

Two Lectures for April 11, 2021: Hong Kong University

Introduction:

I first heard about the disappearance of the body -“the rainbow body”- of an elderly Tibetan monk, Khenpo A cho, in 1999. Within a year, I was able to interview eyewitnesses in eastern Tibet and in India. This led me to the spiritual byways of Central Asia to find the wellsprings of the practices known as “the great perfection” (dzogchen). Here I found shared narratives disclosing some remarkable conversations in which the experiences of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and other mystics witness to a remarkable era of spiritual exchange. In Tibet, the outcome has been the rainbow body attainment: a yogin’s body may shrink dramatically after death, or even disappear, accompanied by rainbows of varied shape, mystic sounds, perfumes, and optical illusions.

In recent years, various relics of such yogins have been displayed for veneration around the world. It is no longer possible to dismiss the phenomenon as folklore. Our lecture, “Narratives that Walk”, proposes criteria for research on this topic, mindful that the researcher’s self-awareness may play a key role in the emergence of the luminous contours of the human adventure.

The Body and the Phenomenon: Anthropological Research

The Life and Death of Khenpo A-chö. Research on paranormal postmortem phenomena in Tibet

The body is the vehicle for spiritual practice, even when it is experienced as a weight, as an obstacle, a fortress vulnerable to temptation, a temporary dwelling, fragile and subject to old age, sickness, and death. Traditions of spiritual practice have reshaped the body to make it a more fitting vehicle for the sacred. These interventions from the outside work to exploit the body’s symbolic capabilities: circumcision, tattooing, hair modifications, piercing, coloring, flagellation, incision, fasting, adopting fixed bodily postures, dance (with concomitant bodily development and decoration), costuming, and nudity.

However, some instances of bodily modification seem to arise either spontaneously or in connection with ascetic practices. Some of these modifications may not to be the result of an external intervention, and would seem to indicate that some spiritual practices

either directly or indirectly produce bodily modifications on a very deep level: stigmata, spontaneous healing of diseases, incorruption of the body after death, symbolic objects formed of human tissue in the bones or organs (found after death, as in the case of St. Veronica Giuliani or in the cremation of highly realized Tibetan lamas), longevity or “immortality”, bilocation, levitation, resurrection/resuscitation, and the various forms of the rainbow body.

Our research is directed toward the manifestation of the rainbow body after death. I am defining the “rainbow body” as: the shrinkage and disappearance of a human body within a short time after death accompanied by paranormal phenomena such as unusual emanations of light and altered atmospheric conditions in the locality of the deceased.

[Slide 1: Khenpo A cho]

The research is based on the case of Khenpo A-chö, a dGe lugs pa (with rNyingma pa roots) monk of Khams (eastern Tibet, now part of the Province of Sichuan) who died in 1998. My spiritual teacher for many years, Br. David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B., had heard about the death of this Khenpo from a friend in Switzerland and was attracted by the reports of paranormal phenomena, including the manifestation of the disappearance of the corpse within a week of death. Br. David’s interest was specifically directed toward an eventual comparison of the rainbow body phenomenon with the bodily resurrection of Jesus, which is of course one of the central faith-convictions of Christianity. For the most part, since the days of late nineteenth century European biblical scholarship directed along secular lines, the resurrection has been consigned to the category of those miracles that comprise a symbolic account of the faith experience. This approach, associated with the historical-critical method of textual hermeneutics, asserts that miracles do not literally happen. Rather, the paranormal phenomena reported in the Bible were composed by the disciples of Jesus as an explanation for why they continue to believe in him after his death on the cross, -and why they courageously continue to spread his message in the face of violent opposition. The historical-critical approach, however, does not seem to answer all our questions: historical, archeological, psychological, and theological.

[Image of the Shroud of Turin]

Br. David had been in touch with some of the scientists who were able to study the Shroud of Turin. He came away convinced that *this relic is not a fraud* made some time

during the Middle Ages. When he tried to raise the question of the Shroud as an archeological “source” in conversation with his historical-critical Biblical scholar colleagues, he ran into a total lack of interest. It was as if the Shroud were a symbol of the very opposite style of discourse from that of the *community of discourse of modern literary critics* of ancient texts.

[Slide: emic1 – emic2]

Moreover, the scientific aspects of Shroud research, by now amounting to thousands of pages of published articles, turned out to be all but incomprehensible to the Biblical scholars. Just as archaic tribal societies have their “insider” ways of articulating reality, so too, among literary scholars there is an “insider” language that is rarely if ever violated, and the same prevails among scientists. Each community of discourse seems to live in its own “**emic**” worldviews. At the interdisciplinary boundaries, communication becomes very difficult and at times almost impossible. Br. David entrusted me with the task of engaging with this risky terrain of research, knowing that I had studied Tibetan Buddhism, that I had done anthropological fieldwork in the Himalayas, and that I have a strong background in Biblical studies and theology. Moreover, we have been working together on our respective “spiritual journeys”, including interreligious dialogue, for over 40 years.

There are noteworthy advantages in working with an instance that is quite recent in time for which there are living eyewitnesses. In the case of Khenpo A cho, written accounts were produced within months of the events described. For these reasons, we are able to overcome some of the criticisms of the New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, the first of which (I Thessalonians) was most likely written about 20 years after the event. At the same time, given the fact that the rainbow body is a topic of interest in Tibetan culture for at least the last 1000 years, we are confronted with a well-established community of discourse that requires careful interpretation.

A Description of the Research Journey

The following material moves us directly into the inner world of the Khenpo and his disciples. The text comes from my fieldwork notebook covering our trip to western Sichuan Province in 2000. Thus, there are some indications of a certain “participant observer” quality to these notes, bringing the researchers into the sphere of life and faith

of the circle of the Khenpo's disciples.

Our trajectory began at Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, from which we set out west through the towns of Luding (site of a famous bridge and mythic battle between Communists and Nationalists in 1935), Kangding (site of the warehouses where Chinese block tea was traded for Tibetan silver in days gone by), and finally Kandzé. Beyond Kandzé is the former royal capital and printing house of Dergé, which we were unable to visit. Our chronology is as follows:

[Slide: Vanja Palmers, Tiso, Dr. Shi-tse-tsang in Zurich, Switzerland]

July 17, 2000. A visit to the Gelugpa monastery, Kandzé Gompa in the town of Kanzé in West Sichuan. This is the monastery with which Khenpo A chö was officially affiliated. Our research team, early in the morning, went up to the Gompa to attempt to interview the three Gelugpa rinpoches associated with this monastery. These three were identified as spiritual friends of the late Khenpo A chö by our research consultant in Switzerland, Mr. Shi-tse-tsang. We approached through narrow streets of Kandzé that tended to ascend to the left of the monastery, without any clear idea of how to find the main entrance to the extensive building complex. We eventually came to a small entryway. There we were welcomed by a young Khampa layman, Tashi Jamso, who fortunately spoke fluent Lhasa dialect. He immediately agreed to take us around the monastery and to introduce us to monks who knew the late Khenpo. With Tashi's help, we were introduced to Gelong Ba song who, without hesitation, gave us the precious text of the biography (*rnam thar*) of Khenpo A chö as written by Gelong Sonam Puntsog before the death of the Khenpo. Among other things, the text tells us that the Khenpo's main teacher when he studied in Lhasa was Trijang Rinpoche, who also taught the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. The final chapter, describing the death and manifestation of the rainbow body, is in the keeping of the community of nuns across the river.

We were informed that the Khenpo's hermitage is located in the region of Nyarong, south of Kanzé; the name of the locality is Lo ma ga (i.e. Khampa dialect for kLu ma gompa, which means "monastery of the lady Naga"). There is a small hut there on the side of the mountain where the Khenpo had lived a number of years.

[Slide: Gertag Rinpoche, Francis Tiso, Tashi Jamso]

After our visit to the main monastery in Kandzé, Tashi Jamso took us to the residence of Gertag Rinpoche, a married Gelugpa lama who has a home in the lower part of Kandzé in a complex of single-story buildings that house the other two incarnate lamas of the gompa with their families and assistants. Gertag Rinpoche was not feeling well, but graciously received us.

Gertag Rinpoche then described an episode that occurred one year before the Khenpo's death. Significantly, none of the biographies mention this episode, which reflects the close personal relationship between the Khenpo and the superiors of his own Gelugpa monastery.

From time to time, the Khenpo would visit the Rinpoche for the purpose of divination (*mo*). Because of their dharma connection and because of the Rinpoche's name (*sKye brTag*, which literally means "the result of a divination", particularly of the type in which a person is to make a representation of the Three Jewels in some form so as to be liberated from bad rebirths), the Khenpo wanted to have an idea of the time of his impending death. In 1997, he came for a session of divination. The result of the ritual was that the Khenpo should have a *thangka* of the Tushita heaven (*dga' ldan yid dga' chos 'dzin*) painted as a sign of what was to happen. Khenpo was to pass away and go to the Tushita heaven. In a subtle way, the Rinpoche was confirming the Gelugpa affiliation of the Khenpo, both in the experience of divination, and in the fact of recounting this episode, and none other, in our interview. [Note that "lGa' ldan" is another name for the Gelugpa Order, whose main monastery has this name, referring to the Tushita heaven.]

I went on to ask about how the Rinpoche felt when he realized during the divination that Khenpo A chö was going to die. He replied that the disciples had already been doing long life pujas for the Khenpo and so he was not too surprised that the Khenpo had come to the end of his life. After the *mo*, the students continued to pray for his long life, even knowing that he would die soon. Khenpo was very happy to die and go to the Tushita Heaven, because he knew that he would thereby have the good karma to eliminate all defilements. During the *mo*, he told the Rinpoche to say "whatever came into his mind".

So, instead of doing the usual procedure¹, he spontaneously told the Khenpo to commission the *thangka*. It is again significant that this intimate conversation between two spiritual friends speaks of the “elimination of defilements” in contrast to what is said in the biographical account, which implies that the Khenpo had already eliminated all defilements long before the final year of his life.

[Slide: Ani gompa]

On the afternoon of the same day, accompanied by Tashi Jamso, our team visited the Ani Gompa across the river from Kandzé to meet with the chaplain, Lama Puyok. He is an enthusiastic “promoter of the cause” of Khenpo A chö, by which I mean that he seems eager to encourage devotion to this lama, who was very dear to him. Thanks to his kindness, we were able to acquire the final chapter of Sonam Puntsog’s biography of the Khenpo from the nuns. This text, which we have presented above, covers the time of his death and the rainbow body manifestation. We also had a very moving meeting with the nuns, who had received many teachings and initiations from the late Khenpo. While looking over the text of the final chapter in the presence of the nuns and of Lama Puyok, I found the words “*dad-gus*”, which mean “faith and devotion”. The expression is meant to sum up the intentions of the author in writing the biography. I pointed delicately to these words and explained how important they are, at which point the nuns began to weep heartfelt tears of devotion, one after another, until all of them had wet faces, as did our research team.

July 18, 2000 At Ya chas Gompa, Chung T’ai village on the road to Pelyul (Baiyu).

To find this remote place, I am following the roads with a highly detailed map in Chinese that I had purchased in Chengdu. I was attempting to memorize the Chinese characters for the various towns that we passed on our journey, which I am sure many of you will find amusing.

[Slide: Lama A Khyug reciting Gesar epic]

After a very rough ride in the land cruiser, we were able to interview Lama A Khyug, the Dharma brother of Khenpo A chö, at the large and very primitive monastic

¹ “Mo” divination involves tossing a rosary in the air, catching it with two hands, counting the number of beads between one’s two hands. The resulting count is evaluated in accord with Tibetan numerology.

community of Ya Chas Gompa, near Chung T'ai city, farther west on the road to Balyul, near the border between the Tibet Autonomous Region and the province of Sichuan. This Lama is a relative of Lama Puyok, who is serving as guide and helper to our translator, Douglas Duckworth. The monastic community is said to consist of 1000 monks and 1000 nuns, studying under Lama A Khyug's guidance. The two communities are gathered like two huge flocks on either side of the lama's residence. The surreal site is located in an environment of high steppe grasslands, with hardly a tree in sight. Rolling hills are all around us and in the extreme distance one can make out snow-capped mountains.

After considerable confusion as the fascinated young monks gathered to observe the newly arrived foreigners, we were admitted into the presence of the Lama. Without a great deal of ceremony, Lama A Khyug informed us that he has all the teachings on the rainbow body and has realized them himself.

Lama A Khyug tells us that Khenpo A chö, his Dharma friend, attained the rainbow body because he obtained the teachings from a legitimate, realized guru, and practiced those teachings until they became an integral part of his own experience. To attain the rainbow body, one has to obtain the teachings and practice assiduously. He and his teacher were together for 54 years. One needs to practice for at least 60 years for results to occur, which suggests that even a master of the lineage conceives of the attainment as the result of a technique- albeit a technique shaped by a profoundly metaphysical set of presuppositions.

[Slides: of the drawings I have prepared from memory of the two photos]

At a certain point in our interview, he showed us two photographs of himself taken in the dark. They are intended to show his ability to manifest the subtle body of light. I was able to examine these photos quite closely in the fading daylight because we were obliged to leave the Lama's room to allow a group of visitors to offer *khataks* and make offerings. One photo was of the Lama's body in faintly luminous silhouette in meditation position. The other showed three bodily outlines in light, more intense than the other photo, with streaks of light coming forth from each of these outline-bodies, one slightly superimposed on the other. Unfortunately, it was twilight and I was unable to get the camera to focus on these photographs so as to be able to reproduce the images. These

photos, if authentic, would have been our only non-verbal evidence for the paranormal phenomenon of a body radiating light.

Later in the evening, we had another meeting with Lama A Khyug in order to clarify further what he wished to say about the rainbow body. In this interview, he became more confrontational, almost like a *smyon-pa* yogin (mad yogin, crazy wisdom master). He asked us: “Are you willing to stay here forever? Do you have faith that in front of you is a Lama who has attained the rainbow body?” I was in fact profoundly moved by the fact that he repeated several times: “You do not see the rainbow body with the bodily eyes, but with the eyes of the heart (*sems*)”² while gesticulating emphatically. He continued to insist: “The view³ is in our mind and cannot be learned from books. Only from practice, and from seeing the Lama as Buddha, can the view be brought into our own experience. It is not helpful just to talk; one has to practice. So I advise you: receive teachings from a Lama on the correct view. Then practice. When you have realized the view, then and then alone can you benefit others. Only then can you really bring benefit to people.”

As he spoke, Lama A Khyug frequently repeated the contrast between bodily eyes (*mig*) and the eyes of the heart (*sems*). He also referred to his own mala, which he held in his hand, saying: “You can recite many malas of mantras, but it is inner realization that matters.” The message seemed quite clear to me: neither philosophical study nor pedestrian forms of religious practice are sufficient. To realize the rainbow body requires a more advanced form of spirituality that must become an intimate part of the life of the yogin. This also hints at the view of early dzogchen, to the effect that the attainments of this “highest vehicle” take the yogin beyond the realm of rituals and mantras.

I was able to follow most of what Lama A Khyug was saying in his rough Khampa dialect, because his message was actually quite simple and insistent. He would frequently point to his heart when he used the word “*sems*”, for heart-mind, and he

² As St. Leo the Great says about the death and resurrection of Christ: “The signs of our future resurrection appear now, and that which will one day happen to our bodies, is now accomplished in our hearts.”

³ The key term, view, refers not only to the doctrinal assertion of “non-duality” between perceiver, object perceived, and the act of perception, but also to the state of awareness or of contemplation in which this non-duality is experienced directly.

seemed in the habit of using his mala of 108 beads to insist about the need for inner realization. “*Jalu mik ma rey; Jalu sem rey!*”

That he meant a mystical experience as a necessary sign of realization became clearer as he shared a personal anecdote. Once he went to Kandzé Gompa, where he met a Lama of that monastery. He looked at him and saw the image of Chenresì (Avalokiteshvara) on his forehead, i.e. an image invisible to most people, but visible to Lama A Khyug. He recognized that this was a good lama and he had faith in him. He challenged us to find something on his face, in order to test our ability to understand his intentions. I looked closely and noticed a certain similarity between his appearance and “presence” and that of the bishop who ordained me to the priesthood, Most Rev. Ettore Di Filippo. Lama A Khyug was pleased with this reply, which harmonized with the attitude of guru-yoga.

Having understood that I am some kind of Christian lama, he asked me if there is the rainbow body in Christianity. I gave an interpretation of the resurrection, but he seemed quite unimpressed. He also dodged further questions about his friend, Khenpo A chö, returning with insistence to the contrast between sights perceptible to the eyes (*mig*) and that which is accessible only to the heart-mind (*sems*). This left me feeling a degree of ambiguity that was only partly removed by what happened a number of days after this interview (the spontaneous emergence of the non-dual state after a strong emotional experience). Was he telling us that the rainbow body is reducible to a mental phenomenon or that it amounts to a verbal expression of reverence for a holy person? It seems difficult to believe that a person who has two luminous photographs of himself, claiming to be able to manifest the rainbow body would not have faith in the literal paranormal phenomenon⁴.

[Slide: Hermitage at Lo Ma Ga]

On July 20, 2000 At Khenpo A chö’s hermitage, Lo ma ga (kLu ma Gompa) village, Nyarong County.

From the main road, after a modest hike, we were met- as if by magic or

⁴ Lama A Khyug did manifest paranormal phenomena at death (2008), leaving a greatly shrunken body relic, which has been part of the Buddhist relic tour sponsored by Lama Zopa in recent years.

telepathy- by two teenaged novice monks and two of the nuns that we had left at this turnoff the day before on our way back from Ya chas Gompa. They insisted on carrying our backpacks, running on ahead to gather a large quantity of fragrant flowers for the altars of the hermitage. After about a three hour trek, we cross a river on a relatively recently constructed bridge, whereupon we come into the immediate vicinity of the Khenpo's hermitage. A small stupa appears on the left. Further down in the valley, the charming village of Lo ma ga (kLu ma gompa) with its modest monastery is now visible.

We can see the hermitage, which is a small cabin built entirely of unpainted wood and rough-hewn stone, above the stupa on the mountain slope. It is set apart from the meadow, adorned with the flowers of midsummer, by a ragged stockade meant to protect the vegetable garden positioned in front of the rickety porch. We ascend the slope and soon, inspired by the spiritual feeling of the place, we remove our shoes and begin to make prostrations with the novices and the nuns. Completing our climb, we find ourselves surrounded by a group of disciples and relatives of the Khenpo who had been awaiting our arrival. Lama Norta invites us in to venerate the place of the life, spiritual practice and death of the holy Khenpo. Masses of fresh flowers are placed in vases and located in every empty space inside the hermitage. We are so happy to have arrived that we effortlessly offer prostrations, mantras, supplications, tears of devotion and joy. Then we all settle down to tea and the interview process, to which Lama Norta agrees, thanks to the explanations of Lama Puyok.

[Slide: Interview with Lama Puyok and Lama Norta]

Our team interviewed Lama Norta on the manifestation of the rainbow body by Khenpo A chö. Lama Norta is a nephew of the Khenpo, and was an eyewitness of the death process.

Lama Norta explained that his uncle was a very humble man. He did not brag about the teachings he had received or the lamas under whom he had studied. He spoke often of the importance of cultivating compassion, both in meditation and in practice. To those who knew him, his high level of spiritual realization was well known. Khenpo A chö would lock himself in for periods of strict retreat inside this hermitage. However, Lama Norta tells us that he had seen Khenpo A chö *outside* the hermitage, circumambulating it during one of these strict retreats. The Khenpo gave few initiations,

but would work intensively with select disciples, many of whom were from the Nyarong region. He was also very supportive of the nuns that we met near Kandzé, and favored them with many special teachings, which explains their extraordinary joy, devotion and energy.

Lama Norta recounted some of the extraordinary things that occurred two years previously (1998) at the time of the death of their beloved teacher. As we read in the biography (*rnam thar*) that we were able to obtain in Kandzé, the five colors of the rainbow manifested in the sky. Moreover, on several occasions, the air was pervaded by music, which was heard by monks and laypeople. His niece Tsering Tshitsho and her father and other relatives saw that the sky in the eastern direction was pervaded by rainbow colors.

The author of the biography, who was in retreat at the time, saw rainbow colors in the sky for two days in the direction of the road to the retreat place. And on the next day, Gyu Ja Sherab Gyaltzen heard the news of the lama's death, and he too saw some signs, which we presume to have been rainbows. Moreover, the light of the sun, which was like copper, appeared in the eastern direction like a body of light for a long time at the time of liberation (death). All the persons from the inner circle of disciples witnessed this. During days following the Khenpo's death, his attendants and servants, young and old, were daily performing circumambulations of the cabin, offering supplications and prayers. His body became smaller and smaller, day after day. After seven days, there was nothing left. He had manifested the uncontaminated *vajra body*. His own lama had prophesied that this would occur. This could be considered the uncontaminated rainbow body of great transformation⁵, liberation into the body of light, without leaving hair or nails.

In this interview we immediately note that the notion of fulfillment of prophecies is at least as important as the paranormal phenomena being described. Within the world of discourse of our Tibetan informants, prophecy is a key feature of hagiographical accounts, in marked contrast to the way Buddhism is popularly described. There is the "real" Buddhism of traditional communities in the highlands of Southeast Asia and Tibet,

⁵ This assertion of the attainment of the '*ja' lus chen po* or "*pho wa chen po*" might be contested by orthodox rNyingma practitioners.

and there is an academic Buddhism that seems to be missing some of its characteristic DNA. The problem impinges on our research because it requires us to interpret the data with greater sympathy for the “insiders” view. What is seen may in fact not be what is known, just as Lama A Khyug warned.

During the rest of the interview, having reviewed the main points of the biography of the Khenpo, we proceeded with the formal set of questions that I had had translated into Tibetan.

[This portion can be skipped or summarized orally:]

What was the date and time of the passing away of Khenpo A Chö?

- It was two years ago, almost exactly at this time of the year. The seventh day of the seventh Tibetan month.

Did his passing away take place here in this house?

- He was lying on the bed (the meditation box) with his right hand under his cheek; he was not sick, he was lying there reciting the mantra *om mani padme hung*. His breath was very weak. They were discussing that this would be the time in which he would be passing away.

So did he die at that moment?

- There were six people present. Lama Norta with his two nephews, Lama Nyendrak, and Sonam Gyaltzen and Rinchen Tsering, the latter two who are monks and are now studying in India.
- Are they monks? Yes, the last two are monks.

After his death, what happened to the body right away and in the days that followed?

After his breath stopped, his body remained there, and his face become pinkish, like an eight year old child's flesh; the wrinkles disappeared. They did not take pictures, but if they had taken pictures it would have been amazing. At that time, they were so sad that he passed away. For this reason, they did not think to take pictures, it did not occur to them.

After that, did they notice any changes in the body? Did it get wrinkled again? Did it shrink? Any signs of decay? What happened in the next day or two?

They asked Lama A Khyug of Ya chas Gompa what to do with the body; he said to wrap the body in a yellow robe, it is the robe all Gelug monks have, symbol of Shakyamuni. He said not to tell anyone that he had died because there might be obstacles if there were disciples and great lamas present. According to the Lama, there are some good people, but there are some bad people round about, and they might spread the word in a way that would create problems, or even try to steal objects that belonged to the Khenpo. Day by day, observing the yellow robe that covered the body, they noticed that the bones of his arms and legs diminished in size. Lama A Khyug at Ya chas gompa said to leave the body alone for 7 days.

Were there any other phenomena besides the shrinking that they noticed?

They were very saddened by the death of the lama so they did not wander around looking for signs, but *there were many people in the monastery below this mountain, old monks and nuns, who saw many*

rainbows over this hermitage, and they wondered to themselves, why are there so many rainbows over the hermitage? Also people from where Lama Puyok is from, near Kandzé, could see the rainbows. Another monk, Sonam Gyaltsen, while walking outside, heard an amazing song coming out of the hermitage. He entered the hut and heard the voice coming from the sky above. At the time, he thought that it would have been good to have been able to make a recording of that music, but he did not have a tape recorder.

How long did it take for the body to dissolve completely?

Seven days. Lama A Khyug at the Ya Chas monastery told them not to look below the robe for 7 days.

They followed these instructions. *After 7 days* Lama Norta, Sonam Gyaltsen, Rinchen Tsering, and Lobzang Nyendrak looked under the robe and found nothing. *There was no body to be found.* (So it might have taken less than 7 days.)

Where was the body all this time? Was it here in this room where we are having the interview?

No, it was in the bedroom full of shrine objects, not in the room where we were taping the interview.

Even from outside the hut there was an amazing fragrance emitted by the corpse, an amazing perfume.

Lama Norta says he himself experienced this perfume, as did many of the older people who were outside, circumambulating the hermitage.

Does Lama Norta know of any other manifestations of rainbow body that have taken place in recent times?

There was one monk from Nyarong, Pema Dudul, who attained rainbow body, this was a long time ago, but he heard about it. This was about 150 years ago.

Did he ever hear of some holy person who attained rainbow body and who left an *imprint or impression at that time on cloth or on stone or some other kind of imprint* when they attained it?

No, he has never heard of such a thing.

On the yellow cloth, there was no mark of any kind?

No, there was no mark.

Do they still have *the robe*?

It is in the possession of Lobzang Nyendrak.

Anything else that they would like to say about this beautiful experience?

He does not have anything else to say about the way the rainbow body was manifested. When the Khenpo was young, he studied the *Five Main Treatises* [of Maitreya-Asanga] at Sera Monastery in Lhasa and memorized them all. Whatever questions you would ask him, he would know the answers. He was always giving teachings that would benefit people. *Even when he was dealing with someone that was quite busy or rude, he could give appropriate teachings that would make their minds workable. He was a truly unique teacher.*

Has anyone had a *visionary experience, a visit from Khenpo A chö since his passing away*?

Yes, certainly. Lama Puyok has had a vision of Khenpo A chö. He had a lot of disciples and many of them have had this experience. He has appeared in dreams.

And Lama Norta?

He says yes, he has had such an experience.

Also, Lobzang Nyendrak was in retreat at one time. This happened to him when he was not sleeping. At that time he had the experience of Khenpo A chö tugging on his shirt sleeve and telling him, “*Practice well, meditate well. Be attentive.*”

I (the author) commented: Once I was saying Mass, and at the time of reciting the Our Father, my mind opened and I had a visionary experience of a monk who was one of the founders of Br. David’s monastery, in happiness and surrounded by light. So I know what they are talking about and I have a lot of respect for their willingness to speak to us. So I am very humbled by your willingness to tell us these things.

Lama Norta continued: Once a nun had a dream of a high cliff. She was falling off the cliff and the moment she thought of the Khenpo, he came to rescue her.

As we left the hermitage compound, we exchanged gifts and greetings with the various disciples, and felt ourselves surrounded by a great sphere of peace and luminosity, as if we had truly connected with the essential reality of the rainbow body. Thus the rainbow body is not so much the manifestation of one man’s spiritual attainment, as it is a state of authentic liberation from all that weighs us down, blocking our ability to imagine a **vast reality**. This message became more and more vivid in the days to come, during which we would be dealing with several distressing misadventures. Upon our return to Kandzé, while having a light supper with a Tibetan family, we were treated to a magnificent display: a huge, perfect half-circle rainbow over the entire city of Kandzé. The “sign” seemed to be a kind of reassuring confirmation that whatever we had done was in some way worthwhile.

[Slide: The Presence of the Rainbow Body]

Narratives that Walk: How the Inter Cultural Spirituality of Central Asia told its own story:

Topics to summarize where we have been and where we are going:

1. What is dzogchen? [Slide: Dzogchen History]

<i>Phases of Dzogchen History:</i>
Early assimilation of Buddhist teachings from China and Central Asia: 600s-770s
Foundation of Samye Monastery: 775
Council (?) of Samye against (?) Chinese Buddhism: 792-4

Era of “pristine dzogchen” within the First Diffusion: 770s – 850s
Era of the lay tantrics (<i>sngags pas</i>); development of a nine-vehicles system: 850s- 1100s
Tantric aspects of Buddhism acquire greater importance in Dzogchen practice: 1000-1300
Longchenpa’s (scholar, yogin, and tertön) philosophical revolution: 1330-1360s
Age of the Tertons (treasure discoverers; ritual specialists and yogins): 1100- present day

2. Why is bodily dissolution important? The rainbow body emerged as a yogic attainment during the culture war period of the eleventh century, based possibly on earlier speculations on how the human body might participate in the experience of enlightenment at the time of death. The history of the attainment of the rainbow body within the dzogchen tradition is not easy to establish. Samten Karmay, in his seminal work on the history of dzogchen, shows that the 11th century theorists did in fact base their ideas on Buddhist ideas of “nirvana attained without leaving any remainder”, i.e., understood at that time as to attain nirvana without leaving behind any visible relics after cremation. The idea was that a practitioner of Mahayoga tantra (in the series Mahayoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga, recognized as the highest three vehicles in dzogchen theory) “passes into nirvana either with the actual body or leaving it behind, but it must be mentioned that ... the author he cites does not speak of this in connection with dzogchen”⁶. The idea of the dissolution of the body emerges in dzogchen only after the “mind series” of texts has been assimilated by the lineages in the later period- the time of conflict during the “second diffusion” of Buddhism in Tibet. Samten Karmay tells us that the term “*phung po lhag med*” (the body without remainder) is discussed in the *klong sde*, the “Space Series” of teachings and, even more amply, in the *Man ngag gi sde*, “The Instruction Series” of dzogchen teachings. *Since these treatises only go back to the eleventh century*, we are constrained to that period for any discussion of this attainment. For the Instruction Series, “the internal elements vanish into their original place. The attachment to one’s own body ceases and the body no longer appears with the actual flesh

⁶ Samten G. Karmay, *The Great Perfection (rDzogs Chen)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), page 193.

and blood. As the five external elements cease to exist, the appearance of earth and stone is no longer a coarse appearance, so nothing remains.”⁷

From the eleventh century onwards, dzogchen treatises consistently use the term “without remainder” to designate a process by which the body of a deceased master ceases to exist, retaining its existence in the form of a “body of light”. When we come to Longchenpa in the 14th century, we find the expression “*the exhaustion of the elements after the principle of the primordial purity has been finalized* by means of the *khregs chod*, ‘cutting off the rigidity’ and the purification of the elements after the spontaneity has been finalized by means of the *thod rgal*, ‘passing over the crest’ are identical in their effectiveness for purifying the external and internal substances, but in the case of the *khregs chod*, when the atoms of the body vanish separately, the adept is instantly released to the primordial purity. ... In the case of the *thod rgal* the adept assumes a luminous body and accomplishes the ‘Great Movement’”⁸. Karmay notes that the conception of the rainbow body is not unique to dzogchen (cf. our translations of the earliest biographies of Milarepa). However, the practitioner of dzogchen intends to attain such a body as a sign of the “return to the primordial state which is conceived to be in the form of light”⁹.

Significantly, other Tibetan Buddhist schools severely criticized this point of view vigorously, affirming that “the notion of the dissolution of the physical body into lights is totally extraneous to Buddhism.”¹⁰ These critics asserted that the rainbow body was a return to the pre-Buddhist idea of the ascent of the early Tibetan kings to heaven by means of a magical rope¹¹. In fact, at times the rhetoric of our dzogchen practitioners seems to hearken back to the early cultural history of Tibet! The eighth Karmapa, Mi bskyod rdo rje pointed out that the rainbow body was the result of *practices found among the Bon po who teach methods “for watching lights and hold that if one’s body enters into light one attains the ‘eternal body’”*¹² These criticisms in the name of Buddhist

⁷ Samten Karmay, p. 193.

⁸ Karmay, citing Longchenpa’s *gNas lugs mdzod*, p. 193.

⁹ Karmay, p. 194.

¹⁰ Karmay, p. 195

¹¹ Karmay, pp. 195-6, citing dPal mang dKon mchog rgyal mtshan, p. 196, fn. 90.

¹² Karmay, p. 195.

orthodoxy suggest that there really was something alien about the rainbow body as a goal of spiritual practice. If we compare this notion with the original Mind Series teachings (*Sems sde*, as in the texts written prior to 1000 C.E. found at Dunhuang), we can also detect a certain dissonance because of the resistance of those “pristine” dzogchen teachings to the notion of attainments, stages, progress, purification, and striving. We also know that “watching lights” was a practice of the Tamil Siddha tradition several centuries (Tirumular, 8th century) prior to the 11th century “explosion” of dzogchen treatises, and it was also a practice of Central Asia Buddhists in the tattered *Yogavidhi* book found at Turfan¹³. This puts us back into the world of Manicheans and Syro-Oriental Christians along the great Silk Road. In the final analysis, however, none of the Silk Road traditions ever intended to resurrect or save the human body except one: *the Christians*. A purified, subtle, luminous body, the *soma pneumatikos*, is described in I Corinthians 15, written in about 52 C.E. This doctrine is further developed by Evagrius of Pontus in the *Kephalaia Gnostika* (late fourth century), and finds a place in St. Thomas Aquinas’ discussion of the resurrection body in the 13th century *Summa Theologiae*.

[Slide: The Stele of 781 written by Jingjing]

3. Why is the experience of luminosity important, and how is it achieved?

Inner luminosity can be achieved through a variety of yogic practices that work with breath retention (pranayama, and especially kumbaka). Advanced practitioners can move the energy of a living human body (prana) into the central channel of the subtle body, an energy structure coincident with the material body.

[Slide: the subtle body image as taught by Tenzin Wangyal for Bonpo gtummo]

The important practice of gtummo, yogic heat, enhances the yogin’s ability to focus prana in the central channel. While meditating on this energy, with eyes closed, the yogin may begin to see patterns of luminosity that are not reducible to phosphenes or other natural phenomena involving stimulation of the retina. With time, these spheres of light may be seen with the eyes open, and under a variety of circumstances. The traditions that teach methods for achieving this experience of luminosity consider this to

¹³ Dieter Schlingloff, *Ein Buddhistisches Yogalehrbuch*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964.

be a way to develop the abilities that can produce an illusory body, light body, or even the post mortem dissolution of the body.

[Slide: a look inside the avadhuti]

Perhaps most significantly, this experience makes it possible to pass from ordinary awareness and sensory perception into a sort of “parallel world” of deeper awareness and more insightful perception (*vipaśyanā*) that is normally inaccessible to the human mind. In fact, Western philosophy since Hume and Kant has declared this dimension of consciousness to be beyond the capacity of the human intellect. By making this state of awareness accessible, the practices of *trekchod* (including heat yoga and de-localized luminosity), and the even more advanced dark retreat practices of *thodgal*, constitute a direct challenge to all modern philosophical explanations of human cognition. Human beings in fact do have access to states of consciousness that make possible forms of cognition that would have been called “metaphysical” in the pre-Kantian sense. It seems that we now even have some evidence (the work was done in 1997, but only now has been picked up by French news services) that such states of consciousness can augment the emanation of biophotons, which means that scientific research on these states is in fact possible.

4. Our Tool Kit for Exploring Narratives.

To gain an understanding of the history of dzogchen as it was woven into the *Life of Garab Dorje*, believed to be the first human dzogchen master, we need a complex tool kit. The **first tool** for entering the world in which dzogchen first arose is the “First Story” narrative, typical of Eurasian heroic sagas. Christopher Beckwith lists the essential narrative elements of the “First Story” as follows:

[Slide: outline of the “First Story”]

- i. A maiden is impregnated by a heavenly spirit or god.
- ii. The rightful king is deposed unjustly.
- iii. The maiden gives birth to a marvelous baby boy.
- iv. The unjust king orders the baby to be exposed.
- v. The wild beasts nurture the baby so he survives.
- vi. The baby is discovered in the wilderness and is saved.
- vii. The boy grows up to be a skilled horseman and archer.

- viii. He is brought to court but put in a subservient position.
- ix. He is in danger of being put to death but escapes.
- x. He acquires a following of oath-sworn warriors.
- xi. He overthrows the tyrant and reestablishes justice in the kingdom.
- xii. He founds a new city or dynasty.¹⁴

This “Eurasian” myth, which certainly resonates with other great heroic tales, is easily adapted to both royal and religious applications. It forms the narrative core of many of the sagas of the Central Asian monarchs, conquerors and heroes of our period of research; other typologies and historical elements are added by the bard as he or she recites an oral poetic account of the epic¹⁵. Our friend Lama A Khyug was a bard of the Gesar epic, and his monks were extraordinarily able to dance the parts of goddesses and demons, heroes and nomads – while the great lama chanted the tale from a booth with loudspeakers.

In the 11th century life of Garab Dorje, we have a document that seems in many ways to correspond to the First Story, applying the themes to a spiritual hero. At the same time, the dzogchen authors tell the story with a skillful use of narrative typologies colored by other great stories encountered along the way. The text of the *Life of Garab Dorje* resembles the Christian hagiographical romance of *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, whose latest version was probably produced in the same period (8th century and 11th century),¹⁶ using the same *bardic methods* of oral composition and spontaneous editing of a well-known tale. It is particularly interesting how the doctrines of the Great Perfection are illustrated by the very strangeness of the narrative.

Our second research tool is the story of Jesus and Mary¹⁷ in Qur’an Surah 19 and in other parts of the Qur’an that refer to Jesus. Perhaps the 19th Surah had already entered

¹⁴ Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009) p. 12.

¹⁵ See: Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960). There are some important features to the bard’s oral recitation and re-creation of the traditional materials of the epic account of his/her community’s history.

¹⁶ [St. John Damascene](attributed), *Barlaam and Ioasaph*. Translated by Rev. G. R. Woodward and H. Mattingly. Introduction by D. M. Lang (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983, Loeb Classical Library, 34).

¹⁷ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, general editor. *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003), Volume Three, pp. 288-295, “Mary” by Barbara Freyer Stowasser.

the realm of legend and folklore, and was “ripe” for becoming the core story of a new Buddhist story. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to find this Surah as the core story in a Tibetan narrative. It is more the tale of Maryam than of Issu Messia, entering into the psychology of a deeply pious woman who chooses to go into retreat, only to find herself embarrassingly with child. How the Qur’an came to nurture oral narrative folklore is a topic that invites further research.

A third tool would be to be aware of elements of the life of Jesus and Mary as found in apocryphal gospels, the New Testament, and other early Christian literature. This body of literature seems to have been passed alongside a folklore version of the 19th Surah in its journey from West Asia to the Himalayan highlands. There are some well-known features of the life of Jesus that are not in the Qur’an, but which do turn up in the Garab Dorje hagiography, such as the hero’s rising from the dead.

A fourth tool of our research is to be aware the view of the humanity of Jesus in the theology of the Antiochian school of early Christianity, and the appropriation of that theology (so-called “Nestorianism”) by the Syro-Oriental Church of the East that was in contact with China, Central Asia, and Tibet in the period 600-1100. Antiochian Christianity de-emphasized the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, gave great importance to the literal meaning of the text, and kept the two natures of Christ (human and divine) separate without abandoning the soteriological vision of the ecumenical councils of the fourth century.

[Slide: Sketch of the history of the Church of the East]

The Church of the East went its own way after the fifth century councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. This Church spearheaded the ambitious project of evangelization that took the Christian message from Syria, Mesopotamia and Asia Minor as far as Central Asia, India, Tibet and China. The adaptability of Syro-Oriental theology is reflected in the remarkable documents that have been preserved in Chinese¹⁸, Sogdian, Turkic, and Uighur. The spirituality of the Church of the East, especially that of its great contemplatives Isaac of Nineveh, Abraham of Kashgar, Joseph Hazzaya and John of Dalyatha, certainly influenced Islamic mysticism as we can see in the writings of Sufi masters, such as Ibn ‘Arabi. It is this spiritual heritage that may have challenged north

¹⁸ Matteo Nicolini-Zani, *La Via Radiosa per l’Oriente* (Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 2006).

Indian and Himalayan contemplatives to reformulate their practices in the direction of what David Germano calls “pristine dzogchen”.

It is significant that the spirituality of the Syriac mystics was effective in preparing the missionaries of the Church of the East for their encounters with religions along the Silk Road, particularly the pre-eminent and highly diverse forms of Buddhism.

[Slide: Three Themes contributed by Christian Syriac theology]

It seems that the emphasis on a (1) dynamic (i.e. not “unchanging” or static, but simultaneously transcendent and imminent) view of the Absolute, on a (2) mysticism of personal transformation (including visionary experiences and bodily changes), and on (3) knowledge (gnosis, but not dualistic gnosticism) as the path to union with God, did in fact open up a lively exchange with contemplatives in that more enlightened time long ago, the seventh and eighth centuries. That dialogue seems to have been preserved as narrative theology, as we shall see.

The Narratives that “walk” East and West across the Silk Road.

[Slide: Map of Central Asia]

The Buddha becomes a Christian Saint? Barlaam and Ioasaph.

The life of Shakyamuni Buddha becomes the life of two Eastern Christian saints. *Barlaam and Ioasaph* is the tale of the Buddha’s life and conversion, embellished with elements of Manichean, Muslim and finally Christian spirituality, and presented as an integral part of the corpus of Christian hagiography. The translator, Prof. Lang, introduces the wide ranging linguistic pilgrimage of this tale: “The resemblance between the ethical system of the book of *Barlaam and Ioasaph* and the teachings of the Buddha is not complete in every respect, particularly since the Manicheans of Central Asia, the Arabs of Baghdad, and then the Christian translators, all worked over the text in their turn, and adapted it to fit the dogma of their particular faith.”¹⁹ Lang goes on to trace the history of the legend making use of texts recovered from Turfan in Old Turkish, and a Manichaean Turkish version of an episode that appears in the later Shi’ite version of the

¹⁹ Introduction to *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, by D. M. Lang, p. xiii; cf. also: Joseph A. P. Wilson. “The Life of the Saint and the Animal: Asian Religious Influence in the Medieval Christian West. *JSRNC* 3.2 (2009): 169-194, equinoxonline. for additional hagiographical observations, including everything in Lang.

tale of Yudasaf (or Budhasaf)²⁰. This material is traceable to Manichaeian propaganda during the Caliphate of Mahdi (775-785), influencing later Sufi groups in Mesopotamia²¹. The Arabic version of the tale ended up in Spain, where it was translated into Hebrew about 1220.²² The tale was handed on in Persian as well, where it was part of the oldest (early 10th century) poem in Classical Persian. The first Christian version is traceable to an 11th century manuscript in Georgian; the Greek version is a translation of this work. The old attribution of the *Barlaam and Ioasaph* tale to St. John of Damascus is unsustainable because in fact there is no mention of this tale among Greek speaking Christians for three centuries after the Damascene, who died in 749. The Greek version is attributable to Abbot Euthymius, a Georgian on Mt. Athos, who died in 1028²³, but was probably further embellished by the great Byzantine hagiographer Simon Metaphrastes before it came to the attention of a Latin translator in 1048²⁴. From there, the legend passed into European medieval literature in many languages. This itinerary of the story of Buddha Shakyamuni illustrates the kind of multi-layered redaction a tale in the period of our own interest might undergo. If a Buddhist tale might travel westward among Manicheans, Muslims and Christians, it is likely that a Christian or Muslim tale might have found its way eastward to Tibet.²⁵

The Prodigal Son becomes a World Savior? *The Gnostic Hymn of the Pearl*.

In this example, we have a Gnostic tale that seems to have remote connections to the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke and to a similar parable in the Lotus Sutra. The text exists in a Manichean redaction, which gives more importance to the search for true spiritual knowledge than to the notion of repentance and forgiveness. Even so, as narrative theology, the *Hymn of the Pearl*²⁶ corresponds in many ways to the overarching catechetical scheme of the trajectory of Origen and Evagrius: sublime and noble origins, descent into danger (matter and passions), the search for the “pearl” which

²⁰ Lang, pp. xvii-xviii.

²¹ Lang, pg. xix.

²² Lang, pg. p. xix.

²³ Lang, p. xxixff.

²⁴ Lang, p. xxxi.

²⁵ An article by Dan Martin from 2013 tends to support my contention that narratives do indeed travel from West Asia as far as Tibet, in this case the tale of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

²⁶ Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, Volume II, The Acts of Thomas, pp. 425-442 (Introduction); text: pp. 498-504.

is illuminating gnosis, being rescued from one's errors along the way, returning to the origin in which all the seemingly separate features of the tale turn out to be essentially one metaphysical reality. It is an exceptionally beautiful tale that bridges spiritual concerns East and West, and it is certainly an influence on the great Persian tale, the *Conference of the Birds*, by Attar of Nishapur (Farid ud-Din Attar, early 13th century).

Jesus and Mary: from the Qur'an to Tibet? The tale of Garab Dorje.

[Slide: Garab Dorje]

Qur'an Surah 19 (Maryam and Issu Messiah) becomes the Life of Garab Dorje in the *Bi-ma snying thig* (The heart essence of Vimalamitra). Garab Dorje's story, we might venture to say, is the story of dzogchen itself, a spiritual practice system that attempts to harmonize and correct all that has come before, by disclosing the most fundamental realities of consciousness, presence and perception. In this effort, the dzogchen story of Garab Dorje occupies a niche similar to that represented by the *Bhagavad Gita* in Indian religious history. In this particular section of the epic *Mahabharata*, just before the battle among the Kshatriya tribes, we have Hindu responses to the previous schools of spiritual discipline known to India. So too, our "odd" dzogchen biography of Garab Dorje impresses us with its free form, its contempt for any semblance of narrative logical structure, and its numerous allusions to other legendary sources. It uses its sources quite freely, as we can see in other similar works such as the *Life of Barlaam and Ioasaph*. The Garab Dorje biography is aware of the details of its sources and their meaning, and provides responses to these sources, perceived as inadequate. The authors of the Garab Dorje biography altered the meaning of their narrative sources when it suited the purpose of telling a **dzogchen narrative** of origins. As in gNubs chen's *A Lamp for Contemplative Seeing* (ninth century), alternatives are passed in review and found wanting as compared with the view of dzogchen. We note the dramatic contrasts between this biography and the extravagances of the *Lalitavistara* account of the Buddha Shakyamuni's birth and life. Where the *Lalitavistara* and the *Buddhacarita*, emphasize the purity and perfection of the appearance of Shakyamuni in this world, the biography of Garab Dorje seems to emphasize a climate of emotional turmoil, opposition, incomprehension and risk. The characters in the narrative appear and disappear the way

thoughts and appearances manifest during a session of meditation. Their disappearance suggests that even while captivated by the narrative, the reader is not to fall into the habit of conceptualizing everything he or she reads! The cremation ground imagery, which at first glance seems to indicate the eagerness of the 11th century authors to insert dzogchen into the historic moment of the Second Diffusion of Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet, on further reflection, seems to contrast with, or even to parody, Vajrayana imagery.

Unlike the descriptions of sacred sites in the Vajrayogini, Hevajra, and Cakrasamvara tantras, these “apocalyptic” scenes are not suggestive of resplendent ritual mandalas of peaceful and wrathful deities in *yab-yum* union. More than anything, they conjure up the impression of a mind at meditation, assaulted by thoughts that manifest in consciousness, arising from memory and from the body itself. In this way, the narrative suggests for itself a place in the genre of an *upadesha*, an oral teaching, meant for the committed practitioner. It is not simply an edifying tale or an account of legitimation for a lineage that has been subjected to criticism. In fact, the most ferocious critical responses to Dzogchen seem not yet to have been written²⁷ at this early 11th century moment. The narrative is an embodiment of the teacher and of the teachings, flowing playfully around the figures of princesses, dakinis, the Joyful Zombie, the Buddhist Brahman, and the Shaiva-like retinue that occupies the charnel ground geographies in which revelation takes place. Personages are like fragments of a rainbow dissolving into the sky, narratives trail off like clouds in a sunset, apocalyptic nightmares vaporize with the rosy morning rays of the rising sun, and numerology taunts the reader with temptations of conceptual interpretation. Time and library cataloguing roll on together, suggesting that the *upadesha* also involves the disciple in the process known as “tradition”: handing on what has been received. Handing on only in credible, authentic relationships between master and disciple, in which mind-to-mind, word and symbol, mediate an understanding rooted in previous long searches, frustrations, terrors and rages. In the life of Garab Dorje, the main character disappears more than once; the narrative ends by telling us about someone else- Manjushrimitra!

²⁷ Samten Karmay, “On the Doctrinal Position of rDzogs-chen from the 10th to the 13th Centuries,” *Journal Asiatique* 273 (1975):147-156.

All of this suggests that the full verbal account of anyone's life and liberation cannot be written. The unknown author of the *Bi-ma snying thig* seems to have known this well on the basis of contemplative training. Someone else's life has been lived and cannot be re-lived; neither can a narrative bring about the resurrection of an entire lifetime. The tale was lived, as we must live, in the conditions in which we find ourselves. No one is here to retell it all, nor to make connections and corrections for us. We are left to our fleeting perceptions, self-liberating in the body-mind's own light, gaining strength we know not how. Even if we were, like Mahler in the 7th or even the fragmentary though poignant 10th symphony, to scream and become shrill with anxiety over not having said or sung all that we might have wished to have said or sung, we are still assured in the unitive view of things, that nevertheless there are *some* connections that matter more than others. These flash forth from the ground of consciousness, make themselves present, stir up wonderment, and spontaneously place us in our primordial state of being *aware*, indeed "awakened awareness."

[Slide: Three Points of Garab Dorje]

Jesus Teaches St. Peter about Buddhism? The Chinese Christian *Book on the Realization of Peace and Joy*, 780s C.E., enters the stream of Buddhist Thought

The author of this work, *The Book of the Realization of Perfect Peace and Joy*, Jingjing, was a Syriac prelate living in the Tang capital Hsian. He is known as the author of the great Stele of 781, which recounts the history of the Church of the East in China. His uniquely creative work, the "Peace and Joy" text found at Dunhuang, presents the Messiah in dialogue with Simon Peter, explaining Buddhist and Daoist concepts. The work resembles some early apocryphal Christian works such as "Conversations between Jesus and his Disciples after the Resurrection" (p. 188 Schneemelcher) and "Fragments of a Dialogue between John and Jesus" (p. 331) and "The Questions of Mary" (p. 338). It has much in common thematically with the early dzogchen work also found at Dunhuang, *The Small Hidden Grain*, attributed to the dzogchen master Buddhagupta:

To what extent does a profound non-conceptual state
Appear as an object of the intellect?
Since an experience of profound non-conceptuality

Is experience, that is not the case [it cannot be an object].
Debate over the characteristics of Suchness
Is teaching that does not penetrate the Dharma.
So, however profound may be the words that one speaks,
How could they measure up to the true meaning?
In the accumulation of merit and wisdom,
Meditation and purification of karmic traces,
There exists the ‘peg of fixation’. Whereas-
In the ungraspable sky there is no artificial improvement.
And all bodily artificiality
Arises from attachment to the idea of the body.
In the sky without karma, there is nothing to improve.
Sky-like primordial presence
Has no crossed legs or straight posture.
Being naturally present in the sky
Is not the basis for alteration in the sky.
The nature of mind, the sky-like sphere of Enlightenment,
Is not the basis for attaining enlightenment [it is already Enlightenment]
The nature of mind, without base or root,
Is not found by searching for it, like the sky.
In enlightenment, which is free from generation,
Causes or effects of enlightenment are completely absent.

The interlinear notes to this work go even farther to speak of “the nondual mind of enlightenment”, “discernment of each thing”, “great non-conceptuality”, “great emptiness”, “the teaching on obscurations and obstacles”, “the extreme of subject-object fixation”, “free from effort and striving”, absence of “virtue and non-virtue”, absence of “both cause and result of great enlightenment”, the sky as “great expansiveness”, the sky as “wisdom of discernment”, the basis as “free from conceptual elaboration”, the mind as

“the reality of the universal ground”, and various metaphors such as “fire extinguishing water” or “a wild animal seeking a mirage.”²⁸

Enclosed together in the caves of Dunhuang, Buddhagupta’s poem and Jingjing’s parable seem paused between moments of an intense dialogue. Jingjing seems to be about to acknowledge²⁹ Buddhagupta’s perspective by insisting on affirming “the absence of desire, the absence of mental actions, the absence of merits...being meek and humble, free and patient, and to have within oneself great compassion...to be able to obtain that which is absolutely transcendent is called the way of peace and joy.” In this Christian soteriology, the attainments of Buddhist meditation are linked to the Sermon on the Mount by allusions to both sets of scriptures. The Messiah also says: “I affirm the absence of desire and the absence of mental action, abandonment of the sphere of corruption, and immersion in the wellspring of the uncontaminated. Abandoning corruption, one can become pure: this corresponds to ‘emptiness’; emanating grace and light, it is possible that all of reality to becomes luminous. *Causing all of reality to become luminous* is that which is called the way of peace and joy.” Here we can see the Christian contemplative doctrine of luminosity, already present in the New Testament, affirmed by the Egyptian monastic traditions, and strongly asserted by the Church of the East. This is the same vocabulary adopted by the Manicheans to unite Buddhist and Christian terminology in their own attempt to explain their beliefs in China. Christian *photism* arises directly from baptismal theology in which it was understood that the newly baptized Christian participates in the light of the risen Christ, called “*photizometha*” or illumination (New Testament, Justin Martyr, and Clement of Alexandria). Here at Dunhuang, the doctrine of light becomes a narrative that has “walked” to China.

[Slide: blessing the Paschal Candle]

The monastic life is the way of an existential realization of this baptismal gift of luminosity. The Pseudo-Macarius, a monastic writer of the fifth century, writes: “at the resurrection, everything will become luminous, everything will be immersed in light and

²⁸ Karen Liljenberg, www.zangthal.co.uk, pp. 4-5, notes on “The Small Hidden Grain”, IOL Tib J 594.

²⁹ Or else Buddhagupta is responding to Jingjing, depending on when the “Small Hidden Grain” was written.

fire and will be transformed”³⁰. Evagrius took the risk of asserting that this kind of contemplation occurs during the lifetime of the monk: “When the rational beings in their intellects shall have attained the contemplation that is truly noetic, then too shall the material nature of their bodies be taken away, and thus the contemplation of the nature of bodies will become immaterial” (*Kephalaia Gnostica* II.62), based on Origen, *On First Principles*, Book II, Chapter III. With Hans-J. Klimkeit’s work on the Christian-Buddhist encounter notes the persistence of the theme of the resurrection in the Christian documents³¹. This idea, as he rightly points out, is in total contrast to early Buddhist soteriological teachings. Still, the possibility of a dialogue between the two great traditions remained open – even if in Tibet, Trisong Detsen decided to exclude the Manichees in a decree of 755, and along with them it seems also the Christians.

It is only during the eleventh century, however, that we find the Buddhists expressing ferocious resentment against Christian, Muslim and Manichaean teachings. For example, both the *Kalacakra Tantra* and the *Insadi-Sutra* polemicize against Christian and Muslim figures, and hope that Maitreya will soon appear on earth to overcome the kingdoms of Bagdad and Byzantium.³²

At the time of Jingjing, however, it was still possible for Christians and Buddhists in China to work together on mutual understanding, and for the Christians to develop a unique set of theological solutions to the problems raised by their dialogue with the Buddhists in Central Asia. The resurrection idea, and the notion of embodied luminosity, however, created challenges for Buddhist thinkers. It is true that the cult of Amitabha already existed, and the Hua Yen school, based on the brilliant *Avatamsaka Sutra* of the Mahayana canon, was flourishing in China in the seventh and eighth centuries. However, there is no evidence at this period for any claims about a rainbow body. Even the Christians are not really pressing for a realization of the body of the resurrection in this

³⁰ Pseudo-Macario, *Spirito e Fuoco*, (Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 1995), edited and translated by Lisa Cremaschi, p. 190, my translation from Italian.

³¹ Hans-J. Klimkeit, “Christian-Buddhist Encounter in Medieval Central Asia,” typescript 1980s; see: Klimkeit, Hans-Joachim, “Christian-Buddhist Encounter in Medieval Central Asia”, Pages 9-24 in *The Cross and the Lotus: Christianity and Buddhism in Dialogue*. Edited by Houston, G.W.. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985. See also: Nicolini-Zani, p. 66, where he points out that the Christian Sogdian texts display a certain insistence on the theme of the resurrection, to contest the Manichean “docetic” beliefs about the resurrection of the body.

³² Klimkeit, typescript p. 8.

life, only for an increased mental and bodily subtlety anticipating the full participation in the resurrection at the end of time³³.

Moreover, the non-dzogchen schools of Buddhism, even those tantric schools that speak of a subtle body or a light body, do not make any claims that would be equivalent to the rainbow body in the period before the eleventh century. Later apocryphal “treasure” literature (*terma*)³⁴ does make such claims, but none of the Dunhuang documents refers to this kind of attainment. For these reasons, we are tempted to say that the rainbow body manifestation emerged along with other Buddhist writings in Tibet to express the “myth of religious superiority” in a time of crisis and change. Other tantric schools, we repeat, did not accept this teaching. Only the dzogchen school presents itself as the way to attain this particular manifestation of Buddhahood, and only at a time in which it is in a weak position during the Second Diffusion in Tibet. This also coincided with the time in which the caves at Dunhuang had been sealed shut. Christianity in this period seems to have overcome the crushing devastation of the 840s in China, and to have spread among the northeastern Turks, the tribes of the Ongut and Kerait during the 10th century. Even more conversions occurred in the 11th century when the Keraites carried Christianity to some of the Mongols³⁵. This is exactly the period in which Tibetan dzogchen masters begin to take stock of their situation and systematize their teachings. The Dunhuang texts indicate a lively exchange between Christians, Manicheans, and Buddhists during the period immediately preceding the “Second Diffusion”.³⁶

³³ Ilaria Ramelli’s commentary on the *Kephalaia Gnostika* shows how there are to be three resurrections, of the body, of the soul, and of the *nous* (intellect).

³⁴ I.e. texts based on the elaboration of shorter discovered scrolls or sacred objects.

³⁵ Klimkeit, typescript. Sam Van Schaik, in his blog (December 2, 2007), has discussed a Dunhuang fragment, IOL Tib J 766, that contains a sketch of a Syro-Oriental cross alongside writing in Tibetan and Uighur or Sogdian script. The cross has the three “beads” that make it a symbol of this Christian tradition (see the Iranian silver bowl- ciborium or chalice? - in the National Museum of Oriental Art, Rome, Palazzo Brancaccio). The same kind of cross is found at the top of the X’ian stele of 781, which was probably written by the same Jingjing who wrote “Peace and Joy”.

³⁶ E.g. crosses written in the margins; manuscripts with Christian texts on one side and Buddhist or Taoist texts on the other; exchange of esoteric vocabulary (see articles by Chen Huaiyu, Rong Xingjiang, Nicolas Sims-Williams, etc.)

The strange biography of Garab Dorje was written soon after the sealing of the Dunhuang caves, bringing us to the threshold of a new kind of hagiographical tale in which the charnel ground imagery of the Buddhist tantras is combined with Muslim and Christian narratives about a remarkable contemplative master born of a virgin, who rose from the dead, worked in 32 year cycles, ascended into heaven in a body of light, and transmitted the dzogchen teachings to Manjushrimitra and apparently other masters associated with the First Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet. All of this points to a new, more polemical kind of exchange among Bon po and Buddhists in Tibet, taking place in the milieu of the *sngags pa* masters placed under scrutiny by the reforms of Rinchen Zangpo and Atisha in the first half of the 11th century.

Final Comments: *The Life of Garab Dorje* has made a long journey

In the midst of the infra-Tibetan culture war of the 11th century, a strange biography is written, that of Garab Dorje. Adhering to all the signs and symbols of funerary Buddhism, charnel ground imagery, and “pristine” dzogchen, it also slips a highly unexpected narrative into the Tibetan culture world: the biography of a saint from a western kingdom, containing unmistakable elements that refer to Jesus and Mary (both objects of polemics in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism at the time) by way of the 19th surah of the Qur’an. While telling an apparently Buddhist Vajrayana story, the biography subtly reminds the astute reader that there is more to be told, but which cannot for the moment be told because the primary concern of the author is to address the “culture war” that is underway at the time in Tibet. This culture war is amply attested in the texts that have been preserved on all sides of the argument (see new articles on desktop). It is interesting that, for what seems to have been a minority of local *sngags pas*, the dzogchen literature for the 11th and 12th centuries “explodes” with vigor and abundance. For example, the “*Bi-ma snying thig*” collection (referring to the first diffusion figure of Vimalamitra), in which the Garab Dorje biography is found, is clearly a response to a crisis³⁷. It is not only a return to the debate theme of the 8th century, between a supposedly gradual versus spontaneous experience of enlightenment. It seems rather to work with the experience of real life as a village practitioner, lived in dramatic contrast to the perfectionist theme in

³⁷ Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection*, p. 9: “The *Bima Nyingtig* is said to have been concealed in the eighth or ninth century and rediscovered in the eleventh, yet it is not strictly classified as a treasure text...”

earlier Buddhist literature. Buddhist tantrism addresses some aspects of the perfectionist theme by employing a system of interpretation based on the Perfection of Wisdom and “emptiness” doctrines. However, the tantras of both the first and second diffusion involve elaborate ritual procedures, many of which were not only reserved to a small circle of privileged disciples, but also required a considerable outlay of wealth³⁸. The sngags pa lineages sought to keep tantrism within the sphere of local village communities by creating new ritual cycles addressed to the concerns typical of “the village life”, as we can see in the Milarepa biographical tradition. Dzogchen teachings seem directed at an ever more radical interpretation of the same tantric themes that acquire central importance in all forms of tantra (“great and little traditions”). This radical interpretation of “pure from the beginning” (*ka dag*) and a spontaneous introduction to the true nature of the mind and reality, allows the practitioner to access the states attributed to highest tantric initiations via contemplative relaxation and non-striving, exactly the themes³⁹ that animate Jingjing’s intentionally syncretic *Peace and Joy Sutra*. However, the dzogchen writers for the most part seem to evade the eschatological themes typical of theistic approaches, by which I mean the notion of time as three-fold and linear. With the emergence of the *Kalacakra* as a preeminent tantra at the beginning of the eleventh century, however, it becomes necessary to address the question of the purpose of the universal process⁴⁰. In fact, it seems that theistic developments in Central Asia, whether Manichean, Christian, Shaivite, or Muslim, force the great thinkers of Buddhist civilization to reexamine Buddhist teachings from top to bottom. The doctrinal and moral pillars of early Buddhism: spiritual progress toward enlightenment; altruistic compassion in the bodhisattva path; intense meditation training in *shamatha* and *vipasyana*; severe moral discipline both monastic and lay; deconstruction of the notion of a creator god; deconstruction of the stability of individual components of reality (*dharmas*) and of the self; denial of an origin and final purpose of the cosmic process; karmic retribution as inevitable and inexorable; extreme dualism between moral

³⁸ See: Gampopa’s biography of Marpa and Milarepa in Francis V. Tiso, *Liberation in One Lifetime*, pp. 247-258.

³⁹ Dalton Esler, “The Exposition of Atiyoga in gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes bSam gtan mig sgron,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* #24, (2012), also goes into considerable detail on the persistence of these themes during the late ninth century.

⁴⁰ David Germano, “Shifting Terrain of Tantric Bodies...”, p. 53.

defilement and enlightened purity: all these key elements of a Buddhist worldview are challenged and reformulated in tantrism, and further subverted in dzogchen. This trend culminates in the brilliant philosophical synthesis of dzogchen that we find in Longchenpa, in which finally the universe does indeed seem to hold within itself the seed of enlightenment, having no beginning or end in a linear sense. Rather: there is radical instantaneity and the absence of a metaphysical substratum (*nihsvabhava*). That seed is the presence of manifestation from the very ground of consciousness, operating dynamically even within the cyclic bondage of beings down through the eons, moving consciousness in the direction of “recognition” [i.e. “awakened awareness”] that illuminates and liberates spontaneously. Thus the universal process itself is enlightenment working itself out in the very midst of darkness and confusion, and there is nothing that the contemplative practitioner need do but to allow this process to occur. In that way, as the translators of one of Longchenpa’s works entitle it: **you are the eyes of the world**. Which is to say, the enlightened person is a manifestation of the original purity and enlightenment of the cosmic process itself, become conscious of itself. In the process of affirming this intuition based on the tantra known as *The Supreme Source* in its English translation, the *Bodhicitta Tantra that is the All-Creating King*⁴¹, Longchenpa was able to articulate the basic understandings of his lineage on the attainments that accompany the ongoing practice-process of becoming the universe-conscious-of-itself, including the realization of the rainbow body. The rainbow body emerges as an attainment only during the culture war period of the eleventh century, based on earlier speculations on how the human body might participate in the experience of enlightenment at the time of death. Such speculations incorporate West Asian and Himalayan soteriologies oriented away from karma and towards gnosis, which unfolds in the cosmic awakening of a level of consciousness that self-liberates in every moment.

[Slide: Two elderly ladies at Lo ma ga]

⁴¹ *Supreme Source*, p. 14, which lists the five root tantras of the dzogchen mind series of teachings, the earliest dzogchen works.