, *cham*, in which the deities of the maṇḍala were manifest to the eyes of all.

Chapter 7
When this life ends

Among the Tamang people of Nepal, it is sometimes said that for weddings one must send for a brahman priest, but that a funeral must be officiated by a lama. Tibetan Buddhism is regarded as having a special command of mortuary ritual and the means to assure a fortunate rebirth for the deceased. The prominence of mortuary cult in Tibet reflects the confluence of both indigenous and Buddhist beliefs and practices, as these have intermingled and developed for more than a thousand years.

The uncertain fate of the dead

Archaeology and early Tibetan writings demonstrate the importance to pre-Buddhist Tibet of mortuary rites. The *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, composed ca. 800, opens with an account of the death of the first mortal king, Drigum Tsenpo, and describes the origins of royal interment: the monarch's hair was to be braided and his face painted with vermillion; his body was preserved in a mausoleum, with offerings of food and drink. Other documents discovered at Dunhuang also detail the program at royal funerals, which required an elaborate and specialized priesthood, and often followed the death by several years. These were solemn moments for the old Tibetan monarchy, and later Tibetan historiography reflects this in its scrupulous attention to the construction and

placement of the mausoleums of early kings, which have remained hallowed places of pilgrimage.

The careful attendance of the dead, their provision with adequate nutrition, and traditions concerning the bodily ascent of the kings prior to Drigum Tsenpo to the heavens—these demonstrate that there were clear Tibetan beliefs concerning the fate of the dead prior to the advent of Buddhism. Just what those beliefs were, however, remains uncertain. It is possible that reincarnation, at least in the event of neonatal death, was affirmed, suggesting the concept of a persisting soul. Nevertheless, several of the earliest Tibetan Buddhist documents clearly treat the Buddhist idea of a repeating cycle of birth, death, and rebirth as alien to earlier belief. One example is *The Cycle of Birth and Death*, a poem that begins with the discovery of death by the Tibetan gods, one of whom, Precious Jewel, becomes profoundly upset on learning that his father, Light Blazing King, is dying; he searches throughout the universe for the means to overcome this terrible situation. He ultimately finds the goal of his quest in India, meeting with the Buddha, Śākyamuni, who assuages the gods' fears by teaching them a tantric funeral ritual, which will insure future well-being for the deceased.

From the late-tenth century on, Tibet absorbed newly transmitted rituals and contemplative practices from India, including many that were intended to forestall death or to guarantee that the deceased would realize an auspicious path. Accordingly, funerary rites of Tibetan authorship responded to these new inputs. The so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, revealed as "spiritual treasure" (*terma*) in the fourteenth century, is surely the most famous product of this process.

Of central importance here was the conception of the *bardo* (Skt. *antarābhava*), the "intermediate state" between death and rebirth. The idea originated in Indian Buddhism in response to problems raised concerning the Buddhist denial of an enduring

The Ars Moriendi in Tibet

A fourteenth-century "treasure" attributed to Padmasambhava offers these counsels to prepare for death:

> After the earth element [in the body] dissolves into water, the body grows heavy, and cannot be supported. When water dissolves into fire, the mouth and nose dry out. When the fire dissolves into wind, bodily heat is lost. When wind dissolves into consciousness, breath is forced out in a sudden exhalation, and you can't accept the offerings you're given to swallow. At that time, you feel that you're being pressed down by a great mountain, or that you've been forced into darkness, or thrown into empty space, and all appearance is accompanied by whirring and hissing noises. The entire atmosphere becomes glaringly bright, as if a silken canopy were thrown open. In a tent of rainbow-light one's awareness seems to fill up space with peaceful and wrathful and semi-wrathful [spirits], who have various sorts of heads and forms, and wield all sorts of weapons, roaring in all sorts of ferocious tones. . . . And the light that shines is like a hundred-thousand suns rising at once.
>
> At that time, know this: the thought that you are being crushed is not a mountain oppressing you, for it is the dissolution of your own physical elements. Don't be frightened by that! The thought that you are being forced into darkness is not darkness, for it is the dissolution of your own five sensory organs. The thought that you are falling through space is not falling, for when mind and body part, and breath ceases, mind is without support. All manifestations of rainbow-light are the radiance of your own awareness. All peaceful and wrathful embodiments are forms of your own awareness. All sounds are its natural sound. All the lights are its natural light. Have no doubt about it! For if you doubt, you'll be thrown into saṃsāra.

Introducing the Moment of Death, a treasure of Dorjé Lingpa

self or soul, in the absence of which the connection between one life and the next seemed inexplicable. The concept of a passage linking successive lives was embraced by some schools as a plausible solution, and it was this theory that was adopted as the *bardo* in Tibet.

The notion of the *bardo* was not just theoretical, however. In some tantras, a process was described in which the deceased experienced various sounds and lights, to which he or she reacted with fear or attraction, thereby setting the course to a new birth. Special meditations were developed to prepare for these experiences, so that one might be assured a safe journey culminating in fortunate rebirth.

With the promotion of such instructions in Tibet, funerary rites based on them were elaborated, incorporating what may have been an indigenous Tibetan funerary custom of calling the dead. The meditations of the *bardo* were no longer the exclusive domain of the adept, but could be imparted by a priest reading a guide to the *bardo* during the period when the deceased's consciousness was thought to be still wandering within it. With the great distribution of the *Book of the Dead*—in Tibetan the "Great Liberation by Hearing in the Bardo" (*Bardo tödröl*)—and similar works, such beliefs came to pervade Tibetan conceptions of the fate of the dead.

The pure lands

If you were able to choose your course of rebirth, what would you choose? Certainly, birth in the hells or among tormented ghosts must be avoided; so too animal existences, subject as they are, according to Buddhist views, to short lifespan, terror, pain, and stupidity. The gods and titans enjoy great power, longevity, and heavenly pleasures, but they are subject, in the end, to the decline of their merits and an inescapable fall into inferior realms. And human life is considered to be really favorable only if one has the capacity and inclination to enter the Buddha's path, together with

the resources to do so. For consciousness wandering in the *bardo*, terrified by sounds and lights, the prospects therefore appear dismal.

By all means, then, one should either put an end to rebirth by attaining nirvāṇa, or else seek rebirth in a realm where one can learn and practice the Dharma and thus progress to eventual liberation. Many such options seem available. In the Tuṣita heaven, Maitreya, the coming Buddha, is already crowned as regent and teaches the Dharma to the gods. In the mysterious land of Shambhala, somewhere to the north, the kings preserve the *Tantra of the Wheel of Time* and prepare for world conquest. On Mount Potalaka, Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, holds court; while on the isle of ogres the great adept Padmasambhava will teach the tantras until the end of the eon.

One should never make travel plans in haste, however. To be born in the presence of Maitreya, one requires the merits of a god. Only advanced adepts will reach Shambhala, and to join Padmasambhava one risks birth among the ogres instead of among human disciples. On close examination, even most Buddhist paradises are therefore not without risk. It is for this reason that one destination is favored over all: Sukhāvatī (Tib. *Dewachen*), the Land of Bliss to the west presided over by the Buddha of endless light, Amitābha (Tib. *Öpamé*). For this Buddha's vow stipulates that all those who have faith in him and his realm, and who have been morally upright, will be born in his presence on this basis alone, without need for the merits of a god or the attainments of an advanced meditator.

The teachings of the buddha Amitābha and his Sukhāvatī realm began in early first millennium India but soon spread to China and enjoyed enormous success throughout East Asia, giving rise to "Pure Land Buddhism," which is sometimes portrayed as resonating with Christian spirituality owing to its emphasis on the devotee's faith and the Buddha's grace. In Tibet, however,

there was no sectarian development of this sort; instead, all of the Tibetan Buddhist orders affirmed rebirth in the Land of Bliss as a preeminent, though not exclusive, spiritual goal. Innumerable tantric as well as exoteric devotions, meditations, and rituals were composed to ensure this happy outcome.

On preparing for rebirth as one sleeps

At night, when going to sleep, lie down upon your right side. Perform the refuge and cultivation of *bodhicitta*, and thinking to yourself that this very place is the Sukhāvatī realm, visualize yourself as your favored meditational deity. Visualize that before you, atop a lotus and lunar disk, sits Amitābha, red in color, his hands resting in an even gesture and holding a begging bowl filled with ambrosia. He sits in the cross-legged posture, adorned with jewel-ornaments. Think that he is surrounded by the gurus. Then, thinking that all around them are the buddhas and bodhisattvas, mentally perform three prostrations. . . . Then, together with your exhalations, imagine that your mind dissolves into the heart of the Conqueror, indivisibly merging with the Conqueror's heart. When you inhale, imagine that light comes forth from the Conqueror's heart, and entering by the path of your speech, dissolves into your heart, so that the Conqueror's Mind and your mind indivisibly merge. After practicing that for three cycles [of breath], imagine that the buddhas and bodhisattvas dissolve into the gurus and the gurus then into Amitābha. Amitābha melts into light and dissolves into yourself. And you, in turn, dissolve into light, thinking the trinity of Buddha, meditational deity, and your own mind to be indivisibly intermingled. . . . Go to sleep in that state, without letting your thoughts wander. . . . By practicing this, in the future, sloughing off this body like a serpent's skin, you will be miraculously born from a lotus in Sukhāvatī in the west, and hear the Dharma preached by Amitābha.

Sleep Meditation on Amitābha, by Sakya Paṇḍita (1182–1251)

The most powerful means to direct one's course at death was generally considered to be the practice of *powa*, "transference," a tantric exercise intended to cause the consciousness of the dying individual to depart suddenly from the body through a forced opening at the crown of the skull, whence it may travel immediately to a desired realm. Although, once again, this was initially a technique reserved for virtuoso practitioners, at some point it came to be popularized and, like the teachings of the *bardo*, could be performed on one's behalf by a suitably qualified priest. Because adepts of *powa* were believed to be able to direct the consciousness to a blessed realm, the technique became not only an essential aspect of personal religious practice but equally the stock in trade for ritual specialists called upon to assist at the time of death and for the subsequent funeral rites. Thus its performance became a major source of religious revenue. Inevitably, given the devotional focus upon Amitābha's Land of Bliss, this came to be the preferred destination for the *powa* ritual as well.

Funeral customs

In Tibetan society the manner of one's death is a matter of great importance. Ideally, one should be comfortable and calm, and, if too ill to undertake appropriate religious practices oneself, at least able to understand when friends, family members, or, preferably, a lay priest or monk whisper instructions in one's ear to visualize one's teachers and to mentally perform devotions to the deities upon whom one has previously meditated. Those in attendance seek to ensure that the dying be in a tranquil and virtuous state of mind, for final thoughts contribute greatly to one's future destination. Immediately following death, the corpse is not to be touched until the *powa* has been performed. Lamps are to be kept constantly alight surrounding the deceased, and family members adopt the formal signs of mourning, leaving their hair disheveled, abandoning ornaments, and wearing old clothes.

If at all possible, a lama known to be a master of *powa* is invited to perform the rite in the presence of the deceased, but if this is not practical, the rite may be performed from afar. After some hours have passed, it is permitted to handle the corpse, and those who are charged to do so first touch the crown of the head, a sign of the departure of consciousness effected by the *powa*. As these and subsequent funerary activities are conducted, it is customary, too, to invite monks to the household to perform constant prayers on behalf of the departed. All clergy who participate in the last rites are to receive generous donations, for it is essential to demonstrate and augment the merits of the deceased in this way. An astrologer may also be consulted to prepare a death horoscope, and to determine what special rites need to be undertaken.

Once the corpse can be handled, it is bathed with fragrant water and wrapped in clean cloth, its orifices blocked with butter. It must also be bound with cords made of plant fiber, a means to render it immobile and thus incapable of being possessed by a zombie. As this clearly suggests, Tibetan mortuary practices, like last rites in other cultures, are as much concerned to assuage the anxieties of the living as they are to secure the peace of the dead. On the eve of the date determined by the astrologer for the disposal of the corpse, special efforts are made to multiply merits by making sure that prayers are recited and plentiful lamps and incense offered at neighboring shrines, following which the corpse will be removed from its former home, never to return.

The deceased departs on his or her final journey before dawn. Though interment and burial in rivers were known, the favored means of disposal in Tibet were cremation and "oblation for the birds (*jator*)," usually called "sky burial" in English, a euphemism for the dismemberment of the corpse at a designated charnel ground, where the remains are fed to vultures. It is not clear when this custom, which has a marked affinity with burial by exposure as practiced in the Zoroastrian religion, first became widespread in Tibet, but it has certainly been the preferred means in recent

centuries. Cremation, however, is frequently practiced in lower elevation, forested regions, and in particular in areas such as Ladakh, Bhutan, and Nepal, which are closely contiguous with the sphere of Hindu civilization. Cremation is also often employed to dispose of the remains of lamas and other dignitaries.

The practice of sky burial was first noted by European travelers in the Middle Ages, and they interpreted it as evidence of cannibalism, imagining that bone implements used in some tantric rituals were the gruesome remains of departed parents. In fact, Tibetans regard the sky burial as an event of great solemnity, the last and ultimate offering one can make, a sacrifice of one's own flesh to feed hungry creatures who bear the matter of which one was made to pure celestial realms. Similarly, when cremation is practiced it is treated as a form of *homa*, the ancient Indian ritual of offering sacrifices into the flames, thereby transporting to heaven what is burned. The disposal of the corpse is both a final, culminating act of generosity and a passage to higher stations.

Following the custom said to have been introduced by the Chinese princess Jincheng during the eighth century, weekly observances are held for a period of seven weeks, culminating in elaborate ceremonies marking the forty-ninth day after death, at which point the deceased is supposed to have completed his or her passage through the *bardo* and to have reached the point of rebirth. After this, a service to mark the first anniversary of death is often performed and, in some cases, a regular annual memorial.

Throughout this entire period, Tibetan families place considerable emphasis on demonstrating their unstinting commitment to merit-making activities on behalf of the departed. At present, parental funerals are as enthusiastically documented in photography and video as are weddings in the United States, the reason for this being that "people should know that we have done well by our parents." As this makes clear, rebirth is thought to be determined, not as normative Buddhist doctrine would

have us believe by the weight of one's personal karma alone, but also according to the merit that is generated on one's behalf, particularly by one's descendants.

Saintly death

Death, for Tibetans, is an incisive index of how one has lived. A serene passing contrasts sharply with dying in agony, a sense of closure following a life well lived with feelings of dismay and regret. The events leading up to and surrounding death, including the entire ensemble of mortuary rites, constitute a distillation of the life they conclude. For this reason, the passing of a religious figure is scrutinized with particular attention for signs of sanctity and indications of future rebirth. It may be noted, for instance, that one died quietly in meditation, or while practicing the yoga of *powa*. The unanticipated appearance of flowers out of season, pleasant aromas, lights in the heavens, and more may be regarded as omens. And of the innumerable signs that may accompany death, none is rarer or more marvelous than the disappearance of an adept in the "rainbow body" (*jalü*), the body of light. An oft-mentioned example is the death, in 1872, of the Nyingmapa master Pema Düdül.

Most religious figures, however, even those renowned for their accomplishments and sanctity, do not pass away so dramatically. Following their decease, their remains will often be preserved in state for some time, so that disciples and patrons from distant locations may arrive to pay last respects. Thus, as much as a year may intervene between death and cremation (for, to the best of my knowledge, the sky burial is seldom the means to dispose of the corpse of a distinguished cleric). During this period, the deceased is considered to repose in samādhi, and *powa* is usually not performed, for the saintly dead are thought to direct their own destinies without the interference of others. Following cremation, the ashes are carefully examined for hardened remains classed as relics (*ringsel*), some of which may be preserved in memorial

An adept's death

> In the water ape year (1872), on the new moon of the peaceful month of Vaiśakha, the venerable lama [Pema Düdül] set up a meditation tent and dwelt there. He instructed his disciples to come, and had them all settle into meditation, [visualizing the guru] upon the crowns of their heads. . . . He then said, "Now, go back to your own places. After sewing shut my tent-flap, no one is to come here for seven days."
>
> The disciples did what the lama had told them, and returned to their own places feeling mentally ill at ease. At dawn on the seventh day, they performed prostrations before the meditation tent which was the lama's dwelling, and they opened it up. The lord's robes and meditation seat, his hair and the nails of his fingers and toes were there on his bed, but the maṇḍala of his body had disappeared. At that, they lamented very much in sorrow, whereupon the sky was all filled by rainbow lights and such. At that time, some intelligent and supremely religious persons and some who were certainly his closest spiritual sons met him in contemplative experiences, visions, and dreams, in which he granted them his approval in speech, comforted them with the highest teachings, and so forth.

from the *Biography of Nyakla Pema Düdül*

stūpas, while some are distributed as blessings to disciples and sponsors, who carefully guard them as sacred treasures.

In some cases, too, a deceased master will be mummified rather than cremated, the preserved body encased in a stūpa as a relic unto itself and thus in effect transformed into a perpetual shrine. This was practiced, for instance, in the case of the Dalai Lamas,

beginning with the fifth, whose gigantic, bejeweled memorial is housed in the Potala Palace in Lhasa. The mummification of noted spiritual leaders in Tibet may hark back to the ancient funerary rites of the rulers of the old Tibetan empire, though the precise connections between them remain to be studied in depth.

Postmortem journeys

An important class of mortuary specialist belongs at once to common and saintly spheres. Indeed, liminality is the hallmark of the *delok*, the revenant, who, in virtue of what we would term "near death experience," is uniquely stationed to offer testimony regarding the tribulations of those who traverse the *bardo* and the varied rebirths they attain. Such persons, who may have had no formal religious training before they "died," frequently act as diviners and healers following their experience, and written records of the *deloks*' travels in the beyond—whether fictional or based on the tales of historical revenants—are a popular form of religious literature. An example is the legend of Chöwang, a historical figure of the thirteenth century whose real biography contains no hint of this story of his otherworldly adventures.

Following his father's death and several failed attempts to convert his sinful mother, Chöwang departs to visit Lhasa on a business trip as the story unfolds. His mother dies before he returns home, leaving Chöwang tormented by anxious concern for her destiny. Entering a trance, he "dies" and ascends to heaven, where he meets the god Indra, who declares that, owing to his mother's arrogance and greed, she had quickly fallen from one realm to the one below. Realizing that his mother is to be found nowhere but in the hells, Chöwang meets with Yama, the lord of the dead, who urges him to give up his quest. But the hero persists and determines to take his mother's sufferings upon himself so that she be released. He is told, however, that the workings of karma are infallible, this being one of the messages that is highlighted throughout the *delok* literature. This moral is made clear through a series of judicial proceedings

in Yama's court that unfold before Chöwang's eyes: A virtuous man who had once sinned—with three friends he once stole and slaughtered a yak—is mercifully sentenced to a series of human lives; a young woman, who had profited from her husband's trade as a diviner by deceiving those in distress, is condemned to a sealed iron chamber in the pit of hell; a preacher of Avalokiteśvara leads female disciples to higher rebirths, while most of their husbands descend; and the virtuous wife of a doctor is sentenced to just a week in the poisonous waters of purgatory in order to expiate her husband's crime of imprudently bleeding (in the medical sense) his patients.

After witnessing this, the fate of Chöwang's mother is at last revealed: she has been consigned to the sealed iron chamber in the very subbasement of hell. The hero manages to penetrate even this dungeon; his appearance there causes the demon-guardians to drop their weapons and faint, but at last he manages to find his mother among the shades. By reciting Avalokiteśvara's six-syllable mantra he secures the release of tens of thousands, but his mother remains incorrigible. Coercing her consciousness, he elevates her to the land of the hungry ghosts and from there to the animal realm. Following this, she is condemned to take birth once again, this time as a dog. In this form, she becomes receptive to her son's teaching of Dharma, and after returning with him to their ancestral home, she gives up her canine form to be reborn in the heavens where her former husband resides.

Such narratives pervade the *delok* literature. By offering first-person testimony in confirmation of the truths of karma and Buddhist cosmology, they serve to uphold the moral universe of Tibetan Buddhism, with its strongly marked distinctions of merit and fault.