Travels in the Netherworld
For my parents
Acknowledgments

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A Note on Tibetan Words

Tibetan words in their correct written form are not read phonetically. For example, the name Bla-ma Byams-pa-bde-legs is actually pronounced Lama Jampa Délek. For ease of reading, therefore, I have employed throughout the main body of the text a phonetic system based generally on the Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan devised by David Germano and Nicolas Tournadre of the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library (thdl.org). Proper Tibetan spellings are given according to the Wylie transcription (Wylie 1959) in the notes, in the bibliography, and in the list of Tibetan spellings of names and terms. Specialists should note that in my transcriptions I capitalize initial letters only, not “foundation letters” (ming-gzhi), and I follow standard English rules for the capitalization of titles, proper names, and so on.
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Travels in the Netherworld
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To Hell and Back

Though warned by the divine messengers,
Full many are the negligent,
And people may sorrow long indeed
Once gone down to the lower world.
But when by the divine messengers
Good people here in this life are warned,
They do not dwell in ignorance
But practise well the noble Dhamma.

—Devaduṭa-sutta

Writing in 1928 of his travels in Tibet, Charles Bell makes reference in passing to a brief but noteworthy encounter on the streets of Lhasa: “Now and then in Tibet is to be found a man or woman who claims to have risen from the dead. Such a one is known as De-lok, ‘Passed away and returned.’ I met a de-lok one day on the Lhasa ling-kor behind the Potala.” Bell continues, “She was an old woman from eastern Tibet, and she claimed to have come back to life five or six days after she had died. So she sat by the Sacred Way reading prayers, and pious pilgrims gave her alms. Tibetans always respect a miracle, though they are not unduly surprised by it.”

What sort of “miracle” was this woman whom Charles Bell met behind the Potala? Who were the délok in Tibet, those women and men who had passed away and returned to life? What was the nature and circumstances of their experience? What category of
person in Tibetan society was inspired or motivated to have such an experience? Were women, as is often assumed, more predisposed than men to become délok? Were there notable distinctions between levels of social status or between the experiences of monks and those of the laity? And what can we learn about popular religion in Tibetan society from the details of their experiences? Throughout this book I will consider these questions and offer a few possible responses. In doing so, I will also highlight how the Tibetan literature on délok can be approached as valuable social-historical resources, largely untapped, for gaining better insights into the nature of popular Tibetan Buddhist beliefs and practices about death and the afterlife.

Generally, the délok (lit., “those who have returned from the dead”) are simple ordinary people, either women or men, who die, tour the netherworld, and return to report their afterlife experiences. Their accounts emphasize the universal Buddhist principles of impermanence and worldly suffering, the fluctuations of karma, and the feasibility of obtaining a favorable rebirth through virtue and merit. Although there is some scattered textual evidence that attests to the emergence of the délok phenomenon in Tibet in the twelfth century, the development of délok narratives as a distinct literary genre did not get underway, it seems, until the fifteenth century. In fact, to my knowledge, the earliest recorded reference to a délok in Tibetan literature occurs in the fifteenth-century Religious History of Lhorong composed between 1446 and 1451 by Tatsak Tséwang Gyel and repeated by Gô Lotsāwa Zhönu Pel (1392–1482) a few decades later in his famous Blue Annals (written between 1476 and 1478). In the section on the life of Tashi Pel (1142–1210), first abbot of the Kagyu monastery of Taklung, Tashi Pel is said to have met an old woman at Tankya in central Tibet who had returned from death. This woman, referred to by the term “female revenant” (shi-log-ma), offered Taklung Tashi Pel a prophecy predicting his success as a great spiritual teacher.

In the Religious History of Lhorong, as in Bell’s observation cited above, we catch a glimpse of the social identity and function of the délok in Tibet. In both cases, first and foremost, the délok is female. Secondly, both women are distinctive in that they not only claim to have died and come back to life—an extraordinary feat in and of itself—but they also subsequently act as soothsayer (in the case of the Lhorong history) or as preacher (in the case of Bell’s woman in Lhasa) reciting prayers to solicit alms. These particular social-religious functions of the délok are corroborated by Françoise Pommaret’s pioneering ethnography of two female délok in modern-day Bhutan and Nepal. We certainly owe a great debt to Pommaret for being among the first to bring the Tibetan délok phenomenon to the attention of the western world and for breaking new ground in research on this subject in her fine study Les Revenants de l’au-delà dans le monde tibétain,
originally published in 1989. In interpreting the délok’s social roles, Pommaret distinguishes between features described in the literary sources and those observed in contemporary society. Pommaret shows us that the délok in the written sources are always favorably characterized as messengers of the dead and as preachers of virtuous action and of the effects of karma. However, in modern social settings, as she highlights, the délok are identified also as “shamans” who undergo the death experience at fixed dates and times, as guides for the dead who save them from evil destinies, and as soothsayers who receive visitors asking for spiritual assistance. Furthermore, Pommaret reveals that the délok in contemporary society are also viewed as ritual outcastes and are prohibited from assisting with births and funerals. In my view, the logic behind such prohibitions likely stems from the perception of the délok as perilous liminal beings, capable of moving freely among the dead. Still, we may ask whether such prohibitions have anything to do with gender distinctions or discrimination? Are such prohibitions and even the délok experience itself affected by social divisions or professional religious roles or lack thereof? And what do descriptions of the return-from-death experience in the Tibetan literature reveal about popular perceptions of death and the afterlife? These are a few of the questions raised by Pommaret’s landmark study, and in Lawrence Epstein’s work before hers, but in my own reading of the literary evidence I found that answers to such questions do not often conform to expectations. For example, the written narratives, unlike the contemporary “living” cases examined by Pommaret, are populated by just as many men as women, and so the phenomenon does not appear to have been dominated by either one or the other, as is usually assumed. The literature, moreover, offers little or no evidence of how these possibly shaman-like individuals were perceived by the society in which they all lived. Fortunately, the texts do tell us quite a bit about the lives of the délok themselves and about their unusual personal experiences.

Yet the societal role of the délok is not the focal point of these texts. Rather, the narratives are chiefly concerned about personal sins and virtues acquired in this life to be tested in the next. They are, moreover, less interested in the achievement of Buddhist enlightenment professed in monastic textbooks as the only true goal of religious endeavor. Inasmuch as the biographies of these revenants emphasize the universal Buddhist principles of impermanence and the fluctuations of karma, these popular narratives are in accord with the basic teachings of Buddhism. But unlike the scholastic and specialized ritual texts, such as those accompanying the celebrated Tibetan Book of the Dead (meant primarily to be employed as professional manuals for the dying and advanced meditation guides for the recently deceased), the délok stories are aimed almost
exclusively at a living nonspecialist audience. While parallels can be noted between these texts and those of a more technical nature (and indeed, as we shall see, the basic concepts in the délok narratives are almost always rooted in some aspect of formal doctrine), these personal accounts rarely contain all the particulars described in the theoretical works. They are, however, rich in detail about everyday anxieties surrounding death and about common beliefs concerning the world beyond. Though frequently distorting and even contradicting canonical Buddhist doctrine, the popular conceptions found in the délok books articulate religious and social values that may have been ultimately more meaningful and compelling to the average Tibetan than those offered in the sophisticated and generally inaccessible literature of the monasteries and mountain hermitages. In an attempt to expand and advance the pioneering research efforts of Epstein and Pommaret, I shall argue throughout this book that the insights gained from a close reading of the délok narratives can help illuminate the contours of “popular religion” in Tibetan society, which is a crucial topic still largely neglected in the available scholarship on Tibet and on the Tibetan délok in particular. The present study is meant to provide fresh perspectives on Tibetan religious culture more broadly in hope that these insights may help to encourage even more nuanced approaches to the study of Buddhism in Tibetan society.

Tibetan Popular Religion

It is my general contention that much scholarly work in Tibetan studies has tended to rely on neatly formulated conceptual paradigms and static two-dimensional models of Tibetan religion that fail to communicate the multiplicity of Tibetan religious life. Religion in Tibet, as in all religious cultures, was and continues to be fluid and thoroughly untidy. In my opinion, what first needs to be resisted is the tendency to equate Tibetan religious life unproblematically with either the “tame” activities of the monks (grwa-pa) and lamas (bla-ma), whom I qualify here as the “professional religious,” or the “wild” activities of the accomplished adepts (dngos-grub) and saintly madmen (smyon-pa), whom I shall call the “extraordinary religious.” I want to suggest that we begin to take seriously the devotional life of the “ordinary religious” (so-so-skye-bo), the village peasants, priests, traders, craftsmen, nomads, and so on. For it is only by widening our focus in this way that we can begin to shed better light on the multi-tiered landscape of premodern Tibetan Buddhist society. Moreover, in revising accepted models for understanding Tibetan Buddhism to include not only the professionally and the extraordinarily religious but also the
ordinary practitioners as well, we may also begin to recognize certain common
suppositions shared by all Tibetan religious groups, lay and celibate, learned
and illiterate, female and male. I am confident that we can demonstrate a
commonality among these groups that, for lack of a better term, we can call
“popular.” In this regard, popular would be those common viewpoints and
concerns that play as much a vital role in the religious life of village peasants as
in the religious life of village monks, lamas, and accomplished yogis.

In Tibetan societies prior to 1950 (the date of Chinese Communist occu-
pation and a convenient transition point between so-called “premodern” and
“modern” Tibet), almost all Tibetans no matter what their status viewed
themselves as inhabiting a world animated by forces both benign and antag-
onistic. Recourse to local beliefs, practices, and institutions, particularly in
times of stress and anxiety, insured that everyone acted on such a world view in
similar ways, though determined individually by the circumstances of history
as well as specific local concerns. In general terms, the predominant preoc-
cupation of day-to-day religious activity was to seize, to control, and/or to
defend against the pervasive forces of good or evil in order to win success in
endeavors large or small. In almost every case, such endeavors were aimed at
better health, increased wealth, and future happiness, whether in this or the
next life. Again, I use the term “popular” in reference to these common atti-
tudes shared by Tibetans of all classes and occupations; the monks and lamas,
accomplished adepts, and male and female laity alike. I want to be clear that I
am using the term in this way as a corrective to conventional two-tiered models
that polarize Tibetan religious culture usually into a “cleric mode” and a
“popular mode” and from there generate countless levels of homologized di-
chotomies (e.g., great-little, elite-folk, rational-magical, textual-ritual, Buddhist-
shamanic, Buddhist-Bön, Gelukpa-Nyingmapa, and so on). In my opinion,
these sorts of dichotomous models do little to illuminate the social-religious
complexities of Tibetan culture as a whole and obscure the fluid and organic
nature of Tibetan Buddhism in particular.

Some scholars, inspired in part by the early work of Melford Spiro, have
attempted to resolve the polarity dilemma created by the two-tiered approach
by focusing on the different orientations motivating religious practice. These
religious orientations are generally divided into three categories: the soterio-
logical (“nibbanic”), the ethical (“kammatic”), and the pragmatic (“apotro-
paic”). Here, the soteriological goal is directed toward the attainment of lib-
eration, enlightenment, Buddhahood, and is defined narrowly as the primary
concern of monks and a few extraordinary lay practitioners. The ethical goal is
concerned with virtuous action and karmic merit, and is associated also with
the activities of the monks. The pragmatic goal, the pursuit of health, wealth,
and future happiness, is characterized broadly as the sole concern of ordinary laypersons. Although on a formal doctrinal and structural level this three-tiered model works well to highlight certain theoretical distinctions in Buddhism and a few of the possible psychological motivations of religious practice, it ultimately fails to resolve the polarity dilemma. The three-tiered orientation model still rests firmly on a logic that assumes a dichotomous relationship between clerical and lay religious practice, whereby monks are the ones doing serious religion in the heroic pursuit of enlightenment and laypeople are just simply wasting precious opportunities.

Such a binary division actually replicates an indigenous Tibetan distinction between the mundane concerns of the everyday world (’jig-rten-pa) and the supramundane affairs of the transcendant (’jig-rten las-’das-pa), but despite this fact, there are certain sociological distortions created by dichotomizing Tibetan Buddhism and religious practitioners in this way. At the ground level of day-to-day life, we would be hard pressed to recognize the Buddhist activities either of monks or laypeople as anything other than pragmatic, maybe ethical in some specific pedagogical circumstances, and only rarely if ever soteriological. If in the case of Tibetan monks, for example, we clearly discern in their daily religious observances primarily a pragmatic orientation, do we really learn anything about the religious life of monks by forcing them into the soteriological or ethical category? Likewise, we gain little insight into the religious life of Tibetan laypeople if we also insist on assigning their motivations to such rigid categories. I would rather speak to the distinction between monks and laypeople in more historically grounded terms in an attempt to avoid overly generalized dichotomies and speculative psychological profiles altogether. In this way, we may be better able to remain attentive to the complexities of Tibetan social-religious structures without unnecessarily restricting religious attitudes and activities to any one social group.

Traditional Tibetan society consisted broadly of three overarching groups: monks/lamas, aristocrats, and commoners. After the twelfth century, it was the monks and their institutions that dominated society and government, and so it is important that we clarify precisely how monks and monasteries were understood in Tibet. First and foremost, not all monks were celibate. Tibetan society, profoundly embedded as it was within a tantric framework, recognized many types of professional, noncelibate Buddhist clerics. The majority of these religious professionals are referred to by the term lama, loosely akin to guru in Indian tantric traditions. Ideally, a lama is supposed to be the penultimate master of tantric ritual and meditation, but on the ground he was actually distinguished by a wide variety of overlapping social identities, including, among other things, the celibate monk, the scholar, the unmarried lay yogi, the
married householder, the solitary hermit, and the wandering ascetic. Some lamas were identified also as embodiments of specific tantric deities or, more commonly, as reincarnations (yang-srid) of previous lamas whose authority, status, and property he, and occasionally she, had inherited. It is clear, then, that professional “cleric” in Tibet covers a wide range of meanings and cannot be limited solely to the distinction of celibacy. The same must be said of the Tibetan monastery (dgon-pa), which is best understood broadly as a type of Buddhist institution that could and frequently did shelter not only celibate monks but also an assortment of lay and noncelibate religious professionals.

As we may begin to suspect, the dividing line between the religious world of clerics and that of the laity in Tibetan society is not an easy one to define. It is clear, however, that it was not a line that separated too sharply the “sacred” from the “secular,” as we might interpret the terms, for those categories really have something of a different connotation in Tibetan society. Religion permeated every aspect of Tibetan social and political life. To speak of a strict dichotomy between monks and laity, then, would certainly distort the complexity of Tibet’s pervasive religious environment; yet there are distinctions that must still be made. Perhaps one natural step would be to distinguish divisions across social categories, between the “learned” (dpe-cha-ba) and the “unlettered” (thos-chung-ba) religious practitioner, for indeed this is a distinction that we do encounter in Tibetan society. But such a distinction can work only if we avoid turning it into a clear-cut opposition between monks and laypersons, the literati versus the illiterati as it were, one against or above the other. Indeed, there were as many illiterate monks in Tibet as there were unschooled village peasants, and in turn there were more than a few unlettered villagers who rose to prominence as the best of scholars. I am aware, of course, that two-dimensional models are difficult to avoid and are often in fact useful and perhaps even necessary. My suggestion, then, is not that we do away with binary distinctions altogether (as if we could), but that if we insist on using them to express something about Tibetan Buddhism and society, we do so based on categories that we have some evidence for in history and that the culture itself has recognized or would recognize (e.g., the literate-unlettered distinction). Moreover, it is best that we avoid too inflexible a distinction between terms.

We should stress further the complex interweaving and instability of each of the individual categories, as we find, for example, in the relationships that exist among one typically polarized group, the so-called “elite” among Tibetan Buddhist practitioners: the scholarly monks/lamas—many of whom belonged to the highest strata of Tibetan society through heredity or incarnate birth and held positions of authority in the monasteries—and those semi-literate
professionals who had some access to the scholarly tradition but only partially. The latter group’s access to the tradition was usually filtered through familiar written sources put to memory without further study and limited to what was necessary for the exercise of their day-to-day social-religious functions such as reciting from prayer texts, performing rites inscribed in liturgical manuals, and other similar activities. This sort of differentiation between categories of the professionally religious leans also in the direction of another distinction we could suggest that might better reflect the complexity of the Tibetan religious world at every level. This is the distinction between “formal” religious doctrine and “informal” religious understanding.

At the level of “lived” tradition, it is clear that religious beliefs are usually only vaguely conceived. Ideas and perceptions are ambiguous and variable, often logically inconsistent with one another, and not always quite what the books say they should be. This results in discrepancies, and, very often, tensions, between the ideals of the tradition and its practical reality. In the context of distinctions between gradations of religious literacy, for instance, we will assume here that the learned among religious practitioners, regardless of their status as monks or laypeople, would have had more direct access to the formal doctrines of the tradition through written sources and thus were more likely to assimilate many of the details of those formal written doctrines into their own expressions about this world and the world beyond. We have to keep in mind, however, that when viewed alongside the textbooks, their ideas might still appear to us a bit blurry. Likewise, we must assume that the conceptions of the unlettered religious practitioners, ideas picked up along the way from the teachings of lamas and conversations at home and in village circles, would have been, of course, even less formal but probably still conforming generally to the basic principles and values of the received tradition.

Whichever distinctions we choose, whether they be between the learned and unlettered or between the formal and informal, we must avoid forcing the categories into a hierarchically organized dichotomy between a monastic “elite” culture and a lay “popular” one. One cannot argue effectively for the presence of two separate and distinct cultures in Tibet, one clerical and the other popular, because there really was no disjunction between popular belief and monastic culture in premodern Tibetan society. The boundaries were simply too fluid. And, as I have said before, I take the term “popular” in this case not to mean some autonomous cultural group but rather, more literally, to what was common in the attitudes and concerns of all Tibetans, no matter what their social status.

One benefit of defining popular as common, as shared, is that it encourages us to expand our field of view to include not only the professionally and
the extraordinarily religious but also the ordinary religious, who are more often than not the neglected category of religious practitioner in scholarship on Tibetan religion. The point, then, is really not to set off against one another two distinct cultures, the elite and the popular, privileging one over the other. On the contrary, my goal here in examining the literary narratives of the délok is to look into some of the common beliefs shared among multiple levels of society, but, I should add, not at the risk of ignoring important differences. At every turn, it is crucial that we remain critically attentive to contrasts and shades of disparity, to the conceptual textures, contradictions, and so forth. In this regard, making a distinction between learned and nonlearned religious practitioners, or between formal and informal religious ideas, despite certain ambiguities and tensions, appears to me to provide at least one effective basis for analyzing popular values, practices, and attitudes within Tibetan society at multiple levels, while allowing enough flexibility for recognizing differences among social groups. Keeping all this in mind, I offer in the following study of the délok in Tibet an examination of a category of literature that both defines and blurs distinctions between the learned and the unlettered, the formal and the informal, while at the same time revealing something about the popular in Tibetan religious culture.

The Traveler’s Tale

Most délok accounts follow a standard plot, indicating that the written narratives did not change too drastically over time either in form or content. It appears that certain set patterns may have been preserved by continuous literary imitation, and in fact, many of the later texts refer explicitly to the influence of earlier délok stories, as we shall see. At this point, we cannot say which of the earliest texts constitute the “original” délok tale, but it is safe to conclude that such a single work may never have existed. These texts represent a conglomerate of traditions that circulated in both oral and literary form and were worked and reworked over time by the collaborative efforts of multiple contributors, including the délok themselves, their biographers, editors, scribes, printers, and other interested promoters. For our purposes, one of the most significant aspects of these literary narratives is not so much their universal form, but their local texture. Despite a certain generic structure and indications of borrowing from established Buddhist literary models, the biographies do provide precise and specific details about the délok’s birthplaces, their families, social background, and other information about their local communities. The délok narratives tend to lack the typical hagiographical flourish usually found in the life stories of great Buddhist
saints. In contrast to the “liberation stories” (rnam-thar) of celebrated Tibetan Buddhist heroes, these tales do not focus on miraculous events, superhuman actions, or accounts of superior virtues, but, rather, they emphasize the subjective experiences of ordinary women and men, who are more often than not confused and frightened by those experiences.\(^\text{16}\)

Moreover, enough evidence is scattered about in these stories to convince us of the actual existence of the individual délok as historical personalities. The overall tone is realistic and unaffected, the voices autobiographical. There is in these narratives an emotional frankness, an intimacy of expression and a real sense of human frailty that in substance and style bears little resemblance to hagiographical literature.\(^\text{17}\) Whether these texts are truly autobiographical is difficult to say, though it is more than likely that the délok rarely wrote of their experiences and instead relied on anonymous scribes to record their words. Many of the details of their experiences are recorded with such a familiarity and directness that it is difficult to imagine that the authors of these texts, whomever they may have been, did not have direct contact with the prime subjects. We will assume, then, that at least some of the authors must have originally heard these things from the délok themselves and were not simply copying from another written source. To be sure, we need only to observe a consistent stylistic peculiarity of these texts. The overwhelming frequency of homophonic errors in spelling, for example, points to the likelihood that the original writers responsible for recording the stories transcribed the written words by means of the ear rather than the eye.

All these characteristic elements of the délok tales can be used effectively as sources for illuminating popular perceptions and attitudes at the local level of Tibetan society, particularly as they pertain to common notions about death and the afterlife, interpretations of the soul, and relations between the living and the dead, as well as certain aspects of the self-consciousness of personality and social identity. Before turning to particular examples from the délok biographies, however, I will introduce at least cursorily some of the standard elements of their basic plot.

In most cases, the protagonist of the story, who may be a monk or a layperson, male or female, is struck unexpectedly by an illness that leads to a quick death. The individual is not immediately aware that he or she has died and is confused when relatives and friends are seen performing the memorial services or going about their normal business. Confusion turns to anger as the deceased perceives that the group is ignoring his or her attempts to communicate with them. In truth, as we know from the doctrinal literature, the living cannot see or hear the dead. At some point, the person comes to realize the reality of his or her situation and is then transported to the otherworld where
he or she is guided by a vaguely divine figure, who in some cases is female and in others male. The délok visits the regions of hell and the bardo (the intermediate state between lives), where he or she is terrified by the tortures of heat and cold, by jagged mountains and dark valleys, and by rivers of blood and fire. In these horrifying places, he or she witnesses the torments inflicted upon the damned by the ferocious attendants of Yama Shinjé Chök. Gyelpo, the Lord of the Dead. The tortured beings plead desperately with the délok to relay messages for their families to perform the necessary rites and prayers so that their sufferings may be quickly alleviated. Sometimes the délok witnesses these pitiful beings being delivered by the miraculous chants of a lama or mani-pa (one skilled in the use of the six-syllable mantra of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara) who has traveled there to save them.

Later, the délok arrives in person before Yama Shinjé and sees several people being led to judgment, their punishment determined by the nature of their past actions in previous lives. Sometimes the délok is then joined by two personal advocates, both believed to be born together simultaneously with each individual—a divine spirit (lhan-cig skyes-pa'i-lha) holding white pebbles representing the délok’s virtues, and a demonic spirit (lhan-cig skyes-pa'i-'dre) with black pebbles representing accumulated sins. The two spirits are present to help the délok argue his or her case before the judge. Yama Shinjé listens to their case and, after weighing the white and black pebbles on a scale of justice, orders a check of their appeals in the “mirror of karma” (las-kyi me-long), in which is vividly reflected every virtuous and sinful deed. When all is said and done, the Lord of the Dead pronounces judgment and exhorts the délok to mend ways and commit to a life of religious service for the welfare of all suffering beings. The journey concludes with the délok returning to the living and delivering the messages from the dead for their families and repeating Yama Shinjé’s moral exhortations to pursue a virtuous and devoted life.

In the popular representations of death and the world beyond that we encounter in the délok biographies, we see evidence for an extensive variety of common notions, some consistent with formal doctrine and others less so. Of these ideas, I will focus in this study on only a select few, these being the constellation of beliefs and perceptions clustered around three cardinal events of the délok experience: dying and departure from the world, the journey beyond death, and the return to the body. The narrative accounts we will examine here dramatize these three events and the ideas surrounding them in truly evocative ways, and it is my hope that the examples chosen will illustrate some of what can be learned about the “popular” in Tibetan religion, as I defined the term above.

The selections discussed in the chapters that follow come from the biographical narratives of four délok: two laywomen, Lingza Chök. and Karma
Wangzin; a lama, Jampa Délek; and a monk, Jangchup Sengé. These figures are of special interest for at least two reasons. First, all four cases exemplify in a variety of distinctive ways the standard form of the délok genre in Tibetan literature. Second, and most important for our interests, the two pairs—Lingza Chökyi and Karma Wangzin, and Jampa Délek and Jangchup Sengé—together represent the paradigmatic poles of the traditional two-tiered dichotomies, that is, the ordinary (female) layperson and the professional (male) cleric, respectively. My examination of the common ideas and values about death and the afterlife expressed in the biographies of these typically polarized individuals will demonstrate some of the inadequacies of the conventional two-tiered approach and should better illustrate not only some of the unities but also the diversities within certain categories of Tibetan Buddhist life. Rather than explaining the délok phenomena in Tibet, or tracing the history of the literature, I have tried to illuminate from specific délok narratives how Tibetans experienced both the world they knew and the world beyond they imagined. In the process, I attempt to provide some answers to the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter.

Some readers may wonder whether the délok portrayed in these texts actually died, or traveled to the land of the dead, or even had the experiences they report. Other readers, suspecting that the texts do not describe actual experiences, might instead be inclined to read these colorful narratives as purely imaginative or rhetorical. These reflections are understandable. But the question “Did these people actually die?” is one that really cannot be answered, and even if our modern skepticism would persuade us to conclude decisively that such a question can only be answered negatively, the authenticity of the délok experience is not at issue in this book. Whether these experiences actually happened or whether the texts are invented fictions is of little consequence. The crucial point is that the narratives of those experiences, even if purely imaginative, do in fact tell us something about certain Tibetan beliefs about death, the afterlife, karmic retribution, and so on. Furthermore, to read those beliefs as merely rhetorical, to treat them all as nothing more than conventionalized tropes, as somehow referring to phenomena less than real, is a tactic I have also tried to avoid in this study. That being said, I do not adhere to some naive assumption that these narratives are simply transparent, that everything described in them reflects reality just as it happened, but I do accept that Tibetans believed the ideas and experiences expressed in these narratives to be true, which is to say they did not deny them, nor did they have any reason to do so. Belief, in the context of this study, is best understood as a confidence and trust in ideas and perspectives that are accepted as true simply because they are corroborated by trustworthy authorities, including Buddhist scripture,
or simply by personal experience or the experiences of others close by, or more circularly, by expectations of what must be true. More important, these ideas and experiences had moral force for Tibetans precisely because they believed them. When all is said and done, we cannot deny the fact that the délok narratives and the experiences they describe, whether real or imagined, belong to one and the same world, share similar conceptions of that world, and draw on a common vocabulary and treasury of images to communicate those conceptions. In this study, I am concerned with highlighting those shared conceptions, not with making claims about their justification.

I feel it necessary also to respond outright to what seems to be a fairly natural impulse in us all, namely, the desire to compare. Without having to look very far, we can find a wide variety of similar types of return-from-death narratives throughout world literature spanning different periods and traditions, from both Buddhist and non-Buddhist cultures. Particularly captivating are analogous examples from China and from farther afield the many comparable works from late antiquity and medieval Europe, as well as contemporary accounts of “near-death experiences” (NDEs). Numerous points of potential comparison could be drawn between these culturally and historically varied works and those of the Tibetan tradition, but in this study I have resisted the impulse to explore those comparisons. My general opinion is that comparative analyses of Tibetan Buddhism, though potentially insightful, are also risky and can unnecessarily smooth over the textures of history and localized tradition. Provided the scholarship is sound and the details rich, I believe tightly focused studies of specific traditions can inspire reflection on broader themes without having to draw too boldly parallel lines across dissimilar contexts. I leave it to readers to discover for themselves what fruitful connections may be found among the varied samplings of this distinctive literary genre across cultures.

The Texts

This critical study of the range of popular Buddhist ideas about death and the afterlife revealed in Tibetan accounts of otherworld journeys has required close reading of a wide variety of Tibetan and Buddhist literary sources, including canonical works, medical treatises, yogic manuals, and ritual texts. But it is the délok biographies themselves that have provided my primary evidentiary base. Each of chapters 2 through 5 of this book focuses on one of four délok biographies, and the discussions included therein are structured in linear order following the main narrative events recorded in the texts. All translations of these and other related sources are my own unless otherwise noted.
The Tibetan *délok* manuscripts and printed books currently extant come from both public and private collections in Asia, Europe, and America. The majority of those that are readily accessible, however, and the ones I have most relied on for this study, belong to the United States Library of Congress collection that was first instituted in the early 1960s under the government directive of Public Law 480 (PL 480).\(^{19}\) This vast and invaluable collection comprises Tibetan language materials printed in India from 1964 onward. Specifically, the *délok* works of the PL 480 include photographic reproductions of impressions made from woodblocks and old and newly calligraphed copies of manuscripts that had been preserved in monastic libraries and private collections throughout Tibet and Bhutan.

One exceptional collection of *délok* texts that was never acquired by the PL 480 but is worth briefly highlighting here is the so-called “Kashö Karka” anthology of blockprints compiled in 1888 for the aristocratic Kashö family by one Jadrel Kunga Rangdröl.\(^{20}\) This anthology of *délok* stories—the only one of its kind currently known to exist—was printed at the Kashö family estate of Serchok in Karka near Gyantsé in southwestern Tibet.\(^{21}\) Only three copies of this collection exist: one original print in Japan, another at the Société Asiatique au Centre d’Études tibétaines du Collège de France, and a third preserved on microfilm at the University of Washington.\(^{22}\) The history of this important collection remains obscure, but it is my hope that further study should narrow down the circumstances involved in its compilation and printing. It is still unclear, for example, why the Kashö family, who rose to prominence in the Lhasa government in the early 1920s, would have been interested in commissioning the printing of a collection of popular biographies about people who die and come back to life. As for the basic motivation of its compiler, Jadrel Kunga Rangdröl offers the following explanation:

> Nowadays in Central Tibet no true collection of *délok* biographies are to be found. To exhort persons of various native abilities to do virtuous deeds for the welfare of all beings, I, Jadrel Kunga Rangdröl, at the behest of my *mūlaguru* [root teacher] Upa Rinpoché, have taken the responsibility of helping to so exhort them. In regard to the request: many deep teachings have been mercifully granted by Shinjé Chökyi Gyelpo, who knows the means, who divides the fruits of sin and virtue, who is the reliable authority for the belief in the necessity to carefully calculate karma. To this I exhort all these world’s beings.\(^{23}\)

Below I introduce the specific *délok* works examined for this study. For the biography of Lingza Chökyi, a laywoman from eastern Tibet who lived in the sixteenth century, I consulted the following five documents:

2. *(Biography of) Lingza Chökyi* (G2). A manuscript included in a collection of three délok texts reprinted in 1977. In this version, the name of the scribe is given as simply Tênkyong.

3. *(Biography of Lingza Chökyi)* (G3). An incomplete cursive manuscript reprinted in 1983 with no proper title page or colophon.


5. *Biography of Lingza Chökyi, a Messenger of the Dead and the Living, who crossed the Border between Hell and the Human World and visited the Bardo, where she [met] the Great King of Samsāra and Nirvāṇa and [saw] the Results of his measuring out White and Black [Actions]* (G5). This is a blockprint included among the texts of the Kashö Karka anthology.

I should make clear that in addition to its early chronology, the biography of Lingza Chökyi is placed first in this study because of the influence it apparently exerted on the délok genre as a whole. It is evident from the frequent references to it in the later biographies that the Lingza tale served as the source-narrative for many if not all subsequent délok accounts. We should also be aware that her story, in turn, mirrors several significant events in the life story of the legendary Nangsa Öbum, a popular female heroine of Tibetan opera believed to have lived in the twelfth century (see chapter 6). Although the historical authenticity of Nangsa Öbum and her life story is open to suspicion, it is indeed possible that this dramatic tale may have served as a model of sorts for the extended story of Lingza Chökyi. Nevertheless, it is Lingza’s biography that undoubtedly set the precedent to be repeated in the experiences of various later délok figures, including Jampa Délek, Karma Wangzin, and Jangchup Sengé.

For the biography of Jampa Délek, a sixteenth-century lama from western Tibet, there is only a single source, *Lama Jampa Délek’s Visions of Hell and the Bardo and Messages Received from Chökyi Gyelpo* (BL). This is a manuscript reprinted in 1977 in a collection that also includes a version of Lingza Chökyi’s story (see G2).

Perhaps the most celebrated of the many délok known in the Tibetan-speaking world is Karma Wangzin. She was born in the seventeenth century in southern Tibet and there are a number of versions of her story from different regions. In several of the written works, the primary compositor of the biography is identified as one Traktung Dorjé (alias Śila-dhwa-dza, or Tsültrim Gyentsén). Little is known about this individual, though there is evidence in
the colophons suggesting he may have been a student of the first Zhapdrung of Bhutan, Ngawang Namgyel (1594–ca. 1651). This means, of course, that the extant biographies of Karma Wangzin likely date to the end of the seventeenth or beginning of the eighteenth century. For material on her experiences, I have consulted the following five texts:

3. *Biography of Karma Wangzin* (K3). A third manuscript with the same simple title reprinted in 1978 from the private library of Lhakang Lama.
5. *Abridged Biography of the Messenger Dākinī Karma Wangzin, who visited the Bardo and the Hell Realms where she [met] Chögyel Rinpoche, Dharma King of All Samsāra and Nirvāṇa and [saw] the Results of his measuring out White and Black Actions* (K5). A blockprint included among the texts of the Kashö Karka anthology.

Our fourth and final délok, Jangchup Sengé, was an eighteenth-century monk from eastern Tibet who seems to have had close affiliations with Katok monastery in Kham, one of the earliest and most influential monasteries of the Nyingmapa order. The primary text I consulted for his biography is a manuscript from Bhutan reprinted in 1976 and titled *The Visions of Hell of the Délok Jangchup Sengé, Incarnation of Avalokiteśvara, in which are recounted the Differentiations between Virtue and Sin and the Detailed Messages of Shinjé Chökyi Gyelpo* (B1). Two earlier versions of his story are to be found also in the Kashö Karka anthology. Unfortunately, my incomplete copy of this anthology only includes one of these works—a blockprint entitled *Self-Liberation through Visions of Hell: The Profoundly Meaningful Wondrous Elements of Jangchub Sengé’s Chapter on Offering Supplications and Worship to the Sources of Refuge in the Hell Realms* (B4). I was also able to examine a third work attributed to Jangchup Sengé that corroborates many of the biographical details contained in the aforementioned texts. This is a blockprint (B2) dealing mainly with the religious benefits of a special type of prayer flag that is said to have been invented by Jangchup Sengé. We will have reason to return to this topic in chapter 6.
délok’s recorded experiences: namely, departure from the world, journey beyond death, and return to life. As a preamble to the accounts of the délok’s deaths, the narratives introduce a few details about their lives. I have noted the likelihood that these tales were not written down by the délok themselves. Still, the narratives are almost always dictated in the first person and in such a style that we can approach them as autobiographical. Indeed, the narratives provide intimate details about family, social relations, and local communities all in the private voices of the délok. And, although the narratives do draw on certain orthodox Buddhist doctrines about death and the need for recourse to monks and lamas for ensuring a favorable destiny in the next life, we find in these accounts a much greater emphasis on personal descriptions of the death experience. In my discussions throughout the following chapters, I have chosen to mirror the narrative tone of these stories and to quote, sometimes at great length, direct passages from the texts themselves. My reason for doing this is to convey a sense of the directness, intimacy, and vividness of description found in these stories. We begin with the délok Lingza Chökyi, a laywoman, wife, and mother.
Lingza Chökyi was the mother of three children: one daughter and two sons.¹ She and her husband lived as animal herders in what was probably a fairly typical eastern Tibetan nomadic community. Their tribal group was likely small and made up of several separate households or encampments (sgar). No member of her immediate family was professionally religious or formally belonged to a monastery as monk or nun. Lingza Chökyi’s husband and sons were followers of the Bön religion, but she and her younger brother were devoted adherents of Buddhism.² This disparity between religious faiths appears to have been a source of family conflict and, as we shall see, became a sore point in a heated debate over funeral arrangements after her death.³

Following the conventions of the genre of the délok tale, Lingza Chökyi’s story begins with a particularly troublesome illness. She relates that after sixteen days of battling this sickness taking medicines and having numerous healing rites performed, she attempted to discover its cause by divination (mo) and by examining her horoscope (rtsis). It is common Tibetan practice to consult an astrologer (rtsis-pa) for all manner of personal and public crises such as illness, epidemic disease, war, and death. From such an astrological investigation, one is said to be able to answer a number of questions about the direct causes and actual nature of the crisis and to decide a proper course for avoiding it or putting an end to it altogether.⁴

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Lingza Cho¨kyi’s case, no answers were forthcoming and nothing could be done about her deteriorating condition.

Accepting her fate, Lingza Cho¨kyi then reflected on the life that she had led. As a child, she had wanted to become a nun, but her parents and brothers would not allow it. She was expected to participate in the work of the family, to take a husband, and to have children of her own. As a consequence of this path chosen for her by her parents, Lingza Cho¨kyi notes with much regret that she was not able to receive initiation into advanced religious practices or even receive special religious instruction. Although she did remain devoted to Buddhism and made offerings to a few lamas whenever she could, she feared now that the little merit gained from her faithful devotions would not be enough to counter the weight of a lifetime of sin. To make matters worse, Lingza Cho¨kyi admits that her husband and sons also had no great virtues, for they had no faith in Buddhism, and so even they could not help her at this most dire of moments.

Convinced that she was now dying, Lingza Cho¨kyi was desperate to right the wrongs of her life, and made requests of her husband and sons to perform religious acts of virtue on her behalf. But religious rites always require money, so Lingza Cho¨kyi also asked that they divide up her jewels of turquoise and coral and offer one-third of the wealth to the monks in payment for services rendered. She specified that the rest should be given to her only daughter. According to Tibetan social custom, articles of fine jewelry—especially of turquoise and coral—are given as heirlooms, usually by the mother, to a girl as preparation for marriage. The jewelry is symbolic of the wealth of the maternal family and is expected to be passed down from generation to generation.5

Lingza Cho¨kyi then adds a few hopeful caveats to her final request to her husband: “It is best if you become religious, but if that doesn’t happen, please permit my two sons to enter the religious life [as monks]. Finally, avoid the side of sin and be faithful to the side of virtue; otherwise, at the moment of death, you’ll have great remorse. You must promise me that you won’t let my children fall into the hands of another woman!”6

Her husband was not happy with any of these wishes, particularly with the notion of giving away so much of their wealth to the monks and with what he saw to be an absurd request not to bring another woman into the home to help with the maintenance of the family duties. He thus refused to do anything she requested beyond commissioning a few ritual acts of merit. Lingza Cho¨kyi was saddened by this and became especially distressed at the thought of her children being raised by another woman. She worried that the children would suffer. It is in this agitated state of mind that Lingza Cho¨kyi dies, her despair and anxiety indicated as the direct cause of death.
The Experience of Dying

The causes of death are numerous, yet the causes of life are few. This traditional and sobering Buddhist observation is a starting point for any sustained reflection on death and the impermanence of life. Tibetan medical literature provides explicit detail: physical decay and death are caused by a variety of bodily disorders, pathological imbalances, fatal injuries, demonic invasions, and other types of critical impairment of the lifespan principle (tshe), the life-essence (srog), or the soul (bla). In Buddhist religious works on the subject it is commonly taught that death occurs as a result of the termination of the natural lifespan, the exhaustion of merit, or an untimely accident. A timely death is, of course, preferable to an untimely one. A timely death caused by the end of the lifespan or by the depletion of merit generally signals the absence of evil influences and represents a death that is both normal and natural. More specific causes of untimely death (dus ma-yin-par ’chi-ba) are detailed in the Small Medicine Sūtra, a work included among the canonical texts of the Bhaisajyaguru cycle—the sūtras of the Medicine Buddha—and first translated into Tibetan in the late eighth century. This text enumerates nine types of untimely death: (1) death due to an illness left untreated, either for lack of proper medicine or unavailability of a doctor; (2) death by imperial execution; (3) death caused by the ravages of harmful nonhuman spirits due to careless and negligent living; (4) death by fire; (5) death by drowning; (6) death by animal attacks—lions, tigers, foxes, snakes, or other beasts of prey; (7) death by falling from a mountain; (8) death by murder—by poison, by enemies, or by contact with zombies (ro-langs); and finally, (9) death caused by thirst and starvation. In the personal stories of the délok, those who die and return to life, untimely death comes by other means: most often it is some form of emotional distress.

No matter the exact cause, when the moment of death finally arrives, a process of mental and physical disintegration is set in motion. Many Tibetan texts describe this process in highly technical and elaborate detail based on the advanced physiological theories of tantric Buddhism and medical science. According to the specialized literature, such as the eleventh-century Tantra of the Secret Union of Sun and Moon or the practice manuals of famous Tibetan scholar-yogis, death is defined as a gradual dissolution of the individual’s senses and constituent elements. These constituents are characterized as being either coarse or subtle. It is held that the subtle components in particular can be controlled by accomplished meditators to bring about profound transformative states leading ultimately to liberation from samsāra. The coarse, physical body is said to be composed of the five elements: earth, water, fire,
wind, and consciousness. Each element is identified with a specific energy that generates certain qualities of corporeal existence. Earth gives rise to the qualities of heaviness, solidity, and desiccation, and influences the formation of the “hard” properties of the body such as bone and hair. Water engenders the attributes of wetness, flexibility, and cohesiveness, and influences the formation of the body’s “fluid” properties, such as blood, urine, and bile. Fire generates the qualities of heat, maturation (smin-pa), and lustre, and sustains the body’s temperature. Wind produces the qualities of buoyancy and mobility, handles the functions of respiration and expulsion, and serves as the seat of consciousness. This latter quality is very important. In both the coarse and subtle bodies, the winds directly contribute to the actual functioning of consciousness. If the winds did not serve in such a capacity, then consciousness would be unable to move and thus could not be directed toward any objects.

In the process of dying, the senses and compositional elements that worked in cooperation with consciousness collapse and thus become incapable of supporting the activities of mind and body. Consciousness then withdraws from the sense organs and finally gathers at the center of the heart before departing the body altogether. The dying person is said to have a variety of distinct physical sensations and visionary experiences corresponding to the gradual physical deterioration and the eventual dissolution of consciousness during death. It would be appropriate to consider some examples of the sort of precise detail that one reads in these specialized texts, since we find reference to such descriptions, though very often loosely presented, in the délok narratives. Although an extended examination of the full complexities of Tibetan Buddhist tantric theories about death is not required here, mention of a few relevant details can help to foreground comparisons between ideas presented in the scholastic literature and in the délok accounts.

When we read through the authoritative Tibetan works that are roughly contemporaneous with the délok narratives discussed in this study (that is, the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries), we find the process of dying described generally in the following terms. As signs of the dissolution of the earth element, the body, weak and emaciated, loses its luster; the limbs slacken and the neck becomes incapable of supporting the head. Bodily fluids can no longer be retained, and saliva and mucous begin to flow freely. The eyelids grow heavy; sight, dim and obscured, becomes blurry. Drawing inward, the mind becomes sluggish and confused. At this point there appears a mirage-like vision that resembles the shimmering, translucent haze of heat rising from the earth in the hot afternoon sun. Then, as the water element dissolves, bodily fluids begin to dry up, the nostrils draw in, the tongue contorts, and the low constant humming in the ears disappears. The mind grows agitated and
nervous. When the fire element begins to dissolve, the body temperature drops, the breath chills the mouth and nose, inhalation becomes weak while exhalation grows strong. Then there is the dissolution of the wind element; the winds flow to the heart and inhalation ceases. Prolonged exhalations cause the breath to wheeze and rattle. The eyes roll backward, and the tongue becomes thick and compressed, its root turning bluish-black. Bodily functions no longer operate and there is a complete loss of awareness of external surroundings. Bewildered and confused, the dying person has various hallucinations. As one advanced yogic manual from the seventeenth century puts it: “Those who are sinful see Shinjé [Lord of the Dead] appear before them and are terrified. Their bodies contort and they cry out in fear.”

At times we see in the descriptions of the death experience narrated in the délok stories a familiarity with these formal doctrines about death and dying that are more fully explicated in the theoretical and specialized literature. In some instances the person’s illness and death are described with such accuracy and precision that it is undeniable that the writer, whomever it may have been, was conversant with the most scholarly of works on the subject. However, in the majority of cases we find only allusions, imprecise at best, to these formal technicalities. Let us consider, for example, Lingza Chökyi’s account. (She has similar social circumstances in common with Karma Wangzin, whose délok experiences we will consider in chapter 4.) In the discussions that follow we must bear in mind, as I set out to argue in chapter 1, that the standard paradigm of a two-tiered dichotomy between women and men and between ordinary laypersons and religious specialists is a model that too often obscures the realities of Tibetan religious life and fails to reflect certain shared ideas and experiences, particularly those concerned with death and afterlife. Lingza Chökyi tells of her experiences on the brink of death:

I had a vision, an experience of going under the ground. It was as though many people were holding me down from above, and I panicked. After that, I felt I was being tossed back and forth emerged in a great ocean. In the cold [water], I suffered open blisters on my body. The entire earth and ground were filled with fire, and I felt the pain of my body burning within the blaze of a great thunderous roar. After that there appeared red, white, and yellow paths; it seemed like late evening just before midnight, and great roaring sounds occurred. A reality that wasn’t real. Then, for a brief moment, I felt as though I arrived inside a sack of butter. Lights of five colors shined above my head, and emanating from [this] radiant halo were many rays of light. At the tips of each light ray were human
bodies and many different heads. Their eyes were wide open like the sun and the moon, and in their hands they carried many different types of weapons. Then there came the resounding roar of a thousand thunderclaps, calling out, “Ha! Ha! हूँ! हूँ! Kill! Kill! Strike! Strike!” I was filled with inconceivable terror.

A lama, who I had requested instruction from in the past, had said, “All lights are your own light, all rays your own ray, all forms your own form, all sounds your own sound. They are the natural glow of your own mind.” As soon as I thought about this, everything vanished, including my fear and panic.  

We find here several features of the dying experience that are common to all four of our délok protagonists. First and foremost, death is described as extremely frightening and physically unpleasant. Lingza Chökyi recalls her panic as she felt herself being held down, tossed around, submerged under water, and scorched by fire. She also mentions hearing loud and thunderous noises. All of this, she notes, was horrifying and physically excruciating. She speaks of seeing lights of five colors and phantom human shapes wielding weapons and bellowing threatening words. Her descriptions recall passages from Buddhist tantric books and ritual manuals, such as texts included in the famous Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo (Bar-do thos-grol), a collection that was first codified in the early decades of the fifteenth century not long before Lingza Chökyi’s time. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the spread of this literature and accompanying rituals throughout Tibet beginning in the early sixteenth century must have influenced the development of the délok literature. But at this point, given the limits of the available resources, we cannot easily establish the precise historical relationship between the two genres. Nonetheless, the similarities between them are noteworthy.

O son of noble family! At this time an enormous storm of karma, swirling about fiercely and insufferable, will push you from behind. Do not be afraid! It is a hallucination (‘khrul-snang), your own deluded projection (rang-gi ‘khrul-snang). Up ahead in front of you, you will encounter a heavy darkness, extremely terrifying and intolerable. You will hear a great clamor of voices [crying out] “Strike! Kill!” Do not be afraid of them! Others with much sin will also see many karmic flesh-eating demons (srin-po) wielding various weapons, lashing out, and shouting “Strike! Kill!” You will experience being chased by various fearsome, wild and carnivorous animals, pursued by many people in the snow and rain, in blizzards, and in heavy darkness.
You will hear the sounds of crumbling mountains, lakes overflowing, fires spreading, and strong winds rising up. Fearing these sounds, you will run away to wherever you can, but you will be stopped short by three dreadful cliffs in front of you, one white, one red, and one black, and it so happens you will just be about ready to fall from them.\textsuperscript{16}

In both this passage from the \textit{Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo} and Lingza Chökyi’s narrative quoted above, there is reference to the dying visions as mere hallucinations. What we see here is the idea expounded in the advanced yogic literature that such visions are in reality nothing more than the projections of a deluded mind. For those individuals who had achieved deep and profound meditative accomplishments in life, when the nature of these visions are immediately recognized fear is quickly overcome. Once Lingza Chökyi remembered the words of her lama, who had instructed her about such teachings, the hallucinations subsided and she was no longer terrified by them. Odd that she mentions a teacher here since in no other sections of her biography is there evidence that she was ever trained by a lama. Perhaps in this passage we encounter the exterior voice of a scribe interpolating into Lingza Chökyi’s story his own memories of the lama’s instructions, or maybe this is just simply an expression of conventional wisdom that all Tibetans learn at home or in village circles and expect to hear at their dying moment. In this respect, it is significant that the author (or maybe Lingza Chökyi herself) insists on pointing out that the dying visions are not real; a clear indication of familiarity with some of the more theoretical notions of Buddhist tantra introduced at the beginning of this section.

The Dreadful Cadaver

Following the accounts presented in the \textit{délok} biographies, upon the separation of the mind and the body at the moment of death the \textit{délok} regains consciousness and appears in the same form as before, only now free and independent of a lifeless body. Usually, it is at this moment that the \textit{délok} sees his or her own corpse and is horrified by it. Accounts of such “autoscopic” experiences occur in all four of our narratives, and in most of the Tibetan \textit{délok} texts in general.\textsuperscript{17} What is most intriguing about the descriptions of this experience is the corpse itself and how it appears to the \textit{délok}. In every case, the dead person’s body is seen not as a human corpse but as the cadaver of some specific animal—a pig, a frog, a snake, or a dog. The \textit{délok} never recognizes it as his or her own body,
even though in many instances the animal corpse lies in the délok’s bed dressed in his or her own clothes.

In one version of Lingza Chökyi’s biography, she recounts: “Glancing over at my bed, I saw the corpse of a large pig, rotten and smelly.” It had been placed there dressed in my own clothes.” Alternate versions of her story mention that she sees the corpse of a frog and of a snake, instead of a pig. The accounts of Jampa Délek, Karma Wangzin, and Jangchup Sengé (to be discussed in subsequent chapters), on the other hand, all describe seeing the corpse of a dog or of a dog-like creature. The symbolism is significant despite these variations. We cannot restrict the significance of these forms to just their appearance as animals, but must expand our consideration of their possible meanings to include also the symbolic impressions these specific species of animals may have conveyed to Tibetan audiences and readers. Those impressions, however, cannot be studied over and against the Buddhist moral logic of these texts and beyond their Tibetan contexts.

In an early study of the délok phenomena, Lawrence Epstein interpreted the appearance of the animal carcass in this and in other délok narratives as “a comment on the value of the body: rotting animality; and on bodily states in general: loathsome and sickening.” Epstein justified his explanation here with reference to traditional Buddhist reflections on the foulness of the body (asubhābhavana). Formal Buddhist systems of meditation on death and decay had been codified in India as early as the fifth century by such famous scholars-as Buddhaghosa in his influential compendium of Theravāda doctrines and meditational practices, the Visuddhimagga (Path of Purity). I should make clear, however, that Buddhist texts such as the Visuddhimagga were aimed at audiences consisting solely of celibate male monks. Moreover, the grisly cemetery meditations prescribed in these texts were intended as dramatically effective methods for ridding young celibate men of lust and attachment to the (female) body. While these sorts of austere methods and righteous monastic concerns gained their fullest meaning in a very narrowly defined context, I wonder if the image of the grotesque corpse in the délok stories requires a less lofty interpretation. Certainly, it is only the rarest among Buddhist practitioners, including Tibetans, who strive for religious truth by sitting in cemeteries late at night and meditating on the repulsiveness of decaying corpses. Nevertheless, Epstein’s point remains a valid one from an idealized Buddhist perspective. But to my mind, the more interesting question is not the significance of the animal carcass per se—a recurrent and generic motif in these stories that plainly signals, to borrow a common psychoanalytic term following Epstein, the “dissociative” state of the délok’s self-perception—but the symbolism of the specific breed of animal that appears.
Keeping in accord with the didactic tone of the délok tales, in which the most basic of Buddhist moral teachings predominate, we might suggest that the image of the pig here in Lingza Chökyi’s account symbolizes ignorance defined in Buddhism as blindness to the truth of impermanence and the root of suffering in saṃsāra. Ignorance leads to desire and hatred, which in turn generate a host of afflicting emotions such as jealousy, pride, and selfishness. Hatred is represented in Buddhism by the snake. The pig and the snake, with the addition of the rooster symbolizing desire, are depicted graphically in paintings of the “Wheel of Rebirth” (Skt. bhavacakra, Tib. srid-pa'i 'khor-lo). In these paintings, all three animals are pictured inside the hub of the wheel locked in an ouroboros chain—each biting the tail of the other—illustrating the cyclical nature of suffering and the interdependency of its causes.23

Looking beyond Buddhist doctrinal principles, we might also see in the image of the snake and the frog—both reptilian creatures—the symbolism of the nāga, serpent-spirits who inhabit the underworld. The nāgas have a long history in Indian mythology in connection with the symbolism of the waters and the subterranean realms.24 They are also identified as temperamental guardians of treasures hidden beneath the earth who can, and often do, cause harm to human beings. The nāga was thoroughly assimilated very early on in Tibetan mythology, and the Indian nāga myths became fused indistinguishably from indigenous conceptions of a similar variety of troublesome water and earth spirits. The Tibetan lu, like their Indian counterparts, the nāga, are easily angered and when provoked, according to Tibetan medical texts, can cause illnesses leading to kidney failure, swollen limbs, and skin disorders, and even more serious diseases such as leprosy and cancer. Tibet’s earliest and most authoritative medical work, the Four-fold Tantra, lists a wide variety of causes of plagues exacted by the lu demons.25 Moreover, because of the belief that these spirits can inflict such painful and deadly diseases, they are also invoked in Tibetan rituals of black magic (mgon-spyod) and assault sorcery (mthu-gtad) aimed particularly at destroying one’s enemies.26 I wonder if it is this more disturbing and darker symbolism of the snake and the frog that the délok texts are conjuring in their descriptions of the deceased’s encounter with his or her own corpse? Of course, all of these symbolic associations could be in play simultaneously. After all, religious symbols do have multiple meanings.

Despair of the Invisible

In the context of premodern Tibetan understandings of death and afterlife generally, we witness a hybridization of two basic models: one predicated on
formal Indo-Buddhist doctrines drawn from both the philosophical and esoteric tantric traditions with emphasis on correct knowledge and psychophysical control of the dying process, postmortem transition (Tib. bardo, Skt. antarābhava), and rebirth; and a second model founded on widespread Tibetan beliefs and anxieties surrounding the persistence and vulnerability of the soul (bla) and the pollution and potential danger of the corpse. This soul is described in Tibetan medical sources as a vital physiological and intellectual support principle pervading the entire body and dependent on the respiratory breath (dbugs).\(^{27}\) In life, the soul is capable of wandering (’khyams-pa) away from the body and is particularly vulnerable to being seduced and captured by demons or other evil manifestations. Hence, several of the goals of Tibetan ritual in both ancient and premodern times was to shepherd the soul (bla-gugs), to recapture it by means of a ransom (bla-glud), to summon its return (bla-bod), and to guarantee its safe passage (lam-bstan) after death.\(^{28}\) Evidence of the persistence of this indigenous Tibetan notion of soul lies embedded in the popular délok narratives.

Here, the deceased’s soul—identified as “consciousness” (rnam-shes) in Buddhist terms rather than “soul,” for philosophical reasons—separates from the body, hovers for a time around the places that were most familiar to it during life, and maintains, as we have seen, a close proximity to its corpse. The soul of the dead is not completely immaterial; it retains its human form and appears with the same features it had at the time of death. Early Indian Buddhist literature, such as Vasubandhu’s famous fifth-century commentary on the Abhidharmakoṣa (Treasury of Abhidharma), describes the essential characteristics of this disembodied soul, which has now been established in the bardo between death and rebirth: its sense organs are complete; it can move unobstructed through space and material objects; it can only be seen by beings of its own class and by those with pure divine vision; it feeds on fragrance and is thus called gandharva, literally “that which eats (arvati) odors (gandham).”\(^{29}\) Extensive narrative descriptions of the actual afterdeath sensations and experiences of this intermediate-state “odor-eater” are nowhere to be found in Vasubandhu’s text or in other similar Buddhist scholastic works. On the other hand, in the délok biographies, such experiences are recounted in very vivid and personal flourish. We discover a literary precedent for this sort of narrative style in the Tibetan ritual texts, such as in these brief passages from the Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo dating back to the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries:

O son of noble family! With a body like that [gandharva] your village and family will appear [to you] as if meeting them in a dream.
Though you speak to them, they will not respond. Seeing them weeping, you will think, “I’ve died! What should I do?” You will feel intense pain like the suffering of a fish stiffening in the hot sun. . . .

. . . . You will see your own village, friends and family, and your own corpse. You will think, “Now, I’ve died! What do I do?” Your mental body will be eager for refuge, and you will then think, “If only I could find a body.” Then, you will have a sense of going everywhere in search of a body.

Though our délok accounts may not have been influenced directly by these particular texts or derived from these exact passages, we do encounter very similar elements in their descriptions of the out-of-body experience that immediately follows death. What is striking, however, about the délok versions of this very same experience is the highly individualized attention given to the private details of the deceased’s mental and emotional state and of his or her surroundings, all recounted in the first person. Examples of some of the common notions that find expression in these personalized narratives include the idea that the dead are capable of seeing close relatives and friends but are not in turn able to be seen by them, and that mourning relatives can cause with their tears great pain and suffering for the deceased. That suffering is invariably externalized and experienced by the délok as a painful “hail of pus and blood,” visceral elements that, in fact, may be alloforms, as Epstein has suggested, for sexual and social attachments (e.g., pus symbolic of father and blood symbolic of mother). The notion that the dead keep the same identity and physical appearance that they had while alive, and that by a mere thought the dead can travel instantly to any place that comes to mind are also ideas that can be located in these texts. Moreover, all of these specific features, variously described, can also be read in some of the less abstract Buddhist scholastic works.

According to the actual accounts recorded in the délok texts themselves, when persons physically die, they find themselves in an environment and in a mental-physical state already familiar. The only immediately noticeable change is that they are no longer anchored to their bodies, which we know by now they are unable to recognize as anything other than the rotting cadavers of strange and horrible animals. The failure to see their corpses as their own bodies, as well as the generally subjective dream-like, or rather nightmarish, quality of their ambient experience, causes much anxiety and a temporary bewilderment before they abruptly realize that they have actually died. A few passages quoted at some length below from the writings of Lingza Chökyi will illustrate for us the sufficiently disturbing experiences of the dead wandering invisible among the living. Lingza Chökyi speaks of her harrowing situation:
My children, friends, relatives, and all my neighbors came, crying and weeping. Some held hands crying, and at the same time [I heard] sounds of a thousand thunderclaps. Then an overwhelming hail of pus and blood the size of eggs rained down upon me. As soon as everyone stopped crying, the roaring and hail ceased, as well as my pain.

After that, the boy Chödron [my brother], said, “What good is it for us to stay here like this? Since there’s no one to perform transference (’pho-ba), we have to invite twenty-one teachers, the chief of whom must be a pure Buddhist lama-monk. It’s best if we perform rites and recite prayers. Since my elder sister had faith in the Gomchen [advanced meditator] Tukjé Rinpoché, we should invite him and request a wake (rgyun-bzhugs, lit., “constant sitting”). I’ll look for four men to recite the Vajracchedikā [Diamond Cutter].”

My husband said, “We have to summon four Bönpo lamas,” and the boy Chödron replied, “My elder sister had no faith in the Bönpos, but do whatever you prefer. I’m going to invite a pure Buddhist monk and a meditator,” and then he left. My nephew, Trowo Kyap, and my husband went off to fetch my pack mule with six loads [of barley] from inside the house and sent the [rest of] the group to make roasted barley flour (rtsam-pa).

I thought, “Why are they doing this, I wonder? They seem to be doing a healing ceremony. [But] my illness has gone away. All of you don’t need to gather here.” But they didn’t look over [at me] even slightly and I felt peckish and surly. I didn’t think I had died. A young boy brought along the officiating priest Tukjé Rinpoché, and then left after giving him the requisite items for recitation of the Vajracchedikā. The priest [gave] the refuge [formula] and performed rites, and I derived great joy [from this].

Then, in the evening, about twenty lamas and teachers and the Gomchen Tukjé Rinpoché showed up. I prostrated before the lama and asked for his blessings, but he didn’t give them to me and I wondered why. As I stood there, anxious and uneasy, the Gomchen placed his hand on the head of the pig’s corpse, recited the refuge [formula], gave religious instruction and prayers, and said, “At this very moment, Chökyi, your death has come. Don’t be attached to your sons or to your food and wealth, but meditate one-pointedly on the aspects of the white letter ā and the white seminal drop wam at your heart. Say, ‘May the Buddha Amitābha accompany me to the pure land Sukhāvati. May both of us go there.’”
As soon as he said this, I thought, “I’m not dead! My body is just like it was before! I’ll leave after that lama finishes speaking.” But I was afraid of the pig, so I wasn’t able to go. The lama said, “Phat!” and I became happy, and beamed with enthusiasm and joy. The lama said, “The transference (’pho-ba) is finished. Body and mind have been separated.”

Then [the lamas] boiled tea, ate food and meat, and afterward invited [others] into the ceremonial feast. They gave me nothing. The Gomchen said [to my daughter], “Girl, bring your mother some food.” My daughter then put food and a piece of meat on a plate, along with a cup of tea, and placed it at the foot of the pig’s corpse, and said, “Mother, please eat.” I thought, she didn’t give this to me; she put it at the foot of [that] pig’s corpse! And I felt nauseated and disappointed in my daughter. I was thirsty and hungry, but I remained patient. The Gomchen recited the mani [om mani padme hum], and so forth, and some mantras. He then burned my share of food in the fire, and when he did this, I had a vision of eating and drinking. My hunger and thirst went away. The lamas and teachers were preparing the ceremonial feast and performed rites. Later, the lamas and Tukjé Rinpoché sat in meditation. I was angry at all of them because they didn’t give me my share of food. I was depressed and sweating profusely. My body and mind could not stay together, and I was tossed about to and fro like a feather in the wind. In this state, I now thought about what best to do. I thought I should take my turquoise and coral and wander around the country. All my children were calling out “Mother!” and weeping. Again a hail of pus and blood rained down upon me, and I had immeasurable suffering. And again, when [the crying] stopped so did that [hail]. Besides this, I also [heard] a sound, but I couldn’t see [where it was coming from]. My body felt heavy and without strength; my mind was restless and confused and drifted quite a bit.

Thinking what might be best, I [stood] before the lama, this pure [i.e., celibate] Buddhist monk. I thought, “Since he’s a Kadampa monk, I don’t know if a woman should stand in front of him,” so I hid behind him and stayed there. [Listening to] the melodious sound of his ritual recitations did nothing to calm my fears. Thinking about what might be best, again I went before the Gomchen. He was without defilements, inside and out, and so I found myself in the presence of an image of the four-armed Avalokiteśvara. He said [to me], “I feel compassion [for you].” Tukjé Rinpoché was resting in
meditative equipoise on rainbow-like emptiness, and there was no
distinction between him and [Avalokiteśvara]. All my mental confu-
sion was pacified and I felt immeasurable bliss.

Then after a while I regained my presence of mind. The [lamas
and teachers] were eating, and like before, they didn’t give me any-
thing, [but instead] placed [food] at the foot of the pig’s corpse. And
like before, the Gomchen burned my portion of food in the fire
and again I imagined eating and drinking. Then after some time I
prepared to go, but then a person said, “Chökyi, come here!” I went
to look [who it was]. I thought it might be my father. The person said,
“Follow me, I have something to show you.” Then he said, “I’ll
send you back quickly.” I thought, “Here, sitting inside the house are
many lamas and teachers; all of them are angry at me. My hus-
band and children didn’t give me my portion of food. I’m powerless. I
need to leave!” Immediately, I arrived atop a mountain plateau...

From the start, the scene that Lingza Chökyi describes here is a disturbing
and uneasy one. Before this, she had just caught glimpse of a pig’s corpse
dressed in her own clothes and rotting in her bed. Now, she finds herself
standing in her room surrounded by her closest relatives and neighbors, all of
whom are visibly upset and crying. Their tears produce a hail of dreadful bodily
fluids that showers down on Lingza Chökyi and causes her much pain. The
scene shifts to an argument between her brother and her husband over the
appropriate priests that should be summoned for the performance of a funeral
rite. Lingza Chökyi is witness to the entire conversation, but is confused about
why they are even discussing this matter. She is clearly unaware that they are
speaking about her own funeral. Her brother, sensitive to Lingza Chökyi’s own
religious affinity, insists on inviting Buddhist lamas, but her husband
stubbornly demands that Bönpo specialists should be brought in for the cer-
emonies. What we are being permitted to see here is very private family conflict
over religion and a debate about the ritual effectiveness, or lack thereof, of the
two religious traditions apparently endorsed in Lingza Chökyi’s household.
Whether the Bönpo priests were ever summoned is not mentioned, but the
rituals that are observed by Lingza Chökyi are performed following relatively
standard Tibetan Buddhist custom.

Tibetan deathbed rites, both Buddhist and Bönpo, are performed by reli-
gious specialists to assist the deceased’s transit to a favorable rebirth or exit
from saṃsāra altogether. Rituals to assist the dying range from simple support
at the deathbed, such as chanting prayers and exhorting the dying person to
generate virtuous thoughts, to highly specialized intervention on the individual’s
behalf by a qualified ritualist. In this scene described by Lingza Chökyi, the Vajracchedikā Sūtra is the predominant religious text recited. In fact, references to this widely celebrated Buddhist canonical work are found throughout the délok narratives in general. The sūtra belongs to the larger Prajñāpāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom) cycle of Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, all of which address the central philosophical theme of “emptiness” (śūnyatā), the notion that all things and persons without exception lack an independent and substantial essence, a “self.” The Vajracchedikā offers a less abstract and more intuitive message about emptiness and is primarily aimed at calming fear and despair, cutting through doubt, and awakening faith in the truth of the Buddha’s teachings. It makes sense, then, that this sūtra would become such a popular text for Buddhists to have recited during the deathbed rites as a way to ease the anxiety of those dying and recently deceased.

A more specialized deathbed practice in Tibet is the rite of the “transference” (pho-ba) of consciousness, by which a religious adept, trained in recognizing the precisely appropriate moment in the death process, is said to be able literally to extract the consciousness of the dying person from the body and propel it to a buddha’s pure land. This we see performed by the lama Tukje Rinpoche in Lingza Chökyi’s story. When he calls out the mantric syllable phat—the activating word that marks the separation of the mind from the body—Lingza Chökyi mentions feeling joy and enthusiasm. The message is clear: the rites of the Buddhist lamas are positively affective and through them the dead rest easy, at least for a time.

Another notable feature of the scene described above is the quality of a certain corporeity to Lingza Chökyi’s experience. Several times she mentions having various physical sensations, such as hunger and thirst, and in one instance she even speaks of sweating profusely and her body feeling heavy. All of these sensations recall those characteristics of the disembodied consciousness detailed in the early Buddhist scholarly texts, where the spirit of the deceased is given the name and traits of the ethereal being known as gandharva who feeds on scent. In standard Tibetan funeral rites, usually taking place at the home of the deceased, various offerings are provided for the dead by the family every morning and evening. Specifically, Lingza Chökyi’s family make offerings of food and place it at the foot of the corpse. Tukje Rinpoche and the other officiating lamas then burn the food as an offering. The scent from the burning food is pleasing to Lingza Chökyi and her hunger and thirst subside the instant she smells the smoke. She is nourished by these burnt offerings precisely because she is now vaguely identified as one of those odor-eating gandharvas. Lingza Chökyi does not fully understand the connection between her vision of eating and drinking and the smell of the food burning in the fire, and she
becomes angry that no one is giving her any food. She is still unaware that she has died. Eventually, she hears a familiar voice calling out to her. This person will be her guide throughout her journey to the world beyond death.

Journey to Hell

The journey from this life to the next is not often portrayed in Buddhism as a pleasant one. The paths traveled by the dead are fraught with many dangers, and for those who do not take care, the terrors of the road are difficult to escape. The idea that death is a journey, a passage across boundaries, a transition between two worlds, is expressed throughout Buddhist Mahāyāna literature. The Tibetan notion of postmortem transition—bardo in Tibetan and antarabhava in Sanskrit—was developed from Indian Buddhist models expounded in the scholastic Abhidharma literature, particularly that of the Sarvāstivāda school, and closely followed the formal patterns set forth by Vasubandhu in the fifth century. Over time, interpretations of this intermediate period were reconfigured and embellished by certain tantric scholar-yogis, and in Tibet from the late tenth century onward, the doctrine and its attendant rituals became distinctively esoteric.

It would be worthwhile to highlight four pertinent characteristics of the Buddhist intermediate state that we encounter in one form or another in the délok narratives. First, death is presented as a spatial transition between two states of existence, between the former life and the next rebirth. Second, the duration of the intermediate state is divided into seven short phases, each lasting no more than a week, for a total of up to seven weeks, or forty-nine days. Third, the deceased is likened to a subtle celestial being called gandharva because he or she is believed to subsist only on fragrance. Fourth, in the intermediate state, the deceased’s senses remain intact, although in subtle forms, and he or she can only be seen by beings of his or her own class, that is, in the particular context of the délok stories, only by other people who have died.

As for the formal doctrine in its ritual dimension, Tibetan Buddhist funeral rites are timed ideally to coincide with the forty-nine days of intermediate existence. When the complete program is followed, services are to be performed weekly for the entire seven-week period. They are thus called the “seven-day juncture rites” (bdun-tshigs cho-ga)—later we will see these rites referred to explicitly by name in Karma Wangzin’s account of roaming among her living relatives (chapter 4). The fully-developed ritual sequence consists of a variety of offerings, prayers of confession and reconciliation in the purification of sins, and rituals for guiding the deceased through the perilous pathways.
of the bardo and into the next life. The general assumption underlying this series of rituals is that actions performed by the living directly affect the condition of the deceased. The funeral rites are thus essentially designed to provide for the dead a means of expediting safe passage and insuring a positive future destiny.

Around the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, a Buddhist liturgical program unique to Tibet, called the “bardo ritual” (bar-do cho-ga), developed and flourished. The rituals of this Tibetan Buddhist funeral program, best exemplified in the rites accompanying the specialized texts of the Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo, emphasized the purification of sins through ritual actions and prayers that followed the deceased through the perilous bardo and incorporation into a favorable new existence. A distinctive feature of these bardo rituals was the evocation of the journey after death during which the destiny of the dead might still be altered. This journey and the various means to help navigate it are recounted in copious detail in the délok texts.

In addition to the concept of the intermediate state in both its Indian and Tibetan formulations, the délok narratives also reflect the influence of the classical Indian Buddhist doctrine of hell (Skt. naraka, Tib. dmyal-ba). According to Buddhist cosmology, there are sixteen categories of hell, divided evenly between hot and cold hells. The primary hells are arranged one on top of the other and each one has several neighboring places of torment (Skt. utsada, Tib. nye-khor-ba), organized around the four cardinal directions and surrounded on all sides by an iron wall. Added to these are also numerous ephemeral hells (Skt. prādeśika, Tib. nye-tshe-ba) whose locations are indefinite. As might be expected, the hells are understood as prisons for criminals where the dead pay for sins committed in former lives. Their suffering, however, is not eternal. Hell in Buddhism is characterized as only one of five or six transient realms of potential rebirth in the continuous cycle of birth and death (samsāra).

Buddhist descriptions of the hells are embellished by the most macabre imagery, which is intended to arouse faith through fear and to help to show what happens to those who do not defy sinful thoughts and actions. Representations of the tortures and punishments of the wicked are unsparing in their gruesome detail. Each of the hells is given a name that evokes the specific types of misery experienced there. Thus, for example, in one of the hot hells called Reviving (Skt. saṃjīva, Tib. yang-sos), beings emerge by the force of their previous evil actions on a flaming battlefield where they engage in mortal combat until everyone is killed. A disembodied voice then calls out “Get up!” and they all revive to begin fighting once again, and the cycle continues. In the hell of Black Lines (Skt. kālasūtra, Tib. thig-nag), beings are tied to a ground of molten iron and black lines are etched into their naked bodies; these are used
by cruel and diabolical hell-minions as guidelines for slicing and mutilating with burning swords and axes. In the most fearsome of all the hot hells, called Incessant [Torment] (Skt. avīci, Tib. mnar-med), some beings are boiled head-down in huge iron kettles of molten bronze, while others are imprisoned in red-hot metal houses where they are impaled through their anuses with spikes of blazing iron, the sharp tips pushing up and out through the tops of their heads.

The neighboring hells are no less excruciating. In the Pit of Hot Embers (Skt. kukūla, Tib. me-mur-gyi 'obs), for instance, beings are immersed up to their knees in a pit of burning coals; their flesh is scorched and peeled away from the bone as they try to lift their feet up from the heat. The skin and flesh are then regenerated and again they find themselves knee-deep in the flaming embers. In the Swamp of Rotting Corpses (Skt. kunapa, Tib. ro-myugs-kyi 'dam) swim tiny worms with iron teeth that devour the beings mired in this muddy bog of decomposing bodies. Other neighboring hells, with equally graphic and descriptive names, include the Plain of Razors (Skt. kṣuramārga, Tib. spu-gri'i thang), the Forest of Razor-leaves (Skt. asipattravana, Tib. ral-gri lo-ma'i nags-tshal), and the River of Ash (Skt. vaitarāṇī, Tib., thal-tshan-gyi chu-bo rab-med).

The cold hells are not generally described with as much flourish, but all of them are just as bleak; these are bitter realms frozen in ice and snow, and as a result, the beings who are unfortunate enough to end up there suffer from cracked skin and stinging blisters that are constantly bursting open.\textsuperscript{47}

Tibetan conceptions of hell follow the basic outlines of these traditional Buddhist schemes, but were also influenced by the notion of hell being a transitional state of temporary duration for those heavily burdened with sins and karmic defilements. In this respect, hell became identified as a way station for the penitent dead, and as such could be qualified as a type of "purgatory;" that is, an interim state in which the sins of the departed are cleansed. Indeed, the concept of hell is frequently conflated in Tibetan scholastic writings with the Buddhist idea of the transitional period between lives, the bardo. This conflation of two separate formal concepts—hell and intermediate state—may be explained in part by the fact that the transitoriness of hell, as seen in light of the Buddhist notion of rebirth, already fulfills a sort of intermediate function. Since hell and the bardo are both places where the dead suffer the effects of previous actions while en route to their next place of birth, the two terms essentially came to refer to the same scenario in Tibetan Buddhist popular literature. In other words, lines between the two were not clearly delineated. Keeping this ambiguity in mind, we turn now to a consideration of how the space of hell and purgatory are conceived in Lingza Chökyi’s story and in the délok narratives more generally.
Mapping the Netherworld

Following standard Tibetan Buddhist models of death and rebirth, the person who has died is said to emerge from his or her previous life in ethereal form (lit., a “mental body,” yid-kyi-lus, possessing the characteristics of a gandharva) and pass through an interim state, the bardo, before entering the next life. The scholastic books describe this bardo in abstract terms as nothing more or less than a transition between two states of consciousness. In these works, there is no notion of the intermediate state as an actual place, a realm with spatial dimensions and physical features. Such notions are reserved only for characterizations of the six realms of rebirth, including the realms of ghosts and the denizens of hell. By contrast, however, in the délok narratives and in some Tibetan meditation manuals we do find references to the bardo that use geographic imagery and speak of this interim state between lives as a distinct physical world. Consider, for example, this brief but suggestive passage from a fifteenth-century yogic guidebook belonging to the extensive cycle of literature associated with the Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo. The text describes the space of the bardo as follows:

Not knowing where I was going, I arrived in a valley. That valley led to the north and was dark in color. [I saw] no travelers and [heard] no human voices. [I heard] the cascading sounds of water flowing, the howling of the wind, and the rustling grass. The sun was slowly setting [behind] the mountain peaks. The rocky mountains were completely blue. [I heard] the squawk of ravens. I had arrived in such a place without knowing where I was, and I had no friends or companions. I had never been here before.48

The image here is of a desolate and lonely land. This passage, though evocative, makes use of certain generic images of mountains and valleys, and the sounds of wind and water, which are not unlike what we read in the Buddhist canonical literature about the realm of ghosts (pretaloka) and the border areas in hell. In the descriptions of the délok, on the other hand, representations of the world beyond are more elaborate and often distinct from what are found in the formal works. In these accounts, the geography of the bardo is endowed with the local characteristics of the “real” world in which the délok lived and modeled on familiar features of the Tibetan landscape. Many of the more generic motifs found in these texts are borrowed from Buddhist doctrinal sources about the hell realms—both Indian and Tibetan—while other images seem unique to the délok genre and reflect a very personal and realistic
picture of the afterlife. Consider this brief description found in Lingza Chökyi’s story:

I arrived on an open sandy path where no vegetation or even trees grew. I then looked down [the path] and saw a large desert valley without bumps and crannies that would take about twenty days to reach on horseback. In the middle of that [desert] was a river flowing above and below everywhere with no place to come ashore. As wide as this [river] was, [still] there was a bridge that surmounted it. On the side [of the shore nearest me], on a plain, was a town, inconceivably large…."49

Accounts of the otherworldly voyages of the délok comprise the largest portions of the narrative plot and usually describe in great detail the délok’s journeys over a vast and varied terrain: they travel over earth of molten iron, long and empty stretches of road, over rocky mountains and mountains composed of fire, mountains of copper, boulders of molten bronze, valleys and open plains, through magic forests with trees of iron and trees with razor-sharp leaves, along the edges of ravines and pits of burning embers, inside houses of molten iron, across the shores of immense rivers and oceans, inside palaces of lotus flowers, temples, and so on. The other worlds depicted in these narratives are in many respects like the hells described in the canonical literature going back to the *Abhidharmakośa.*50 So when the délok travel through this infernal world, we expect that they should see houses of iron and houses of fire, boiling rivers of burning ash, and forests of swords. But unlike the more formalized cosmographic representations found in texts such as the *Abhidharmakośa*, in which the various hells are hierarchically situated within a well-ordered structural scheme, the geography of the other world in the délok literature is presented as a conglomerate of uncoordinated vertical and horizontal spaces, a patchwork of disconnected topographical features, and landscapes mysteriously divided by uncertain distances. And yet, despite its peculiarities, the other world described by the délok is a familiar one and thoroughly ordinary. It is a reflection, though at times a nightmarish distortion, of the everyday world the délok left behind.

What is also noteworthy is that this hellish but strangely ordinary world is represented as the bardo, the intermediate state between death and rebirth, and travels through this interim space are also described in exactly the same topographic terms. In the délok accounts, the bardo is depicted as a vast landscape with uncertain boundaries and familiar geographical features, all of which lie at different altitudes that must be either climbed or descended. Such a notion shows very little correspondence with Buddhist intermediate-state
doctrines (of both tantric and nontantric variety) that narrowly define the bardo as an interim of consciousness, a transitional space of a specific duration between two separate states of conscious existence. We have here several fine examples of popular notions about the afterlife that really only vaguely concur with ideas explicated in the canonical literature.

Like all délok, Lingza Chökyi does not travel alone. Her escort in the other world is described simply as a friend and companion (zla-grogs); we do not know whether her guide is a man or a woman. She recounts her first conversation with this individual and their encounter with a woman suffering in the bardo:

Then a friendly companion of mine said, “Come over here!” and I went, arriving inside that town. My companion said, “Look, do you recognize this? Down there across that bridge.” I thought I might recognize it, so I went to the town to have a look. I saw an inconceivable [number of] men and women like a pile of ants. Some had nice clothes and some were good-looking, while others had unsightly clothes and some looked horrible like the color of ashes. Angry expressions flashed across everyone’s faces like bolts of lightening. Some gathered around and I wondered now why they came [together] like that. My body began to tremble.

Thereupon, [my companion and I] moved on [and came across] a large group of people, some of whom I [knew] before to have been cattle herders at [my local] monastery. A woman [from this group] looked nicely at me and said, “Madam, why have you arrived here? What have you done to be in this [place]? For me, madam, being here hasn’t been pleasant.”

Then, I asked her, “What is the name of this town? Why have all these people gathered here? [These people] who have crossed over this bridge, who are they? Now, can I go there?” I became animated, and when I thought about going, I [suddenly] arrived [there].

The woman said, “This is the border between the living and the dead, those who have passed on from the human realm. It is called the bardo. As for those who stay here, some of them are people who, after completing their lifespan, sit waiting for weekly acts of virtue [from their living relatives and friends] for up to forty-nine days. Some are those who [died] before their lifespan was completed and were called here by mistake, an identity error made by [Yama Shinjé’s] workers. There are people who may have to wait for [acts of] virtue for up to ten, fifteen, twenty, even thirty years! Those who
have nice wealth and clothing performed ceremonies to the Three Jewels [Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha] in their previous lives. They sent blessings intended for [those] evil [beings] down below. After [they died], their relatives and friends were devoted to the lamas and requested small, medium, and large dedications [of merit] and prayers, and having received [these] extensively each day, [their merit] increased and they are [now] very happy. Those who are destitute did not send out virtues in their previous lives to [those beings] down below. After [they died], their relatives didn’t send out [dedications and prayers]. With only the slightest dedications [of merit], [these people] don’t receive very much, and [their merit] doesn’t increase. They stay here for a long time without food. Now, after death, Chökyi Gyelpo [Lord of the Dead] and his minions are on the other side of that bridge. When you go there, your virtues and sins will be calculated. If you sent out virtues in your previous life, then after [death] those who are [virtuously] active and skilled will be sent upward to heaven along the path of liberation. Those who did nonvirtuous activities [in their previous lives] will not have the ability to do virtue after [death], and will experience the inconceivable suffering of being cooked and burned. I wonder what will happen. Day and night, there is [so much] suffering. When I first arrived here I went over to the other side. They told me ‘You have to go back over there and wait because your lifespan isn’t over yet,’ so I came [back] here. Madam, why not go there yourself and see what Chökyi Gyelpo and his minions have to say. If they say you have to stay there, then [try to] come back here!”

The woman Lingza Chökyi meets in the bardo reminds her that the dead are helpless while traveling in the netherworld and thus require the assistance of surviving relatives and friends to lessen their sufferings. The woman’s message underscores the importance of prayers and rites for the dead performed by the living—monks and laity alike—and reflects the influence of basic Buddhist morals of filial responsibility. This aspect of Lingza Chökyi’s story, and of the dēlok narratives in general, is clearly inspired by long-standing Buddhist notions of the “hungry ghost,” or preta (peta in Pāli), and of the special ritual bond between preta and human being. In the Pāli anthology of short stories called Petavatthu (Ghost Stories) from the Khuddaka-nikāya (Minor Collection), the preta is described as a recently departed tormented being suffering the effects of past actions (karma). To alleviate its pain and to enhance its present circumstances, the preta makes requests to the living that certain
virtuous actions be performed for its benefit. Most often these actions include the dedication of merit, almsgiving, and the recitation of Buddhist scripture. This is virtually the same scenario we find throughout Lingza Chökyi’s account of her otherworld meetings. In fact, we encounter similar scenes in all délok descriptions of the voyage through hell and the bardo, where the deceased traveler meets and interacts with a host of beings who are suffering there. In these Tibetan accounts the damned request the same sorts of pious actions that are recommended in the early Buddhist writings, as in the Petavatthu, for favorably influencing the effects of karma. Again, we see an underlying and common Buddhist principle at work in the délok literature—that virtuous actions performed by the living can positively affect the predicament of the dead. Lingza Chökyi, as well as listeners and readers of her narrative, would likely have been familiar with such stories of the desperate dead from homilies delivered by local monks or lamas about the sufferings of this and other worlds, from Buddhist folklore and oral tales about ghosts.

Meeting Others

That hell and the bardo are populated by such an enormous number of people and that many of those people are identified by name and known personally by the délok is a provocative feature of these narrative texts. Lingza Chökyi, for example, encounters lamas and nuns, cotton-clad yogis, and many laymen and -women, including a noble woman from eastern Tibet and a doctor from Mongolia. As we shall see in the next chapter, the lama Jampa Délek, as we might expect, meets various monks and religious figures, such as the lama Trülshik Chökyi Gyentsén from a border town between India and Tibet; but he also encounters ordinary villagers and nomads, men and women, young and old. Likewise, Karma Wangzin meets along the way a host of men and women from her home region (see chapter 4). A large proportion of them are nuns, not surprisingly, but several are lamas, and others are simply ordinary people, most of whom are identified by their proper names. On the other hand, the crowds of ordinary people the monk Jangchup Sengé (chapter 5) encounters are unlike the sorts of identifiable people met with in the three other délok biographies; the people he meets tend to be nameless, tormented beings suffering in typical fashion for rather generic sins. But these sins are similar to the ones we read in all four délok accounts and include various types of robbery, theft of religious items, abusing monks, killing animals, causing others to commit sin, and so on.

The essential point of all of this seems to be that in the bardo the dead encounter familiar people in familiar contexts. Lingza Chökyi, Jampa Délek,
and Karma Wangzin meet local monks, nuns, and lamas, and various classes of laywomen and -men both from home and from neighboring villages, while Jangchup Sengé meets among the anonymous crowds familiar religious professionals and extraordinary yogis from his home institution. What we find in these personal details, then, is clear evidence of a move in the délok narratives not only to localize hell and the bardo in familiar ways but also to populate it with hordes of identifiable personalities, a maneuver not characteristically found in Buddhist doctrinal literature on death and the hell realms but certainly accepted across the board by monks and laity alike.

We see illustrated in these otherworldly journey accounts a number of popular ideas about the world beyond. These include the idea that after death a person undertakes a voyage across a vast and multilayered landscape; that this landscape is populated by the souls of dead relatives, friends, local personalities, strangers, and religious heroes; that this world and the other world can be found in relative proximity, in both time and space; that to reach the other world it is necessary to cross a bridge suspended across a fearsome river; that the journey is undertaken alongside a mysterious but divine escort who guides the deceased along the way; and that wrathful minions of hell tormenting the sinful dead appear everywhere. In the end, all enter the judicial court of the Lord of the Dead.

Yama, Lord of the Dead

When speaking of hell and the other world in Buddhism we must assign special prominence to Yama. This fearsome figure has a long history in India and occupies a central role in Tibetan délok depictions of the afterlife, where he appears as Shinjé Chökyi Gyelpo (Skt. Yama Dharmarāja), “Lord of the Dead, King of the Dharma.” In India as early as the Rg Veda (ca. 1200–900 B.C.E.), Yama was recognized as the first mortal and the first being to travel to the world beyond. In Vedic India, it was believed that in order to arrive safely in the celestial realm beyond death the deceased first had to pass Yama’s pair of watchdogs, who guarded the entrance to heaven and permitted only a select few to enter. This was the first hint of the judgment seat that Yama would come to occupy in classical Hinduism, and later in Tibetan (and Chinese) Buddhism. But even prior to his being identified as the postmortem judge, Yama, the great pioneer of the afterlife, had been transformed into the ruler of the dead. In the Abhidharmakośa, to give an early Buddhist example, Yama is identified as “king of the pretas” who dwells in the ghost realm (pretaloka) five hundred leagues below the earthly human world referred to by the name
Jambudvīpa or Dzambuling in Tibetan.\textsuperscript{60} As noted before, the boundaries of the various realms of the dead are often blurred; the lines separating them are not drawn too sharply. Symbolically, the orientations of the underworld of the \textit{pretas}, the nether regions of hell, and even the interim space of the bardo are all essentially united and are frequently depicted as a single space, or at least all in very close proximity. Yama is thus represented as ruler over the three places inhabited by ghosts, by the denizens of hell, and by the souls of the dead wandering in the bardo.

In the Indian Brāhma\textit{ṇ}ical tradition and later in Buddhism, Yama’s sovereignty over the kingdom of the dead came to be viewed in economic terms, and so this god of death became also the divine creditor.\textsuperscript{61} In that role, he and his menacing entourage of punishers (themselves called \textit{yamas}, or \textit{shinjé} in Tibetan) assumed the authority of registering each individual’s death and determining each one’s future course. Yama and his retinue had thus become the administrators of death, the underworld magistrates who meted out judicial verdicts. Yama’s image as the supreme judge of the dead appears with great flourish in Chinese accounts of the postmortem bureaucracy, but also frequently in Tibetan ritual and literary traditions having to do specifically with death and the world beyond.\textsuperscript{62}

One of the earliest Buddhist references to Yama standing in judgment over the deceased’s soul appears in the \textit{Devadūta-sutta} from the Pāli \textit{Majjhima-nikāya}, which can be dated to at least the fourth century but was likely extant much earlier before the common era. In this short work, Yama as king of the netherworld interrogates the sinful deceased person and then hands him over to the minions of hell for punishment. The phrase repeated at the end of each stanza of the narrative emphasizes the moral weight of past evil deeds and evokes the judicial role Yama occupies in the later literature:

Then King Yama says: “Good man, through negligence you have failed to do good by body, speech, and mind. Certainly they [the wardens of hell] will deal with you according to your negligence. But this evil action of yours was not done by your mother or your father, or by your brother or your sister, or by your friends and companions, or by your kinsmen and relatives, or by recluses and brahmans, or by gods: this evil action was done by you yourself, and you yourself will experience its result.” Then, after pressing and questioning and cross-questioning him… King Yama presses and questions and cross-questions him [again]…\textsuperscript{63}

The Buddhist theme of a trial over the dead in King Yama’s court, during which a list of past virtuous and sinful deeds are recorded in writing for
examination, can be traced to the Mahāyāna sūtras going back to the fourth century. As far as I can determine, the image first appears in a passage from a small but influential work connected to the Bhaisajyaguru-sūtra (King of Medicine Sūtra). The relevant passage reads:

At that time, from within the assembly, a great bodhisattva named Refuge Liberation (Tib. Skyabs-grol, Skt. Transamukta) rose up from his seat. Shifting his upper robe to one shoulder, he knelt with his right knee to the ground and bowed with his palms pressed together. He addressed the Victorious Transcendent One [the Buddha] in these words:

“O Venerable Victorious Transcendent One, in the future, sentient beings will be afflicted with a variety of diseases (bro-nad); their bodies and flesh [afflicted] with prolonged illnesses; starving, their throats [parched] by thirst, their lips dry, they will proceed to die. Their beloved friends, relatives, kinsmen, and acquaintances will all gather around, [but the dying] will see [only] darkness. Led away by the minions of [Yama] Shinjé while their bodies lie in repose, their consciousness will be brought before Shinjé, King of the Dharma (Skt. Yama Dharmarāja). The spontaneously-born spirit (lhan-cig skyes-pa’i lha) that follows after [all] human beings wherever they are, will record in writing all virtues and sins committed [throughout their lives] and will offer [this] written record to Shinjé, King of the Dharma. Shinjé, King of the Dharma will ask them questions and after examination he will issue a judgment that suits exactly the nature of the virtues or the sins that had been committed.

If those [living friends and relatives] are [able] to take refuge in the Victorious Transcendent One, Supreme Healer Radiant Lapis Lazuli (Skt. Bhaisajyaguru Vaiḍūryaprabhasya), for the benefit of the sick, and by applying themselves in this way are [able also] to make religious offerings, then the consciousness [of the deceased] can again return [to life]. [The dead] will recover on their own as if they had [only] been dreaming. Even if seven, twenty-one, thirty-five, or forty-nine days [have passed], the consciousness of those [individuals] will again return. Upon regaining their memories, the ripening of their virtuous and sinful actions will become clearly discernible to them, and [they will realize that] in order to continue living (srog), they cannot engage in sinful activities.”

This passage is remarkable for several reasons. First, of course, we find Yama clearly represented here as the judge of the dead. Second, the text speaks
of a unique type of spirit who is born together with human beings, accompanies them throughout their lives, and who keeps track of their good and evil actions (karma). In later Tibetan literature, from at least the fourteenth century onward, it is more common to find two such spirits rather than one identified in scenes of the postmortem judgment: a divine spirit (lhan-cig skyes-pa’i-lha), who resembles the figure cited above, and a demonic spirit (lhan-cig skyes-pa’i-’dre). The former is usually described as holding white pebbles (rde’u dkar-po) representing the deceased’s virtues, while the latter carries black pebbles (rde’u nag-po) representing accumulated sins. Both spirits stand beside the deceased to help argue his or her case before Yama, as we see in this exemplary passage from the fifteenth-century Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo:

O son of noble family! You, so-and-so [name of the deceased], listen! You are suffering like that because it is your own karma. No one else is responsible. It is your own karma, so now supplicate the Three Jewels earnestly. That will protect [you]. If you do not make supplications like that, do not know even the Great Seal meditations [Tib. phyag-rgya-chen-po, Skt. mahāmudrā; specialized Tantric practices], [and] do not meditate on your tutelary deity (yi-dam), then your spontaneously-born divine spirit (lhan-cig skyes-pa’i-lha) will collect all your virtuous actions and count out white pebbles. Your spontaneously-born demonic spirit (lhan-cig skyes-pa’i-’dre) will collect all your sinful actions and count out black pebbles. At that time, you will be very frightened, worried, and afraid and trembling you will even lie, saying “I have not sinned.” Then Shinjé, Lord of the Dead, will say, “I will question the mirror of karma (las-kyi me-long).” In the mirror of karma [all your actions] appear brightly and clearly, so although you have lied there is no benefit. The Lord of the Dead will lead you along by a rope worn around your neck, cut off your head, pull out your heart, take out your intestines, lick your brains, drink your blood, eat your flesh, and gnaw on your bones, but you will not be able to die. Although your body is cut into pieces you will be revived. There will be great suffering from being cut up again and again.

This frightful drama involving Yama weighing the deceased’s white and black pebbles on a scale of justice, ordering a check of his or her appeals in the mirror of karma, and pronouncing final judgment is more elaborately detailed in other Tibetan works on the judgment of the dead from the liturgical cycle of the Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo. Two such works have even influenced the development of a popular religious dance still performed regularly in Tibet and Bhutan. Similar judgment scenes are recounted in the délok biographies,
but it is only in these latter texts that we find Yama deciding in the end to send the deceased back to the world of the living. The theme of the return of the dead from Yama’s court—a quintessential element in the délok plot—is clearly not an innovation of the délok genre. The theme goes back much earlier in Buddhist literature, originating perhaps in canonical works such as the Bhaisajyaguru-sūtra.

The most remarkable feature of the judgment scene from the Bhaisajyaguru-sūtra is that the dead can actually return to life, revived by living relatives who must perform certain prescribed acts of devotion. The sūtra is one of the earliest records of this idea in Buddhist literature, therefore providing a canonical basis for later Tibetan narrative elaborations of what happens after death and of the possibility of return. In simple terms, following the template of the Bhaisajyaguru-sūtra, the dead are met by an inborn spirit, who leads them to the place of judgment. There the dead are questioned and cross-examined by Yama and censured accordingly. Some, however, come back to life by the aid of their devoted relatives. The scene is a prototype for the Tibetan délok accounts of postmortem judgment and the return from death.

Trials of the Damned

What is most unique about such scenes in the délok narratives, however, is the personalization of the trial and judgment before Yama, whereby the sins and virtues of the familiar dead are calculated and weighed, and a final verdict delivered. In other words, these scenes in the délok accounts are exceptional not so much because they describe a postmortem trial—a common motif portrayed in a variety of early canonical and scholastic sources, as noted above—but because the texts describe the judgment scenes in personal rather than collective terms. Though the scenes are far too numerous in the délok narratives to review them all here, it is worthwhile to note one exemplary case from Lingza Chökyi’s biography concerning the interrogation of a young girl named Chödrön who had just recently died:

[I saw] a well-dressed young girl with a nice complexion, beautiful face, and sweet voice. She was a very ostentatious girl, made up in fine turquoise and coral, and she was responding to questions [addressed to her by Yama Shinjê]. She said: “Yes, I am the princess of Margung. Today, I left my home to visit my parents’ place. There was a river along the way and, as I was crossing over it, I fell in and arrived here. Then, just like that, my virtues and sins were being
calculated in detail [and] I didn’t know [what to do]. I couldn’t recall [if] I had done [any] virtuous religious activities. What I do remember is asking many lamas and teachers for religious teachings and blessings when[ever] they came [around]. I wanted to go and offer them food, but I didn’t go because I [worried] people might say I was not acting like a girl of high standing (mi-chen), that I was naive (mgochung) and stupid (klad-med). I did listen [for a time] to the guiding instructions of the lama Zhönu Gyentsén, and afterward he told me to be his [yogic] consort (yum). But, because I held myself in such high esteem, I [was offended and] thought, “Such an itinerant lama said that to me!” and I [left him] without obtaining the complete instructions. I also had no faith [in him]. Because I was so young I didn’t know [how] to accomplish virtues. Now, I [take] these turquoise and corals from my body and offer them to you, [Yama] Chögyel, and ask that you send me back. I intend now to practice religion. If you don’t send me [back] up, I will have been a sinner. I beg you, please don’t send me down to that mayhem (tsir-tsir hob-hob) below.”

[Yama Chögyel] examined the mirror [of karma] and his written [records and said], “O, you say you’re not a sinner, but that isn’t true. At home, during your wedding, twenty-three sentient beings were killed, so you gained a quarter of sin because of that. Also, that Lama Zhönu Gyentsén had cultivated the goal of the Great Perfection (Dzokchen) and had even realized the essence of mind-itself. He acted extensively for the benefit of living beings. [In fact] last month he came here and took away more than a thousand [suffering beings] from those mountains over there and over here. A lama like that is good. When you went to ask him for religious teachings he told you to be his secret consort (gsang-yum), but you thought, ‘I am a girl of good patrimony (pha-bzang) and high standing. Some [lama] traveling the county on pilgrimage said that to me!’ so your faith was perverse. You left [after] asking for teachings and told your girlfriends (grogs-ma) [about what had happened].”

The young girl Chödrön said [in her own defense], “Because that lama had [already] realized phenomena lack true [existence] it was not suitable for him to ask that [of me].” [And Yama Chögyel replied,] “When that lama died, [miraculous] signs and relics appeared and a rainbow filled the sky above. There were many positive signs and I thought he might even guide you [out of here], but now you will receive [retribution] for your perverse faith.”
The girl said, “I was ashamed and [thought] it wasn’t necessary to go and believe him, so I went away and said harsh things [about him] to my girlfriends.” [Yama Chögyel replied,] “Because you had bad faith in the lama and expressed [this] to a lot of people, many [also] lost faith in him. Those people should be made to go to the lower realms. The lama’s students in that local valley were harmed [as a result]. It is a greater sin to denigrate and slander lamas and teachers than it is to murder a thousand living beings, [including] the chief among them, humans, horses, and dogs. Now, there is no need to cast the [black and white] pebbles. You are indeed a very beautiful young girl of high standing, but the terror you are feeling [at the moment] is good. You have accumulated much gold, turquoise and coral, and yet all of that is of no benefit [to you] now. You requested religious teachings and broke your commitments (dam-tshig). Because you did harm to the lama, you must go down to all the hell realms. You’ll be dragged by your tongue and neck down below and as much as a thousand iron spikes will be driven [into you]. You’ll be beaten about the head with hammers. Furthermore, you’ll stay at that mountain over yonder until your lifespan there is complete. Then, you must experience swift suffering and shoulder the penalty for [harming] the lama. Your lifespan here will be sixty-five [years]. At [your young] age of twenty, it was not the right time for you to come [here], but because you committed the faults of disobeying the lama and having perverse faith, you had to die before it was time. Now, you’ll experience the sort of suffering that will drive you insane!”

That young girl began trembling and crying heavily. [Yama’s minions] the yama said to her, “If you wish to cry forever, you can live in the Howling Hell!” They grabbed her with iron hooks [bellowing], “Kill! Kill! Strike! Strike!” and, raising up their weapons, they dragged her off. The young girl warned, “Don’t have bad faith and perverted ideas about those lamas you have a religious connection with. Slander is a terrible fault!”

Lingza Chökyi cites a number of further examples of this same sort of intense court drama, including the trials of such sinners as a charlatan doctor from Mongolia; a married man who, after burning down the house of his in-laws, killing them and all the livestock inside, married another woman; and a lascivious cotton-clad yogi from Tsang named Shérap Dorjé, who was caught deceiving his teacher, the lama Yönten Gyatso, and seducing the queen.
Always in the end the message is clear: have faith in the monks and lamas, practice religion with great devotion, and avoid committing sinful acts; otherwise, a horrible destiny awaits. This is a very conservative message and in accord with the most basic Buddhist ethical values. With this as the prime moral of the texts, we have to call into question the suggestion first put forth by Lawrence Epstein and later reinforced by Françoise Pommaret that the emergence of the délok literature primarily along the southern and eastern border regions was a direct consequence of the rise of the orthodox Gelukpa hegemony in central Tibet beginning in the fifteenth century (the Gelukpa is the affiliated sect of the Dalai Lamas). Implied in their suggestion is the notion that the délok experience is a subversive experience and was perceived as such by the organized Buddhist institutions in central Tibet. Following this perception, the délok and the books that recorded their experiences must then have been marginalized and forced out to the borderlands. The argument is provocative but difficult to support, given the overwhelmingly conformist message of these texts and the lack of any concrete historical evidence for institutional prejudice or persecutions against the délok. Still, it is true, very few délok appear to have come from central Tibet, but details about the specific social and political circumstances in the fifteenth century that might explain this situation remain unclear.

The details Lingza Chökyi provides in her story generally conform to the basic principles of the received tradition, but we should also note that those details are often more personally embellished, perhaps influenced more by private memories and impressions of daily life than by the reading of scholastic texts. For Lingza Chökyi, and for most délok in general and other nonprofessional illiterate women and men, reading would have been an unlikely activity. Their accounts, then, were probably inspired less by formal ideas written in textbooks and more likely picked up along the way from the teachings of learned lamas and conversations at home and in their villages.

Returning Home

Lingza Chökyi eventually learns that, unlike all the others suffering in the bardo, she will be given a second chance and is being sent home to bring Yama's moral message to the living. The initial reason offered as justification for her return is curious—her death was a mistake. Errors of identity are common motifs in many of the délok stories. Returning home, Lingza Chökyi tells of her visit to the netherworld and of her conversation with the Lord of the Dead:
When I crossed over to that iron mountain in hell, one of the yamas said, “Even though [Yama Shinjé’s] attendants are nearby, you now have no time to stay [here]. [Go] quick!” I then went before [Shinjé] Chökyi Gyelpo, who said, “Right now, your [human] lifespan is not finished and because there’s been a mistake in regard to your family name, you have been led [here]. Now that you have left [the world], that room of yours is about to disappear. When I look into the mirror [of karma] and examine the written [records], your contentment is not forthcoming. At this point, in order to return home, you must [vow] to work diligently on the side of virtue when you go back there. You, yourself, have seen the extent of the benefits of virtue and the harmfulness of sin. Now, do not forget my message to the people of the world. Again, my message to those inferior minded people is that to obtain a [human] body without virtue is to return empty-handed without the dharma . . . Alas! Take notice of the greater and lesser advantages of counting out the essential mani [syllables]. Do not forget any of these messages. Convey your story to all. Now, go home!”74

We find, then, descriptions of the experience of returning to the body similar to those we read in other délok accounts. Lingza Chökyi relates what happens when she comes back to life:

I went again by way of that mountain plateau that I had come to before, and then suddenly I arrived at home. I could see my bedroom, and on the other side of the curtain hanging from my door there was that pig’s corpse from before, wearing my clothes and covered in that old felt. I thought I should move the pig’s corpse down [off my bed],75 but I thought my husband and children might do something bad to me, fearing that I was the pig.76 I thought, “How did the pig’s corpse climb up on my bed wearing my clothes?” Distraught, I felt both anxious and fearless, and thought to take back my clothes, thinking that they had to be thrown out, along with that corpse.77 Closing my eyes, I took hold with both hands and pulled. Turning over like I had just woken up, I let out a noise.78 My eldest son saw this and cried out, “Mother! Mother! She’s breathing! My mother has returned! Everyone, come here!”79

Again, we see the corpse described not as human but as the cadaver of an animal, a pig. Even when returning to life, the délok does not recognize her own body. How Lingza Chökyi actually re-enters her corpse is intriguing.
Closing her eyes, she grabs hold of her clothing and yanks at it. Suddenly, she awakes fully conscious and back in possession of her own physical form. She then describes what she did after returning from hell:

All my relatives showed up, and at that [point] I explained the whole story to them. I remembered the sufferings of hell, and feeling sad I wept. I had recovered from my illness and made offerings to the lamas and teachers who had arrived. In their presence, I recited the mani as I had been taught before. I held a feast offering for the monasteries in the area. Then, in turn, I sent out [virtues] to my husband and sons and to whomever else had slandered the dharma. Me and my daughter even became nuns. Having let go of this world, I set out on pilgrimage. In this way, I was able [to speak to others personally] about the realities of hell... 

It is significant that Lingza Chökyi becomes a nun after her return-from-death experience and persuades her daughter to do the same. In the end, we see her story as a conversion tale of sorts, starting off with Lingza Chökyi as an ordinary housewife without much religious merit and ending with her being transformed into a pious Buddhist practitioner who sets out through her newly found profession to preach the benefits of religious commitment and moral action. In this regard, Lingza Chökyi’s tale is actually reminiscent of traditional Tibetan Buddhist “liberation stories” (rnam-thar). The story of Lingza Chökyi, however, lacks most of the defining characteristics of that hagiographical literature. Nowhere in her life (and death), for example, do we find reference to her superior virtues or her miraculous skills, and even in the end we see that she follows a rather ordinary religious course that a great many women in Tibet pursued. The only remarkable thing about her story, aside from her extraordinary experience of visiting hell and coming back to life, is that she or someone else recorded it. Her tale ends on the following note:

It is of great benefit, my story of hell, [just] to see it with [your own] eyes, to hear it with [your own] ears. Furthermore, by reflecting on truth, do not waste [the opportunities] of this life. Generate sympathy in yourself, concern for yourself. Look upon yourself with compassion. Be modest in yourself. Do not grieve for those who live in the bardo. Abandon sins and establish virtues. From the depths of your heart, [know] that you are your own mind. If only I had not forgotten [some things], this book (pu-ti) would have been ten times [as long]. This is as much as I recall. May all sentient beings draw benefit from this “sūtra” (mdo). OM MANI PADME HŪM HṚĪ.
What is particularly interesting about this passage is the reference to itself as a written work (pu-ti), and a sutra no less. We are privy to all the private episodes in Lingza Chökyi’s story precisely because she was able to remember (most of) them and because they had been recorded in writing and compiled into this single book. We have no idea who actually wrote the biography, who gave instructions about the form it should take, and who suggested what additions and omissions should be made. Given the low levels of literacy among average Tibetans in the premodern age, in all probability Lingza Chökyi was not the author of her own story, although judging from many of the very personal details that do appear in the text, it is likely that the original writer, whomever it may have been, may have heard these things from Lingza Chökyi’s own lips. But, as it was often the case in Tibet that the writing of books in general, and of biographies in particular, was rarely initiated by the scribe or compositor himself and was thus usually commissioned by a third party willing to pay for the work involved, we end this chapter by asking a few open questions: Why was the scribe of Lingza Chökyi’s story—or, for that matter, any of the délok stories—encouraged to write? What purpose did it serve and in what context was it used? Was this book intended to be read privately or recited to a group of listeners? These are important questions and I will highlight them again throughout the chapters that follow. For the moment, however, we should move on to the narrative of a different category of person in Tibetan society, a Buddhist lama, with the goal of gaining a better comparative sense of the délok experience.
A Lama in Distress

Anxiety appears to have led to the death of the dölök Jampa Délek, a sixteenth-century lama from the village of Nakar in the northern reaches of southern Latö, probably located in or nearby present-day Ngamring.¹ Jampa Délek was born into a family of the Namru clan and had been ordained as a young boy at a monastery called Sera Samten Ling.² He became the personal attendant of Aku Rinpoché Ronyom Dorjé, a student of Kédrup Pagö Zhönu who had been himself a disciple of the famous “mad monk” from Tsang, Heruka Sangyé Gyentsén (1452–1507).³ Jampa Délek was therefore a lama of primarily Kagyu affiliation. At the age of thirty-three, he ascended to the position of abbot at a monastery called Loro, the precise location of which is not yet identified. It is clear from the outset that the range of social circumstances surrounding Jampa Délek’s story are quite different from those of Lingza Chökyi. He was a man, first and foremost, and also a lama and monk who held high standing in a formal religious institution. The professional religious life that had been denied Lingza Chökyi from an early age (though open to her in somewhat limited terms after her dölök experience) was made fully available to Jampa Délek when he was still just a child. And yet they both speak of certain religious ideas and describe experiences that are remarkably similar, in both tone and content.

Jampa Délek begins his tale with reference to long-standing Buddhist prophecies of the “evil age” (dus-ngan) and the corruption and eventual disappearance of Buddhism in Tibet. He was convinced
that the end had finally come, signaled by the widespread degeneration of moral values, the rise of sinful attitudes and behavior, and the invasion of Tibet by foreign armies. It was this latter circumstance, Tibet teetering on the edge of war, that appears to have agitated him most and to have sparked the collapse of his physical condition.

It is difficult to identify historically the specific events that Jampa Délek felt so threatened by. The few extant historical records of Latö make no mention of foreign invasions to the area in this period, though in 1555, during the era in which Jampa Délek appears to have lived, the region was conquered by the neighboring western Tibetan kingdom of Gungtang, whose rulers occupied Latö until they were overthrown by the lord of Tsang in 1620. More than a century later, the first actual non-Tibetan invasion of Latö occurred in 1788 when the region was overtaken by the Gurkhas of Nepal. They came up through Kyirong in the heart of southern Latö. We might be tempted to accept this event as the omen of the evil age that Jampa Délek refers to at the beginning of his story, which would then place him much later in history. However, all other internal evidence, scant as it is, seems to support the fact that he more likely lived in the sixteenth century. Without additional historical evidence to corroborate the dates we must unfortunately leave the matter unsettled.

Yet it is probably the case that Jampa Délek’s fear of foreign invasion and of the decline of Buddhism in Tibet may not actually have had anything to do with historical realities. Millenarian prophecies with apocalyptic visions of the end of the Buddha’s teaching are commonplace in Tibetan Buddhist literature. Prophecies of this sort began to gain prominence in Tibetan writings around the fourteenth century, when the Mongols initiated their first military campaigns against the Tibetans. In the prophecies of this period, Tibet’s foreign invaders were consistently identified as Mongol antagonists and reference to the invading hordes very quickly became a defining trope of Tibetan prophetic writing. Also consistent in the prophecies was the notion that the happiness and well-being of Tibetans was fated to be short lived. Warnings to this effect are almost always placed in the mouth of Padmasambhava, the legendary exorcist from Orgyeñ (in the vicinity of modern-day Pakistan) who tradition claims formally established Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century. In the texts, it is Padmasambhava who warns of the horrors that await Tibetans in the future, of the inevitable collapse of the monastic institutions and the subsequent corruption of Buddhist doctrine and practice. And as a sign of his concern for the welfare of Tibet and compassion toward her people, he offers advice and salvific instructions, which he then conceals in code to be preserved until circumstances require that they be revealed in the future. This is the root
narrative of the Tibetan “treasure” (gter-ma) texts, or concealed apocrypha, which began to circulate widely throughout Tibet in the fourteenth century, though the earliest examples of the genre appear to date back to at least the eleventh. In addition to initiating and sustaining a paradisaic mythology of Tibetan dynastic history (seventh through ninth centuries), many of the treasure works introduced innovative interpretations of older religious ideas and practices, or simply popularized in the form of prayer and liturgy what had previously existed only in the clandestine atmosphere of Buddhist hermits and religious savants. It is among these hidden treasures that we find much of Tibetan Buddhism’s conceptual and ritual innovations having to do with death and the afterlife. The texts of the so-called Tibetan Book of the Dead, for example, belong to this category of literature. In this connection, moreover, the délok narratives are also clearly related, if not genetically at the very least stylistically. But what is most important, at least for my interests, is not the question of the historical influence of treasure collections such as the Book of the Dead on the délok tradition, but rather the common set of ideas and images that Tibetan visionaries, monks, and even housewives equally shared and that they wished to express in words. Jampa Délek’s story is a fine case in point. It is to his death that I now turn.

Death, Dogs, and a Hail of Sorrow

Like Lingza Chökyi, Jampa Délek falls victim to an incurable sickness, one whose symptoms included chills, severe back pain, and congestion. His illness is described in Tibetan medical terms as a disorder of the bile (bad-kan) and wind (stong-’khrugs). Worn down by illness and distressed by the threat of invading armies, Jampa Délek finally dies. What is noteworthy about Jampa Délek’s death is that the anxiety that leads to it is political, a fear and despair over certain impending external events that look as if hopeless for Tibet. In marked contrast is the anxiety that Lingza Chökyi experiences, an emotional reaction to a very personal domestic situation and one that she believed could only end in the suffering of her children. The social template that is revealed here in these particular emotions is not all that unexpected. As a lama and abbot, Jampa Délek was required to maintain relations with various levels of society, some religious, some commercial, and others political. We should not be surprised, then, that Tibet’s struggles with foreign invaders would have been of great concern to him. Lingza Chökyi, on the other hand, was a wife and mother who managed the home and took charge of family matters. She held the key to all the family’s affairs and thus any threat to the safety and stability of the household (say, for example, her husband’s remarriage) would have been
of paramount importance to her. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fact that Jampa Délek and Lingza Chökyi represent the two poles of a time-honored dichotomy, that is, the professional male cleric and the ordinary female layperson, respectively. Their careers are also typically homologized to this two-tiered paradigm—the political versus domestic life. Yet, in the end, we find that the lama dies in much the same way as the housewife.

As in Lingza Chökyi’s account, very detailed descriptions of the dying process are also recorded in the story of lama Jampa Délek. As we have been conditioned to expect, given his status as professional religious practitioner, he provides remarkably precise information about the stages of death. Jampa Délek narrates his experience of his final moments:

Then, in the first month of the new fire-male-monkey year, when I was living in retreat in a narrow cave, I developed an intense illness of the bile and wind. I lost the warmth in my body, became congested with mucous and blood, had back pain, and so forth. I invited a doctor to administer medicines and to ask what steps I should take and so on, but nothing benefitted me. I was done for (rang-song). I had been hallucinating and on the fifteenth day, when the horse-star was in the descent, I saw a clear sky, a path of ceremonial scarves, rainbows and clouds. I saw everything [around me] appearing in the shape of stupas. Flowers rained down [upon me], a mandala appeared, and I could smell the pleasant odor of incense. I made supplications to Aku Rinpoché, and began a series of meditations. I practiced whatever could be of advantage to me, [but] in doing so I could no longer rely on the stability of my body, and as such the series of dissolutions began. After adjusting my bodily posture, I died. At that moment, I had no faith whatsoever in my own realization, but could only rely on my good luck. In one moment, suddenly, the future was upon me. Then, four fearsome men, holding a spear in each hand, came up behind me, and I was extremely frightened. For three days I remained in this state. Then, I again assumed my posture, and later, after some minutes had passed, the stages of dissolution began as they had before. As I persevered, I turned my body like before and performed the visualization of transference (’pho-ba). My body and mind separated. At that time, I had the sensation of being suppressed by a rocky mountain. I heard all of the sounds of the earth, the stones, the mountain, and I was scared and felt pain. After that, the entire ground fell into a great ocean...
What is particularly striking about this passage is Jampa Délek’s attempts to meditate at the time of death. As a lama and presumably accomplished practitioner, this is exactly what he had been trained to do at this moment. Tibetan tantric texts elucidate a variety of advanced yogic techniques for gaining control over death and purifying the ordinary dying experience. But for Jampa Délek, his meditation proceeds with some difficulty. The evidence here of human frailty in the face of death is noteworthy. He struggles throughout to maintain his composure and to sustain his meditative concentration. Eventually, he chooses to practice the method of consciousness transference (‘pho-ba). In general, it is taught that the transference technique is a last-minute safety measure to insure a wholesome rebirth in a buddha’s pure land and to avoid rebirth into one of the lower realms of animals, ghosts, or denizens of hell. The method, if successful, promises that the meritorious energy of one’s previous deeds will continue without interruption into the next life.

After this point, Jampa Délek goes into great detail about the dissolution of the four psychophysical elements and the various sensations associated with it. The dissolution stages are explicated in rather generic textbook style and lack the personal nuance of Lingza Chökyi’s descriptions. After taking us through the various stages of the dying process, he continues:

There were about a thousand levels of human forms all around me. In the middle of the group there were about thirty of them wielding various weapons, and I saw that they had a variety of human-like heads, saying “Kill! Strike!” and so on. Just seeing them terrified me. At that moment, they rushed toward me, and [seeing] all those weapons I panicked. My fear and anxiety were immeasurable. Then a man in black arrived carrying a [prayer] banner tied to a spear (dar-mdung). As soon as he arrived, those fearsome men vanished. The man in black also left like a rainbow dissolving [into the sky]. I had an immense feeling of bliss. Then, at that moment, many wild human-like animals and dogs came up to me. I thought about running to hide, but suddenly a large black dog with human-like [features] similar to the others came rushing at me. The wild animals and dogs scattered and disappeared. The black dog sat there and [again] I had an immense feeling of bliss. Then, I thought about leaving, since I wasn’t afraid. I had regained my mindfulness, and said “In fear I am above fear!” and so I had an immense feeling of bliss.

Again, we see mention of those phantom human-like beings who wield weapons and shout threatening words, “Kill! Strike!” But once Jampa Délek is
able to regain his meditative concentration, he is no longer frightened by these visions. Recall that this is similar to the moment in Lingza Chökyi’s account when her fear also subsides the very instant she is able to remember the advice of her lama. Clearly what is intended here is to give verified testament to the truth of the lama’s teachings about the distorted projections and fear in a mind confused at the moment of death. The personal quality of such eyewitness accounts certainly helps to establish the trustworthiness of the authorized Buddhist teachings.

But what can we say about the symbolism of dogs? Like the descriptions of the pig corpse in Lingza Chökyi’s story, Jampa Délek speaks similarly of dogs and a strange corpse lying in his own bed. Before considering what the image of dogs might mean in this context, let us first see how Jampa Délek describes his own corpse:

I arrived inside my house. Looking around, I saw on my bed a large shriveled corpse of a sentient being that I had not seen before, its head resting on its ear, its mane [of hair] rough and rigid. The moment [I saw] my cloak had been put on that [dog-like] corpse, I reflected on the three generations of supreme lamas in my life, on whatever blessings and protections I had, and examined that frightening corpse. Images of deities had even been displayed (skram)16 around it, particularly the images of the three chief maṇḍalas of Tukjé [Chen]po [Avalokiteśvara]. These had been displayed above that corpse’s head, so I asked, “What is this supreme wisdom deity [my root lama] doing? Why has this mangled warm carcass been put in my bed?” I felt a bit frightened, and said, “Putting this corpse in my bed is polluting the sacred images and is also ruining the consecrations, so it should be moved elsewhere!” But there was no reply . . . .17

The images in the above two passages are palpable—nightmarish hounds, aggregates of teeth and hair, snarling and foaming at the mouth, or dog-like bodies lying lifeless in dead people’s beds stinking of rot and decay. Dogs have long been associated with death in myths spread widely across Asia and Europe.18 Where domesticated, as in Tibet, dogs are often relied on to protect home and property and are thereby identified generally as guardians of the threshold, protectors of the boundaries between zones of safety and zones of danger, between inside and out, and between this world and the next.19 In connection with these notions of liminality, early Indian myths portray dogs as companions of Yama, the Lord of the Dead. In this capacity, they help to escort the dead along the paths to the other world and guard the entrance to heaven.20 In China, as well, dogs served as guardians of the dead and as psychopomps to
the world beyond. For some Tibetans, moreover, black dogs in particular, when appearing in dreams and visions, were often believed to be a form of Mahākāla, the fiercest of Buddhist protectors and a wrathful emanation of Avalokiteśvara. Among his many divine forms, Mahākāla’s manifestation as the grand protector of nomads, the “lord of the tent” (gur-gyi-mgon-po), a black dog by his side, seems especially relevant here. In addition to their capacity as protectors of the threshold, dogs are also wild carnivorous scavengers, devourers of flesh and bone, and in many parts of the world, including India and Tibet, are found roaming cemeteries and cremation grounds with noses to the ash sniffing out whatever body parts remain to be eaten. As cemetery dwellers and carrion-feeders, dogs naturally bear strong funerary associations in Indian and Tibetan society. In the délok scenarios above, dogs and dog corpses simultaneously evoke the frightening reality of death and the guardianship of the buddhas. To continue:

I wasn’t able to move. I saw preparations [being made] for sacred images and ceremonies, and with each [preparation] I became less pleased. I could still see that mangled warm carcass and each [time] it frightened me. My clothes and food were even [placed] around it. I couldn’t get up. Then, [I heard people] crying out to [my root lama] the wisdom deity. With their cries, a hail of pus, blood, and weapons rained down upon me, and my body felt like it was being torn into pieces. I asked [my lama] the wisdom deity what was happening, but there was no reply. Now, whatever it was that was happening to me caused fear and pain.

Then, on account of [my lama] the wisdom deity, my illness now went away. I tried to take in some hot soup (thug-pa), but I didn’t know how. So I got angry . . . there was much chatter [around me] and I became very desperate.

Then, I made offerings to master Aku Rinpoché. When I arrived in the garden of the monastery, there came a sort of thunderous roar. Immediately, pus, blood, and weapons rained down upon me, and my body felt like it was being torn into pieces. I thought, “I refuse to experience such a hail storm like this now. I must say [and do] this.” And so I meditated on the generation and completion stages of the Great Seal [Skt. maha¯mudrā]. Still the hailstorm did not end, but when it struck my body I didn’t feel the pain of being torn to pieces. At that moment, the hailstorm ended. Then, after I made offerings to master Aku Rinpoché, I paid homage to him and requested his blessings. The blessings did not appear, so I requested them [again]
and asked that my illness be cured. Nothing I said was noticed. I began to wonder about these things, and thought to myself, “I wonder why there was no notice of what I said, why no blessings appeared? Am I dead?” After saying this, I reminded myself of the transference [practice]. I believed in my heart I had performed it [properly], but now I thought, “What am I to do about this?” I felt great despair, and in order to diffuse that [feeling] I left [the monastery garden].

In the assembly hall [of the monastery], there were soothing sounds of drums, but my joy had slightly diminished. I went inside the assembly hall where [the monks] were performing many services of atonement (skang-so). I asked for some news, but there was no reply whatsoever. I thought, “Is everyone angry at me?” I turned around and left. In this unfocused state of mind, I became a bit distracted. It occurred to me that [maybe] everyone was angry at me for not joining them [in the services], and so they didn’t respond to me with any news. I was unable to focus my mind. I didn’t know what was happening. I thought that maybe I had died and arrived in the bardo. I went away here there and everywhere. I could see that I hadn’t left any footprints behind and that my body didn’t cast a shadow. I had no shadow! Now, I thought I may have entered the bardo. I remembered my lama, prayed to him, and thought I must do whatever I know to do. I thought I should now sustain my own mindfulness. My memory had already begun to get stronger, and as my recollections streamed forth, that man in black arrived carrying a [prayer] banner tied to a spear, and said, “This is unnecessary. Go up there!” My mind turned upward, and I went up there.

I arrived inside my house. I saw on my bed a corpse of a sentient being. That warm shriveled carcass was still lying there. Because there was a circle of offering lamps, I felt very happy. Like before, though, [my root lama] the wisdom being was handing out boiling soup, but I didn’t get any. Also, like before, [I heard] cries and lamentations, and again pus and blood rained down upon me, and my body felt like it was being torn apart. I experienced great suffering. Now, this person [my lama] was irritated at me, since he had no affection for me [anymore]. I thought that these people I met at the monastery were angry at me. I’d even developed great trust [in them], but now it seems they hate me. Generating an awareness of non-attachment, I immediately went to the roof [of the house]. I went away distracted a slight bit. From the roof I could see the snow.
As in Lingza Chökyi’s account, we again see mention here of the tears of crying relatives causing a hail of pus and blood to rain down on the deceased who lingers invisible among the living. But, as if being pelted by blood and pus were not excruciating enough, Jampa Délek adds falling weapons to this terrible shower of body fluids and describes also feeling his body being ripped apart. The commonly expressed warning in Tibetan Buddhism that the deceased is negatively affected by outward displays of sorrow cannot be made clearer than in these images. However, Jampa Délek, by meditating, is able to counteract for a short time the painful effects of his friends’ tears.

We saw Jampa Délek engaging in meditation before, when at the time of his death he attempted to gain control of the dying process and to pacify all fears of the visions he experienced in those moments. He was not particularly successful at this and struggled throughout to maintain his meditative concentration and eventually chose to practice the transference of consciousness. Now, after various strange and unsettling encounters with his fellow monks, he begins to doubt whether he performed the technique properly. His uncertainty and confusion cause him to lose his composure once again and fear overcomes him.

As he moves from different areas of the monastery and finally back to his home, his anxiety is intensified by the lack of response from those around him. Teachers and friends appear to ignore him when he speaks to them directly. He is unaware that his words are spoken without a voice. The experience is paralyzing and claustrophobic. This is a common motif in the délok narratives—the dead are capable of seeing close relatives and friends but are not in turn able to be seen by them. Jampa Délek begins to wonder whether he is still alive and he apparently knows enough about such matters from monastic textbooks and religious manuals to look for certain signs that might signal that he had in fact died. In one of the texts from the Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo, for example, it is written: “As a sign of [wandering in the bardo], you do not see your own reflection when you look in water and your body casts no shadow.” In line with this statement, Jampa Délek notes that his body has no shadow and that wherever he walks he leaves no footprints. These are sure signs that he has died, and yet Jampa Délek is never quite certain.

As for Tashi Tséringma (Good Fortune Long Life), she and her four long-life sisters are mountain goddesses believed to reside on Mount Jomo Tséringma (Gauri Shankar) located in the Rongshar valley southwest of Dingri and
apparently within close proximity to Jampa Délek’s home. The mountain is famous as one of the sacred sites of Milarépa (1012–1097), which is significant. The earliest extended reference to the goddess Tashi Tséringma and her sisters occurs in a chapter from the beloved Songs of Milarépa compiled in the fifteenth century by the “mad monk” from Tsang, Heruka Sangyé Gyentsén. The chapter is titled “Song of the Golden Rosary” (Gser-gyi phreng-ba) and predates the larger collection by several centuries. In this song, Tashi Tséringma, the leader of the five long-life goddesses, is severely burned by fires started by local shepherds. She runs to Milarépa to request a cure for her life-threatening injuries. Milarépa is concerned for her and performs a cleansing ritual (khrus-chog) that brings the goddess back to health. Tashi Tséringma and her sisters show their gratitude by reaffirming their loyalty to the Buddha’s teachings and by offering themselves to Milarépa as his yogic consorts. Milarépa is moved by their devotion and sings the “Song of the Golden Rosary” as a religious instruction to avoid the sufferings of death and the dangers of the bardo. Given the symbolic associations this famous episode establishes between Tséringma, death, and the afterlife, it is reasonable to suggest that Jampa Délek’s dying vision of Tashi Tséringma and the mountain on which she resides must at one level be viewed as a powerful symbol evoking his passage to the other world.

The World Beyond

Jampa Délek describes this other world in some detail:

Without concentrating on going to this place, I arrived suddenly in a region to the southwest. Heading out from there, [I saw] over yonder a long narrow passageway, and over here [near me], black rocks on either side. At times, [I could see] in the faces of the rock there were dark holes like dungeons. Not able to escape [through those rocks], I felt I had to enter [the long narrow passage]. Then, through the dust of that long narrow passageway [I could see] wide open the base of a mountain. In some places, [I saw] just red earth or just stony ground, and there was no grass, no trees, and so forth. I took an alternative path that cut across [the mountain] not knowing really [how] high it was. Suddenly, I arrived at its summit. Then, I looked over the other side and saw a vast plain as if limitless, and I immediately showed up there. In that area was a large river, and to the right [of the river] there were about five streams, rushing toward the west. There was a great bridge as wide as the distance of an arrow
shot. On my side of the river was a huge deep purple mountain, dangerously high. [On the other side] were so many villages I couldn’t count or describe [them all]. Suddenly, I arrived before them, and thought, “I’ve come to a place I haven’t seen before. Do I know this group of villages, or not? Have I reached a place [where I can] rest?” I went [forward].

In those big towns there were inconceivable [numbers of] men and women, countless thousands of them, all of different classes (rigs), different languages and dress, [representing] Tö, Mé, and Ü, India, Tibet, and Kham, Pel, Dro, Mön, and so on. Those people were going to and fro. Some seemed very disturbed, walking behind [each other] in single file. Some seemed dazzled, some angry, some frightened. I thought to myself, “There are so many people in this place!”

What is intriguing in Jampa Délek’s account of the world he experiences after death is his representation of the topography of the bardo, its spatial organization, and the population of that space. His account reflects a very localized understanding of the places in which he suddenly finds himself. He uses topographical images that would have certainly been familiar to Tibetan audiences and readers: soaring mountains, vast open plains, and rivers and streams. There are human elements here as well: bridges, towns and villages, and other people, large numbers of them from Jampa Délek’s home region and surrounding areas, meandering about in the distinctive dress of their own lands. Local descriptions of this sort are invariably encountered in all of the délok narratives. We saw in Lingza Chökyi’s story and will see again that the délok all travel across vast and varied terrains. Many of the more generic motifs found in these texts are borrowed from Buddhist canonical sources, while other images seem unique to the délok genre and reflect a very personal and realistic picture of the world beyond.

In this other world, Jampa Délek recounts his meeting with an old woman, who tells him why people end up in the bardo and in hell and how long they suffer there:

Then, I climbed [back] up to the upper area. On a side path, [I saw] a person who looked like an old woman. She was completely and beautifully adorned in delightful red clothes and wearing a shawl. I asked her, “What is this place [here] in this big town? What three good lamas live here? Who is the leader (dpon-po) among these people? Who has come here who’s particularly happy and hasn’t expressed various degrees of suffering? [And] what’s your name?”
[The woman responded,] “My name is Cho¨kyong Tashi. My place is a land of strife. I live at the bottom of a ravine. After I [first] arrived in this [place], I’ve been [living here] for about three or four years. In the human world I was summoned from my home. After my body and mind separated, I was taken to the village of the bardo, where I had to stay until I rose up [in another] body. As for those who live here, some don’t stay here for very long, while others are sent here for up to nine [years], but [then] sent away according to their virtue. There are those who have been sent for one week, a month, or a year. Some who arrive here have to stay for three years, forty-nine days, and so forth. There are some who live here for many years after being summoned [according to] their powers of virtue. Some are brought here by mistake, a wrong name or wrong family. They have to stay here until their time is up. Some even have to stay for eight years. There are even some exceptional [people] who leave as soon as they arrive.

The leader of [all] of them is called [Shinjé] Chōkyi Gyelpo [Yama Dharmarāja]. When you cross that big bridge, your virtuous and sinful actions will be calculated and differentiated in great detail, collected and measured, and [then] you [will] have [a place] to live. Everyone who is here must go there. Those who aren’t here for long, will return here later, and then they have to stay. This place is the bardo where I was transported after being called away from my home in the human world.”

I [Jampa Délek] was now staying in this [place] in a good house. I wore fine clothes, and even had a nice complexion. For those whose happiness has dissipated, when [you] in the human world are summoned away from home, you [should] make offerings, with a positive mind, to your lama and to the Three Jewels. Make offerings and prostrations before a stūpa, erect [images and sculptures] of the enlightened body, speech and mind, and make copies of the scriptures . . .

Here again, Jampa Délek highlights the generally accepted Buddhist idea that virtuous actions performed by the living can alleviate the sufferings of the dead. Echoing the sorts of requests made by ghosts, the preta, in the stories found in the Petavatthu, which we briefly discussed in the last chapter, Jampa Délek encourages the practice of devotional actions such as almsgiving, guru devotion, and the copying of Buddhist scriptures. The passage of time is another interesting feature of the other world described by Jampa Délek. The old
woman he meets speaks of time in the bardo, which is measured by earthly standards of days, weeks, months, and years. Buddhist doctrinal sources indicate that the duration of the bardo can last no more than seven weeks before the deceased has to find his or her next place of rebirth, but clearly Jampa Délek encounters people who have been there much longer than forty-nine days. What is revealed in this passage is that the textbooks are not always reliable and the world of the living and the world of the dead are equally subject to the same pace; in other words, the other world is just as proximate to this world temporally as it is spatially.

Judgment Before the Throne

In the délok literature, the theme of the final judgment of specific individuals is usually most pronounced in the concluding episodes of the court drama, in which Shinjé Chökyi Gyelpo speaks directly to the délok narrator about his or her own moral character. Jampa Délek’s record of his judgment and of the many court dramas he witnesses, however, is spoken of in rather generic terms. This is unlike the many episodes in Lingza Chökyi’s story of familiar people from her past being led to judgment, where their punishments are determined by the nature of specific actions described in detail. Such scenes stand in contrast to other more conventional Buddhist depictions of this sort of post-mortem event. Scriptural accounts of Yama’s adjudication of deeds or painted images of the Wheel of Rebirth, for example, tend to always depict the collective judgment of sentient beings as a generic group, as in Jampa Délek’s story. The judgment scenes in these texts and paintings are really nothing more than doctrinal and pictorial expressions of the impersonal laws of karmic cause and effect. Because such representations are made to conform to traditional symbols of Buddhist cosmology and, in the case of the Wheel of Rebirth paintings, are established in accordance with the strict requirements of Tibetan artistic conventions, they are best suited to depict ideal types rather than the personal characteristics of specific relatives and friends, of neighbors and colleagues, or of the individual who speaks of the event autobiographically in the first person. But Jampa Délek’s judgment scene resembles more the traditional image, and he does not give the same degree of personalized details that we read in the accounts of Lingza Chökyi, nor as we shall see in the story of Karma Wangzin. One possible explanation for this discrepancy might have something to do with the fact that Jampa Délek was a religious professional with access presumably to the Tibetan scholarly tradition; he would have likely been better versed than Lingza Chökyi in the formal written sources that describe the
judgment of the dead in Yama’s court. These sources would have been committed to memory through years of study. It is not unusual, then, to find that the judgment narratives of lamas and monks, like Jampa Délek, are fashioned according to traditional Buddhist models by drawing upon generic motifs from the canonical and scholastic materials. Here, we seem to have an example that actually reinforces rather than dissolves differences between the learned and unlettered in Tibetan society and we are once again reminded of that long-standing two-tiered dichotomy of monk and lay person. As I tried to make clear in chapter 1, we need not shy away from such distinctions, which are real enough, but when we find them we have to resist the temptation to overstate them. Rigid dichotomies only obscure the fluid realities of life on the ground. Tibetans, of course, distinguished monks from nonmonks and recognized differences in their styles of living, their attitudes, and degrees of merit. But not all monks and lamas were the same: some were especially virtuous, others were morally corrupt; a few were gifted scholars, or skilled meditators, others inspired visionaries, or prone to fits of madness; most, however, were just average men and boys. The same degree of variation and lack of correspondence to an idealized model and polarized image can be just as easily identified within the category of layperson in Tibetan society. Differences between the two groups certainly existed on multiple levels, but in certain contexts, as in the accounts of the délok experience, the intersection of the two is made particularly clear. After all, monks and laypersons, men and women, together participated in a single world and shared similar ideas about that world.

Jampa Délek now arrives in Yama’s court. He describes his experience of entering into the presence of Yama, the majestic and fearsome Lord of the Dead:

Then, I again came upon [another] road. I tried to focus my mind, but couldn’t do it. Within this state of continuous distraction, I thought “Though this path is terrifying, did I come [here] just like that?” and I left. I passed over into some valley. I then turned toward a valley that was peaceful and clear. In the middle of a circle of mountains that appeared to be made of iron, [I saw] a mansion of precious jewels. Inside [one of its] small rooms, ablaze [in fire] with a jeweled ceiling and a gilded roof of gold, I saw a large golden throne. Seated on this throne was [Yama Shinjé] Chökyi Gyelpo . . . .

Jampa Délek is the only one of the four délok we are concerned with in this study who does not narrate his own judgment scene. Instead, he relates the details of a lecture given to him by Yama Shinjé about the various hell realms, with special attention to the Plain of Hot Embers, the Swamp of Rotting
Corpses, the Howling Hell, and the She¯lmari [Skt. Śālmali] Mountain of Weapons. In the characteristic style of the délok tales, Jampa Délek uses vivid topographical imagery and speaks of these hells as distinctive physical worlds. Even Yama’s court is described in colorful geographic and architectural detail, as we see in the quote above. In Tibet, the residence of Yama Shinjé is always thought to be in the midst of majestic iron mountains.

In the final sections of Jampa Délek’s biography, he gives a standard moralizing conclusion about the threat of tortures in hell, the importance of religious practice to avoid such suffering, and the power of the six syllable mani-mantra, the significance of which we will discuss in chapter 6. He ends on this single note:

I saw the sufferings of hell and the bardo... these good words [encapsulate] the essence of my experience. Without doubt, the six syllables are to be revered. My summary of the messages delivered by [Shinjé] Chökyi Gyelpo is complete.

And so ends the story of lama Jampa Délek’s travels in the netherworld. In the next chapter, we will examine the délok experience of Karma Wangzin, a young noblewoman from southern Tibet who, like Lingza Chökyi, died from the stress of marriage.
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The délok Karma Wangzin, like Lingza Chökyi a century before her, also had to endure the despair of domestic strife. She was born in the mid-seventeenth century in the southern region of Lhodrak in a village called Géchu Kunga Ling. Her father was a lama by the name of Tsokye Dorje and her mother was a noble chieftain’s daughter (dpon-sa) named Tséring Chözom. She may have had more than one sibling, but we know of only a single elder brother, deceased, named Tsangpa Gyentsén. When Karma Wangzin was still a young girl, her parents sent her off, against her wishes, to be married to Yugyel Púntsok, the governor (sde-pa) of a neighboring district called Okdro. As was the general custom in Tibet, marriages were arranged between the families of the bride and groom. In the selection of the two to be married, strong priority was placed on the social status of each of the families. Neither side wanted to see their son or daughter marry into a family of lesser standing. Moreover, marriages were frequently designed to seal alliances between nobles, and this seems to have been the case in Karma Wangzin’s marriage to the governor of Okdro. This was an arrangement, however, that Karma Wangzin wished to reject in order to flee from marriage and to devote herself to the religious life.

In Okdro, hoping to pursue such a life, Karma Wangzin sought out a number of Buddhist lamas and yogis, including one by the name of Drupchen Norbu Tashi, who became her root teacher. While in retreat at the nearby hermitage of Trapu, she relates that
she began to have a series of ecstatic visions of Padmasambhava and the goddess Tārā. About a year later, she developed the illness that led to her death. To some degree, but certainly not as conspicuously as in the story of Lingza Chökyi, Karma Wangzin’s illness appears to have been brought on by emotional distress; in her case, though, it was her frustrations over an arranged marriage preventing her from pursuing a religious career.

Dissolution

In Karma Wangzin’s account of her death, we find a few references to more formal, sophisticated Buddhist ideas, particularly those concerning the dissolution stages of dying. This is not unusual given that her father was a lama and she apparently had some religious training under the tutelage of another learned religious specialist even before her délok experience. We noted previously that Lingza Chökyi’s death is described in slightly less formal terms, which could possibly be explained by the fact that she was not trained by a lama or monk and so was not as conversant with the doctrinal points as was Karma Wangzin. Still, the details both women provide in their stories conform generally to the basic principles of the received tradition, but as we have seen thus far, those details are often more personally embellished. We also observe the same in lama Jampa Délek’s story. Of course, it is equally possible that in reality, none of them, the two women or Jampa Délek, were familiar with these technical notions, but rather it was their biographers or scribes that introduced such details into the narratives. We may never know and we could go on ad infinitum questioning the authenticity of the voices in these literary works, but for the sake of our present interests we will continue to assume that the délok texts do actually provide some real facts about the lives of these individuals and do express common ideas prevalent in Tibet.

Karma Wangzin begins by describing her illness. After a few days she lost interest in eating and became restless and very uncomfortable. Her maidservant, Sönam Tséring, was worried about her deteriorating physical condition and asked if Karma Wangzin would want her husband, who was away on business at a nearby village, to be summoned to her side. Stoically, Karma Wangzin thought that she could endure for a bit longer. Then at midafternoon, she grew feverish and began shivering. Thirsty, she tried to drink water but was not able to keep it down. She recounts what happened next:

The process of the dissolution of the four elements began. As a sign of flesh and earth dissolving my body collapsed and I fainted. With
the dissolution of blood and water I became extremely thirsty and my mouth and nose dried up; I no longer had the capacity to drink. With the dissolution of heat and fire I began shivering and felt cold even when putting on a lot of clothes. With the dissolution of breath and wind my breath became raspy and I couldn’t suppress it even when I tried. Because the circle of light around my eyes diminished I could no longer recognize my friends and companions. Because the sounds in my ears grew faint I could no longer hear words spoken in my direction. Because the external and internal channels were closed off I was no longer able to speak. Visions of this life faded as visions arose of my future life; I had reached the borderline [between this life and the next]. Because my awareness was clear I could remember my close friends and companions and all the joys and goodwill we shared, but now my friends were of no help to me. Now the time had come for me to walk alone. I had no confidence that I was going to the heavens above due to my practice of religion. All the sins I committed were vividly clear in my mind and I felt intense remorse. I cried many tears because of this.

At that time there came a very loud roaring and cracking sound. Since the movement of my breath had ceased I blacked out like a butter lamp smothered with a clay lid (rdza-phub). My consciousness [withdrew] into the center of my heart and I swooned unconsciously without mindfulness. When that happened I was left in a blank state (tho-me-ba) without cause to fixate on the painful thought of dying or the joy and sorrow of the thought of not dying or on any thoughts whatsoever.

Then over yonder came the voice of a woman clear and distinct calling out, “Wangzin, Wangzin!” That was the name given to me by my lama and so it had certain significance. “You have crossed over from this world. Do you not know that the impermanence of death has arrived, that you desire and yearn for a body that is illusory? Come rest your mind in the state of reality-itself!”

Karma Wangzin’s description of the dissolution process of death is notably accurate and informed, consistent with the formal yogic manuals and scholastic textbooks. In those works, the dying process, both coarse and subtle, culminates with the swoon into unconsciousness followed then by the dawning of the clear light of death (’chi-ba’i ’od-gsal), the most fundamental level of reality-itself (chos-nyid). Many texts add that this clear light manifests as a panorama of five different rainbow-colored lights, and we find mention of these
five lights in Karma Wangzin’s narrative. Her encounter with a mysterious female presence at the moment of death is a common motif in the délok literature. Breaking with standard plot conventions, however, Karma Wangzin’s description of the corpse she sees in her room does not occur until the end of her story. There she writes: “Through my doorway I saw the corpse of a dog with a leather shroud covering its eyes and foaming at the mouth. I was frightened and felt sick to my stomach. I ran just a few steps away to the far side [of the room].”

Karma Wangzin’s account of her death experience is the most vividly personal of the four délok biographies we are concerned with in this study. Her story offers multiple insights into popular notions of death and dying and even permits us an opportunity to reflect on the despair of domestic life that a great many women in Tibet most certainly had to endure. In fine detail, she tells of her desperate wanderings in the company of her living relatives:

Without the support of a body my mind stirred about like a feather in the wind. Again I thought about that woman’s voice and worried about whether I had died. I searched for my dear friends but couldn’t find them. Again I didn’t know if I had died and I was worried. Because I had been dishonest and slandered the livelihood and reputation [of others] I hadn’t practiced religion [very diligently]. Feeling sad about this, I now wanted to practice, so I thought I needed to return to my village.

I arrived at Okdro and heard loud voices wailing and weeping. [My husband] the district governor and all the men had gone to [the village of] Trapu and were not there. The women servants were calling out my name and I thought, “I haven’t died. Did the governor scold them?” I grabbed [one of the maidservants] by the shoulder and [tried to] lift her up but she didn’t respond and acted as if she didn’t see me. Outside there were also clear and distinct voices wailing. I looked out and heard people saying I had died. Some said I was humble and kind and took care of others. Other people said I was stingy and jealous and whispered many secrets about me. My feelings were hurt and I began to shed tears even though I tried to hold them back.

Inside some people said, “The Madam has passed away,” while others said, “It’s a pity the daughter has passed away,” and “It’s a pity for the district governor.” At that moment in dependence upon [these expressions of sentiment] a hail of pus and blood the size of eggs rained down upon me. I felt suffering in my mind as though my bones had been crushed and my skin had been pierced. Then, there
came a loud roaring sound. I looked at my body and saw that I was wearing the same clothes as before. As soon as the hail had fallen I became naked. There came loud cries of unbearable suffering. A disembodied voice said to me, “Go to Trapul” and suddenly as soon as the thought of having to go flashed into my mind I arrived at Trapu.

[My husband] the district governor and his servants had already arrived at Trapu. Vessels of beer had been poured, tea was on the stove, and two monks were laying out scroll paintings and making preparations to set up an altar. There I thought to myself, “Is this a seven-day [funeral] ceremony?” One person from the village arrived and then two more showed up and went before the governor. All of them offered him beer and expressed their sympathies.

Then, the steward Déchen Drakpa arrived with my turquoise and coral jewelry rolled up in a piece of cloth. He placed these inside the torma shrine (gtor-khang). Prostrating before the governor he said, “Shapdrung, sir. Please do not break down in tears. It’s true you are now sad and grieving. Nevertheless, after [Wangzin] was made the bride of Okdro she didn’t recognize the value of her responsibilities and held many conversations with the girls of Trapsho Begor, instructing them in religion. Consequently, she was stolen away by a gyelpo demon from Okdro. Her passing should cause you no more suffering than the mild pain of an aching finger. Accordingly, now it would be best if you made efforts to recover from the suffering . . . be free from this corpse outside.”

The district governor cried out, “The sun at midday grows old. We both were companions for such a short while. I have no father or mother and now it’s time I have to be separated from my only friend.” He wept many tears and again said, “There are books about those in similar circumstances who have returned from death (shi-log) and also many anecdotes (dpe-gtam) about those who were taken and then returned, like [the story] of Lingza Chökyi. [I’m hoping] there’s a great chance [my wife] will also return, so it’s best to leave her corpse untouched for the duration of the forty-nine day period.” There again he wept many tears, and I thought, “I’m not dead am I?” After the thought of not having died flashed in my mind I took hold of the governor’s hand and exclaimed many times, “I’m not dead. You mustn’t suffer!” But [my husband] the district governor and all his servants didn’t respond. I thought, “Everyone must be angry with me.”
Here, we find Karma Wangzin, like Lingza Chökyi and Jampa Délek before her, lingering invisible around her home and listening to the cries of her relatives and friends. Again, we see reference to their tears creating a painful hail of pus and blood and the sensation of her body being torn apart, but now we also catch a glimpse of a more elaborate scenario full of social and personal dramas and private emotional episodes. Karma Wangzin describes at some length the conversations that she is able to hear at her home in Okdro and at Trapu, where she travels instantly the moment she thinks of going there. Distance is of no consequence for those without a body. At home in Okdro, she is confused by all the tears and tries to get her servants to answer her questions, but unable to see her, of course, they do not respond. This is maddening for Karma Wangzin, a noblewoman who is clearly used to being treated with more respect. She also mentions overhearing people gossiping about her and this leaves her feeling hurt and depressed. What she witnesses at Trapu only exasperates her shame and anger. There she hears the family steward speak, with little sensitivity, to her mourning husband. The steward accuses her of not being a good wife and even of stirring up trouble among the girls at a nearby village. In all of this, it is clear that in life Karma Wangzin worked diligently to spread the teachings of Buddhism, and particularly to other young women who may have been in the same domestic situation she herself had been placed in by her parents. The accusation that Karma Wangzin may have been possessed by a demon will be discussed further below.

In this scene, her husband is portrayed as a rather sympathetic character. He is clearly shaken and upset by the death of his wife. Interestingly, he makes explicit reference to the biography of Lingza Chökyi, which gives us some idea of the popularity of that délok’s story and of the chronology of Karma Wangzin’s own biography. It also confirms that these stories were transmitted in literary form and not passed down simply as oral lore. Inspired by Lingza Chökyi’s tale, Karma Wangzin’s husband offers a peculiar reason for observing the full forty-nine day funeral period, which is the total duration of the deceased’s existence in the bardo. The ritual manuals claim that the purpose of the forty-nine day funeral ritual is to provide for the dead a means of expediting safe passage through the bardo and into the next life. Her husband, however, suggests that Karma Wangzin’s corpse be left untouched for forty-nine days not so that she can be guided safely to her next life, but in hopes that she might actually come back to this life!

Karma Wangzin continues by describing the scene at Trapu. It is at this point in the narrative that her frustration at being rudely ignored finally overtakes her and she lashes out in anger and contempt at her husband:
Then tea was brought in. I moved closer to [my husband] the district governor and sat facing him in my usual way. The governor asked for tea, and he and the others were given some, but after gulping it down, they went off without giving me any. I thought, “Are they not getting up [to make more] tea?” Then, [my husband] the district governor asked Atrung Tse´ring Raptén to get [more] tea. [I saw Atrung] take some [blocks of] tea and put them inside [his] straw sack. I thought, “He’s willing to commit such a sin for just a day’s worth of tea?” I was ashamed of him and his master. Then more tea was offered, but even though the governor and I were [sitting] together, no one asked me [if I wanted any]. [My husband] the governor didn’t even ask me to eat with him and nothing was even put aside for me. I thought, “I have no will to eat,” and feeling depressed, I cried many tears.

Again, I thought, “O! I was going to practice religion, but I wasn’t permitted to do so. I wasn’t allowed to live with my parents. You, [my dear husband], promised to make me happy, but I couldn’t practice religion and had to do worldly things! Now [dear] governor, [you] and the servants behave in the same [rude] manner [toward me]! I have no will to eat or drink. I feel I have to go [practice] religion.”

I went out through the monastery gate and [turned to] look back inside. I said to [my husband] the district governor, “First, when my parents were taking care of me I was motivated to practice religion. You pretended to take notice and filled [my head with] promises.14 Now, I’m not even motivated to eat or drink. You listened to [what those] people [were saying about me] and tossed me out in line [with all the rest] to eat and drink. Men are generally spineless and lack substance (gzhung dang rkang mi-'dug)! [You] especially, Governor Yugyel Pu¨ntsok, have no enduring character! You kept my jewelry given to me by my parents! In the beginning, you beheld me as a goddess, but now I wander like a dog. After [all you’ve] said, there’s nothing left; [it’s like] throwing [it all] into the river. They say a woman doesn’t recognize the conditions of her life until a rope is [tied] around her neck.15 Now this is happening to me. I thought I should say, ‘Girls! Do not do worldly things! Practice religion!’

Listen up, [my dear] governor, masters and servants! In the past, I lived like a rolling stone [falling] into the middle of a ditch.16 Now all of you go and be satisfied with your wealth and your wives! I’ll be
satisfied by practicing religion. [My dear] governor, don’t feel guilty.”

Having said [all of that], I thought, “I should go [practice] reli-
gion,” and I went away freely. They stayed behind, chattering. Not a single person told me not to go.

In this dramatic scene issues of gender discrepancy and the status of ordinary women in Tibetan society come to the fore and are expressed emotionally in very human terms. Karma Wangzin reacts strongly to her unfortunate lot in life as a woman forced to marry and largely deprived of the opportunity to pursue a legitimate religious career. Here, we do see a very subjective reflection of some of the dire social realities facing many women in Tibetan life. We should be aware, however, that some of these disadvantages were also shared by many young men, who were also pressured if not forced into arranged marriages and, as a result, may not have had the freedom to pursue alternative courses in life. All of this then leads to a few of the questions I raised at the beginning of the book. Are women, as often presumed, more likely than men to be délok? Does the délok experience have anything to do with gender distinctions and is the délok’s social role affected by gender discriminations?

A Question of Gender

I can respond to the first question without too much difficulty. If we consider only the literary sources, then we find that there is very little evidence to support the argument that women were more prevalent among the délok than were men. In fact, counting all available délok texts presently available, the division between women and men is practically equal—seven women, six men. Moreover, as we have seen so far in the preceding chapters, the descriptions of the death experience, the journey to hell, and the return to life provided in these narratives, by both women and men, are essentially indistinguishable from one another. I believe this fact to be significant and worth emphasizing if we wish to properly contextualize and interpret the délok phenomenon in Tibet. It is only in contemporary ethnographies that we begin to see a documented discrepancy between the prevalence of women over men, and of their respective experiences. This brings us to the remaining questions about gender distinction with respect to the délok’s social identity; questions that are a bit more complicated and require that we reflect on the role of women as religious specialists in Tibetan society.

Insofar as historians of Tibetan religion have asked these questions at all, there seems to be a common assumption, quite understandably, that answers
must be sought by reference to the structural position of women within Tibetan society, and by reference to the cultural attitudes and beliefs that relate to them. At the level of formal ideology (in large part influenced by the gender biases inherited from early Indian Buddhist orthodoxy) women as a category in Tibet were held to be inferior to men—a notion apparent in the very Tibetan word itself for woman, “low birth” (skyes-dman)—and women were associated with a host of unfavorable characteristics, for example, women as promiscuous, jealous, wicked, miserly, and so forth. Accepting implicitly the subordination of women as cross-cultural as well as transhistorical, and working from the standard Indian Buddhist and even perhaps indigenous Tibetan ideological standpoint of women’s lowness and associated misfortunes, scholars often presume that these formal gender distinctions necessarily prevented actual Tibetan women from achieving positions of religious authority in Tibetan society. The conclusion is thus reached that women in Tibet sought out alternative spiritual goals and experiences as a response to, and perhaps even a strategy against, religious and social restrictions. This argument of exclusion or disadvantage is quite standard and in my opinion, at least in the context of Tibet, too often adhered to without critical reflection. Proponents of the argument tend to view the exceptional religious experiences of women such as those of the délok as exclusively “a phenomenon of marginality,” to quote Hanna Havnevik, “a strategy employed by the powerless, particularly of women, to achieve goals when they lack access to legitimate channels.” In my view, this argument, as it stands, calls for some modification. Such a line of reasoning does not offer a definitive solution to the questions about gender and the délok phenomenon.

As for some of the fundamental reservations I have with this argument of exclusion, I noted the compelling literary evidence that both women and men became délok in Tibet. Historically, Tibetan men appear to have been caught up in this phenomenon as often as Tibetan women. Thus, it would be a mistake for us to assume without hesitation that the délok experience was an exclusively female experience. If we still wish to accept the marginality argument, then we must be able to account for the instances in which men had also undergone the délok experience and were themselves identified as délok. We might find, then, that exclusion is not necessarily gender specific. In this regard, I tend to agree with the observations of Sherry Ortner, who writes:

To the extent that women are excluded from positions of leadership and public initiative, we tend to think of them as excluded from the public domain. We sometimes forget, however, that most men are excluded from leadership and public initiative as well. This bias
prevents us from seeing the degree to which many men are as dis-
advantaged as women with respect to property, marriage and the like.
At the same time, it also prevents us from seeing that women,
however much their day-to-day lives appear immersed in domestic
concerns, systematically participate in the larger social rankings of
their natal and marital families, and so participate in important ways
in macro-political and economic processes.\textsuperscript{20}

It has been well documented that in Tibet, rules of kinship and inheritance
gave women, often on par with men, access to and control over land and other
forms of domestic wealth, either from their own family or from a spouse.
Women in Tibet also frequently managed trade and other commercial enter-
prises. These factors undoubtedly served to enhance some women’s ability to
exercise considerable power and influence in the social arena. In the sphere of
religion, moreover, it was possible—though, as we see in Karma Wangzin’s
case, admittedly difficult—for women (as for men) to abandon the householder
life even after marriage to pursue a path of celibacy and devoted spiritual
practice. In this regard, it is significant that such a path became open to Lingza
Chökyi after her return from hell. Furthermore, some specific sectors of men
and women in Tibet, like Karma Wangzin, had open access to less formalized
channels of religious authority, such as access to esoteric religious instruction,
ritual knowledge, and other powerful spiritual technologies.

Still, we cannot ignore that women \textit{as a category} in the structure of Tibetan
society remained a marginalized group and were largely deprived of the oppor-
tunity to fill certain roles and formal positions of legitimate power. But, as
Ortner reminds us, some of these disadvantages were also shared with many, if
not most, men, just as some of the real advantages enjoyed by a few men were
shared also with a few women.\textsuperscript{21} The existence of institutionally sanctioned
female incarnates and official female oracles in Tibet is a fine case in point.\textsuperscript{22} In
the end, the theory of marginality as a general explanation for the apparent
frequency with which women became délok is inadequate. That is, unless of
course, we were also willing to claim the same argument for the men who
became délok, as specific individuals in society who, for whatever reason, might
have been equally deprived of access to dominant sources of religious authority.
Yet, the specific cases of Jampa Délek and Jangchup Sengé considered in this
study make it difficult to claim an argument of marginality for men who became
délék. As we saw with Jampa Délek, male délok often did hold conventional po-
sitions of religious authority as monks, lamas, and abbots of monasteries.

What should be emphasized here, then, is that gender stereotypes may not
always correspond to the social realities of everyday life. Tibet, like all great
societies, encompassed ambiguous and often paradoxical values. On the ground, Tibetan women, as well as men, were distinguished by a wide variety of overlapping social identities, statuses, and positions within complex power structures affected only in part by gender distinctions and biases. Tibetan men might be placed in social and religious positions just as ambiguous or contradictory as those of women, and in some contexts experience the same sort of structural disadvantages. So I cannot deny the appeal of the marginality argument, but it is too simple to interpret the délok experience of women, like Karma Wangzin or Lingza Chökyi, as merely a response to, or perhaps even a strategy against, social and religious discrimination or exclusion from specific offices of authority. In fact, on the contrary, the experiences of women délok, as in Lingza Chökyi’s case, consistently reinforce the hierarchy of the dominant system and enhance the power of the monks and male lamas and their official ritual activities. The texts preach very conservative messages. The narratives of these women délok, like those of the men, emphasize orthodox Buddhist doctrines and the need for recourse to monks and lamas for ensuring a favorable destiny in this and the next life. For now, however, we still leave unanswered the question of why certain women and men in Tibetan society were motivated to have such extraordinary experiences.

To highlight something positive about women in Tibetan society, as influential religious personalities we can certainly take the délok phenomenon as a noteworthy example. If we rely on the information transmitted through the narratives of women like Karma Wangzin, for example, we find some evidence that these women who claim to have died and returned to life were almost always in the end perceived as powerful religious figures in their own right. Judging from these specific cases, it is clear that the monks and lamas who had advised these women throughout their normal lives also listened to them with great respect after their extraordinary experiences and took their religious messages quite seriously. The enhanced prestige these women achieved enabled them to serve as teachers, counselors, and mediators between the living and the dead. Preaching the efficacy of Buddhist prayer and ritual for accumulating virtue and warning against vice, the délok served as channels of direct information about the fate of the dead in the netherworld, how they ended up there, and what practices and devotions were the most beneficial for alleviating their suffering and for ensuring a positive destiny for those still alive. Occasionally, the délok even became adept at prophesizing future events. In this way, these distinctive women mystics achieved culturally sanctioned positions of religious power and influence, despite some admittedly heavy social constraints and an underlying negative ideological view of their status as women in society; a view influenced mainly by traditional Buddhist clerical values.
Historically, we might even argue that these women were principally responsible for encouraging the emergence of a charismatic female spirituality in Tibet and propagated some of the most distinctive aspects of popular Buddhist piety. More broadly speaking, to include men here as well, the délok as a specific category of religious authority in Tibetan society may have played an instrumental role in the rise of itinerant preaching, didactic storytelling, and popular Buddhist evangelism (although the reverse is more likely the case, as we shall see in chapter 6). Whatever the direction of influence, the délok clearly helped to promote the flourishing of devotional cults across Tibet like those surrounding the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. In the end, it is quite evident that the délok phenomenon was not necessarily a gendered phenomenon and that this unique sort of visionary experience flourished as a complement to, and not a contradiction of, the dominant values and institutions of “official” Tibetan religious culture. We return now to Karma Wangzin’s story already in progress.

Selfish Spirits

Karma Wangzin leaves Trapu and meets with a group of “hungry ghosts,” described properly as Buddhist pretas:

From the upper valley came many nonhuman spirits (mi-ma-yin) speaking in whispers. I listened in on their conversation: “Down there in the village of Géchu Ling there’s a banquet going on. We should all go!” They took off without taking steps and as soon as I started after them I suddenly arrived at Géchu Kunga Ling [my birthplace], thinking I had to go to my house. All the dogs [in the village] that had been tame before were now barking and biting at me. Frightened I was unable to move. Suddenly, [I saw] in the thatched hut of the monastery’s chant leader (dbu-mdzad) a realized yogi performing a torma rite. Here he had thrown out water and many torma pills and as a result many beings of the six realms were gathered there. [They swarmed around] the water and pills like flies on rotten meat and grabbed them up like guests invited to a feast. Some of those who waited ran off with the water used for cleaning [the ritual implements]. After them the weakest ones got nothing, and suffering from hunger and thirst they fell face down on the ground weeping and wailing. Some of them held on to each other and cried. My sense of shame and the strength of my own habits and karmic predispositions (bag-chags) prevented me from going there.
Seeing these beings I felt a strong compassion but I had nothing to give them. Thinking it was like the blind leading the blind I burst out in tears. Then all of a sudden I heard the disembodied voice of a woman clear and distinct:

“First, these beings do not have the fruit of virtues accumulated in former [lives]; second, they experience their own suffering; third, these beings come together for shortsighted goals. You can’t help them, let it go!”

As soon as I heard this, memories of my parents came to mind and I had a thought that I should go to Zakrum [monastery] and in a flash I arrived there.23

The spirits that Karma Wangzin runs into on her way to the monastery are a pathetic group, as is characteristic of pretas known from Buddhist writings. Tormented by hunger and thirst, they scamper about in painful desperation looking for any morsel of nourishment they can find. The ones here are selfish, rude, weak, and whining creatures, and are thoroughly dislikeable. Karma Wangzin is reminded by her faceless guide why these spirits have found themselves in such despicable circumstances. The scene provides a brief opportunity for the reinforcement of Buddhist moral lessons—the effects of virtuous actions (karma) lead to a positive destiny, while the effects of nonvirtuous actions lead inevitably to negative rebirths as pretas, animals, or denizens of hell. We should also make special note of the spirit-sighted dogs that bark and bite at Karma Wangzin as she wanders into her village. As already remarked, dogs are closely linked to the dead and we continue to see reference to them throughout the délok stories.

After arriving at Zakrum monastery, Karma Wangzin confronts her mother:

There was my mother, circumambulating the monastery’s offering temple (mchod-khang). I said to her, “Please give me something to eat and drink.” My mother didn’t respond and continued circumambulating [the temple]. I thought, “In the old days, I would’ve rode up on a horse and servants (’u-lag) [bearing] gifts would’ve gone ahead of me. My mother would’ve said, “Welcome, my daughter!” and there would’ve been a welcoming party along with beer, and I would’ve been delighted. But now my mother won’t even look at me. I thought, “Did a letter from [my husband] the district governor get here before me? Now, she thinks of someone else’s son instead of her own child.” I resigned myself to this idea. I went again along the [path] circling the temple and grabbed onto my mother’s dress. I thought
Previously, I agreed to follow the advice of [you] my parents [about what to do] in the world, and I submitted [to your wishes]. I politely followed your orders and was picture-perfect (ri-mo bkd-pa). I was the district governor’s young woman and his support. Many times he beat me, cursed and admonished me, but I thought [because of having] this female body it was necessary that I endure [these] difficulties. I never even asked [you] my parents to listen [to my troubles]. Now, [because] I was not lucky to have children of my own I’ve been cast aside without food or water. [My husband] did many heartless things [to me] and acted without foresight. Now, I have nothing to do but practice religion. This entire time I haven’t caused any difficulties for [you] my parents, no quarrels or disputes, so [mother] would you please give me something to eat and then I’ll go and practice religion?” My mother acted as if she didn’t hear or see me and went inside [the temple]. Desperate, I cried many tears.

We learn here something less appealing about Karma Wangzin’s disposition. As a noblewoman she had become used to being treated with respect. She comes off in this scene as spoiled and haughty and is angered that her mother does not welcome her with proper pomp and circumstance. She takes notice, in fact, that no one has been treating her well and everyone around her, without exception, has ignored her presence. It is at this point that Karma Wangzin finally acknowledges that she may actually be dead:

I thought about the words of [my teacher] Drupchen Norbu Tashi who taught about how this and that vision occurs in the bardo at the time of death and I remembered the way. Thinking, “I seem to have died,” I looked at my body to see if it cast a shadow and it didn’t. I stepped back and forth but there was no sound of footsteps. I thought, “Alas! I’ve definitely died!” I became depressed and I stayed for awhile in the human world, which I saw through an opening like a window. I felt a bit thirsty. I had no way to rely on religious practice. Back when I had the free time I saw no reason to make offerings. Now, thinking that the lords of death were coming to seize me I felt terrible and began crying. I then collapsed.

At that moment a woman appeared dressed in white, her hair tied up in back, holding a ritual hand drum (damaru). She grabbed me by the shoulders and lifted me up saying, “O dear, do not suffer! Stand up! When afflictive emotions arise there are no remedies that come, and those who claim to have the religious [means to remedy those afflictions] are only speaking lies and harsh words. Birth and
death are human merits; they happen over and over again. This death is not your only one. I’ll be your companion on this great path we all must travel. Let us go peacefully.”

As in Jampa Délek’s acknowledgment of his own death, Karma Wangzin also looks for proof that she has died. She looks to see if her body casts a shadow and whether she leaves footprints wherever she steps. She sees nothing and is now convinced that she is dead. Her faceless female companion appears with a few words of Buddhist wisdom and then offers to be her guide into the next world.

The Tour of a Lifetime

The other world is described in Karma Wangzin’s biography in much the same way as it is in the narratives of Lingza Chökyi and the lama Jampa Délek. We read, for example, the following description of the river that separates the two realms of the living and the dead:

On the south side of that great mountain I saw a large winding river. The far end of that river was called Great River of Becoming (srid-pa’i chu-chen) and it was as big as all the rivers of Dzambuling [i.e., the earthly world of ordinary human beings]. The mists of that river, like the summer fog, refracted rainbows. Suspended across the river was a large iron bridge.

As we may recall from the previous chapters, the first person the délok meets is a guide, a vaguely divine male or female figure who usually appears soon after death. In all cases, the délok are escorted through the other world by a mysterious companion. Jampa Délek, we may remember, travels with a man in black who carries a prayer banner tied to a spear. Karma Wangzin’s escort is a woman, a divine emanation of Tārā, who offers a few words of wisdom. Karma Wangzin’s travels continue:

Instantly, I was led to the edge of a vast plain. When I arrived there I could feel the wind [like I had before] but could see nothing on the ground. I heard the thunderous roars of “Strike! Strike! Kill! Kill!” and I suffered just a little bit. Memories of my parents, relatives and close friends came to mind. I cried out the names of my parents and asked, “Where am I going?” There was no advice from their side. My parents didn’t tell me where they wanted me to go over here. I said, “I’ve been sent out alone. How do I cope with this?” and I rolled over.
Then that woman from before showed up carrying a ritual hand drum. I grabbed onto her clothing and asked her: “Madam, what is the name of this plain? Whose great town is this? What is it called? What is your name? My parents, relatives and close friends didn’t advise me about where they wanted me to go and I arrived here beyond my control. Now, please accept my jewelry and in exchange please give me instructions about how I can get back to my village.”

The woman responded: “Because your ignorance is so severe your own visions (rang-snang) rise up as enemies. This plain, as wide open as the sky, is called Desert of Razors (spu-gri bye-thang). It’s also the path that great sinners use to get to the hell realms. That large town over there is called Plain of Vast Expanse (klong-thang). That area is also called Red Element Ridge (dmar-khams-sgang), or the Great City of the Dead. Do you not recognize me? My secret name is Yeshe ´Dorje´ma. Both of us are friends; we’re as close as a body and its shadow. You’ve left behind your own body of flesh and blood, your friends and attendants, food and wealth. You have no control over it. You bear the burden of your sins and defilements coming to fruition and now you’ve arrived here in the bardo realm . . .”

We may recall that the délok meet other people suffering in the bardo and in hell who are personally close to them. Karma Wangzin describes meeting her well-intentioned but somewhat eccentric uncle:

[As I continued on my way, I could no longer see] my home [which had] disappeared behind a huge mountain. I was very sad and began crying. I traveled further on and came to a [crossroads]. There were three rocky paths ahead of me. I chose the middle road and headed west [toward the setting sun]. I arrived on the peak of a big mountain. I saw a [man] with gray hair, bopping [up and down]. [I recognized him as my uncle and so] I called out to him, “Uncle!” He carried a black rosary and was dancing and jumping [in the air]. He called my name and shouted, “You’re on the wrong path!” . . . He then gave me many religious instructions on the paths and lights [I would see in the bardo]. I thanked him and then thought I should climb [further] up [the mountain] . . .

Later she has an emotional conversation with her dead brother:

Then I arrived in the south and my elder brother, Tsangpa Gyentsén, came out from a small doorway. I was very sad. I held my brother’s hand and wept, “Alas, boy! Why have you had to stay here for so
long? You were born the son of a lama so you haven’t accumulated any sinful karma, have you?”

He responded, “Dear sister, I didn’t accumulate the sin of desiring wealth but since [our] parents and older brothers viewed me with scorn I didn’t feel encouraged [to pursue] the religious course required of me. Even though I was a lama’s son I had no understanding of religion. I was even forced without cause to tend the cattle herds. Consequently, I had to face verbal abuse and teasing from the wives of the cattle herders. I did become skilled in bleeding cattle. I couldn’t recognize [the difference between] virtue and sin. I caught small birds and mice and roasted them alive. As for the ripening of those actions, the area from here to over yonder is called Great Mass of Fire at [the End of the Present] Age (bskal-pa’i me-dpung chen-po). Loud roaring sounds and the voices of people burning in that great fire fill the entire three thousand-fold universe and I’m very frightened. I was led here beyond my control by [Yama] Shinje’s attendants. They said to me, “Even though your class and family lineage is good your behavior has been bad.”

Tsangpa Gyentsén then tells Karma Wangzin about all the tortures he has endured and how he was first informed of his sister’s arrival:

That ascetic from before, who wore blue layman’s clothing, bundled his hair up over his head, and wore earrings made from paper scrolls, grabbed me by the hand and said, “Your sister has arrived up there, you should go up to her. She’s here. Again, according to the proclamations of [Shinje] Chökyi Gyelpo, even though you belong to a lama’s family you haven’t recognized your hallucinations and so for a little while you have to experience more suffering. It is of no use to mention your family lineage. It is said that in order to purify the sins of your body you should make prostrations and circumambulations; in order to purify the sins of your speech, you should recite the six syllables; and in order to purify the sins of your mind, you should cultivate the Great Seal meditations. If you do all of this, you will attain the level of a knowledge holder (Tib. rigdzin, Skt. vidyadhara) who draws out many suffering beings from the Circle of Iron Mountains (lcags-ri khor-yug). If you don’t do all of that, then again you’ll only take a body in one of the two lower realms where you’ll be reborn.”

I asked my brother where he was going to go and he said [Shinje] Chökyi Gyelpo had told him he was going to be reborn at Sengé
Dzong to the south. I said, “In that case, for your benefit I’ll make a community tea offering as well as an offering for the dedication of merit. I’ll commission a copy of the *Vajracchedikā* and have it recited. I’ll have one hundred thousand *torma* sent off to the male and female realized yogis and also make prostrations, and so forth. I’ll make sure that you get the fruit of whatever virtues can be achieved through these activities... Now, according to Chökyi Gyelpo’s command, you [must] go to Sengé Dzong.”

Then with great sadness I held onto my brother’s hand and said, “Boy, pull your mind together. Supplicate Dorjé Pakmo, your personal meditation deity (*yi-dam*), as well as the great Precious One from Orgyen [Padmasambhava]. You’re a lama’s son but don’t slip up!"

Just when we started to walk off together a mountain to our west began to crumble. It was inconceivably frightening. Then a great wind storm rose up and took my brother away beyond his control. I swooned unconsciously falling into a stupor like heavy darkness and then my female friend arrived.

“This brother of yours was from a good family, had a clear mind, and wasn’t conceited but since he didn’t cultivate the Great Seal meditations he had to experience for awhile the fear and terror of the bardo. So there’s no need for you to suffer. Stand up!”

Like Jampa Délek it appears, this boy, the brother of Karma Wangzin, seems not to have been a particularly successful practitioner, despite the supposed advantage he had of being raised as the son of an accomplished lama. He and Jampa Délek are both examples of professional religious men who work against the accepted stereotype.

In another example of familiar people met with in the bardo and in hell, Karma Wangzin relates her conversations with a woman from her home village:

At the end of the bridge was a fortress. In front of the fortress gate I got a whiff of the scent of ginger and peppercorn. I saw an old woman carrying a heavy load, the size of Mount Meru, of ginger, peppercorn, cotton cloth, paper, and so forth. She had bloodshot eyes and her bluish gray hair was pulled back in a knot with [the loose] ends wrapped around her head. The servants of Shinjé [Lord of the Dead] pulled her along with a lasso and pushed her from behind with spears. She stared intently at me and I asked, “Who is this woman?” My female friend spoke to her: “You carry this heavy load without
nourishment. You’re pulled along in front and pushed from behind with weapons. Were you a minister’s fair mistress or a solitary hermitess, a female merchant at a great pilgrimage site or a beer seller at the base of a fort? What were the circumstances that caused you to come here? What are the names of your relatives and close friends, your children, and your homeland?”

This woman came up to me and said, “I’m the daughter of a lama from Géchu Kunga Ling. I’m the middle child among many sisters. Take this message from the dead back to the living about [the effects of] good and evil [actions].” The old woman struck her chest with her fists, her eyes filled with tears, and she continued: “Alas! I’ve run out of joy and sorrow; there’s nothing left. When I saw your face I noticed a resemblance to the high lama (chos-rje) of Kunga Ling [i.e., Karma Wangzin’s father]. When I lived in the human world you weren’t even on the verge of entering your mother’s womb. From then until now I had to live in an iron fortress without a gate. Because today is the fifteenth of the month I’ve been taken out of that fortress and revived again in hell. The reason being that when I was living in the human world my daughter and I benefited from the sponsorship of the fifteenth-day ceremony offered at the time of the ‘Victorious Uncle-Nephew’ (rgyal-ba khu-dbon). My village was called Sokcha Okma. My husband was Népo Dépa, minister (bka’-blon) of the Géchu estate. My name is Gókyi Dzompa. The monks who came from Géchu estate entrusted me with their possessions (dkor) when they left for Môn; they even took to calling me ‘Mother Gókyi Dzompa.’ They gave me many things like ginger, peppercorn, cotton cloth, paper, and so forth and in exchange I offered them meat, beer and other things, but I never returned those monks’ items that they had loaded on their backs and carried around everywhere. I’m now dealing with the karmic retribution of keeping their belongings. When the monks went away they left their possessions behind and entrusted me [to look after them] and when they returned I kept a few belongings of the monks who had died [on the road]. I’m now dealing with the karmic retribution of breaking my vow [not to steal from monks]. As for my other sins, I used to kill about two yaks a year and so I’m suffering for all of this.” The old woman wept bitterly . . .

The old woman is confronted by one of Yama Shinjé’s attendants and soon thereafter, an itinerant holy man, a maṇi-pa, arrives to assist all the suffering
beings. He recites the *mani* mantra—*om mani padme hum*—and the old woman feels comforted by this. And, as is typical in all such scenes repeated numerously in the délok tales, she requests Karma Wangzin to tell her living daughter and mother about her terrible situation, and to ask that they perform virtuous activities for her benefit. The appearance of the itinerant savior figure in this scene reflects another classical Buddhist influence on the délok literature: the descent into the netherworld of saintly heroes intent on saving the damned. This is a common theme found in Buddhist literature throughout Asia, and we will consider the significance of the *mani* chanting heroes in chapter 6.

Many more cases of personal meetings are recounted in Karma Wangzin’s biography. She describes the details of numerous trials and all of the people she sees in court seem to have been known to her in other circumstances or are at least familiar to her by name. To mention just a few examples, she speaks personally about a young woman named Dorje Gyelmo from the southern district of Nédong who was forcibly captured by invading Mongol troops when her village was ransacked. She subsequently died from an epidemic disease that had spread through the area.36 Karma Wangzin also describes the terrible trials of an unfortunate woman from central Tibet named Samtén Kyipa;37 a man named Peljor of the noble Dowo family from Lhodrak;38 a girl from Lhasa who refers at one point to having been taught the biography of Lingza Chökyi;39 a girl named Samtén from Rinpung between Tsang and Rong;40 and several Nyingma lamas from Lhodrak, Tsang, and Yamdrok.41 All of these individuals are noted as having come from areas in Tibet located either within Karma Wangzin’s own home region or in relatively close proximity, reachable within just a few weeks or months of travel. As was first suggested by Françoise Pommaret, such references in the délok accounts to recognizable geographical areas provide a compelling reason why certain délok stories circulate in print and are better known in particular regions but unfamiliar in others.42 Most written versions of Karma Wangzin’s biography, for example, come from Bhutan, near her original home in Lhodrak, southern Tibet. If the purpose of these stories was to sermonize to listeners and readers, to stir their emotions and even entertain them, then it is not unusual that such personalized details are to be found throughout the narratives. These details serve to establish a strong and intimate bond between the délok and his or her audience.

We have already noted that Lingza Chökyi’s story served as the model for subsequent délok accounts, her experience frequently cited as exemplary. This we see throughout Karma Wangzin’s biography. At her own trial before Yama, Lingza Chökyi is again mentioned by name:
With eyes wide open [Shinjé] Chökyi Gyelpo looked into the mirror of karmic existence and said this to me: “Oh, as to your name there’s no error; your name is Trinlé Wangzin. As to your clan there’s no error; yours is the clan of Sumpa. As to your form there’s no error; your form is of a dark complexion. As for your mind there’s nothing artificial; your mind is genuine. As to the year there’s no error; it is the year of the dragon. As to the month there’s no error; it is the month of the dragon. As to the day there’s no error; it is the day of the monkey. As to the time there’s no error; it is early morning. Now that you’ve arrived here, should we look closer at your good and evil deeds to tally up your karma? Have you seen the terrors of [Yama] Shinjé’s messengers? Have you understood what virtues should be adopted and what sins should be avoided? Have you understood the messages delivered to you? Do you know that I am [Shinjé] Chökyi Gyelpo?”

He continued: “Previously, Lingza Chökyi returned [from death] because an error was made in regard to her name and clan. [Today] a girl from Dartséndo named Samten, a Bönpo girl from Kham named Yungdrung Wangmo, and yourself are returning [to the human world], but not because of any error in name or clan. The girl from Dartséndo is returning under the following conditions: I warned her, “If you get distracted by financial profits gained from trading and by worldly activities then you won’t be awakened [to buddhahood]. Don’t mix virtue and sin!” With that I send her back. The Bönpo girl from Kham is returning under these conditions: I told her that the Bön religion doesn’t have the fruit of enlightenment so she should convert to Buddhism. She’s returning because it’s necessary that she behold the essence of the Great Seal. Now, as for you, encourage the people of Dzambuling to follow virtue and give them a message about [what happens] in the bardo between death and the [next] life. The reason you’re doing this is that in your former life you met with Dorjé Pakmo and you received initiations, reading-transmissions, and oral instructions from her. Consequently, the breath of the dākinī has not dissipated [in you] for up to seven generations. Since you have the capability to work for the welfare of sentient beings you have been planted in the valley of existence (srid-pa’i lung) to show the way (lam-ston) to liberation.

“Now, a word about your previous incarnations. In a former life you took rebirth in India as a clairvoyant elephant. Then, after many
more lives, you took rebirth as a girl from Lhodrak Khoting. From the time you were very small your parents gave you religious instructions and at temples you made prostrations and circumambulations before Vairocana and his divine retinue. You made butterlamp and food offerings and offered extensive prayers. Then a special holder of Padmasambhava’s lineage arrived, the treasure revealer (gter-ston) Nangtséwa. You offered him jewels and were delighted to attend to him. You asked that he embrace you with his compassion. This treasure revealer bestowed upon you many of his sacraments (dam-rdzas) such as the sacred substance that liberates through taste (dam-rdzas myong-grol) as well as the guru’s white and red bodhicitta (gu-ru’i byang-sems dkar-dmar). For a long time you prayed that in a future life you would gain the ability to show the way of bodhisattvas, to encourage all sentient beings to abandon the darkness of ignorance and to follow virtue, and to help yourself and all others attain buddhahood in the realm of Heavenly Enjoyment (mkha’-spyod). Your prayers [in that former life] were offered genuinely and so you gained these abilities. As a consequence, you were born in a good family and with clear intelligence. You are in the direct lineage of Avalokiteśvara’s incarnations and foster loving kindness and compassion for all sentient beings . . . By the power of your previous prayers and the benefits of your virtue you will return to your body in the human world and work extensively for the welfare of beings . . . “

Interestingly, Yama Shinjé takes special care to prove to Karma Wangzin that no apparent mistakes have been made regarding her proper identity, as had been made in Lingza Chökyi’s case long before her. Instead, Yama tells her that he is sending her home because she had established in a previous life an exceptional bond with the female deity Dorjé Pakmo, the “Vajra Sow” (Skt. Vajravārāhi), a popular wrathful emanation of the tantric goddess Vajrayoginī. Also in her favor, Karma Wangzin in a former life had received advanced religious training under the tutelage of a renowned Buddhist visionary from the estate of Nangtsé in southern Tibet and became his yogic consort. This figure can be corroborated in other sources. He is the treasure-revealer Zhikpo Lingpa Garkyi Wangchuk (1524–1583), the teacher of a number of remarkable and highly respected Nyingma lamas of the “Northern Treasures” (byang-gter) tradition. Although he continued to be an influential figure in some Kagyu circles, his relationships with the leaders of the Northern Treasures eventually soured. The possibility of a connection between this somewhat controversial
visionary and Karma Wangzin is enticing but I have yet to find any evidence of a link between them in other relevant sources.

Again, Yama’s reasoning during Karma Wangzin’s trial reinforces conventional Buddhist moral lessons: virtuous actions such as religious study, prayer, and devotion bear direct positive results, while nonvirtuous actions lead inevitably to a horrible fate in the fires of hell. The délok narratives, however, individualize this teaching about death and retribution. In the end, Karma Wangzin is not the only one returning home. Yama also announces to two other women—presumably standing alongside Karma Wangzin—that they too are being given a second chance to mend their ways. Here, we see very specific injunctions against greed in matters of business and against devotion to the Bön religion, identified in not-so-subtle terms as a heretical teaching.

Rising Corpses

The world of human beings is frequently portrayed in the délok tales and in Tibetan literature and narrative works more generally as overrun by a host of malicious spirits (bdud, ’dre, bgegs, gdon, etc.) and roaming manifestations of the dead (mtshun). The human body was particularly vulnerable to attacks by demons, and the threat of demonic possession was perceived to be most acute immediately following death, once the consciousness had left the body. One of many widespread fears surrounding death was that evil spirits might enter the abandoned corpse and reanimate it, in which case the body would be transformed into a destructive zombie, literally a “standing corpse” (ro-langs). We find in Karma Wangzin’s story, and in many other of the délok texts, evidence of this common Tibetan belief in demons and rising corpses and of the terror they provoked. The return of the délok to his or her lifeless body provided a perfect opportunity for confusion among the living—was this the return of a benign loved one, a délok, or the menace of a dreaded demoniac (gdon-zhugs-pa)? Echoing Lingza Chökyi and Jampa Délek’s autoscopic experiences of the departure from their bodies at death—in which they behold with revulsion the corpse they left behind—Karma Wangzin describes her terrifying return from the land of the dead and the reactions of those sitting nearby:

Then I thought to myself, “I will return to my village.” And in a flash I arrived in Trapu. There, through my doorway, I saw the corpse of a dog with a leather shroud covering its eyes and foaming at the mouth. I was frightened and felt sick to my stomach. I ran just a few
steps away to the far side [of the room]. After thinking again about it, I felt I could go up to [to the body], and as I became accustomed to the dog’s corpse my mind suddenly entered my body. My recollections were scattered and I blacked out as if everything had gotten dark. Then I slightly recovered my presence of mind, but since my body had no strength I couldn’t move. As my recollections gradually became clearer I moved just a little bit and the person keeping watch at my pillow repeated “PHAT” three times. When the unforgettable suffering and terror of the hell realms became vividly clear [again in my mind], the palms of my hands shot upward and the cloth covering my face shifted. The person keeping watch [exclaimed], “Is this a zombie animated by a malicious gyelpo demon from Okdro?!” Removing the veil he smacked my head many times and then placed his hands on my bosom. I thought about grabbing his hand and telling him I wasn’t dead, but because my body had no strength I wasn’t able to grab hold of him and I couldn’t speak. The person keeping watch checked to see if there was any warmth at my heart and when he noticed a slight bit of warmth he called out to my relatives, “Your daughter has returned. Come here!” My mother came and cried out, “Mother’s girl has returned?!” and she untied the stitching of the cloth sack [my body had been bundled in]. The old district governor [my father-in-law] arrived and moved me to another room. I was given a boiled mixture of beer, honey, and brown sugar but since my tongue and throat had dried out during the seven days my mind and body were separated, I wasn’t able to drink. As a result, I had to be fed with a spoon a little bit at a time.

This passage offers compelling testimony of the sorts of popular ideas about demons and animated corpses that are repeated frequently in Tibetan oral lore, but less commonly in the scholastic literature. One obvious insight about death and the délok phenomena that can be drawn from Karma Wangzin’s descriptions is that demons and death are intimately linked. There are demons that cause death in humans (these are called shéma and tend to linger near the home), and demons that possess corpses. To guard against the latter, the corpse must be watched continuously throughout the day and night. We see reference to this practice of “pillow-guarding” (sngas-srung) in Karma Wangzin’s account above. Here, also, we find that the lama who watched over the corpse was responsible for determining whether or not a demon had taken hold of the body, that is, if the body was suddenly to move or rise up. Although Karma Wangzin is clearly annoyed by the lama’s physical tests, he is able to
determine correctly that she was in fact the one who had returned. Fortunately for him, this meant that he would not have to confront a zombie.

A few Tibetan oral legends of zombies, of the demonic possession of corpses, have been preserved in print, gathered by Turrell Wylie, Per-Arne Berglie, and, most recently, by Geoff Childs, from personal interviews with Tibetans living in Seattle and in Nepal. In these reports we find, for example, dramatic tales of monks engaged in hand-to-hand combat with possessed corpses, of entire villages contaminated by “zombie madness,” and even comical stories of young inexperienced lamas beating corpses over the head with the thick wooden book covers of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. This concept of the evil animated corpse, however, is not entirely a Tibetan invention.

Much like the Tibetan term for ghost (’byung-po)—a topic we will discuss in the next chapter—the word for zombie, rolang, is ambiguously defined. The term is roughly equivalent to the Sanskrit vetāla known from Indian Buddhist and Hindu literature. There are several different categories of this demonic entity and we should be clear in distinguishing between them, since there is only one specific type of zombie relevant to the popular ideas expressed in the Tibetan literature on délok. Following Wylie, we can distinguish broadly between two categories of rolang in Buddhist and Tibetan literature: the “tantric” type, referring to a corpse activated by yogic techniques to be exploited for various purposes, and the “demonic” type, which is a corpse possessed and animated, without human intervention, by an evil spirit.

The former type of rolang—the one most closely aligned with the Indian vetāla—is perhaps best recognized from Hindu and Buddhist popular narratives. The Vetalapāñcavinṣati (Twenty-Five Vetalā Stories) is the most famous of such Indian works. The text is extant in Sanskrit but also in several variant Central Asian and Tibetan versions, generically titled Tales of the Magic Corpse. The disparate tales that make up this anthology are all framed by a common narrative. Briefly, to follow the Tibetan versions, a yogi named Lüdrup Nyingpo (Skt. Nāgārjuna) rescues a king named Déchö Zangpo (Skt. Śaṅkarabhadra) from seven evil sorcerers. As payment for his life-saving services, the yogi asks the king to fetch for him a magic corpse (ro dngos-grub-can) from the great charnel ground Cool Grove (Tib. Bsil-ba’i-tshal, Skt. Sītāvana). This, of course, is no ordinary corpse—its body is composed of gold and its limbs made of turquoise; on its head sits an image of a buddha with a conch top-knot. Before the king sets out on his quest for the magic corpse, the yogi gives a few parting instructions:

> From here, follow this path. A mile up the road you’ll come to a mountain valley full of deep ravines, a very frightening and dangerous
place. In that valley there are dead bodies everywhere. When you get there, all of those corpses will begin to rise up. When that happens, sprinkle these consecrated seeds (*thun*) on them and recite [the spell] “*hala! hala! svāhā!*” Then, you’ll pass another valley with many smaller corpses. When they begin to rise, toss the consecrated seeds and recite [the spell] “*hulu! hulu! svāhā!*” Still further on, you’ll come to another valley filled with the dead bodies of little children. Again, when their corpses rise, repeat [the mantra] “*tīra phaṭ!*” and sprinkle the consecrated seeds on them. At that moment, the magic corpse will run out from the middle of [that group of bodies] and climb the trunk of a mango tree, and there it will stay. Then, with this axe called White Moon begin to cut down the tree in the way that I’ve shown you. As soon as you do this, the magic corpse will fall down. Bind that corpse with [this special] multicolored cord and place it inside [this special] multicolored sack... Bring the corpse to me. But until then, along the way, don’t look back [at the corpse], don’t speak [to it], don’t fall asleep, and don’t stop to rest.51

The king follows the yogi’s instructions and captures the magic corpse. However, this corpse turns out to be rather cunning and tricks the king into allowing him to tell a few stories. These become the “tales of the magic corpse.” Several elements of this framing narrative are of special note. First, we have reference to the danger of corpses rising up from the cremation grounds. Second, we see that the yogi possesses certain consecrated substances and spells that are effective in warding off these terrible *rolang*. And finally, there is the special golden corpse who wields magical powers. Such powers are called *vetāla-siddhi* (Tib. *ro-langs-kyi dngos-grub*) and are discussed at greater length in Buddhist tantric literature.

Perhaps one of the earliest canonical manuals of Buddhist necromancy, in which techniques are described for achieving *vetāla-siddhi* and for dealing with the threat of rising corpses, is the *Saptavetālaka-nāma-dhāranī* (Spell of the Seven Zombies).52 In this esoteric work, the Buddha offers assistance to his disciple Ānanda, who is suffering from a deadly illness brought on by the touch of seven evil *rolang*. These demonic corpses had been aspirated by a group of wandering heretics (*mu-stegs-pa*) intent on destroying the Buddha and his followers. The Buddha gives Ānanda a series of practices to cure his illness and to guard against any future threat of *rolang*. The bulk of the text is thus filled with descriptions of a number of ritual hand gestures (*mudrā*), tantric spells (*dhāranī*), and magical “knots” (Tib. *mdud*) to be employed in the service of paralyzing (Skt. *stambhana*, Tib. *rengs-pa*) the *rolang* and bringing them under
control. The rolang are potent beings, and once bound and controlled they can provide a host of magical powers (siddhi) for the one who is able to tame them. Presumably, this is the reason the yogi Lüdrup Nyingpo in the Vētālapaṅcavimsati was interested in obtaining the golden corpse. We read in the famed seventeenth-century History of Buddhism in India by Tāranātha (1575–1634) that the powers of a golden corpse, animated by yogic means, are even said to have been manipulated to establish the Buddhist monastery of Otantapuri in south India. A number of additional texts on exploiting the powers of the rolang are found preserved in the alternative Tibetan Buddhist canon of the Nyingmapa, the One Hundred Thousand Tantras of the Ancients. Here, again, a variety of esoteric rites of sorcery are detailed for resuscitating corpses and using their powers to accomplish magical results. The rolang described in such works are all of the so-called “tantric” variety. More in the form of anecdotal evidence, Alexandra David-Neel gives this detailed and rather amusing description of the tantric rolang ritual:

The celebrant is shut up alone with a corpse in a dark room. To animate the body, he lies on it, mouth to mouth, and while holding it in his arms, he must continually repeat mentally the same magic formula, excluding all other thoughts.

After a certain time the corpse begins to move. It stands up and tries to escape; the sorcerer, firmly clinging to it, prevents it from freeing itself. Now the body struggles more fiercely. It leaps and bounds to extraordinary heights, dragging with it the man who must hold on, keeping his lips upon the mouth of the monster, and continue mentally repeating the magic words.

At last the tongue of the corpse protrudes from its mouth. The critical moment has arrived. The sorcerer seizes the tongue with his teeth and bites it off. The corpse at once collapses.

Failure in controlling the body after having awakened it, means certain death for the sorcerer.

The tongue carefully dried becomes a powerful magic weapon which is treasured by the triumphant ngagspa [tantric magician].

The Tibetan who gave me these details described most vividly the gradual awakening of the corpse: the first conscious look which brightened its glazed eyes and its feeble movements slowly growing in strength until he became unable to prevent the agitation of the jumping monster and needed all his strength to hold it. He described his sensations when he could feel the tongue issuing from the mouth of the corpse and touching his own lips, and realized that
the terrible moment had come when, if he failed to conquer it, the horrible being would kill him.\textsuperscript{55}

There are also \textit{rolang} that are corpses involuntarily possessed by demons, as we see mentioned in Karma Wangzin’s account of her return to life. In this context, the term \textit{rolang} is used interchangeably to refer to both the possessed corpse and to the demon that possesses it. The narrative literature and canonical tantric works introduced briefly above do not contribute much to our understanding of this second category of rising corpses. Demonic \textit{rolang} are distinct from those corpses activated by yogic means. Nevertheless, both types of \textit{rolang} share a few common traits, such as their physical attributes, their malevolent nature, their magical powers, and their capacity to inflict disease. In the \textit{Four-fold Tantra}, the root text of the Tibetan medical tradition, for example, the \textit{rolang} are listed among eighteen different demons (’\textit{byung-po} or \textit{gdon}) that enter the body and cause illness and insanity.\textsuperscript{56} Fortunately, they can be turned away with appropriate countermeasures.\textsuperscript{57} Those unlucky enough to be possessed by the demonic \textit{rolang} exhibit certain peculiar signs: they “speak the truth, sleep a lot, delight in gambling, and [their bodies] tremble.”\textsuperscript{58}

In the oral folktales of the Tibetan zombie recorded by Wylie, Berglie, and Childs, descriptions of the \textit{rolang} often mix the attributes of the two types. Once the corpse is animated, it walks about with tongue wagging and arms outstretched, intending to spread its “zombie sickness” throughout the village by touching victims with the palm of its hand. These stories seldom mention whether or not sorcery was involved in the initial activation of the corpse. All descriptions, however, agree that zombies have certain physical restrictions—they move slowly, are unable to speak, and cannot bend at the waist. Incidentally, for this reason, the main doorways of Tibetan homes are often cut low to keep \textit{rolang} from entering. In no context are the \textit{rolang} ever portrayed as invincible; they can always be overcome by Buddhist mantras and spells, as in the oft-repeated syllable \textit{phat}, and even by a well-placed physical blow to one of several vulnerable points on their bodies, that is, by cutting the skin, making them bleed, breaking a bone, or piercing a mole.\textsuperscript{59}

There seems to be little agreement in the Tibetan sources as to the exact type of demon that reanimates the dead. In the scene quoted above from Karma Wangzin’s biography, the lama watching over her body calls out in fear that a \textit{gyelpo} or “king” demon may have inhabited her corpse. This identification is unusual, since the \textit{gyelpo} traditionally belong to a high-ranking class of demon affiliated—as the literal term suggests—with the vengeful spirits of nefarious kings and religious leaders. Moreover, the \textit{gyelpo} are not often linked to the ordinary dead but are most closely associated with the great spirit-
protectors of Buddhism in Tibet, such as Pehar, who at one time occupied the preeminent position of oracle of Samyé, Tibet’s first Buddhist monastery founded in ca. 779.60

According to Wylie’s Tibetan informants, corpse-possessing demons belong to a class of spirits called dön, and sometimes also the gék or “obstructors.”61 Generally, the dön are demons that threaten local places (gnas-gdon), cause harm to human bodies (lus-gdon), and obstruct human activities (las-gdon).62 Although there are multiple classifications of the dön, the more common enumeration is eighteen.63 In this regard, the dön are often equated with the eighteen elemental demons (’byung-po) described in the medical treatises.64 The rolang are included as a separate category in this group of eighteen. Among other significant listings of dön are the fifteen demons that inflict harm on children (byis-pa’i gdon bco-nga), appearing in the shape of a variety of wild animals.65 The passage from the Tibetan version of the Vētālapañcanāsati quoted above attests to this fear of children attacked by demons, though in that context it is specifically the threat of the possession of dead children that evokes anxiety. Berglie, on the other hand, identifies the corpse-activating demons as dré, which is yet another name for a generic type of malignant spirit.66 Discrepancies of this sort are common in Tibetan written and oral accounts—no doubt the result of the imprecision and disparity of classification of the many gods and demons that populate the Tibetan landscape.

In an intriguing and possibly very early (ca. ninth or tenth century) illuminated manuscript of divination practices examined by R. A. Stein, the spirit that transforms corpses into rolang is identified as a cemetery-demon (dur-sri)—a particularly fearsome being who inhabits the charnel grounds and belongs to an early Tibetan category of evil spirit called damsí or “transgressors.”67 Preserved in the authoritative Precious Anthology of Treasures, a seventeenth-century manual for exorcising the damsí opens with a prophecy attributed to the eighth-century Lotus Guru Padmasambhava, warning that Tibet will one day be overrun by the damsí and other similarly noxious spirits:

Here in Tibet, in the evil age, during the period of decline when the five degenerations are rampant, the damsí, the jungpo, and the living demons (gsdon-’dre) will all run amuck. During the day, they will race over every cemetery, and at night will attack the life-essence (srog) and the breath (dbugs) of living beings. They will appear in the form of tantric priests (sngags-btsun) and women, and speak with voices of wild carnivorous animals. These are the signs [that indicate infliction by] their diseases and demonic possession (gdon-zhugs-pa): the onset of plagues (gnyan-nad) that cannot be identified, momentary
insanity, and drifting into unconsciousness. Some [of these afflic-
tions] will resemble the sage and planetary diseases (drang-srong
gza’ nad), some will just [result in] careless deaths, or stupidity, or
physical tremors. A variety of such [demonic afflictions] will come.

We have here another example of Tibetan millenarian prophecy that we
also saw at the beginning of Jampa Délek’s story. Recall how fearful Jampa
Délek was of the threat of invasion and the corruption of Buddhism in Tibet
and that this anxiety seemed to have caused his death. It is just this sort of
doomsday scenario of a world overpopulated by evil forces threatening de-
fenseless human beings that lies behind much of the worldview expressed in
the Tibetan délok narratives. This view looks out onto a world haunted by fear of
death and disease, terrified of dark demonic powers, and suspicious of de-
structive forces that are able to appear deceptively normal and harmless to the
untrained eye. This view of such an uneasy world had a popular basis in Tibetan
society and was widely shared among all categories of people, whether they
were scholar-monks or illiterate lamas, pious laymen or -women, wandering
evangelists or accomplished yogis. In reading through the Tibetan literature on
demons, rising corpses, and people who return from the world of the dead, one
cannot help but come away with the sense that fear and paranoia must have
struck a constant chord in the lives of Tibetans everywhere, or at the very least in
the imaginations of those Tibetans such works were most likely to impress.

It is this sort of anxiety that we read in Karma Wangzin’s story after she
comes back to life. Though her guardian lama is satisfied that she has not been
transformed into an evil zombie, a rolang, some of the others nearby are less
certain of her innocence and accuse her of being demonically possessed.

The wife (yum) of the high lama (chos-rje) spread malicious gossip
about me, saying “She’s of a very evil class! She left her body in order
to steal away the breath of people from central Tibet and Tsang and
now she’s returned here [to do the same to us]!” Listening to this,
others also began accusing me, saying “Yes, she is such a demoness!”
They lost faith in me and the evil rumors continued to spread. Then
the old district governor [my father-in-law] proclaimed that [my sit-
tuation] was like being ostracized for stealing the ruler’s yak instead of
being congratulated for circumambulating Mount Tsari. He sug-
gested that for the time being I stay quiet and keep my [stories]
secret.

As this scene makes clear, there appears to have been a belief that there
were certain individuals who, when possessed by demons, could leave their
bodies temporarily in order to murder other living humans by stealing their breath. Such individuals most closely resemble what are called sön-dré, “living demons” or witches, in the Tibetan literature on demonology. The sön-dré are actually human, or at least appear in human form, and are capable of inflicting as much harm as “ordinary” demons. As we see in the passage quoted above from the seventeenth-century exorcism manual, the sön-dré were typically women or lay tantric priests manipulated by nonhuman agents of destruction. Perhaps these unfortunate hosts, and particularly the priests, had been black magicians (sngags-pa nag-po) or unwitting dabbler in the esoteric arts (gsang-spyod) and in necromancy, and through imprudent contact with demons opened themselves up to attack. Traditionally, the idea was that at night the souls (bla) of these individuals left their bodies, transformed into demonic spirits, and roamed about bringing fever and disease to whomever they came into contact. At daybreak, the souls returned to the sleeping bodies and the persons carried out their daily routine usually without anyone suspecting what had happened during the night. All this continues to resonate even down to modern times as is evident in the recent memoirs of the fighting monk Tashi Khedrup, who recounts some frightful gossip about the witches of Sakya monastery in western Tibet:

[Sakya] was rather a frightening place with huge dark, dusty buildings and not many monks about. Its Lamas are famous for their magical powers and control a great number of witches and female spirits through which they send messages all over Tibet. I was told that the six most powerful are tied to a straw pillar in one of the halls; they appear to have human bodies and their heads are covered with fleas. One day in the week they take possession of six monks, who perform a dance carrying red-hot vases on the palm of their hands. At the end, they put some goat fat on a fire and that seems to make any women who are watching go into hysteric. When I saw it, a party of drokpa [nomad] women pilgrims ran away in terror. In the evening for about three hours no one goes out because of the danger from magic ceremonies that are being performed. When they are over, a thigh-bone trumpet is blown. My friends told me to be very careful there not to talk to any pretty girl or even to pick up a coloured thread that you might see on the road; and if you borrowed someone’s cloak or blanket you should take good care to spit on it before using it, otherwise you might fall into the power of a witch.

Even in Lhasa people were afraid of those witches, and when I was living there later I sometimes heard a cry going around “A Sakya
witch is out!” Then everyone would hurry indoors, or, if they had to be outside, they would carefully avoid speaking to any strange women they might see. People who did come under a witch’s influence behaved in all sorts of strange ways, and if it was not certain whether someone was genuinely possessed or not, the test was to put a hot iron on his hand. If he was possessed, the iron would leave no mark and the man, when asked, would name the witch or spirit that was troubling him. Then if it was a witch and if you could trace her, you would find the mark of the iron on her hand.73

By what path do demons and other foreign spirits enter the body? In order to understand the physiology of demonic possession, we must first understand how the Tibetan medical and tantric traditions conceive of the embodied human spirit, and specifically of the human lifespan principle (tshe), the life-essence (srog), and the life-vitality or soul (bla). The soul supports the physiological and psychological aspects of life and is thus fundamental to the preservation and maintenance of the life-essence and the lifespan principle, including also the respiratory breath (dbugs) as well as the intellect (yid) and the mind (sems). Without breath, however, the soul cannot remain inside the body. The soul pervades every part of the body, moving through numerous pathways or channels (rtsa), both material and subtle, and, according to the Four-fold Tantra, is even capable of leaving the body through the ring finger and temporarily wandering off on its own. Exits from the body generally occur at night. The soul’s capacity for free movement means that it is highly vulnerable to misfortune and can be stolen away by demons. Once attacked, the soul becomes unstable and may lose its ability to support either the life-essence or the lifespan principle, in which case the person’s death is almost certain. Under such dire circumstances, there are special Buddhist tantric rituals that can be performed by lamas and other religious specialists for cheating death (‘chi-bslu), recapturing the soul by means of ransom (bla-glud), rites for summoning its return (bla-'bod), and for securing longevity (tshe-chog-byed-pa), techniques, for example, Milarepa imparted to the long-life goddess Tashi Tséringma referred to in the previous chapter.74

The soul, life-essence, and lifespan principle are not the only vulnerable features of the human being; the body is also highly susceptible to invading demons and the diseases they carry, particularly when it is abandoned by the soul either during sleep or after death. According to Tibetan medical systems, the human body possesses multiple points of vulnerability. Apart from defenseless physical components, such as the head, the bones, the muscles, and the limbs, the body also has several pervious external openings and hundreds of internal
passageways through which unclean foreign spirits can freely enter. It is worth noting that discussions of the vulnerable points of the human body in Tibetan medical literature are generally sex-neutral; male and female bodies are equally at risk. Men and women both share nine external orifices that are open to invasion or attack. These are the two eyes, two nostrils, two ears, the mouth, rectum, and urethra. Women, however, additionally have two breasts and a womb, which perhaps puts them slightly more at risk for possession than men.75

Once inside, the invading demon takes control of the body's internal physiology. In the case of a body abandoned during sleep, the demon can take over the sense organs, assuming control over the person's physical movements or inflicting the body with diseases; it can also manipulate the person's mind and cause the individual to go insane and act out in various inappropriate ways. Moreover, as we now know, the demon can completely inhabit a body left behind after death and can reanimate it, transforming into a rolang, for its own nefarious purposes.

What then is the precise difference between a possessed individual, a demoniac (gdon-zhugs-pa), and a délok? The Tibetan scholastic response should be obvious enough: the délok are not demonically possessed, but have instead undergone an extraordinary journey to the realms beyond death where they communicate with the dead and bring back edifying messages for the living. Society’s response, however, as we have seen, was often a bit more ambivalent. In Tibetan village communities where terror of evil forces and illicit sorcery were endemic, any sign of misfortune or unnatural break-up of the normal life routine was proof there must always be something out there that is more than meets the eye. It is understandable, then, that suspicious events were accompanied by charges of sorcery or possession. The strange and unusual could always be explained away, made less strange by pinning blame on suprahuman agents or on individuals controlled by those agents.

We should end this dark discussion of rising corpses and demon-possessed bodies with something a bit lighter. The Italian traveler Fosco Mariani, upon first entering Tibet in 1948, relays in his book Secret Tibet an incident between him and his Tibetan guide, Paljor, as they came up one late night through the pass of Nato La on the Sikkim border. Through the thick and misty air, the jagged rocks along their path appeared to them “like the shapes of mysterious beings,” and Paljor remarked that “they look like ro-lang.” Mariani then asked his friend about these “standing corpses” and how one is changed into such a strange thing:

“If you are struck by lightning and killed, sometimes you become a ro-lang,” the young man replied. “Your body stands upright, with its
eyes closed, and walks. It walks straight ahead, and nobody can stop it, or make it change direction. In any case anyone who touches a ro-lang falls sick and dies. Ro-lang wander about the mountains. They only stop if someone throws a shoe at them . . ."

This last remark broke the tension, and I laughed heartily. But that too was characteristic of the country. The sudden transition to the comic from the macabre, the grotesque, the obscene, the sudden burst of laughter, was something essentially Tibetan. Paljor, however, remained serious. For him the throwing of the shoe was a magical act, an act of exorcism, a rite, and not a ridiculous anti-climax as it seems to us.76

Messenger of the Dead

The return to an abandoned corpse does not occur without incident. We learn from reading the story of Karma Wangzin, and most other délok tales, that those who come back to the world of the living are transformed, endowed with a new sense of purpose and a stronger will to pursue a religious vocation. The délok traveled to the realms of the dead and survived to tell of their experiences. They met personally with those suffering in the bardo and in hell, and witnessed first-hand the tortures and torments that await those who do not follow the virtuous path of Buddhist devotion. In the end, the délok return with messages from the dead and the moral injunctions of Yama Shinjé. During their journey through the netherworld, it was believed, the délok acquired certain powers of understanding and insight and a clear and full knowledge of the workings of karma and the effects of sinful and meritorious actions. For the living, the dramatic stories recounted by the délok likely touched them deeply and must have served to rally their sentiments. Moreover, their stories may have even helped to broaden the popularity of certain Tibetan forms of Buddhist devotionalism within their communities.

The final episode in Karma Wangzin’s biography substantiates the point raised several times in this study about the recording and transcription of the délok experiences. Karma Wangzin describes the following account of how she was encouraged to share her remarkable story with others by traveling the country far and wide. In the end, though, as we shall see, it seems she may have never fulfilled that role:

The next day I gradually recovered my strength. My family got over [their grief] saying, “Our daughter has returned!” and everyone was overjoyed. They called in two scribes: one of the scribes wrote
down and edited (’debs) my stories about [the dead I had met] from central Tibet, Tsang, and Lhodrak, and the other copied down my series of stories about [the dead I had met] from the Sok region [Mongolia] and from Mön [northern Bhutan]. I myself planned to travel the country delivering Chökyi Gyelpo’s message . . . .”

This brief but insightful passage reveals something about the process involved in recording Karma Wangzin’s délok experiences. From this we know that her story was written by someone other than herself and so, in this case, we are clearly not dealing with an autobiography, strictly speaking. In some versions of Karma Wangzin’s tale, the author is identified as a certain Traktung Dorjé (alias Śīla-dhwa-dza, or Tsültrim Gyentsén), whom we noted in chapter 1 may have been from Bhutan and a student of the first Zhapdrung of that country. Unfortunately, we know nothing else about him. In addition to this reference to the writing process, we should also bear in mind the localization of the stories of those people Karma Wangzin encountered in the other world. Her story ends on another intriguing note:

Then one day Pönlop Jé Rinpoché arrived at Trakar and I went there to request religious instruction from him. After about a month of listening to his teachings I started asking him a number of questions about the direct introduction to [the nature of] mind (sems ngsprod). I understood the lama’s answers but I told him I found it difficult to generate [experiences] like that.

Around that time my servant girl said to the lama, “Certainly, being introduced to [the nature of] mind is easy for her. She has returned from the land of the dead!” The lama drank from three skull cups filled with beer and after offering me some he proclaimed, “First of all, I too have had the experience of traveling to the land of the dead, three times! I traveled there and this daughter has traveled there and both of us have seen a variety of things, so let the daughter tell her story.” One by one the lama’s students began gathering around me as I related the story [of my journey to the land of the dead]. Pönlop Rinpoché’s eyes filled with tears as he listened. For the entire day he postponed his religious classes so that I could finish telling my story about hell and about the messages delivered from the dead.

Afterward, Pönlop Rinpoché developed great faith in me and said, “Daughter, I’m convinced by what you’ve told us. I want you to leave here and travel all over the country for the welfare of the people. I’m offering you a riding horse, a pack mule, two servants,
and a cook so that you can tell [your story] to the whole world. Give me that charm box around your neck and if you go in the direction of Tö [western Tibet] you’ll be of great benefit to people and you’ll even attract more students than me.”

But even though the lama had said this to me, [I recalled] that [back during my journey to the land of the dead], when I arrived before [Shinjé] Chökyi Gyelpo, I was frightened by the wrathful gods and goddesses that surrounded him and in my volatile state [of mind] I prayed for my own liberation. Aside from praying in this way, I wasn’t used to praying for the benefit of all beings and so due to my own self-interest I was really of no great benefit to people.78

This passage sparks yet another question about the délok in Tibet. How did society react to the délok, and what was their social identity? Unfortunately, the final episodes in the story of lama Jampa Délek, and to a lesser extent Lingza Chökyi—whom we remember became a Buddhist nun following her return—offer us very little in this regard. Relying on a few fragments of information transmitted in the written texts, we have seen that upon returning from death Karma Wangzin was simultaneously detested and revered by those around her. In the end, however, we learn that she came to be perceived as a powerful religious personality in her own right, and even potentially more influential than the high lama Pönlop Rinpoché, who had himself traveled to the land of the dead on as many as three separate occasions.

But what of her social function? To fully explore that question we could only turn to contemporary ethnographic sources for answers, since the written literature offers no clues. It is, however, problematic to make historical claims about the social realities of the past based solely on evidence gathered centuries later in very different contexts. In truth, we cannot say very much about the social status of the délok in Tibet before the twentieth century. I must refer again to the pioneering ethnographic research of Françoise Pommaret, who concluded that the délok now living in modern-day Bhutan and Nepal are very different from their literary counterparts. In these contemporary settings, the délok undergo the death experience at fixed dates and times and act as soothsayers and spiritual guides to the living. As we see in the example of Karma Wangzin, the délok in the written sources are messengers of the dead and preachers of virtuous action. They are a peculiar bunch who experience one extraordinary moment in their lives when they are able to move freely among the dead and bridge the gap between the two realms. In the next chapter, we will examine yet another hapless soul, a monk no less, who stumbles down this very same path.
Jangchup Sengé was born sometime in the eighteenth century into a family of the Trawa clan in the isolated valley of Nyarong in the eastern Tibetan region of Kham in a village called Ralang. The area has been dominated throughout history by the Buddhist Nyingma and non-Buddhist Bönpo traditions, a fact that is evident in Jangchup Sengé’s biography. Jangchup Sengé was educated under the tutelage of a Bönpo lama named Tsachok Bhéra but appears also to have had close affiliations with Katok monastery, the oldest Nyingmapa institution in eastern Tibet. At any rate, he seems to have been a typical Nyingmapa-style monk with some ascetic inclinations, a constitution that might be partially explained by his physical condition. The biography notes that at the age of ten he was crippled while playing with a neighborhood friend. This injury seems to have prompted his first series of ecstatic visions of the goddess Dorjé Pakmo (Skt. Vajravarāhī). But later, while in retreat, it was a vision of Avalokiteśvara that would actually lead to his délok experience.

Jangchup Sengé speaks of a dream he had at Ralang Khargong monastery in which the people of the village were eating tainted food. He felt that he too should be eating this food, but a little boy dressed in white warned him that the food was unsafe and that he must avoid it. Intrigued by this, he followed after the boy and discovered him sitting in the center of a thousand-petaled lotus blossom surrounded by a thousand other little boys of similar appearance. They were all reciting in unison the six syllable mani-mantra, ōm maṇi
The boy told Jangchup Sengé to recite the mantra along with them. In the boy’s hand was a conch-shell vase filled with what appeared to be milk. Identifying the substance as nectar, an elixir, the boy handed the vase to Jangchup Sengé along with a crystal rosary and instructed him in these words, “Count this while reciting the six syllables. I am Avalokiteśvara!” The little boy then disappeared into the sky like a rainbow and the dream ended.

In the three délok narratives reviewed thus far, we have seen anxiety and despair as the prime causes of illness and eventual death. These were emotional reactions to specific personal and social circumstances beyond the control of the individuals whose stories are told. By contrast, in the tale of Jangchup Sengé we find a different reason given for his demise, one that is less about feelings directed against some outward state of affairs perceived to be stressful, and more about a quality of mind generated by inward reflection. Jangchup Sengé specifies that he awoke early at sunrise and reflected on the significance of his dream. He was suspicious of what it meant, skeptical that this vision of Avalokiteśvara might be negative. Perhaps he was being deceived and the dream was inspired by a demon or a portent of some terrible event. We learn then that it is Jangchup Sengé’s doubt, his lack of faith in the auspiciousness of his vision in the middle of the night, that causes his death. This is rather unusual, at least from a Buddhist scholastic standpoint; doubt and skepticism in Buddhist canonical literature are rarely, if ever, described as life-threatening. Doubt is included among the classic list of ten “fetters” (Skt. saṃyojana) that keep sentient beings tied to the cycle of rebirth, but nowhere do the canonical texts say that doubt leads directly to death.³ In other formal Buddhist writings (Tibetan monastic textbooks on epistemology for example), doubt is even explained as positive in the initial stage of progress along the religious path, a natural and necessary step leading from ignorance to a direct knowledge of truth.⁴ In any case, it is clear that at least for Jangchup Sengé doubt was fatal.

Four Frightening Enemies

Like those délok before him, Jangchup Sengé also gives formal descriptions of the dissolution phases of dying. He recalls the sounds of crumbling mountains, the sensations of being overcome by a great river, of being engulfed in a blazing fire, and of being blown about by heavy wind. All are direct references to the so-called “four frightening enemies” (jigs-pa’i dgra-bzhi) said to be experienced during the collapse of the four elements, earth, water, fire, and wind.⁵ In fact, most of the experiences reported in Jangchup Sengé’s death narrative
seem to be pulled directly from standard textbook explanations of the psycho-
physical process of dying and dissolution. He relates his own personal expe-
riences of this process:

I woke up at sunrise and thought about my dream of Avalokiteśvara. I
had some doubts about whether the dream was good or bad and as
these doubts continued my body began to feel hot and feverish. I
had no interest whatsoever in eating food, no dairy or sweets. I
thought I should get up but I wasn’t able to. Feeling thirsty I thought
I should go and drink water but when I stood up I had the sense
that I had flown into the sky. I thought my home was being threat-
ened. I had visions that every inch of my body was being struck
with sharp spears and knives and countless weapons. Then suddenly
I had the impression that buildings atop Mount Meru were crum-
bling down, and in a flash I had a vision of being overtaken by a great
river. Then suddenly I was engulfed in a blazing mountain of fire.
Then I was pulled by a crossed vajra (rgya-gram) into a black column
of wind. Suddenly in a single moment many thousands of suns
appeared and I had the sense that I was engulfed in light. At that
moment I heard the words “Kill! Kill! Strike! Strike!” resounding like
a thousand thunderclaps simultaneously. I had the sense that thou-
sands of years had passed by one year at a time.

Everything up to this point was the preparatory phase of the
dissolution] of the four elements during the bardo of dying (’chi-kha
bar-do). It is at this time that one should perform the stages of
transference (’pho-ba) according to the teachings quoted [in the
books]. Follow those instructions (ngo-sprod) in due order after the
external breath has ceased and the [dissolution] of the four elements
is complete. After the internal breath has ceased and when the five
lights begin to dawn the instructions are like this: “om maṇi padme
hūm. O son of noble family, listen without distraction . . .”

We see in this passage, as in the other previous délok accounts, that the
délok descriptions of death accord generally with the authorized written sour-
ces and with one another. But, as might be expected, some of the accounts lack
a degree of formal precision and detail. This is not at all surprising, of course,
in the case of Lingza Chökyi and Karma Wangzin since we know they were
not religious scholars or tantric specialists, nor were they particularly ad-
vanced practitioners, though Karma Wangzin was clearly more experienced
than Lingza Chökyi. What these two women do say about their deaths, how-
ever, shows at least some familiarity with the advanced doctrines (apparently
taught to them by their male teachers or interpolated by an editor or scribe), but perhaps only informally understood and assimilated as part of a more personalized interpretation of their experiences. Jampa Délek and Jangchup Sengé, on the other hand, make it very clear that they are true scholars of the subject and have some degree of skill in meditative practice. Both mention, for example, performing the advanced yogic practice of transference (’pho-ba) and even give instructions on when best to apply the practice. Jangchup Sengé, moreover, identifies explicitly the technical names of the bardo stages (e.g., bardo of dying, bardo of reality-itself, and so on) that we find in the doctrinal and ritual works, and at times his narrative voice even takes on the authoritative tone of a scholarly text itself, knowledgeable and pedantic. This is most clearly demonstrated in the occasional use of a literary style normally found in specialized literature like what we read in the Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo, the so-called Tibetan Book of the Dead, “O son of noble family, listen without distraction . . . ,” and so forth. In these examples, it is almost as if Jangchup Sengé and Jampa Délek, or more likely the scribes that took down their stories, simply inserted large chunks of the formal literature directly into the narrative.

Keeping these distinctions in mind, we can suggest that the death accounts of Jangchup Sengé, Karma Wangzin, Jampa Délek, and Lingza Chökyi all equally highlight the contours of a variety of popular Tibetan notions of death and dying, many of which are rooted in some aspect of Buddhist formal doctrine. Such common notions include the idea that death can be brought on by intense emotional distress, which is something quite different from what the tantric and medical texts indicate; the idea that dying is a horribly unpleasant experience; also, the idea of the body’s gradual collapse at death by means of the serial disintegration of the psychophysical elements; and finally, the idea that in conjunction with the dissolution of the elements there occur a variety of visionary experiences of sound and light, and horrible human-like phantoms appear with weapons in hand bellowing threats of torture and murder. When all is said and done, according to these evocative délok accounts, the last moments of life are fraught with anxiety and panic, even for those who may have accomplished some degree of meditative skill. But the horrors do not end at death. The délok narratives go on to describe the traumatic experience of survival without a body, roaming about invisible in the company of the living.

Ghosts

Jangchup Sengé describes his own autoscopic experience after dying. His is a true ghost story in every sense of that label:
[A door appeared] and as soon as I thought I should go behind the door I arrived there. Then thinking I should go inside the house I arrived at my family’s home. Vegetables were cooking on the stove and I asked for some, but none were given to me. I thought they were angry at me so I decided to go somewhere else. Some people on the roof were calling out religious [verses] and so I went up there, but no one said anything to me. I thought all my relatives and friends were angry with me. Then I showed up [again] behind the door. There was someone standing watch at the wheel of the water mill and I asked, “What are you doing?” But there was no answer. I thought this person must be hard of hearing. Then, I went inside the water mill where I saw my nephew grinding barley flour (rtsam-pa). I thought I should eat the flour but [I worried that] my nephew might get suspicious of me if I took some. I said, “Nephew, is a portion of this flour you’re making going to be set aside for a religious offering?” But there was no answer. I thought, “This bad person is also not speaking to me. I need to eat some flour.” When I reached into the leather grain sack (skyal-khung) the millstone shook and my nephew called out, “Are ghosts roaming about?” and drew his knife. I asked him [in surprise], “Ghosts are wandering [around]? Did your parents die? Who in the village has died?” My nephew didn’t answer me. I thought, “It seems as though some [ghost] is messing with that barley flour of his,” and I ran behind the door of the water mill. Then I became thirsty.

On the banks of the river there was a young girl carrying water. I tried to fetch some water but the girl didn’t even say anything to me. Then I thought I should drink the water and reached my hand into the girl’s bucket but the bucket fell off her shoulders and the bottom burst open. I thought, “That girl is going to get mad at me,” and like before I quickly ran away. A neighbor was drinking beer but didn’t say I could drink any. I thought, “All these people are angry at me,” and I thought I should [again] go behind the door. A horse was there when I arrived. I grabbed the horse by the tail and the horse collapsed. I was very frightened. Then I came out from behind the door and the horse’s condition improved.

After that [I saw] an old woman carrying a load (khal) of wool and I asked her, “What are you doing with this wool?” The old woman didn’t speak to me. Then I thought I should take some of this wool but when I reached out to grab it, pieces of wool were carried off in the wind. The old woman quickly ran about to and fro [to
retrieve it] and I thought, “All those pieces of wool have been carried off in the wind. What’s the best thing for me to do?” I ran away.

Now I thought I should go to the monastery, and so I went there. A dog followed after me on the road nipping at me. On the roof of a house was a girl who said, “That corpse has taken on the form of a dog-demon!” I thought, “It seems she’s calling me a demon.” I said to that girl, “Show me that lowly demon!” But she said nothing at all and went back inside. Then thinking I should go to the monastery I arrived there. In my room was a corpse. I was very frightened. Its arms and legs were stretched out in four directions and placed face down on the ground. At the foot of this corpse were two terrifying hunting dogs. I panicked and recited $\text{om ma ni pad me hUhm}$. Then I went over to take a look. The corpse’s legs were tied behind its head. I was terribly frightened. I then thought, “It seems I’ve died,” and as soon as this crossed my mind I arrived outside [in front of] a large mountain . . .

As we have seen at various points throughout this study, it is generally accepted that the immediately deceased in their ethereal disembodied condition cannot be seen by ordinary people. This is not unusual since the dead are no longer in this world, but clearly they are not completely detached from it. Jangchup Sengé’s account above gives us reason to suggest that there was also a belief in Tibet that the dead could actually interfere with the physical world of the living, causing mill stones to shake, buckets to topple over, pieces of wool to spill out of bags, and horses to collapse. To the living, these physical disruptions were perceived as sure signs that ghosts were haunting the premises. In the case of Jangchup Sengé, that “ghost” was simply a humble monk looking for food, unaware that he had died. And in the end, we again see references to dogs barking at invisible spirits, which is yet more evidence of the close link that is perceived to exist between dogs and the dead.

Buddhists everywhere believe in ghosts. But what exactly are ghosts in Buddhism? We generally use the term “ghost” to refer to the spirit of the dead who lingers at the scene of its previous life. In Buddhism there are a variety of classifications of spirits, but only a few can be identified as “ghosts” in the general sense of disincarnate beings who continue to exist in some form after death. We should clearly distinguish these sorts of spirits from those categories of beings who represent the rebirth of the deceased and belong to their own realm of existence, and who are known to Buddhist canonical literature as preta (Pali, peta, Tib. yi-dwags)—frequently translated as “hungry ghost.” We have already noted that stories of these Buddhist preta inspired several key narrative
elements in the Tibetan délok literature, most importantly the emphasis on the special ritual bonds between preta and living relatives and the offerings required for the benefit of the dead. We find some of those features also in Janchup Sengé’s account, but the ghosts that concern us presently are the spirits of the dead who roam about here and now haunting the living.

The Tibetan word most commonly used for this sort of spirit of the dead is jungpo and, like the word for zombie, rolang, discussed in the last chapter, is somewhat ambiguously defined. The word jungpo is roughly equivalent to the Sanskrit bhūta, meaning literally “has been, gone” and referring in Indian contexts both to the ghost of a deceased person and to a particular type of demon. Technically, the Tibetan jungpo are demonic spirits without physical form who cause obstructions and harm to human beings. In Tibetan medical literature, such as the authoritative Four-fold Tantra, the word identifies a type of possessing demon that causes insanity; eighteen classes of such demons are enumerated. Tales of the ghostly jungpo of the sort that resemble our own more gothic-inspired ideas—that is, of angry spirits who hang about haunting the living—are rare in Tibetan Buddhist written sources, though stories of vengeful spirits and yearning ghosts are preserved abundantly in oral lore. Witness the following testimony by Rinchen Lhamo, wife of the British diplomat Louis M. King and one of the first Tibetans to write in English about old Tibetan customs:

That there are such things as the spirits of the dead is a fact of common knowledge, of human experience. Ordinarily you cannot see them, but there are some people so constituted as to be able to see them. . . . Sometimes the dead try and draw the living after them. This is where some great affection existed, the dead desiring their loved ones to join them. Sometimes it happens when not affection but hatred is there, the dead had suffered some great injustice.

It is only to living people that the thoughts of the dead are apt to turn, but also to material objects they were especially attached to in life; and so it is that no Tibetan will knowingly use things that were of special moment to some one who has died.

In all cases where contact with the dead has occurred, the lamas are called in. They hold the appropriate service and the spirit of the dead departs, leaving the living in peace.

Discarnate spirits are also said to disport themselves in wood and glade and ravine. They dance as we do, round-dances. And here and there you may see, in some secluded place, the circle their feet have trodden in the grass. If a human being comes upon them
they disappear. But not always. There is the story of the man who was riding home late one evening, and came upon a girl all alone and far from everywhere. She asked him to let her ride behind him on his horse. He consented and sat her behind him, and tied his sash round them both, so that she should not fall off, and rode home. Arrived, he found he had behind him, tightly tied to him by the sash, nothing but a bundle of straw. He thrust the bundle into the fire, taking no heed of a voice from it, begging him not to burn her. You can see the story points a moral.11

In the délok narratives we also find the belief that the souls of human beings continue to hang around for a time after death and that with the demise of the physical body the human personality persists, its hang-ups and desires in tact.

To offer a more formal Buddhist definition of ghost in purely theoretical terms, we could say that these spirits of the dead are actually the animated traces of a person’s karmic propensities and mental habits (Skt. vāsanā, Tib. bag-chags). At the time of death, these karmic imprints continue to exert a firm hold on the consciousness of the deceased and take the form of a subtle, illusory “double” of the individual. This phantom double is imbued with the memories and emotions that propelled the life that has just been left behind. Across all Buddhist cultures it is believed that the quality of a dying person’s last thoughts exerts a determinative influence on that individual’s future destiny. Committed Buddhist practitioners thus seek to die with a calm, focused, and virtuous mind. But if a person panics in their critical last moments or is full of fear or strong attachment, that nonvirtuous energy sets a negative course into the next life, and in some cases can even create a ghost of the person. This ghost clings to former attachments and hovers around familiar places where these objects of desire remain. This scenario is indeed typical of what we find in the délok biographies more generally and in particular in the stories discussed in the previous chapters. There are two compelling and significant events in the délok narratives that relate to what I have briefly described here about ghosts in Buddhism and that occur in all four of our tales. The first is the by now familiar scene in which the recently deceased sees his or her own corpse in distorted nightmarish form but does not recognize it for what it is. Then, in the second instance, the person, still unaware of being dead, tries desperately to communicate unsuccessfully with relatives and friends, all of whom are visible and present in the same room with the délok but never respond. Angry and confused, the deceased wanders about from place to place looking for answers about his or her condition before setting off on the journey to hell.
Looking back over the relevant passages quoted in the preceding chapters, we can now highlight several general notions about death and the experience of the dead shared by all four of our délok protagonists, despite differences of social status and religious authority. These popular notions include the idea that the dead do not immediately depart to their next place of rebirth and do not immediately recognize that they have died; the idea that the boundaries between the living and the dead are transparent and permeable; and that the dead are able to interact with beings not usually perceived by the living. The dead, moreover, are highly emotional beings who retain very personal memories of their lives and social bonds. They are strongly affected by former attachments and attracted to familiar places of security—the village, the home, the bedroom, the monastery—in much the same way that ghosts are often described in our own legends hovering around familiar places where objects of comfort and desire are still to be found.

Compassionate Guidance

Jangchup Sengé sets off on his journey and describes his encounter with various therianthropic minions of hell, the shinjé or yamas, who stand guard over a bridge that separates the living from the dead:

...I arrived on the banks of a large river where I heard voices shouting loudly, “Strike! Kill!” On the far side of the river was a large human-headed guide and above him the ox-headed shinjé. In front of them were countless numbers of lay men and women crying and wailing. In the river itself were the serpent-headed and fish-headed shinjé and about a million other lords of the dead. They wielded a variety of weapons, like lassos and sky-iron swords, and so forth. Then I asked the human-like frog-headed shinjé, “Where are you guys going?” and he responded, “We’re coming to welcome sinners.” I then asked, “What’s the name of that river?” The black shinjé said with pride, “This river is called Wailing River. We use this bridge to lead the sinners along ...”  

In all four délok stories we see consistent mention of a river and a bridge. These images recall an almost universal feature of the netherworld found throughout the world, as for example, in Indo-European mythologies of the afterlife, in the myths of ancient Greece, with its five underworld rivers (Styx, Acheron, Cocytus, Lethe, and Phlegethon), and in the Iranian conception of the famous Cinvat Bridge, “Bridge of the Separator.”  

In India there is the
river Vaitaraṇī, described in early Buddhist sources as “boiling water loaded with burning ashes” and surrounded on both sides by “persons armed with swords, lances and javelins, who push back the damned who would get out.” These poor souls are “boiled and cooked, as the grains of sesame or corn poured into a cauldron placed over the fire.”

But this river Vaitaraṇī is itself one among several distinct hell realms; it is one of the neighboring infernal places of torment that surround the eight hot hells described in chapter 2. In the délok accounts, however, the river and the bridge that crosses over it stand at the entrance to hell, the other world described as both hell and the bardo. The bridged river is a patent symbol of transition. It suggests the proximity of the living and the dead and the precariousness of passage between the two worlds.

We now know the délok always moves through hell accompanied by a guide. Jangchup Senge’s guide is none other than the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in the form of a young boy named Jiktën Wangchuk (Skt. Lokeśvara):

I had gone to a land where everything was dark. Pushed from behind by the strong winds of karma, I could hear [Yama] Shinje’s workers shouting like a thousand thunderclaps, “Kill! Kill! Strike! Strike!” The ground below me was molten iron and it burned my feet and hands. My focus cleared up a bit but I could barely see anything at all; [it was like looking through] the eye of a needle. On all sides, Shinje’s workers shouted, “Kill! Kill! Strike! Strike!” The ground of burning iron began to tremble and quake. Countless numbers of sinners were being pursued like children chased after by hawks and again I became very frightened. I didn’t have even a single friend [to help me]. I didn’t know where to go; I wasn’t familiar with this place. As soon as I had these thoughts, I was picked up like a feather in the wind and thrown down onto a path that countless sinners had also fallen onto. I saw incalculable karmic lords of death with human-like heads; some were killing sinners, some were devouring their flesh, others were drinking their blood, crushing their bones, pulling out their intestines, and licking their brains. Ōṃ maṇī padme ṭhūṃ ḍhrī. I was very frightened and out of despair I called out like this:

“Oh! I pray to the compassionate buddhas and bodhisattvas. My suffering is inconceivable. My previous karma has come to fruition. Initially [when I was still alive], the heat in my body was unbearable, but when [I died and] my mind separated from my body, the suffering was endless. When I rose up to the bardo of
peaceful and wrathful deities my mind wavered and my fear was overwhelming; I couldn’t hide it. Now I’m worried about being separated from my parents and friends. May the compassionate buddhas and bodhisattvas escort me. I’m worried about wandering around an unfamiliar place. May the compassionate buddhas and bodhisattvas advise me. I’m worried because I’m surrounded by armies on the perilous path of Shinjé [Lord of the Dead]. May the compassionate buddhas and bodhisattvas accompany me. I’m worried about other sorts of punishments. I pray to the compassionate buddhas and bodhisattvas.”

As soon as I had called out these supplications, an eight year old boy appeared in front of me sitting atop a layered sun, moon, and lotus heap. His body was white with a tinge of red. His upper garments were made of fine silk brocade and his hair was the color of a rainbow. He wore red silk garments around his waist fastened with a crystal belt and red silk around his neck. On the protuberance atop his head he wore a reddish green crown inlaid with precious ornaments. He wore a variety of jewels in his ears and on his hands and shoulders, and bracelets around his feet and ankles. He said to me, “Boy, you’re having dream visions in the bardo but since your perception is impure [you experience] these anguished visions as negative and externally manifest.” Above the eight year old boy I heard a voice say, “The self-resounding syllables roar. [I hold] in my hand a vase perpetually radiant and [filled with] garlands of sacred jewels (mani). I bestow upon you the fortunes of this vase. I am the Great Compassionate One [Avalokiteśvara].” Then from the protuberance atop the boy’s head appeared the eleven faces of the Great Compassionate One . . . .

Here, before meeting his compassionate divine guide, the frightened Jangchup Sengé calls out a prayer of supplication, invoking the buddhas and bodhisattvas to help lead him along the path. The words he recites are similar to those we read in the basic prayers associated with the Tibetan bardo rites, such as the Prayer Requesting the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for Assistance—a short devotional text included in every manuscript and facsimile edition of the Tibetan Book of the Dead:

When the time has come to go alone and without friends, may the compassionate ones [buddhas and bodhisattvas] provide refuge to so-and-so [name of the deceased] who has no refuge. Protect him, defend him, be a refuge from the great darkness of the bardo, turn
him away from the great storms of karma, provide comfort from the
great fear and terror of the Lord of Death, deliver him from the long
and perilous pathway of the bardo. O, Compassionate One, have
compassion [on him] and don’t let it be small. Assist him, don’t
send him to the three lower realms, don’t forget your former vows.
Please indulge him with [your] compassion.17

When Jangchup Sengé indicates that Avalokiteśvara himself actually ap-
ppears before him to give comfort and advice the efficacy of ritual prayers like this
is certainly reinforced. Jangchup Sengé is also reminded that the visions he is
experiencing are in reality nothing more than the projections of his deluded
mind. We remember that this same idea, expounded in the advanced yogic
literature and liturgical manuals, is alluded to also in the stories of Lingza Chökýi
and Karma Wangzin. So, it would appear scholarly notions of this sort are not as
rarefied as one might think. At the very least, we know this idea to be a common
trope in a variety of Tibetan literary contexts, including the popular délok nar-
ratives. Another widespread and familiar element is the compassionate hero.

Reports abound in the délok texts of beloved lamas “harrowing” hell and
freeing countless numbers of tormented beings from their shackles. There are
specific types of advanced tantric practices available for accomplishing such
things; that is, eradicating the sins of others who may be unable to help
themselves. The process is likened to pulling something up from its roots (rtsa-
ba nas ‘don-pa). These practices are referred to as “dredging the depths of hell”
(na-rag dong-sprugs) and are frequently mentioned by name in the délok liter-
ature as rites to be performed for the benefit of the dead.18 Scenes of yogis
performing these practices successfully are repeated a number of times in
the individual stories of Lingza Chökýi, Jampa Délek, Karma Wangzin, and
Jangchup Sengé. Invariably such dramatic gestures can be viewed as testa-
ments to the extraordinary skill and compassion of these accomplished yogis.

To be sure, the descent into the netherworld of saintly heroes intent on
saving the damned is a common theme found in a wide array of Buddhist works
throughout Tibet, India, China, and Japan. The tale of the Buddha’s disciple
Maudgalyāyana is the prototype of this sort of savior narrative. The story of the
hell journey of Maudgalyāyana (Ch. Mulian) to save his suffering mother is
widely popular in China where it forms the framing narrative of the famous
“ghost festival.”19 In Tibet there is no such festival, but we do find similar
episodes in popular epics like King Géṣar of Ling and in the “liberation sto-
ries” (rnam-thar) of renowned mystics, such as the great treasure-revealer Guru
Chöwang (1212–1270), both of which we will return to again in the next
chapter.20 Jangchup Sengé in his account of his own hell journey mentions
Maudgalyāyana explicitly by name and even visits the very place where this
great Buddhist saint had saved his mother:

Then [I found myself walking] along some road. With each and ev-
ery step the ground was transformed and flowers popped up [wher-
ever I had last stepped]. I asked, “What’s going on?” and [my
young guide] Jikten Wangchuk said: “In a former age, when the
Buddha, the Supramundane Victor, was residing [in the world],
Maudgalyāyana (Tib. Me’u-’gal-gyi-bu) had come here to lead his
mother out of the hell realms. At that time, each spot where Maud-
galyāyana stepped turned into flowers. On the road that leads here
Maudgalyāyana erected a temple as a ransom for his mother.”

I then left and saw the temple. Inside were two large copper
cauldrons turned face down. That temple has the capacity to remove
suffering just by being seen and when the two large copper caul-
drons are seen all sentient beings are released from fear. That temple
is also a four-sided celestial palace with four ornamental gates, a
series of archways, and dharma wheels (Tib. chos-khor, Skt.
dharmacakra). I circumambulated the temple and offered praises. Inside
the temple I heard the harmonious music of gods and goddesses. I
prayed to Jikten Wangchuk. Then from the temple’s eastern gate a
white iron hook appeared, and someone said, “Yogi! Grab hold of my
iron hook.” I asked, “Who is this?” and in response I was told: “This
temple was erected as a ransom for Maudgalyāyana’s mother. These
large copper cauldrons are the chief copper vessels for Maudga-
lyāyana’s mother.” I grabbed onto the iron hook and went inside.

In the temple lived the forty-two peaceful deities, the fifty-eight
ferocious blood drinking deities,21 and the five chief buddhas and
their retinues. I aroused my faith in these deities and prayed to them
as follows: “Homage to the gurus! I pray to the compassionate
buddhas and bodhisattvas. I pray that I may circumambulate many
millions of times the lineage of the Buddha’s teachings and re-
ceive their blessings. In the palace of great bliss at the crown of the
head resides the Buddha Śākyamuni. I pray that I may circumam-
bulate many millions of times the arhats and receive their blessings.
In the palace of immutable bliss resides the great Dharmakāya Vaj-
radhāra. I pray that I may circumambulate many millions of times
the siddhas and receive their blessings.”

Jikten Wangchuk said: “These supplications that you make are
self-liberated divine visions (lha-snang rang-grol). If you meet with this
and accumulate [merit] then in this auspicious age you will without doubt obtain magical powers (siddhi) using whatever personal meditation deity (yi-dam) you choose . . . .”

The return-from-death accounts of the délok certainly share strong structural parallels with the heroic descent narratives of Maudgalyāyana and others, but the délok texts themselves must be seen as really quite a different sort of literature. As we know all to well by now, these délok stories are about ordinary people who just happened to have had extraordinary otherworldly experiences. Their journeys are hapless ones and are rarely made by choice.  

In the King’s Court

In the judgment accounts of Jangchup Sengé, Yama’s court is populated by great numbers of monks and lamas, many of whom are identified as former residents of Katok monastery—the mother institution of Jangchup Sengé’s own monastic home in eastern Tibet. Some of them are even délok themselves. Jangchup Sengé also describes numerous scenes involving the judgment of various men and women, monks and nuns, as in the tales of Lingza Chökyi, Jampa Délék, and Karma Wangzin. But unlike the specific cases described in the earlier biographies, our two female délok in particular, the sinners in Jangchup Sengé’s account are frequently identified without reference to their personal names or to the locales of their former homes. More like Jampa Délék’s record of the many court dramas he witnesses, Jangchup Sengé speaks of his court experience in similarly generic terms. The few personalities whose names are actually given by Jangchup Sengé are primarily yogis and religious specialists, and most of them are affiliated in one way or another with Katok monastery. This discrepancy of detail in descriptions of otherworld travels highlights an interesting difference between the délok accounts of women and men and may indicate why in Tibet stories of the hell journeys of Lingza Chökyi and Karma Wangzin appear to have been a bit more widespread than those of their male counterparts. That is, of course, assuming that stories with a more personalized and regional flavor appealed more to local audiences. But we should be careful not to push the differences between them too much. Jangchup Sengé’s story does contain some rather specific local references, as in the following account of his trial in hell:

We arrived before Shinjé Chökyi Gyelpo and [my guide] Jiktén Wangchuk said: “Oh, Shinjé Chökyi Gyelpo, please listen to me. This humble beggar Jangchup Sengé, who in the past was without
hindrances, is a member of my retinue. Please send him back up to the mundane world.”

Shinjé Chökyi Gyelpo then asked me: “Why did you die and cross over here from the mundane world?”

I replied: “Oh, Chökyi Gyelpo, please listen to me. I am a yogi who has died. My domain is in Lhogyel [the southern continent of Jambudvīpa] and I belong to the Trawa clan. Nowadays, my place of residence is a village called Ralang, which is on the right side of the Nyakchu river. My homeland is the region of Kham. My father’s name is Tarpa and my mother’s is Zhangmén. My own name is Jangchup Sengé and I’m the middle child of eight brothers. I was educated under the tutelage of a Bönpo lama named Tsachok Bhéro and it was he who introduced (ngo-phrad) me to [the nature] of mind as it exists in the bardo realm.”

As soon as I spoke, Chökyi Gyelpo looked at his scored wooden tablet (khram-shing) and the paper scroll [inscribed] with virtues and sins and said, “Ah! What you told me is true.” Then the lion-headed yama looked into his clear mirror and said, “Human, everything you’ve said is true.” The angry serpent-headed one said, “Human, it is certain that the gateway to your home is in the southern region.” I thought, “This is in reality my own [natural state of being].” Then Chökyi Gyelpo said to me, “Go on!” and I left . . .

Here we learn of Jangchup Sengé’s birthplace, family details, and the names of his parents and teachers. Moreover, the non-Buddhist Bönpo are presented in rather favorable light, which is unusual in Tibetan Buddhist literature. Remember in Lingza Chökyi’s biography, for example, the family dispute that ignited over the choice of who should perform her funeral services. The rites of the Buddhist lamas won out over those of the Bönpo priests. And remember Karma Wangzin’s Bönpo companion at court who had been brought to hell because of her misguided faith. Yama sent her back so that she could convert to Buddhism. Jangchup Sengé’s early Bön training, on the other hand, actually seems to have contributed to his virtuous character. In this perhaps we see evidence again of a délok story reaching out to its local audience. We already noted at the beginning of this chapter that the eastern Tibetan valley of Nyarong, the home of Jangchup Sengé, has long been a stronghold of the Bönpo tradition.

Following his brief trial, Jangchup Sengé relates a long discussion with Yama Shinjé about the various causes of death, what to do when death arrives, the benefits of the six-syllable mani mantra, and the special qualities of the
jodar—a type of prayer flag to be set up for the benefit of the dead and for those suffering in hell. We will discuss this in greater length in the next chapter, but it is worth noting here that the origin of the jodar, said to be a more effective means for gaining merit than even Buddhist images and stupas, is traced by tradition back to Jangchup Sengé himself.

In the end, Yama, the Lord of the Dead pronounces his judgment and exhorts Jangchup Sengé to mend his ways and commit to a life of religious service for the welfare of all suffering beings. His return is much quicker than the others, but in his account we do see other identical elements, such as reference to the familiar animal corpse, along with a few other special creatures:

Then I came up to the mundane human world. I arrived inside a hut that I had visited before and there I saw the corpse of a dog. A honey bee inside the corpse’s mouth was counting out maṅi. On the roof of the house a pigeon appeared and said, “What a pity! Boy, are you not feeling very strong?” Then also a swallow arrived, having come out of its nest, and said, “Boy, you’ve come here now go inside!” I went up close to the dog’s corpse and saw [that it was dressed in] clothing. I thought I should take the clothes, but because my body and mind were separated I couldn’t do it. My body felt like it was being held down by a mountain. I thought I should stand up but I wasn’t able to. My body felt like a water stone (chu-rdo) without heat. I then thought, “That dog’s corpse is my own corpse!” and I felt as sad as a depressed ox. At that moment, in the sky in front of me, Jikten Wangchuk appeared and said, “With just a little will power you will attain a precious human body. You’ve arrived inside your own proper home.” I then recovered my presence of mind [and returned to my body]....

The emphasis placed here on the saving power of Avalokitesvara’s six-syllable maṅi mantra gives us a fine launching point for our closing reflections on the délok in Tibet. In the next chapter, we conclude by examining the possible historical and social links between the tradition of the Tibetan maṇi-pa, or wandering storytellers, and the literature of the délok. We will also return to questions raised at the beginning of the book and throughout our discussions about the nature of popular Buddhism in Tibetan society.
What did people do when they returned from death? In Tibet they told their stories. They recounted in vivid detail their terrifying experiences and relayed the messages from the dead they met during their travels through the netherworld. The custom of oral recitation and storytelling was well established from early on in Tibet and continues to the present day. Those who told stories professionally enjoyed a certain level of favored status in village life as entertainers, preachers, and public orators of beloved local lore and time-honored Buddhist themes. Whatever the origin of professional storytellers in Tibet (and to date only a few theories have been proposed), they served much the same roles in society as did the yamapada storytellers in India, the performers of the bianwen (“transformation [texts]”) in China, and of the etoki (“picture explanation”) in Japan. Giuseppe Tucci offers a succinct description of the popular raconteurs in Tibet:

The custom survives in Tibet; in the fairs, places of pilgrimage and bazars [sic] of the chief cities one frequently meets itinerant lamas or laymen, who sing to a devoutly spell-bound audience wonderful stories about Padmasambhava and the glories of Amitābha’s heaven, showing as they sing, on large tankas they unroll, the pictorial representation of the events or miracles they are relating. Often
they repeat tales in verse, reciting them in a sort of sing-song, and drawing them from a special section of sacred literature, called gsol adebs [gsol-'debs], hymns or invocations; the saint is invoked in each verse, with a brief allusion to one of the most remarkable episodes of his life, a vision he had or a miracle he performed; some tankas . . . are precisely illustrated gsol adebs.3

It was not only stories of buddhas and great religious figures that were orally delivered. We find evidence in the historical records and even have access to contemporary examples of the practice of entertaining audiences by reciting the deeds of Tibetan epic heroes. The tale of Gésar, King of Ling, is the most celebrated of these epic stories.4 The professional epic bards (sgrung-mkhan), some of them women and most all of them illiterate, were proficient in reciting and performing from memory the story of Gésar, which they learned from childhood. It was often the case that these bards were invited on special occasions by local rulers and prominent noble families to recite favorite episodes from Gésar’s adventures. The epic of Gésar is even performed as a dance (gling-bro), which is particularly popular in eastern Tibet.

The tradition of public oral recitation of the deeds of famous epic heroes like King Gésar hearkens back to the earliest recorded period in Tibetan history (ca. seventh century) when the great ruling families relied on professional minstrels to preserve and transmit the clan’s genealogies and the records of past glories and battle victories. During this period, we know of two types of professional bard: the déu, singers of riddles and epic poems, and the drung, the storytellers. The déu performers recited their tales in the form of questions and answers, in a call-and-response style, during important festivals (e.g., horse races) or during other momentous communal gatherings.5 Their songs dealt with a variety of mythological and religious subjects, such as the creation of the world and the nature of gods and demons. The role of the drung was similar to that of the déu, though it was more customary for the drung to recite stories about the origins of the different Tibetan clans, the genealogies of particular families, and the exploits of local heroes.6 Stein suggests that from the eleventh century onward, the old oral tales of the drung gave shape to and were incorporated into “an edifying literature of anecdotes and moral maxims” that preserved a large body of popular ancient lore, some elements of which were indigenous to Tibet and others inherited from India.7 One such example that still survives is Tales of the Magic Corpse, which we examined briefly in chapter 4. That work is directly linked to the storytelling tradition of the drung by the sixteenth-century Tibetan historian Pawo Tsukla Tréngwa (1504–1566) in his influential history of Buddhism in India and Tibet, Feast for Scholars.8
The songs of the Tibetan *drung* were often brought to life in theatrical performance with the principal characters portrayed in masked dances or *cham*. The *cham* is essentially monastic theater, but there were also similar dances sponsored by the government during the New Year festivities and on special religious holidays. These court dramas (*gar*) were first formally established in the seventeenth century under the leadership of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) and his regent Dési Sangyé Gyatso (1653–1705). Monastic dance and government performances were not the only theatrical traditions in Tibet. In addition, there were popular street songs (*khrom-gzhas*), which were very often used as channels for public satire and social criticism, and other forms of folk song (*nang-ma*), as well as Tibetan opera or *lhamo*. Many of these dramas, songs, and dances (*zlos-gar*) are still popular today throughout Tibet, Bhutan, and India and bring to life many of the same subjects that were included in the repertoire of the Tibetan storytellers. Indeed, it is a common claim in Tibet that the *lhamo* itself actually evolved from the storytelling tradition, its origins attributed to the great visionary and culture hero Tangtong Gyelpo (1361–1485). We may note with some interest that our *délok* Janchup Sengé was closely affiliated with the lineage of this famous figure, even meeting him in the afterlife. Moreover, one of Tangtong Gyelpo’s direct disciples known by the Sanskrit name Ratnabhadra, whom I will introduce shortly below, was renowned as the first professional storyteller of *délok* tales.

The founding of Tibetan opera is just one among many of the innovative accomplishments Tangtong Gyelpo has become famous for throughout the Tibetan-speaking world. His most celebrated achievement, of course, was civil engineering and, in particular, the construction of iron suspension bridges. Several of these bridges are still standing, their foundations in place, though to my knowledge none are still in use. Legend has it that Tangtong Gyelpo first organized his opera group, the “seven siblings” (*spun-bdun*), in order to raise money for the cost of building bridges. Even so, it is much easier to confirm historically his connection to iron bridges than his relationship to Tibetan opera. There is no evidence in the historical record that corroborates his direct link to the theatrical tradition. Nevertheless, among contemporary drama troupes in Tibet and Bhutan, and in the Tibetan exile communities in India, images of Tangtong Gyelpo are ubiquitous, and even to this day Tibetan *lhamo* performers look upon him as their patron saint and begin all performances with dedications to him.

The traditional *lhamo* repertoire includes a number of time-honored plays. One such play that is especially relevant to our focus is the masked drama of the maiden Nangsa Öbum. As mentioned in earlier chapters, Nangsa Öbum is a semi-legendary figure who may date back to the eleventh or twelfth century.
Her story has something in common with the délok narratives, such as those of Lingza Chökyi and Karma Wangzin, and roughly follows the general plot of those works. Allow me to briefly summarize the basic story line. Nangsa Öbum was a young girl from Nyangtö in southwestern Tibet (in present-day Gyantsé). One day, a lord named Drakchen, from nearby Rinang, saw Nangsa Öbum at a temple festival. He fell in love with her at first sight and demanded that her parents give her to him in marriage. Her parents consented and sent her off, against her wishes, to be married to this local lord. This was an arrangement that caused Nangsa Öbum great distress and one she wished to flee from in order to devote herself to the religious life. She was, however, unable to avoid her domestic fate and was married and gave birth to a son. Eventually, after enduring much abuse from lord Drakchen and her in-laws, she chose to leave her home to become a disciple of a charismatic Buddhist yogi. After she returned from visiting the yogi, her father-in-law scolded and accused her of being a disobedient wife and a sinful woman. The elder lord took her child away and beat Nangsa Öbum repeatedly until she collapsed, lost consciousness, and died. She then traveled to the realm of the dead where she met Yama Shinjé. The story at this point parallels the standard délok tale, and particularly that of Lingza Chökyi. Upon Nangsa Öbum’s return to life, she became a nun and was recognized as a virtuous religious figure. She worked tirelessly to convince all the sinners in her life to give up their wicked ways and to practice religion. She even succeeded in converting the lord Drakchen to Buddhism. Like the délok tales, the drama of Nangsa Öbum emphasizes basic Buddhist ideals and highlights certain realities of Tibetan domestic life, conveying the toils of everyday living and the hope of brighter days. In so doing, the story is sympathetic to the common people, especially women, and for this reason has remained one of the most popular dramas of Tibetan opera.

Given similarities in plot and theme, the tale of Nangsa Öbum is frequently cited as belonging to the délok genre. But there is reason to see it as only tangentially related to that body of literature because Nangsa Öbum’s return-from-death episode is only a very small component of the larger story. Still, as a literary piece it is rather unique. Françoise Pommaret is correct to note that Nangsa Öbum’s story is the only délok account (assuming we accept it as such) that was and continues to be performed as a theatrical play and dance.¹⁵ There is no evidence in the later texts that any of the délok narratives were ever dramatized. But were they ever the subjects of oral recitation? Were the accounts of Lingza Chökyi, Jampa Délek, Karma Wangzin, and Jangchup Sengé, for example, intended to be heard in the public square or were they only produced for private reading? And we might also ask, were the délok themselves storytellers?
Strolling Masters of the Six Syllables

Throughout all the dêlok biographies, there is one theme that consistently emerges—faith in the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and in the effectiveness of his special six-syllable mantra, om maṇi padme hūm, the accoustic essence of his divine grace. Avalokiteśvara is an omnipresent, omnipotent savior deity beloved throughout Asia. He is believed to possess all virtues and is especially rich in love and compassion. Consequently, he is frequently invoked by Buddhist devotees to rescue them during times of great crisis, imminent danger, disease, and death. With respect to Avalokiteśvara’s significance in Tibet, Matthew Kapstein has demonstrated convincingly that in the twelfth century, as a new level of Tibetan historical consciousness was gradually emerging and becoming reconfigured in Buddhist terms, Avalokiteśvara came to view as the country’s patron deity linked directly to the role of Tibet’s divine kingship. Thus, for example, the emperor Songtseṅ Gampo (ca. 617–649/650), retroactively identified by indigenous historians as Tibet’s first Buddhist king, was reconceptualized within this new mythic framework as the compassionate Avalokiteśvara incarnate. The fusion of identities between this central Buddhist deity and Tibet’s great leaders would persist throughout premodern (and even modern) history, reaching its high point in the person of the Dalai Lama. The dominant role of Avalokiteśvara in Tibet is clearly highlighted in the fifteenth-century Blue Annals by Gō Lotsāwa Zhōnu Pel:

In much the same way the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī embraces China, the great and noble bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara watches over this country of Tibet. Through his blessing the sound of the maṇi [om maṇi padme hūm] reverberates naturally in the mouths of all [Tibetans], from little children, to men and women, to ordained monks and so forth.

From the twelfth century onward the emerging cult of Avalokiteśvara spread widely among all classes of Tibetan religious practitioners and pious devotees. This popular movement was largely ignited by the widespread appeal of Avalokiteśvara’s six-syllable mantra. Gō Lotsāwa Zhōnu Pel again reinforces this point: “Among the many religious practices that appeared [in Tibet], the prayer to Avalokiteśvara and the six-syllable formula spread among all Tibetans.” This six-syllable mantra is quite a powerful charm and it is believed that one who obtains its power can control gods and demons. Moreover, the maṇi-mantra is said to be such an effective formula that it can also cure leprosy and even catapult the dead to the pure land of a buddha.
The mantra of Avalokiteśvara can be traced back in India to the sixth- or seventh-century Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra, which has recently been examined in some detail by Alexander Studholme. Though this sūtra had begun to circulate in Tibet by the late eighth or early ninth century, the mantra’s first concentrated point of dissemination is to be found in the indigenous Mani Kambum from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The origin of the literary cycle of the Mani Kambum is associated with the treasure-revealers Nyangrel Nyima Özer (1124–1196) and Guru Chöwang (1212–1270). The power of the mani-mantra and its many spiritual and worldly benefits for those who encounter it are the principal messages of this eclectic and highly influential work. Tradition credits Guru Chöwang as the first to actively promote the wide dissemination of the mani throughout Tibet in the middle of the thirteenth century.

Following Guru Chöwang and the Buddhist evangelical movement he initiated, the popular cult of Avalokiteśvara and his famous six-syllable formula continued to be promoted in the public sphere by a disparate group of strolling bards called mani-pa, “one [who recites] the mani,” a name derived from Avalokiteśvara’s mantra. The itinerant mani-pa were professional storytellers who wandered around Tibet reciting edifying tales of buddhas and bodhisattvas, of the sufferings of sentient beings in the different realms of cyclic existence, the benefits of virtuous action, and the magical effectiveness of the mani-mantra. As Tucci noted, one would frequently encounter these wandering storytellers, the mani-pa, at important religious gatherings, pilgrimage sites, and even at the marketplace.

The first among the mani-pa, whom tradition claims to have been their founder, was Ratnabhadra, his Tibetan name Rinchen Zangpo. Ratnabhadra appears to have lived in the fifteenth century and was a disciple of Tangtong Gyelpo, the distinguished father of Tibetan opera. Ratnabhadra’s life is not well-documented, his biography rather obscure. What little we do have available about the details of his life is found only in one anonymously authored source—a rare incomplete manuscript of unknown provenance but possibly originating in Sikkim and currently housed at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India. The text provides a few early biographical details, which are of special interest to us here. Ratnabhadra was born in Dakpo in the village of Kyipo Shar. This was an area in southeastern Tibet dominated by the Dakpo Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism founded by Gampopa (1079–1153) and the home of that tradition’s main monastic center, Dakhla Gampo. This famous monastery bears the same name of the jagged mountains that rise above it. Legend proclaims that it was in this very same mountain range, on a small peak known as Gampodar, that the fourteenth-century treasure-revealer
Karma Lingpa unearthed a cache of scriptural treasures containing esoteric teachings on death and postmortem travels in the bardo. Some of these works would later become widely celebrated in translation as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. That Ratnabhadra also hailed from the same region is symbolically significant.

Something else worth mentioning about Ratnabhadra’s early years has to do with his parents, especially his father. His mother was a princess named Kelzang Chökyi Drölma unidentified; his father, on the other hand, may be well known to us. His name was Dakpo Tashi Namgyel, and we just might be tempted to equate him with the highly renowned Kagyu scholar-yogi who bears the same name, if only their dates were slightly a bit closer. This latter fellow, the Kagyu Dakpo Tashi Namgyel (1512/13–1587), was a master of the yogic tradition of the Great Seal or Mahāmudrā.

The Mahāmudrā system, mentioned by name throughout our délok narratives, flourished and was actively maintained at Daklha Gampo monastery by the successive generations of Gampopa’s family and lineal descendants until the early eighteenth century. What is most remarkable, though, and hard to imagine as a mere coincidence, is that the name Dakpo Tashi Namgyel is also found among the small group of délok whose biographies are still extant. The written account of this Dakpo Tashi Namgyel’s personal experiences traveling through hell and the bardo is available in a rare cursive manuscript reprinted in India in 1982. Was this délok the Kagyu master of Mahāmudrā, or was he the father of Ratnabhadra, or was he both? Unfortunately, we have no evidence to establish a connection, much less a true identity. Whatever the case, we should be aware that there are several figures in Tibetan history with the name Dakpo Tashi Namgyel, and scholars have frequently confused them. Best not to contribute further to this already tangled mess.

The biography of Ratnabhadra opens with his parents upset that they have no male heir who will succeed the throne. Desperate, they travel to the famed iron suspension bridge at Chuwori in southern Tibet to meet with the great yogic visionary Tangtong Gyelpo, who is there presumably overseeing the maintenance of this bridge he had constructed. Tangtong Gyelpo offers a prophecy that the parents would indeed soon have a son, an extraordinary boy named Ratnabhadra, “Precious Jewel,” who would be none other than the incarnation of Avalokiteśvara himself. Later, the mother Kelzang Chökyi Drölma has an auspicious dream and soon thereafter Ratnabhadra is born. When Ratnabhadra is ten years old, he receives yogic initiation and religious instructions from his father. Three years later he has a vision and a disembodied voice calls out to him that he should go to Chuwori to study with Tangtong Gyelpo. What happens next is worth quoting in the text’s own words:
The adept Tangtong Gyelpo cut Rinchen Zangpo’s hair, transformed his body, and changed his name. After [Tangtong Gyelpo] gave [Rinchen Zangpo] the layman’s vows, he conferred [on him] the name lochen Ratnabhadra. He then gave him the initiation, reading-transmission, and esoteric instructions of the Great Compassionate One [Mahākārīṇika], his personal meditation deity (yi-dam), as well as the consecration of Áryapalo Avalokiteśvara. So began the lineage of the lochen, which is like the source of the river [that flows] wherever the spirit (thugs-pa) [takes it]. Oṁ maṇi padme hūm. [Tangtong Gyelpo] also taught him all the sacred words of the Supreme Victorious One [the Buddha] and his history. At that time he also [told him about all] the treasures one finds in the liberation stories (rnam-thar) [of Buddhist saints]. The adept Tangtong Gyelpo, lama of Chuwori bridge, said: “Ten chapters of liberation stories have been composed by the lineage fathers and the most important among them are the [books] about the supreme lamas, especially the dharma kings (chos-rgyal) Jiktén Wangchuk and Drimé Kündén. There are seven chapters [of liberation stories] composed by the lineage mothers and the most important of these is the story of the brahmin girl Zukyi Nyima. Among the twenty-one délok [biographies], that of délok Lingza Chokyi is the most important. But that’s not all. In addition to these I’ll give you the religious names of a few more [important] liberation stories. O, Ratnabhadra, chief among the lochen, purify yourself. Meditate at the Golden Park of Ménding.”

...In the middle of the Golden Park of Ménding, the incarnate lochen Ratnabhadra, formed with his right hand the mudrā that bestows protection, and in his left hand [he held] the Maṇi Kambum. On his head he wore the garuḍa hat empowered by a garuḍa bird and he donned the religious robes of a monk.

This passage introduces several key points. First of all, it is the great civil engineer Tangtong Gyelpo who initiates Ratnabhadra into the tradition of the maṇi-pa, here identified by the curious label lochen, an honorable title generally reserved for Tibet’s most renowned scholars and translators of Buddhist scriptures, as, for example, that other more famous and influential “Ratnabhadra” in Tibetan history, the early eleventh-century translator lochen Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055). The two are obviously not to be confused with one another. But it is not altogether clear why in this manuscript lochen is used in place of the more common word for Tibet’s wandering bards; the term maṇi-pa occurs nowhere in the text. A second point to note in the passage above is that
Tangtong Gyelpo is again given pride of place as the founder of a particular Tibetan dramatic tradition. He is the one who provides Ratnabhadra with the stories that will make up his traveling repertoire. Of those tales, which include among them the *Jātaka* (Birth Stories) and various liberation stories of Tibetan saints, as well as the story of Zukyi Nyima—one of the other beloved heroines of the *lhamo* drama traditionally performed during the Yoghurt Festival (*zho-ston*) in Lhasa at the end of summer—Tangtong Gyelpo specifically encourages Ratnabhadra to propagate the biography of the *dėlok* Lingza Chökgyi. He informs Ratnabhadra that Lingza Chökgyi’s story is the most important of all *dėlok* tales. This reinforces my previous suggestions that Lingza Chökgyi’s biography served as a sort of source-narrative for many if not all subsequent *dėlok* accounts and was one of the most popular or at least the most familiar of such tales. Reference here to this story and to twenty one other similar narratives clearly signals that our Ratnabhadra manuscript is a much newer work and cannot possibly pre-date the appearance in Tibet of the *dėlok* genre, although the text offers itself as the founding legend of the tradition of *dėlok* storytellers. Finally, we should make note of this reference to the *Maṇi Kambum*, which Ratnabhadra holds in his left hand as one of several accoutrements presumably to be held by all the *maṇi-pa* or *lochen*. It seems they are also expected to wear monk’s robes. The *Maṇi Kambum* symbolizes the power of the maṇi-mantra and its benefits. The text also highlights the links that exist between the tradition of storytelling and the evangelical work of the great Tibetan patriarchs of the six syllables, such as Guru Chöwang.

The biography of Ratnabhadra continues, after several missing pages of the manuscript, with further descriptions and explanations of the props employed by the storyteller. There is a long account, for example, of the symbolism of the ornate iron rod (*lcags-mdung*) that the performer uses to point out sections of his scroll painting (*thang-ka*) to illustrate specific episodes while narrating the story. Traditionally, these paintings depict scenes from the *Jātaka* tales about the Buddha’s previous lives, or the lives of other Buddhist saints, as well as images of the Wheel of Rebirth. The stories are to be performed in public for the benefit of all people and as a means for soliciting alms. Although not mentioned explicitly in Ratnabhadra’s text, we know also that the Tibetan storytellers carried a rather large embroidered umbrella-like object decorated with colorful ribbons, mirrors, and metal rings that spread open when its long handle was spun. This object is called a *jokor*, the “Lord’s wheel,” or *maṇi jokor* (pronounced *maṇi jyong khor* according to the Bhutanese informants interviewed by Pommaret). The use of the *jokor* by itinerant devotees and pious beggars, some of whom may have told stories of the *dėlok*, seems to have been most prevalent in eastern Tibet.
As for the meaning of the term jokor or mani jokor, Pommaret has suggested “noble prayer wheel,” translating jo as the adjective “noble” and indicating a term of respect for the rather large size of this portable “wheel” (’khor). However, considering the specific context in which this “parasol tournant” is found and given the identities of those who use it, I prefer to interpret jo as an abbreviation of the name Jowo Tukjé Chenpo (Skt. Mahâkarûñika), “Lord of Great Compassion,” a common appellation for Avalokiteśvara. Thus, jokor should be understood as the “Wheel of Lord [Mahâkarûñika],” and mani jokor as “Mani-Wheel of Lord [Mahâkarûñika],” that is, more precisely, a portable prayer wheel inscribed with the six-syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara. Despite the observations of Stein and Macdonald, I agree with Pommaret that the jokor/mani jokor was probably not an object used by the délok themselves. In fact, to my knowledge, this instrument is never mentioned by name in any of the extant délok biographies or even in the life of Ratnabhadra, the supposed premier délok storyteller.

We do find, however, reference in the délok texts to another type of prop, the jodar, which is a large cloth (dar) or prayer flag (dar-lcog) attached to a stick and inscribed with the six syllable mani-mantra. The jodar is frequently planted in the ground of cemeteries (dur-khrod) and intended as a votive offering for the benefit of the dead and those suffering in hell. Interestingly, it is the délok Jangchup Sengé who is most often identified as the inventor of this devotional object, and there is some textual evidence that might encourage acceptance of such an idea. At the conclusion of Jangchup Sengé’s biography, for example, he expounds at great length on the benefits of the jodar, presented as part of the many messages he received directly from Yama Shinjé in hell:

\[
\text{Jodar are the speech icons (gsung-rten) [of Avalokiteśvara] inscribed with the seven [or six] syllables [of the mani-mantra]. They should be placed on the banks of large rivers, on the peaks of great mountains, and at the openings through which great winds [blow]. When you do this, [you are following] the instructions for churning the depths of saṃsāra (’khor-ba gdong nas sprug-pa) . . . Of all icons of body, speech, and mind, the jodar are the most powerful.}
\]

The best number of jodar [to erect] is 108, the average number is 21, and the minimum is 7 or 3 . . . there is nothing more powerful than the jodar for expiating sins and purifying afflictions. It is good if you set-up the jodar on mountain peaks, because all sentient beings who dwell on that mountain will attain liberation [the instant their] lifespan is cut. If you place the jodar on the banks of a large river, all sentient beings who drink from those waters, all who fall into the
river, and all who swim around in there will be reborn in the Land of Bliss (Tib. bde-ba-can, Pure Land of Amitābha). If you place the jodar at the top of a mountain [where it can wave] in the strong winds, wherever those winds blow all sentient beings there will be reborn in the Land of Bliss. Even one single person who has murdered a hundred horses and a hundred men can, without doubt, purify all sins if he erects 108 jodar. If villagers set-up the jodar on the roof of each home and at the four cardinal and eight intercardinal directions, then all living beings who dwell in those houses, humans and animals, will certainly attain buddhahood. If you put the jodar on [both] sides of a bridge, all humans who cross that bridge will be reborn in the Land of Bliss. If you set-up the jodar along a vast stretch of road, then whoever travels back and forth on that road will also, without doubt, go to the Land of Bliss [after death].

In reality, Jangchup Senge´ was probably not the actual creator of the jodar tradition—such devotional flags were known in Tibet long before the eighteenth century—though in his day he must certainly have been one of its strongest advocates. As further evidence of his close connection to this tradition, he continues his long discussion of the jodar by elaborating step-by-step methods for constructing the object. He describes the types of ropes and poles that should be used, what materials are best for making the banner and streamers, what various ingredients and colors of ink are acceptable for writing the maṇi on the flag, and what one should do while installing the jodar once constructed. We see here that Jangchup Sengé, in spreading Avalokiteśvara’s maṇi-formula in the form of a special type of prayer flag, was helping to contribute to the evangelical efforts initiated centuries earlier by Guru Chöwang, Tangtong Gyelpo, Ratnabhadra, and all the lochen of the maṇi-pa lineage. As it was the case for the Indian yamapaṭa, the Chinese bianwen, and the Japanese etoki, figures such as Guru Chöwang, Ratnabhadra, and Jangchup Sengé were eager to popularize Buddhism, and the mantra of Avalokiteśvara in particular, among Tibetans of all classes. What is particularly noteworthy about Jangchup Sengé’s contribution to this style of Buddhist evangelism in Tibet, however, is that his abiding interest in the jodar, which is expressed everywhere throughout his biography, seems to have been directly inspired by his dēlok experience. Still, we have no proof that he wandered the country personally planting his jodar flags throughout Tibet, nor do we have any evidence that he became a professional storyteller or an itinerant maṇi-pa once he returned from his harrowing travels through the netherworld. It may be true that the maṇi-pa were in fact the chief curators and transmitters of the dēlok
testimonials in Tibet, but we cannot be so certain that any of them died themselves and returned to life to become wandering raconteurs and popularizers of the cult of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. On this note, I am inclined to accept the suggestion of Victor Mair on the relationship between the narration of stories and the recording of them in writing: “Those responsible for the writing of texts are most often members of the audience. Those who transcribe oral folk literature and thus begin the process of transforming it into popular written literature are very seldom the performers of oral literature themselves.”

The literary sources, like Ratnabhadra’s biography, for example, do support the early suggestions of Stein and others that among the varied repertoire of the mani-pa were to be found tales of people who died, traveled to hell, and returned to life. A statement that further reinforces this point, and one that mirrors Tangtong Gyelpo’s instructions to Ratnabhadra cited above, is found in the biography of Jadrel Kunga Rangdröl, compiler of the late-nineteenth-century Kashö Karka anthology of délok stories and a délok himself:

Give this message to the mani-pa: First, request instructions from the learned lamas. Then, convert the country to Buddhism. [Recite the stories] of Jinlaga, Zukyi Nyima, and Nangsa [Öbum]. [Recount] the genealogies of the [Tibetan] kings and [speak about] the Buddha’s deeds. [Tell] the biographies of [the délok] Gomchung, Karma Wangzin, Padma, Ténzin Chödrön, and Lingza Chökyi, but don’t add anything to their messages. Present them just as they are in the books.54

It is clear from this passage that the mani-pa were at the very least expected to recite, among other subjects, the stories of the délok, which curiously enough they may have learned from handwritten or printed books. But aside from the unusual case of Jadrel Kunga Rangdröl, there is nothing here to indicate that the mani-pa were délok themselves, meaning that they probably would not have claimed direct personal experience of dying and traveling to the land of the dead.55

Furthermore, it is also likely that the mani-pa obtained their knowledge of these sorts of tales not by reading the books themselves, as the above passage recommends, but rather through having heard others read or recite them. Given the fact that literacy among the masses of Tibetans before at least the eighteenth century was generally quite low or widely nonexistent, the content of written texts was hardly ever absorbed through private reading. It is therefore unlikely that the mani-pa and storytellers of the délok biographies would have had sufficient skill to read from books. A similar conclusion is supported
by studies of contemporary epic bards who sing of the conquests of King Gésar. In addition, stylistic evidence in the délok books themselves suggests that even the recorded texts were much closer to spoken language than to written literature. I noted at the beginning of this study that the high frequency of homophonic errors in these texts points to the likelihood that the original writers responsible for recording the stories probably transcribed the written words by hearing rather than reading them.

In addition to the insightful references in some of our texts to the process involved in recording the délok experiences, we may also recall the attempts by the authors of these works to localize the stories of those people encountered in the other world. Pommaret observed in India and Bhutan that contemporary mani-pa and storytellers frequently recount only the tales of délok who came from their own home region or from nearby locations. She notes:

According to the information of Tashi Tsering, there lived in Mysore, in the camp of Hunsur, a mani-pa from Tsang, Buchen Padma, who had a painting [thang-ka] and recited the history of a délok from Tsang named délok Drakya. The mani-pa from Dolpo, who Corneille Jest met, told the tale of a délok named Tenzin Chödrön whose experiences had taken place in the area of Mount Kailash. Since that area was thus familiar to them [the people of Dolpo], they could easily follow the history of this délok.

Similarly, in Bhutan, certain mani-pa tell the stories of the two most popular délok: Karma Wangzin and Sangyé Chözom. Karma Wangzin, however, was from Lhodrak, a Tibetan area on the northern border of Bhutan that many Bhutanese crossed, and Sangyé Chözom was from the area of Tashigang in eastern Bhutan and was the reincarnation of Karma Wangzin.

This is good to reinforce the point made in earlier chapters that certain délok stories circulate in print and are better known in a particular region but unfamiliar in others precisely because those accounts provide specific references in the narratives to recognizable geographical areas. Previously, in a number of cases, I highlighted the fact that descriptions of the afterlife in the délok narratives are usually endowed with the local characteristics of the real world in which the délok lived and are modeled on familiar features of the Tibetan landscape. Moreover, since the délok had made direct contact with the dead as a result of their travels to the netherworld, the personal information they supplied about dead relatives, friends, and local acquaintances was trusted and affective. This guaranteed the popularity of specific délok within their own communities and in nearby villages. This is one of those elements of the délok
literature that establishes it as a unique textual resource for illuminating popular Buddhist beliefs and perceptions, particularly the commonly shared ideas about death and the afterlife, in a distinctively Tibetan social context. The délok narratives reflect a very localized understanding of death and the world beyond by employing personal and realistic images of topographical spaces and by placing familiar people, who would have been well known to local Tibetan audiences and readers, in those spaces. This much is certain: the délok narratives encapsulate in writing a range of popular ideas. But whether or not the main protagonists of these narratives, the individual délok themselves, like Karma Wangzin in the final episode of her story, for example, were responsible for disseminating those ideas by actually traveling from village to village recounting their stories remains a mystery.

The délok are people who died, traveled to the world beyond, and returned to life. At some point their experiences were recorded in writing and preserved in books. Their stories were told and retold by various categories of people, some of whom traveled from village to village as professional storytellers carrying props such as painted images and umbrella-like prayer banners. Others were pious beggars and Buddhist evangelists promoting the ecumenical cult of Avalokiteśvara and popular faith in the effectiveness of that deity’s six-syllable mantra. Though many of these itinerant storytellers may have had in their repertoire one or two délok tales committed to memory after having received them through oral transmission, few if any would themselves have had personal experience of dying and coming back to life.

Final Thoughts

The Tibetan délok tales are stories about women and men who unexpectedly find themselves wandering the realms of the netherworld and afterward returning to life to reveal what horrors they had witnessed there. We have seen reflected in the vivid images of the other world recorded in their narratives how Tibetans from a range of social backgrounds and disparate times conceived of death and the afterlife, drawing on ideas and notions familiar in this world, here and now. In other words, the délok stories reveal very clearly a variety of popular perceptions at the local level of Tibetan society, illuminating in particular the shared notions about the living and the dead and the transparent boundaries between them, conceptions of the soul and the supernatural, and aspects of the self-consciousness of personality and social identity. In them, we see the tendency to bring together time-honored Indo-Buddhist doctrines and indigenous Tibetan conceptions of death and the passage between lives.
Concepts of hell, individual judgment, and intermediate existence (bardo) are especially prominent, with the lines between them not sharply delineated. The texts are preoccupied by the fate of souls and the obligations of the living to assist the dead. The basic moral of these stories is never ambiguous: time spent in the netherworld depends on the virtues and sins of the departed and on the help given them by relatives and friends. The realities of the tortures and torments that the sinful dead must undergo, and the trials that take place in the court of the terrifying Lord of Death all reinforce the dire necessity of leading a virtuous and devoted Buddhist life.

Although the délok tales in Tibet rested firmly on traditional Indian Buddhist scholastic foundations, the development of the genre was influenced also by certain Tibetan advances. Most importantly, the systematization in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries of specific liturgical programs designed for the most part to guide the dead through the perils of the bardo. It was in this period that the funeral treasures of the Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo, the so-called Tibetan Book of the Dead, were first codified. The wide success of this textual-liturgical tradition’s ability to express the shared religious hopes and beliefs that had for centuries flowed over the entire Tibetan-speaking world exerted a decisive influence on the standardization of Tibetan Buddhist conceptions of death and the afterlife. After that, from the fifteenth century onward, came narratives about the personal experiences of people who died and returned to life.

Though it is true that in Tibet the monks and scholars determined official interpretations of Buddhist doctrine and the monasteries primarily controlled the rites and offerings for the dead, it was never the case, as in medieval Catholicism, that the popular ideas of death and “purgatory” were ever controversial or were ever manipulated by religious institutions for the purpose of strengthening their own power and position in society. The notions of hell and the bardo expressed in the délok texts were firmly based on canonical and widely accepted Buddhist principles. Ideologically, there was little novelty in them and hence their ideas posed no threat to the established “church,” so to speak. And it appears there was never any official prejudice against the délok and no legislative restrictions on the public recitation of their stories or the circulation of their writings. On the contrary, the délok narratives expressed ideas and moralizing messages that held wide currency in Tibet among the scholars in the monasteries, the hermits in caves, the pious townsfolk, villagers, and nomads. Indeed, we might even suggest that in these tales of travels through the netherworld Tibetans sought proof of the existence of the bardo and hell and verification of the truths of Buddhist moral laws. The stories were addressed to everyone and, just as our own tales of near-death experiences
(NDEs), ghosts, and the miserable dead continue to fascinate us in this (supposed) modern world of ours, in Tibet the délok narratives of souls temporarily crossing to the other side and witnessing first-hand the torments of hell aroused the interest of both the learned and the unlettered. If nothing else, it is hoped that this study has shown that the délok descriptions of otherworldly journeys are of significant value for those interested in understanding something about popular Buddhism in Tibetan society.

I began this study by reflecting briefly on the term “popular” vis-à-vis popular religion in Tibet and suggested that we do our best to avoid narrowly defining the concept and placing it in the service of two-tiered dichotomous models of religious culture, modal interpretations of Tibetan Buddhism that set over and against one another a purely theorized world of a clerical elite and a clear and distinct world of the uneducated, superstitious common folk. Certainly, there are categorical differences between monks and laypeople in Tibet, but I opted instead to interpret “popular” to mean what both groups share in common and set out to highlight ideas and concerns that played vital roles in the religious lives of all of them. In the assumptions about death and the afterlife specifically, as we have seen, differences of religious and social standing, and also it seems differences between men and women, were of little significance. In short, what we find in the délok narratives are just that: popular ideas. These ideas consist of the complex intermingling of textbook doctrines and informal beliefs professed by the great mass of the professionally, extraordinarily, and ordinarily pious population of premodern Tibet—that includes, of course, the monks and the laypeople, men and women, disciplined scholars, the saintly madmen and inspired visionaries, the uneducated, the uninitiated, and so on. The diversity of ideas that find their expression in the délok stories permeated every level of society.

Through the eyes of women, men, lamas, and monks, these books offer insights into Tibetan popular religion, shedding light not only on widely familiar scholarly ideas but also on the common beliefs and practices of a diversity of pious Buddhists, all of them preoccupied with the terrors of death, the karmic weight of sins committed, and the hope of salvation from future suffering. It is through the délok narratives that we learn of the views shared by Tibetan housewives, anxious lamas, noble ladies, and earnest monks about the mental confusions and physical pains of dying, the trials over the departed souls, the means by which the sins of the dead can be absolved, and how to avoid the horrible fate of rebirth in the lower realms. In this sense, the study of the délok leads to a much clearer understanding of the nightmares and aspirations that dominated the minds of all men and women in premodern Tibetan society regardless of social position or religious standing. We have
observed through specific episodes in these books, reference to a great number of common themes and motifs, combining formal Buddhist doctrine and everyday informal understanding. To list in review just some of the elements of Tibetan popular imagination that emerged from our study of the délok, we might pay special note to the idea that for a time at least when the soul is disconnected from the body at death, it sees itself in the repulsive form of an animal’s rotting corpse and immediately finds a new body outwardly similar to the old one; the idea that the deceased enters a physical world after death, its topography modeled on familiar features of the Tibetan landscape and that in this other world old familiar faces will be seen again; expectations of post-mortem judgment by Yama, Lord of the Dead; belief in the salvific power of the six-syllable maṇi mantra of Avalokiteśvara and faith in those who possess it; the necessity of the rites of passage and the effectiveness of prayer to insure a better destiny for the dead; fears of deadly sorcery and the threat of demonic possession; the nefarious intentions of witches, the optimism inspired by soothsayers, and the moral persuasions of wandering storytellers and traveling entertainers. All these ideas and attitudes belong to Tibetan popular religion and are expressions of the everyday worldview shared by monks and householders alike, and both men and women equally. In the end, it may be that I have raised more questions than I was able to answer. It is my wish, then, that some day soon more and better answers will be forthcoming as scholars begin to take the subject of popular culture in Tibet seriously and to delve more deeply into its hidden treasures, and in the process, hopefully devise more sophisticated approaches for understanding popular Buddhism in Tibet.
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## Spellings of Tibetan Names and Terms

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Bka' brgyud (pa)

Karma Lingpa  
Kar ma gling pa

Karma Wangzin  
Kar ma dbang 'dzin

Kashö Karka  
Ka shod mkhar kha

Katok  
Kaḥ thog

Kédrup Pagö Zhönu  
Mkhas grub Pha rgod gzhon nu

Kelzang Chökyi Drölma  
Skal bzang chos kyi sgrol ma

Kham  
Kham

Kyipo Shar  
Skyid po shar

Kyirong  
Skyid grong

lama  
bla ma

Latö  
Lha stod

Lhakang Lama  
Lha khang bla ma

lhamo  
lha mo

Lhodrak  
Lho brag

Lhodrak Khoting  
Lho brag Kho thing

Lhogyel  
Lho rgyal

Lhorong  
Lho rong

Ling  
Gling

Lingza Chökyi  
Gling bza’ chos skyid

lochen  
lo chen

Loro  
Lo ro

lu  
klu

Ludrup Nyingpo  
Klu grub snying po

Maṇi Kambum  
Maṇi bka’ 'bum

maṇi-pa  
maṇi pa

Margung  
Dmar gung

Mé  
Smad

Ménding  
Sman lding

Milarépa  
Mi la ras pa

Mön  
Mon

Nakar  
Sna dkar

Namru  
Rnam/Gnam ru

Nangsa Öbum  
Snang sa 'od 'bum

Nangtse (wa)  
Snang rtse (ba)

Natö La  
Na stod la

Nédong  
Sne’u gdong

Népo Dépa  
Gnas po Sde pa

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Notes

Chapter I

The quote from the Devadūta-sutta that begins chapter 1 can be found on page 1036 of The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya by Bhikkhu Ēnaṃolī and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995).


3. Lho-rong chos-'byung, p. 457: thang rkyā na rgan mo shi log byed pa zhig yod pas / khyod kyis slob ma snod ldan mang po sdud grol mang po 'byung zer nas lung yang bstan (“At Thang-rkya, an old woman who had returned from death prophesied, ‘You will gather many students who are worthy recipients [lit., “open vessels”] and there will be much realization and liberation.’”); see also Deb-ther sngon-po, p. 719; cf. Roerich [1949] 1979, p. 611. I wish to also direct readers to an interesting reference in the biography of Sle-lung Bzhad-pa’i-rdo-rje (1697–ca. 1747) to the soothsaying abilities of a female ‘das-log. According to that work, this woman revenant (shi-log-ma) correctly recognized the young Bzhad-pa’i-rdo-rje as the incarnation of the
Rje-drung Rin-po-che. Later, Bzhad-pa'i-rdo-rje was officially identified as the fourth successor in the incarnation line of the 'Ol-kha Rje-drung. See Rtogs-pa brjod-pa skal-bzang dga'-ston, fol. 30. A list of the ‘Ol-dga’ [-kha] Rje-drung is given in Bod-kyi-gal-che'i lo-rgyus, pp. 287–288. The monastery of Rnam-grol-gling located in the valley of Sle-lung in 'Ol-kha was the seat of this line of incarnations. See Wylie 1962, p. 91.


5. The dichotomy of the “tame” and the “wild” is adopted in Samuel 1993, pp. 217–222. For criticism, see Gibson 1997. On accomplished adepts and saintly madmen, see especially Dowman 1985; Ardussi and Epstein 1978.


7. On some of the basic issues involved in the periodization of Tibetan history, see Cuevas 2006 and references cited therein.

8. A brief survey of the various dichotomizing models employed in Buddhist studies can be found in Mayer 1996, pp. 22–44.


10. Carrasco 1959; Bogoslovskij 1972; Stein 1972, pp. 92–163; Samuel 1993, pp. 39–154. We find within the ‘das-log literature itself enumerations of the Tibetan social classes. The biography of the ‘das-log Byang-chub-seng-ge, for example, provides a list that begins with lamas, great meditators (sgom-chen-pa), philosophers (mtshan-nyid-pa), Buddhist monks and nuns (ser-mo-ba), and tantrikas (sngags-pa). Then follow the lords (mi-dpon), youngsters (gzhon-pa), nuns (btsun-ma), girls (bud-med), and the wealthy (phyug-po). Among the special religious are then the siddhas (grub-thob) and religious teachers (ston-pa). Among the merchants and commoners there follow the slave merchants (khol-g.yog tshong-mi), female beer sellers (chang-ptsong-ma), prostitutes (smad-ptsong-ma), archers (mda’-mkhan), bowsmiths (gzhu-mkhan), swordsmen (gri-mkhan), fish keepers (nya-ra), deer keepers (sha-ra), pig butchers (phag-bsad-pa), and finally, bee keepers (sbrang-bcom-mi). See B1, fols. 240–247.


13. There are a number of examples of female incarnations in Tibet, but the most revered is perhaps Rdo-rje-phag-mo, the abbess of Bsam-lding monastery. On the line of Bsam-sding female incarnates, see Bsam-sding rdo-rje phag-mo sku-phreng; also Chayet 2002; Diemberger 2007. An interesting personal description of the ninth Rdo-rje-phag-mo incarnation is presented in Charles Bell [1928] 1994, pp. 166–167. On the Tibetan tradition of recognizing incarnate masters, see Jamgön Kongtrul 1997; Wylie 1978.
14. I do not wish to imply that Tibetans did not make distinctions between religious and nonreligious categories. As noted above, such distinctions in Tibet were understood generally in terms of differences between the realm of soteriology (‘jig-rten las ’das-pa) and the realm of the pragmatic (‘jig-rten-pa). Here, it may be worthwhile to also mention the Tibetan political theory of the “dual system” (lugs-gnyis, also lugs-zung, “combined system”), in which the spiritual and temporal functions of authority were combined in one leader (e.g., the Dalai Lama). The theory was derived from a religio-political arrangement that appears to have been first established in the late thirteenth century in connection with the relationship between the lama ’Phags-pa (1235–1280) of the Sa-skya order and Qubilai Khan. This arrangement was formulated in terms of a “patron-priest” (yon-mchod) relation. This dual theory harmonized well with the classical Aśokan paradigm of Buddhist kingship whereby a symbiotic relationship was established between king and saṅgha (monastic community). The king supported the monastic establishment as the conveyor of blessings, and used the spiritual power of the saṅgha to legitimize his authority. The saṅgha, in turn, depended on the king for economic and organizational support. On the “patron-priest” relation in Tibet, see Ruegg 1995 and 1997.

15. The distinction is often seen in specialized rhetorical contexts, particularly in the polemical remarks of famous Tibetan adepts (grub-pa) who frequently champion the potency of meditative practice over the ineffective bookish learning of scholars (mkhas-pa). See comments in Kapstein 2000, pp. 18–19; also Martin 1992.

16. A succinct definition of the Tibetan “liberation story” (rnam-thar) is provided by the nineteenth-century ecumical scholar ’Jam-mgon Kong-sprul (1813–1899) in his autobiography. He writes: “In brief, the term [rnam-thar] applies to any remarkable story that recounts how someone becomes completely freed from suffering and its causes, and thus is able to free another’s mindstream from bondage. For those who read or hear of them, the purpose of relating these kinds of stories is to cause any or all of the three kinds of faith [i.e., awe, emulation, and conviction] to arise in their mindstreams. Once faith has arisen, the energy of their particular spiritual potential is awakened.” Jamgon Kongtrul 2003, p. 3; cf. Kong-sprul yon-tan rgya-mtsho’i rnam-thar, p. 66.

17. For an insightful discussion of the characteristic features of Tibetan autobiography vis-à-vis Buddhist hagiography in Tibet, see J. Gyatso 1998, esp. chap. 1.


20. In the colophon of the second work of this anthology, a text describing Byabrul Kun-dga’-rang-grol’s own return-from-death experiences, he gives the date of composition as the earth-mouse (sa-byi) year. Given what we can surmise about the
historical context of the collection, and considering that a print of the anthology was first acquired by Jacques Bacot (1877–1965) in the early 1900s, this earth-mouse date can only correspond to the year 1888. For what it is worth, Bya-bral Kun-dga’-rang-grol also mentions here that the work was completed at Bsam-gtan-chos-gling. See Dmyal-ba mi-yul-gyi sa-mtshams shi-gson gnyis-kyi bang-chen bka’-phrin-pa bya-bral kun-dga’-rang-grol-gyi dmyal-khams gnas su byon nas ’khor’ das kun-gyi chos-rgyal rin-po-che dkar-nag dbye-ba’i ’bras-bu’i rnam-thar nas mdo-rbsdus-pa, in Ka-shod mkhar-kha, text no. 2 (kha), fol. 41b.

21. For a brief history of the Ka-shod family, see Petech 1973, pp. 88–89.


23. Translation in Epstein 1982, p. 22 (Tibetan spelling has been modified for consistency). According to Epstein’s n. 6 (p. 82), this passage was taken from Bya-bral Kun-dga’-rang-grol’s Bya-bral-pa kun-dga’-rang-grol dang sprang byang-chub-seng-ges gcos chos-kyi-rgyal-pos bka’-phrin lon-pa sky-a-bo pho-mo’i rnam-thar, in Ka-shod mkhar-kha, text no. 1 (ka). However, I was not able to locate this comment there or in the second work by Kun-dga’-rang-grol included in the collection—Ka-shod mkhar-kha, text no. 2 (kha). Perhaps this passage occurs in the colophon to the entire volume, which is not available to me.

24. Pommaret 1989, p. 186. The first Zhab-drung Ngag-dbang-rnam-rgyal was renowned as the great unifier of Bhutan under the authority of the ’Brug-pa Bka’-rgyud. See comments in Aris 1979, pp. 233–254.

25. See B4. The title of the missing second work from this collection is Chos-rgyal chen-pos bka’-yis’-phrin lon-pa sprang byang-chub-seng-ges bar-do dmyal-bar byon-nas ’khrodas-kyi dkar-nag dbye-ba’i ’bras-bu’i rnam-thar mdo-rbsdus (B3). I am also aware of yet another version of Byang-chub-seng-ge’s biography. This is a manuscript housed in the private collection of Don Rodrigo de Zayas in Seville, Spain. Gene Smith kindly shared with me photocopies of the final three pages of this work, which he referred to as the “cholapa” (jo-lha-pa or chos-lha-pa?) manuscript. According to its colophon, the manuscript was written at ’Bri-chu Ngang-pa’i-rgyud by two scribes, the Śā-kyä’i dge-slong Bsod-nams-mkhyen-rab and Sprang-phrug Mkhyen-rab-mchog-grub. I have not yet been able to identify these two individuals.

26. This is an independent work attributed to Byang-chub-seng-ge on the benefits of the jo-dar, but the text is of uncertain provenance (see B2). My thanks to Dan Martin for mailing me his own personal copy of this very fragile text all the way from Israel and trusting me with it long enough to make a digital scan.

CHAPTER 2

1. The following details of Gling-bza’-chos-skyid’s life are drawn from the opening pages of G1, fols. 305–311. See also G2, fols. 409–418; G3, fols. 3–7; G4, fols. 1–8; G5, fols. 1a-3a.

2. The prevailing opinion among scholars nowadays is that the Bön religion, long thought by many inside and outside the tradition to be the earliest indigenous
religion of Tibet, is actually an alternative form of Buddhism; a controversial position the Bönpo themselves do not accept. For a cogent discussion of this debate, see Kvaerne 2002.

3. G1, fol. 312. Compare G2, fol. 421; G4, fol. 10; G5, fol. 3b.

4. The practical and historical intricacies of Tibetan divination are discussed in Dorje 2001; on divinations of ill-health and death, see particularly pp. 296–357.


6. G1, fol. 308.


8. See, for example, Rgyud-bzhi, part 2, chap. 7; also discussion in chap. 5.

9. See Sman-mdo chung-ba, fols. 282a.7–282b.1–5 (pp. 563.7–564.5).

10. The following description of the dying process is based primarily on details found in the Nyi-zla kha-b’yor, fols. 539–541. Trans. found in Orofino 1990, pp. 36–37; Bar-do spyi-don, fols. 588–599. Trans. in Tsele Natsok Rangdrol 1987, pp. 27–34. For additional sources, see especially Latv Rinbochay and Hopkins 1979, pp. 30–48.


12. G1, fol. 310.1: chu bur rdol ba is also the name of one of the eight cold hells, the Hell of Open Blisters.

13. G1, fol. 310.3: dgra khug; G2, fol. 417.4: sgra yi mar khug; G3, fol. 6.5: ri’i mar khug; G4, fol. 7.6: sgra yi mar brgyab. The term khug here probably refers to either a corner, a bend in a river, or a leather bag. The term mar khug means literally “butter sack” and refers to a type of leather bag used to carry butter. The term brgyab in G4 is likely a scribal mistake. I am not sure which meaning makes better sense, particularly when taking into account the various qualifying adjectives, dgra, “enemy,” sgra, “sound,” and ri, “mountain.” Epstein 1982 (p. 43) renders this as “crackling butter lamp,” but I see nothing here that supports this translation.


15. See Cuevas 2003, esp. pp. 120–133.


18. G2, fol. 419.2, and G3, fol. 7.6, have a frog instead of a pig; G4, fol. 8.6, and G5, fol. 32a.6, have it as a snake’s corpse.

19. G1, fol. 311.


22. See Wilson 1996 for a provocative analysis of the Buddhist trope of the young male monk awakened to the truth of impermanence by the sight of decaying female bodies.

23. For a history of this image painted on temple walls throughout Asia, see Teiser 2006.


27. The *bla* is also regarded as one of the three intellectual principles together with ‘thought’ (*yid*) and ‘mind’ (*sems*). See Karmay 1998, p. 311.


33. The *khal*, “load,” is a standard volume measure of varied weight. Generally, a *khal* of barley weighs somewhere between twenty-seven and thirty pounds and a *khal* of butter between seven and eight pounds.

34. G1, fol. 315.3: *phros*, which is clearly a misspelling of *khros*, as evident in G2, fol. 426.4, and G3, fol. 12.3 (*khros*). G4, fol. 13.4: ’*khros*.

35. G1, fol. 315.3: *lus chu sel chil chil byas pa*. The archaic term *lus chu* is synonymous with the word *rngul*, “to sweat, perspire.” The term *chil chil* means “bubbling, surging, boiling.”

36. G1, fol. 315.3–4 omits the negative particle.

37. G1, fol. 316.1, gives the incorrect spelling *bjrid* for the correct term *ljid*, “heavy.”

38. G1, fols. 311–318. Compare G2, fols. 419–430; G3, fols. 7–15; G4, fols. 8–12; G5, 3a-4b.

39. Notable studies of this sutra include Conze 1974; Schopen 1989.


41. See discussion in Cuevas 2003, pp. 39–68.


43. It is not uncommon, however, for the full seven-week sequence to be abbreviated depending on the wealth of the family.

44. Cuevas 2003, pp. 69–77 and 122–133.
45. The eight hot hells in classical Indian Buddhism are Avīcī (No Respite), Pratāpana (Greater Torment), Tapan (Torment), Mahāaurava (Great Howling), Raurava (Howling), Samghāta (Heap), Kālasūtra (Black-lines), and Saṃjīva (Reviving). See *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* 3.58–59; trans. in La Vallée Poussin [1923–1931] 1988, pp. 457, 459.
47. The eight cold hells are Arbuda (Blisters), Nirarbuda (Enlarged Blisters), Atāta, Hahava, Huhuva, Utpala (Bursting Open), Padma (Lotus), and Mahāpadma (Great Lotus).
49. G1, fol. 318.
51. G1, fol. 319.1–2: *thams cad glog ’khyug pa bzhin ngo nag thul le ’dug*. This particular phrase does not appear in any of the other versions.
52. G1, fol. 319.2–3: *yang phyin pa na mi mang po ’dus pa’i nang du sngar nged phyugs rdzi chos mgon ’dug te*. A puzzling sentence. The *sngar nged* here is confusing. Does *sngar* refer to the previous lifetime or just earlier in the story, and who exactly are the *nged*, “we,” here? I have translated it as referring to Gling-bza’ and her friend, but it could just as well be referring to the cattle herders familiar to Gling-bza’ from her previous life as Baruch 1948 (p. 317) suggests.
53. *Tib. a zhe* refers to the female head of the household.
54. G1, fols. 318–322. Compare G2, fols. 430–432; G3, fols 15–19; G4, fols. 16–19; G5, fols. 5a-6b.
55. Kennedy and Gehman 1931, vol. 4; also U Ba Kyaw and Masefield 1980.
56. On this issue, see Holt 1981.
57. It may be of interest to list the specific people mentioned by name Gling-bza’-chos-skyid meets in the netherworld. They are in order of appearance: Mnga’-thang Bsod-nams-dar-ba (G1, fol. 327; G3, fol. 25; G4, fol. 25), the cotton-clad yogi Shes-rab-rdo-rje (G1, fol. 344; G2, fol. 453; G3, fol. 43; G4, fol. 42), the lama Yon-tan-rgya-mtsho (G2, fol. 454; G3, fol. 43; G4, fol. 42), the *maṇi-pa* Jo-chung-smra’ba’i-seng-ge (G1, fol. 348; G2, fol. 460; G3, fol. 47; G4, fol. 46), the lama Shes-rab-’od-zer and his female benefactors Tshe-dbang-sgrol-ma and Bsod-nams-dpal-skyid (G1, fol. 344; G2, fol. 468; G3, fol. 55; G4, fol. 54), the woman Chos-sgron (G1, fol. 360; G2, fol. 477; G3, fol. 62; G4, fol. 61), the great meditator Kun-dga’-ye-shes (G1, fol. 367; G2, fol. 478; G3, fol. 63; G4, fol. 62), the noblewoman Chos-sgron from Dmar-gung (G1, fol. 375; G2, fol. 497; G3, fol. 79; G4, fol. 78), the lama Gzhon-nu-rgyal-mtshan (G1, fol. 376; G2, fol. 498; G3, fol. 79; G4, fol. 78), and the *maṇi-pa* Shes-rab-rin-chen (G1, fol. 380; G2, fol. 505; G3, fol. 85; G4, fol. 83).
61. Accordingly, human beings are born as a debt to Yama, for it is he who has loaned out their bodies; once born, they must begin making payments to him. An individual is released from such debt only by dying. However, to free oneself without having to be destroyed, one must convince Yama to accept a substitute for what is owed him; this one does by ritual sacrifice. On this subject, see Malamoud 1996. For a brief history of Yama from his Vedic origins to his various roles in exoteric and esoteric Buddhism, see Siklós 1996; also Merh 1996.


64. This popular sūtra was translated into Chinese in the seventh century and into Tibetan in the late eighth. On the dating of the Chinese versions, see Birnbaum 1980, pp. 52–57.

65. Sman-mdo chung-ba, fols. 281a.3–281b.3. This passage is quoted verbatim in the De-bzhin gshegs-pa bdun-gyi sngon-gyi smon-lam-gyi khyad-par rgyas-pa’i mdo, vol. da, fols. 267b.5–268a.3, and also again in the Gsung-rab rin-po-che’i gSAM-gNYID shAKya’i rab-GNYud, vol. co, fol. 240a.4–6. Pommaret (1989, p. 93) suggests that these two works (translated into Tibetan in the seventh and eighth centuries, respectively) are the earliest sources for the Tibetan notion of the spontaneously-born spirits. It is clear, however, that both texts merely borrowed from the Sman-mdo chung-ba, which is likely the actual source of such a notion. It is worth noting, furthermore, that the Chinese version of this passage from the Sman-mdo chung-ba translated by Birnbaum differs from the Tibetan version that I translate here. The Chinese text provides details, that do not appear in the Tibetan text, about the various activities the living should perform for the dead; notable examples include the practice of lighting seven lamps and hanging a five-colored banner above the deceased’s head. See Birnbaum 1980, p. 165.

66. Though the idea of an inborn divine spirit goes back to the Sman-mdo chung-ba, I have not yet located an early canonical source for the second figure, the inborn demonic spirit (lhan-cig skyes-pa’i ‘dre). This dark counterpart to the divine spirit seems only to be found in Buddhist literature indigenous to Tibet.


69. G1, fols. 375–378. Compare G2, fols. 497–504; G3, fols. 79–84; G4, fols. 77–82.


75. G1, fol. 396.3: tsog tsog la bzhag, lit., “place upright” or “put in a pile.”
76. G1, fol. 396.3–4: nga'i bsam pa la khong pha bu rnams kyis nga phag pa la skrag gi yod pas nga la ngan bsam 'dug pa; G2, fol. 530.3–4: nga'i bsam pa la khong pha bu rnams kyis nga la ngan byas nas nga shal pa la sngang nas skrag cing yod pa; G3, fol. 104.4–5: da nga'i bsams pa la khong pha bu rnams kyis nga la ngan byas nas su nga shal ba la snga rang nas skrag cing yod; G4, fol. 103.3–4: nge khong pha bu rnams kyi nga thal pa la skrag shes yod pa.

77. G1, fol. 396.4: snying na nas da skrag ma skrag med snyams nas gos dang mnyam du sbrags te gos 'di bur dgos bsam ste. G2, fol. 530.4: snying na ting nge ba zhig byung nga skrag ma skrag med gos tshur blangs nas skyur dgos bsam ste; G3, fol. 104.4–5: snying na ting nge ba byung ngo da nga skrag ma skrag med nga'i gos tshur byungs nas shal ro de bskyur dgos snyams nas; G4, fol. 103.4: snying nas ting nge ba cig byung skrag ma skrag med gos dang mnyams por drung nas sgo na 'phang dgong bsams nas. Given certain ambiguities here, my loose translation above is derived from a comparative reading of all four versions.

78. G1, fol. 397.1: kha nas shugs byas pa byung. My translation here follows G3, fol. 105.1: nga'i kha nas shu zer ba sgra shor song.


80. G1, fols. 397–398.


CHAPTER 3

1. On the history of this region, see Pasang Wangdu et al. 1996.

2. The monastery is unidentified, though given its apparent location in La-stod Lho it is possible that the name refers to Bkra-shis Bsam-gtan-gling in Skyid-grong, an institution that was formerly a stronghold of the Bka'-brgyud sect but later converted in the seventeenth century to a Dge-lugs-pa monastery. For a thorough study of the historical archives of Bkra-shis Bsam-gtan-gling and affiliated centers, see Schuh 1988.

3. Details of the life of Byams-pa-bde-legs are based on BL, fols. 10–14.

4. See Bod-rje lha-bsan-po'i gdung-rabs, pp. 140 and 145.


6. On the concept of the decline of the dharma in Buddhist literature across traditions, see Nattier 1991. For discussions of millenarianism in Tibet, see Brauen-Dolma 1985; Childs 1999.

7. See, for example, the brief overview in Smith 2004. Some of the more dramatic prophecies of Mongol aggression were compiled in the early seventeenth century by the renowned physician and Rnying-ma polemicist Sog-bzlog-pa Blo-gros-rgyal-mtshan (1552–1624) in his unique work, Sog-bzlog-bgyis tshul-gyi lo-rgyus (History of How the Mongols Were Repelled). This is a fascinating little book that details over a period of three centuries the efforts of Tibet’s most noteworthy religious heroes who fought effectively against the northern invaders using rituals of magic and sorcery designed specifically to combat Mongolian armies. The authority of Tibetan prophecy and its interpretations at different points in history is a centerpiece of the work.
8. BL, fol. 14.3. According to the *Bod-rgya tshigs-mdzod chen-mo* (p. 1107), symptoms of the disease stong-khrug, a wind (rlung) disorder, include back pain (stod-gzer), dry mouth (kha-skom), severe restlessness (gzer-pho-ba), and dementia (smyo-’chal).

9. BL, fol. 14.3, *me pho spre*, corresponds to the dates 1536, 1596, 1656, and 1716. Given Byams-pa-bde-legs’ close proximity in time to Gtsang-smyon Heruka, the years 1536 or 1596 are the most probable here. This would mean he was born in either 1502 or 1562, and entered Se-ra Bsam-brtan-gling in 1511 or 1571.

10. BL, fol. 15.1–2, *cho ’khrul chen po’i tshes bco lnga’i skar ma rta pa la bab pa’i tshe*. A reference to Tibetan astrological science. The fifteenth day (full moon) of the month is generally considered an inauspicious time for any activity other than meditation, and is particularly a bad day for funerals. The so-called “horse-star” (skar ma rta pa) is the first month of the Tibetan calendar.

11. BL, fol. 16.4, *sdug sran sked nas*. I take this to mean “just when I had attained some degree of tolerance,” or “just when I was able to endure” the dissolution stages.


14. BL, fol. 22.1, *dar mdung*. This is likely some form of prayer flag—perhaps the dar-lcog or jo-dar—set up for the benefit of the dead. The jo-dar is discussed in chapter 6 of this volume.

15. BL, fols. 21.1–23.2.

16. BL, fol. 24.2 gives *skram*, but this is not a word and is clearly a scribal error for the verb *bkram*, “to display, exhibit.”

17. BL, fols. 23–25.

18. On references to dogs and death in a wide range of myths recorded in Indic, Iranian, Armenian, Greek, Celtic, Germanic, and Latin literature, see Lincoln 1979 and references cited therein; also White 1991.

19. On Tibetan attitudes toward dogs, particularly among the nomads, see Ekvall 1963; also Jest 1980.


22. This symbolic link is to be found, for example, in the early literature of the Shangs-pa Bka’-brgyud, where the black dog is said to be the form Mahākāla chooses to appear in dreams. And apparently this is the reason Shangs-pa adepts vow never to harm dogs. I am grateful to Matthew Kapstein for this information. The history of the Shangs-pa Bka’-brgyud tradition is reviewed in Kapstein 1980. For interests of comparison, see T. Brown 1958, on the black dog in European ghost lore.

23. For a discussion of the origins and iconography of Mahākāla as Gur-gyi-mgon-po, see Pal 1977.

24. BL, fol. 26.1–2, *de nas ye shes pa la da nga’i nad de brag tu song ’dugs pas thug pa cig skol las nga la slang byas pas ma dgo ’dug pas*. Apart from the obvious misspellings, there seems to be something missing before this line, though I will assume the scene is that people are actually making food preparations for ceremonial offerings but Byams-pa-bde-legs is thinking they are making food for him to eat, but he is unable to do so because he does not have a body.
25. BL, fol. 29.2–3; likely a misspelling of bs[kang gso, which is how I translate it here. This is one of many examples of homophonic spelling errors in this text, all of which indicate the original scribe was possibly writing down what he was hearing rather than copying from a written source.

26. BL, fol. 29.3; again, possibly a misspelling. The text has ltam for gtam.

27. BL, fol. 30.2, ngas khà ba’i khà la phyin pa. I translate khà ba’i khà la here as a variant of ga sa ga la, “all over, everywhich way.” I had originally taken this peculiar phrase to be a variant of ga la ga le, “quietly, gently, slowly.” But the other option makes better sense in this passage. My thanks to Matthew Kapstein for the suggestion.

28. BL, fol. 31.3, dkar me rnams phra thag thag pa ’dug. This is a reference to the dkar me bsngo zhu, the custom of offering and setting up numerous butter lamps around the corpse a day before it will be removed from the home and brought to the cemetery.

29. BL, fol. 32.2. Text has sdang shas, which is clearly a misspelling of sdang she, or rather she sdang. Again, another example of a homophonic spelling error.

30. BL, fol. 32.4; skya zeng nge is a homophonic misspelling of skya seng nge.

31. BL, fol. 32.4; text has bcol btam for bcol gdams.

32. BL, fols. 25–33.

33. Bar-do thos-grol chen-mo, fol. 178.4–5. The line quoted is from the Srid-pa bar-do’i ngo-sprod.


36. van Tuyl 1975; Cuevas 2003, p. 54.

37. BL, fol. 34.1, gong kha sma shes tshod cig la ’phred gsags la lam se ba res pa cig ’dug pa de la phyin pa.

38. BL, fol. 33–36.

39. BL, fol. 40.4, srang bar cig na mi rgan ma gzugs rgag ge byas pa. I have not found a precise meaning for rgag ge byas, so I have translated this line according to context.

40. BL, fol. 40.4. The text has bkra dan nes byas pa, which I take to be a misspelling of bkra gtan nas byas pa.

41. BL, fol. 41.1–2, ’di na bla ma bzung gsum ci ’dra bzhugs. I am not quite sure what the number “three” refers to here. Perhaps the three good qualities of lamas—learned, virtuous, noble (mkhas btsun bzang gsum)?

42. BL, fol. 41.4–5, mi yul sbrang ma ’khang nas. This phrase could be translated, “In the human world I was a honey bee [or flying insect of some sort], and I hated it.” An unusual sentence. Later, an alternative spelling appears: fol. 44.2, mi yul sbran ma mkhar na. Here, sbrang is spelled sran, “summoned,” and ’khang is now mkhar. The frequency at which this phrase appears in this section of the text suggests that it must mean something other than the quirky “a resentful honey bee in the human world.” I wonder if it just means being called (sbran) away from one’s home (ma [’khang) in the human world (mi yul). The mkhar, “fortress, castle,” in the alternative spelling is also quite suggestive of this rendering.

43. This could be read also as “some stay here whose lifespan is not complete,” referring to those who died an untimely death.
44. BL, fols. 43.4–44.1, ‘di ni mi yul sbrang ma khang nas ’dir spags yongs pa’i bar do’i gnas yin no.
45. BL, fols. 40–44.
46. BL, fols. 94–95.
47. BL, fols. 227–232.
49. BL, fol. 235.5.

Chapter 4

1. Karma-dbang’-dzin’s details here are drawn primarily from K3, fols. 100–106. See also K1, fols. 1–11; K2, fols. 1–5; K4, pp. 2–7; K5, fols. 1a-2b.

2. I have not yet been able to identify this hermitage of Trapu (Khra-phu, sometimes spelled Phra-phu). For what it is worth, a monastery by that name is mentioned in the Blue Annals. This institution was said to have been founded in the eleventh or early twelfth century by one Stabs-ka-ba, a disciple of Sar-ba-pa (1070–1141). The monastery was recognized as a center for the study of the Vinaya and Abhidharma teachings. See Deb-ther sngon-po, p. 346; cf. Roerich [1949] 1979, p. 284. The same information is repeated verbatim in the Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston, p. 717.

3. K3, fol. 109.4, rig pa chu nang las gsal bas a tsa ma; K4, p. 10, rig pa chu nang nyang las gsal a tsa ma.

4. K3, fol. 110.1, has rdza phug.
5. K3, fol. 110.1, omits tho me ba.
6. K4, p. 12, ‘chi ba mi rtag sleg pa ma shes sam. K3, fol. 110.4, has mi rtag sgyu ma zhig pa ma shes sam.


9. mig ko dong du ‘drus pa, according to spelling in K3, fol. 314.4; K4, p. 231, has mig ko stong du ‘drus pa.


11. K4, p. 15, chang zom la chu blugs. K3, fol. 113.5 has chang zom gang sar.

12. Tibetan gtor-ma are offering cakes made of dough (roasted barley flour) and/or butter. For descriptions of their use in ritual, see Beyer 1978, pp. 217–222 and 340–346.


14. K3, fol. 117.5, khyed kyi ya byed khu byed kyi lung pa khyengs. I read khyeng here as kheng, “to fill,” and assume lung pa refers to something like “testament” and hence a “promise.”

15. K3, fol. 118.2–3 has bud med kyi skyid sdug de skye la brag pa ma skon tshun ngo mi shes zer ba de. This line has several spelling errors, so here I am following the line as it appears in K4, p. 20: bud med kyi skyid sdug ’di ske la thag pa ma gyon tshun ngo mi shes zer ba de.
16. K3, fol. 118.4, sngar ngsad pa rbab yur ‘tshangs su ‘dug pa. The line in K2, fol. 19.5, which I follow here, better clarifies the expression: sngar nga’i sdad pa rdo rbab yur tshang su byung ‘dug pa.

17. For recent scholarship on the role of women in Tibet see the essays compiled in J. Gyatso and Havnevik 2005 and references cited therein.


23. K3, fols. 119.1–120.5; K4, pp. 20–22. Compare also K1, fols. 31–34; K2, fols. 21–22; K5, fol. 3a.

24. Lit., “[like] the arrangement of a painting.” K3, fol. 121.5, bkod tshad thod pa’i ri mo la bkod pa yin; cf. K2, fol. 23.3. I take thod pa here to mean “virtuous actions,” which I render somewhat loosely as “politely followed.” My translation of ri mo la bkod pa is inspired by an example sentence listed in Goldstein 2001 (p. 1034): ri mor bkod pa’i mi bzhin, which he translates literally as “like a person in a painting.”

25. K3, fol. 122.2–3, lab bzhi and gling bzhi should read lab gzhi and gleng gzhi.


27. K3, fol. 146.4–5; K4, p. 51. Compare also K1, fol. 76; K2, fol. 53.
28. K3, fols. 126.3–129.4; K4, pp. 28–32. Compare also K1, fols. 43–48; K2, fols. 29–32; K5, fol. 4b.
31. K3, fols. 170.4–173.2; K4, pp. 77–79. Compare also K1, fols. 114–118; K2, fols. 90–94.
32. According to spelling in K2, fol. 74.1; K1, fol. 94.1; K3, fol. 158.1; and K4, p. 63. All have rgyal ba kho dbon, which I have not been able to identify.
33. The Tibetan term dkor refers to the material goods and property monks receive as religious donations.
34. The Himalayan border region east of Bhutan, which is today a part of Arunachal Pradesh in northern India.
35. K3, fols. 156.2–159.2; K4, pp. 61–64. Compare also K1, fols. 90–96; K2, fols. 70–75.
44. On the symbolism and rituals of this significant female deity, see Slusser 1999; English 2002, esp. pp. 47–50. In Tibet, Vajravārāhī is one of only a few female incarnate deities, taking the form of the abbesses of Bsam-sdings monastery in southern Tibet beginning in the fifteenth century. The first of the succession of Rdo-rje-phag-mo incarnations was a nun by the name of Chos-kyi-sgron-ma (1422–1455), sister of the ruler of Gung-thang. She is said to have founded the monastery of Bsam-sdings in 1440. See chap. 1, n. 13 for references.
46. Literally, “secret or hidden spot.” K2, fol. 297.2–3, adds the line, drod yod med lta ba’i phyir du, “in order to see whether or not there was heat [in the body].”
47. The bundling of the corpse is a common Tibetan funerary practice. Usually, to secure the corpse against demonic attack, its back is broken and then wrapped in a crouching position. See Cuevas 2003, p. 71.
49. Wylie 1964, p. 69, 72.
52. See Ro-langs bdun-pa. For a discussion of this and other specialized religious texts about the vetāla, see Walter 2004.
54. Works dealing with ro-langs and vetāla-siddhi in the Rnying-ma’i rgyud-bum (NGB) are too numerous to list here, though two texts should be highlighted for their extensive treatment of the subject. See Gnod-sbyin ma-ru-tse ro-langs gsang-ba’i rgyud and Dpal gshin-rje nag-po ’khrul’khor rgyal-mtshan me-long-gi rgyud-kyi rgyal-po, esp. fols. 639.5–646.7, 793.1–815.1, 861.3–865.3, and 942.6–954.3.


57. Indigenous Tibetan incantations and ritual techniques for controlling demonic corpses are to be found, for example, in such esoteric manuals as the ‘Jam-dpal’ dus-rgyud rig-sngags brgya-rtsa (also known as ‘Jam-dpal sras-rgyud ya-ma-rä-tsä); see the chapter entitled Byung-po ro-lang-gi gdag-pa ’dul-ba’i rig-sngags, fols. 350–358. This rare Tibetan work is a treasure text (gter-ma) discovered probably in the fourteenth century by one Grwa-sgom Chos-kyi-rdo-rje of the Grwa-nang valley in south-central Tibet. Chos-kyi-rdo-rje is said to have been the sixth in the line of Rgyal-sras Lha-rje incarnations, all of whom were acknowledged as masters of magic, medicine, and healing. To date, the ‘Jam-dpal’ dus-rgyud rig-sngags has not been the subject of scholarly attention, though the work is arguably a key source for understanding the early practice of demonology and sorcery in Tibet.


59. Wylie (1964, p. 73) notes that the ro-langs can be classified according to these vulnerable points. Thus, there are five different classes: (1) skin-zombie (lpags-langs), (2) blood-zombie (khrag-langs), (3) flesh-zombie (sha-langs), (4) bone-zombie (rus-langs), and (5) mole-zombie (rme-langs).

60. The fascinating history of Pehar, one of Tibet’s most important protector deities, is examined in Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1993, pp. 94–133; in Ariane Macdonald 1978a and 1978b; and most recently in Martin 1996a; Vitali 1996, pp. 202–220; Stoddard 1997; and Dreyfus 1998.


63. There have been several attempts by indigenous Tibetan scholars to classify the variety of demons and protectors of Tibet. The most influential of these schemes include the fourteenth-century Lha’dre bka’-thang of O-rgyan-gling-pa (1323–ca.1360), the eighteenth-century illustrated Bstan-srung dam-can of Sle-lung Bzhad-pa’i-rdo-rje (1697–1737), and the Bstan-srung dam-can rgya-mtsho’i mtshan-tho of Klong-rdol Bla-ma Ngag-dbang-blo-bzang (1719–1794). To date, the major secondary studies on the subject have exclusively relied on these three Tibetan works as their primary resources. See, for example, Tucci 1949, pp. 717–731, and Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1993.

64. Bstan-srung dam-can rgya-mtsho’i mtshan-tho, p. 489.

65. Lha’dre bka’-thang, p. 50; Bstan-srung dam-can rgya-mtsho’i mtshan-tho, pp. 486–487.


67. Stein 1939, p. 367. The Tibetan text reads: ro langs la bab te / pha med kyi dur sri langs pas dur ngo yod / dur lha gsol dur sri mnan / nad pa yod na tshe zad // zas grangs thims gang byas kyang mi phan pas / mo shin tu ngan no. The image of the ro-langs
depicted in this text shows a man standing naked, emaciated and covered in spots. His large hands, resembling claws, are raised above his head.

68. According to the Rgyud-bzhis (part 3, chap. 77, p. 386), people afflicted with the demonic sage disease “befriend whatever children [are around], strip naked, wear their hair long, are depressed, and become detached for a long time” (gang yang byis pa dang ’grogs ge r ger bur ’bud / skra bdzes blo sms mi bde yun ring spang).


71. Spells for vanquishing the gson-dre are listed in the ‘Jam-dpal’ dus-rgyud rig-sngags, in the chapter entitled Gson-dre yul du rgyu-ba’i gdug-pa ’joms-pa’i rig-sngags, fols. 423–431.


75. Rgyud-bzhis, part 2, chap. 4, p. 25.


CHAPTER 5

1. On the Kham region of Nyag-rong, see Dorje 1996, pp. 547. The village of Ra-lang is unidentified.

2. Byang-chub-seng-ge’s contact with this influential monastery was more likely maintained through its branch institution, Dhā-ki drug-btad near his home in Nyag-rong. This monastic branch of Ka-thog is mentioned briefly by name in Kah-thog-pa’i lo-rgyas, p. 166; also see Dorje 1996, p. 547 (listed there as Da-ge Drongtok Gon). It is also possible, of course, that Byang-chub-seng-ge’s own monastery, Ra-lang Mkhar-srong, was itself a subsidiary institution of Ka-thog. For a brief account of the history of Ka-thog and its succession of abbots, see Gu-bkra’i chos-byung, pp. 750–759; Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 694–696; also Eimer and Tsering 1979, 1981, and 1986.

3. The standard Buddhist list of ten “fetters” (sa-nyojana): (1) belief in the self (satkāyadrṣṭī); (2) doubt (vicikitsā); (3) clinging to mere rules and rituals (śīlavratapārāmāra); (4) sensual desire (kāmacchanda); (5) ill-will (vyāpāda); (6) desire for the material (rūpara); (7) desire for the immaterial (ārūpara); (8) pride (māna); (9) restlessness (auddhatya); (10) ignorance (avidya).

4. Accordingly, there are three types of doubt: (1) doubt leaning toward the truth (don-gyur-gyi the-tshom); (2) doubt leaning toward what is false (don mi-gyur-gyi the-tshom); and (3) doubt that is indecisive, equally divided as to what is or is not correct (cha myam-pa’i the-tshom). See Lati Rinbochay and Napper 1980, pp. 106–109; Sopa and Hopkins 1989, pp. 241–242.

6. B1, fols. 11–16.
7. The correct spelling should probably be rkyal khug or rkyal gog, a term referring to the leather bag used to feed the grain into the millstone.
8. B1, fols. 36.3–43.3.
9. Bod-rgya tshigs-mdzod chen-mo (p. 1981): gnod byed gzugs med gdon bgegs. A number of works on the bhūta (byung-po) are preserved in the Tibetan Kanjur, all of which give advanced instructions on a variety of techniques for appeasing or “liberating” (i.e., killing) these loathsome beings. Among this group of scriptures, the most noteworthy are the 'Byung-po 'dul-ba zhes-bya-ba'i rgyud-kyi rgyal-po chen-po, the 'Byung-po'i gdon las thar-bar gyur-ba, the Dpal 'byung-po 'dul-byed-kyi mdor-bsdu-s-pa'i sgrub-thabs, and the 'Byung-po 'dul-byed-kyi sgrub-thabs yan-lag dang bcas-pa.
10. Rgyud-bzhi, part 3, chap. 77, pp. 385–386. The eighteen classes of 'byung-po are listed as follows: (1) gods (lha, Skt. deva); (2) demi-gods (lha-min, Skt. asura); (3) fragrance eaters (dri-za, Skt. gandharva); (4) serpent demons (klu, Skt. nāga); (5) harmful demons (gnod-sbyin, Skt. yakṣa); (6) brahma (tshangs-pa); (7) cannibal demons (sra-pa, Skt. rākṣasa); (8) flesh eaters (sha-za); (9) ghosts (yi-dubs, Skt. pretā); (10) ghouls (grul-bum, Skt. kimbandha); (11) curse demons (byad-stems); (12) distracting demons (gyeng-byed); (13) zombies (ro-lang, Skt. vetaṭa); (14) ancestral deities (mtshun-lha); (15) lama demons (bla-ma, Skt. guru); (16) sage demons (drang-srong); (17) elder demons (rgan-po); (18) adept demons (grub-pa, Skt. Siddha).
12. B1, fols. 55.5–57.3.
15. B1, fols. 43.3–49.1.
17. Bar-do thos-grol chen-mo, p. 95. The Tibetan title of this prayer is Sangs-rgyas dang byang-chub sms-dpa’ rnams-la ra-mdas’ sbran-pa’i smon-lam.
18. The na-rag dong-sprugs practices date back to at least the eleventh century and are derived from even earlier traditions recorded in the Dunhuang materials surrounding the ritual cycle of the Sarvadurgatipariśodhana-tantra. See brief summary in Kapstein 2001a; also Cuevas 2003, pp. 37–38. Two well-known Buddhist texts describing this practice are the two works belonging to the Bka’-bryad revelations of Guru Chos-dbang—that is, the Bka’-bryad drag-po rang-byung rang-shar las byung-ba’i zhi-khrong na-rag skong-bshags-kyi cho’ga and the Na-rag dong-sprug skong-bshags. See Cuevas 2003, pp. 155–156.
20. The Tibetan version of the tale of Mulian and its connections to the biography of Guru Chos-dbang and the descent into hell of the epic King Gésar are discussed in Kapstein 2007a. It is significant that versions of the stories of Maudgalyāyana and Guru Chos-dbang are included in the Ka-shod Mkhar-kha blockprint collection of 'das-log stories. See Mnyam-med shakya’i rgyal-no nyan-thos dgra-bcom-pa mo’u’gal-gyi-bus a-ma dmyal-ba nas bton rab-kyi le’u, in Ka-shod mkhar-kha, text no. 9 (ta); and, O-rgyan-gyi rgyal-po padma’-byung-gnas mchog-gi bu-chen gter-ston gu-ru chos-dbang-kyi
21. A reference to the maṇḍala system of the peaceful and wrathful deities derived from the eighth and ninth-century Mahāyoga tantras and made famous in later works of the Rdzogs-chen (Great Perfection) tradition. In the fourteenth century, this collective group of one hundred or so deities began to appear widely in visionary descriptions of the bardo. See discussion in Cuevas 2003, pp. 63–66; also Blezer 1997.

22. B1, fols. 145.1–149.2.

23. As Pommaret’s ethnographic research demonstrates, this is not always the case. In the modern Bhutanese context, for example, the ‘das-log make the journey regularly by choice. See Pommaret 1989, pp. 125–161, and chapter 6 in this volume.

24. The many names of these religious figures are given as follows: Bka’-dam-pa Bde-gshegs and Dam-pa-sangs-rgyas (B1, fol. 108); the siddha Mahāyogi (B1, fols. 109–110); Bka’-thog-pa [Kah-thog-pa] Nam-mkha’-dpal-bzang (B1, fol. 111); Rab-sgongs-chos-rij (B1, fols. 114–115); ‘Das-log Blo-gros-bzang-po and Chos-rij Gtsang-ston-pa (B1, fols. 115–116); Sras-mo G.yu-drung-ye-shes, incarnation of Yum-chen (B1, fols. 117–118); Tshe-dbang-rig-dzin (B1, fols. 143–144); Bka’-thog-pa [Kah-thog-pa] Byams-pa-rin-chen, Nam-mkha’-dpal-bzang-po, Rig-dzin-chen-po, Ras-pa Thar-bzang, and Rgyanag Cer-bu (B1, fols. 155–156); Dbus-pa Chos-rij, Nyi-ma-rgyal-mtshan, Stobs-lidan Dge-ba-rgyal-mtshan, Chos-rij Rab-mdlo, Kun-mkhyen Shes-rab-od-zer, Rang-byeung-rod-rije, and Bka’-thog-pa [Kah-thog-pa] Rgyal-mtshan (B1, fols. 163–164.), Bsod-nam-bumpa, Chos-rij Len-tras, ‘Bar-ba, Stong-bskor-dpon-po, Chos-sgra-rgya-mtsho, and Bka’-thog-pa [Kah-thog-pa] (B1, fols. 167–168.).

25. In general, the term khram-shing refers to a wooden board used for keeping tallies etched on its surface, a record tablet. In old Tibet the term also referred to a type of long plank upon which criminals were stretched out and flogged. The word khram itself means “notch” or “cut” and when combined with the verb rgyag “to strike,” it refers to the practice of slashing a corpse to attract vultures during the so-called “sky burial.” On the use of the khram-shing and its symbolism see Röna-Tas 1956; Schwieger 1996. On the Tibetan custom of sky burials, see Martin 1996c.

27. B1, fols. 215–240; see also B2.
28. B1, fols. 261.2–263.2.

CHAPTER 6

2. Stein 1969, p. 143. For a discussion of bianwen and popular Chinese storytellers, including extended comparisons with other similar performers across Asia, the yamapata and so on, see Mair 1988 and 1989; on etoki and medieval Japanese storytellers, see Ruch 1977; Kaminishi 2006.
4. Much has been written on the epic of Gésar and scholarly interest in this tradition continues to gain momentum. The classic study is still Stein 1959, but more recent studies include Karmay 1998, pp. 465–501; Samuel 1992, 1994 and 1996; Kornman 1997; Kapstein 2007a.

8. *Mkhas-pa ’i dga’-ston*, p. 164: **mdo sde ’byung ba’i stas su sgrung rnams dar / ro langs gser sgrub kyi sgrung dang ma sangs kyi sgrung dang / mchil pa’i sgrung sogs nyan bshad.**


10. See Richardson 1993.

13. On the life of Thang-stong-rgyal-po and specifically the problems involved in establishing his role as founder of Tibetan *lha-mo*, see Gyatso 1986; Stearns 2007.


16. For a detailed history of Avalokiteśvara in China, including discussion of the deity’s East Asian gender transformation as Guanyin, see Yū 2001.

27. There is some evidence, as well, that the Karma Bka’-brgyud incarnate Karma Pakṣi (Karma-pa 2, 1206–1283), a contemporary of Guru Chos-dbang, was also instrumental in spreading the *ma-nī* formula. See Thinley 1980, p. 48. On the scholastic career of Karma Pakṣi, see Kapstein 2000, pp. 97–106.
29. See RB. My thanks to Benjamin Bogin for first introducing me to Ratnabhadra, and to Gene Smith and Derek Maher for procuring copies for me of his biography in both digital and photocopy format. I should clarify that Thang-stong-rgyal-po’s lineal tradition knows of another, and later, Lo-chen Ratnabhadra, who lived from 1489 to 1563 (or 1565). He was a renowned master of the Jo-nang Kālacakra tradition. For references, see Stearns 2007, p. 516 n.498. Comparing what little biographical details are available at present, it seems these two are actually different historical figures despite the fact that they both share the same name and title and belong to the same lineage.

30. Dwags-po Bkra-shis-rnam-rgyal’s most significant work on Mahāmudrā is his Nges-don phyag-rgya chen-po ’i sgom-rim gsal-bar byed-pa legs-bshad zla-ba ’i ‘od-zer. This work is translated in Dakpo Tashi Namgyal 2006.


32. This confusion of names is examined in Kapstein 1990, esp. pp. 103–109.

33. RB, fols. 2a-2b.

34. RB, fols. 5a-5b.

35. RB, fol. 7a.

36. Āryapalo is the name of the first temple built at Bsam-yas in the eighth century. It is dedicated to Hayagrīva.


38. RB, fols. 8a-9b.


41. The manuscript is missing fols. 10a–14b.

42. RB, fols. 15b–16b.


46. Pommaret 1989, p. 168 n.32.

47. Tucci 1966, pp. 185–186, also p. 193. A line drawing of a jo-dar is reproduced in the same volume, fig. 11, p. ix.

48. This final section of Byang-chub-seng-ge’s biography on the jo-dar exists also as a separate text in at least two recensions. See, for example, B2.


50. B1, fols. 229–231; cf. B2, fols. 5r-6r.


52. The biography of Ratnabhadra concludes by identifying the name of his chief patron, Sding-dpon-chen-po from Skyid-grong, and a long list of lo-chen storytellers belonging to the maṇi-pa lineage. They are as follows: O-rgyan-bstan-’dzin, Lo-chen Bdags [Dwags]-lha-sgam-po, Lo-chen Bkra-shis-dar-po, Lo-chen O-rgyan-rig-’dzin, Lo-chen Slo [Blo]-sel [gsal]-rgya-tso [mtsho], Lo-chen ’Jam-dpal-rang-grol, Lo-chen


55. See comments in Pommaret 1989, p. 22.


57. I should note here that professional mani-pa are still active in the modern world. Two of the last surviving performers, both with the name Bu-chen—Bu-chen Nor-rgyas and Bu-chen ‘Gyur-med—currently reside in exile in northern India. Ongoing efforts to preserve and transmit the craft of storytelling began in Dharamsala in 2001 under the auspices of the Lama Mani Project with the assistance of the Tibet Fund in New York City (www.tibetfund.org).

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**B4:** Dmyal-nang rang-grol byang-chub-seng-ges dmyal-khams-su skyabs gnas-rnams la mchod-bstod gsal'-debs phul-ba'i le'u nas mdor-bsdus-pa don-zab rma-dcha. In Ka-shod mkhar-kha, vol. nga.


Gnod-sbyin ma-ru-tse ro-langgs gsang-ba’i rgyud. In NGB, vol. 29, folks. 1014.4–1023.5.


RB: Lo-chen ratnabhadra'i rnam-thar bzhus-so 'gro-don 'phel. Digital scan of an incomplete manuscript in the possession of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala.


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