Tibet

CHAPTER 3

According to a well-known myth, the first Tibetan kings descended from heaven by means of a rope. When the king's firstborn son had reached maturity (measured by the ability to master a horse), the king would return to heaven via the rope, never to be seen again. The departed king disappeared like a rainbow, leaving no corpse behind. The first seven kings of Tibet descended and ascended in this way. The eighth king bore the ominous name Ti-gum (Gri gum), "Killed by the Sword." Knowing his fate, the king challenged his groom to a duel, and sent a spy to determine how the groom would arm himself. The groom, recognizing the spy, deceived the king by musing aloud, "If the king binds a black leather turban on his head, fastens a mirror on his brow, carries the corpse of a fox on his right shoulder and the corpse of a dog on his left, loads and

binds leather bags of dust on a hundred red oxen and cows, and brandishes the sword called Lang-ja-po (Glang bya pho, 'Male Ox Bird') over his head, I am no match."[1] On the windswept field of battle, the groom immediately slashed open the bags of dust on the backs of the oxen, creating a blinding dust storm. Waving his sword wildly above his head in the confusion, the king inadvertently cut the heavenly cord. Because he had dead animals affixed to his shoulders, his protective deities would not approach to defend him. Although difficult to discern the king in the dust, the groom saw the sun reflect off the mirror in the king's turban, drew his bow, and loosed a fatal arrow. And so the royal funerary cult began.

Like all cultures, Tibet developed practices for the disposal of the dead, including cremation, burial, mummification, and chopping up the body and feeding it to birds, the so-called "sky burial." But with the introduction of Buddhism, the ideology reflected in these practices was that of rebirth in the six realms of saṃsāra, and the ultimate goal of putting an end to rebirth in nirvāṇa.

According to Buddhist legends, Buddhism entered Tibet during the reign of the twenty-eighth king (who likely lived in the fifth century CE). By this time, Tibet was surrounded by Buddhist cul-

tures: India and Nepal to the south; Kashmir and Afghanistan to the west; China to the east. Yet, according to the story, Buddhism entered Tibet from none of these directions, arriving instead from above, when a casket of texts fell onto the roof of the royal palace. The king opened the casket and examined the texts, but finding them illegible (Tibet had no written language at this time), he resealed the casket, dubbed it the "Sacred Secret" and left it for future generations to read. Five generations later, in the seventh century, the thirty-third king of the dynasty, Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po), received Buddhism from the east and south. As a result of treaties, he accepted as wives first a Nepalese princess and then a Chinese princess. Both were Buddhists, and they converted their husband. He built temples in Lhasa to house the statues of the Buddha they had brought from their homelands, and he sent a delegation to India to learn Sanskrit and then return to invent an alphabet for Tibetan so the teachings of the Buddha could be translated. And so began what the Tibetans call the "early spreading of the dharma."

The building of temples and the translation of texts began in earnest under the patronage of the thirty-eighth king, Trisong Detsen (Khri srong lde btsan), who ruled the Tibetan empire over the last

half of the eighth century. In order to establish the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, he invited the great Bengali master Śāntarakṣita, former abbot of the great Nālandā monastery in northern India. Impeded by various natural disasters and the protestations of local priests, he urged the king to invite a renowned tantric master named Padmasambhava ("Lotus Born") from India (he is said to have come from Oḍḍiyāna, traditionally identified with the Swat Valley in what is today northern Pakistan), who would be able to dispel the obstacles to the monastery's establishment. Padmasambhava accepted the invitation and succeeded in subduing the local spirits. Together, the king, the abbot, and the adept, founded Samye (Bsam yas), the first Buddhist monastery, and seven Tibetans were ordained as the first monks. Buddhism flourished, and more monasteries were founded, numerous masters were invited from India, and hundreds of Sanskrit sūtras were translated into Tibetan. Royal patronage of Buddhism came to an end with the ascent of the evil king Lang Darma (Glang dar ma), who is said to have closed monasteries and defrocked monks and nuns. He was assassinated by a Buddhist monk in 842, and the Tibetan monarchy came to an end.

According to later historians, Tibet plunged into almost two centuries of political chaos and

religious corruption, which ended only when a pious prince in western Tibet sought to restore the dharma by sending a group of twenty-one young men into India to bring back Buddhism (only two returned alive) and by inviting the renowned Bengali scholar Atiśa to come from the monastery of Vikramaśīla. These events mark for the Tibetans the beginning of the "later spreading of the dharma." This period was one of extensive spiritual traffic between India and Tibet, with Tibetans making the perilous trip across the Himalayas, returning as tantric initiates bearing texts and lineages. As Buddhist institutions in India came under threat from Muslim armies, Indian masters also made the journey north. The major sects of Tibetan Buddhism arose during this period. These were the Kadam (Bka' gdams) associated with Atiśa; when Tsong kha pa established what came to be known as the Geluk (Dge lugs) in the fifteenth century, he called it the "new Kadam." The Kagyu (Bka' brgyud) traced its origins to the three trips made to India by Marpa the Translator, the teacher of Milarepa. (It is noteworthy that both of these sects employ the term *bka'* or "speech" in their names, evoking their claim to direct oral instruction from Indian masters.) The third was the Sakya (Sa skya), which traced its teachings to the Indian master Virūpa, and was

named after its chief monastery, "Gray Earth" (*sa skya*). The fourth sect called itself "Ancient" (Rnying ma). It did not trace itself to pilgrimages to India or recently arrived Indian masters. It did not invoke oral instructions passed from master to disciple, unbroken by the passage of time. Instead, it looked to the distant past and to the written word.

The history of the ancient kings described here was not recorded until centuries after the events it claims to recount, and subsequent scholarship has called into question the existence of the Nepalese princess, as well as the piety of Songtsen Gampo. It is unclear whether Padmasambhava was a historical figure; recent scholarship suggests that, if he was, his contribution to Tibetan culture was the introduction of certain irrigation techniques. But for reasons that are not entirely clear, over the subsequent centuries, he underwent an apotheosis, transformed into the "Precious Guru," by far the most famous of the Indian masters who may have ventured into Tibet. According to the later chronicles, the king of Tibet had been his devoted disciple, the queen his tantric consort. Long before the persecution of the dharma, Padmasambhava had departed Tibet for the Copper-colored Mountain, located on the isle of Lanka, where he lives today in his octagonal palace, called Lotus Light. But before doing

so, he is said to have written, or dictated, thousands of texts on yellow paper in a coded script, and hidden them—inside pillars, in mountains, in lakes—all over Tibet. These were teachings, it is said, that the Tibetans would need at specific moments in the future; often the texts themselves contained a prophecy.

Thus, in the eleventh century, as the new sects of Tibetan Buddhism claimed authority by going to India to retrieve Indian texts, the ancient sect (or so it would be later designated) began to discover its own authoritative texts, Indian texts, or at least composed by an Indian master, without having to go to India; the texts had been concealed in the Tibetan landscape centuries before. Such texts were called *terma* (*gter ma*), "treasures." Many of the most influential instructions on death, the intermediate state, and rebirth belong to the genre of the treasure, including the work we know as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

By the thirteenth century, bardo teachings had begun to proliferate widely in Tibet. A Kagyu text from the period enumerates fifteen separate lineages of bardo instructions.[2] All sects developed instructions and prayers in a genre called "liberation from the straits of the bardo" (*bar do 'phrang sgrol*), whose purpose was to "close the womb

door"—that is, to put an end to rebirth, or at least prevent rebirth in an unfortunate realm.

But centuries before, at the court of King Trisong Detsen, Padmasambhava is said to have made a prophecy. He predicted that in the coming degenerate age, virtuous deeds will only provoke resentment, monks will break their vows of celibacy, and the world will descend into factionalism and strife. At this time of turmoil, special instructions will be necessary to prevent beings from falling into negative rebirths as animals, ghosts, and hell beings. Padmasambhava then declared:

So to benefit the sentient beings of this
degenerate age,
I have committed [this cycle of teachings] to
writing,
And concealed them at Mount Gampodar.
In that age, a supremely fortunate son will be
born.
His father will have the name Accomplished
Master Nyinda,
And he will be the courageous "Karma
Lingpa."
On his right thigh there will be a mole,
Resembling the eye of pristine cognition,

And he will be born in the dragon or snake year
Into a heroic family line, the fruit of past good actions.
May that fortunate person encounter this [teaching].

But he [Karma Lingpa] should not publicly teach the cycles of
The *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention*
To anyone at all, even by whispering into the wind,
And so it should remain until the time of the third lineage holder.
Obstacles will arise if these [teachings] are publicly taught.
However, he should impart the cycle of the *Great Compassionate One: Lotus Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*
To all of his fortunate students.

If the oral instructions of the lineage issuing from the third generation lineage holder
Are kept secret for seven years, there will be no obstacles.

When seven years have passed,
That [third generation successor] may
properly impart to others
The empowerments and practical application
of the [abridged] cycle,
The *[Great] Liberation [by Hearing] during the Intermediate States*.
Then, when nine years have passed, the
[complete] cycle of the
Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention
Should be imparted gradually, not all at once.

These treasures will be extracted in the region
of Dakpo, in Southern Kongpo,
And they will be concentrated for the sake of
living beings,
In the region of Draglong, in Upper Kongpo.
Karma Lingpa's activity on behalf of living
beings will ripen in the north.[3]

As we shall see in what follows, everything in Padmasambhava's prophecy uncannily came true. Thus, in accordance with the prophecy, around 1350 a son was born to a treasure-revealer name Nyida Sangye (Nyi zla sangs rgyas, Sun-Moon Buddha). The child's name was Karma Lingpa (Karma gling

pa). At the age of fifteen, he engaged in the practices necessary for him to discover textual treasure himself. The revealers of treasure are regarded as the reincarnations of Padmasambhava's own disciples, students to whom he had personally bestowed tantric initiation. In order to find the treasure, it was said to be necessary for the reincarnated student to manifest the mind of clear light, the same state of mind that Padmasambhava had revealed to the previous incarnation, centuries before. The mind of clear light manifests at death, but it also manifests during orgasm. The discovery of treasure is therefore often preceded by the practice of sexual yoga with a consort. That consort, however, is also predestined for her partner, in some cases, named in a prophecy by Padmasambhava or his consort. But in the case of Karma Lingpa, something went wrong. He chose the wrong woman, who bore him a son.

Despite the apparent mismatch, Karma Lingpa successfully extracted two treasure texts from Gampodar (Sgam po gdar) Mountain, assisted by his father. The first was entitled *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention* (*Zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol*). The second was entitled the *Great Compassionate One, the Peaceful and Wrathful Lotus* (*Thugs rje chen po padma zhi khro*). He already had a circle

of disciples, to whom he bestowed the teachings of the second text, while restricting the teachings of the first text to a single disciple. He is also said to have produced a digest of yogic teachings from the discovered texts, which he entitled *Instructions on the Six Bardos* (*Bar do drug khrid*).

But his failure to find the appropriate consort bore bitter fruit. According to one account, his consort ran away with his attendant, only to return with him to poison Karma Lingpa. Knowing that he was dying, Karma Lingpa attempted to save himself through the practice of consciousness transference (*grong 'jug*, literally "entering a corpse"), a practice at which his father was adept. Asking his father to watch over this body for three days, he caused his consciousness to enter the body of a dead bird. The bird then came back to life and flew to a distant mountain, where the antidote to the poison grew. Just as the bird was returning to Tibet on the third day, Karma Lingpa's evil attendant and his consort insisted that the body be cremated. The bird descended on Karma Lingpa's corpse and was about to deposit the healing fruit in his mouth, when it was attacked by the attendant. The bird flew away and the fruit burned in the flames, together with Karma Lingpa's body.

Among the many biographies of the great trea-

sure revealers of the Nyingma sect, that of Karma Lingpa is one of the less glorious; his untimely death left much undone. His father and his son are said to have found among his possessions various manuscripts, some finished, some not, connected with the series of funeral rites that would come to be known as *Bardo Tödöl*, *Liberation in the Intermediate State through Hearing*. The task of consolidating the texts, as well as the treasures that he had discovered, seems to have fallen to Karma Lingpa's son, and to his son's disciple. They likely played a central role in the creation of the work that would eventually come to be known, through a series of transformations, as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

It seems clear that those transformations began shortly after Karma Lingpa's death, through a process of revision and reorganization, by many hands, making it difficult to identify which parts derive from Karma Lingpa himself. However, from the various accounts and descriptions that have survived, some of which include references to works no longer extant, it would appear that the collection of works attributed to Karma Lingpa's discovery (known as the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*) was a set of texts—texts that foliated in the subsequent centuries—designed for dealing with the dead, specifically, for guiding the spirit of the de-

ceased to the next lifetime, ideally to a happy rebirth, both for the sake of the dead and for the sake of the living, so that the surviving family may be free from the contagion (whether natural or supernatural) that had brought about the death.

The universe through which the dead would wander was composed of three bardos. The first, and briefest, is the bardo of the moment of death (*'chi kha'i bar do*) when the profound state of consciousness called the clear light dawns. If one is able to recognize the clear light as reality, one is immediately liberated from rebirth. If not, the second bardo begins, called the bardo of reality (*chos nyid bar do*, a term that seems to be a Nyingma innovation). The disintegration of the personality brought on by death reveals reality, but in this case, not as the clear light, but in the form of a *maṇḍala* of forty-two peaceful deities and a *maṇḍala* of fifty-eight wrathful deities. These deities appear in sequence to the consciousness of the deceased in the days immediately following death. If reality is not recognized in this second bardo, then the third bardo, the bardo of existence (*srid pa bar do*), dawns, during which one must again take rebirth in one of the six realms—that of gods, demigods, humans, animals, ghosts, or hell beings.

These texts provide instructions for the post-mortem confession and expiation of negative deeds and violated vows; for bestowing initiation; for reciting mantras; for making ritual cakes (*gtor ma*) and burnt offerings; for the making of amulets to be placed on the corpse, the so-called "liberation by wearing"; prayers to be recited by the officiating priest, both requesting assistance from the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and offering advice and comfort to the departed soul wandering in the bardo, especially in visualizing the one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities of the *maṇḍala* and avoiding rebirth in an unfortunate realm.

The instructions to the departed on the experience of the *maṇḍala* of peaceful deities on the second day after death provide an example of the style of the text. As described in the previous chapter, at the time of death, a series of dissolutions of the elements takes place; first earth, then water, then fire, then air. On the second day of the bardo, the water element appears in the purified form of white light. From that, in the east, the buddha called Vajrasattva will appear. He is blue in color, holding a five-pronged vajra in his right hand. He is seated on an elephant throne and is in sexual union with his consort, named Buddhalocanā. They are accompanied

by two male bodhisattvas and two female bodhisattvas. Here are the instructions to the spirit of the departed person:

> A [brilliant] white light, [indicative of] the mirror-like pristine cognition, which is the natural purity of the aggregate of form, white and dazzling, radiant and clear [will emanate] from the heart of Vajrasattva and his consort and it will shine piercingly before you [at the level of your heart, with such brilliance] that your eyes cannot bear it. Together with this light of pristine cognition, a dull smoky light, [indicative of] the hell [realms], will also dawn before you [and touch your heart]. At that time, under the sway of aversion, you will [wish to] turn away in fear and terror from the bright white light and come to perceive the dull smoky light of the hell [realms] with delight. At that moment, you should fearlessly recognise the white light, white and dazzling, radiant and clear, to be pristine cognition. Have confidence in it. Be drawn to it with longing devotion. Pray with devotion, thinking, "This is the light ray of the transcendent lord Vajrasattva's compassion. I take refuge in it." This, in reality, is Vajrasattva and

his consort come to escort you on the dangerous pathway of the intermediate state. This is the light-ray hook of Vajrasattva's compassion. Be devoted to it. Do not delight in the dull smoky light of the hell [realms]. This [dull light] is the inviting path of the negative obscurations created by your own deep aversion, which you yourself have generated. If you become attached to it, you will fall into the realms of hell, sinking into a swamp of unbearable suffering, from which there will be no [immediate] opportunity for escape. [This dull light] is an obstacle blocking the path to liberation. Do not look at it. Abandon your aversion. Do not be attached to it. Do not cling to it. Be devoted to the white light, radiant, and dazzling.[4]

Similar instructions are provided for each of the seven days of the bardo, as different visions, and different deities appear. Eventually added to the cycle of texts were advanced instructions for master meditators on how to identify the most profound nature of reality, in preparation for their own deaths.

The story of Karma Lingpa and of the transmission of his treasure would not be told until 1499, a century after Karma Lingpa's demise, when a monk

named Gyarawa (Rgya ra ba, born 1430) completed a work entitled *A Garland of Jewels*. He had received the transmission himself from one Nyida Özer (Nyi zla 'od zer), who had received them from Karma Lingpa's son. In the versions of the cycle of texts that have come down to the present day, Gyarawa is listed as author or editor of twenty-five works, almost all of which deal with mortuary ritual. He also is listed in five separate transmission lineages of the Karma Lingpa cycle. This suggests that Gyarawa performed two important roles in the history of what has come to be known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. First, he took what had likely been a somewhat amorphous cycle of texts and organized them into a more coherent ritual system that performed a variety of funerary functions. Second, he used his position as a high-ranking monk—he occupied the throne of Menmo (Sman mo) monastery and seems to have founded as many as seven others—to disseminate the Karma Lingpa rituals to monastic institutions in southern Tibet, the primary sites for the performance of funerals in the region.[5] Gyarawa is likely "the third generation lineage holder" proclaimed by Padmasambhava in the prophecy cited here, thus providing a clue for the date of the prophecy's composition.

Yet despite the crucial editorial and institutional

efforts of Gyarawa, the work as we have it today would not assume its present form until the seventeenth century, through the efforts of one Rigzin Nyima Drakpa (Rig 'dzin nyi ma grags pa, 1647–1710), himself a treasure-revealer, whose previous incarnations would be said to include the star-crossed consort of Karma Lingpa.

He was born in the kingdom of Nang chen in eastern Tibet to a family with strong ties to the Kagyu sect. As a child, he was sent to a Kagyu monastery to study, but experienced a vision of Padmasambhava and eventually received permission from his father to receive instruction from a Nyingma lama. He would eventually study with many of the leading Nyingma teachers of the day, traveling extensively throughout Tibet and visiting Bhutan, Nepal, and India. He developed a reputation both as a revealer of treasures and a subduer of demons, attracting a large circle of influential patrons who made generous offerings for his services, including the regent of the fifth Dalai Lama. By the time he was thirty, he was widely regarded as a custodian of Karma Lingpa's revelations, well qualified to transmit its teachings. Around 1680 (and perhaps continuing until his death), Rigzin Nyima Drakpa began organizing and editing various transmissions associated with Karma Lingpa into a sequence of

liturgies and prayers in seventeen chapters, entitled *Liberation in the Intermediate State through Hearing*, the *Bardo Tödöl*.

His achievement was to place seventeen smaller texts into a sequence for use in a funeral ritual, with individual works connected with the three standard stages of death, intermediate state, and rebirth. Thus, the work begins with instructions on how to recognize the mind of clear light at the moment of death and thereby achieve liberation. If this opportunity is missed, visions of a *maṇḍala* of forty-two peaceful deities appear, followed on the fourteenth day by a *maṇḍala* of fifty-eight wrathful deities. Prayers are provided, requesting assistance from the buddhas and bodhisattvas at this time, and instructing the deceased in how to navigate the straits of the bardo. The deceased then acquires a mental body and begins to make its way to the next rebirth. To aid it in finding a fortunate rebirth, prayers and mantras are provided for the purification of negative karma.

Rigzin Nyima Drakpa seems to have been something of a controversial figure, in part because of his skill in the black arts, providing individual patrons with the means to destroy their enemies and empowering local chieftains to repel invaders. It is possible that his fame in this regard contributed to the

popularity of his edition of the *Bardo Tödöl*, which was first carved onto woodblocks and printed near the end of the eighteenth century. The *Bardo Tödöl* would eventually become but one of a variety of liturgies from which a local lama could draw in ministering to the spirits of the dead.

On March 20, 1888, British troops crossed the Sikkimese border into Tibet. Ten thousand Tibetan troops and militia were dispatched, fighting the British in battles around Mount Lungdo from June through October of that year. The thirteenth Dalai Lama Thupten Gyatso—twelve years old at the time—and his regent launched a campaign called "Repel the Foreign Army" (Phyi gling dmag zlog). Many Tibetans were killed in the fighting, and funeral rituals were performed for them.

The British invaded Tibet again in 1903. Tibetan militia resisted with swords, spears, and antique matchlock rifles, suffering several thousand dead in more than a dozen battles and skirmishes. But they were unable to stop the advance, and British troops under the command of Colonel Francis Younghusband marched into Lhasa on August 3, 1904. The Dalai Lama had already fled to Mongolia. A treaty was signed, according to which Tibet agreed to have relations with no foreign power other than Great Britain. More practically, the treaty allowed

the British to establish trade missions in three Tibetan towns, (but not in the capital Lhasa), including the second largest city in Tibet, Gyantse. As a result, with the Tibetans' grudging assent, British officers would begin going back and forth between the British colony of India and Tibet. Fifteen years later, in 1919, one such officer, Major W. L. Campbell, bought a thick set of block prints of Tibetan mortuary texts in Gyantse. He brought these back to India, where he would sell them to an American who was on a kind of spiritual holiday to Asia. The result of this purchase would be yet another example of the strange things that can happen when Americans go abroad.