

CHAPTER SIX

TIME TRAVEL IN TIBET

Tantra, terma, and tulku



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INTRODUCTION

The central soteriological vision of Buddhism in Tibet is the same as that in Buddhism elsewhere: it is founded upon the four noble truths that describe cyclic existence (*'khor ba*, “turning, going around”; Skt. *samsāra*, “wandering”) as pervaded by suffering (*sdug bsngal*), and it possesses instructions on the practices needed for the achievement of peace. Nevertheless, as elsewhere, the Buddhist traditions of Tibet have been marked by developments that in some cases they shared with other Mahāyāna traditions, and others that can be identified as being specifically Tibetan.<sup>1</sup> The development of specifically Tibetan theories (*lta ba*), practices (*sgrub thabs*), and institutions (*chos lugs*, *gzhung lugs*, *'gro lugs*) is, of course, what most stands out when we think of phrases like “Tibetan Buddhism” or even “Buddhism in Tibet.”

HISTORY AND INSTITUTIONS

Buddhism’s becoming “Tibetan” was a historical process, and the features that may be identified as being specific to (if not typical of) Buddhism in Tibet are marked by the history of the tradition’s arrival and its subsequent development within Tibetan history. This much goes without saying. Nevertheless, the phenomena I explore in this chapter are instances of remarkable ways in which the history of Buddhism and its development in Tibet faced particular problems relating to time and history. Looking into those problems should have something to tell us about religion in Tibet, now, in the past, and in the future (“the three times,” *dus gsum*), as well as about some more general problems in the study of religion. It is an “institutions” approach, rather than a doctrinal one, although it should become clear that the two are related in the Tibetan case.

There are a number of interesting things Tibetans have done with time over the ages, the three most obvious being, in rough chronological order: (1) canonical revelations<sup>2</sup> known as *tantras* (Tib. *brgyud*, continuum); (2) noncanonical revelations hidden in the landscape during Tibet’s early empire and discovered at a later date, or *termas* (*gter ma*, treasures); and (3) *tulkus* (*sprul sku*, “apparitional embodiments”), lines of enlightened teachers who continue to return and teach in human form for centuries. Focusing on *tantra*, *terma*, and

*tulku*, three more or less well-known institutions that continue to generate curiosity about Buddhism in Tibet, is one way of accomplishing an overview of how Tibetan religion has been transmitted, how it has been renewed, and how it has been practiced over the centuries. It will also provide insights into some of the historical processes underlying Buddhism's development in Tibet and how well placed it is to continue in the immediate future. Each of the three, *tantra*, *terma*, and *tulku*, may be understood as temporal technologies that enabled Buddhism in Tibet to flourish, but I will also argue that they pose a number of interesting problems for Tibetan religion in our own time, and so I will end by asking if Tibetan religion is about to face a crisis, what that question tells us about religion in general, and also what it says about our own time (in the sense of both this "twenty-first century" and our own construction of time including our relationship to it).

I will not offer a specialized analysis of the three institutions, drawing out instead the different approaches to time each development appears to have involved to consider how each approach was – as a strategy of representation – meaningful in its own time of introduction or development, with perhaps less attention to how the time of its meaningfulness has been (and is or isn't being) extended.<sup>3</sup> Time in Buddhism, or any religious tradition, is not a simple matter (or at least it isn't when scholars and mystics get hold of it: Eliade 1969; Wayman 1969; Tachikawa 1998), and neither is Buddhism's development in Tibet, but I hope the simplifications I enforce here will at least succeed in outlining what is an important challenge for Tibetans and Tibetan religion as they come to terms with a period of deep crisis and sweeping change (Spurling 2001: 327). If Tibetan cultural history has performed some miraculous tricks with time from time to time, now may also be another of those times.

## TIME IN BUDDHISM

In addressing the question of time in this essay I am interested in time in relation to soteriology and what I will call "life-time," rather than to questions of what time is made up of and whether or not it exists, and if it does exist, in what way it is real (questions Buddhist thinkers entertained in many places and times). The discussion is going to get complicated enough without going too far into cosmology, and there are considerable differences around these questions within Buddhist tradition, so I have sidestepped such an approach in preference for an uncomplicated heuristic. It is perhaps easiest and quickest to begin with a comparison. Buddhism takes a very different stance from Christianity, for example, in its general orientation to time, life, and eternity. Indeed, they head in opposite directions. Christianity in the main sees each person as beginning at one point in time (when they are born) and ideally entering eternal life when they depart this world. The arrow of life-time begins at a single point and ideally goes forward forever, the proper destiny for a person being eternal life.

In the Buddhist traditions life has already been eternal. Neither time nor the chain of lives has a beginning, and the problem is how to bring cyclic existence to an end. While there are great eons that are described as being to some extent cyclical, with universes and gods coming into and going out of existence, the mind-stream of individuals is beginningless, proceeding through an infinite number of lives and life-forms. It is the beginningless series of lives that is to be brought to an end at the achievement of nirvana (*mya ngan las 'das*, the transcendence of sorrow), the cessation of the causal chain that involves an individual in cyclic existence. While there are debates in the tradition relating to the nature of karma and

continuity (Sharma 1993), or the unchanging and unborn nature of the real (Prasad 1988), individuals turn through cyclic existence life after life; this is the general backdrop to the Indian worldview within which the Buddha’s four noble truths were developed, and the Buddha’s teaching makes little sense outside it.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the requirement in the *Delineation of Monastic Discipline* (*’Dul ba lung rnam ’byed*; Skt. *Vinaya-vibhāṅga*) that the wheel of life (*srid pa’i khor lo*; Skt. *bhava-cakra*) be displayed in the vestibule to a temple (*gtsug lha khang*; Skt. *vīhāra*) is precisely “for the purpose of meditation upon the four noble truths” (Rechung 1989: 39). Surrounded by impermanence – in the figure of death – those who fail to extinguish the cycle of ego-maintaining reactive emotions (desire, aversion, ignorance) continue endlessly to spin through the wheel as hell-beings, ghosts and animals, barely ever rising to human or godly existence, rapidly descending again if they should fail to use a superior birth to attend to the task of awakening.<sup>5</sup>

Ongoing study of the Tibetan manuscripts from the Dunhuang cave temples (a busy transcultural conduit of Buddhism north of Tibet,<sup>6</sup> seventh to tenth centuries for Tibetan manuscripts) reveals that the conception of time held by the Tibetan imperial court and elite prior to the introduction of Buddhism was considerably different from both patterns described above, consisting of four great eras beginning with a happy time of humans and descending through three subsequent eras of degeneration when a new cycle of four eras was initiated through a revival of the cult honoring the king’s sacredness or divinity.<sup>7</sup> There appear to have been two options for an individual at death: (1) “the country of miseries” and suffering; and (2) “the country of joy and happiness” (Imaeda 2007: 106; 2010: 153).

It is difficult to accept characterizations of the idea of rebirth in Buddhism as “life after death” wishful thinking. Depending on how life works out for an individual, with its expanded prospects for lower births and the rarity of precious human rebirth, the Buddhist view of things has the potential to make death more traumatic ... not least if an individual has become what the nineteenth century yogin Shabkar (1781–1851) called a “slave to this life” (Ricard et al. 1994: 280). Given the attention to death rites found in the Dunhuang “library,” and particularly the proliferation of rites for parents, this was no small matter for Tibetans involved in the early period of Buddhist translation. It is likely that the tradition of representing the wheel of life entered Tibet as part of the Fundamental Everything Exists School’s (Skt. *Mūlasarvāstivāda*) monastic code and served as a rapid introduction to Buddhist cosmology and soteriology (and it has been the Tibetan *thangkas* [*thang ka*, scroll paintings] and murals that have made the image more widely known to the non-Buddhist world).

## TANTRIC TIMELINES

Buddhism came to Tibet quite late, around about a thousand years after the Buddha’s passing.<sup>8</sup> Ancient legend suggests evidence of earlier piecemeal contact, but there is no suggestion of any significant foothold in Tibetan culture until the reign of Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po, ca. 617–49/650), with a concerted translation program under way by the time of the reign of Tri Songdetsen (Khri Srong lde btsan, 755/756–97). While China and Central Asia were initially important sources for much of the translation effort, there was at the same time a degree of prestige and authority given to Indian sources and teachers. Traditions concerning doctrinal debates at Samyé (Tibet’s first monastery, founded late eighth century) suggest the existence of a growing desire to avoid China in the context of Central Asian power machinations.<sup>9</sup> India, separated by the high Himalaya, allowed more selective cultural contact,

and Buddhism's origins in India were becoming emblematic of authenticity and textual authority, an impression that was only assisted by the rise of the Buddhist Pāla empire (750–1174) and its monastic-cum-tantric universities in northeastern India.

The late arrival of Buddhism in Tibet and the fact that it came at a time of dynamic religious activity in northern India and Central Asia has left modern historians of religion with a plethora of questions regarding the periodization of texts and doctrines, but it is unlikely that Tibetan converts in the eighth century saw things that way. Not only had there been a flourishing array of doctrinal, cosmological, and ritual innovations since the passing of the Buddha – from which an entire new approach to Buddhist soteriology, the Mahāyāna, had developed – the entry of Buddhism into Tibet coincided with the appearance of the first self-conscious tantric Buddhist traditions in the Indian subcontinent in the mid- to late-seventh century (Davidson 2002: 24; Gray 2009: 2; Weinberger 2010: 138).<sup>10</sup> The Mahāyāna and the tantric traditions the Tibetans would come to call the Adamantine Vehicle (Skt. Vajrayāna) or the Vehicle of Mantras (Skt. Mantrayāna) entered Tibet at the same time, a situation exemplified in the image that has been passed down of the co-presence and codependence of the logician abbot Śāntarakṣita (ca. 725–788) and the tantric magician Padmasambhava at the court of the Tibetan emperor Tri Songdetsen.

From approximately the first century, those subscribing to Mahāyāna approaches to Buddhism had been developing a new model of sainthood that included a commitment to strive within the wheel of life working for the liberation of all sentient beings for countless lifetimes as a bodhisattva (Skt. “an agent of awakening”), and as they were developing this new soteriological model they were at the same time aligning their religious vision with abstract philosophical treatises on topics such as “emptiness” and yogic insight. There were diverse communities subscribing to this new mode of Buddhist thought, all busy composing new scriptures, new discourses (Skt. *sūtra*) of the Buddha, and new ritual practices and art that suited the gradually emerging “larger” (Skt. *mahā*) view of the Buddhist project (Williams 2009: 3). When we consider that it took around 350 years before the canons of early Buddhism were written down, this addition to the record of the Buddha's teaching does not look at all out of place.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, it did begin to institute a decline in the importance of the historical Buddha over and against increasingly remote and abstract sources of inspiration: “Mahāyāna Buddhists increasingly came to disembodied their teachings from [the] spatial and temporal context [of the historical Buddha], maintaining instead a stance of ultimacy by insisting on their [teaching's] timeless non-locality” (Gray 2005: 422).

The tantric teachings that were entering Tibet in the period of Tibetan empire were part of a movement that broke even further away from orthodox notions of authenticity or historical purity, yet, while we have seen that there were polemical disputes and opposition even early on (Weinberger 2010: 146), there does not appear to have been a lot of concern in this period over the historicity or otherwise of the scriptures being imported from India and Central Asia. Even if these were among concerns raised by opponents of Buddhism at the imperial court – and even opponents who refuse contact with a system of thought still tend to pick up on such things – it is unlikely that any record of them has survived. Buddhism arrived (and was imported) with an impressive array of cultural apparatus (writing, literature, history, law, art, ritual complexity etc.) that gave an already sophisticated Tibetan elite access to the latest cultural trends in their part of the world.

And, indeed, the Tibetan world was quickly changed forever. What happened next will never be completely unraveled, but the speed of development from the reign of Tri Songdetsen onward eventually placed a great deal of strain on life at the Tibetan court. There

were standoffs between Buddhists and older interests, there were persecutions and assassinations, and finally the court broke up entirely in 842 following the assassination of the last emperor of the dynasty by a monk. After Buddhism revived at the end of the tenth century, the polemical questions would be over *tantras* of the “old” and “new” translations as the Tibetans begin to establish their own lineages of teaching and transmission, the “new schools” (*gsar ma*) or orders (Raudsepp 2011). The arrival of the renowned teacher Atiśa (982–1054) at the behest of monk-king Jangchub Ö (Byang chub ’od, 984–1078) in Western Tibet in 1042 probably represents an attempt at using royal patronage to reestablish both political and doctrinal unity in central Tibet, but the remainder of Tibetan history demonstrates that this was never to happen, despite later attempts at synthesis or centralization.

Tibet remained post-imperial after 842, even while at times it was drawn into Mongolian and Chinese imperial designs. The first efforts of Atiśa to bring integration to the variety of new practices taking shape in Tibet did bear fruit, either through individual investment or under sponsorship by regional principalities (Davidson 2005). While during Atiśa’s time and afterward Tibetans were importing tantric practices modeled on non-Buddhist cults (Sanderson 1994), in Tibet these in the main blended into the new stratified picture of the three vehicles (Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna/Mantrayāna) and were normalized. *Tantras* and tantric commentaries then became part of the Tibetan Buddhist canon compiled by Butön Rinchendrup (Bu ston Rin chen grub, 1290–1364) in the fourteenth century (the Kangyur, “translated word,” and the Tengyur, “translated treatises”).

## TIME, TANTRA, AND CANONICITY

In the Tibetan traditions the approaches of the three vehicles are often explained through the simile of a poisonous plant (representing the ego-maintaining reactive emotions that involve us in cyclic existence). The first approach to dealing with this danger, the Hīnayāna (“Lesser Vehicle”), represents the option of avoiding the plant entirely; the second approach, that of the Mahāyāna (“Greater Vehicle”), represents the ability to apply antidotes (e.g., meditation on emptiness) that enables the practitioner to remain in the vicinity of the plant and help others who are likewise endangered; and the third approach of the Vajrayāna (or higher *tantras*) allows the poison to be transmuted alchemically into the nectar of awakening. In short, these are respectively paths of renunciation, salvation, and transformation.<sup>12</sup> This simile involves questions of time, as does the three-vehicle structure. The career of the bodhisattva’s practice of the six perfections (generosity, ethics, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom) and progression through the ten stages of awakening takes an inordinately long time; numerous, not to say hundreds or thousands of lifetimes. Yet if there are celestial buddhas and bodhisattvas who are already possessed of the transcendent wisdom that perceives emptiness, and who are already providing access to celestial rebirth in their pure lands and divine maṇḍalas, should it not be within their power to deliver much faster ways for devotees to join them in their quest?

I would argue that this is how time is supposed to be thought by practitioners in the tradition, i.e., in the context of altruistic motivation. The logic is not one of legitimation after the fact, but of production of efficacious methods. In temporal terms this is an emphasis on existential *duration* rather than historical *sequence*, although there are ongoing questions about sequence in an individual’s practice. The following passage from Dakpo Tashi Namgyal (Dwags po bKra shis rnam rgyal, 1511–1587), a great lama and scholar of the Kagyu (bKa’ brgyud) order of Tibetan Buddhism, comes in defense of the instantaneous

approach of the founder of his lineage, Gampopa (sGam po pa, 1079–1153).<sup>13</sup> It brings together many of the questions in the preceding discussion:

[Critics of Gampopa’s approach] certainly did not understand the meaning of the following passage from the earlier and later *Āhāpramāṇasamyak* [*ka dpe gsar rnying*]:<sup>14</sup>

The great medicine for seekers of gradual illumination  
Becomes a poison for seekers for instantaneous illumination;  
The great medicine for seekers of instantaneous illumination  
Becomes a poison for seekers of gradual illumination.

The classical treatises of the sūtras hold that no tranquility can be achieved without first obtaining both perfect ease of body and mind, no insight without achieving tranquility, no realization of Thatness (of true reality) without these two (tranquility and insight). Those who were influenced deeply by this statement not only concluded that no one at present or in the future would achieve the meditation, but went so far as to pronounce that the present age is not meant for meditation. It was utterly wrong for them to turn their backs on meditation and to mislead others. Moreover, such an assertion would imply that the many different dharmas expounded by Buddha according to the different levels of seekers were wrong. If this were their attitude, they would be committing the karma of abandoning the key instructions of the esoteric path, which produces great results through little striving, and many distinct paths that originated from the illuminating experience of the great saints.

(Takpo 1986: 144)

That is not to say that questions of historical sequence/s are entirely irrelevant to questions of legitimacy and productivity. From the very beginning we should give Tibetans credit for being aware of the questionable attribution of much of the religious material they were importing, and therefore also recognize that they were thus concerned with issues of quality, purity, and history. Some kind of temporal attribution to the Buddha, either directly or celestially (or through lineage transmission), was a feature of almost all works of any importance (and would continue to be, even with works clearly produced in Tibet; see below); as a result, problems of quality and purity had to be solved in other ways (Kapstein 2005: 2). Devotional practices aside, Mahāyāna doctrine, on paper anyway, focused on the threefold training (discipline, concentration, wisdom) expressed in the form of the six perfections on which the career of the bodhisattva is founded. These are of little threat to anyone. The tantric approach of working with the “poisons” and its attendant “left-hand” methodologies brought questions of legitimacy into sharper relief.<sup>15</sup> There was also the matter of sectarian rivalry, more than a hint of which can be heard in Dakpo Tashi Namgyal’s defensiveness.

Canons and texts rarely end up being the whole story. As David Gray observes in his discussion of the “myth” of the tantric canon, “Perhaps one of the most important and persistent ideas that underlies the tantric traditions of Buddhism is the notion that a complete collection of tantric scriptures, a Treasury of Tantras (*Tantrakośa*) or Collection of Tantras (*Tantrapīṭaka*), either did exist in the past, and/or continues to exist in an alternate level of reality” (Gray 2009: 1). With its assembly of visualizations, iconography, diagrams, gestures, yogas, offerings, spells, pledges, and initiations, *tantra* is the means of entry into

that timeless level of reality, preparing and eventually enabling the practitioner to blend with the deity (*lha*, the archetypal object of tantric visualization) and transform their own body, speech, and mind into the body, speech, and mind of a buddha. The nature of the timeless treasury is such that texts and language, products of history, only allow partial access – means are needed to allow the practitioner to settle within the pristine or intrinsic awareness of clear light mind.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most important implications of the myth of the tantric canon is the idea that our knowledge of *tantras* is always fragmentary and incomplete, which leaves open *the door to further revelation*, and creates *the space for the construction of a hierarchy* to mediate access to the inaccessible store of wisdom.

(Gray 2009: 15, emphasis added)

### TIME: THE DOOR TO FURTHER REVELATION

The collapse of the Tibetan empire after the assassination of emperor Lang Darma (gLang dar ma, r. 838–842) in 842 had a number of significant consequences for the direction of the development of Buddhism in Tibet. What centralizing authority had been present in the imperial court at Rasa/Lhasa disappeared, taking with it the sponsorship it had been able to offer the monasteries. The collapse of the imperial administration also meant the disbanding of the army in a manner that Ronald Davidson has compared to the situation in Western Europe after the Black Death – dominated by wandering bands of armed men (Davidson 2005: 18). The break-up of organized monastic religion also meant a temporary retardation of Tibetan interaction with Buddhist north India, which in turn meant that the *tantras* that were popular after the revival of Buddhist institutions in the middle of the eleventh century – that is to say the *tantras* of the newly emerging indigenous lineages, or New Orders (Sarma, *gsar ma*) – emphasized practices that did not exist in the earlier period (Davidson 2005: 216). Unexpectedly, the breakup of the empire also cleared the way for the full indigenization of Buddhism, what Davidson has styled, again drawing European parallels, a “Tibetan Renaissance.” In Tibetan historiography this new era is known as “the later spread of the doctrine” (*bstan pa phyi dar*), in contrast to that of the imperial period, “the earlier spread of the doctrine” (*bstan pa snga dar*).

The authority, organization, and resources for regrouping would eventually come from the old aristocratic clans, but this did not end up being directed toward a revival of centralized royal institutions; rather, local lords competed to establish themselves as the new Buddhist authorities while merchant families dominated the trans-Himalayan trade in texts. The fate of the original royal line remains something of a mystery, perhaps a sign of the royal household’s tenuous reliance on other aristocratic families. Those same aristocratic families were eventually responsible for investing in bringing a renewal of Buddhist teachings from India, and as fate would have it, the flourishing Buddhist Pāla empire was still waiting for them not all that far south of the Himalayas, the number of its monastic universities now expanded. At the same time, it would not be long before Buddhism in India and Central Asia was annihilated by Muslim invasions – one of the stimuli for the appearance of the millenarian *Wheel of Time Tantra* (Skt. *Kālacakra-tantra*) traditions in the eleventh century – while Mongolian armies took control of the territory to Tibet’s north.

Before he left this earth (or was hounded out of Tibet), Padmasambhava is believed by Tibetans to have secreted a large number of texts in the landscape of their country as

“treasures” (*gter ma*) to be rediscovered at a future time when they would be of greatest spiritual benefit. Probably the most famous of these is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (*Bar do thos grol*, “Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State”), first discovered by Karma Lingpa (Karma gling pa, 1352–1405) in the fourteenth or fifteenth century. While *terma* revelations were later developed into a threefold typology of “earth,” “knowledge,” and “pure vision” depending on the form of access the recipient (*gter ston*, treasure revealer) was given, the earliest revelations were associated with material remains left from the old empire (Davidson 2005: 213–215; Doctor 2005: 40). The sudden “discovery” of treasures in the tenth century probably emerged out of disagreement regarding the relative roles of lay and monastic interests in the “later dissemination.” Davidson argues that the earliest “discoverers” of treasures in the tenth and eleventh centuries were lay mantrins (practitioners of secret mantra) with old aristocratic connections who had kept the embers of Buddhism glowing and who were now marginalized with the return of monasticism. They were committed to an older vision of the Buddhist tradition that allowed an alternative to the new Indian traditions and translations dominated by more influential parties (the translation effort required privileged access to resources to fund travel and expertise):

[I]n the late tenth century the ancient Tibetan traditions were suddenly faced with alternative Sarma voices ... in response, the older aristocratic lineage holders began to build on a practice that had already been initiated by Central Asian and Chinese monks, that texts could be revealed in the target civilization.

(Davidson 2005: 216)

The treasure texts of the Nyingma Great Perfection were more than just one more innovation in the presentation of the Buddha’s teachings. They were keyed into the traditional protectors and autochthonous spirits of Tibet’s landscape, they offered a new “tradition” that identified the Buddhist emperors and other key figures of the former dynasty with Buddhist deities, they bore the imprimatur of the great Buddhist emperor Tri Songdetsen, and most important of all they opened a door of continuing communication with Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, and other revered guides to spiritual development, in the process having Padmasambhava raised up as a “second buddha,” a status that would eventually be accepted by all Tibetans whatever their denominational allegiances. In essence the *terma* are important to the Nyingma (*rNying ma*, “old order”) traditions in providing continuous renewal to the authority of Padmasambhava, bypassing the India so important in the New Order traditions while opening up a new space for spiritual expression. Later treasures also develop an intricate mythology through the hagiographies of Padmasambhava’s twenty-five great disciples, among them Emperor Tri Songdetsen. At the same time, with Indian models driving intellectual fashion the Nyingma adherents were faced with the irony of the “old” becoming unconventional ... in more ways than one!

Given the shaky historical ground on which tantric texts stood, it was unlikely that opponents were going to want to push too hard in questioning the *termas*’ credentials (Doctor 2005: 39). Even in early Buddhist traditions there are anticipations of the decline of the true teachings after 500 years and their virtual disappearance until “rediscovery by a future Buddha” (Williams 2009: 12), and it may even be said the Mahāyāna tradition was founded upon Nāgārjuna’s (ca. 150–250) retrieval of the *Perfection of Wisdom* from the realm of the *nāga* serpents. We find with the *terma* tradition, not for the first time in history, fideistic thinkers using skepticism as a fundamental defense in their arguments for faith

(Davidson 2005: 212; Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 163–165).<sup>17</sup> Treasures allowed the authority of the past to continue on as a physical, living presence and influence in the present, many *terma* contained prophecies that allowed the past to be extended into the future, and in the present they were not averse to incorporating or imitating new Indian material taken from the New Orders. When the *terma* traditions of the Nyingma were eventually taken up by the other orders, the holy land of India was no longer a viable source of renewal. The Buddhist Pāla empire (750–1174), which had ruled in ancient Bengal for over 400 years, came to an end, and with further portioning up of India between Muslim powers by the thirteenth century Buddhism in India had practically disappeared. As the influence of the subcontinent receded, the deification of the old religious kings of Tibet in the *terma* texts as earthly embodiments of buddhas and bodhisattvas would have consequences for native Tibetan conceptions of saintliness.

### TIME: THE SPACE FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A HIERARCHY

With the influx of Indian Buddhist doctrines during the later spread of the doctrine in Tibet, new schools or orders of Buddhism emerged centered on particular lineages of teachers and the texts and practices they transmitted. The Sakya and Kagyu orders have their origins in this new fluorescence in eleventh-century Tibet, and their emergence as “new orders” also had the effect of consolidating the earlier tradition as the Nyingma (“old order”). The Gelug order was founded much later by followers of the great reformer Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419) in the early fifteenth century, but it also inherited the monastic mantle of the Kadampa (bKa’ gdams pa) order – whose roots are found in the eleventh-century missionary activity of Atiśa already noted above. There were other movements, many later salvaged through the nonsectarian movement (*ris med*) of the nineteenth century, but that these four traditions have gone on to remain active in the twenty-first century is testament to the importance of the eleventh-century foundations of the Tibetan traditions. It may be one of the ironies of history that this flourishing was a result of the disappearance of strong centralized power.

At the end of the twelfth century India may have been declining as a source of Buddhist inspiration, but Tibet was poised to become the new nexus of Buddhist learning. Before long the increasingly powerful Mongolian khans and princes to Tibet’s north were taking an interest in Tibetan learning and territory. A Mongol invasion of Tibet in 1244 resulted in an alliance between the Sakya order and Mongol power, with the Sakya hierarch Chögyal Pagpa (Chos rgyal ’Phags pa, 1235–80) becoming “imperial preceptor” (*ti shri*; Ch. *dishi* 帝师) to Qubilai Qan (1215–94), and his nephew being made “chief ruler” (*dpon chen*) with authority over the thirteen “myriarchies” of Tibet under Mongol overlordship from 1268. This was not the first time Tibetans had served as imperial preceptors in lands to their north (Sperling 1987: 34): the Kagyu order had been cultivating a relationship with the Tangut court (Mi nyag; Ch. Xixia 西夏) just prior to the first attacks following Činggis Qan’s (1162–1227) coronation in 1206 (the Tangut capital eventually falling in 1227, the year of Činggis’s death). It is probably no coincidence that at this time the Karmapa hierarchs of the Kagyu order emerged as a formal system of reincarnating lamas, the first such reincarnation line in what would become an institution that remains unique to Tibetan Buddhism.

It is difficult not to see the emergence of the *tulku* institution in terms of ongoing rivalry between the Kagyu and Sakya orders at this time in relation to larger powers outside Tibet,

but it is also difficult to resist speculation that the appearance of reincarnate lamas *as an institution* was not an extension of the problem of administrative succession as it related to the sacral role Tibetan hierarchs were playing first in the Tangut empire and then to Qubilai, who in 1271 would found China's Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). The first institutionally recognized *tulku* in the history of Tibet was the second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi (1206–1283). He is said to have become known as the reincarnation of Karmapa I Düsüm Khyenpa (Dus gsum mkhyen pa, 1110–93) due to his own recollection, and on his own passing he left instructions that would guide the identification of the next in line, Karmapa III Rangjung Dorjé (Rang 'byung rdo rje, 1285–1339).

If these were some of the sociopolitical conditions for the emergence of the *tulku* system, what were the doctrinal developments? One place to begin looking might be the *Vajra Verses on the Oral Tradition* composed by one of the Indian ancestors of the Kagyu order, Naropa (1016–1100). According to Bryan Cuevas, it is here that many of the finer details of the conceptualizations of the intermediate state between existences are worked out:

The basic pattern involved a conflation of the four “existences” [or states] (*bhava*), the three-bodies theory,<sup>18</sup> and both the generation and completion phases of the supreme yoga. The result was a precise yogic system that emphasized the contemplative “blending” (*bsres ba*) of these triune components in a practice known as bringing the three bodies to the path (*sku gsum lam 'khyer*).

(Cuevas 2003: 48)

Cuevas also gives an account of how these practices allowing yogic use of the clear light of death and control of rebirth were further refined and adapted through the practices of Naropa's Tibetan disciple Marpa (Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros, 1012–97/9) and Marpa's disciple Milarepa (Mi la ras pa, 1040–1123), whose chief student Gampopa had four great students, including Karmapa I Düsüm Khyenpa, the first lama to take rebirth as a recognized *tulku*.

Again, none of these developments should be seen as particularly extraordinary in a Buddhist context. There are very early traditions in Buddhism of the Buddha speaking of his previous births and a whole tradition of Birth Stories (Skt. *Jātaka*) that provide a narrative of his journey to awakening, his bodhisattva career, through numerous lives. The ability to determine the destination of rebirth was also held by highly realized *siddhas* (tantric adepts) in India, and the very aim of Mahāyāna training was the development of awakened compassion as a bodhisattva, returning life after life for the benefit of all sentient beings. In this interpretation the Vajrayāna should be viewed as a continuation of the Mahāyāna, the tantric “technologies” merely providing means for its full realization. There are also traditions in Tibet regarding the commitment of Padmasambhava's twenty-five disciples, all fully realized adepts, to take rebirth in accord with their aspirations for the propagation of the guru's dharma, and their incarnation lines still continue. Depending on one's point of view on these matters, however, given their development in later “treasure” traditions these accounts may postdate the period when the idea of the *tulku* was first initiated as an organized institution in the thirteenth century. And it is this eventual organization of the *tulku* as an institution that is most remarkable (Wylie 1978).

It is no coincidence that the reincarnate lama system originated and developed in the order that performed best at bringing monasticism together with yogic approaches, Gampopa's Dakpo Kagyu (Davidson 2005: 289). As time moved on, the *tulku* system

provided a mechanism for abbatial succession in monastic centers belonging to all the orders as they were established, with varying regional commitments, across the Tibetan plateau. The *tulku* are a kind of religious royalty, with monastic seats and mansions (richly adorned but not supporting a life of luxury) to which they were returned in each life upon recognition as a child (*yang srid*). Unlike royalty, which depends on bloodline, they have spiritual genealogies that enable reproduction while remaining celibate monks (which may not always be a status necessary for tulkuhood). And while incarnation lines may be suppressed from time to time, excepting the annihilation of the entire community of devotees – and lamas traveled extensively establishing communities in a diversity of locations – there is no royal bloodline to be eradicated via assassination.

### UNTIMELY MEDITATIONS

We should care for our responsibilities as much as we care for our eyes. If not, all we do is collect causes of a rebirth in one of the hell regions. The wheel of time continues to turn day and night as we continue to spend our time and energy just creating problems for people we don't like and favouring those we like. Meanwhile, our actual work never gets done. We cannot keep even our own house in order, let alone doing anything useful for the country.

(His Holiness the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso,  
“Sermon at the Great Prayer Festival,” 1930.  
Trans. Glenn H. Mullin (1988: 263))

The three Tibetan institutions of *tantra*, *terma*, and *tulku*, founded between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, remain in place at the beginning of the twenty-first (most remarkably *terma*, see Terrone 2002; Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2012). Joining the rest of the world effectively at the end of the nineteenth century, surrounded by a struggle between great states for power in Central Asia (“the Great Game”), Tibet was met with an emerging international community whose principal ideology was centered on the history of the nation-state, nations governed by the clock (clock tower having replaced steeple) and the clock's particular order of rationality. The consequences for Tibet's achieving nationhood are well known, but there have been consequences also for our three Tibetan “temporal technologies” as they have had to adjust to this changing world.

Even His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama has been hard-pressed at times to explain the temporal enigmas of the *tantras* to modern Tibetan audiences and more particularly Western audiences. In surveying the Dalai Lama's teachings on the *Kālacakra-tantra* or *Wheel of Time Tantra* – a *tantra* (like others) that is known only through abridgements and commentaries and that first appeared in Tibet only in the eleventh century and not much earlier in India – Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim has traced how his approach to teaching its history has evolved to meet the needs of different audiences. The *Stainless Light* (Skt. *Vimal-aprabhā*) synopsis of the *Kālacakra-tantra* may state that the *tantra* is taught “throughout the three times by countless buddhas” (Yoeli-Tlalim 2004: 239), but this introduces Western practitioners (at least) to a type of rationality that involves forms of faith they may not have initially associated with Buddhism.

The Dalai Lama is the most recent embodiment of a *tulku* lineage going back to the fourteenth century and is regarded by Tibetans as an emanation of the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara. His role as the exiled temporal and spiritual leader of Tibet

has involved him in several ongoing crises over the *tulku* institution, a matter that also affects him personally. His recognition of the eleventh Panchen Lama (Paṅ chen bla ma) in 1995 resulted in the young boy Gendun Chokyi Nyima (dGe ’dun chos kyi nyi ma, 1989–) being spirited away by the Chinese government and replaced by a puppet. This immediately raised questions about what would happen when the time came to identify the next Dalai Lama, and it has also led to unhappy outcomes for the two boys, one becoming a state prisoner and the other, Gyeltsen Norbu (rGyal mtshan nor bu, 1990–), an unwelcome symbol of Chinese power (International Campaign for Tibet 2007). In John Powers’ analysis,

Tibet’s most important cultural markers relate to religion, and because China’s leaders are not Buddhists they cannot use them as part of their campaign. Indeed, many of their attempts to do so ... have the reverse effect, resulting in absurd situations where reincarnations are enthroned by officials who do not believe in reincarnation.

(Powers 2004: 147)

The Chinese state’s management of *tulkus* (not just the selection process, but also their “patriotic education”: Ch. *aiguozhuyi jiaoyu* 爱国主义教育; Tib. *rgyal gces chos gces slob gso*) only strengthens the attractions of the Dalai Lama as representing an alternative to state control. His Holiness and other *tulkus* able to manifest exemplary behavior have for centuries been recognized by their communities as *kapjé* (*skyabs rje*), “lords of refuge” whose realization protects all from the dangers of cyclic existence.

Yet the *tulku* system in its new context does raise questions of hierarchy for many, as well as questions regarding international conventions on the rights of children, both questions that have led to discussion among representatives of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. In a recent essay on “Tibetan Buddhism as a World Religion,” Geoffrey Samuel reflects:

In retrospect, this re-creation of Tibetan monastic institutions in exile is perhaps an even more remarkable achievement than it appeared at the time, and we can see how all subsequent developments within Tibetan Buddhism [worldwide] depended upon it ... Just why, in what were extraordinarily difficult circumstances, did things happen in this way? Why, in particular, did the various traditions retain so much separateness and individual identity?

(Samuels 2005: 298)

A simple answer, and one he goes on in effect to cover, is that lineage and transmission remain important outside of external conditions, but also that hierarchy is a condition internal to lineage. Lineage implies hierarchy, hierarchy implies lineage.<sup>19</sup> Hierarchy has been a feature of religion everywhere, and for a long time, and hierarchy in many ways *was* religion. It is unclear if religion of any kind can participate significantly in our present and future world and at the same time continue with established hierarchies, even while some religions have been better prepared by history for this challenge than others. The nonsectarian Rimé movement of Tibet’s early modern history has been a source of inspiration and guidance for many of the most innovative lamas, but their status as lamas and *tulkus* appears to have remained something western followers have wanted up to this point. Some could be accused of investing in that hierarchy, while others have suggested a rethink (Batchelor 2011).

Tibetan Buddhism has at times been assigned the label “medieval,” as has Tibetan culture. More recently it has, on the contrary, experienced being fashionable, being the latest thing. These are quite contrary temporal events experienced in relatively quick succession, which points to a pre-existing and continuing instability in Tibet’s temporality in regard to the West’s popular and intellectual perception of it. Being the latest thing, too, has a certain precariousness that goes with it, and there is a real possibility that it will become stale, that the message, for example, “that all beings want happiness,” will become thinner and thinner. That is the way time appears to work under the conditions of late capitalism. Are there as yet untapped resources within the Tibetan tradition, “hidden treasures” that will make their mark in the remarkable new century ahead? We know that as the Tibetan tradition adapts to these current challenges it actually emerged and took its present shape in response to similar crises in the past. If the past record is any indication, the innovations that will arise in the coming decades will in all likelihood relate to temporal visions and perspectives. We don’t know what they will be, but we do know that the conditions of memory and oblivion are very different. For example, how will memory continue to be linked to place? Things have moved very quickly since the Dalai Lama’s escape into exile in 1959, yet in an ongoing and deeply felt sense his exile has left the Tibetan people in a state of waiting: on both sides of the border, and also in their hearts. Treasures continue to be associated with the ancient empire, perhaps as never before.<sup>20</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 As Christian Wedemeyer points out in his “genealogy of the historiography of tantric Buddhism,”

[w]hile the entire question of patterns of development in the literature and ideas of Buddhist Tantrism bears inquiry – indeed, it is precisely in the construction of a relative chronology of Buddhist Tantric texts that the most promising avenue of historiographical inquiry lies – scholarship has not yet reached the point where such claims can be adequately justified.

(2001: 254)

Wedemeyer’s main target is the influential early nineteenth-century conclusion that *tantra* is a corruption of early Buddhism, as well as its perhaps longer-lasting corollary that tantrism is a later development that became increasingly transgressive (= “corrupt”?) with each step in innovation, a pattern that appears to mirror the more established understanding of an evolution proceeding from early monastic *prātimokṣa* vows, through the Mahāyāna expansion of the *prātimokṣa* in accord with the bodhisattva ideal, and then, following the bodhisattva vows, the *samaya* vows of Vajrayāna Buddhism (van Schaik 2010: 61). I also risk running another comparably narrow boundary here, namely the anthropologist’s assumption that abstract concerns, such as happiness and its causes, rarely concern ordinary village or nomad folk who are focused on “heaven and improved worldly status” (Lichter and Epstein 1983: 223–24). As an anthropologist here entering somewhat unfamiliar territory, I attempt to avert these errors with the constant reminder that anthropologists are the peasants of the scholarly world.

- 2 While the texts of *tantras* appeared from the late seventh century onwards, they are inevitably backdated to the time of the Buddha, given an origin in a space outside time altogether, or both, and for me at least this is a sign of their revelatory function (in addition to other signs of their divine origins). As I will make clear below, in line with Guenther (1968), I do not believe we should see revelation as necessarily “less philosophical.” I should note also that in the paper just cited Guenther is discussing Great Perfection revealed “treasure” *tantras* (see later in the chapter).
- 3 In this “succession of moments” (as opposed to linked points in time) approach I am guided by practices of the new historicists (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 20–48), who are guided in part

- by Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953 [1946]) and Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* (1623) in conjuring out of the canon, "without exhausting themselves or their readers," a "historically specific spirit of representation" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 36, 37). For what is becoming a lineage of specialized studies that apply literary theory to the analysis of Tibetan religious history, see Goodman (1983), Katz (1984), Kapstein (2000, particularly Chapter 9, "Samantabhadra and Rudra: Myths of Innate Enlightenment and Radical Evil"), Cabezón (2001), Gray (2005), and Raudsepp (2011).
- 4 This is of course a simplification of a problem of considerable historical diversity. For an introduction to the range of problems, see the papers in O'Flaherty (1980).
  - 5 The wheel of life, Buddhism's (and Tibet's) most famous "visual aid," is sometimes translated as "wheel of becoming."
  - 6 Tibet annexed the cave temple site of Dunhuang in the 780s. The documents stored there over the subsequent centuries were discovered by a Chinese monk in 1907. There is also an allied concept of a "wheel of the round of rebirths" (Skt. *saṃsāracakra*, P. *saṃsāra cakka*). For an account of both, see Buddhagosa, *Visuddhimagga* (fifth century CE). In some accounts it is said to have been originally designed as a work of religious art by the Buddha for his patron King Bimbisāra (582–554 BCE, 558–491 BCE), who was in need of something suitably impressive in exchange for a precious gift of armor from a neighboring king (Rechung 1989); in others the Buddha devised it as a way of communicating the Elder Moggallāna's teaching of the five (later six) destinies of rebirth more broadly (Khantipalo 1970) as he could not be in more than one place at one time. Ven. Khantipalo's source text is a Sarvastivādin [sic] account of the wheel's invention by the Buddha from the *Sahasodgata Avadāna*, *Divyāvadāna* 21. Cave 17 at Ajanta, where the earliest extant depiction of the *bhavacakra* is found, was started in 463 CE (Spink 2007: 204), and the cave itself, sponsored by King Upendragupta, was the model adapted for *vihāras* in the later expansion of Mahāyāna Buddhism in northern India and into Tibet.
  - 7 There is a general consensus that Tibetan beliefs at this time had received strong influence from Chinese and Indian ideas related to conceptions of royal charisma (Macdonald 1971: 367; Stein 2010 [1985]). It is also clear that during the Tibetan imperial period China and Central Asia were equal to India, if not more important, as sources of Buddhism and translated Buddhist texts.
  - 8 While there is doctrinal agreement on his lifespan being eighty years, there is no single agreed dating for the life of the Buddha. Recent scholarship has centered on a life spanning the fifth century BCE: "The death of the Buddha should be placed much nearer 400 BCE than 500 BCE" (Williams 2009: 10). According to some traditions the commentarial material accompanying the *Kālacakra-tantra* (see later in the chapter) portrays him teaching in the ninth century BCE.
  - 9 The Samyé debate, if there actually was one, occurred during a period when the Tibetan empire was able to capture the Tang capital, Chang'an, in 763 (dates from Kapstein 2000: xvii). The first Buddhist *temple* in Tibet was Trandruk, a royal shrine built during the reign of Songtsen Gampo.
  - 10 The earliest evidence for *doxological* discussions of *tantra* in India relates to the middle of the eighth century. Concerns around political aspects of *tantra*, particularly some violent or coercive practices, meant the ruling elite placed strict controls on what was promulgated; nevertheless, royal figures such as Tri Songdetsen appear to have actively sought to import tantric texts from India for their own purposes (Davidson 2005: 215; Weinberger 2010). These tensions may also relate to Davidson's observation that "the early Nyingma tantras are much more philosophical and abstract than their Indian prototypes" (2005: 228).
  - 11 Étienne Lamotte gives 35–32 BCE for the writing down of the Canon (1988: 364–71, cited in Gray 2005: 241 n. 9), by no means a completely unified process. We may even wonder if the appearance of Mahāyāna texts soon afterward is an effect of the tradition being written down, an extension of the process of Buddhism's literary narrativization.
  - 12 The approach of the Great Perfection is sometimes explained as a separate alternative, that of self-liberation (or "relaxation"?)

- 13 Something of a forbidden topic, or at least an easy target for opponents or competitors, since the reputed expulsion of exponents Chinese. Gampopa's approach was to suffer a concerted attack in the thirteenth century (Davidson 2005: 289).
- 14 There is some doubt over this identification of the text. Kongtrul Lodro Thaye's *Treasury of Knowledge* has "the former and latter *Authoritative Texts of Six Dharmas*" (*chos drug bka' dpe snga phyi*) (Skt. *Pravacanottaropamā*, Tohoku no. 2332 [=bka' dpe snga ma, bka' dpe phyi ma?]) (Harding 2007: 397 n. 33). See also Torricelli (1996).
- 15 These included orgiastic elements within the language and practice of tantric initiation involving sexual practices, ritual pollution, intoxication, and killing, as well as inversions of ordinary ethical precepts. There is a refrain through Tibetan history condemning their misuse, and accusations of excess and corruption played a role in the founding of the Sakya (Sa skya) and Gelug (dGe lugs) orders.
- 16 Given "the extreme resistance, inherited from certain of the earlier Buddhist philosophical traditions, to an affirmative discourse concerning ultimate reality," even these refined terms function metaphorically (Kapstein 2004: 125). There may even be a danger of error in drawing distinctions between clear light mind and everyday experience.
- 17 That is to say, when the credentials of the treasures were challenged by skeptics as requiring an unusual leap of faith it was not difficult for supporters of the treasures to find equally untested foundations underlying the positions of even the skeptics, thereby finding refuge behind the skeptics' skepticism. Gallagher and Greenblatt discuss this logic in relation to the standoff between Catholicism, Protestantism, and the first stirrings of the Enlightenment in the sixteenth century.
- 18 Fully awakened beings continue to act on three levels: the body of reality (*chos sku*, Skt. *dharmakāya*), the body of perfect rapture (*longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku*, Skt. *sambhoga-kāya*), and the emanational body (*sprul pa'i sku*, Skt. *nirmāṇa-kāya*). These are also related to a system of microcosm–macrocosm correlations e.g., mind, speech, and body, and even death, intermediate state, and rebirth.
- 19 Michael Aris wrote of Tibetan religious institutions'

preoccupation, sometimes to the point of obsession, with the lines of continuity that link present institutions, or their scattered remains, to both divine and human origins ... In their sheer multiplicity they reveal the intensely competitive and diversified world that gave them birth.

(1997: 9)

"Intensively competitive" may be an impression created by the compressed perspective of history, but Samuel comes to a similar if milder conclusion about the dynamic contemporary survival of the tradition when describing the "entrepreneurial logic of Tibetan Buddhism" (2005: 309).

- 20 The author would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of the Ninth Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche (b. 1955), who passed away in Melbourne in 2012. May he quickly return.

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