

CHAPTER 4

Master of Experience

*Through the strength of the blessings
of Lord Padma the Self-Produced
I, met what is meant, in Great Perfection,
by the ground field,
in deep experience,
with my bone touching the stone. [7]*

DESPITE the attribution of a Treasure to the mythic force of Padmasambhava's will on the one hand and the needs of living disciples on the other, Treasure discovery remains dependent upon the active contribution of the discoverer. The irony in such a contribution is epitomized in the epigraph above, where Jigme Lingpa's deference to Padmasambhava is so extreme that he even credits an intimate experience within a subtle channel of his body to the workings of the Precious Guru. Yet the latter part of the same statement makes an equally striking qualification: the person who is the recipient of Padmasambhava's great boon is a haggard yogin, living in retreat on a subsistence diet, meditating for years until the bones of his rear end virtually wear through his flesh and touch the hard floor of the cave. If Padmasambhava's intentions are so all-powerful, if a millennium ago he created an inexorable destiny for Jigme Lingpa, to reveal the *Longchen Nyingtig*, why does Jigme Lingpa have to expose his poor bone to the stone? Why doesn't Padmasambhava just swoop down and hand Jigme Lingpa his earmarked Treasure?

In this chapter I will examine the virtuosity in Buddhist practice and realization to which Jigme Lingpa makes claim in his secret autobiographies and which is considered to be a sine qua non for Treasure revelation. This will take us beyond the Treasure tradition, but that is only appropriate, for Jigme Lingpa is more than a Treasure discoverer, and his secret autobiographies are about more than scriptural revelations. Meditative achievements and religious virtues would in fact be fundamental to the achievement of all of his stated aims in writing his secret autobiographies.

To give a comprehensive account of everything that Jigme Lingpa studied would require a systematic and historical account of virtually all of Tibetan religion. But even a limited introduction to his religious orientations can provide considerable insight into his autobiographical self-conception.

Jigme Lingpa's Buddhism

The principal steps that Jigme Lingpa saw fit to report in his outer autobiography as leading to his first meditative retreat were becoming weary of samsāra,

conceiving of the bodhisattva vow, and desiring to meet the guru, Padmasambhava, in his pure paradise.¹ These are paradigmatic sentiments of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and all forms of Tibetan Buddhism consider their underlying attitudes to constitute the initial moments of the Buddhist path.²

The Nyingma school with which Jigme Lingpa was affiliated has preserved distinctive practices and ideas, but it is rooted in “standard” Buddhism, which in Tibet means a combination of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna literature and tradition. Jigme Lingpa’s Buddhist education began at the age of six when he took *upāsika* vows, after which he lived either in a monastic setting or a cave retreat for the rest of his life. Thus it comes as no surprise to find classical Buddhist metaphors, ethics, cosmologies, and modes of intertextuality throughout his autobiographies. His understanding of his life is imbued with normative attitudes: renunciation of worldly existence; compassion for deluded sentient beings and a desire to devote himself to teaching them; belief in the principle of reincarnation and the possibility of remembering previous lives; conviction that emotional obscurations and karma must be purified through rigorous meditative and ritual practice; and an obsession with the fact that life span and time of death are uncertain.

Such basic Buddhist presuppositions already adumbrate the tensions we are uncovering in Jigme Lingpa’s autobiographical self-conception. On the one hand, his compassion gives him a sense of connectedness to others. He also has an expanded sense of his own selfhood: Buddhist doctrines about rebirth allow him to make contact with his own past identities, thereby mitigating the specter of death. The most salient kind of connectedness Jigme Lingpa displays is his “staff of soulful devotion” for his envisioned gurus: “Father Lama” Padmasambhava and “Omniscient Dharma Lord” Longchenpa. Devotion to the guru, again, is typical of many forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism and certainly all of Tibetan Buddhism. It underlies Jigme Lingpa’s penchant for pilgrimage to the hermitages and temples of his predecessors, where he searches for traces of the sacred past. Some of these traces are the treasured body prints of Padmasambhava that electrify Jigme Lingpa in his early visions: such prints are an omnipresent feature at Tibetan pilgrimage sites and in devotional lore, and they reflect a belief that advanced masters have as one of their powers the ability to leave impressions in rocks.

On the other hand, Jigme Lingpa’s Buddhism helps him build an image of himself as a separate agent. The sentiment of world renunciation, at the center of the legendary life of the Buddha himself, is expressed many times by Jigme Lingpa in both his outer and secret autobiographies. Entering into a meditative retreat and living the life of a “beggar roaming around rock caves” also inaugurate an intense schedule of meditative practice. The person in retreat sleeps little and spends long periods, both by day and by night, in meditative exercise. In such a retreat, Jigme Lingpa was not merely sitting around and waiting for Padmasambhava to grant him experiences or to show up and hand him a Treasure text. Rather, Jigme Lingpa was working on himself and his delusions and habits, as do Buddhists of every tradition when they go into retreat, with the

hope and intention of winning liberation and enlightenment. The assumption is that the performance of the right kinds of meditation, ritual, and philosophical contemplation can effect radical personal change.

No-Self and Buddhist Subjectivity

The hallmark theory of no-self (*anātman*), which makes possible such a change, itself has important implications for the concept of the person. This fundamental Buddhist doctrine states that there is no independent, permanent, or essential self; rather, persons are constituted by a combination of many interdependent components, each of which is constantly in flux. However, the theory does not entail an absence of will or agency. Quite the contrary, it is because of such emptiness that the individual can take action or change, for if there were really anything permanent or fully autonomous about the person, it is maintained, there could be no action at all.³ This brings us to correct a commonplace misconception: the doctrines of emptiness or no-self do not imply that there is nothing at all. Selves exist, but only dependently, and, Jigme Lingpa's tradition emphasizes, as illusions.

In the next chapter I will discuss the implications that the theory of no-self has for the subject of autobiography. My interest at present is in how the theory is put into practice and the effect such practice has upon Buddhist concepts of the person. No-self is much discussed in doctrinal literature and is the object of scholarly study. But in contemplative schools such as that of Jigme Lingpa, the principal arena for its realization is the meditative retreat. And here we must observe that the very disciplines that induce a realization of the emptiness of the self simultaneously produce an interiorized subjectivity. As has been forcefully suggested by Foucault, disciplines that proceed by way of scrutiny, from either within or without, can create a subject where there might not have been one before.⁴ Bernard Faure has applied such an insight to Ch'an Buddhist confessional practices; a similar point needs to be made about Buddhist contemplative techniques.⁵ For example, the widespread "establishing in mindfulness" (Pāli *satipaṭṭhāna*) meditations, meant to develop a minute awareness in order to see experiences for what they are (that is, lacking in essence), end up providing the meditator with very detailed self-knowledge. "Mindfully he breathes in, mindfully he breathes out," reads an early description of this practice. "When walking, [he] knows that he is walking, when standing, [he] knows that he is standing. . . . If sensual desire is present in himself, a monk knows that it is present. If sensual desire is absent in himself, a monk knows that it is absent."⁶ A much later Tibetan treatise on meditation, from the sixteenth century, encourages similar candid self-scrutiny:

Now look scrupulously at the nature of your mind. . . . Is it outside, inside, or where is it settled? . . . [I]s it a total blackness, or is it a clear, vivid brightness. . . . ([W]hen your Guru questions you about your med-

itation) if you spout forth intellectual ideas about it, or parrot descriptions you have heard . . . [y]ou are only deceiving yourself. . . . [B]e completely honest and (speak from) the experiences and insights that develop within yourself from the force of your own meditation.⁷

One could object, of course, that these practices do not entail “real” self-observation, since what is observed is strictly structured by the normative categories of Buddhist meditative culture. But as Steven Collins observes, “*Dhammā* [the components of the person] here are both elements of the normative system to be applied, and ‘objects’ of experience in insight meditation.”⁸ Even if the way meditators label their experience, and the attitude they adopt toward it are the product of training, the point for our purposes is that they are looking inward. Rather than observing the landscape, or engaging in community service, the meditator’s gaze is turned to the subject, even if that subject is ultimately shown to be empty. What has been said regarding a very different tradition of self-emptying can also be applied here: “to affirm and to turn against are both aspects of self-involvement.”⁹

In short, Buddhist tradition provides the meditator with a complex goal: one should be empty of essence but full of self-consciousness. In the traditions that most influenced Jigme Lingpa, both the realizations of emptiness and subjectivity were marshaled for a program of self-transformation and empowerment. The particular practices that he performed to achieve these goals were complex and various. For convenience, they may be grouped under two traditional rubrics: Buddhist tantra and the Great Perfection.

Tantra

What is broadly referred to as “tantra” developed in several Indian religions.¹⁰ The distinctively Buddhist terms for this multifarious tradition include “*Vajrayāna*” and “Secret Mantra,” phrases which Jigme Lingpa often uses in his autobiographies. The tantras themselves are scriptures, which gained currency in Buddhism in its late period in India, largely after the seventh century C.E.¹¹ Many volumes of these scriptures were translated into Tibetan beginning in the eighth century and were later organized into two major canonical collections. The *Kanjur* was codified in the fourteenth century by Buton Rinchen Drub; its tantric section contains primarily what are labeled “New Tantras,” since they were translated in the period of the “later propagation” of Buddhism, beginning in the eleventh century.¹² The other major Tibetan Buddhist collection of tantras is the *Nyingmai Gyubum*, which contains the “Old Tantras,” said to have been translated in the eighth to ninth centuries, the period of the “early propagation” of Tibetan Buddhism, although many, at least in their current form, probably date from the eleventh century onward.¹³

The tantras of the *Nyingmai Gyubum* were the primary scriptural sources for Vajrayāna theory and practice in the Nyingma school. As we saw in chapter 2, Jigme Lingpa himself had a major hand in the codification of that collection. He

also knew the New Tantras well and sometimes cited them in his writings. Although Jigme Lingpa also wrote about more exoteric matters in Buddhist doctrine and history, the bulk of his writing and teaching concerned tantric Buddhism and its outgrowth in the Great Perfection tradition. He portrays his tantric self-identification with humor and irony in *Dancing Moon* when he reports his dream of debater monks, those who favor philosophical analysis over meditative practice [12]. They are celibate, which Jigme Lingpa is not. He sees these monks as antagonistic toward adepts of the Secret Mantra, even toward their attire, in which Jigme Lingpa would have been dressed in the dream, as he probably was in waking life (and is so represented in paintings, with a white yogin's robe, earrings, a ritual dagger [*phur-pa*] in his belt, and a topknot [*thod-gtsugs* or *thod-cog*] wound around a small container [*glegs-bam*] for special miniature texts that benefit those who wear them [*btags-grol*; see fig. 1]). Apparently Jigme Lingpa is intimidated by the monks' approach. He performs the feats of a tantric adept to impress them, augmenting this self-image by casting himself as the famous Indian adept Virūpa, who would have been respected even by these monks.

One of the fundamental principles that governs tantric practice in Buddhism is what is sometimes called "transformation." This refers to a nondualistic attitude toward spiritual development and contrasts with what is seen as the limited approach of "lesser-vehicle" Buddhism. Instead of rejecting certain "impure" aspects of human existence, as is attempted in the imputedly lesser path of monastic celibacy, the *tāntrika*, or tantric practitioner, is supposed to accept everything. Moreover, he or she should use everything. For example, negative emotions such as anger are not to be suppressed in tantric practice, but rather exploited for their powerful energy and thereby transformed into something beneficial for Buddhist development.¹⁴ Tantra is especially (in)famous for its use of sexuality, which marks one of the primary distinctions between the Secret Mantra adept and the monk (although many Tibetan monks practice tantra, and some maintain that tantric sex, far from violating monastic vows, actually strengthens them!).¹⁵ More broadly, *tāntrikas* refuse to draw a line separating themselves unconditionally from any kind of activity. In many ways the logical development of earlier Buddhist approaches, such as those epitomized by the lay Mahāyāna sage Vimalakīrti, the *tāntrikas* in India were especially interested in exploring the forbidden corners of Brahmanical culture, breaking caste boundaries, food prohibitions, and sexual prohibitions.¹⁶ Tantra became so influential in the later phases of Indian Buddhism that it even came to be practiced in monastic centers, where prominent scholar-philosophers would employ tantric techniques in their meditative practices. This model continued in Tibetan Buddhism, all schools of which have a tantric spirit—Jigme Lingpa's caricatures of the tension between monks and laypersons, scholars and meditators notwithstanding. Longchen Rabjampa, Jigme Lingpa's revered predecessor, is an exemplary case of a monastic scholar who was thoroughly immersed in tantric practice and theory.

Transmission in Tantra

A fundamental prerequisite for becoming a tantric practitioner is that the aspirant first receive, from a qualified guru, a ritual transmission of the tantra with which the practices to be performed are associated. We have already seen the specialized importance of transmission in the Treasure tradition, and the critical “connectedness” it creates. A similar emphasis on transmission, and the resulting link between individuals in a lineage, obtains throughout the tantric sects. It is literally an unbreakable rule that tantric practice, such as that outlined below, must be preceded by permission and instruction from a teacher who has experience with those same practices and who has in turn received the appropriate transmission from a qualified teacher. With the exception of the initiated circle, the tantric teachings and practices are kept secret, because they are thought to be so powerful. Hence the preeminence of the guru in tantric traditions, and Jigme Lingpa’s own preoccupation with his teachers in his visions. Hence also one of the foremost goals of his career: to transmit teachings and practices to his own disciples, an act that will tie them together with social and political bonds of fidelity.

There are many kinds of initiatory transmissions in tantric Buddhism, varying both in terms of which teachings are being conveyed and the method of conveyance.¹⁷ They are distinguished in terms of how much, or how little, ritual is used; whether words and symbols are used or not; and, if so, how such words and symbols function. In addition to the very common terms “transmission” (*brgyud*; also *lung*) and “initiation” or “empowerment” (*dbang-bskur*; Skt. *abhishekha*), Jigme Lingpa mentions other kinds of transmission in the secret autobiographies: the “introduction” (*ngo-sprod*) to a practice; the rite granting permission (*rjes-gnang*) to perform a meditative technique; the ceremony conferring blessings (*byin-rlabs*); the “assigning of the life force” (*rig-gtad*) initiation; and the standard “four initiations” (*dbang-bzhi*) of Indic tantric Buddhism. Of special importance for Jigme Lingpa is the “initiation into the display-energy of awareness” (*rig-pa'i-rtsal dbang*), the key Great Perfection transmission.

Jigme Lingpa celebrates his receipt of transmissions in his autobiographies, since they are rites of passage that make possible what he wants to accomplish and who he wants to become in his life. We see Jigme Lingpa drinking “the nectar of profound maturation and liberation” (which in part he means literally, referring to the imbibing of symbolic liquids during the ritual) [26] or receiving other initiations especially before entering a retreat. Jigme Lingpa speaks of taking initiations on his own as well [6]. This means he achieved the states that a particular practice is meant to cultivate, and thereby renewed the transmission he had originally received from a teacher.¹⁸ In 7 it is Jigme Lingpa’s experience of radiant light itself that confers an initiation on him, suggesting again what we saw repeatedly in the previous chapter: that Jigme Lingpa understands the very heart of his realizations and experiences to be fundamentally communicative in nature.

After receiving an initiation, the student is supposed to put its teachings into practice. Belief in the efficacy of personal effort now comes to the fore. For the serious practitioner, this means going into retreat. The first exercises performed there are preparatory. At 9 Jigme Lingpa reports that he was doing “preliminary practice” (*sngon-gro*), by which he means a rigorous set of five exercises that precede the “main” tantric practices. The preliminary practices are: prostration; recitation of a “taking refuge” prayer and arousal of compassion for sentient beings; recitation of the purificatory Vajrasattva mantra; performance of the “mandala of the universe” offering; and a guruyoga visualization. Each are performed one hundred thousand times, totaling five hundred thousand ritual acts.¹⁹ Many Tibetan Buddhists, both monastic and lay, complete several sets of the preliminaries during their lifetimes; we can assume that Jigme Lingpa completed the set at least once. The exercises are both physical and psychological; they foster an attitude of devotion toward the practitioner’s teachers and tradition and are believed to purify bad karma.

Jigme Lingpa specifies at 9 that the preliminary practice he was doing was guruyoga, the last and most advanced of the five preliminaries, and one that also becomes a “main” tantric practice as such. Guruyoga consists in meditatively visualizing a sequence of images, the upshot of which is some kind of merging between the practitioner and the guru. This guru is envisioned as a single teacher, or as a combination of many teachers and celestial buddhas. The teacher Jigme Lingpa would have visualized could have been Tukchog Dorje or other masters of his youth, but more likely he identified his primary gurus as Padmasambhava and Longchenpa. We see in the autobiographies how important any contact with these two teachers and the other members of his lineage are to Jigme Lingpa. It is not an exaggeration to say that both his secret autobiographies, with their countless invocations and epiphanies of such masters, are in their entirety an expression of guruyoga.

Creative Self-Visualization

The idea of merging with a visualized guru, with its resulting transformation of the self, introduces us to Jigme Lingpa’s main tantric practices. Most basic among these is visualization, a widespread meditative technique in tantra that has profound implications for Jigme Lingpa’s understanding—and autobiographical representation—of himself. Visualization has to do with kinds of imagining that are similar to what Jung called “active” and “archetypal.” The latter comes especially to the fore in the spontaneous visions that occur as Jigme Lingpa makes progress in his practice.²⁰

A principal goal of tantric Buddhist visualization is to reimagine, and thereby to transform, the person performing the practice. The procedure is guided by a text, the Sanskrit term for which is *sādhana* (Tib. *sgrub-thabs*). *Sādhanas* have been written in great quantity both by Indians and Tibetans.²¹ They codify meditative techniques, often representing a vision which their author once had.

Sādhanas describe a sequence of meditations during which the practitioner assumes, or “accomplishes,” the identity of a particular buddha figure or deity, whose general label in Tibetan is “yidam” (*yi-dam*; Skt. *iṣṭadevatā*, “the deity to whom one is committed”). The yidam figure can be any of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, or deities in Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna Buddhism. In his secret autobiographies, the yidams that Jigme Lingpa indicates he was visualizing—the horse-headed Hayagrīva [6], Vajrakīla [15, 29, and perhaps 30], and the group of “peaceful and wrathful” deities [40]—are all associated with the Mahāyoga class of the Old Tantras.²² Sādhanas can also focus upon historical human teachers.

Sādhana meditation usually proceeds in two parts: the “creation phase” (Skt. *utpattikrama*) and the “fulfillment phase” (Skt. *sampannakrama*).²³ The creation phase of the meditation entails the construction, via the imagination, of a visualized scene, a scene which includes the practitioner. The practitioner’s conventional self-image is first imagined to have dissolved into emptiness. Then a series of objects are visualized that culminate in a new self-image of the practitioner as a buddha or deity figure.

The procedure often commences with an image of a place, which can be a mandala structure, a palace, or a seat. This sets the stage for the unfolding scene. There appears in this place a mantric “seed syllable,” which, in a process that is symbolic of human birth, gives rise to an image of a buddha or other enlightened deity. The meditator identifies with this figure, imagining that he or she is that buddha. There ensues a variety of ritual and liturgical actions that reinforce and facilitate this identification. The meditator invites the “primordial consciousness being”—that is, the “actual” buddha or deity who is residing in a “pure land”—to enter, animate, and bless the “sworn being,” which is the visualized figure that was just produced. Verses of praise are then recited to oneself, the newly self-consecrated buddha/deity. A mantra is recited many times as a way of achieving verbal identity with this figure. Other ritual applications can also be appended (see 6, 15, 40).

The desired fruit of creation meditation is the personal transformation of oneself, a deluded being caught in the snare of *samsāra*, into an enlightened buddha. The Buddhist doctrine of karma—asserting the agency of the individual’s previous thoughts and actions in determining the species and circumstances of their succeeding lives—is here taken to an extreme conclusion: identity and experience as expressed in body, speech, and mind can be created and controlled if there is understanding of how they are constructed. However, to avoid reification of this new identity, sādhanas often commence with a visualization of emptiness, dissolve the image of the buddha or deity back into emptiness at the end, and in between describe the figure as transparent or elusive like an image in a mirror.²⁴

At 6 Jigme Lingpa discusses his achievements in visualizing himself as the tantric buddha Hayagrīva. The “three spheres” of his creation of himself as this deity, by which he probably means his “body, speech, and mind,” exemplify the confidence and strength of a “champion athlete.” The result is that he “knew the

rising of the mature awareness-holder." The "awareness-holder," a general term for the Vajrayāna adept, is analogous to the bodhisattva of the Mahāyāna; we have already met it in the context of Treasure transmission, where the phrase is an epithet for Padmasambhava and other Nyingma patriarchs. The "completely mature awareness-holder" is a more technical designation, referring to the first of what are usually listed as four kinds of awareness-holders, who correspond to four degrees of achievement on the way to enlightenment.²⁵ The realization of the completely mature awareness-holder is equated by Nyingma exegetes with Mahāyāna specifications about the first level (Skt. *bhūmi*) of the bodhisattva path; such an individual is said by some commentators to be on the verge of attaining the "path of seeing" (Skt. *darśanamarga*). Completely mature awareness-holders are defined as having achieved control over their self-image, because their visualization of their identification with the buddha/deity has stabilized. This stabilization is metaphorically called a "seal" (*phyag-rgya*; Skt. *mudrā*), another term Jigme Lingpa uses in this passage. In this context it means that the practitioner has sealed, or finalized, the transformation of his or her body image and experience into that of the buddha figure. It also means that an impression, or trace, has been established which is mnemonically efficient enough to be maintained through the process of death and rebirth.²⁶ Jigme Lingpa's claim to have achieved the level of the mature awareness-holder reinforces his assertion, made in other passages of the secret autobiographies, that he was able to remember past lives.

Fulfillment Yoga and Internal Experience

The terminology of "body, speech, and mind" already indicates that sādhana practitioners do not attempt to identify with a buddha/deity only by constructing an image of themselves in that buddha's outer likeness. Transformation of the self in sādhana is also sought in the verbal sphere, by chanting the buddha's mantra, as well as in the mental, internal sphere. This inner transformation is undertaken through an esoteric set of exercises that cultivate the *experience* of the buddha/deity. Jigme Lingpa is absorbed in these practices at several points in *Dancing Moon*. By visualizing inner psychophysical organs and movements of energy, practitioners such as Jigme Lingpa endeavor to intensify their awareness of their own bodily and mental reality and to transform that intensified awareness into an enlightened experience. At their most complex, these practices involve sexual union with a partner, but that is not essential.

A comment is in order here about Tibetan terms for experience and other meditatively trained subjective sensations. A distinction is made in Tibetan parlance between meditatively cultivated experience (*nyams*) and a more general category of experience (often indicated by forms of the verb *myong-ba*). It is largely the former to which I will be referring in the following discussion. Experience of the cultivated, meditative sort is germane to Jigme Lingpa's entire

autobiographical project; the term “visionary experience” (*nyams-snang*) appears in the very title of *Dancing Moon*. This deliberately induced kind of experience does not necessarily refer to “experience-as-such” but rather to particular states of absorption. Three principal varieties are often distinguished: bliss (*bde-ba*), lucidity or manifestation (*gsal-ba*), and absence of discursive thought (*mi-rtogs-pa*). But other experiences are also commonly discussed, including the bodily heat that has long been said in Buddhism to accompany meditation (as has bliss).²⁷ Meditative experiences are seen as tricky matters; they can be negative or positive, soteriologically speaking, as Jigme Lingpa frequently indicates in his secret autobiographies.²⁸ Even the positive ones are ambiguous, since on the one hand they are desired and expressly cultivated, but on the other hand they are dangerous: if they are not understood to be empty, it is warned, they can become the object of attachment, whereby the entire purpose of the practice would be destroyed. Hence the point is not simply to have more meditative experiences but to achieve “realization” (*rtogs-pa*) or understanding of the nature of such experiences. Nonetheless, we cannot help but note the great interest in subjectivity in this tradition, albeit a subjectivity in which the subject itself is seen as empty.²⁹

One of the principal practices in Tibetan Buddhism in which empty meditative experience is cultivated is that of the “fulfillment phase” (*sampannakrama*) of the *sādhana*, which sometimes follows the creation phase.³⁰ Fulfillment meditation is also commonly referred to as “the path of method” (*thabs-lam*), that is, the path in which special methods are employed. Another euphemism for fulfillment technique, especially when it refers to practices involving sexual union, is “third initiation,” or “initiation into the primordial consciousness of intelligence” (*shes-rab ye-shes-kyi dbang-bskur*) the locution used by Jigme Lingpa at 28. These phrases refer to the fact that fulfillment practices are first conveyed by master to disciple in the third of the four parts of the typical tantric initiation ritual. They also suggest the secrecy of these practices and their limitation to those who have received the requisite initiations. In 28 Jigme Lingpa also uses a figurative phrase, “the profound path of the envoy,” where “envoy” (*pho-nya*) indicates that the internal cakras and channels that are visualized in fulfillment meditation serve as emissaries of the subject, acting to facilitate the subject’s experience. There is also the common appellation “channel and wind” (*rtsarlung*) meditation, which names two of the three principal psychophysical factors of fulfillment practice.

The three factors are the channels, vital winds, and elements. These have long been the central focus of Indic yoga.³¹ As for the first of these, three principal channels (*rtsa*; Skt. *nāḍī*) are imagined as columnar tubes running through the trunk of the body.³² They are not thought to be material or physically observable, but to indicate the directions and locations of the flow of psycho-physical experience. The central channel is usually imagined as originating at the top of the crown (sometimes it bends back down to the center of the fore-

head) and ending either at the perineum or the tip of the sexual organ. The standard name for the central channel in Buddhism is *avadhūtī*, but Jigme Lingpa makes a host of figurative references to it. Sometimes he sees the central channel as a tent or a house in his visions, and sometimes he simply calls it the “center” (*dbu-ma*) [7, 30], a term which is also the Tibetan name of the Buddhist philosophical school Madhyamaka and suggests the nature of the mental attitude needed to abide in the central channel. Jigme Lingpa also calls the central channel Rāhula [30], an epithet that implies an analogy between this deity/planet, who in Indian mythological astronomy swallows the sun or moon during an eclipse, and *avadhūtī*, whose function it is to take in the vital winds and the “tigle” elements of the “sun and moon” during fulfillment yoga.

There are said to be two side channels on the right and left (the reverse in females) of the central channel (*ro-ma*; Skt. *rasanā*; and *rkyang-ma*; Skt. *lalanā*). These control bodily functions and regulate the entrance of vital wind into the central channel—hence Jigme Lingpa’s allegory casting the side channels as ministers, who “decid[e] the law in the dungeon” [28]. Numerous other subsidiary channels are imagined to stem from the central channel and extend all over the body.

At key spots along the central channel—usually at the crown, the forehead, the throat, the heart, the navel, and the sexual organs—are “circles,” or to use the well-known Sanskrit term, *cakras*. At the site of each cakra, the two side channels twist around the central channel and obstruct its free functioning. The virtuoso yogin endeavors to loosen these “knots,” thus enabling the cakras to open like lotus flowers and to become the locus of blissful sensations.

The channels are understood primarily as the passages for the vital wind (*rlung*; Skt. *vāyu*). This wind is the second principal factor of fulfillment-phase yoga. It is associated with, but not limited to, breath (*rtsol*; Skt. *prāṇa*) and with life, or “soul” (*srog*; sometimes = Skt. *jīva*), another term that Jigme Lingpa uses frequently in his secret autobiographies.³³ Vital wind is believed to be the mount on which consciousness rides. In an often-repeated formulation, vital wind is said to be blind, consciousness a cripple; each needs the other in order to travel.

In Nyingma traditions of inner yoga, a distinction is made between the “primordial consciousness wind,” which is associated with enlightened states, and the “karmic wind,” the energy behind gross life-breath and the grasper-grasped syndrome that Jigme Lingpa ever endeavors to eliminate.³⁴ The gross vital wind is believed to course through the bodies of ordinary, samsāric sentient beings via the subsidiary channels, but to be prevented from entering the central channel because of the tight knots wound by the side channels. The gross vital wind is synonymous with a distracted, confused state of mind that grasps at sense objects and conceptualizes mental objects. In 22 and 28, Jigme Lingpa expresses the widespread belief that the disharmony of the vital winds and their dispersal into the minor channels can cause illness and premature death. Thus, the first major goal of the practitioner performing fulfillment meditation is to facilitate the vital wind’s entrance into the central channel.

The method by which the yogin attempts to bring the winds into the central channel involves a combination of imagination and physical exercises, which together produce both mental and physical effects. An inhaled breath is held down and mingled with the inner “downward motility wind” (*thur-sel*), which is in turn drawn upward; this combined wind then is encouraged to enter the central channel by virtue of a series of supporting visualizations.³⁵ Success is supposed to be indicated by the appearance of certain signs, among them, particular types of visions. It is thought that the manipulation of the vital winds has a direct connection to the occurrence of visions (Jigme Lingpa cites the hallucinations that result from mixing one’s vital winds with the drug *datura* to prove this connection).³⁶ In Jigme Lingpa’s secret autobiographies, entrance of his vital wind into his central channel is what heralds the onset of elaborate visions of heavens and radiant light (e.g., in 7). And in 10, the escape of the vital wind back into the channels of the five senses marks the loss of a set of visions.³⁷

In one of the most sustained passages in the secret autobiographies, Jigme Lingpa teaches a dākinī the techniques of fulfillment meditation [28]. Parts of this passage are remarkable for characterizing the subject of this practice as a female, an issue on which we will reflect in chapter 6. But here we can unpack instead one of the passage’s central allegories. The subject—styled “the son, the king of awareness,” here cast in the first-person voice of Jigme Lingpa—imprisons the two potent vital winds, “grasper and grasped,” in the dungeon of *avadhūtī*. Keeping the winds in prison is not easy; it requires the oral transmission of special instructions, which Jigme Lingpa glosses as “envoys.” Following these instructions, the subject employs the two side channels as ministers to keep order and enforce harmony. The unruly winds, intimidated by the glory of yogic awareness and the transmissions of the lineage, submit and merge harmoniously “in a single intention,” and dualistic grasping is quelled.

The next step involves the third factor of fulfillment yoga: the “elements” (*khams*). The more common word for element in this context is “tigle” (*thig-le*), a term having several distinct meanings, with no English analogue of similar semantic range. For this reason I am retaining the Tibetan word, for no matter in what context the term is used, many, if not all, of its meanings are resonant, including procreative seed (either male or female), quintessence, sphere, and drop. “Tigle” generally translates the Sanskrit *bindu*, but the special sense the term has in Great Perfection, to be discussed below, is hard to find in Indic sources. “Tigle” is also sometimes glossed with that old Mahāyāna word *bodhicitta*, “thought of enlightenment.”³⁸ It is conceived as the basic stuff, as it were, of enlightenment—as well as *samsāra*. It is traced back to the moment of conception, when the father’s and mother’s tigles join, sandwiching in between them the baby-to-be’s own seminal mind. Both the male and female tigle elements are believed to remain in the body (regardless of gender) throughout life, rejoining only at death or in those special cases when an accomplished meditator practices fulfillment-phase yoga.³⁹ In Nyingmapa traditions, a distinction is made between gross, or “conventional” tigle, from which originate the bodily

elements and which course through the body in a monthly cycle, and “ultimate” tigle, the basis for enlightened realization and certain Great Perfection visionary practices.⁴⁰ It is conventional tigle that is mobilized in fulfillment yoga.

The cultivation and channeling of tigle is what is believed to create meditative experiences. When the vital winds have been brought into the central channel and merged into a single, controlled “intention,” they are used to initiate a process in which the practitioner endeavors to experience the tigle elements with intense bliss (a far greater bliss is possible than that achieved by mundane sexual orgasm, it is said). We can return to Jigme Lingpa’s instructions to the dākinī in 28. The practice begins with the two winds, breath and life, visualized at the top and the bottom of the central channel respectively. In those positions they are associated with the two tigle elements, female and male, imaged as fire and liquid.⁴¹ Breath at the bottom of the central channel fans a visualized fire of inner heat of “tumo” (*gtum-mo*; the female “sun”), which blazes upward. The heat is seen as melting the tigle element (the male “moon”) at the top of the crown. As the nectar melts and mingles with the heat from below, it descends down the central channel through the four cakras. This is said to cause four great joys, which is what Jigme Lingpa is referring to when he asserts that “the sun and moon each hold wealth of their own”: he means that they have the ability to generate bliss.⁴² After the nectar collects in the lowest cakra, “the pond of primordial consciousness, the Dharma field,” the yogin is to reverse the movement and draw the imagined liquid back up the central channel through the four cakras to the crown of the head. All the while, experience is intensifying. The session ends when the yogin performs exercises to disperse the blissful elements back out into the minor channels throughout the body.

In 30, Jigme Lingpa is referring to much the same practice. The liquid moon, here represented by the mantric syllable *vam*, has reached the palace of the dawning sun, the “field” of the mantric syllable *e* (*evam* means “thus” in Sanskrit, signifying ultimate truth).⁴³ The two are integrated in the “glorious first buddha,” “the nucleus of the earth,” “the center of the world,” “the vajra heap village”—all epithets for the central channel, where bodhicitta, the primal element of enlightenment, has been residing, waiting to be activated.

Sexuality and Bliss-Emptiness

Why do Buddhist yogins practice fulfillment yoga? Several sorts of benefits are attributed to it. A relatively mundane benefit of the harmony believed to result from bringing the winds into the central channel is longevity and the banishment of illness. These are autobiographical concerns of the most basic sort, and Jigme Lingpa mentions them in connection with his own fulfillment practice in 28 and 30.

But more pertinent is the fundamentally soteriological orientation of fulfillment practice, in the way it links physiology with bondage—or liberation. The

physical analogue of successful fulfillment practice is sometimes expressed by the metaphor of the “vajra body,” into which practitioners endeavor to transform their gross, fleshly bodies. Bringing the winds into the central channel and cultivating the bliss and heat associated with the tigles and cakras is understood to be synonymous with a loosening of the knots around the central channel, allowing the subtle winds and energies to course unobstructedly. This in turn is believed to engender Buddhist realization: “*samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*’s pristine freedom,” the “one taste” of appearance and mind, as Jigme Lingpa puts it. It is also believed to make the subtle winds and energies manifest externally, leading to visions of the “pure lands” as well as an ability to create apparitions of the body that can be perceived by others.⁴⁴ The Treasure tradition adds, as already mentioned, a special claim: that the entrance, abiding, and dissolution of the vital winds in the central channel is the sine qua non for the receipt of a “transmission of the realized” [10].

In 28, Jigme Lingpa cites an additional benefit of fulfillment yoga: it purifies the practitioner who has broken vows. This has to do with the sexual aspects of the practice. On the surface, it seems ironic: fulfillment yoga, which is sometimes performed with a consort of the opposite sex, would itself seem to constitute a violation of the renunciant’s vows. But when it is performed properly, orgasm is controlled and transformed. This means that in fact fulfillment yoga of the sexual sort would involve the most rigorous type of vow of all: what more difficult renunciation is there than to stop at the brink of orgasm and try to reverse the flow of sexual fluids back up the central channel?

This sexual side of fulfillment-phase yoga requires further discussion. A sexual metaphor is unmistakable in the union of male and female tigle elements, not to mention the experience of bliss that accompanies that union. On the other hand, fulfillment practice does not necessarily involve sexual congress. Rather, it is most often performed by a single individual, either male or female, using a variety of imaginative psychophysical exercises. A full set of elements, winds, and channels are believed to be present in a single individual’s body. Note too that the fruits of the practice have to do with the individual’s welfare and progress on the path, not the welfare of a couple.

But fulfillment yoga is also practiced by couples. When they do so, however, there is no talk of love, nor any celebration of the union of the sexes. We do not even find the kind of normative prescriptions for coupling that we might expect, given the pervasive tantric symbolism of gender complementarity and male and female aspects of enlightened states. Sexual union in the context of fulfillment yoga is not a sacralization of the love act. When yogins such as Jigme Lingpa engage in fulfillment-phase sexual union, they do so for other reasons.

Sexual yoga, for example, is believed to facilitate Treasure discovery; we will explore why this is so in chapter 6. The more general reason why fulfillment yoga is performed with a consort is that the consort is believed to strengthen the practice. This is because the presence of a sexual partner facilitates the

experience of bliss. Even though meditation of all kinds has long been associated with bliss in Indic systems, it is thought that many people cannot experience meditative bliss easily. For those cases where the practitioner is having difficulty in experiencing bliss, the sexual arousal facilitated by an attractive consort is used to ignite it.⁴⁵ But as is often noted, the bliss that is deemed soteriologically beneficial is of a special kind: it is to be experienced as empty—as “bliss-emptiness” (*bde-stong*), an important term that often occurs in Jigme Lingpa’s secret autobiographies. The recognition of the emptiness of the experience is the critical difference that distinguishes fulfillment phase sexual yoga from mundane sex. Bliss-as-emptiness is not seen as an object of attachment; rather it is an intensification of experience *without attachment*.⁴⁶

The other way in which the consort is deemed valuable for fulfillment yoga has already been alluded to: the restraint that is needed to resist or transform orgasm will be greater due to the greater bliss that results from the presence of a partner. This resistance is thought to strengthen the practitioner. In a cryptic verse in 30, Jigme Lingpa also asserts that his performance of sexual yoga served to establish the lineage of his disciples. The relationship between the two accomplishments is not made clear, but it is interesting to note the connection that is made between an esoteric meditative practice and matters of more prosaic autobiographical concern, such as attracting good students and assuring a future legacy.

Because of the promised benefits, many Tibetan practitioners of fulfillment yoga perform it with a consort. Often monks and nuns will join with an *imagined* consort, but some take an actual one. This is expected of Treasure discoverers, and it is not uncommon in the Nyingma school, many of whose lamas have a wife or consort(s), often referred to euphemistically as “secret mother” (*gsang-yum*). Sexual yoga between actual partners is still practiced today among Nyingmapa lay couples, both in Tibet and in the exile communities in the Himalayas.⁴⁷ Jigme Lingpa signals to his readers on several occasions that he himself performed fulfillment yoga with a partner, and although it is always ambiguous whether he is referring to an imagined consort or a real one, we can be confident that he practiced with real women on occasion.

I speculated about Jigme Lingpa’s wife in chapter 2 and noted that he had a son. A yogic consort is not necessarily to be conflated with a wife, however, and is certainly not to be connected with the presence of children. As already indicated, sexual yoga is usually not supposed to end in ejaculation. I have heard Tibetans joke that children are precisely the sign that someone has *not* been successful in their fulfillment-phase practice. The fact that Jigme Lingpa had a son, however, only proves that on the occasion when his partner conceived a child they were not practicing—or achieving—the goals of fulfillment yoga. Jigme Lingpa portrays himself in 28 as an expert in the practice, distinguishing pointedly between someone such as himself, rare as an *udumbara* flower, who has tasted the “sweet lion’s milk,” and the many charlatans who masquerade

as sexual-yoga virtuosi, all the while merely indulging their passions. He is even critical of those who have mastered the “instrument gesture” (*thur-ma'i phyag-rgya*), an exercise in which males try to suck a slender implement into the urethra by drawing their vital winds upward. Such persons are believed to be able to reverse their sexual flow, but Jigme Lingpa disdainfully indicates that this still does not prove that they practice fulfillment yoga successfully, that is, experience bliss as empty. Even mules don't reproduce, Jigme Lingpa notes wryly, warning that those who misuse the practice will suffer in Lacerating Mountain Hell.

Jigme Lingpa's characterization of himself as a master of fulfillment yoga, in contradistinction to his contemporaries who lack such expertise, creates one of the key insignia of his self-image. In 28 the reader is told that the lineage Jigme Lingpa holds for sexual yoga is rare, and further that he is the only one who has really understood its practice. He goes on to stress the importance of secrecy—another hallmark of his self-conception—thereby underlining simultaneously the preciousness of these techniques, his own privileged access to them, and his mastery of the rigor they demand. Finally, we can see that Jigme Lingpa's expertise in sexual yoga endows him with a sense of autonomy, a sentiment that we will see thematized in the Great Perfection tradition but that is evident here too in the advice he gives to his *dākinī* disciple at the end of this passage. His exhortation to her to shoot her arrows at every kingdom suggests a life of taking chances and operating confidently in the public domain. (Khanpo Palden Sherab, especially moved by this line, felt it means that the practitioner should not stay at home or in retreat but should wander in the world and assume the role of a powerful teacher.) His comment that a connection will only be made with those with whom one already has a “karmic link” recalls his emblematic self-defining prophecy in the opening to *Dākki's Secret-Talk*: “He will launch whoever is connected to him into the heaven of the awareness-holders.” This is the language of the bodhisattva ethic, but suffused with the particular flavor of independence and individuality with which Tibetan tantra is practiced.

Great Perfection

The complex techniques of creation visualization and fulfillment yoga form only a part of what we need to say about Jigme Lingpa's meditative practices, how he was developing himself, and what belief systems contributed to his secret autobiographical portrayal. Equally integral to his secret self-construction was the “Great Perfection” (*rdzogs-pa chen-po*) tradition, developed in Nyingma, Bon, and certain Kagyu lineages.⁴⁸

The historical origins of Great Perfection are not entirely clear. References to the phrase are found in certain Old Tantras of Indic origin, such as the Mahā-yoga tantra *Guhyagarbha*, where it refers to the final culmination of creation and fulfillment meditation.⁴⁹ The fully developed Great Perfection tradition perhaps

appears first in the Atiyoga tantras, which subordinate visualization to an iconoclastic focus upon enlightened realization as such, along with special meditative techniques. This does not mean that the Atiyoga tantras are entirely free of ritual, however; many of them include substantial discussion of initiation and other procedures.⁵⁰ Indeed, transmission is fundamental to the Great Perfection tradition, although often there is expressed a preference for initiations that are stripped of ritual and accoutrements, and are instead direct and “without formulation” (that is, the *spros-med*, *shin-tu spros-med*, and *rab-tu spros-med* types). A principal Great Perfection transmission offers an “introduction” (*ngo-sprod*) to awareness. There is also the “initiation into the display-energy of awareness” (*rig-pa'i rtsal-dbang*) mentioned repeatedly by Jigme Lingpa in his secret autobiographies. During these kinds of transmission, the teacher guides students through special meditations that are meant to make them experience the “nature of mind” directly.

Nyingma accounts maintain that the Atiyoga tantras were brought from India to Tibet and translated there in the eighth to ninth centuries by the Indian master Vimalamitra, the Tibetan teacher Vairocana, and others.⁵¹ But the history of this period is overlaid with myth and needs more study. We do have expositions of the Great Perfection similar to that presented in some Atiyoga tantras in several short eighth- or ninth-century treatises preserved at Tunhuang, as pointed out by Samten Karmay.⁵² These documents attest to the fact that some of the critical components of what is now referred to as Great Perfection were current at that relatively early moment of Tibetan Buddhism. Some Tibetologists, not to mention some Tibetan critics, have been of the opinion that the Great Perfection tradition’s principal source was Ch’an Buddhism, principally on the basis of the latter’s similarity with the iconoclastic views expressed in the “mind section” (*sems sde*) tantras.⁵³ However, early Tibetan exegetes of Great Perfection themselves explicitly distinguished the tradition from Ch’an;⁵⁴ and certainly the distinctive practices for cultivating visions of radiant light described in the Great Perfection “key instruction section” (*man-ngag sde*) tantras are not found in Ch’an at all.⁵⁵ The presence of the term Great Perfection in Indian tantras does indicate an Indic connection, but Great Perfection is most likely a syncretic tradition, forged primarily in Tibet and representing several creative trends in meditative theory and practice that were fermenting around the eighth to tenth centuries in Tibet and neighboring lands.

Great Perfection practice is often discussed under two headings: “Cutting Through the Solidity” (*khregs-gcod*) and “Supreme Vision” (*thod-rgal*), rubrics that go back at least to the period of the composition of the “key instruction” tantras.⁵⁶ The first, “Cutting Through,” represents a view and practice akin to those found in many brands of Mahāyāna Buddhism: a philosophically motivated critique of the reification of existence, a radical nondualism, and an attempt to experience an empty reality “naturally,” through nonstructured meditation.

Nonduality

The salient philosophical position of Great Perfection Cutting Through is “nonduality,” a theme already central to Indian Madhyamaka and Yogācāra doctrine.⁵⁷ The basic nature of samsāra and nirvāṇa, good and bad, and any other conceptual opposites is the same; there is no ultimate difference between them. It is just such a theme of nonduality that opens *Dancing Moon*. Jigme Lingpa bemoans a sad irony: the world fails to realize that there is no absolute metaphysical or ethical distinction to be made between deluded sentient beings and the primordial buddha Samantabhadra. Any difference that does obtain between freedom and bondage—and his tradition does acknowledge a very great gulf indeed between saṃsāric delusion and enlightened manifestation, even if this gulf is not absolute—is ultimately only a matter of whether nonduality is recognized, or ignored [1].

The metaphysics of nonduality translates epistemologically and psychologically into the idea that one’s situation depends entirely upon what one makes of it, a point that was also thematized in Mahāyāna texts. The principle is central to the project of Jigme Lingpa’s secret autobiographies. He applies it to his own visionary experiences, which from one perspective he sees as delusory and from another as the manifestations of enlightened awareness. This undecidability makes for far-reaching self-doubt, and he worries that the personal experiences that he is to report in his secret autobiography are only the “extremely hollow” delusions of a dream [1].

The soteriology of nonduality is based on the entailment that illusion itself must be illusory. This logic is crucial to many strands of Buddhism and underlies their theories on the possibility of enlightenment. If illusion were real in an essential way, it could never be eliminated. Sentient beings must already be enlightened, or at least have access to it by nature, if enlightenment is to be possible at all; enlightenment cannot be created, because if it were, according to a fundamental Buddhist dictum, it would also be subject to destruction. The soteriology of nonduality also implies that to realize the ultimately perfected nature of samsāra is in itself what nirvāṇa consists in. This logic is at the bottom of Jigme Lingpa’s description of his salvific visions in 7, for example, where it is precisely his understanding that samsāra and nirvāṇa are not separate that makes possible his vision of the land which is “apart from mind’s grasping imputations.”

A correlate doctrine, once again pervasive in Buddhism, is that imputation (*kun-rtog*; Skt. *parikalpa*) or conceptual thinking (*rnam-rtog*; Skt. *vikalpa*) is what constitutes the fall from the exalted realization of enlightenment. Especially if informed by grasping, these kinds of thinking serve to reify the difference between subject and object, thereby undermining the all-important realization of nonduality. It is such grasping at dichotomized appearance and analytical mental consciousness that Jigme Lingpa says caused him to lose his exalted

visions in 7 and 10.⁵⁸ The trick is to maintain a simultaneous perception both of nirvāṇa—which includes “pure primal appearance,” as well as the enjoyment bodies (Skt. *sambhogakāya*) of the buddhas—and of the deluded realms of samsāra [7]. That in any case is the actual situation at hand, according to Great Perfection, because the same “ground” informs all phenomena, enlightened and not.

The Ground: Unformulated, Self-Aware

At the heart of Great Perfection nonduality is the idea that a ground (*gzhi*) underlies and unites all phenomena.⁵⁹ The notion of such a ground and other kindred metaphors is primarily indebted to what is called “third turning of the wheel” Buddhism, that is, the literature associated with the idea of a universal “buddha nature,” as well as some Yogācāra and “Mind-Only” treatises.⁶⁰ But Great Perfection descriptions of the ground are particularly detailed and introduce distinctions not found in the Indic materials.

The Great Perfection texts consider the ground of existence from three perspectives: its nature (*ngo-bo*), its inherent quality (*rang-bzhin*), and its compassion (*thugs-rje*).⁶¹ Ontologically, its nature is glossed, in what is probably a uniquely Tibetan characterization, as “primal purity” (*ka-dag*). In his secret autobiographies Jigme Lingpa often uses such synonyms for the ground’s primal purity as “reality” (Skt. *dharmaṭā*), “the ultimate meaning” (*don-dam*), “the genuine” (*gnyug-ma*), and the “vajra ground,” that which has “dwelled primordially in own-mind,” as he puts it in 2.

As could be expected, the ground’s primordiality calls into question any attempt to denote it in words, although this does not necessarily imply that it is a holistic or mystic state; in fact, the ground is understood to be intrinsically expressive. The ground does exceed language, but the phrases in Jigme Lingpa’s secret autobiographies that express this inexpressibility thematize freedom and escape from language, not static closure. The ground is “free from extremes” (*mtha'-bral*)—by which is meant conceptual or linguistic reification—and is “indeterminate” (*lung-ma-bstan*). The ground’s slippery undecidability is especially thematized in Jigme Lingpa’s secret autobiographies as “unformulated” (*spros-bral*). The ground, not being anything in particular at all, is in itself free from formulation. Unformulatedness, a central notion in Great Perfection ontology, is another way of saying nonduality: all (dualistic) formulations are provisional and not intrinsic, while the ground itself, in its true nature, eludes the reification so often implicit in distinctions and oppositions.

The ground is the home base of Jigme Lingpa’s secret autobiographies. The ground has to do with persons because of a crucial point: the ground is aware. The ground is the naked “consciousness of the present” to which Jigme Lingpa reverts after a vision (7) or the “base, the naked state of conceptlessness” into which he awakens after another experience [10]. Especially, the ground is “self-aware” (*rang-rig*) or “self-arisen primordial consciousness” (*rang-byung ye-shes*), two key Great Perfection terms for self-reflexive knowing.⁶²

The ground's awareness and unformulatedness are also given psychological analogues, hence the implications of Great Perfection theory for the personality conception of virtuosi like Jigme Lingpa. The ground is "aimless" (*gtad-med*), a term with which Jigme Lingpa frequently characterizes the visions he sees, as well as his own state. The characterization is not pejorative; quite the contrary, it is considered a high achievement to be aimless. It implies that someone has no grasping or self-interested intentionality, but rather abides steadily in an unformulated, open way. The critical term "self-liberation" (*rang-grol*) also serves both as an ontological/soteriological specification and as a personality trait. The person who is self-liberated is one who finds enlightenment in any and all states and is not moved into suffering and anxiety by changing conditions. Another common characterization of the ground is that it is free, or unobstructed (*zang-thal*). This translates into the free and spontaneous personal style of Jigme Lingpa's self-portrayal.

The ground's intrinsic awareness raises again the issues of experience and subjectivity, although just what kind of experiential self-awareness is supposed to consist in is not altogether clear. We can say, at least, that it is not the sort of specific experiential state that accompanies fulfillment practice.⁶³ Further, the ground is not seen as a personal subjectivity as such, and it certainly does not denote a bounded, reified subject. Some of what is implied by the ground's intrinsic awareness and self-reflexivity are historically related to third-turning and Mind-Only doctrines in Indian Buddhism. But Great Perfection exegetes such as Longchenpa distinguish the pure and primordial ground of which they speak from the Mind-Only ground of *samsāric* consciousness. The latter is the "ground-of-all consciousness" (*ālayavijñāna*; Tib. *kun-gzhi rnam-par shes-pa*), and Longchenpa, usually followed by Jigme Lingpa in his secret autobiographies, also considers the shorter term "ground-of-all" (*kun-gzhi*) to refer to that secondary *samsāric* ground that has already been polluted by discriminative thinking.⁶⁴ Longchenpa's metaphor is that the ground-of-all, the root of *samsāra*, is a ship, whereas the Great Perfection ground, the root of *nirvāṇa* and the equivalent of a buddha's Dharma body, is the ocean. In his incessant internal debate about the authenticity of his experiences, Jigme Lingpa self-deprecatingly characterizes his own visions as originating, not in the ground of primal purity, but rather in a ground-of-all that he associates with darkness [6], stains [7], conceptual thoughts [10], and (discursive) consciousness [13].

A key dimension of the primordially pure ground, as it appears in Great Perfection texts, is its "radiant light" (*'od-gsal*).⁶⁵ Jigme Lingpa often specifies that he was in a "state of radiant light" when he saw a particular vision. Like bliss and heat, light has long been affiliated with meditative states by Buddhists, especially light radiated as an externally observable manifestation.⁶⁶ Great Perfection theorists associate radiant light with the ground's inherent quality (*rang-bzhin*), which is to be "spontaneously productive" (*lhun-grub*). In other words, the ground is active; it manifests, as a self-expression. We have seen the Treasure tradition's view of the ultimate "meaning" as a continuum to be transmitted and

expressed. In Great Perfection, this expressiveness is attributed to the ground itself, which is intrinsically pellucid. The ground has an inherent effulgence (*ye-gdangs*), which accounts for the luminous quality (*dangs*) of self-awareness. This means, further, that the ground produces appearances (*gzhi-snang*). These are defined to include both the purified, self-conscious manifestations of the virtuoso and the conventional perceptions of average persons; both are said to be manifested (*gsal*) by the ground. Awareness has “display-energy” (*rtsal*), according to the Great Perfection tantras. Again, this display power produces both conventional, karmically influenced appearances and the special manifestations of awareness that are believed to become apparent to the Great Perfection yogin. Such a yogin is said to have “perfected the display-energy of awareness” (*rig-pa'i rtsal rdzogs-pa*), a feat that Jigme Lingpa highlights in his secret accounts of himself.

The ground has a conspicuous spatiality, a feature that enables its manifestations. Jigme Lingpa’s secret autobiographies are rich in spatial imagery for the expanse (*klong*) or field (*dbyings*) in which his visions occur, “the sphere which makes room” (*go-byed-pa'i dkyil*) for the manifestations of his awareness.⁶⁷ The experiential analogue of this expansiveness is the “spacing out” (*'byams*) he achieves. Note that “spacing out,” like the “aimlessness” discussed above, does not have the connotation of mindlessness that it has taken on in American English, especially since the 1960s. Just the opposite: to space out in the Great Perfection context implies a rigorous mindfulness, by virtue of which the meditator becomes absorbed in the field of awareness as such. This field extends both inward and outward (*nang-dbyings* and *phyir-dbyings*), since the ground’s manifestations dawn both internally and externally (*nang-gsal* and *phyir-gsal*), yet the Great Perfection exegetes also insist that the reflexivity of these self-aware manifestations finally obviates any meaningful distinction between inner and outer altogether.

The Physiology of Apparition

In order to cultivate the transparent manifestations whose egress would herald the demise of all remaining barriers between inner and outer, the Great Perfection yogins developed the tradition of “Supreme Vision” (*thod-rgal*) practice, featuring an arcane physiology of the phenomenon of vision.⁶⁸ The mate to the Cutting Through tradition, Supreme Vision constitutes the most esoteric dimension of Jigme Lingpa’s secret autobiographies.

Supreme Vision practice issues from the Great Perfection conception that the ground’s inherent quality is to produce spontaneous manifestations (*rang-bzhin lhun-grub*). Since the ground is not a static void, Supreme Vision exegetes reject the ideal of enlightenment that would entail a “swooning” in indeterminacy or blankness. Rather, the virtuoso should recognize and engage with the ground’s unceasing visionary expressions, and most importantly, assimilate them onto

the religious path. This is the message that Jigme Lingpa finds in the authoritative *Khandro Yangtig* and cites at a critical juncture in his secret autobiographical recollections [7].

Several entire episodes of Jigme Lingpa's secret autobiographies are overtly about Supreme Vision experiences [3, 7, and 10]. He also characterizes other visions in Supreme Vision terms, such as when Longchenpa's face dawns "on the very limpid, cleanly wiped face of the mirror of insight—lucid primordial consciousness's vision-producing radiant light" [35], or when a vision of Padmasambhava appears in a circle of rainbow light [13]. It is just such achievements that he touts as differentiating his lineage—whose traditions create "the interdependency for the situation of the vajra ground, which has dwelled primordially in own-mind, to awaken in actuality," in turn creating "the ensuing great miracle" of Supreme Vision experience, in which "all sorts of reflected visionary images are possible"—from those of his contemporaries [2].

The earliest literature on Supreme Vision of which we are now aware are the seventeen "key instruction" tantras and the closely related early Nyingtig ("Heart Sphere") Treasures.⁶⁹ But the historical sources of the Supreme Vision tradition have yet to be satisfactorily identified.⁷⁰ We have virtually no indication of the existence in India of the key instruction tantras, and it is probable that in their current form they were codified in Tibetan.⁷¹ Like the rest of Great Perfection metaphysics, Supreme Vision notions have affinities with the positive characterization of the absolute in Indic "third turning of the wheel" texts like *Ratnagotravibhāga*;⁷² the tradition also preserves aspects of the physiological systems of Indic fulfillment yoga. But clearly other elements were incorporated as well, such as what are now called Bonpo traditions, from areas to the west of Tibet, concerning the role of light in meditative practice.⁷³

One way that Supreme Vision differs from fulfillment yoga is in its relative neglect of bliss. Supreme Vision is concerned instead with the projection/perception process. A distinctive feature of its physiological theory is a focus on the sense organs, particularly the eyes,⁷⁴ and it posits subtle channels that are not commonly associated with tantric fulfillment practice. These channels are considered the pathways of awareness, which is believed to travel from the "inner field" in the heart to the eyes and other organs of perception. It is these channels that make possible the manifestation of primordial consciousness.

The heart is the "inner field" of the ground and its primal awareness and is sometimes spoken of as a crystal palace of five lights.⁷⁵ The crystal palace in the heart is further elaborated as the site of what is called the "youthful vase body" (*gzhon-nu bum-sku*), a unique Supreme Vision image representing latent buddhahood that is analogous to older, Indian Buddhist ideas such as *tathāgatagarbha*, buddha nature, *dharma-dhātu*, and the Dharma body.⁷⁶ However, the youthful vase body is a more developed sort of latency; it is a youth, rather than a mere seed or embryo. The vase, long a symbol of the body in Buddhism (as in the tantric "vase initiation"), serves in this case as a container, holding within it

primordial consciousness in overtly bodily form. Moreover, unlike the older notions, the youthful vase body locates latent buddhahood in a particular spot in the body.

Once again, note the prominence of metaphors of spatiality. The youthful vase body is the “inner manifestation” of the ground’s radiant light at its most primordial level. This manifestation is “unlimited” (*ma’gags-pa*), a key term that Jigme Lingpa uses in 7. The youthful vase body is even sometimes identified with the Ghanavyūha paradise (Jigme Lingpa experiences it as a buddha land in 7). But usually it is the seminal body of buddhahood, a spontaneous primordiality whose “seal” has not been “torn.”

In deluded samsaric beings the youthful vase body is occult, like a lamp burning inside a vase. It has no outer manifestation. But the yogin is said to be able to perfect self-awareness and its display-energy, whereby the seal on awareness is rent (*rgya-ma ral*), after which visions begin to emerge and manifest. These visions, or appearances (*snang-ba*), are said to be self-conscious manifestations which are importantly different from the karmically produced appearances of mundane objects of perception, even though both are labeled by the same Tibetan word. This key but ambiguous word might be rendered “apparitions” in the Supreme Vision context, since it refers to something that appears, the crystallized products of a process of projection, as indeed are all objects of perception, according to Great Perfection, samsāric or not. But since in English, “apparition” can suggest falsity, I usually reserved that term in my translation of the secret autobiographies for those instances when Jigme Lingpa was either referring to a very particular manifestation within a larger vision, or when he deliberately characterized the image as dreamlike or delusive—precisely, in fact, to mark the ambiguous truth value of such experiences. Otherwise my term of choice for Jigme Lingpa’s spectacles was “vision,” especially when he was describing an entire visionary episode or an overt experience of the Supreme Vision “awareness-radiation of vision-producing radiant light” or “radiance of actualized awareness” (*mngon-sum rig-mdangs*).⁷⁷ The latter exalted visions are sometimes even glossed as the product of “insight” (*lhag-mthong*; Skt. *vipaśyanā*), an old Buddhist notion which in Great Perfection is equated with Supreme Vision perception.⁷⁸

If in imagistic terms the visual manifestation of reality (*chos-nyid mngon-sum*) is traced to the youthful vase body, in more physicalistic (and also metaphysical) terms, this source is identified as the “subtle tigle.” This is not the same as the conventional tigle of fulfillment yoga. Rather, in Great Perfection, tigle is analogous to buddha nature or reality as such.⁷⁹ This subtle, or ultimate, tigle has a physiological basis, which manifests as a visible sphere surrounded by a circle of rainbow lights. Such a rainbow circle is often the first vision reported by Supreme Vision practitioners; Jigme Lingpa describes many of his visionary images as appearing in enclosures of rainbow light.

The effulgence of the youthful vase body/radiant light/subtle tigle emerges from the heart and travels to the eye along the “crystal tube channel,” men-

tioned by Jigme Lingpa in 7. This channel is one of four special pathways of awareness enumerated in Supreme Vision literature.⁸⁰ The channels are the “doors” that make possible the dawning of the radiant light as a visual display of visions. Thus does Jigme Lingpa characterize a vision of the body-print of Padmasambhava at Monkha as dawning “in the door through which shines unimpeded cognition of what appears to experience” [3].

It is often said that Supreme Vision states can only dawn naturally and effortlessly, without any intentional construction.⁸¹ Even so, Supreme Vision teachings are shrouded in much secrecy, in part to prevent neophytes from attempting to cultivate hallucinations. Genuine Supreme Vision is said to be possible only after the adept has received an “introduction to awareness” transmission, and has achieved stability in the Cutting Through view. An apparition is a Supreme Vision when its perceiver fully recognizes it to be self-produced. Any other visions or hallucinations that appear are manifestations of the karmic vital winds and the conventional, as opposed to the ultimate, tigle.

The meditator is instructed not to be attached to Supreme Visions if they occur, since they are by nature insubstantial and lacking in “self” (*ātman*).⁸² Nonetheless, they are perceived directly, even if they are insubstantial, and appear in the space in front of the point between the two eyebrows (*smin-tshams*), a specification made on several occasions in *Dancing Moon*. The apparitional object is not material, but it is called “reality” (*chos-nyid*), because it is the “own-radiance” of the bodies of the buddha. It is said that images of many kinds will appear as the visionary display develops, the precise form of which depends upon the individual’s training and propensities. When this display-energy is perfected, the practitioner is believed to have full recognition of all that appears. The body will begin to turn into letters and light. This will be accompanied by awesome powers, one of which, according to Jigme Lingpa’s *Yeshe Lama*, is the ability to dive into the earth, a feat that he exhibits in the playful vision described in *Dancing Moon* 12.⁸³

The Supreme Vision exegetes maintain that these self-realized experiences bring the practitioner into the domain of full buddhahood. Realizing the mature youthful vase body, which is now called the “precious amulet” (*rin-po-che ga’u*), the adept’s own visionary experiences will come to an end, but he or she will continue to manifest as a buddha, “like a reflection in a mirror,” in order to teach others.

Full buddhahood and its corresponding manifestational power are understood in terms of the third dimension of the ground: in addition to its basic nature of primordial purity and inherent quality of spontaneous productiveness, the ground is pervasively compassionate (*thugs-rje kun-khyab*).⁸⁴ This introduces ethics into Great Perfection theory and underlines the fundamental connectedness of the virtuoso. Compassion is characterized as all-pervasive because the ground is everywhere equally; the one who perceives this ubiquity would have no preference for self or other. In this way, a recognition of the ground and its inherent manifestational quality are made synonymous with compassion. The

perfected virtuoso's manifestations would no longer be motivated by personal concerns but instead determined by, and therefore responsive to, the needs of all sentient beings. The buddha's compassionate manifestations are thus made dependent upon samsāric conditions. The Great Perfection exegetes describe periods in which there will be no teachable sentient beings; then the enlightened one's light manifestations will gather again inside the "precious interior" (*rin-po-che sbubs*) of the youthful vase body, in which awareness circles in the realm of the Dharma body. When there are sentient beings to teach, however, a buddha will appear. The presentation of the fully enlightened body is called "the great movement" ('pho-ba chen-po) which will manifest along with an array of buddha fields.⁸⁵

The Perfection of Imperfection

Such is the endpoint of the path that Jigme Lingpa is on, the telos of his self-construction. Jigme Lingpa does not claim to have attained such enlightenment himself, but he hints that he is in reach of it.⁸⁶ And yet he also hints at the imperfections in his life. *Dākki's Secret-Talk* closes with his betrayal by the "demon minister" and his effort "to endure all the perversity and depression." *Dancing Moon* leaves him trying to write treatises so humble they are "like the light of a firefly" and promising "to learn the activity of teaching."

That he can portray himself as incomplete in these and other ways and yet still be viewed as the "All-Knowing Jigme Lingpa" reveals much about the ideal of enlightenment in his tradition. It appears that Great Perfection nonduality ends up enabling an incorporation even of personal imperfection into the religious path. "Everything is fine" goes a fundamental Great Perfection dictum, referring to the utter control that Great Perfection masters are supposed to exert in determining the meaning and value of their experiences; everything in itself is already perfect, fine, but only the master can realize that. In keeping with the concept of nonduality, the Great Perfection exegetes do not locate the critical difference between the enlightened master and the deluded sentient being in the absolute nature of either of them; subjects in themselves, just like objects in themselves, are merely "unformulated." This creates a fundamental undecidability for self-conception, but as I will show in the next chapter, Jigme Lingpa makes such a slippery ontology the very heart of his autobiographical self-portrait.

In Jigme Lingpa's Buddhism the enlightened master does not dwell in a rarefied world of perfection and purity. Rather, the arena of enlightenment, for both the tantric and Great Perfection traditions, is samsāra. This focus on samsāra rejoins the theme of compassion and further renders impossible any totalized or static perfection. The buddha of the "great movement" is engaged in the world, teaching others in their language and dealing with imperfection. Jigme Lingpa presents his own career in just such terms.

A second point to note about the conception of enlightenment in Jigme Lingpa's milieu is its association with individualistic personality ideals. Tantric visualization practice requires agency and self-reliance. Even if the emulated images are canonized and impersonal, it is still in the individual's own hands to refigure him- or herself, through meditative exercises, into a newly enlightened person, whose qualities are self-created. Such a belief is evident in Jigme Lingpa's confident proclamations that he has become a "champion athlete," an "awareness-holder," a master with complete knowledge and control over his own "body, speech, and mind."

Jigme Lingpa's religious training also produces an emphasis on experience, indicated with a rich vocabulary for kinds of light, heat, bliss, and so on. While these heightened kinds of experience impart subjective content to the newly refigured person, they are nonetheless perceived to be empty. Moreover, they are not thought to remain purely private, internal affairs. Rather, experience is considered to be expressed and manifested, and ultimately to be employed in the teaching activities of the enlightened master, the dynamics of which are detailed in the Great Perfection theory of expression. The latter makes the perfection of the display-energy of awareness an act of freedom (*zang-thal*), encouraging the virtuoso to see everything that is encountered to be his or her own projection.⁸⁷

Both tantra and Great Perfection's interest in an independent and free personality style make for yet other individualistic sentiments. Jigme Lingpa not only cultivates a sense of autonomy from social convention and everyday village life but he even attempts to extricate himself from the reifying presuppositions of conventional language altogether. Again, the rejection of society and/or conventional modes of thinking is itself a convention in the Buddhist tradition, and can be said merely to reposition the adept in an alternative social and conceptual domain. But for a study of autobiography, the interesting question is less whether it is in fact possible to fully avoid concepts and the world than whether Jigme Lingpa and his cohorts *believe* it is possible and try to do so. It is clear that they do, and this is especially evident in the deliberately aberrant and idiosyncratic personal style that is cultivated in Jigme Lingpa's milieu, wherein it is a mark of a master to be spontaneous, natural, iconoclastic, unconventional, "aimless," self-liberated, energetic, powerful, and so on.⁸⁸ These ideals go back at least to the Indian adepts (*Virūpa*, whom Jigme Lingpa impersonates in 12, is one famously eccentric adept), and it can also be found in the Ch'an traditions.⁸⁹ Of course an "ideal" of unconventionality is somewhat of a contradiction in terms. Like the perfection of imperfection, the ideal of unconventionality can be said to be a norm-that-is-not-a-norm, because it encourages individualistic behavior, even if such behavior is canonized.⁹⁰ This unconventionality corresponds to the iconoclasm of the Cutting Through view and is thought to be fueled by the "display-energy" perfected in Supreme Vision meditation. It is equally expected of the tantric virtuoso of sexual yoga.

These iconoclastic attitudes belie any simple characterization of the understanding of enlightenment or perfection in Jigme Lingpa's tradition. That they are appropriated in Jigme Lingpa's own sense of himself can be seen in his recurring references to his openness, spontaneity, and power throughout the secret autobiographies, epitomized in his striking declaration of independence in 17: "Since I have perfected the display-energy to show my own prowess, developed in previous [lifetimes], my awareness is freed into the open directions. Thus am I freed from the ravine of expectation or anxiety. Whatever happens, I decide that it is fine. Having broken out of the trap of wishful thinking, I don't listen to what anyone says. I act with great roomy spontaneity, and since appearance dawns as text, I understand everything that occurs to be a key instruction."

The salient paradox created by such a declaration is that alongside Jigme Lingpa's rhetoric of independence, subjectivity, and agency, his ideal of enlightenment does not seem ultimately to be personal or individual. Moreover, it is explicitly identified as empty. Hence the central dilemma that Jigme Lingpa's Buddhism presents for the student of autobiography: how could a powerful, subjective, and autonomous person see himself as empty at the core? The key to understanding how these two seemingly contradictory personality ideals can operate simultaneously and in concert is to be found in Great Perfection ontology, whose fundamental ground is not about stasis or a simple finality, but rather is "unformulated." It will be the task of the next chapter to show how this unformulatedness, or what in its literary representation I will call "undecidability," makes possible, for an empty self, an intensely personal autobiography.