

Precarity of Death: A Mini-Conference Exploring the Porous Boundary between Death and Life
in Tibetan Traditions

Sponsored by the Yale University Buddhist Studies Initiative and Institute of Sacred Music

December 3, 2021

9am to 5pm

[Register here](#)

Schedule and Participants

Panel A

Friday December 3, 2021

9am – 10:30am

Introductory Remarks and Welcome

Kati Fitzgerald, Yale University

Death or no death. The ambiguity of the deloms in Bhutan

Francoise Pommaret, National Centre for Scientific Research & Royal University of Bhutan

Perception towards death, dying with dignity, preference of end-of-life care and medical aid in dying among Asian Buddhists living in Montreal, Canada

Nidup Dorji, Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan

When the Death Process Reverses: At What Point are the Dead truly Dead?

Alyson Prude, Georgia Southern University

Memories of Birth, Echoes of Death: The Entwining of Life and Loss in Mustang Women's Reproductive Histories

Sienna R. Craig, Dartmouth College

Abstracts

Death or no death. The ambiguity of the deloms in Bhutan

Francoise Pommaret

In conjunction with the publication of my forthcoming book, *Divine Messengers, the untold story of Female Shamans in Bhutan*, I will provide a contextual and theoretical overview of delom traditions in Bhutan. People who come back from the netherworld, *delog* or *delom*, are a documented religious phenomenon in the literature of the Tibetan world. They "die" and travel to the hells and come back to earth with messages from the dead for the living and pieces of advice, which are all linked to the notion of karma. However, here the notion of death can be contested in the western rationale. But is it important to know? I will argue here that the reality of the death experience has no relevance in this context, but the messages carried by these figures play a crucial role in society.

Perception towards death, dying with dignity, preference of end-of-life care and medical aid in dying among Asian Buddhists living in Montreal, Canada

Nidup Dorji

Objectives: Death and dying with dignity are an important issue in the Western world and grievous and irredeemable health conditions and unbearable suffering, has given support to the legalization of medical aid in dying (MAiD). It is unknown how Asian Buddhists who are in contact with the Western culture perceive death, dying with dignity, MAiD, and their preferences for end-of-life care (EoL).

Method: In this qualitative study, 16 Asian Buddhists living in Montreal, Canada, took part in a semi-structured interview.

Results: Participants perceived death as an inevitable reality of life, and a good and dignified death had to be natural, peaceful, and conscious. Contrary to general findings in the literature, religious affiliation does not always determine moral stances and practical decisions when it comes to MAiD. Some participants will take some freedom with the doctrine and based their approval of MAiD on the right to self-determination. Those who disapproved the use of MAiD perceived it as causing unnatural death, creating negative karma, and interfering conscious death. Most preferred palliative care and emphasized the significance of death preparation through daily contemplation.

Conclusion: EoL care providers have to remain sensitive to each patient's spiritual principles and beliefs, understand their needs and choices for EoL care to facilitate a peaceful and dignified death.

Keywords: medical aid in dying, death, dying with dignity, Asian, Buddhism, religion, culture, opinion.

When the Death Process Reverses: At What Point are the Dead truly Dead?

Alyson Prude

The 14th Dalai Lama, in line with Hindu teachings, has likened death to changing clothes: when one's current body becomes old and decrepit, consciousness sloughs it off and is reborn into a new body, a fresh outfit. Anyone who has ever shopped for clothes knows that it is not that easy, and sometimes we retrieve a previously discarded piece of clothing to wear one more time.

The *delog* ('*das log*) phenomenon, in which someone's consciousness discards but then reanimates their human body, confuses our understanding of the moment of death. Does life end when consciousness, having separated from the body, experiences the clear light of death or when consciousness is reborn into another form? The answer to this question has implications for how we understand *delogs*. Are they people who have died and returned to life, or people who have undergone a *near*-death experience? I will discuss contemporary Tibetan Buddhist views that I documented while pursuing ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal and eastern Tibet. The perspectives of monastic leaders, secular scholars, *delogs*' patrons and detractors, as well as *delogs* themselves, constitute a diverse field for approaching issues of death and the *delog* phenomenon.

Memories of Birth, Echoes of Death: The Entwining of Life and Loss in Mustang Women's Reproductive Histories

Sienna R. Craig

This paper will reflect on the dynamics of talking about and around the death of children at different stages in the life course – from miscarriages and stillbirths to the death of infants, young children, and even adult children – while tracing the reproductive histories of elder generations of women in Mustang, Nepal. Drawn from fieldwork in 2012 and again in 2019, conducted in collaboration with biological anthropologist Cynthia M. Beall, this paper will explore the ways that some of the more than 800 women in our biocultural study, ranging in age from 40-90 at the time of data collection, navigated discussions of death within the context of talking about birth. I will consider some of the ethical and methodological conundrums as well as the moments of tenderness and cross-cultural connection that occurred in these research spaces. How do discussions of the deaths of children lead researchers and local women, alike, to contemplate the workings of *karma* on the one hand and the role of socioeconomic inequality on the other? What sorts of bonds can be formed and re-formed through acts of remembrance that occur when reproductive history data is collected and then revisited after several years? How did we acknowledge and navigate the contours of personal suffering and trauma that was evoked and revisited through this fieldwork? What did we learn about each other, as women and as human beings variously shaped and impacted by Buddhist worldviews, through these conversations? To the extent that questions about the transmigration of consciousness, the perceived cultural and karmic challenges of being a woman, and changes in norms around pregnancy and birth came up in these discussions, where did such comments and reflections lead, particularly as women in our study considered the reproductive lives of their daughters and granddaughters?

Bios

Francoise Pommaret, PhD, is a cultural anthropologist, Director of Research at the CRCAO/CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research, France) and Associate Professor at the College of Language and Culture (CLCS), Royal University of Bhutan. She has been associated with Bhutan in different capacities since 1981 and has published numerous scholarly articles and books on different aspects of Bhutanese culture. She is currently involved in the documentation of the [Bhutan Cultural Atlas](#). Her research interests focus on the interface between deities, local powers and migrations in Bhutan as well as non-Buddhist practices in the framework of Vajrayana. Her PhD dissertation was on the *Das log. Sources ecrites et traditions orales*, CNRS eds, Paris, 1989, 1994, 2010. She was the co-editor and co-author of *Bhutan: mountain fortress of the gods*, Serindia, London, 1997, and *Bhutan. Tradition and change*, Brill, Leiden, 2007. Her wide audience books in English are *Bhutan, a cultural guidebook*, Odyssey Guidebook, Hong-Kong (1990, reprint 2003, 2006, 2010, 2018) as well as *Tibet, an enduring civilization*, Abrams Discovery series, NY, 2003. Both have been published in several languages. Her latest book co-authored with Stephanie Guyer-Stevens, is *Divine Messengers, the untold story of Female Shamans in Bhutan*, Shambhala, 2021. Françoise Pommaret has lectured in numerous academic institutions around the world and has been guest-curator for several exhibitions. For her work in Bhutan, she is the recipient of the French Legion d'honneur (2015) and the Gold Merit Medal of Bhutan (2017).

Dr Nidup Dorji is a full time lecturer at the Faculty of Nursing and Public Health (FNPH), Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan. After obtaining his Doctor of Philosophy in Public Health from Queensland University of Technology, Australia, he rigorously worked in the area of psychological wellbeing, happiness, and quality of life among older adults in Bhutan. He

also developed his patients on adverse childhood experiences and their lifelong influence on health and wellbeing. He has published scientific articles in national and international peer-reviewed journals as first and second author. He also obtained a Postdoctoral Fellowship from the University of Quebec at Montreal (UQAM), Canada. Dr Dorji is currently teaching international public health, epidemiology and biostatistics, environmental health, sexual and reproductive health including HIV/AIDS, and health research at FNPH. His special interests are in the areas of prevention of stressful life experiences and childhood adversities, happiness, wellbeing and quality of life, elderly health, life skills education, end-of-life care and spirituality. Mixed-method research design is also his area of special interest. He is currently a member of the editorial board of the journal of management and Thai journal of Public Health.

Alyson Prude is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia Southern University. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 2011. Her current work focuses on issues of power and authority and the relationships between normative Buddhist and indigenous traditions in the Himalayas.

Sienna R. Craig is Professor of Anthropology at Dartmouth College. She received her PhD in cultural anthropology from Cornell University (2006). Craig is the author of [*The Ends of Kinship: Connecting Himalayan Lives Between Nepal and New York*](#) (University of Washington Press, 2020), [*Mustang in Black and White*](#), with photographer Kevin Bubriski (Vajra Publications, 2018), [*Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine*](#) (University of California Press, 2012) and [*Horses Like Lightning: A Story of Passage through the Himalayas*](#) (Wisdom Publications, 2008). She is the co-editor of [*Medicine Between Science and Religion: Explorations on Tibetan Grounds*](#) (Berghahn Books, 2010), and [*Studies of Medical Pluralism in Tibetan History and Society*](#) (IITBS, 2010), among other publications. Craig enjoys writing across genres and has published poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction, and children's literature in addition to scholarly works in medical and cultural anthropology. Her work has been supported by the National Science Foundation, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, among other sources.

Kati Fitzgerald is a Postdoctoral Associate in the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale University. She received her PhD from The Ohio State University's Department of Comparative Studies in 2020. Her work centers on the lives and religious experiences of Tibetan lay women. Her work has been published in *Asian Theatre Journal*, *Asian Ethnography*, *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, *Buddhist Studies Review*, *Korean Journal of Buddhist Studies*, and *Religions*. Using primarily ethnographic methods in contemporary Tibet, her work seeks to explicate the religious theories of everyday Buddhists. Her current book manuscript utilizes gendered labor as a frame for re-thinking the role Tibetan women play in Buddhist modernity.

Panel B
Friday December 3, 2021
10:45am – 12:15pm

Death as Moral-Heuristic Ground: Paradigms of Generating Resilience and Cultivating Compassion among Tibetan Buddhist Practitioners in South India

Tenzin Namdul, University of Minnesota

Evoking death and the dead in Tibetan secular songs: teachings, devotion, commemoration

Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy, Laval University

Coping with (Un-)timely Deaths and Extending one's Life Span: Reflections on Ethnographic Research among Tibetans in Darjeeling, India

Dr. Barbara Gerke, University of Vienna

What is the Lifespan of a Tibetan Incarnation?

Gray Tuttle, Columbia University

Buddhism and Organ Donation: The (Dead) Body Multiple

Tanya Zivkovic, University of Adelaide

Abstracts

Death as Moral-Heuristic Ground: Paradigms of Generating Resilience and Cultivating Compassion among Tibetan Buddhist Practitioners in South India

Tenzin Namdul, PhD, TMD

This presentation elucidates the role of and techniques for the cultivation of compassion and resilience as a Tibetan Buddhist practitioners' response to an existential human fear of death. The presentation explores the cultural significance of death for Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and its role as "a moral heuristic ground," to transform orientations to self and other. Tibetan Buddhist practitioners use death to contemplate two fundamental Buddhist concepts: impermanence (*mi rtag pa*) and interdependent nature (*rten 'brel*). While contemplating impermanence provides an alternative perspective about death, interdependent nature helps in deconstructing the conception of "self." This technique, according to Tibetan practitioners, generates heart strength (*snying stobs*), also described as mental strength, offering a spiritual opportunity at the time of dying and a buffer against fears of death. Based on 18 months of ethnographic study among Tibetan refugees in southern India, the presentation demonstrates how the particular cultural significance ascribed to death motivates unique epistemology of death, which propels an in-depth self-investigation of death and the process of dying involving body, mind, and consciousness. The presentation examines how such an epistemology of death is applied in one's own process of dying, as well as caring for others in their process of dying. Moreover, I will propose that such practices not only suggest a novel mode of viewing death but contribute to the ongoing debate about the character of an "ideal death," and therefore, the appropriate care for an individual at the end of life.

Evoking death and the dead in Tibetan secular songs: teachings, devotion, commemoration.

Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy

Tibetan secular performing arts, such as music, dance and story-telling, are vivid indexers of life, prosperity and fortune, quite the opposite of death and transitioning, in the Tibetan cultural context. They are key elements of joyful social gatherings, such as new year celebrations, weddings, and community festivals and they are not mobilized in the funerals of lay people – these are silent apart from mantra and prayer recitations. But several performing genres do evoke the dead and their ongoing relationships with the living, such as opera (*a-lce lha-mo*) and the Gesar epic for the most well-known traditional genres. The play *sNang-sa 'od-'bum* features a famous revenant (*'das-log*) who came back to life to dispense religious teachings. In other plays, characters die who on stage are sent to hell or paradise realms following different stage conventions. The warrior Gesar had to conquer various hells to come back to the human realm and protect the living under his jurisdiction. Moving onto intercultural adaptations, the iconic *Tibetan book of the dead* (*Bar do thos 'grol*), a treasure-text attributed to Padamsambhava but “discovered” in the 14th C., detailing the progressive dissolution of the physical body into light, has been adapted into at least two Western sound projects, one by Leonard Cohen (1994), and one by Laurie Anderson, Tenzin Choegyal and Jesse Paris Smith (2019).

The second part of the presentation will look at evocations of the dead in contemporary Tibetan pop music, for example devotional songs for important lamas (in particular the 10th Panchen Lama, whose untimely demise inspired a vast array of songs); and commemorations of the victims of the Yushu (*sKye dgu mdo*) earthquake (2010). Songs about the martyrs (*dpa' bo*) who fought for the independence of their country, and more lately about the self-immolators, form another important sub-genre of political songs. The final section will be devoted to the various Tibetan songs created during the coronavirus pandemic, to either mourn the dead or encourage the medical staff fighting the disease, either in propaganda releases or stemming from traditional performers such as opera actors and epic bards.

Coping with (Un-)timely Deaths and Extending one's Life Span: Reflections on Ethnographic Research among Tibetans in Darjeeling, India

Dr. Barbara Gerke

During my doctoral research on Tibetan perceptions of the life-span and life forces in the Darjeeling Himalayan regions of India (2004-2007), I interviewed several Tibetans who experienced short life-spans and untimely deaths in their families. Divination, astrology, and Buddhist longevity practices played an important role in their lives, (a) to make sense of the untimely deaths of their loved-ones and (b) to extend their own life spans. Practices to extend the lifespan included pilgrimages to sacred places (e.g. the longevity cave Maratika in Nepal), freeing of animals aimed for slaughter, as well as reciting mantras and engaging in mediation practices of the three main deities linked to longevity: White Tara, Amitāyus and Uṣṇīṣavijayā. It was also very popular to attend longevity empowerments and receive the blessings through consuming “long life pills.”

I will present an ethnographic example to demonstrate how life and death are interwoven in daily Buddhist practice in ordinary lives lived among Tibetans in multiethnic Darjeeling. “Untimely deaths” occurring during childhood can be understood as “timely” when a remaining life-force

from a previous life is lived out in a short childhood life. A death can be “timely” when the life force was truly exhausted and nothing can be done. Daily Buddhist longevity practices engage with the fluidity of life forces of others and oneself, extending into non-human realms, where life-forces can be gathered, protected, and passed on to others, weaving a web between the dead and the living in an encompassing world of sentient beings. Taken together, these practices are not only about a good life, avoiding illness and obstacles, but also about creating time for Buddhist practice towards a good death and a promising human rebirth.

What is the Lifespan of a Tibetan Incarnation?

Gray Tuttle

In recent work trying to assess the lifespan of Tibetan lamas I started to think about what a “lifespan” means in the context of conscious reincarnation. The lives of Tibetan reincarnations are counted as both individual and corporate. Tibetans talk about incarnation series as a rosary of lives. There are both fourteen separate Dalai Lamas and only a single incarnation series, one consciousness that spans all these corporeal lives. Tibetans certainly mark and mourn the death of each body, but has the experience of living with some 1000 incarnation lineages for centuries changed Tibetans’ sense of what a life is? And what would it do to the mean lifespan of Tibetan lamas to count each incarnation as a single—very long—life?

Buddhism and Organ Donation: The (Dead) Body Multiple

Tanya Zivkovic

This paper examines Buddhist responses to the Australian ‘*DonateLife...the greatest gift*’ publicity campaign to increase organ donation in minority ethnic and religious groups. It shows how Tibetan Buddhist approaches to death and organ donation enable new ways of thinking about the promotional rhetoric of ‘the gift’ vis-à-vis divergent temporalities of dying. In doing so, the paper attends to the varied deaths occluded by organ donation. Drawing on Annemarie Mol’s (2002) concept of ‘the body multiple’ to examine the multiple realities of the (dead) body, their enactments in practice and in relation with other bodies and technologies, reveals the many deaths encountered in organ donation and their impact on how donation decisions are made. As Tibetan Buddhist perspectives make clear, the prevalent conception of (neurological or circulatory) death that has legitimated organ donation is more contentious than ‘the gift of life’ acknowledges.

Bios

Tenzin Namdul is a Tibetan medical doctor and medical anthropologist. Tenzin received his Tibetan medical degree from the Men-Tsee-Khang Tibetan Medical School in Dharamsala, India, and PhD from Emory University. He is a NIH TL1 Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, and a graduate faculty at the Bakken Center for Spirituality and Healing. Tenzin’s research focuses on the intersection of biological and sociocultural factors in the study of aging and end-of-life care. His current research examines the factors associated with cognitive and physical resilience and its impact on Alzheimer’s Disease and related dementias.

Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy is Professor of Anthropology at Université Laval in Québec. She has investigated Tibetan popular culture since the mid-1990s, looking at drama, pop music, dance, television, amateur cinema, and autobiographical writing. She seeks to understand cultural and political dynamics running through in High Asia (both in Tibet and exile), namely shifts in imaginary and identity occurring among Tibetan societies since the take-over of the People's Republic of China, how tradition and modernity play out in ideology and practice, the uses of cultural heritage and the emergence of contemporary Tibetan cultural forms – both official and popular. She has written, among others, a monograph on Tibetan drama ([*Le Théâtre ache lhamo: Jeux et enjeux d'une tradition tibétaine*](#), Peeters, 2017), and edited four volumes on Tibetan performing arts and the anthropology of media: "[The Singing Mask: Echoes from Tibetan Opera](#)" (*Lungta*, no. 15); [«MédiaMorphoses: la télévision, quel vecteur de changements?»](#) (*Anthropologie et Sociétés*, vols. 36: 1-2, 2012); "Studies in The Tibetan Performing Arts" (*Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, vol. 40, 2017); (with Katia Buffetrille) [Musique et épopée en Haute-Asie: Mélanges offerts à Mireille Helffer à l'occasion de son 90e anniversaire](#) (L'Asiathèque, 2017). Postpandemic travels permitting, her future research interests lie in the history of Tibetan language radio and television broadcasting.

Barbara Gerke holds a DPhil in Social Anthropology (2008), and an MSc in Medical Anthropology (2003) from the University of Oxford. She is currently the project leader of a three-year Austrian Science Fund (FWF) research project on “Potent Substances in Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist Rituals” at the University of Vienna. Working across the disciplines of Medical Anthropology and Tibetan Studies, her research focuses on medico-religious interfaces in Sowa Rigpa pharmacology with ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal and among Tibetan and Ladakhi communities in India. Her open-access monograph *Taming the Poisonous: Mercury, Toxicity, and Safety in Tibetan Medical Practice* (Heidelberg University Publishing, 2021) examines the use of refined mercury in Tibetan medicines and related safety and toxicity debates. Her first monograph *Long Lives and Untimely Deaths* (Brill, 2012) analyses long-life rituals, as well as vitality and life-span concepts among Tibetans in the Darjeeling Hills.

Gray Tuttle studies the history of twentieth century Sino-Tibetan relations as well as Tibet's relations with the China-based Manchu Qing Empire. The role of Tibetan Buddhism in these historical relations is central to all his research. In his *Tibetan Buddhists in the Making of Modern China* (Columbia UP, 2005), he examined the failure of nationalism and race-based ideology to maintain the Tibetan territory of the former Qing empire as integral to the Chinese nation-state. His current research project, “Amdo Tibet, Middle Ground between Lhasa and Beijing (1578-1865),” is a historical analysis of the economic and cultural relations between China and Tibet in the early modern periods (16th – 19th centuries) when the intellectual and economic centers of Tibet shifted to the east, to Amdo — a Tibetan cultural region the size of France in northwestern China. Key to that project is data on the 1000s of monasteries and reincarnation series of the modern period, when there was explosive growth on both fronts.

Dr Tanya Zivkovic is an anthropologist and Australian Research Council Future Fellow at the University of Adelaide. In her current research projects she is examining end of life decision making and organ donation in diverse cultural and religious contexts. She has published journal articles and a book on death and dying in Tibetan Buddhism. Her monograph is titled *Death and Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism: In-between Bodies* (Routledge 2014).

Keynote Address
Mystery, Meaning, and Nature of Death: A Tibetan Buddhist Perspective
Dr. Thupten Jinpa
McGill University

Thupten Jinpa, Ph.D. is the Founder and Chairman of Compassion Institute, and the principal author of Compassion Cultivation Training™ (CCT©), the Institute's flagship compassion education offering, developed while Jinpa was at Stanford University.

Jinpa trained as a monk at the Shartse College of Ganden Monastic University, South India, where he received the Geshe Lharam degree. Jinpa also holds a B.A. in philosophy and a Ph.D. in religious studies, both from Cambridge University.

Jinpa has been the principal English translator to H.H. the Dalai Lama since 1985, and has translated and collaborated on numerous books by the Dalai Lama including the New York Times Bestsellers *Ethics for the New Millennium* and *The Art of Happiness*, as well as *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*. His own publications include *A Fearless Heart: How the Courage to be Compassionate Can Transform Our Lives* and translations of major Tibetan works featured in *The Library of Tibetan Classics* series.

A frequent speaker at various international conferences on mindfulness, compassion, and contemplative practice, Jinpa also serves as an adjunct professor at the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University, Montreal and is the founder and president of the Institute of Tibetan Classics. He has been a core member of the Mind and Life Institute and its Chairman of the Board since January 2012.

Panel C
Friday December 3, 2021
3:30pm – 5pm

The 'das log, revenant experience in the Khandro Chodzo Chenmo
Padma'tsho (Baimacuo) Prof., Southwest University for Nationalities

The Miracle of Yama's Little Helpers: Problems and Practices of Bodiless Transference in the Kālacakra Tantra
Michael Sheehy, University of Virginia

Modes of Liberation in Tibetan Buddhist Death Practices: Purificatory, Didactic, and Yogic Approaches
Rory Lindsay, University of Toronto

Ontological Realities and the Biocultural Nexus of Life in Suspension with Death: Perceptual Cues and Biomarker Diagnostics for the Tukdam State
Tawni Tidwell, PhD, TMD, Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstracts

The ‘das log, revenant experience, in the Khandro Chodzo Chenmo

Padma'tsho (Baimacuo) Prof.

In Tibetan culture, death is an extremely important opportunity to transform the lives of human beings. Related to this, 'das log means revenant, which is an extraordinary reality for some Tibetan women where they return from the dead. In this talk, I will explain the material in the Khandro Chodzo Chenmo, published in 2017 by the Larung Ārya Tāre Book Association Editorial Office.

The Miracle of Yama's Little Helpers: Problems and Practices of Bodiless Transference in the Kālacakra Tantra

Michael Sheehy

There are problems with not having a body. Buddhist tantric systems articulated in India, and extrapolated in Tibet, identified issues vexed about disembodiment concerning the continuity of consciousness during dreamtime and death, and the im/possibility of awakening. A central image of the Gnosis chapter of the *Vimalaprabhā* or *Stainless Light* commentary on the *Kālacakra Tantra* is Yama, the Lord of Death, commanding his minions to transport and hurl a body into the waking state so that the inhalation of breath reanimates a lived body. This paper embarks from this passage in the *Vimalaprabhā* to discuss philosophical problems and contemplative practices related to the body and death in the *Kālacakra Tantra*. While several tantric systems, including the *Guhyasamāja* and *Six Dharmas of Naropa*, rely on an illusory body (*sgyu lus*) that emerges from clear light at death ('*chi ba 'od gsal*) in the intermediary bardo state, the Kālacakra system asserts that awakening cannot be attained based on an illusory body developed in a bardo. Because the *Kālacakra Tantra* correlates the growth of the human body with yogic processes, Tibetan scholars debated the body and its transformations at death based on theoretical interpretations of the sixfold vajrayoga (*rdo rje rnal 'byor yan lag drug*) completion stage practices prescribed in the tantra. We discuss key points of tantric theory related to the coarse and subtle physical body, mental body (*gid kyi lus*), dream body (*rmi lam lus*), and being bodiless (*lus med*) raised by fourteenth century Kālacakra scholars including Buton Rinchen Drub (1290-1364), Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltzen (1292-1361), and Remdawa Zhonnu Lodro (1349-1412). Special attention is given to contemplative practices and processes that were devised and explained by Kālacakra practitioners to solve these problems, specifically the transference ('*pho ba*) of consciousness out of the body at death. To understand the salience of these mind-body problems and related practices to contemporary discourses, the paper concludes with analogs in the cognitive sciences from studies on body illusion, out-of-body experiences (OBEs), and near-death experiences (NDEs).

Modes of Liberation in Tibetan Buddhist Death Practices: Purificatory, Didactic, and Yogic Approaches

Rory Lindsay

This paper examines three soteriological methods found in Tibetan Buddhist works on death practices. Purificatory approaches can include the purification of self and others, but Indian Buddhist works that were influential in Tibet like the *Sarvavidyāpariśodhana Tantra*

emphasize rituals performed on behalf of the dead that can purify their negative actions, thus delivering them to a pure realm. Didactic models—practices involving speaking to the dead in real time to help navigate the afterlife—can be traced to the Imperial Period and do not seem to have any Indian Buddhist antecedent. Finally, yogic approaches associated with tantric Buddhist works like the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* and its commentaries describe advanced tantric practices that allow the deceased to achieve complete awakening at the moment of death or in the intermediate state between lifetimes. This article explores examples of these three methods before considering attempts in the history of Tibetan Buddhism to combine them.

Ontological Realities and the Biocultural Nexus of Life in Suspension with Death: Perceptual Cues and Biomarker Diagnostics for the Tukdam State

Tawni Tidwell, PhD, TMD

In March 2021, the Tukdam Study, led by neuroscientist Richard Davidson and Center for Healthy Minds since 2013, had its longest case—a senior Buddhist practitioner who remained in the post-death meditative state called tukdam (*thugs dam*) for 37 days. His body remained supple and radiant with marked resistance to the decomposition process. Both Tibetan medical and biomedical systems rely on indicators from each tradition’s respective ontological paradigms and epistemic diagnostic instruments to guide treatments for alleviating disease and suffering. These same lenses determine specific progressions during the dying process and confirm the final transition to death. Euroamerican biomedical and research communities increasingly rely on biomarkers that index function and dysfunction that, at the time of death, focus on brain stem, heart and lung parameters to demarcate end of life. Tibetan medical physicians, on the other hand, rely on perceptual and inferential markers derived from the *pramāṇic* tradition, assessing the validity of evidence largely gained through perceptual means, to determine when a consciousness releases from a dying body.

In contemporary research collaborations with Tibetan medical physicians, Buddhist monastics and biomedical researchers, Euroamerican epistemologies and modes of inquiry have dominated, resulting in relegating traditional modes of inquiry, such as indirect evidence (*rjes dpag*) and direct perceptual evidence (*mgon sum*), to largely theoretical bystanders. This presentation explores the ontological realities of the case of *tukdam*, and its biocultural nexus of life suspended in death. It explores the breadth and diversity of perceptual signs such as radiance (*mdangs*), heat (*drod*) and posture (*bzhugs stangs*) alongside biomarkers such as EEG-measured brain activity, oximetry and microbiotic changes; and posits the possibility for discourse by forging epistemic bridges, even for supramundane signs such as *ring sel* (*ring bsrel*) and *kü-ding* (*sku gdungs*) relics. This paper applies a biocultural lens to assess how competing epistemologies and ontologies frame the investigative object simultaneously as a dying person, a moment of awakening and a bardo transition state from life to death to luminosity.

Bios

Padma 'tsho (Baimacuo) is Professor in the Philosophy Department of Southwest University for Nationalities in Chengdu, China. She holds a Ph.D. from Sichuan University in Chengdu and M.A. from Central Nationalities University in Beijing. She published about 50 articles and two books of her research. Her areas of research and teaching include Tibetan Buddhism, ritual as well as the education of Buddhist nuns in Tibetan areas. Her articles have appeared in edited

volumes such as *Eminent Buddhist Women*, edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Voices from Larung Gar*, edited by Holly Gayley, and numerous journals, including *Religious, Contemporary Buddhism*, *China Tibetology*, *Journal of Ethnology*, *Sichuan Tibetan Studies*, and *Asian Highlands Perspective*. In the last decade, Professor Padma 'tsho has spent time at several North American universities as a Visiting Research Scholar, including Harvard, Columbia, University of Virginia, and CU Boulder.

Rory Lindsay is an assistant professor in the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. He is also an editor at 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha and a visiting scholar at the Buddhist Texts Translation Initiative at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His forthcoming book *Saving the Dead: Tibetan Funerary Rituals in the Tradition of the Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra* (Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde, 2021) examines the history of Kunrik funerary practices in Tibet and the intersecting forms of agency—human, nonhuman, and material—that are described in Kunrik ritual manuals.

Michael R. Sheehy is a research assistant professor in Tibetan and Buddhist studies and the director of scholarship at the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia. His work gives attention to philosophical thought and contemplative practices in Tibet, and more broadly, to the relevance of meditation research to the interdisciplinary humanities. He specializes in contemplative practices detailed in Vajrayāna Tibetan Buddhist yoga and meditation manuals. He is the co-editor of *The Other Emptiness: Rethinking the Zhentong Buddhist Discourse in Tibet* (SUNY 2019), and for the University of Virginia Press, he serves as a Series Editor for both the *Contemplative Sciences* and *Traditions and Transformations in Tibetan Buddhism* book series.

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