



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

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DEATH AND REINCARNATION IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM is an ethnographic study of the continuing social presence of deceased high-ranking Tibetan religious figures who are understood to be a conscious part of the incarnation process, individuals “whose manner of dying appears to challenge biological imperatives” (1). It demonstrates the ways in which this process results in the continuity of a relationship between a deceased lama and their followers.

Death and Reincarnation draws primarily on fieldwork carried out in the Darjeeling hills between 2004 and 2010 among the Tibetanized communities of the Indian Himalayas. Although the author modestly states that this “is not a Tibetological work” in that its approach is not “through the lens of Tibetan

religious rituals or Buddhist philosophy” (12), those aspects are touched upon with some skill.

The social lives of four particular deceased Buddhist figures are examined here; Khenchen Sangay Tenzin, the nun Gelong Palmo, Bokar Rinpoche, and the yogi Gupha Rinpoche. In the Tibetan tradition the appearance of bodily relics is textually attested as one of the accomplishments that attend the death of an enlightened person, and the passing in 1990 of Sangay Tenzin, a master of the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism, is remembered for the posthumous manifestation of bone relics inscribed with sacred icons, along with various other signs of a saintly passing. The author’s concern here is with the development of a collective representation of the event and the circulation of these accounts, which culminates in their recording as spiritual biography (*rNam-thar*). As an enlightened being, freed from its earthly body, the deceased lama is seen as able to continually project his powers into the world. One aspect of this is that his relics, as continuing extensions of his being, become objects of worship among the deceased’s followers. The *rNam-thar* becomes another aspect of this continuing projection, as are various other manifestations of his former presence, not least his new incarnation. These projections are then discussed in the context of their ritual practice, first using the example of two non-literate Tibetan widows, and second an elderly female devotee, in order to demonstrate the lived experience of the continuing presence of the deceased spiritual master.

The passing of the cave-dwelling yogi “Gupha” (that is, “Cave”) Rinpoche revealed the potential for contestation in these processes, with clerical insinuations that the reported vitality of his corpse was due to malevolent forces rather than enlightenment. The author refers back to her encounters with the renunciate, and the claims of both her translator and local clerical authorities that interviewing him would produce an inadequate representation of the dharma, while observing that he was supported by the local community. The author, while carefully avoiding essentialist distinctions between the clerical and renunciate paths, then describes the daily monastic schedule and scholastic emphasis within the Sakya tradition and the contrasting life of the *sngags-pa*, or Tibetan Buddhist Tantric yogi, in demonstrating the grounds for the lamas’ scepticism as to the local people’s understanding that Gupha Rinpoche was capable of controlling his death. That debate continued when the deceased yogi was reported to have transferred his consciousness into the body of a local woman. Situating the debate in the context of earlier studies of the phenomena, she argues that any parallels between the accounts of the Gupha’s passing and that of the lama Sangay Tenzin are best understood “as distinctive extensions of the biographical process”(76).

Gelongma Palmo is generally envisaged as an eleventh-century Tibetanized Kashmiri nun whose practices overcame leprosy. A participant observer account of the ritual practice of her followers, to whom she is envisaged as an emanation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Chenrezig, gives further insight into how the biographical understanding of her life informs that practice today.

The chapter concerning the final subject, Bokar Rinpoche, examines how the biographical process is disseminated cross-culturally through an account of the events following the passing of this transnational figure, who had both Tibetan

and foreign followers. Situating the discussion around the Buddhist concept of the *trikaya*, or mind-body-speech emanations of the Buddha, she is particularly concerned to analyze the understandings of his Western followers in their consumption of preparations containing minute amounts of bodily fluids from the deceased or substances such as water used to wash the corpse.

A brief conclusion observes that advanced Tibetan religious practitioners are seen as experiencing death in a different form from that of ordinary mortals. They are able to extend and direct their consciousness after bodily cessation. The physical signs that the practitioner has reached this level of spiritual attainment form a continuing engagement with the followers of the deceased, and as demonstrated, this engagement may be over time, space, or cultures, transmitted through the medium of the relic, be it bone relics, ritual, or *rNam-thar*.

This is an important and fundamentally original work, theoretically sophisticated and multilayered in its approach. Perspectives offered by texts and individual practitioners are well chosen and balanced. While implicitly and explicitly acknowledging “the variation of knowledge systems in Tibetanized societies” (76), the author is able to present a set of findings with implications beyond the immediate issue. For this reader it was of particular interest in regard to the study of *rNam-thar*, a field in which a number of significant studies have recently emerged. It demonstrates the linking of biographies and realities that allows different lineages to present different interpretations of various biographical events and processes serving different purposes. No one interested in Tibetan concepts of death, whether from a ritual, textual, or philosophical perspective, can fail to gain fresh insights from this stimulating study. Partly due to a writing style that entirely eliminates excess, this is a short work, just 130 pages of text, but it has the great merit of leaving the reader wanting more.

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