

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 21, 2014

*Death and Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism:
In-between Bodies*

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A Review of *Death and Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism: In-between Bodies*

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Death and Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism: In-between Bodies. By Tanya Zivkovic. London: Routledge, 2014, xx + 147 pages, ISBN 978-0-415-83067-6 (hardback), \$140.

An essential component of Tantric Buddhism requires the devotee to regard the lama as an actual living Buddha through whom the spiritual blessings and powers of the lineage are received. It is said that without these empowering blessings, the practice of Tantric Buddhism is not possible. In this volume, Tanya Zivkovic ethnographically documents and analyzes master-disciple relationships in Darjeeling, India over a six-year period (2004-2010). The author's work is groundbreaking in that it focuses on the continuing relationships between faithful devotees and lamas that have already deceased. The author reveals that just as there are prescribed manners of relating to the living lama, there are also accepted practices for continuing one's relationship with the departed master, who is present in a variety of manners while being physically absent. The strength of Zivkovic's work lies in the rich ethnographic presentation of her numerous interviews with ordained and lay practi-

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tioners as well as her records of her own participation in the religious life of the area.

In the first chapter, which serves as a general introduction, Zivkovic establishes the two primary theoretical components of the work: “the continuation of the biographical process” and “intersubjectivity.” She submits that although bodily relics, hagiographies, and reincarnations all signify the absence of the lama, they can also effectively transmit the presence of the lama long after death (4-5). By interacting with the extenders of the lama’s presence, the faithful are able to maintain master-disciple relations by reincorporating the lama into their lived daily experience (4). As these relationships result in narratives that essentially extend the biography of the lama, Zivkovic argues that the entirety of the dynamic relationship between the deceased master and living disciples is best described as a continuation of the biographical process.

Zivkovic also argues that “this biographical process occurs in an intersubjective arena” (4), which entails that the conceptual framework that supports a relationship with a deceased lama is “consensual, public and historically pre-given” in nature (5). The continuation of the biographical process is collectively accepted, proceeds following common practices, and results in shared narratives. Later in the book she expands the discussion of intersubjectivity to help explain the social nature of the internal experience of communing with the lama (98-101).

The ethnographic passages of the second chapter feature accounts of the author’s interviews with monastic and lay devotees of the Sakyapa lama Khenchen Sangay Tenzin (1904-1990). These interviews reveal that even two decades after the lama’s passing, his biographical process is still continuing as disciples recount the details of his miraculous passing (16-19) and the spontaneous appearance of his relics (19-21), devote themselves to his reincarnation (23-25), and continue to receive his blessings from relics as well as hagiographic materials (26-30). The chapter concludes with an illuminating description of three female lay

practitioners that maintain enduring relationships with Khenchen Sangay Tenzin after his passing (30-39). Zivkovic argues that all of the items that transmit the presence of the lama (relics, hagiography, reincarnations, etc.) as well as the practices that involve them “enable the continuing relations between the deceased lama and the faithful practitioner” (38), which is the biographical process.

The third chapter focuses on the continuing biographical process of Gupha Rinpoche, an unconventional layman and retreat practitioner who passed away during the course of the author’s fieldwork. Zivkovic masterfully documents the disagreement within the local community regarding Gupha Rinpoche’s sanctity, which is revealed through discussions of the nature and circumstances of his death (66-71) and surprising return in the body of a woman from a nearby town (71-74). It is argued that despite the differences between Khenchen Sangay Tenzin and Gupha Rinpoche, the biographical process does not end at death for either (76). Moreover, Zivkovic reasons that the differences in opinion between the laity and the Sakyapa monks regarding the nature of the reclusive master can be found in the long history of inter-lineage debates regarding subjects such as the “gradual” or “simultaneous” paths toward enlightenment (47-49) or distinctions between monk-scholars and “saintly madmen” (57-64).

In the fourth chapter, the author offers an ethnographic account of her participation in a particular 16-day retreat, called a *nyungne*, for lay and ordained practitioners, which includes the periodic observation of vows of silence and fasting, the completion of large numbers of prostrations and mantra recitations, and the performance of tantric visualization. The retreat is based on the life and liberation of a princess, Gelongma Palmo, who renounced her royal heritage in ancient times to become a nun. Although she then experiences the extreme physical hardships of leprosy and is exiled from her monastic community, she is able to quickly progress along the spiritual path through devotional practices that focus on the Buddha of compassion, Chenrezig. Zivkovic

argues that in this social retreat practice, the participants who follow in this master's footsteps engage in an "embodied remembrance" (78) of the deceased Gelongma Palmo, which is not dependent upon a conceptual understanding of the practice or the unintelligible words of the Buddhist liturgies that are employed (83-84). She also maintains that the biographical process of this ancient nun continues through ritual interaction with her hagiography (101-102). The chapter also describes the "intersubjective relations between ritual participants, the ritual's founder Gelongma Palmo, and the *bodhisattva* Chenrezig" (101). Zivkovic's rich description of the ritual interaction with sources of Buddhist divinity through the use of visualization and mantra offers a fresh and illuminating perspective on this quintessential tantric practice.

In the fifth chapter, the author employs a Buddhist concept regarding the threefold nature of an enlightened being (*trikāya*) as an organizational device for examining the multitude of methods that faithful disciples use to maintain their connection with the Kagyupa lama Bokar Rinpoche (1940-2004). Highlights of the chapter consist of the analysis of Bokar Rinpoche's sanctity using *trikāya* (105-114), the account of the lama's multi-life relationship with Kalu Rinpoche (1905-1989), and the description of the practice of consuming relics (118-121). Zivkovic also includes accounts of her interviews with two advanced Western disciples of Bokar Rinpoche and argues that "they endeavor to make sense of the 'flux of experience' extending a person's life through conceptual models such as *trikaya*" (126).

Although the ethnographic research of this work is invaluable in that it offers a clear portal into an important dimension of Tibetan Buddhism that has not received much academic attention, the analytical components are somewhat underdeveloped. Much of the work is grounded in the perspective that these Tibetan social realities, which involve ongoing relationships with absent spiritual leaders, challenge Western-centered notions of time and memory (38). Notwithstanding the basic fact that transmigration is not generally accepted in Abrahamic

traditions, there are many obvious parallels that can be found in the Western world. I would suggest that many people engage in largely internal relationships with celebrities, fictional characters, historical figures, athletes, novelists, and musicians without significant interaction in the “real” world. Is a present-day composer’s relationship with the music of Ludwig van Beethoven, for example, a continuation of this master’s biographical process? How is the relationship between a disciple and her absent lama any different? The obvious answer, which is not sufficiently discussed in the book, is that in the context of Tibetan Buddhist tantra, these practices are institutionalized and are essential components of both its lay and monastic configurations.

Moreover, these accepted Tibetan social realities should not challenge Western readers who are familiar with the notion of maintaining a relationship with Jesus of Nazareth, the central personality of Christianity. Even the somewhat shocking practice of consuming relics—I did indeed hesitate the first time I was offered a beverage containing the bones of Longchenpa (1308-1364)—is not so far removed from the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which one is instructed to remember Jesus by consuming his body (bread) and blood (wine). Although the theory regarding the continuation of the biographical process, which occurs throughout the work, is applied in a socially responsible and accurate manner, it does not result in a deep analysis of the subject that makes it more comprehensible.

Concerning the primary argument of the third chapter, I suspect that the difference in opinion regarding the sanctity of Gupha Rinpoche is not ultimately grounded in doctrinal disputes. The laity that lived near Gupha Rinpoche, built his retreat chamber, and regularly brought him sustenance clearly understood this eccentric lay practitioner as a master and a significant source of spiritual blessings both in his life and death. His significance was not so great in the eyes of the monks whose lives were largely dedicated to the long-term scholastic and soteriological programs of the Sakyapa monastic institution. Although it would be un-

couth for a monk who has been ordained in the Sakyapa tradition to question the authenticity of a Sakyapa patriarch such as Khenchen Sangay Tenzin, he need not be so cautious while discussing a practitioner that is neither monastic nor affiliated with the Sakyapa institutional hierarchy. A deeper analysis of the logic of master-disciple relationships would likely uncover that inter-lineage doctrinal disputes do not sufficiently explain the disagreement regarding the nature of Gupha Rinpoche.

When one examines this work as a whole, it is also evident that there is a lack of analytical connection between the chapters. For example, Khenchen Sangay Tenzin (Chapter Two) and Bokar Rinpoche (Chapter Five) were both monks that sat at high levels within institutionalized monastic organizations. On the other hand, Mo Sukey (Chapter Two), Gupha Rinpoche (Chapter Three), and Gelongma Palmo (Chapter Four) were all revered as spiritually developed individuals, but were also marginalized figures that practiced mantra recitation in retreat settings. The fact that such connections between the chapters are left largely unexplored is reflected in the brevity of the three-page concluding chapter (128-130).

Despite these relatively minor criticisms, the research presented in *Death and Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism* constitutes a significant addition to the ethnographic record. Not only will this work be treasured by future researches seeking to examine the complex relationships between lamas and their disciples, it also provides rich case studies for scholars interested in gender analysis or investigating relations between monastic and lay practitioners in the Tibetan diaspora.