

**The Enlightenment of the Body:
The Theory and Practice of Winds and Channels Yoga
at Namdroling Monastery and Nunnery in South India**

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Abstract

This dissertation documents how the practice of winds, channels, and inner heat (*rtsa rlung gtum mo*) unfolds at Namdroling Tibetan Buddhist monastery and nunnery in Bylakuppe, Karnataka, India. The study was prompted by several questions. First, how does the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism present the body and embodiment in practices involving physical yoga postures? Second, does Great Perfection philosophy of the mind-body connection explain how physical yoga practices work? And third, how do Great Perfection views of the body impact contemporary practitioners? These questions were explored using both ethnography and textual analysis during fieldwork in 2018 and 2019.

The monks and nuns at Namdroling discussed the Tibetan Yoga practice of winds, channels, and inner heat and its associated philosophy of the *vajra* body in formal discourses, interviews, and one-on-one classes. In turn, they posed questions about how traditional Tibetan Buddhist representations of the body fit with modern scientific views. This sparked an intercontinental conversation brokered by the author about Great Perfection philosophy and contemporary philosophy of mind.

Two texts provide information on practice and philosophy. Migyur Dorje and Karma Chakme's *Sky Dharma* (*gNam chos*) contemplative trilogy guides practitioners on how to practice inner heat (*gtum mo*) and postures (*'phrul 'khor*). Information on *Sky Dharma* was gathered from oral teachings, the texts themselves, and translations by Namdroling monastics. The second textual basis is Longchen Rabjam's (*kLong chen rab 'byams*, 1308-1364) encyclopedic *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (*Theg mchog mdzod*), which provided greater detail on mind-body philosophy through the *vajra body* (*rdo rje lus*) paradigm. An examination of the life of literature on a monastic campus is brought to light.

The culmination of this research unfolds in the final chapter, an analysis of the relationship between theory and praxis. In particular, Longchenpa's text defines limits for the female body so that women cannot achieve the highest results from winds and channels practices. This controversy invites an examination of the lives of contemporary nuns. Issues that pertain to globalization, Buddhist modernism, and technology influence the ways the monks and nun interpret Buddhism's edict to “do no harm” when women are singled out.

Keywords: Tibetan Yoga; Buddhist modernism; vajra body; subtle body; mind-body philosophy; embodiment; modern postural yoga; Tibetan Buddhist monastics; Tibetan Buddhist nuns; Tibetan Buddhism in India; Buddhism and science; theory and praxis; winds, channels, and inner heat; winds, channels, and vital essences.

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Chapter One: Introduction to Tibetan Yoga at Namdroling

Tibetan Buddhism has Yoga?

As embodied beings, our bodies are at once our greatest tool and our greatest burden. Most of our desires for comfort serve the body. The body marks our gender, gives clues to our race and ethnicity, and signals with our dress how we want to interact socially, such as when a monk wears robes. Nowadays, the body has become central to many popular methods for self-realization such as yoga, biohacking, visualization techniques, breath work, exercise tied to spirituality, methods to care for the gut microbiome, and mind-body philosophy. As a society, we are on a mission to make well-being more relevant, faster, and more effective, and the body figures prominently in these new processes. Advances in such techniques are based on new scientific knowledge, technologies, and cultural paradigm shifts that inspire us to take advantage of the body's natural resources in new ways. We are more interested than ever in exercising our way to spiritual realization through yoga, cycling, and other methods. Podcasts, the internet, and social media invite everyday people to access knowledge about the body so they can achieve promised greater heights of happiness, well-being, and self-realization.

This dissertation is about a system of postural yoga with all those elements but with quite traditional origins in seventeenth century Tibet. The *Sky Dharma* (*gNam chos*) contemplative trilogy textually preserves a system of winds, channels, and inner heat (*rtsa rlung gtum mo*) yoga that has been practiced continually by the Palyul monastic lineage until today. Its largest branch institution is Namdroling Tibetan Buddhist monastery and nunnery in the Tibetan refugee camp in Bylakuppe, Karnataka, South India. The practice has recently come to be known as “Tibetan

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Yoga” in popular literature¹² can be related in complex ways to movements such as these. However, the group of Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns who endeavor to incite wisdom realizations via its dynamic series of postures, breath control, and visualization techniques do not contribute much to these modern streams of thought.

Many spiritual aspirants who rely on the mind-body connection assume that ancient systems need to be modified to adapt to the modern world, or that they should simply be one stream of influence for contemporary practices. The practice of winds, channels, and inner heat—Tibetan Yoga, a term that will be unpacked in the next chapter—is not a modern interpretation of an ancient practice. It has been institutionally upheld in a traditional manner for centuries by the Palyul monastic tradition. Such contemplative practices that require physical performances in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition are even older, but *Sky Dharma* as a text marks the starting point of the tradition practiced at Namdroling. The history of postural yoga in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is explored briefly in chapter two.

Namdroling monastery and nunnery is a Buddhist seminary that offers thousands of young monks and nuns from Buddhist families in Tibetan-influenced regions of India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet a rigorous education in both scholasticism and contemplation. This dual scholastic and contemplative curriculum invites reflection on how theory and praxis work together, which is the main theoretical lens of this dissertation.

¹ W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Ulrich Timme Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism: A Textual Study of the “Yogas” of Nāropa and “Mahāmudrā Meditation” in the Medieval Tradition of Dags Po* (Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies, 2015); Alejandro Chaoul, *Tibetan Yoga for Health & Well-Being: The Science and Practice of Healing Your Body, Energy, and Mind* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, Inc, 2018); Ian A. Baker, *Tibetan Yoga: Principles and Practices* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2019); Nida Chenagtsang, Nejang: *Tibetan Self-Healing Yoga* (Topanga, CA: Sky Press, 2020); Alejandro Chaoul, *Tibetan Yoga: Magical Movements of Body, Breath, and Mind* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2021).

² See chapter two for an explanation of the difference between the neologism “Tibetan Yoga” to refers to Tibetan Buddhist postural yoga, versus the much wider use of “yoga”, or *naljor* (*’rnal ’byor*) in the Tibetan language, which refer to contemplation or to demarcate doxographical categories that organize literature.

This research was conducted using both ethnography and textual translation and analysis. Ethnography consisted of a year of residence at Namdroling over two stays, the first for seven months and the second for five months, with a five-month break in between. With around 3,000 residents, abundant ethnographic field notes and interviews were collected. Thirty formal interviews employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, a qualitative analysis method that originated in psychology to guide researchers to ask open-ended questions and to be unbiased in the thematic analysis of responses.

Two texts oriented the ways both philosophy and ethnography were explored at Namdroling. First, the *Sky Dharma* contemplative manuals instruct practitioners of Tibetan Yoga at Namdroling in both philosophy and practice, and guide the annual Tibetan Yoga retreats at Namdroling. They have been a cornerstone of the tradition since its founding. The texts were revealed by Migyur Dorje (*gNam chos mi 'gyur rdo rje*, 1645-1667) and commented on by his teacher/disciple/caretaker Karma Chakme (*Karma chags med*, 1613-1678). The Palyul monastic lineage was founded in 1665 by Rigzin Kunzang Sherab (*Kun bsang shes rab*, 1636-1698) for the purpose of teaching and practicing these revelations. Second, two chapters of Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (*Theg mchog mdzod*) are examined for their rich descriptions of the *vajra body* made of winds, channels, vital essences, and *cakra*-s relevant to the practice of Tibetan Yoga. This itself was a source of ethnography: translating that text at Namdroling sparked many relevant conversations with the two Khenpos (monastic professors) who guided me.

The young monastics enrolled at Namdroling are in a nine-year training program for Buddhist clergy specific to the Nyingma (*rNying ma*; “ancients”) sect, one of six main sub-denominations of Tibetan Buddhism (Gelukpa, Sakya, Kagyu, Nyingma, Bon, and Rimé or

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nondenominational). The carefully cultivated curriculum of Buddhist philosophy and practice based on the Palyul lineage emphasizes both Tibetan Buddhist tantra and the Great Perfection (*rdzogs pa chen po*) reformulation of Buddhist theory and practice.³ It was specially curated for Namdroling by the great twentieth-century lamas who escaped Chinese military rule in Tibet.⁴ Led by Penor Rinpoche in partnership with Chatrul Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and others, Namdroling's dual scholastic and contemplative curricula were designed in the 1970s and '80s with the goal of preserving and resurrecting the jewel of the dharma in India. The role of the curriculum in the practice of Tibetan Yoga at Namdroling cannot be underestimated: the abundant use of tantric semiotics in contemplative practice depends upon an understanding of Buddhist philosophy gained in the monks' and nuns' scholastic training. As one recently minted Lopon, or graduate of the MA program in philosophy said about the curriculum, "I feel like they made great choices. Buddhism is a profound subject. Everything can be condensed into this curriculum."⁵ The monks and nuns who practice Tibetan Yoga at Namdroling do so with years of study to inform their yoga practice, a reality that will be explored through interviews.

One aim of this dissertation is to situate inner heat yoga among other modern postural yoga traditions. While the main elements of Tibetan Yoga— the dynamic series of postures coordinated with breath control (*srog rtsol*; Skt: *prāṇāyāma*)— are likewise the main elements of Indian postural yoga, the goals of the practice are articulated in a style characteristic of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. In particular, success in practice is indicated by three experiences (*nyams gsum*): bliss (*dbe ba*), clarity (*gsal ba*), and non-

³ David Germano, "Architecture and Absence in the Secret Tantric History of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*)", *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (Vol. 17 Number 2: Winter 1994), 203-204.

⁴ The story of the formation of the curriculum is told in chapter four in the section on Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso.

⁵ Lopon Kunsang Chokyi, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, January 18, 2019.

conceptuality (*mi rtog pa*).⁶ These are achieved through a coordinated effort of Buddhism's three spheres of activity: body, speech, and mind. Unlike most modern postural yoga systems, the practice includes elaborate visualizations, especially guru yoga and deity yoga, two common techniques from Tibetan Buddhist tantra. Tibetan Yoga also stands out among modern yoga traditions because of its clear and unbroken origins in seventeenth-century Tibet. Most modern practice traditions cannot rightfully lay claim to such a longstanding lineage preserved in continuity, although they often self-represent as ancient.

Bylakuppe is a large Tibetan refugee camp in India established in 1963 and the realities of migration and globalization invite exploration of new trends in how Buddhism is being received globally that contribute to our understanding of Buddhist modernism. The young monks and nuns invoke the cultural practices prescribed in seventeenth-century Tibet within an unprecedentedly global cultural context where monastics have access to both the local world of their tradition, to South Indian culture, and to the global world through the internet and occasional visitors. The techniques and philosophies associated with the practice of Tibetan Yoga will be put into conversation with science and contemporary mind-body philosophy using the monks' and nuns' own interests as a starting point.

The dissertation unfolds as an intercontinental dialogue. Questions posed to me at Namdroling about whether their own philosophy is scientific are put into conversation with contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science. Most of that unfolds in chapters three and four.

Winds, channels, and inner heat yoga relies on the philosophy of the *vajra* body, a field

⁶ Or, "absence of thought." See https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Three_experiences for a scholarly entry. This threefold experiential referent was cited many times in the winds and channels doctrinal teachings given by Tulku Dawa at Palyul New York in July and August of 2018. He often spoke of these as practice outcomes.

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of energy imperceptible to the average person that Tibetan Buddhism puts forth to make elaborate philosophical claims about the connections between mind and body. Its main categories are winds (*rlung*), channels (*rtsa*), and vital essences (*thig le*), and these form the unique ontological basis that practitioners learn to inhabit via their education and practice. As an example of one of its unique ontologies, vital essences represents the intelligence of the body, energy, the mind, semen, menstrual fluids, and hormones, depending on context. This mainstay of tantric metaphysics has no corresponding word in the English language. Use of the popular Sanskrit term *bindu*, the original Buddhist term later translated into Tibetan as *thig le*, will be used occasionally.

This chapter introduces the central questions of the dissertation, some specialized terminology, situates *Sky Dharma* among other scholarship on contemporary Tibetan Yoga traditions, and finishes with chapter summaries.

Central Questions

The motivation for this research is a practitioner's question: How does yoga work? Religious texts about yoga tend to focus on ethical teachings on how to live a yogic lifestyle or practice instructions. While ethical issues are a big part of rhetoric around the body in Buddhism, for the purpose of understanding how yoga works, they are subsumed under an exploration of the body. What is special about the body as a vehicle to enlightenment in the context of yoga? How does the body facilitate practice, and how does it stand in the way of ideal mental states? Specifically, what is the philosophy of the mind-body connection that supports Tibetan Yoga?

The main achievement of the dissertation is a description of the practice of Tibetan Yoga at Namdroling with numerous signposts for areas of future research. The monastery and nunnery,

the *Sky Dharma* contemplative practice of Tibetan Yoga, and the related philosophy are all described with points of inquiry where further intra- and interdisciplinary research are warranted. No philosophical or scientific problems were resolved. This dissertation is a map of the landscape of Tibetan Yoga and many points of interest warrant further research.

A central question is how the *vajra* body, aka the subtle body, aka the tantric body, is used in the practice of Tibetan Yoga and articulated in the philosophy of the mind-body connection. Two primary textual sources contribute to this understanding. First is the trilogy of contemplative manuals that guide Namdroling's annual month-long retreats titled *Palyul Mountain Dharma: The Threefold Instructions from the Victorious Early Translation: Foundations, Winds and Channels, and Great Perfection* (*sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ sngon 'gro/ rtsa rlung/ rdzogs chen/*). The second textual source is the influential Nyingma philosopher Longchenpa's encyclopedic work *The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (*Theg mchog mdzod*). Longchenpa describes the *vajra* body in detail, while *Sky Dharma* endeavors to make these esoteric ontologies a reality. *Sky Dharma* claims to present a complete path to enlightenment from beginning to end, and the yoga of winds, channels, and inner heat is presented in book two of three volumes.

These two presentations, one more philosophical and the other more practical in nature beg the question, what is the reality on the ground compared to the ways such presentations are represented in texts? Ethnographic accounts via interviews and observations showcase how the monks and nuns who practice Tibetan Yoga struggle with various forms of physical pain and mental obstacles during the retreats. Most of all, they are humble in their goals and do not aspire to reveal the buddha-nature that the texts constantly reference. We will see that their most common goals are to learn the contemplative system so they can practice or teach it in the future;

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to get some exercise; and to alleviate diseases. Such modest aspirations stand in contrast to the ways texts paint ideal pictures of the attainment of perfected cognitive states as the result of contemplative practice. I hope that contemporary practitioners will be comforted by the stories of the monks' and nuns' struggles. There are many ways that the life of a monk or nun represents ideal conditions for practice because of their elite education and simple lifestyle. Despite all of that, mental and physical transformation is no easy task.

Regarding the question of how Tibetan Yoga works, *Sky Dharma* describes the process of Tibetan Yoga by metaphor: winds and channels practice is like cleaning a dirty pot. When you first add water, it becomes filthy but the final result is totally clean. In the same way, when you first practice winds and channels yoga, the experience can be difficult. This is because negative karmas stored in the body come to fruition, brought on by the practice itself. By “stirring the pot” with postural yoga, *prāṇāyāma* (breath control techniques), and meditation, the obstacles that karmas (*las*) and habitual tendencies (*bag chags*) impose are purified. The main goal of winds and channels yoga is the purification of karma. If done perfectly, the result is the revelation of buddha-nature.

Buddha-nature's place in the body's anatomy and physiology is described by the Nyingma (*rNying ma*) tradition in the threefold Buddha body (*sku gsum*) schema that lies beneath the karmic body. These levels of bodies are all subsumed in the literature on the *vajra* body. The ways that this divine presence is woven throughout the body alongside normal physical structures and dynamics are explored in chapter three.

An enduring research question guiding this dissertation is this: How can Tibetan Buddhism's perspective be brought into conversation with contemporary philosophy of mind? After translating Longchenpa's text twice at Namdroling, upon returning to the US, Professor

Sonam Kachru tipped me off to the fact that leading mind-body philosopher Brie Gertler is at the University of Virginia. In conversation with Professor Gertler through meetings and her writing on *naturalistic mind-body dualism* and contemporary philosophy of mind, I came to see the structure of Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* more clearly. Perhaps because she writes in English using contemporary terms and ways of thinking, I found the clarity with which Gertler presents a physicalist/monist view of the mind-body complex to support my understanding of Longchenpa's presentation of the mind-body relationship. Gertler's work, and also that of David Chalmers, provided an entree into how contemporary philosophy defines naturalism, about which there has been significant discourse in Buddhist studies as of late. In chapter three I argue that what Longchenpa wrote about the *relative* body has much in common with naturalistic mind-body dualism. At the same time, unanswered questions are tagged for future research.

One guiding research question came from the monks and nuns themselves. In interviews, the concluding question was almost always an invitation to "Ask me anything," and the response was usually a question about whether Buddhism is scientific. This was explored based on the specific areas of convergence with naturalism and certain physical realities.

I had hoped to let the texts speak for themselves in that they contain Buddhist presentations of anatomy and physiology, and also physics. The dissertation questions whether presentations of the body and world comprised of the natural elements— earth, water, fire, and wind— are physicalist.

One conclusion is that *tantric* Buddhism in particular is readily conversant with contemporary science, a matter which is discussed in chapter four on mind-body correlations in *Sky Dharma*. However, while I had aspired to tidily package a set of mind-body correlations

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from Tibetan Yoga in that chapter, there are too many esoteric terms that deserve further treatment using philosophy and science.

These inquiries into the convergence of science and Buddhism take the monks' and nuns' questions as the starting point to enter into ongoing conversations about whether Buddhism is naturalistic in the fields of cognitive science, psychology, philosophy, and religion. The question of whether supervenience is philosophically implied in Longchenpa's presentation of the body and mind is highlighted in chapter four.

Throughout the discussion of Buddhism and science, the voice of the current Dalai Lama is frequently invoked has systematically incited interest in Tibetan refugee communities in India. Whether or not hindsight is 20:20, the Dalai Lama envisioned a partnership between Tibetan refugees and scientists that connects refugee Tibetans and the monastics in refugee monasteries to the global world of science. Beginning with the Mind & Life Dialogues in the 1980s, science became an important field of knowledge for the people living in Tibetan refugee camps and refugee camp monasteries in India. The Dalai Lama talks about science in public discourses. I often wonder if the Dalai Lama did this as a visionary act: when the Tibetan people became unhomed, their alliance with science provides new paths to homes.

Another tension in this research is how Tibetan Yoga is situated among modern postural yoga, in particular *haṭha yoga*. Tibetan Buddhist postures are quite different than those in Indian traditions. While Buddhism clearly originates in India and Nepal, many lineages held by these monastics continued to develop in the relative isolation of snowy, high-altitude Tibet for hundreds of years outside of India. After accepting the baton of Buddhism, tantra, and yoga, the Tibetan yogis and philosophers adapted them to local realities, making them uniquely their own. The practice of winds, channels, and inner heat that the monks and nuns at Namdroling practice

to raise vital energy in the central channel share similar goals to Indian *haṭha* yoga, but the texts and lineages claim to be of Tibetan origin almost a thousand years after Buddhism arrived from India to Tibet. *Sky Dharma* claims membership in two genres, namely *kama* (*bka' ma*), or the oral teachings of a Buddha, and *terma* (*gter ma*), teachings hidden throughout Tibet by visionaries for later generations to find. These genres of literature self-identify as unique to the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. In the case of Migyur Dorje, he saw *Sky Dharma* as a revelation in a vision of Avalokiteśvara, the Buddha of compassion. *Sky Dharma* is a mind-treasure (*dgongs gter*), meaning it was hidden in the mind of Migyur Dorje's previous incarnation, a disciple of Padmasambhava. While the origins of Tibetan Yoga will not be discussed at length, we will get a clear picture of Tibetan Yoga as a practice and some of the ways it fits into the world of modern postural and *haṭha* yoga.

With the relatively recent expansion of the Palyul monastic lineage from Tibet to India, another central question is how life within a Tibetan Buddhist monastery and nunnery unfolds nowadays. Namdroling is a large institution with an enrollment of roughly 5,000 students. It is a popular option for young people in Nepal, Bhutan, Northern India, and less so, Tibet, as a place to ordain. It supplies a top-notch education with excellent amenities in the form of housing, food, and education. Its graduates have a significant influence on the ways the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism is taught and practiced today. This dissertation showcases the pedagogy, curriculum, and contemplative practices happening inside the monastery walls. Trends begun at Namdroling are rippling out into the world of Nyingma Buddhism through the influence of its graduates. At the same time, its location in South India impacts the monastics, with different consequences for the genders. Comments about location, migration, and rupture are found throughout the dissertation.

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The relationship between theory and praxis is an ongoing tension throughout the dissertation. Its practical applications culminate in the last chapter, which documents how the Namdroling nuns react to a popular contemporary yogi (*ngags pa*) and teacher of Tibetan Yoga who claims that Longchenpa's philosophy defines limits for female yoga practitioners because of their bodies. The nuns grapple with his claims that they will never achieve the highest realizations because of their equipment— their own bodies. This is a physicalist claim in action if there ever was one. However, with their acute training in logic and a sophisticated ability to interpret Buddhist texts, the nuns read Longchenpa quite differently from the yogi. While this could have been a positive outcome, ultimately despite the special circumstances at Namdroling that provide women with a top-notch education in Buddhist philosophy and ritual, the nuns suffer from systemic discrimination. Outside of the nunnery walls, there is little demand for women as clerical leaders in local Buddhist schools and temples, which are generally positions held exclusively by the monks. With such low demand for nuns outside of the nunnery, the nuns get pushed deeper into contemplative retreat, aspiring to join Namdroling's newly minted three-year retreat house. The ethics around women's issues in the nunnery are a central point of inquiry for chapter six.

David Germano must be credited for his enduring exploration into the complexities of context and how it shapes religious realities.⁷ I have tried to account for the factors that contribute to the experiences the monks and nuns have when they practice Tibetan Yoga and was influenced in this regard by the work of Ann Taves.⁸ While I wanted to explore the realm of

⁷ David Germano, "Contemplation," public talk given to the University of Virginia's Philosophy Society, December 16, 2017. Also, in a class on "Dzokchen" at the University of Virginia on November 7, 2016, and in many one-on-one meetings. Also see his unpublished work *Mysticism and Rhetoric*.

⁸ Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

religious experience more fully, much of my work on that subject remains on the cutting room floor. However, reflections on the importance of context in the shaping of religious experience according to the categories laid out by Taves belie much of the dissertation. Bernard Harcourt's recent work⁹ influenced me to see value formation via texts and traditions as a helpful starting point for social justice projects, where ideas, values, and beliefs inform unjust practices and clarify opportunities for reform. This fits well with the controversy I uncover between the yogi and the nuns. I am grateful that the Namdroling monks and nuns opened their doors and hearts to me, and am certain that my analysis falls short in many ways. I look forward to exploring these topics further for years to come.

In the end, these topics come together as an exploration of Buddhist modernism at a 21st century Tibetan Buddhist monastery and nunnery. The impact of globalization and the internet¹⁰ have influenced the way this ancient tradition is unfolding. Namdroling is an example of a traditional Asian Buddhist context that cannot escape the reaches of modern ways of thinking.

Terminology

The Great Perfection philosophical tradition upheld at Namdroling defines a special set of terms through which the monks and nuns endeavor these practices. *Sky Dharma* Tibetan Yoga promises to clear away the karmic winds and train awareness to “recognize” (*ngos zin pa*) the natural state of the body—that which is “innately real”¹¹ (*rnal ma*) yet normally imperceptible. This refers to buddha-nature (*sang rgyas kyi rang bzhin; de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*). When

⁹ Bernard E. Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis: A Critical Philosophy of Illusions, Values, and Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Evan Thompson, “Buddhist Philosophy and Scientific Naturalism,” SpringerLink (Sophia, September 10, 2021), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11841-021-00880-2>.

¹¹ See chapter two for more on the “innately real.”

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the body is optimized through practice, the body's subtle forces known as winds (*rlung*) enter and abide in the central channel, a feature of anatomy unique to tantric traditions but quite common among them. The ideal result of practice is that the intelligence of the subtle body—the vital essences (*thig le*)— will travel through the central channel and break up the *cakras* (*'khor lo*) located there.¹² This causes transcendence of conditioned reality and the experience of great bliss.¹³ By focusing on the body, this process describes the physical conditions leading up to the coveted mental experience of enlightenment. In order to surpass normal conceptuality, this Tibetan Buddhist contribution to mind-body will employ a unique set of terms.

The deeper philosophical explanations on the *vajra* body, aka the tantric body, aka the subtle body, provide a framework for how this works. Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (*Theg mchog mdzod*) will give the full particulars of *vajra* body philosophy.

“Tibetan Yoga” with a capital “Y” will be used to describe modern Tibetan Buddhist postural yoga that includes an aspect of *trulkhor*. *Trulkhor* (*'phrul 'khor*)— literally meaning “turning around illusion”— denotes practices, or elements of practices, which focus on fixed or moving body postures in Buddhist contemplation. This must be disambiguated from “Tibetan yoga,” which refers to any kind of contemplation, and also demarcates doxographical categories. Since Tibetan Yoga is a primary focus in this dissertation, extended disambiguation of these terms follows in chapter two via a discussion of the wider tradition of yoga in Tibetan Buddhism in which the *Sky Dharma* practice is situated.

Tsalung tummo (*rtsa rlung gtum mo*) will be translated as “winds, channels, and inner heat” with the oft appendage “yoga”, i.e. the yoga of winds, channels, and inner heat. The last

¹² Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on *Sky Dharma* winds and channels yoga, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

¹³ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals & History*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 16.

part, *tummo* (*gtum mo*), can be translated as “fierce woman” but Tony Duff points out in his *Illuminator* dictionary that the Sanskrit *caṇḍalī* from which it is translated means “fierce heat.” While the Sanskrit term *caṇḍa* can mean “fierce,” it also means “violent, cruel, impetuous, hot, ardent with passion, passionate, and angry.”¹⁴ Since the use of visualized and felt heat is prevalent in the *Sky Dharma* practice, the translation “inner heat” is given preference.

Tsalung trulchor refers to winds and channels practices that are accompanied by a postural sequence. *Tummo* and *trulchor* are two different contemplative techniques in the Tibetan tradition. These are the two main elements of *Sky Dharma* Tibetan Yoga¹⁵ that work in conjunction with each other. *Tummo* is the practice of raising heat along the central channel stimulated by the visualization of fire burning upward. *Trulchor* in *Sky Dhama* refers to the series of dynamic physical postures. In its most basic sense, and can be translated as “machine [of the body]” or Alejandro Chaoul's preference, “magical movements.”¹⁶ There are two spellings for *trulchor*, and Chaoul relies upon *'phrul*, which indicates magic in the sense of a magical conjuring.¹⁷ *Sky Dharma* uses the alternative spelling *'khrul*, which is related but parses more readily to the verb “to be mistaken or deceived.” With this spelling, *trulchor* translates to “turning around illusion,” which takes *'khrul-* as illusion and *-'khor* as turning or revolving. This aligns nicely with the purpose of the contemplative path, namely to wake up from illusion. The Tibetan phonetic pronunciation of both *tummo* and *trulchor* are used at times because of their prevalence among English-language practitioners.

At times the Sanskrit term *prāṇāyāma* (*srog rtsol*) is used for breath control practices. In

¹⁴ Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002), 383.

¹⁵ This also seems to be true for the Yuthok Nyingtik tradition. See Nida Chenagtsang, *Nejang: Tibetan Self-Healing Yoga* (Topanga, CA: Sky Press, 2020).

¹⁶ Alejandro Chaoul, *Tibetan Yoga: Magical Movements of Body, Breath, and Mind* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2021), 3.

¹⁷ Alejandro Chaoul, “Magical Movements ('phrul 'khor): Ancient Yogic Practices in the Bon Religion and Contemporary Medical Perspectives” (dissertation, 2006), 17.

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the global yoga community, this word is already in the English language.

Channels, winds, and vital essences (*rtsa rlung thig le*) are the core structures put forth by Tibetan tantric ontologies that explain the paradigm shift that expands the mind-body relationship to mind-body-winds (*rlung*) or mind-body-cosmos.¹⁸ Metaphors work well for these invisible forces, and the Namdroling teachers describe the channels like a house, the vital essences as the wealth inside, and the winds as the owner. *Bindu* represent the innate intelligence of the body, often seen as related to the endocrine system and hormones by contemporary specialists of Tibetan medicine.¹⁹

Channels (*rtsa*; Skt: *nadī*) are the most straightforward conceptually. They are the paths that run throughout the energy body. Although research on origins is beyond the scope of the current project, it is fair to say these are similar to the meridians in Chinese medicine.²⁰ Indian Ayurvedic medicine also includes the channels, but relies on them for healing much less than Chinese medicine. The Tibetan presentation has more details than the Indian system, indicating a possible Chinese influence.²¹

The winds (*rlung*) are *prāṇa* in Sanskrit. They are the vibrational force of motility and energy necessary for action in the body, mind, and physical world. The internal winds are directly linked to the external atmospheric winds, a principle that empowers one's inner world to affect the outer world through basic causality. The idea is that the inner movement of winds has an effect on any wind, including the external elements. Internally, one can control the winds by

¹⁸ See Alejandro Chaoul's *Tibetan Yoga: Magical Movements of Body, Breath, and Mind* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2021), and also Tenzin Wangyal and Marcy Vaughn, *Awakening the Sacred Body* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, Inc., 2011) for explanations on the threefold system. The possibility of adding a third ontological category to mind-body dualism is explored further in chapter three.

¹⁹ Professor of Tibetan Medicine Lobsang Tenzin at the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies, personal communication with the author, Sarnath, India, September 2018.

²⁰ Dr. James Bae, Chinese medical doctor and practitioner/teacher of Tibetan Yoga, private conversation with author, November. 2021.

²¹ Anonymous Namdroling monk, interview by author, Mysore, India, January 2019.

controlling the breath and also through the placement of the mind. A movement of mind is accompanied by wind. This empowers the mind to shift experiences and also make changes to the physical world, which is explored more fully in chapter four on mind-body correlations

The winds are divided into three components that are central to Great Perfection philosophy. The inner winds are either *karmic winds* (*las rlung*) or *wisdom winds* (*ye shes rlung*). These resources depend on one's accumulation of merit or lack thereof, a philosophical explanation of how Buddhist ethics manifests in both body and mind. The karmic winds are the cause of conditional experiences of pleasure and displeasure and are associated with *samsara*, or conditioned, suffering existence. The wisdom winds are the cause of bliss (*bde ba*), clarity (*gsal ba*), and non-conceptuality (*mi rtog pa*), which are the experiential outcomes of Tibetan Yoga and tantamount to *nirvāṇa* (*mya ngan las 'das pa*), the experience of completely extinguishing mental afflictions. The third type of wind is the elemental winds associated with the physical world in the sense of “it's windy outside today.” The winds are explored as the axiomatic feature for the inner-outer correspondence of Buddhist idealist and physical realities alike.

Bindu (*thig le*) are the stuff that lives inside the system, and if there were ever a physical manifestation of consciousness, this is it. More research on *tikle* (*thig le* in Tibetan) would be a welcome contribution to consciousness studies. *Bindu* are often compared to hormones by contemporary Tibetan medical doctors.²² *Tikle* is *bindu* in Sanskrit, which means “drops.” These are the intelligent parts of the system that cause dynamic change and trigger arrangement of other resources. They are arrayed throughout the map of the channels, and the winds move them about.²³

²² Professor Losang Tenzin, professor of Tibetan medicine at the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS), private communication with author, Sarnath, India, December 2018.

²³ David Germano, private communication with author, Zoom, February 4, 2022.

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The *three bodies of a buddha* (*sku gsum*) are the essence of *buddha-nature* that locate wisdom within the body. These naturally existent states are obscured by karma. If revealed, the experience is said to have astronomical effects. This is Tibetan Buddhism's analog to divine nature manifest at the level of individuals. Buddha-nature is the enlightenment of the body in that it is located in the body. This threefold nature of the body invites layered meaning and complexity and is applied widely in both theory and practice. A *Sky Dharma* oral teaching provides an example of the complexity and depth that this concept introduces: "Because the mantra co-exists with the inhalation, hold, and exhalation of the breath, the three buddha bodies also exist within the winds."²⁴ In Great Perfection philosophy, the three bodies of the Buddha map philosophy directly onto the body via the winds, channels, vital essences, and *cakra*-s. For example, the *reality body* (*chos sku*; Skt: *dharmakāya*) is emptiness itself and the foundation of the other bodies. "Primordially pure" (*ka dag*) and "free from conceptual elaborations" (*spros pa med pa*), it is the basic voidness that underlies the constantly changing stream of causes and conditions of the manifest world. Its attributive aspect is luminosity, radiance, and fullness. The second level of embodiment, the *bliss body* (*longs sku*; Skt: *sambhogakāya*), is often equated with the network of channels, winds, and vital essences (*rtsa rlung thig le*; Skt: *nadī, vāyu, bindu*) central to *Sky Dharma* winds and channels yoga. These are both meditation tools and also claimed to be ontological realities. The third level of embodiment, the *emanation body* (*sprul sku*; Skt: *nirmāṇakāya*), is the result of practice that empowers one to emanate as a Buddha to benefit others.²⁵

Zakche (*zag bcas*) and *zakme* (*zag med*) are important terms in Tibetan Yoga that explain

²⁴ Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on winds and channels yoga, McDonough, New York, July 2018.

²⁵ Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 71-74.

the saṃsara-nirvāṇa divide. *Zakje* are the accumulated emotions located in the subtle body. When they are not present, described as “zakme” or literally “without accumulations” one experience bliss, clarity, and non-conceptuality. Again, this is a reference to removing obscurations to reveal what already exists within oneself. To do so, one uses the generation (*bškyed rim*) and completion stage (*rdzogs rim*) practices, which provide the contemplative visualizations that are central to Tibetan Yoga. Generation stage practices are characterized by deity yoga, where one either visualizes a deity in front or themselves as a deity. Completion stage practices focus in purifying the subtle body of winds, channels, and vital essences by moving energy within using the mind.

The Sanskrit term *bodhicitta* (literally, enlightenment-mind) will be used because of its frequent appearance in English books and among practioners, although this term already has a complex situation in Tibetan tantra. The Tibetan *jangchub kyi sem* (*byang chub kyi sems*) refers to the mind intent on attaining enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. This is invoked at the beginning of each Tibetan Yoga practice session. However, inside winds and channels yoga practice, white and red *bodhicitta* refer to the essence of the male and female enlightened spiritual essence, which are key forms of vital essences. These red and white elements represent the coarse, physical constituents of conception. Thus, the coarse form of white *bodhicitta* is semen, and in the context of Tibetan Yoga, this becomes a venue for instructing practitioners to retain their semen.²⁶

Cakra-s have a central role in this dissertation. These energetic centers are defined by Longchenpa as “bundles of tiny nerves” (see chapter three, which discusses *cakra*-s extensively). They are the most important feature of the *vajra* body after winds, channels, and vital essences.

²⁶ Khenpo Norgye, oral teaching on winds and channels yoga, McDonough, New York, July 2019.

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The *vajra* body, aka the tantric body, aka the subtle body, is the hermeneutical device that explains the mind-body connection in Tibetan Buddhism, or so I will argue.

Contemporary Tibetan Yoga Traditions and Scholarship

“Tibetan Yoga” is a neologism that situates an ancient tradition in the modern transnational yoga scene, a history explored in chapter two. Nowadays, even at Namdroling, the Sanskrit term “yoga” is retroactively applied to winds, channels, and inner heat practice.²⁷ The monks and nuns at Namdroling are aware that *Sky Dharma’s* dynamic postural techniques have much in common with Indian postural yoga. However, both historically and outside of the context of winds and channels yoga, *naljor’s* most common use in Tibetan Buddhism is to describe contemplative practice and the tantric doxographical categories. Tibetan yoga’s clear roots in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy harken back to the etymology of *naljor*: they seek to unite (*’byor*) practitioners with the pristine (*rnal*) character of emptiness and buddha-nature (see chapter two). The monastics at Namdroling spend years studying and contemplating these concepts. Much of the dissertation describes the education of a contemporary monastic, a program of study designed and executed by the great Nyingma lamas of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.²⁸

Tibetan Buddhism’s postural yoga practices have remained secret until now. While winds and channels yoga is a type of *naljor*, the wide semantic range of *naljor* is preserved in the Tibetan language, while the Sanskrit term “yoga” has of late come to refer to *haṭha* yoga’s contemplative practices involving significant physical exertion and postures. Prior to the modern

²⁷ See chapter three for more on Tibetan Yoga and *haṭha* yoga.

²⁸ The story of the development of the curriculum is explained in chapter five in Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso’s section. Comments on its effects on monks and nuns are mostly found in chapter four.

period, Tibetan scholars used *naljor* to demarcate a wide variety of contemplative practices, as well as the various tantric systems which presented those practices, many of which had little to do with postural yoga.

Three other scholars have contributed the most to our knowledge of contemporary Tibetan Yoga. First, Alejandro Chaoul's dissertation on the Bon tradition has much in common with the current dissertation, although I go into greater detail on the philosophy and am significantly less descriptive about the postures. Chaoul outlines many of the same categories of mind, body, and subtle body, and locates Tibetan Yoga among postural yoga traditions. The Bon system he describes does not have a *tummo* (inner heat) component the way *Sky Dharma* does.

Chaoul recently published two books meant for public readership, *Tibetan Yoga: Magical Movements of Body, Breath, and Mind*²⁹ and *Tibetan Yoga for Health & Well-Being: The Science and Practice of Healing Your Body, Energy, and Mind*³⁰ that describe Bon versions of Tibetan Yoga. He has also contributed to numerous scientific studies on Tibetan Yoga as an intervention in the treatment of cancer. Such scientific research is helpful. However, in those contexts, he teaches a simplified form of Tibetan Yoga rather than the complex practices that describe themselves as meant only for healthy people such as *Sky Dharma*. It is easy to see why: the practices in *Sky Dharma*, and also those discussed by Longchenpa, are meant for people in a solitary retreat who might use them as remedies for medical conditions that arise in retreat itself. *Sky Dharma* specifically cautions against people with pre-existing illnesses to practice because the practice could potentially worsen certain conditions.³¹

²⁹ Alejandro Chaoul, *Tibetan Yoga: Magical Movements of Body, Breath, and Mind* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2021).

³⁰ Alejandro Chaoul, *Tibetan Yoga for Health & Well-Being: The Science and Practice of Healing Your Body, Energy, and Mind* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, Inc., 2018).

³¹ Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on Sky Dharma winds and channels practice, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

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Ian Baker's 2019 monograph *Tibetan Yoga: Principles and Practices*³² provides the general public with a wide-ranging view of the philosophy, science, and practice of Tibetan Yoga with beautiful photography of contemporary practitioners. The book begins numerous threads to possible conversations and avenues of research. In person, Baker frowns upon monasticism as a suitable location for Tibetan Yoga practice.³³ Baker is a wonderful teacher of Tibetan Yoga philosophy who learned it from Chatrul Rinpoche (1913-2015), the most influential non-monastic lama at Namdroling until his passing. Chatrul Rinpoche's friendship and alliance with Penor Rinpoche demonstrate shared lineage pathways. Baker has written invaluable articles about the now-famous *Lukhang* murals that depict Tibetan Yoga based on the treasure teachings of Orgyen Pema Lingpa (1450-1521) commissioned by Desi Sangye Gyatso (1653-1705).³⁴

The third person who writes about Tibetan Yoga nowadays is Dr. Nida Chenagtsang, a Tibetan medical doctor, lama, and *ngakpa* (tantric yogin) from Amdo who lives in Italy. Dr. Nida represents a new wave of thinking coming out of Tibet, informed by multi-modal aspects of modernity through which he interprets the Tibetan tradition. He is both up to date on social inequities, especially in his book on sexual yoga³⁵ and its implications for women, as well as the realities of living in a modern world. At the same time, he teaches traditional contemplative systems primarily from the Yutok Nyingtik lineage. His book *Nejang: Tibetan Self-Healing Yoga* instructs the general public in twenty-four preliminary postures that train the body (*lus sbyong*) based on a compilation by Buton Rinchen Drup (1290-1364) called *The Trulkhör of the*

³² Ian A. Baker, *Tibetan Yoga: Principles and Practices* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2019).

³³ From personal communication with Baker by author, London, England, September 2019.

³⁴ Ian A. Baker, "Embodying Enlightenment: Physical Culture in Dzogchen as Revealed in Tibet's Lukhang Murals," *Asian Medicine* 7 (2012): 225–64.

³⁵ Nida Chenagtsang and Ben Joffe, *Karmamudra: The Yoga of Bliss: Sexuality in Tibetan Medicine and Buddhism* (Topanga, CA: Sky Press, 2018).

Six-Limbed Yoga (sbyor ba yan lag drug gi 'phrul 'khor). Dr. Nida attributes the system to the Kālacakra Tantra.³⁶ The introduction provides an accurate and lively overview of Tibetan Yoga.

Great Perfection Philosophy

In its philosophical reaches, the current work unpacks subtle body philosophy and its relationship to consciousness, placing it in discourse with contemporary mind-body philosophy. In his dissertation and subsequent book, David Higgins makes an impressive contribution to philosophy of mind from a Great Perfection standpoint.³⁷ As a work on classical Great Perfection thought, he carefully articulates pre-modern philosophy. He minimally addresses the body and calls for more work to be done on the body and subtle body to gain a fuller picture of Great Perfection philosophy. It is my hope that I have filled in some of the story in a contemporary context relying on ethnography and philosophy alike. David Germano talks about the body extensively across the history of his publications on the Great Perfection,³⁸ and he is likely to publish more on the subject, especially on the historical origins of sexual yoga. He has been most influential in the current project and introduced me to the Great Perfection tradition.

³⁶ Nida Chenagtsang, *Nejang: Tibetan Self-Healing Yoga* (Topanga, CA: Sky Press, 2020).

³⁷ David Higgins, “The Philosophical Foundations of Classical RDzogs Chen in Tibet: Investigating the Distinction between Dualistic Mind (Sems) and Primordial Knowing (Ye Shes),” PhD diss., (University of Lausanne, 2013).

³⁸ David F. Germano, “Architecture and Absence in the Secret Tantric History of RDzogs Chen,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 17, no. 2 (1994): 221; ———, “Food, Clothes, Dreams, and Karmic Propensities,” in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); ———, “History and Nature of The Collected Tantras of the Ancients,” *The Tibetan and Himalayan Library. Tibetan and Himalayan Library - Thl*, 2002, <https://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/canons/ngb/#wiki=/wiki/tibetantexts/history%20of%20ngb.html>; ———, *Mysticism and Rhetoric in the Great Perfection (RDzogs Chen)* (Unpublished Manuscript, 2009); ———, *Prophetic Histories of Buddhas, Dākinīs and Saints in Tibet* (Unpublished Manuscript, 2009); ———, “Remembering the Dismembered Body of Tibet: Contemporary Tibetan Visionary Movements in the People’s Republic of China,” in *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*, ed. Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew T. Kapstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 53–94; ———, *The Secret Tibetan History of Buddhist Tantra in the Great Perfection* (Unpublished Manuscript, 2009); ———, “The Shifting Terrain of the Tantric Bodies,” in *The Pandita and the Siddha: Tibetan Studies in Honour of E. Gene Smith*, ed. Ramon N. Prats and Ellis Gene Smith (Dharamshala: Amnye Machen Institute, 2007), 50–84.

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At a conference, a French philosopher of the Great Perfection criticized the way I put Longchenpa in conversation with contemporary mind-body philosophy. To clarify, this project unfolds in the contemporary period and therefore reflects the way the texts under examination *are used today, not their original intent*. The ethnographic approach invites reflection on what happens when these ancient works are put into conversation with contemporary science and philosophy. This does not eschew a need to be true to sources, but rather looks at the ways texts are employed nowadays. Further philological work is warranted on these resources.

This dissertation questions the role of the body in tantric contemplation. An important study of tantra theorizing the body is Gavin Flood's *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion*. While this work reflects on the Hindu tradition, much is shared among Hindu and Buddhist tantra in their mutual use of the revelatory scriptures,³⁹ an emphasis on metaphysics and yoga, the introduction of gods as the manifestation of power in the body,⁴⁰ and the mapping of philosophy onto the body.⁴¹ Flood lays out numerous traditional categories that show the importance of literature and likewise the body in tantric traditions. I take his work as a starting point. However, with the addition of ethnography in the current study, his arguments about the entextualization of literature onto the body through visualization practices are put to the test. While the realities of applying these teachings in one's own life incorporate entextualization in the way he defines it, other aspects of personal and social context come to fore as significantly impacting the ways texts are enacted.

Chapter Summaries

³⁹ Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 55.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 105-107.

Chapter two provides extensive background on the Namdrooling tradition, the *Sky Dharma* contemplative system, and the annual yoga and meditation retreats. This is followed by a lengthy discussion on the concept of *yoga*—*naljor* (*rnal 'byor*) in Tibetan—that weaves together the historical and philosophical backdrop of *Sky Dharma* winds and channels yoga as practiced at Namdrooling. *Sky Dharma* is one of many Tibetan Buddhist systems that bundle philosophy with rituals and contemplation demarcated by the term “*yoga*”—*naljor*. Some of the more popular yoga systems such as the Kālacakra’s Six-branch Yoga, the Four Yogas of Mahāmudrā, the Six Doctrines of Nāropa, and Niguma’s Six Doctrines will be discussed as analogues to *Sky Dharma* winds, channels, and inner heat practice.

Chapter three explores the difference between theory and praxis through two important texts for the winds and channels yoga retreats at Namdrooling. First, *Migyur Dorje* and *Karma Chakme's Sky Dharma* (*gNam chos*) contemplative manuals guide the winds, channels, and inner heat contemplative retreats by giving detailed instructions for practice. Longchen Rabjam's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (*Theg mchog mdzod*) is explored as an ancillary resource for further information on the *vajra* body in the realm of theory. Analyses of the oral and textual traditions in which the winds and channels yoga practice unfolds invite detailed descriptions of the nine postural yoga sequences in *Sky Dharma*. The chapter also looks at Longchenpa's philosophy of the mind-body connection. These two texts are brought together through an analysis of their disparate presentations of *cakra*-s as a point of comparison. “Ethnography of a text” examines the usages of these two texts at Namdrooling.

Chapter four presents ethnographic accounts of monks and nuns who practice *Sky Dharma* at Namdrooling. Via their interviews and inquiries, mind-body correlations included in the explanations of Tibetan Yoga show the uniqueness of the Great Perfection's philosophy of

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mind. The main aim of the chapter is to present examples of the ways *Sky Dharma* correlates the body to the mind and vice versa, investigating how physical practices can influence the mind according to both oral and written teachings. Migyur Dorje and Karma Chakme's claim that the *vajra* body is an extension of the Abhidharma presentation of the body locates the tantric tradition among Buddhism's most classical paradigm for the mind-body connection. The logical thread of some ways the *vajra* body practices and philosophy seem to evoke scientific paradigms are examined. This (1) broadens our understanding of what Buddhist modernism is to include Buddhist monasticism in Asia and the ways it is unfolding under the sways of modernity, and (2) provides examples of Tibetan Buddhist ideas that readily converse with scientific and philosophical conversations but that *also* contain references to ontological categories outside of a naturalistic worldview.

Chapter five reflects on the degree to which postural yoga systems are religiously contextualized through an examination of the ways the mind is directed during *Sky Dharma* yoga. A look at the top-down leadership in the winds and channels yoga retreats at Namdroling unfolds through ethnographic accounts of two of its main teachers, Lama Dorje Wangchuk⁴² and Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso.⁴³ What these two influential Tibetan Yoga teachers say about the practice showcases the philosophical and religious lenses through which such practices are interpreted. Despite asking great physical feats of practitioners, these teachers continually shift the focus to the mind, to society, and to the environment. Compared to the previous chapter, which focuses on monks and nuns in the process of learning winds and channels yoga, these two figures are considered to be masters. The clarity and intentionality in the mental component of yoga training serves as one end of the spectrum of religious contextualization among yoga

⁴² Pseudonym.

⁴³ This is his real name and he is a popular teacher in the US with a formidable internet presence.

systems. I argue that Tibetan Yoga provides an example of extremely specific religious contextualization, and that any postural yoga system can likewise specify the degree of religious semiotics associated with the practice. In this way, postural yoga should continue to be available for use in secular spaces, although only with careful scripting.

Finally, chapter six brings home the relationship between theory and praxis by examining differences in interpretation of a passage of Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* that claims that women's bodies are incapable of achieving the highest goals of winds, channels, and inner heat practice. This interpretation of Longchenpa's writings stems from interviews conducted with a popular Tibetan yogin— a *ngakpa*— who has a retreat center in Northern India and teaches winds and channels yoga to Namdroling khenpos and lopons post-graduation. He claimed that while winds and channels yoga is beneficial for women in that it will help them purify the karma stored in their bodies, they will never be able to achieve its highest goals because of the configuration of their channels. I presented the Namdroling nuns with this information, but they read the text in a manner more favorable for women while still holding true to what Longchenpa wrote. I propose that their lower status as women provoked a more careful reading of passages about women. This chapter describes life in the nunnery and as a contemporary female ascetic in South India.

Throughout the dissertation, the use of ethnography alongside textual analysis contribute unique accounts of practitioners and teachers of winds and channels yoga tied to philosophy. Such accounts take an insider's look at the ways Tibetan Buddhist postural yoga endeavors to bring mind-body theory to life at Namdroling in real ways.

While texts are often central to academic analyses of Tibetan Buddhism, life on the ground at Namdroling is full of paradoxes that defy tidy boundaries. To begin, the practices

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continue a tradition from Tibet to India, which previously went from India to Tibet. It was practiced mostly by ethnic Tibetans in Tibet, but now other traditionally Buddhist people from South and East Asia have the opportunity to practice. The monks and nuns hail largely from Nepal, India, and Bhutan, with a handful from Tibet and a few from other regions. Despite all the migration, the Tibetan Buddhist monastic tradition in India is strong, carefully crafted through its inherited philosophy, ritual crafts, and institutional structure.

The monks and nuns live in the clash of tradition and modernity. They endeavor to uphold traditional Tibetan views and methods, despite living in increasingly modernized conditions where the problems of worldly life are dominated by problems of too much technology and addiction to smartphones and the internet. The monks and nuns suffer from these problems too. An influence of globalization and increased access to information is that the monastics are savvy about gender equality, and are aware that their training in Buddhist ethics to “do no harm” means they might need to revise their policies on how the genders are treated differently. And yet they have inherited roles for men and women that prescribe difference in very particular ways via the monastic code of conduct. These issues are explored in chapter six.

I argue that no one has done more to influence Buddhist monasticism in India than the Dalai Lama himself. Buddhist monastics (including the Dalai Lama) are both academics and Buddhist clergy by vocation. They uphold a set of knowledge that has its own rigorous forms of knowledge embedded within a unique religious ontology and epistemology. The unusual terminology in their texts is strikingly absent from modern scientific discourse. The monks and nuns live under the leadership and influence of the current Dalai Lama in India, who has been exploring the applications of Buddhist thought to science for many years and with great acclaim. They can google anything they want to know about modern science. All of these factors

influence their reception of Namdroling's dual contemplative and scholastic curricula. The monks and nuns are curious about the relationship between science and Buddhism, but they are curious about many other things as well, both traditional and contemporary, Tibetan and global.

Chapter Two: Disambiguating “Yoga” in the Great Perfection

Chapter Summary

Chapter two documents life at Namdroling inside the monastery and nunnery, including the dual scholastic and contemplative curricula that unfold throughout the year. The second half of the chapter describes the background of the term “yoga” in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, disambiguating the popular usage of the Sanskrit “yoga” from the Tibetan translation “*naljor*” (*rnal ‘byor*), which has significant uses outside of the realm of postural yoga. I argue for the establishment of two terms: “Tibetan Yoga,” to refer to contemporary Tibetan Buddhist postural yoga, and “yoga” or “*naljor*” in Tibetan, to refer to various forms of contemplation and doxographical categories.

The Namdroling Monastic Tradition



Figure 1 Namdroling monks performing a ritual.

Namdroling Monastery (founded 1963) and Nunnery (founded 1993) are located in the dusty and aging Tibetan refugee camp of Bylakuppe just two hours from Mysuru (formerly Mysore), Karnataka, which is one of the world's most vibrant hubs for modern yoga. Since 1973, Namdroling has been hosting the *Sky Dharma* contemplative retreats that follow the manuals revealed by Namchö Mingyur Dorje (1645-1667) in Tibet.⁴⁴ The modern-day saint and visionary lama Penor Rinpoche (1932-2009) founded Namdroling just four years after he undertook the perilous journey on foot from Tibet to India to escape Chinese military rule. Penor Rinpoche was among the great lamas of the twentieth century instrumental in establishing Tibetan Buddhism outside of Tibet in order to keep the teachings of the Buddha alive.⁴⁵ This represented a veritable return home for Buddhism after roughly nine centuries of near absence in its birthplace of India, and after significant transformation in Tibet.

This chapter describes life at Namdroling, including details on the scholastic curriculum and the ongoing program of contemplative activities referred to in this dissertation as the contemplative curriculum. To be clear, there is one formal scholastic curriculum at Namdroling. But the contemplative program is regularly scheduled and precisely enacted. The monks' and nuns' schedules, the rules they must follow, and how the annual retreats unfold all provide background information vital to understanding how the monastic leaders intend for the monks and nuns to be educated. The program on offer develops the young monastics in particular ways in line with Buddhist goals. Such information provides an insider's view into the education of a Buddhist monastic. The chapter ends by widening the scope of background information to include the place of yoga in Tibetan Buddhism.

Penor Rinpoche is Namdroling's founding leader and visionary for the community. In the

⁴⁴ See chapter two for more on these texts and their authors.

⁴⁵ Dorje Namgyal, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

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early 1960s, against the advice of the community of refugee Tibetans who sought temporary homes in India, Penor Rinpoche moved to Bylakuppe to found Namdroling. At the time, the Tibetans expected to quickly return to Tibet, and thought the move to South India would be too far.⁴⁶ This move, as well as many other great feats and miraculous deeds he performed,⁴⁷ established Penor Rinpoche as a visionary for the modern age of Buddhism. In Tibet as a young man, he was already known as a great lama (teacher) and upheld the Palyul lineage. He migrated to India at the age of twenty-seven, so had been educated in Tibet and was in his prime in 1959 the year when many Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama, left Tibet. In the forty-six years that he led the Namdroling community, Penor Rinpoche gave most of the textual transmissions, empowerments, and teachings until his passing in 2009. He laid out the campus himself, so that what remains is his vision. In the beginning, he delivered milk on a bicycle in order to earn income to support everyone.⁴⁸ There are many, many stories of the ways he always made sure to take care of the needs of the monks, the Tibetan lay people, and then later the nuns at Namdroling.

⁴⁶ Dorje Namgyal, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 7, 2018. Dorje Namgyal told me stories for sixteen hours in “interviews” where I never had to ask questions. A self-trained historian, he has authored eight books in Tibetan on the history of the Palyul lineage, as well as his own family lineage of Tibetan diplomats (*dpon*). He currently resides in Vermont, USA, and returns to Namdroling every few years. He is Karma Kuchen's father, among other roles. He was instrumental in founding the farming industry in Bylakuppe among Tibetans.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.



Figure 2 An altar at Namdroling with photos of Penor Rinpoche and his reincarnation in front of a religious painting (thang ka) of Penor Rinpoche.

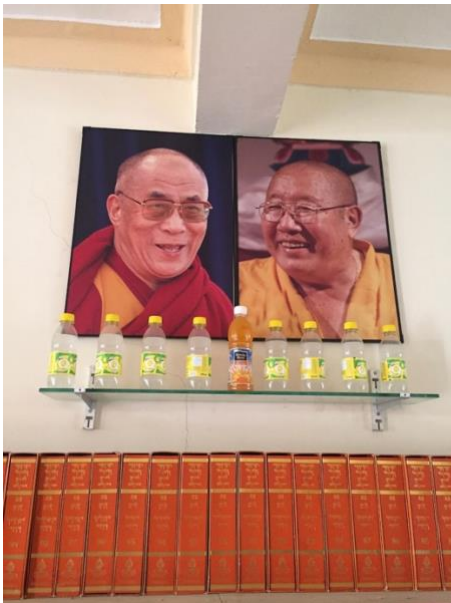


Figure 3 The altar for the Tibetan Yoga retreat with the Dalai Lama on the left and Penor Rinpoche on the right.

The following details on the curricula, the monks and nuns, the rules (*vinaya*) they must follow, and how the annual retreats unfold all provide vital background information to understanding the design behind the education of the monks and nuns. The programs were envisioned by Penor Rinpoche and other great Buddhist thinkers of the twentieth century charged with resurrecting the jewel of the dharma in India but employing the enormous gravity

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and sophistication of the Tibetan monastic tradition. They did nothing less than create a tribe of thousands of specialists in scholasticism, ritual, ethics, and contemplation whose impact on international Buddhism is just beginning to unfold.

Namdroling was the first of the monasteries in what is now a thriving town and monastic center. Its full name is Tekchok Namdröl Shedrup Dargyeling (*Theg mchog rnam grol bshad sgrub dar rgyas gling*), literally “a place for the flourish and spread in theory and practice of the supreme vehicle to complete freedom.” The story goes that when the Tibetan government in exile located in northern India was distributing lands to build monasteries, they declined Penor Rinpoche's request. However, Penor Rinpoche was personally invited to use 200 acres by a sympathetic local Indian government administrator who was born a low caste Hindu and converted to Buddhism as part of Ambedkar's movement. Along with his lay Tibetans and monks, mostly from Kham, Eastern Tibet, they personally cut down rainforests and fought off wild elephants, the likes of which they had never seen in Tibet, to establish Namdroling in 1963. They adapted to local customs and the climate, and learned to farm the land through trial and error. Everyone made great personal sacrifices.⁴⁹

After Namdroling was founded, several other major Tibetan Buddhist monasteries re-established their monastic lineages in Bylakuppe, including the great Gelukpa institutions Sera Mey, Sera Jey, and most recently, Tashi Lhunpo. Namdroling has the only nunnery. The monasteries are scattered throughout Bylakuppe among residential “camps” that are self-governing neighborhoods for refugees with an overarching community organization structure that collaborates on farming.⁵⁰ The homes have evolved from huts in the 1960s to some rather nice houses nowadays.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Farming continues to be one stream of revenue for the monastery. They farm jasmine, coffee, and corn. Another stream of income comes from tourism. Every day the monastery opens its doors to visitors, mostly Indian tourists. It has several shops, cafes, and a bookstore. Visitors enjoy the beautiful gardens and catch glimpses of the monks chanting in Namdroling’s main temple, the famous “Golden Temple.” There is no entry fee, and the monks are gracious hosts who converse with their guests and practice their English and Hindi with visitors.



Figure 4 An early prototype of Namdroling coffee for sale. This was given to me as a gift when I attended the consecration ceremonies for Penor Rinpoche’s new stupa. I thought this packaging was a good idea, but am not sure if it ever was sold publicly.



Figure 5 Young tourists visiting Namdroling. There is a large photo of Penor Rinpoche behind them above the temple

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door.

Namdroling's sister nunnery was established in 1993 just a few hundred meters down the road, called Ngagyur Tsogyal Shedrupling (*snga 'gyur mtsho rgyal shad sgrub gling*) Nunnery. Such a proximity among opposite-sex celibates that would have been discouraged in Tibet⁵¹ but South India does not have space for the great distances that the vast landscapes and open skies of Tibet used to provide as a barrier for contact among the monks and nuns. Nowadays new ways of guarding monastic chastity have developed, a few of which we will see in chapter six on the nuns. There are competing stories for why the nunnery was founded. Some say it was established to provide a home for nuns from Shukseb (*shug gseb*) nunnery⁵² in Tibet who were seeking refuge in India, a small but famous Nyingma nunnery near Longchenpa's retreat cave in Central Tibet. Others say it was founded so women in difficult situations would have a place to go.⁵³

Namdroling is the Indian branch of Palyul in Tibet, one of Nyingma's "Six Mother Monasteries,"⁵⁴ which are the six main monasteries for the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. There are roughly 470 monasteries in the Palyul network in Tibet, India, Bhutan, Nepal, and internationally. In the USA there is a large retreat center in McDonough, NY near Binghamton. Penor Rinpoche's three "Spiritual Sons" (*thugs sras*)— all reincarnated lamas born in Indian refugee camps to Tibetan parents and that he personally brought up— hold the seat of power right now. Penor Rinpoche and Karma Kuchen Rinpoche, one of the three tulkus, are the two main lineage holders for the Palyul tradition at large. Their line of emanated reincarnations—the *tulku* system— is as old as the monastery itself and these two figures have

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² For more on the Shukseb nunnery in Tibet, see <https://treasuryoflives.org/institution/Shukseb>.

⁵³ Two Khenpos and a Lopon, interviews by author, Bylakuppe, India, January through March 2018.

⁵⁴ For a detailed description of the Palyul monastic tradition in Tibet and also the other five Mother Monasteries, see Nyoshul Khenpo 'Jam-dbyaṅs-rdo-rje, *A Marvelous Garland of Rare Gems: Biographies of Masters of Awareness in the Dzogchen Lineage: A Spiritual History of the Teachings of Natural Great Perfection*, trans. by Richard Barron (Junction City, CA: Padma Pub., 2012): 554-555.

been rotating in the primary throne holder position for Palyul via their reincarnations since the seventeenth century. This is a relatively common way of ensuring there is always a leader who has been raised explicitly for the position and of adult age. Karma Kuchen Rinpoche has moved back to Tibet and became a Chinese citizen, but he visits Namdroling, Palyul New York, and other Palyul centers regularly. He plays a major role in raising Penor Rinpoche's *yangtshi* (*yang srid*), or reincarnation, who was discovered in Tibet in 2014. Karma Kuchen was born in 1970 in Bylakuppe to Tibetan parents and recognized at the age of five, at which time he went to live with Penor Rinpoche. His parents remained nearby in the refugee camp. His father Dorje Namgyal recounted the story of his birth, which was miraculous in that he caused his mother no pain at all, and just came out when she thought she was going to the bathroom.⁵⁵ This is a type of kindness that enlightened beings are believed to do for their mothers, such as when the Buddha Shakyamuni painlessly came out of this mother's side.⁵⁶

Penor Rinpoche (1932-2009) is considered a modern-day saint in the way that Tibetan lamas achieve great notoriety for their virtue and the ways they uphold the Buddhist teachings. His primary partnerships with other contemporary Nyingma masters included Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910-1991) and Chatrul Rinpoche (1913-2015), all who carried the jewel of the dharma across the border from Tibet to India and Nepal in the form of their own education, spiritual realizations, and the texts they could carry. Their mission was to keep the teachings alive outside of their home in Tibet.

Namdroling provides a top-notch education to around 5,000 monastics at any given

⁵⁵ Dorje Namgyal, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

⁵⁶ Much has been written on Tibetan hagiography. See, for example, Kurtis Schaeffer, "The Autobiography of a Medieval Hermitess: Orgyan Chokyi (1675-1729)." *Women in Tibet*. Volume One (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 83-109. Also, Janet Gyatso, "Autobiography in Tibetan Religious Literature: Reflections on Its Modes of Self-Presentation." *Tibetan Studies - Proceedings of the 5th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*. Vol. 2. (Narita: Naritasan Shinshoji, 1989), 465-78.

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time.⁵⁷ The education of monks and nuns is almost equal except for differences in the *vinaya*, or code of conduct for monastics, which has many gender-based rules. This is a largely unprecedented phenomenon of gender equality not witnessed in the history of Buddhism until recently. While the monks and nuns train in the same curriculum, they also live in South India and hail from traditionally Buddhist regions in Nepal, Northern India, Bhutan, and Tibet. None of those cultural contexts pretends to uphold gender equality, and without the support of society in the form of clerical roles for graduates, the nuns' options upon the completion of their studies are limited. Additionally, the literature at the heart of the monastic tradition does much to define limits for women, and chapter six looks at how authoritative literature restrains the outlook from Tibetan Yoga practice for contemporary female practitioners.

Namdroling has eight official departments. The population numbers that follow come mostly from their website but have been verified through interviews. It was difficult to get anyone to provide an accurate number of how many people are enrolled, so these are estimates. The way of counting is unusual compared to an American university because when the monks and nuns graduate, even if they live elsewhere, they continue to be enrolled unless they officially leave the monastery, which usually entails giving up the life of a monk or nun and becoming a lay person. Until then, Namdroling is always your home and you always have a place there.

Namdroling's monastic college (*bshad grwa*) for men, the Ngagyur Nyingma Institute (NNI), was officially established in 1978 and runs the scholastic curriculum. This is the main institution at Namdroling. There are 3,000 monks currently enrolled and 1,200 have graduated. It offers Higher Secondary, Bachelors, Master's (*Lopon; slop dpon*), and Doctor of Philosophy

⁵⁷ This estimate is based on what English-language websites recount. The website is part of Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso and Jangkhang Tulku's networks in North America. "About the Children." Ottawa Palyul Centre. Accessed February 16, 2022. <https://palyulottawa.org/children/>.

(Khenpo; *mkhan po*) degrees. The importation of academic categories are their own translations of traditional Tibetan titles.⁵⁸ *Lopon* translates the Sanskrit term *ācārya*, meaning spiritual guide or teacher.⁵⁹ The Khenpo title is offered on top of the Lopon degree after having demonstrated “pure morality with adequacy in teaching”⁶⁰ for four to eight years post-graduation from the M.A. program. The M.A. degree is the culmination of the two prior levels (Higher Secondary and Bachelors), so that altogether these three degrees take nine years of focused study in Buddhist philosophy. The nine-year curriculum covers a set of texts hand-selected by Penor Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Chatrul Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsewang Gyatso, and others.⁶¹ The story of how the curriculum was developed is told in chapter five, and is important to the ways the monks and nuns interpret the winds and channels yoga retreat. The curriculum texts are included as an appendix. I recently heard that a tenth year was added to the curriculum for preliminary practices prior to study.⁶²

While enrolled in the monastic college, the monks and nuns have a busy daily schedule. The wakeup bell rings at 5am, and an appointed disciplinarian (*gi ku*) knocks on the door. The monks and nuns have until 5:15 to get ready, then do morning prayers, memorize texts, or study until 7 am. They are free to stay in their rooms or go outside, but communication among them is forbidden. If caught, they get a warning or fine, and the disciplinarians also go around to make sure no one is still sleeping. They mostly chant quietly to themselves so as not to disturb what their roommates are doing. From 7 to 8:30 breakfast is served and there is another chance to freshen up for the day. Enthusiastic students and those newly admitted use this time to get

⁵⁸ “Conferring of Degrees,” Namdroling Monastery, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://namdroling.net/Portal/Page/Conferring-of-Degrees>.

⁵⁹ Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002), 131.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

⁶² Namdroling graduate, personal communication online, December 2021.

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tutored by senior students to better understand the texts they are studying. The first class is from 8:30 until 11 am, although many end by 10 or 10:30. If there is free time, the monastics must stay in the classroom to discuss what they are learning or go to their rooms to study, review, or memorize root texts. At 11 is lunch and a break until 1 pm during which many go back to sleep.



Figure 6 Disciplinarians seated on benches in the back of the main temple at Namdroling, watching the students.

In the 1 to 3 pm session, the lower-year monastic college students (years one through four) have a review class led by select students from the eighth or ninth year. Those in years five through nine have a self-study period where disciplinarians come to visit periodically. From 3 to 3:30 is a tea break, followed by class from 3:30 to 4:30. If there are no classes, they must remain in their rooms and do self-study. From 4:30 to 5 there is a break with no tea, and debate is from 5 to 6 pm. Dinner is from 6 to 7:30, during which time many students go for a walk or circumambulate the monastery. Some also take extra classes to clarify what they are learning or to learn other skills such as ritual arts. From 7:30 to 9:30 everyone studies on their own, and they are required to review what they were taught in the morning rather than memorize root texts.

Talking is not permitted. They can be indoors or out, but the disciplinarians must know where they are. At 9:30 pm tea is served again, and the break continues until 10:30 pm. Students also use this time for extra tutorials amongst each other, or to learn topics such as grammar, astrology, or *torma* (offering sculpture) making. At 10:30 a bell rings and everyone must return to their room, where they pray or memorize texts until 11 pm. At 11 pm there is a bell and the lights must be turned off. However, many continue reviewing materials and/or memorizing texts using table lamps.⁶³ If anyone is lazy or noncompliant, they can fake their way through this process or remain in the back. Sometimes they read other texts or learn English, but there are consequences for straying, enforced by the disciplinarians. Disrobing is an option, albeit a complicated one since the monks and nuns are an extension of their families. The monastics ordain for many reasons. For example, having a monastic in the family is a continual source of merit for the family that can empower other people's practices and bring wealth or fortune.



Figure 7 Namdroling monks debating near the long row of stupas.

⁶³ Former Namdroling monk Ngawang Sherpa provided rich, detailed descriptions of monastery life. He graduated as a Lopon in 2018 and begins a Ph.D program at Florida State University in August of 2022.

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After nine years of this strict lifestyle, the Namdroling Lopons and Khenpos enjoy a robust array of international positions after graduation. Sometimes they are able to make requests for positions via occasional internal calls for applications, but the vast majority get assigned to teaching positions decided on by monastery administrators. Language skills weigh heavily in deciding what region to send a monk, so Nepali monks tend to go to Nepal to teach, and Bhutanese to Bhutan, although this is not a guarantee. Namdroling provides teachers upon written request to Buddhist educational institutions for children, monasteries, and dharma centers. They maintain a public list of teaching assignments, and the one published online in 2018 before Covid-19 reported 511 Khenpos and Lopons stationed in official positions in India, Nepal, Bhutan, and a few in Europe and the US.⁶⁴

The monks and nuns are ultimately at the whim of the monastery administration who assign teaching positions, and also the work assignments expected for three years after graduation from the monastic college. This is a period of service considered as repayment to the monastery for their education. After that, they have paid off their debt and are free, although one can leave at any time. The monks and nuns do this service willingly and with gratitude for the education and boarding they received.

Another main division is the *Dratsang* (*grwa tshang*), or ritual arts college, that Penor Rinpoche first established in 1963. There, monks learn the ritual arts of the Palyul tradition, and organize Namdroling's ongoing contemplative curriculum throughout the year. The ritual arts college puts on the elaborate, multi-day ritual programs as well as the annual, monthlong *Sky Dharma* practice retreats featured in this dissertation. The separate scholastic and contemplative curricula represented by the division of tasks among the monastic college and the ritual arts

⁶⁴ “Placement of Teachers from Namdroling Monastery,” Namdroling Monastery, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://namdroling.net/Portal/NewsDetail/113/?Title=Placement-of-teachers-from-Namdroling-Monastery->.

college highlights the dual curricula at Namdroling, one scholastic and the other contemplative.

Most of the monks in the Dratsang are in between their time in the Junior High School and the Monastic College. At that time in their education there is often a break, and many get sent for a year to Namdroling branches in Bodhgaya, Darjeeling, Delhi, and Manipal where they perform pujas (rituals) for local people and tend to local monasteries. Also, lamas who have completed three-year retreat are counted as members of the Dratsang. There are a few monks and nuns decide that scholasticism is not for them and enroll only in the ritual arts college.

The *Dratsang* offers classes in fine arts such as ritual music including playing the conch and drums, sculpture (*gtor ma*) making, sand mandala construction, chanting, painting, and Buddhist dance. However, everyone at times participates in the rituals and contemplative retreats the ritual arts college organizes. Their programs include the following list, which provide ample opportunities for contemplation throughout the year. While I do not explore ritual as a form of contemplation in this dissertation, my observation of the monks and nuns led me to see these ritual performances as highly contemplative acts.



Figure 8 Ritual dance performances at Namdroling. Right photo credit to Sherab Yountan.

- Annual rituals performed in the first month of the Tibetan calendar:

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- Gathering of the Vidhyadharas (*rig 'dzin 'dus pa/*)
- Assembly of the Great Glorious Ones (*dpal chen 'dus pa/*)
- Ratna Lingpa's Long-Life Practice (*rat gling tshe sgrub/*)
- Mind Sadhana on the Gathering of the Innermost Essence (*thugs sgrub yang snying 'dus pa/*)
- Assembly of Secret Exalted Mind (*thugs chen gsang ba 'dus pa/*)
- Ritual dances from the Guru Chowang (*gu ru chos dbang 'cham*) treasure revelation
- The annual monthlong *Sky Dharma* (*gNam chos*) retreats in foundational practices (*sngon 'gro*); winds, channels, and inner heat (*rtsa rlung gtum mo*); and Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) contemplation held from the eighteenth day of the first Tibetan calendar month.
- In the fourth Tibetan month:
 - Sadhana rituals on Kama teachings (*'ka ma cho ga bcu gsum*) on the oral transmission lineage with a long dance (*'cham*) performance.
 - Peaceful and Wrathful ritual dances (*'cham*), a preparation for death.
 - Display of 180-foot scroll painting of Lord Buddha, Guru Padmasambhava, or Lord Amitayus, which is a blessing and liberation upon seeing (*kos sku mthong grol chen mo*).



Figure 9 (left) Display of Lord Buddha painting. (Right) A religious sculpture made by the ritual college monks.

- The 500,000 (*bum lnga*) accumulations of the foundational practices (*sngon'gro*) is offered from the fourth Tibetan month until the tenth, where monks and lay people can complete all the 500,000 requisite accumulations. A similar opportunity does not yet exist for nuns, and instead they do the Foundational practices (*sngon 'gro*) retreat three times to satisfy the 500,000 requirement.
- During summer retreat (*dbyar gnas*) from the fifteenth day of the sixth Tibetan month, the following rituals are performed for one-week each:
 - Heart Essence Protection Prayer (*snying thig gsol kha*)
 - Sky Dharma Protection Prayer (*gnam chos gsol kha*)
 - Karma Lingpa's Peace and Wrath (*kar gling zhi khro*)
 - Gathering of the Mind Sadhana on the Inner Essence (*thugs sgrub yang snying 'dus pa*)

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- Wrathful Padmasambhava Coil of Fire and Wind (*gu drag me rlung 'khyil ba*)
- Ratna Lingpa's Dagger (*rat gling phur pa*)
- At the end of each year a separate set of rituals is performed:
 - Ratna Lingpa's Dagger (*rat gling phur pa*)
 - Secret and Perfect Eight Pronouncements (*bka' brgyad gsang rdzogs*)
 - Matis Lion-Faced (*seng gdong*)
 - Wrathful Padmasambhava Coil of Fire and Wind (*gu drag me rlung 'khyil ba*)
 - Other exorcist rites and dances
 - Vajra Kilaya is done in the temple for 7-days, 24 hours per day, by twenty-five monks
 - Two lamas (defined inside the monastery as those who have completed a three-year retreat) constantly perform invocation prayers for both Namcho (*gNam chos*) and Nyingthig (*sNying thig*).⁶⁵



Figure 10 (Left) Religious sculptures. (Right) Monks in ritual garb.

Namdroling's Junior High School for boys and young men, titled Yeshe Wodsal Sherab

⁶⁵ “Dratsang (Monastery),” Namdroling Monastery, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://namdroling.net/Portal/Page/Dratsang>.

Raldriling.⁶⁶ (*ye shes 'od gsal shad rab ral 'dri gling*), is another main division. Established by Penor Rinpoche in 1962, it now has more than 4,000 registrants from India, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and elsewhere. Around sixty monks each year teach at this secondary school,⁶⁷ which includes classes in math and English. They are all housed together in a lively dormitory area. It is mostly a school for child monks and newly minted monks with little prior education. In general, the monks from Bhutan do not need to attend, as the education system there is good and most ordain after completing high school. Monks from rural Nepal tend to need this foundational level of education because they ordain at younger ages, possibly because access to basic education in Nepal is more limited. Monasteries continue to be a source of basic education, a very old tradition in Himalayan Buddhist societies.



Figure 11 Child monks who are students at the Junior High School. Middle photo credit to Sherab Yontan.

The Junior High School has a slightly different schedule. At 5 am they wake and study on their own until breakfast and a break from 6 to 7 am. From 7 to 9 am, they have a morning prayer session which includes marching in line and chanting a prayer to Longchenpa. Then they

⁶⁶ This is the way they spell it on their website.

⁶⁷ “Brief History of Yeshe Wodsal Sherab Raldriling,” Namdroling Monastery, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://namdroling.net/Portal/Page/Jr-High-School-Brief-History-of-Yeshe-Wodsal-Sherab-Raldriling>.

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march over to a temple called Zangdok Palri (*zangs mdog dpal ri*), Padmasambhava's "Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain." Recently Penor Rinpoche's stupa (Buddhist reliquary) was installed there on the bottom floor.

They take a tea break until 9:30, and have Tibetan reading class from 9:30 to 11 am. At 11 am lunch is served and they break until 1, during which time many take a nap. From 1 to 3 pm they have handwriting for the younger students, and the senior students study drawing, tormas (offering sculpture) making, tormas decoration, and other ritualistic disciplines. From 3 to 3:30 tea is served, followed by an English class for younger students and a reading class for the seniors. From 5 to 7 pm there is dinner and a break, followed by evening class from 7 to 9 pm. The younger students again practice reading, while the seniors study ritual arts such as playing the cymbals and other instruments. From 9 to 10:30 pm there is tea and a break, and some go to the monastic college at this time for tutoring. At 10:30 everyone must return to their room, with lights off at 11 pm.⁶⁸

The Drubkhang (*grub khang*), literally a "house of attainments," is Namdroling's internal three-year retreat house for monks. It began in 1985 and has the "prime intention to put the studies into real practice."⁶⁹ One person who completed the three-year retreat told me, "We don't meditate in three-year retreat. We accumulate mantras."⁷⁰ While that is technically true, I heard from others that many meditate on their own. Again, the line between ritual and meditation is blurred, a phenomenon that deserves further attention in religious studies at large but possibly using Tibetan Buddhism as a baseline since it is famous for contemplation.

Life in three-year retreat begins at 3:30 am, and the last of four daily sessions takes place

⁶⁸ Ngawang Lhundrup, personal communication with author, online, March 2022.

⁶⁹ "Drubkhang," Namdroling Monastery, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://namdroling.net/Portal/Page/Drubkhang>.

⁷⁰ Monk who completed a three-year retreat at Namdroling, interview by author, Bylakuppe, February, 15, 2019.

from 7-9 pm. Upon completion, they are given the title of vajra master, *Dorje Lupon (rdo rje slon dpon)*. At Namdroling, these are the only people who get called “lama” despite the much wider use of that term in Tibetan Buddhist communities elsewhere, including at Palyul New York. So far, 153 monks have undergone this process, and forty-seven monks are in three-year retreat right now. In three-year retreat, the monastics accumulate great numbers of mantra recitations in the following practices, which demonstrate a lineal tie to the larger Vital Heart (*snying thig*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism:

- Three Roots of the Heart Essence (*snying thig rtsa gsum*)
- Ratna Lingpa Long Life (*rat gling tshe sgrub*)
- Karma Lingpa Peaceful and Wrathful [Deities] (*kar gling zhi khro*)⁷¹

The female division of Namdroling is the Ngagyur Tsogyal Shedrupling Nunnery, established in 1993. There are currently 1,200 nuns enrolled with roughly 600 in residence. The nunnery has four sub-divisions: the ritual arts college (*grwa tshang*), lower school for children and those in need of basic education, a monastic college (*bshad grwa*), and a retreat center (*grub khang*). About the monastic college, their website says, “The syllabus is almost the same as in the Ngagyur Nyingma Institute and is also a nine-year course.”⁷² The differences pertain to rules in the code of conduct that are different for men and women. The nunnery has its own organizing and governing body, but is a subdivision of Namdroling's overarching organization, so the monastery gets the final word on certain issues.⁷³ In general, the nuns are self-governing. In the beginning, when the nunnery was getting established, monks came from the monastery to teach

⁷¹ “Drubkhang,” Namdroling Monastery, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://namdroling.net/Portal/Page/Drubkhang>.

⁷² “Ngagyur Tsogyal Shedrupling Nunnery,” Namdroling Monastery, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://namdroling.net/Portal/Page/Ngagyur-Tsogyal-Shedrupling-Nunnery>.

⁷³ Namdroling Luponma, interview by author, March 2019.

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the nuns, but nowadays there are enough *loponmas*, or M.A. graduates, for them to teach each other. The nuns have their own ritual arts college and three-year retreat center, but these are not separate departments like they are for the men.

Each day, the nuns perform the Tara ritual to honor the female Buddha. There is high demand in the outlying refugee camps for the nuns to perform Tara pujas on behalf of local lay people. Tara is known for removing obstacles, compassion, and bringing blessings.

The nuns participate in the contemplative and ritual offerings from the monks' ritual college whenever possible as a sister-college. When they do, everyone upholds the old monastic tradition for nuns to sit behind the monks. This is because the youngest monks continue to outrank the most senior of nuns, a rule drawn from the *vinaya* (*'dul ba*), the monastic code of conduct. For me, there was discomfort around this situation, but the monks and nuns mostly claimed it was fine for them. For those who expressed a desire to change the situation, the issue of leading such a social justice movement is a sensitive one, explored further in chapter six.

The highest degree offered in the nunnery is *loponma*, which is conferred upon graduation from the nuns' M.A. program in Buddhist philosophy in their own monastic college (*bshad grwa*). When I was at Namdroling, some *khenpos* were discussing whether to create a higher degree similar to *khenpo* to equal the monks' titles and ranks. There are now several *loponmas* who would meet the qualifications to hold this title in that they have graduated from the monastic college, taught extensively, and likely meet the requirement for displaying ethical conduct (by my own judgment). When I was there, they were debating a technical problem with establishing *khenmo* as a title for the nuns. Like many religious clergy, the monks and nuns must interpret the rules as they are written down despite changes in context. One idea at the time was to create a *geshema* degree, since *geshe* is the term used in the New (*gsar ma*) orders of Tibetan

Buddhism for the highest degree. However, the Nyingma order does not employ this term. Many luponmas expressed a desire for the khenmo degree to be created, which has already happened elsewhere in the Nyingma tradition, most notably at Larungar in Tibet.⁷⁴ No progress had been made at Namdroling at the time of this writing, although it is rumored that khenmos have been instated at Palyul in Tibet.⁷⁵

After graduation the nuns also get posts as teachers, but there are far fewer positions to meet the supply of nuns because demand for female teachers is low. There need to be more nunneries and schools that employ female teachers to keep up with the number of graduates. One interesting phenomenon is that because of this situation, many nuns aspire to do three-year retreats after graduation. Their limited options for placement as teachers have freed them up to go deeper into contemplation. The three-year retreat house at the nunnery is just finishing its second round offering three-year retreats. It remains to be told whether that experience will become a reality for many nuns.

There are other smaller divisions at Namdroling, including a medical center, the Paljor Dargyaling Guest House, and a home for older parents. The medical center houses two more recent developments that are not official departments but hold promising new options for the monks and nuns. One is the in-house translation group, called the Padma Mani Translation Committee, founded by Khenpo Sonam Tsewang. Monks and nuns learn oral and written translation into English through a multi-year program that happens concurrently while they are enrolled in the monastic college. The other recent addition is an internal Ph.D. program for monks and nuns led by the esteemed scholars of the Nyingma tradition Dorji Wangchuk, a

⁷⁴ See Jue Liang and Andrew Taylor, "Tilling the Fields of Merit: The Institutionalization of Feminine Enlightenment in Tibet's First Khenmo Program," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 27 (2020): pp. 231-262.

⁷⁵ Tulku Sangye Tenzin, communication with author, April 14, 2022.

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former Namdroling monk, and Orna Almogi. The first cohort of three monks and one nun graduated in 2018. Almogi and Wangchuk teach research methods with a focus on philology to some of the brightest and most knowledgeable Khenpos, Lopons, and Loponmas at Namdroling. Both of these groups were helpful to me as a scholar and researcher during my stay at Namdroling. There is also an editorial committee that produces excellent Tibetan and English language magazines on a regular basis, and a group of monks working on a dictionary.



Figure 12 The first cohort of Ph.D. graduates from Namdroling's internal Ph.D. program. Left to right: Loponma Karma Yangchen, Khenpo Palsang Dargye, Orna Almogi, Dorji Wangchuk, and two Khenpos whose names are unknown.



Figure 13 (Left) A 2010 issue of Palyul Times. This publication has excellent research articles authored by Namdroling monks and nuns. (Right) Monks in the English Translation program with Dorje Namgyal, an informant for this research and father of the tulku Karma Kuchen, the head of Namdroling. Dorje Namgyal is a lay historian who has authored eight books in Tibetan.

The monks and nuns at Namdroling are mostly not ethnic Tibetans, although some come from Tibet or Tibetan refugee families. The vast majority of monks and nuns hail from traditionally Buddhist regions in the Himalayas of Nepal, India, Tibet, and Bhutan that had little access to such a scholastically rigorous education until Tibetan Buddhist monasteries were established in exile in India and Nepal. There is a lot of excitement about the caliber of education on offer at Namdroling. The monastics are mostly young during their education, in their teens to forties, and the cutoff age for enrolling is forty.⁷⁶

Namdroling graduates make up a new cohort of teachers who are powerfully revitalizing Buddhist education and practice in traditionally Buddhist Himalayan regions as well as across the globe. When they graduate, the monastics often return to their native homes to teach subjects straight out of the Namdroling curricula. This includes the teachings on Tibetan postural yoga and inner heat practice.

Namdroling is having an enormous impact on global modern Buddhism. Its highly trained cohort of graduates are resident teachers in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Recently some of the senior Namdroling monks returned to Tibet to teach at Palyul to contribute to the ongoing revitalization of the lineage in post-Chinese Cultural Revolution Tibet. As one of the newest monasteries in the Palyul lineage, Namdroling holds a rich, enormous, and wide-ranging historical and philosophical lineage that promises to be influential for years to come.

[The Annual Sky Dharma Retreats](#)

Amidst Namdroling's rich history, as well as its philosophical, ritual, and practice pursuits, Namdroling is one of the most accessible places in the world where one can learn Tibetan Yoga.

⁷⁶ Anonymous nun, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2019.

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This form of modern postural yoga is not accessible compared to other forms of modern yoga. The Tibetan tradition strictly requires prerequisites in order to practice. Such hurdles, while enforced on a case-by-case basis, require significant time and effort.

The threefold *Sky Dharma* series of contemplative manuals have been the cornerstone of the Palyul monastic lineage since its founding in 1665. Nowadays, most of the monks and nuns follow a set of three yellow books printed in Taiwan by The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation and distributed for free at Namdroling. The books share the same main title, and differ in their subtitles. In English, the main title is *Mountain Dharma for the Victorious Palyul Early Translation Lineage*. The three subtitles are: *Foundational [Practices]*⁷⁷; *Winds and Channels*⁷⁸; and *Great Perfection*.⁷⁹

The annual retreats begin on the eighteenth day of the first month in the Tibetan calendar during the winter break of the academic year. As students, the monks and nuns have the opportunity to practice contemplation in retreat for this one month out of the year. Most Namdroling monks and nuns try to do all three retreats at least once as part of their education, and some manage to find time to participate multiple times. The retreats are optional but encouraged through monastery culture. If one were to graduate from Namdroling without experiencing the contemplative retreats that it is known for, it could be embarrassing. Also, the monastics need the contemplative training to take forth in their future roles as teachers. A handful of monks and nuns teach the practices at Namdroling, particularly those who take a great interest and possess a higher level of expertise by doing the retreats more than once.

77 gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang shes rab, *sNga 'gyur Rgyal Ba Dpal Yul Ba'i Ri Chos Gsum Gyi Khrid Yig Bzhugs/ Sngon 'Gro/* (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2010).

78 gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kar+ma chags med, *sNga 'gyur Rgyal Ba Dpal Yul Ba'i Ri Chos Gsum Gyi Khrid Yig Bzhugs/ Rtsa Rlung /* (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2010).

79 gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang shes rab, *sNga 'gyur Rgyal Ba Dpal Yul Ba'i Ri Chos Gsum Gyi Khrid Yig Bzhugs/ Rdzogs Chen/* (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2010).

The retreats demonstrate that within the monastic context at Namdroling, contemplation is a fundamental pedagogical mode. While optional, almost everyone at Namdroling meditates in the retreats. Education at Namdroling unfolds as periods of intense study, periods of intense contemplation in the retreats and other contemplative offerings, and a few breaks.

The three retreats represent Migyur Dorje and Karma Chakme's take on the stage-wise path (*lam rim*).⁸⁰ The stage-wise model⁸¹ characteristic of many Tibetan traditions allows ideas and practices to be layered over time. This popular genre weaves philosophy teachings with contemplative instructions and is meant to unfold in a gradual manner. The cultivation of such intentional experiences is curated carefully by some of Tibet's greatest thinkers.

The monks and nuns can participate in the retreats as many times as they like. I met many who had done a particular level of retreat, or even each of the retreats, up to five times. The winter break from the monastic college is the only time the monastics can travel away from the monastery, so participation means giving up a visit home to their families. For those who do not have money to travel home, the retreats are a fulfilling alternative. The retreats are nicely produced, accompanied by elaborate rituals, excellent teachers, good food and treats, and time to

⁸⁰ Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, oral teachings on *Sky Dharma Winds and Channels* yoga, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

⁸¹ Many Tibetan texts describe the “stages of the path” according to various traditions and have been translated into English already. A few examples include: Bsod-nams-rgya-mtsho Dalai Lama III, Gautama Buddha and Library of Tibetan Works & Archives. *The Essence of Superfine Gold: A Guide On Stages of the Paths to Enlightenment*. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 2007. Pha-boñ-kha-pa Byams-pa-bstan-'dzin-'phrin-las-rgya-mtsho, Blo-bzang-ye-shes-bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho Khri-byang III and Michael Richards. *Liberation In the Palm of Your Hand: A Concise Discourse On the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. Rev. 2nd ed. 1993. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1993. Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho Dalai Lama XIV and Guy Newland. *From Here to Enlightenment: An Introduction to Tsong-kha-pa's Classic Text the Great Treatise On the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. Boston: Snow Lion, 2012. Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa. *The Great Treatise On the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2000. Thub-bstan-dge-legs-rgya-mtsho 'Ba'-mda'-ba. *The Chariot That Transports to the Kingdom of the Four kāyas: Stages of Meditation That Accomplish the Excellent Path of the Six-branch Yogas of the Completion Stage of Glorious Kālacakra : The Five Common Preliminaries*. Translated by Tomlin, Adele. Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2019. Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho Dalai Lama XIV, Thupten Jinpa and Christine Cox. *Path to Bliss: A Practical Guide to Stages of Meditation*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1991.

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interact with the local lay people and others who come to Namdroling to participate. Plus, the monastics are aware that they are putting into practice what they learn in the monastic college.



Figure 14 Local lay practitioners at Namdroling.

Each retreat activity, whether a discourse, meditation, or yoga session at Namdroling begins with generating bodhicitta, is framed by the motivation to liberate sentient beings from the suffering of cyclic existence and lead them to enlightenment. This common refrain gets the most attention in public discourses, as well as the concept of emptiness. These ever-present reminders are a source of renewed energy and shared group purpose, a sentiment the monks and nuns spoke about in interviews. To quote a 29-year-old Bhutanese nun at the end of the winds and channels yoga retreat, “In the end, when Khenchen and Rinpoche arrived and gave us advice, it made me so emotional. They always talk about impermanence, and only think good thoughts for us. Sometimes we get angry and can't control our minds. I feel so bad for not controlling my mind.” Me: “You think Khenchen has controlled his mind?” Nun: “Yes, even though he is old, he does not have anger. Like that I am hoping to advance in every way.”⁸²

⁸² Anonymous Namdroling nun, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

Recognizing that motivation wanes over time, a big part of the teachers' job is to keep spirits high and inspire people to work toward a higher purpose. Because Namdroling is a Great Perfection school, in addition to constantly rearticulating a compassionate motivation, they add a unique motivation, to facilitate the dissolution of conceptual thoughts. This is considered necessary to receive blessings through the practices.⁸³ People in teaching roles at the monastery talk about generating these states of mind more than anything else over the course of the monks' and nuns' training. Students are often reassured that their simple, celibate lives as monks and nuns are more meaningful than family or work life.⁸⁴

Prayer and recitation happen for several hours throughout each day in retreat. Lineage prayers reinforce connections to social worlds from the past populated by historical and mythological figures, and situate oneself in a Buddhist lineage that traces back to the primordial Buddha Kuntu Zangpo (*Kun tu bzang po*). The prayers review basic Buddhist philosophy and offer an opportunity to contemplate through song. The monks and nuns are experts and recite quickly. Their songs are melodious, and some even chant loudly as if they are using the music as therapy as in a release of pent-up energy. I observed the chants to emotionally regulate some restless younger nuns, and some nuns told me when they have to chant all day, they find the experience relaxing.⁸⁵ The prayers are also a source of income for the monastery via lay donations.⁸⁶

Each of the three retreats requires an empowerment, and often additional empowerments are offered during retreat time. For the first retreat on the foundational practices, one needs the

⁸³ Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, Oral teachings on *Sky Dharma* Winds and Channels yoga, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Anonymous Namdroling nun, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

⁸⁶ Ethnographic observations, *Sky Dharma* Winds and Channels yoga retreat, Bylakuppe, India, February-March, 2018.

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Vajrasatva and Guru Rinpoche empowerments. For winds and channels yoga, one needs the empowerment of the special *Sky Dharma* winds and channels deity, Troworoza (*'khro ba ro za*, literally, “Wrathful Corpse-Eater”), a manifestation of the Buddha of Compassion unique to Migyur Dorje’s revelations.⁸⁷ The three roots—lama, yidam, khandro (*bla ma yid dams 'kha 'gro*)—are the empowerments required for Great Perfection.⁸⁸

The retreats employ three pedagogical modes. First, a Khenpo reads the *Sky Dharma* text aloud and comments every three days in a main hall or temple. After teaching the practice, everyone goes to their respective practice space to practice for three days. Practitioners follow the books as closely as possible, and since the monks and nuns are so adept at reading Tibetan literature, they tend to read the texts closely and consult them when they are unsure about the instructions. The third way learning happens is via informal tutorials amongst the monks and nuns.

Book One, “The Foundational [Practices]” (*sngon'gro*), is comprised of the eight preliminary practices common in Tibetan Buddhism. These are categorized as either shared (*thun mong*) or unshared (*thun mong ma yin pa*), which can be alternatively translated as common to all Buddhists, or uncommon in the sense that they are unique to Tibetan Buddhism.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Troworoza (*khro ba ro za*) is a form of Avalokiteśvara who is unique to the *Sky Dharma* cycle of treasure revelations. A search on BDRC revealed that there is no other textual record of his name prior to Migyur Dorje's treasure revelations (*gter ma*). Troworoza appears after the time of Migyur Dorje but only in commentaries on Karma Chakme's inner heat practice.

⁸⁸ Anonymous tulku, interview by author, online, February 2022.

⁸⁹ “Common Preliminaries Synonym for Shared,” Study Buddhism (Berzin Archives e.V.), accessed February 16, 2022, https://studybuddhism.com/en/glossary/common-preliminaries?synonym_for=Shared%2Bpreliminaries.



Figure 15 Monks in front and lay people behind prostrating after a session of the Foundational Practices retreat.



Figure 16 Personal practice setups for the Foundational Practices retreat. Objects include pictures of lamas, refuge field of Buddhas, mandala offering map (middle altar), subtle body image to guide transference of consciousness practice (right), bags of rice and other objects for mandala offering (bottom right in maroon), a prayer wheel (bottom right), and personal objects.

The shared foundational practices review basic Buddhist philosophy. These very first lessons in *Sky Dharma* are known widely as the “four thoughts that turn the mind.” Here, one contemplates (i) the preciousness of being born as a human, (ii) death and impermanence, (iii) the sufferings of cyclic existence, and (iv) the law of karma, or cause and effect. In practice, these are given as public philosophy talks, and then practitioners are encouraged to contemplate each thought for an entire day. Through these philosophy teachings, the Namdroling lamas guide practitioners to adopt these basic Buddhist views, which they claim are universal among all

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forms of Buddhism worldwide.⁹⁰

Formal contemplation begins with the unshared foundational practices. Here, practitioners lay down basic skills in meditation and ritual that they will call upon throughout the *Sky Dharma* contemplative path. Spiritual aspirants visualize arrangements of Buddhas in front of them, and coordinate body with mind by applying numerous ritual hand gestures. Every act is loaded with a prescribed doctrinal meaning, plus there are full-body prostrations. Performative acts such as the *maṇḍala* offering is meant to increase one's generosity and devotion. One literally pours rice, small stones, statues, and special objects into an ornate copper or metal molding embossed with art while they imagine giving real objects.⁹¹ Throughout these sessions, practitioners instill a sense of order for how the prayers unfold, and respect for the tradition in general. These practices continue to appear throughout the *Sky Dharma* trilogy in the beginning of each practice session.

According to the way one accumulates the practices, the list of techniques is: (1-2) The recitation of a refuge prayer and also the “mind of enlightenment” (*byang chub kyi sems*; Skt: *bodhicitta*) compassionate motivation, both recited while doing full body prostrations to a visualized field of Buddhas and other celestial beings. These are performed together and constitute 100,000 contemplative acts but are counted as 200,000. (3) *Maṇḍala* offering (*man dal 'phul ba*), which is thematically about generosity and requires the coordination of physically offering piles of rice or sand by dropping them on a special plate along with other objects. One imagines a visualized group special recipients. (4) Vajrasatva (*rdo rje sems dpa'*), where the deity Vajrasatva sits above the practitioner and sends positive energy down through the body, which exits the lower orifices, cleansing karma and negative deeds from past actions. (5) Guru

⁹⁰ Khenpo Norgye, oral teachings on *Sky Dharma* foundational practices, McDonough, NY, July 2017.

⁹¹ Auto-ethnography, McDonough, NY, July 2017.

Yoga (*bla ma'i rnal 'byor*), which connects individuals to the source of the Buddha's teachings via Padmasambhava, who represents their own teacher and the lineage. Guru Yoga's importance in *Sky Dharma* Tibetan Yoga is explored in chapter five.

While the goal is to accumulate 100,000 of each of the five unshared foundational practices, in retreat there is only time to accumulate up to 10,000 of each, or less. The focus is on learning the techniques and building up one's capacity. Prostrations can be particularly physically challenging.

At Namdroling, the foundational practices retreat has the most attendants, with more than 300 people in 2019. A mix of Namdroling monks and nuns, monastics from other monasteries, Tibetan lay people from the surrounding camps, and lay people who travel to Namdroling do the retreat all practice together. The nuns attend the talks by the philosophy teacher—the Khenpo—and then return to the nunnery to practice in their own space. Everyone else remains in the main hall on the monks' campus.

The monks are expected to do the 500,000 accumulations at some point before they graduate from the monastic college, and have the opportunity to do so in a program offered in months four through ten of the Tibetan calendar. Lay people also join this “500,000” practice retreat. The monks must take a sabbatical from their studies in order to do so.

The nuns have a different set of expectations in terms of completing the 500,000 foundational practices. They do not have the facilities to host the six-month long practice retreat that ensues at the monastery, and there is no precedent for them to join with the monks and lay people. Thus, Penor Rinpoche told the nuns that doing the foundational practice retreat three times takes the place of the 500,000 accumulations.

Book Two of the *Sky Dharma* series guides the “Winds, Channels, and Inner Heat” (*rtsa*

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rlung gtum mo) retreat, the central focus of this dissertation. The practice consists of nine *trulkhor* ('*phrul 'khor*) dynamic postural sequences coupled with simultaneous breath retentions, tantric deity yoga, and subtle body visualizations, all described in detail in chapter three. The practices are physically challenging, dynamic, and sometimes painful. They unfold within the wider context of wisdom teachings on emptiness, and method teachings on compassion. The winds and channels retreat requires physical fitness, special equipment, and privacy.

The third book and retreat are on the trademark forms of Great Perfection contemplation: Delineating the Gap between Samsara and Nirvana⁹² (*'khor 'das ru shan*), Direct Transcendence (*thod rgal*) and Breakthrough (*khregs chod*) meditations. These highly specialized forms of contemplation are unique to the Great Perfection tradition, and constantly uphold its pervasive themes of relaxation, letting be what is, and naturalness. At the same time, they are not simple mindfulness techniques. They directly confront the problems of perception, and the ways our own minds and bodies are the sources of suffering. While contemplative stillness is a feature, they include many active forms of contemplation. They teach practitioners to upend habitual reactions, and to question social norms and status quo through speech.⁹³ In general, these are considered to be the most important contemplative techniques this tradition has to offer. Also noteworthy is that the two main contemplative practices for the Seminal Heart (*snying thig*) tradition of the Great Perfection are Breakthrough (*khregs chod*) and Direct Transcendence (*thod rgal*), usually performed in that order. *Sky Dharma* reverses the order, standing in contrast to the vast majority of Nyingma traditions. The monks and nuns at Namdroling explain this by calling

⁹² Richard Barron, translator, "Khregs Chod," Mandala Collections - Kmaps (Tibetan and Himalayan Library, University of Virginia), accessed February 16, 2022, <https://mandala.library.virginia.edu/terms/21124/overview/nojs>.

⁹³ Auto-ethnography, *Sky Dharma* Great Perfection retreat, Bylakuppe, India, February-March 2019.

on the need to still the mind before meditating on emptiness.⁹⁴

“Delineating the gap between samsara and nirvana” (*'khor 'das ru shan*) is considered to be a second set of preliminary (*sngon 'gro*) or foundational practices for the great perfection meditation that follow. Like the yoga of winds, channels, and inner heat, these contemplations heavily feature postures, but here the postures are static rather than the dynamic series of *trulkhor* in winds and channels yoga. One assumes them and stays still while engaging another aspect of the body and/or mind. Some are held for as long as possible, such as in the *vajra* pose where one puts their entire body in the shape of a diamond (standing with hands above the head, elbows and knees out) and remains in that position until they fall down in exhaustion. This is meant to mentally exhaust the mind's conceptual elaborations. This system features the subtle body model, but instead of a focus on raising inner heat— *tummo*— along the central channel as in winds and channels yoga, here one traces paths in the *vajra* body unique to the Great Perfection with a focus on the channel that connects the heart to the eyes and to the outer world.

Each technique is practiced in a group setting for three days. At Namdroling, the monks sit in the front, with mixed-gender lay people in the back and nuns in a rooftop classroom in the nunnery. During practice sessions, everyone needs enough space to fall down from standing, and also to sit and see the sun. People move around depending on the space in order to get a source of light to gaze toward (indirectly).⁹⁵

There are three types of “delineating the gap between samsara and nirvana” (*'khor 'das ru shan*) practices: one each for body, speech, and mind. These preliminary practices are alternative methods to achieve the same goal as winds and channels yoga: to purify the body made of karma and habitual tendencies. The practices are designed to separate out body, speech, and mind. They

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

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promise to exhaust the elements of the body and pacify diseases and demons, which makes the body available for transformation into a *vajra* body, which is the ultimate result of practice.

When the habitual tendencies (*bag chags*) of the body are pacified, one can actualize the nature of the mind through the perfection of the four visions (*snang ba bzhi*) in the subsequent contemplations.⁹⁶

Finally, the main practices in the Great Perfection retreat focus on a vision-centered contemplative path. Open-eye meditations such as sky gazing are the final techniques endeavored in the monastery retreats. These cause one to see shapes in the field of vision, and practitioners literally look for Buddhas. These employ the subtle body model familiar from the winds and channels retreat. In that the subtle body is a shared theme throughout each of the three contemplative phases that correspond to the retreats, the three books work together as a contemplative series with disparate modes. One of the last teachings in direct transcendence practice is on the vajra body, the form of the body that becomes clear upon realization and that is also central to Tibetan Yoga.

Disambiguating “Yoga” and “Naljor”

We now turn briefly to the greater context of yoga in Tibetan Buddhism through an examination of the term “yoga,” or *naljor* (*rnal 'byor*) in Tibetan. *Naljor* (*yoga*) is used broadly to mean “contemplative practice,” but its historical usage in tantric literature demonstrates *naljor*'s huge and shifting scope. While a comprehensive history of the term has yet to be written, this section captures some important usages of *naljor* and how they are tied to Tibetan

⁹⁶ Paraphrased from a handout in circulation at Namdroling. *From the Profound Oral Transmission of the Heart Treasure of Namcho Called Buddha in the Palm of the Hand. The Profound Instruction of the Luminous Thogal, the Heart Essence Instructions on the Dzogchen Direct Perception*. Palyul New York Handout, n.d.

Buddhist tantra at large.

While “yoga” has become an internationally recognized term over the last century due to the popularity of postural yoga, its Tibetan translation *naljor* (*rnal 'byor*) encompasses a wider range of meanings and is instrumental in the ways the Nyingma tradition categorizes its philosophies and practices. Sangye Khandro's translation of Ven. Tsering Lama Jampel Zanpo lays out these categories nicely in a description of the Palyul Tradition. Sangye Khandro herself is an important figure in the early days of Namdroling as one of Penor Rinpoche's first disciples from the US.

“The generation class of *Maha Yoga*, transmission class *Anu Yoga* and the Great Perfection classes of *Ati Yoga* are well-known as the extraordinary vehicles. Each of these three yogas has two general classes, which are the class of *tantra* and the class of accomplishment. In the class of *tantra* of generation *Maha Yoga*, there are eight categories, which include the root *Maha yoga Tantra*, *Sangwai Nyingpo* (Secret Essence). In the class of *tantra* of transmission *Anu Yoga*, there are four categories, which include the root *Anu Yoga Tantra*, *Gonpa Dupa* (Condensed Essence of the Enlightened Mind). In Great Perfection *Ati Yoga* there are three categories: the mind class, the expanse class, and the essential instruction class. The mind class is comprised of five earlier and thirteen later translations. The expanse class is comprised of the *Dorje Zam-pa* (Vajra Bridge) and the essential instruction class is comprised of seventeen *tantras*.

Each of the transmissions of these three inner yogas mingled together, as one great river, to become the complete oral tradition of Panchen Vimalamitra, Lotsowa Berotsana, and Acharya Padmasambhava.”⁹⁷

As you can see from the passage, “yoga” is a moniker the classes of tantra, where *maha-*, *anu-*, and *atiyoga* are presented as distinct packages of rituals with philosophical views and contemplative practices. This dissertation follows the stream of “Tibetan Yoga” into this river of teachings and practices where water meets water in the sense that separating *maha-*, *anu-*, and *ati-yoga* out of the practice is nearly impossible. While these are the primary modes employed by Tibetan Yoga, on Namdroling's campus *Atiyoga* (aka Great Perfection) philosophy permeates

⁹⁷ Ven. Tsering Lama Jampal Zangpo, *A Garland of Immortal Wish-Fulfilling Trees: The Palyul Tradition of Nyingmapa*, trans. Sangye Khandro (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1988), 23

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everyone's thoughts and interpretations, and the practice itself weaves together *maha-* and *anu-* *yoga* characteristic forms of contemplation.

The monastics at Namdroling are aware of the worldwide popularity of postural yoga and highlight the practices and lineages that are shared with the Indian tradition when discussing *Sky Dharma* winds and channels yoga. They are aware that nearby Mysuru is a hotbed for yoga practice, and some monks even go there to learn yoga. Also, in oral teachings on winds and channels practice, the khenpos highlight Tibet's greatest yogin Milarepa, a popular eleventh century figure who has come to represent asceticism, deep retreat, guru yoga, and postural yoga. *Sky Dharma* names Milarepa despite that he is from a different lineage.⁹⁸

However, the more common usages of *naljor* in the Nyingma tradition are to demarcate the classes or vehicles (*theg pa*; Skt: *yāna*) to enlightenment that bundle philosophy together with rituals and contemplative practices. As a synonym for the Great Perfection tradition itself, *Atiyoga* (*shin tu rnal 'byor*) is a term that means “supreme yoga.” *Atiyoga*, described as “utter immersion in genuine being,”⁹⁹ is the highest of all the Nyingma nine vehicles and claims to be the highest among all forms of Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁰⁰ Its salient rhetoric is of naturalness, relaxation, and letting go.

In the eighth century a massive translation project began that continued for hundreds of years in Tibet where Indian languages such as Sanskrit were translated into Tibetan. It was at that time that Tibetan scholars translated the term *yoga* as *naljor*, and when they did, they contended with a fundamental philosophical discrepancy between Buddhist and non-Buddhist

⁹⁸ gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kar+ma chags med, *sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung/* (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2010).

⁹⁹ Richard Barron, tran., “Khregs Chod,” Mandala Collections - Kmaps (Tibetan and Himalayan Library, University of Virginia), accessed February 16, 2022, <https://mandala.library.virginia.edu/terms/21124/overview/nojs>.

¹⁰⁰ It is not uncommon for Tibetan traditions, practices, and philosophies to claim their view, practice or sect is the highest.

worldviews.¹⁰¹ The etymology of *naljor* demonstrates an implicit shift to non-theism, an important distinction between Buddhist and Hindu yoga systems that share practices such as postural yoga, among others. Instead of just rendering *naljor* as “union,” which is what the Sanskrit “yoga” means, the Tibetan etymology literally means “union (‘byor) with natural, pristine reality” (*rnal*).”¹⁰² In Tibetan Buddhism, the culmination of ascetic practice is union with the fundamental nature of reality itself.

The next sections discuss the etymology of *naljor*, which highlights the importance of philosophy in contemplative practice. Next will be an examination of the term *naljor*’s usage by early Tibetan scholars faced with the problem of organizing the influx of tantras from India to Tibet into distinct types. Those scholars delineated tantric doxographical categories that have gone on to define contemplative and ritual practice systems in enduring ways. Winds and channels yoga is best situated in vehicles seven and eight among the nine Nyingma vehicles—*maha-* and *anuyogas*. We will next look at a common use of *naljor* as a moniker for yoga systems that share features with the *Sky Dharma* contemplative system in that they have distinct branches such as Kālacakra’s Six Yogas and the Four Yogas of Mahāmudrā. These practice traditions demonstrate how tantric philosophy comes to life through practices that constantly refer back to buddha-nature theory. *Sky Dharma* winds and channels yoga’s application of inner heat—*tummo* (*gtum mo*)—has been made famous in contemporary scholarship on one of the Six Doctrines of Naropa, explored with those practices below. This section ends with a brief

¹⁰¹ Thank you to Routledge for allowing me to reprint this section, which was originally printed in the *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*. Naomi Worth, “Yoga in Tibet” in *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*, ed. by Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O’Brien-Kop (London: Routledge, 2021), 291-306.

¹⁰² Dudjom Rinpoche, et al give a definition for “yoga” in their glossary: “yoga(s) rnal ‘byor: lit. ‘union in fundamental reality’”. ’Jigs-bral-ye-śes-rdo-rje Bdud-’joms, Gyurme Dorje, and Matthew Kapstein, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1991), 387. See also Bstan-dzin-rgya-mtsho, Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa, and Jeffrey Hopkins, *Yoga Tantra: Paths to Magical Feats* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2005), 24.

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typology of Tibetan *yogis*— *naljorpa*—beginning with an introduction to Tibet's most famous yogi Milarepa (eleventh century), who used inner heat yoga to attain enlightenment. All of these topics constitute the rich history and practice traditions that stand in the background of the Tibetan Buddhist monastics practicing inner heat yoga at Namdroling in the contemporary period.

Tibetan Yoga in the Three Main Canons

When early Tibetan scholars translated *yoga* as *naljor*, they included an implicit semantic shift away from theism by adding the prefix *nalma* (*rnal ma*) to the semantic head *jor* (*'byor*-union). In tantric Buddhist philosophy, *nalma* is “the innate, real condition,” and buddha-nature is what is fundamentally real.¹⁰³ Taken together, Tibetan dictionaries define *naljor* according to its use: “To be subdued by the authentic path,”¹⁰⁴ or “Contemplation and so forth,”¹⁰⁵ or “Effortlessly connecting the mind to the natural state.”¹⁰⁶

Naljor is a term that exemplifies “philosophical tantra,” where praxis systems are unremittingly entangled with Buddhist philosophy. It showcases Tibetan Buddhist praxis systems’ deep commitment to philosophy. Tibetan Buddhism is pervasively tantric yet deeply logical.¹⁰⁷ Its yogic techniques are so enmeshed in philosophy that the somewhat unconventional twentieth century translator Herbert Guenther rendered “*naljorpa*”— “*yogin*”—as

¹⁰³ Dorji Wangchuk, “The rÑiñ-Ma Interpretations of the Tathāgatagarbha Theory.,” *Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die Kunde Südasiens* 1, no. 18 (2005): pp. 171-214, <https://doi.org/10.1553/wzksxlviis171>.

¹⁰⁴ “yang dag pa'i lam dbang du gyur ba/,” *Tshig mdzod chen mo* 1,577.

¹⁰⁵ “sgom rgyab pa/,” *Dag yig gsar bsgrigs* 445.

¹⁰⁶ “bya ba rnal ma la rtsol med kyi ngang gis 'byor/” Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ See David F. Germano, “History and Nature of The Collected Tantras of the Ancients,” The Tibetan and Himalayan Library (Tibetan and Himalayan library - thl, 2002), <https://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/canons/ngb/#wiki=/wiki/tibetantexts/history%20of%20ngb.html>. Also, Christopher Hatchell, *Naked Seeing: The Great Perfection, the Wheel of Time, and Visionary Buddhism in Renaissance Tibet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

“philosopher.”¹⁰⁸

Naljor was translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit during the massive translation project from the eighth to the twelfth century that catalyzed the development of Tibetan Buddhism. As texts were transferred from India to Tibet, scholars faced a dizzying array of literature. In what came to be characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism’s propensity to organize its teachings into categories, organizational schemes were established that both reflected and created streams of Buddhist thought. The monks and nuns at Namdrooling are the latest in a long line of lineage holders on the receiving end of this project. By the fourteenth century, three stable Buddhist collections were redacted, and the term *naljor* was used as a technical term to demarcate tantric doxographies such as Yoga tantra (*rnal 'byor rgyud*), Anuttara Yoga Tantra (*bla na med pa'i rnal 'byor gyi rgyud*), Mahāyoga (*rnal 'byor chen po*), Anuyoga (*rjes su rnal 'byor*), and Atiyoga (*shin tu rnal 'byor*). In this context, the term explicitly refers to internally-oriented contemplative practices in contrast to earlier forms of tantra focused on external ritual activities.

Buton Rinchen Drup (*bu ston rin chen grub*, 1290-1364) was an early seminal redactor of the Tibetan Buddhist canons, which came to be divided between the *Kangyur* (*bka' 'gyur*), the words of the historical Buddha in India; and the *Tengyur* (*bstan 'gyur*), a collection of classical Buddhist treatises attributed to various human authors from India. He notoriously excluded the Ancient (*Nyingma*) tradition, causing the emergence of a collection of tantras as their own canon, the *Nyingma Gyubum* (*rnying me rgyud 'bum*).¹⁰⁹

The preponderance of *naljor* testifies to the long tradition and range of use of the term *yoga* in pre-modern India.¹¹⁰ In a late edition of the canons from the famous print house in Degé,

¹⁰⁸ Agegananda Bharati, in *The Tantric Tradition* (Doubleday Anchor, 1965), 75.

¹⁰⁹ Kurtis Schaeffer, unpublished manuscript.

¹¹⁰ For an in-depth treatment of the origins of yoga in India, see Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

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Kham (Eastern Tibet), 8,815 instances of the term *naljor* appear in the *Kangyur* (ca. 1733), with an additional 1,517 entries for *yogin* (*rnal 'byor pa*). In the *Tengyur* (ca. 1744), there are 19,712 instances of *naljor*. The vast proliferation of texts written in Tibet afterward and not included in these canons frequently refer to *naljor*, with the most common usages discussed next.

Yoga as a Doxographical Category: The Fourfold and Sixfold Classes of Tantra

Tantra was in its heyday in India while Buddhism was being integrated into Tibetan society from the eighth to the twelfth century. By the twelfth century, Tibetans recognized that Buddhism was in serious decline in India, and took responsibility for its preservation. In that process, scholars bundled practices, initiations, rituals, and contemplative techniques together into increasingly formalized tantric doxographies.¹¹¹

The emic category for doxography is “vehicle” (*theg pa*; Skt: *yāna*), which are divided first and foremost according to the philosophical view (*lta ba*). While all the vehicles lead to the goal of enlightenment, their approaches differ not only in theory, but also in the ritual and praxis techniques used to attain that state.¹¹² Each vehicle packages rituals, initiations, texts, and practices. These early literary organizational schemes gave birth to trends in Buddhist philosophy and praxis that went on to define sectarian lines in enduring ways, including how the Nyingma lineage has been handed down.

A fundamental division in tantric versions of such doxographies is between the Ancient (*rnying ma*) and New (*gsar ma*) orders of Tibetan Buddhism. The Ancients’ Nine Vehicle (*theg pa dgu*) system dates back to the eighth century and organizes tantra into the last six of the Nine

¹¹¹ Jacob Dalton, “A Crisis of Doxography: How Tibetans Organized Tantra During the 8th-12th Centuries,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 28 (2005): 116-117.

¹¹² Bstan-dzin-rgya-mtsho, Hopkins, Jeffrey., Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa, *Yoga Tantra: Paths to Magical Feats*, (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, 2005), 14.

Vehicles. By the twelfth century, the New Order's (*gsar ma*) popular fourfold classificatory tantra scheme was in place. These tantric doxographies were unprecedented in Indian Buddhism.¹¹³ The New and Ancient orders share overlapping territory: Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra, the last and highest category for the New orders, roughly maps onto the fourth and fifth categories of the tradition of the Ancients: *Mahāyoga* and *Anuyoga*.¹¹⁴ These are the first two of the three Inner Tantras in the Nyingma nine-vehicle scheme. Winds and channels yoga is classified as both of these.

While *Atiyoga* philosophy is the predominant motif at Namdroling at large, the practice of winds and channels yoga falls into both the *anu-* and *mahayoga* classes of tantra. In that there is a significant deity yoga component to the practice, it is *mahayoga*, and this is equivalent to the New Orders' generation stage (*skyed rim*). In that the subtle body is the focus, it is classified as *anuyoga*, which is parallel to the New Orders' completion stage (*rdzogs rim*) techniques.

The upheaval presented by the Tibetan refugee crisis and the founding of major monasteries in India has had a unifying effect on Tibetan sectarian identities. In the early days in the 1950s to 1970s in refugee camps, scholars from different monasteries suddenly found themselves mixed together, and there was a sharing of ideas. One outcome of this is the increased practice of debate at Nyingma monasteries, including Namdroling. Knowledge of shared practices such as these are all the more unifying for the Tibetan tradition outside of Tibet.

The Ancient Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism: Six Classes of Tantra Culminating in "Supreme Yoga"

Only six of the Ancient tradition's Nine Vehicles (*theg pa dgu*) are tantric, and only the four highest levels are explicitly labelled as types of *naljor*. Some say that the vehicles are

¹¹³ Dalton, "A Crisis of Doxography," 118.

¹¹⁴ Dudjom Rinpoche et al, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 24.

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divided according to the acumen of practitioners, so that *Atiyoga*, the highest vehicle, serves the most efficient methods to the most intelligent people.¹¹⁵ Others assert that each of the Nine Vehicles address a type of delusion. Yet another explanation of the shades of *naljor* is that the last four vehicles are gradients of *samādhi*.¹¹⁶ This last explanation resonates with the way *samādhi* is used in Indian religious contexts to describe gnoseological states that are the resultant realizations of the yogic path.

Atiyoga's more common name is Dzokchen (*rdzogs chen*), the “Great Perfection.” Early forms stress transcendence of all religious practice, including whatever is referred to as *yoga*. Over time, with the emergence of new traditions by the eleventh and twelfth centuries such as the *Seminal Heart* (*sNying thig*) tradition, such religious practices reemerge, including somatic yogas such as deity yoga, inner heat, and sexual yoga. *Atiyoga*'s predominant motif is the rhetoric of relaxation, where practices aim to drop conceptual thoughts and relax into the natural state of “self-radiant awareness.”¹¹⁷ The Dzokchen tradition took models of mind defined by Indian Buddhist philosophers roughly 1,000 years earlier as their basis and added categories such as primordial mind (*ye shes*) and open awareness (*rig pa*). For Dzokchen, because normal conceptuality (*rnam par rtog pa*)—the ongoing stream of thought—indirectly perceives objects through a veil of delusion, it is the cause of human suffering. *Atiyoga* contemplations navigate toward non-conceptual, direct perception.¹¹⁸

Atiyoga has its own take on the threefold Buddha-body theory. The ordinary minds of people have a natural state (*sems nyid*) tantamount to a Buddha's mind that is present throughout

¹¹⁵ Samten Karmay, *The Great Perfection (rdzogs chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching in Tibetan Buddhism*, (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 146-147.

¹¹⁶ Dalton, “A Crisis of Doxography,” 118.

¹¹⁷ Dudjom Rinpoche et al, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 34.

¹¹⁸ Yaroslav Komarovski, *Tibetan Buddhism and Mystical Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 47-52.

the body. This “primordial awareness” (*ye shes*) of a Buddha flows as embodied awareness through the subtle body channels. The mind is mapped across the body via channels, winds, and vital essences (*rtsa rlung thig le*; Skt: *nadī vāyu bindu*). At the level of the individual the karmic winds obscure the wisdom winds. The yogi's task is to reveal the natural presence of the wisdom winds by clearing away the karmic body through yogic techniques¹¹⁹ such as the ones presented in *Sky Dharma*, especially winds and channels yoga. Ultimately, the human body is problematized as being made of karma (*las*) and habitual tendencies (*bag chags*; Skt: *vāsanā*), and the chapter that unpacks details on this from Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* goes into detail.

In adherence with Great Perfection philosophy, winds and channels practice sets out to reveal buddha-nature stored in the body. However, it is important to note that winds and channels yoga is one of many contemplative practices with the same aim. A central theme in the Great Perfection philosophy and practice is to realize one's own buddha-nature.

Naljor in Ancillary Branch Systems

We now turn to a different use of *naljor* as a moniker for Tibetan Buddhist groupings of practices such as the famed “Six Yogas of the Kālacakra” (*'byor drug*). These find a home among the tantric doxographies in the completion stage of unsurpassed yoga tantra (*bla na med pa'i rgyud*).¹²⁰ These ancillary branch systems share an emphasis on the subtle energy body made

¹¹⁹ David Higgins, “The Philosophical Foundations of Classical RDzogs Chen in Tibet: Investigating the Distinction between Dualistic Mind (Sems) and Primordial Knowing (Ye Shes)” (dissertation, Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 2013), 62-64.

¹²⁰ It is noteworthy that the term *naljor* does not actually appear in the bundled families of techniques compiled by Nāropa and Niguma. Twentieth century scholars rendered the “Six Doctrines of Nāropa” (*Nā ro chos drug*) as the “Six Yogas of Nāropa,” which left a legacy of confusion about that practice system due to the popularization of that name (Lopez 2000) as “Tibetan yoga.” The actual term has a wide valence: “chö” (*chos*), which means “dharma” or doctrine. While Nāropa and Niguma’s linked groupings of practices are not *naljor* by name, it is easy to see why they did so: technically, they meet the definition of *naljor* presented here as “contemplative practices, especially tantric in nature.”

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of winds, channels, and vital essences that locates emotion and cognition across the body. These perfection stage contemplations shift the focus internally to imaginal body images, the winds, channels, and vital essences. This stands in contrast to the external visualizations of deities widespread in generation stage tantra. Moreover, they shift to a focus on felt tactile sensations.¹²¹ A popular Tibetan Buddhist metaphor for the subtle energy body is a horse and rider: the vital essences represent units of consciousness that “ride” the body’s winds like a lame rider on a blind horse. Being lame, the rider is unable to walk; being blind, the horse unable to see. They depend on each other to move about. In the same way, controlling the breath controls consciousness and harnesses the body's inherent power.¹²²

Kālacakra's Six Yogas

This dissertation argues that the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist practice of winds and channels yoga is a form of *haṭha* yoga. Vesna Wallace's work on the *Kālacakra Tantra* (“*Cycle of Time*”; *dus kyi 'khor lo*) points out where the term *haṭha* is featured in *Stainless Light* (*Vimalaprabha*), its eleventh century commentary.¹²³ The *Kālacakra Tantra* is an Unsurpassed Yoga tantra characteristic of late Indian Buddhism with a continuous history of transmission in Tibet. Its popularity is well-documented by a stream of commentaries across the history of Tibetan Buddhism. Nowadays, *Kālacakra* has become an important source of contemplative practices due to the activities of the fourteenth Dalai Lama who, in his expanded transmission of Buddhism, brings esoteric yoga into the lives of people worldwide. While some Tibetan Buddhist yogins actually perform the *Kālacakra* six-branch yoga techniques, listed below, the

¹²¹ David F Germano, “Architecture and Absence in the Secret Tantric History of RDzogs Chen,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 17, no. 2 (1994): 221.

¹²² Vesna A. Wallace, *The Kālacakra Tantra: The Chapter on Sādhanā, Together with the Vimalaprabhā Commentary* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010).

vast majority of people receive the Kālacakra initiation as a blessing and way to connect with the Dalai Lama, who links the practice to world peace.

Like *Sky Dharma*, the Six Yogas of Kālacakra follow a prerequisite contemplative curriculum that consists of the standard foundational practices (*sngon 'gro*) and generation stage tantra. The *Six Yogas* have similar features to *Sky Dharma* techniques, especially the control of winds to bring them into the central channel, and meditative concentration, although this is not foregrounded in the same way in *Sky Dharma*. The goal of both practices is to incite bliss, although this is so common in Tibetan Buddhism it is hardly notable. Five of the *Six Yogas* are identical in name to five of eight branches of Aṣṭaṅga yoga in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*, although the order differs. The following translations and descriptions come from Vesna Wallace.¹²⁴

1. Wind control (*srog rtsol*; Skt: *prāṇāyāma*) brings the prāna and apāna winds into the central channel.
2. Retraction (*so sor sdud pa*; Skt: *pratyāhāra*) is meditative absorption free from mental activity.
3. Meditative stabilization (*bsam gtan*; Skt: *dhyāna*) is the single-pointed settling of the mind on empty forms.
4. Concentration (*'dzin pa*; Skt: *dhāraṇā*) is the dissolution of the winds into the central channel as a continuation of breath control.
5. Contemplative inquiry (Skt: *tarka*), or a later iteration, *Anusmṛti* (*rjes dran*), is the consummation of the winds practices.
6. *Samādhi* (*ting nge 'dzin*) is absorption into unchanging bliss and compassion.

Stainless Light (a *Kālacakra Tantra* commentary) is divided among two topics:

¹²⁴ Ibid., 45.

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“sciences” that describe knowledge of the world, and meditation. The Buddhist sciences analyze phenomena in the natural world alongside the doctrine of emptiness to facilitate purification of the physical and mental aspects of human life. The *Kālacakra* connects cycles such as the passage of days, seasons, and years to the movement of *prāṇas* in the human body. In that way the individual is a microcosmic representation of the macrocosmos, a theme common to *Sky Dharma* but articulated differently (see chapter three). It is possible that the *Kālacakra* is an early source for Tibetan Yoga, and also influenced Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, although further research is needed.¹²⁵

The commentary mentions *haṭha yoga* briefly in a section on preserving health with Buddhist-tantric medicine. Buddhism has been concerned with physical health from its earliest stages, and this became paramount in tantra where the body is a main condition for the attainment of supernatural powers, or *siddhis* (*dngos grub*). The *Stainless Light* recommends postures as medical interventions, such as *vajra* posture (*vajrāsana*) to eliminate backaches and head-stand (*śīrṣāsana*) as an antidote for diseases caused by phlegm disorders. The *Kālacakratantra* became a repository for alternative healing remedies to be used in conjunction with each other. As complimentary disciplines, medical practitioners could draw upon the four sciences—religion, *Āyurveda*, alchemy, and medicine—as needed. A healer might prescribe mantras, herbal medications, dietary therapy, *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, tantric rites of healing, massage, precious stones, visualization of deities, and/or recommendations based on astrology. These topics have striking similarity to Longchenpa's recommendations in the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, which calls for pressing and rubbing channels as well as medicinal and

¹²⁵ Personal communication, Dzokchen reading group meeting, University of Virginia, July 2019.

postural remedies for illness.¹²⁶ *Sky Dharma* offers its own healing science through contemplation, which is explored in chapter four.

The *Stainless Light* enjoins practitioners to use force (*haṭhena*) to draw the body's vital energies into the central channel, and recommends sexual yoga as a method to do so. Here, *yoga* is defined as the union of bliss and emptiness, a Buddhist non-dual foregrounding of gnosis that polemically seeks to negate and disparage the Śaiva tantric tradition's emphasis on the Lord (*Īśvara*). Yogins are defined as initiated Completion Stage practitioners for whom initiation originates in their own minds, which is justified by subtle body theory. With the gnostic body as the container of Buddha-nature underlying the physical body, access to initiation from a Buddha can be found in the body.¹²⁷

Mahāmudrā's Four Yogas

Mahāmudrā (*phyag rgya chen po*) literally means the “Great Seal” and uses *naljor* to refer to epistemological states on a contemplative path. The term *Mahāmudrā* is featured in both Buddhist and Hindu tantras, as well as in Svātmarama's fifteenth century *Haṭha Pradīpikā*.¹²⁸ In Tibetan Buddhism, it is an influential meditation system associated with the New orders of Tibetan Buddhism with a formidable trail of literature and lineage that date back to the eleventh

126 This passage from Longchenpa's Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle (Theg mchog mdzod) exemplifies how Longchenpa weaves medical remedies into his descriptions of the subtle body and cakra-s. “Similarly, when earth depends on water, the activities of earth are primary to the second cakra. Because of earth, the body has good flesh, tight flesh, and the various [types of] flesh. There [various types of flesh] spread out from the heart in dependence upon it. If you cut, cover, hit, or pierce these, then it affects the timespan of life. By depending on moxibustion, the illness's activities are alleviated.” *de lta bu'i chu la sa brten pas na/ 'khor lo gnyis pa sa'i byed las gtso ba yin no/ /sas lus kyi gnyan sha dang / grims sha dang / sha sna tshogs pa snying nas mched cing rten pa ste/ 'di rnams bcad pa dang / 'thems pa dang / brdungs pa dang / phug pa las che'i dus byed la/ gtar bsreg gi rten 'brel gyis nad las thar ro/ /kLong chen rab 'byams pa dri med 'od zer, Theg pa'i mchog rin po che'i mdzod/, Tibetan and Himalayan Library Digital Edition. mDzod bdun (dkar mdzes bod rigs rang skyong khul, dpal yul rdzong, a 'dzom chos sgar: a 'dzom chos sgar, 2009). Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg Mchog Mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, ed. Franz-Karl Ehrhard, Facsimile edition series (Lumbini, Nepal: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2000), 195b.*

127 Wallace, *The Kālacakra Tantra: The Chapter on Sādhana, Together with the Vimalaprabhā Commentary*, 6-12.

¹²⁸ See chapter three of the fifteenth century yoga manual *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpika*, which is on mudrās.

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century and continues today. *Mahāmudrā* shares features with *Atiyoga*.

Ulrich Timme Kragh's *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism* is the best philologically grounded source on Tibetan Yoga to date. He explains that a unique facet of Mahāmudrā is its integration of non-tantric Mahāyāna Buddhism with unsurpassed yoga tantra approaches. The redactors of the system aimed to remove the obstacle that requiring tantric initiation posed, but also decontextualized meditation from sexual settings prohibited for celibate monastics. The Mahāmudrā movement freed monastics up to take on the life of yogis as opposed to a sole focus on scholastic activities and non-tantric forms of contemplation. Both radical and timely, Mahāmudrā led to the establishment of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.¹²⁹ As a yoga system that pivots practitioners away from sexual practices, it invites participation by monastics. Mahāmudrā is similar to *Sky Dharma* winds and channels yoga as a subtle body technique easily accessible to monastics with celibacy vows. Sexual yoga practices do not preclude participation by monastics, but realistically, the tensions are obvious and challenging.

Mahāmudrā follows a typical organizational scheme for contemplation called base (*gzhi*), path (*lam*), and result (*'bras bu*) that nicely articulates the relationship between theory and praxis explored in this dissertation. The base is the philosophical view, which in tantra is the innate perfection of every experience, tantamount to the *dharmakāya*, the buddha body that represents a state of mind that is naturally empty and free from conceptual entanglement. The path is the method to uncover that which is already present, i.e., contemplations that seek to reveal co-emergent emptiness. When practicing Mahāmudrā, thoughts should be seen as “self-arisen” (*rang snang*) and allowed to naturally dissolve back into their own essence. Guru yoga is the key to

¹²⁹ Ulrich Timme Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism: A Textual Study of the 'Yogas' of Nāropa and 'Mahāmudrā Meditation' in the Medieval Tradition of Dags Po* (Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies, 2015), 30-31.

circumventing the empowerments: aligning oneself with the guru leads the practitioner to the teacher's level of realization.

The “Four Yogas” (*rnal 'byor bzhi*; Skt: *caturyoga*) of Mahāmudrā are the results of practice. They are four progressive mental stages of settling into a natural, uncontrived state where every thought and perception is yoked with the *dharmakāya*. They are:

1. Single pointedness (*rtse gcig*; Skt: *ekāgra*;)
2. Freedom from conceptual entanglement (*spros bral*; Skt: *niṣprapañca*)
3. One taste (*ro gcig* Skt: *ekarasa*)
4. Great meditative absorption (*myna bhat chen po*; Skt: *mahāsamāhita*)¹³⁰.

Nāropa's Six Doctrines

The Six Doctrines of Nāropa (*na ro chos drug*) is probably the most famous Tibetan Yoga practice system. This group of techniques targets states of consciousness governed by the body's natural processes such as waking, orgasm, dreaming, and dying. Among the New Order's fourfold division of tantra, this bundle is also categorized as the completion stage of unsurpassed yoga tantra. *Nāropa's Six Doctrines* share features with *Sky Dharma* such as *tummo* (inner heat) and consciousness transference (*'pho ba*) systems, as well as overlaps in lineage. It is credited to Nāropā, a tenth to eleventh century Indian who received the sixfold instructions from the Bengali yogin Tilopa. These figures both get specific mention by Migyur Dorje and Karma Chakme in *Sky Dharma*. The *Six Doctrines* likely represent a collection of tantric teachings current in Bengal in the eleventh century. According to Glen Mullin, Tilopa conveyed them to the Tibetan Marpa, who established them in Tibet¹³¹. Alejandro Chaoul speculates that all contemporary Tibetan Buddhist postural yoga systems stem out of this tradition in association with the Geluk

¹³⁰ Ibid., 72-73.

¹³¹ Glenn H. Mullin, *Readings on the Six Yogas of Naropa* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1997), 13.

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and Kagyu traditions, although calls for more historical research to back up this claim.¹³²

The first three doctrines are foremost because they can be endeavored during this lifetime. The others, on the bardo, consciousness transference, and changing bodily residence are related to death or a dead body. Iterations of the list vary, but include:

- 1a. Inner heat (*gtum mo*)—includes central channel yoga and postural yoga techniques.
- 1b. Sexual consort (*las kyi phyag rgya*; Skt: *karmamudrā*).
2. Illusory body (*sgyu lus*).
3. Clear light (*'od gsal*).
4. Dreaming (*rmi lam*).
5. Intermediate state (*bar do*).
- 6a. Consciousness transference (*'pho ba*) to a Buddhist pure land.
- 6b. Changing residence (*grong 'jug*)—transferring consciousness to another body.¹³³

Niguma's Six Dharmas

Niguma is the only female to appear in this list, which sheds light on the scarcity of female role models in which the nuns at Namdroling practice.¹³⁴ She was a *ḍākinī*, a term varyingly used for celestial beings such as Buddhist goddesses and guardian spirits, but also for real women in their roles as consorts and female practitioners. These paradigmatic female figures are important to the transmission and preservation of texts across generations, as well as male access to them. For example, a sexual encounter with a consort is often required for a Treasure Revealer (*gter ston*) to understand the secret, coded language in which the hidden texts (*gter ma*)

¹³² Chaoul, “Magical Movements,” 2.

¹³³ Donald Lopez, “Foreward,” in *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines, or, Seven Books of Wisdom of the Great Path, According to the Late Lāma Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English Rendering* by W. Y. Evans-Wentz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

¹³⁴ I have heard many lamas and Khenpos refute this claim by pointing to the influence of Machik Labdron. One figure is not enough evidence of females in leadership roles to point to gender equity.

are written—*dākinī* code language (*mkha' 'gro'i brda' skad*).

As a *dākinī*, Niguma gave the transmission of her Six Doctrines to Khyungpa Naljor, and together they became the “root” of the Shangpa Kagyu lineage. As the root, they support the main practice of Mahāmudrā, making Niguma's doctrines a Preliminary practice for that lineage. Like the related Six Doctrines of Nāropa, these techniques control the subtle body as part of the Completion Phase of Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra. In *Vajra Lines of the Six Doctrines*, Niguma says, “One's own body is the means: three channels and four chakras.” Her Six Doctrines have much in common with Nāropa's. They are:

1. Inner fire (*gtum mo*)
2. Illusory body (*rgyud lus*)
3. Dreaming (*rmi lam*)
4. Clear light (*'od gsal*)
5. Transference of consciousness (*'pho ba*)
6. Intermediate state (*bar do*)

Niguma was Kashmiri and lived in the tenth or eleventh century. At that time, Kashmir was a center of tantric activity where Buddhist and Śaiva traditions frequently exchanged philosophy and practices.¹³⁵ Śaiva traditions likely held great influence on the transmission of yoga traditions to Tibet. Little was written down about Niguma compared to her family members and even her disciples, but what is available portrays her as a spiritual virtuoso who practiced for many lifetimes. Niguma was likely Nāropa's sister, and was revered as a highly realized being who attained the rainbow body, the outward manifestation of buddha-nature obscured within the depths of the subtle body.

135 David Grey, “Tantra and the Tantric Traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism,” *Religion*, April 5, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.59>.

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Nāropa's disciple Marpa is said to have received teachings from Niguma, but in literary accounts his female teacher is merely referred to as the *dākinī* who is “Adorned with Bone Ornaments,” which is not sufficient evidence to claim this female figure was actually Niguma. Scholar Sarah Harding argues that Niguma has been at the center of scholarly portrayals that cast sexy tales about female figures rather than facts.¹³⁶

In Niguma's description of inner heat yoga, she covers the yogin's relationship to food and clothes: “Inner space of fire, the vital point of the body, eating the food of inner heat (*gtum mo*), wearing the clothing, spreading the seat, receiving the empowerment of existence, naturally liberating obstructing forces, and riding the horse of energy [vital] currents”.¹³⁷ Food and clothes are commonly addressed in Tibetan practices that target energetic blockages made of the network of karmic propensities that permeate the unconscious mind. A mundane way to think about the yogas of food and clothing is that they help yogins in isolated retreat generate dietary nourishment and warmth when access to supplies is scarce. Alchemy (*bcud len*) in Tibet became the process by which yogins took the essences of substances in order to transform non-traditional sources into biological sustenance. Tibetan yogins have been known to eat stones, herbs, metals, the breath, and their own excrement.¹³⁸ In contrast, the monks and nuns central to this study are not transgressive in these ways. They practice a conservative form of tantra suitable for monastics. Sex is prohibited, and everyone living within the monastery expects a hearty South Indian vegetarian South Indian to be served daily.

We will now turn to practitioners of yoga.

¹³⁶ Sarah Harding, *Niguma, Lady of Illusion* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2010), 3-17.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹³⁸ Germano David, “Food, Clothes, Dreams, and Karmic Propensities,” in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 294-295.

Tibetan Yogis

There is a vast literary record of the life stories (*rnam thar*) of Tibetan yogis who claim to have attained freedom from *samsāra* through their contemplative practices. Many went on to become extraordinary teachers, or simply lived out their lives in retreat. What is a Tibetan Buddhist yogi? For modern practitioners, the term *naljorpa* (*yogi*) has the widest valence. It applies to practitioners engaged in contemplative lifestyles, typically spent in long retreats, whether monastic or lay. Another group that gets called “yogis” but for whom a more precise translation would be “tantrists” or “tantrikas” is the *ngakpas* (*sngags pa*; Skt: *māntrin*). Literally “reciters of mantras,” the related term *ngakrim* (*sngags rim*) refers to the “Tantric path.” *Ngakpas* are ordained, non-celibate, tantric practitioners. They typically wear red-and-white robes, sport dreadlocks or at least never cut their hair, and hold vows that enable them to perform clerical functions for their local communities. They often live in retreat or semi-retreat, but can have families. This study adds another group to the list of *naljorpas*, the Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns engaged in tantric retreats, who are only likely to admit to being yogis during or after retreats. Monks and nuns are on the scholastic side of the scholar-practitioner divide. Be that as it may, Namdroling is unique in that the monastics engage in serious contemplative retreats in addition to their studies and ritual performances, the standard activities in most contemporary monasteries. While tantric ritual is not the subject of this dissertation, I would argue in defense of the scholastics that tantric ritual is contemplative in nature.

While religions in general provide many contemplative moments, long retreat is a trademark of authentic contemplative engagement in the Tibetan tradition. Buddhist meditation and yoga requires a level of dedication that involves partial or full renunciation of worldly life and isolation from mainstream society in order to achieve its highest goals. Yogis dwell together

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or alone, typically for periods of months or years. The most well-known format is the traditional three-year, three-month retreat. When no longer forced to entertain the demands of worldly life, ideally the yogin is free to turn their mind inward without distraction. For most of the yoga practices mentioned above, the one-month dedicated to *Sky Dharma* practice annually is not enough. Even at Namdroling, they admit that this serves more to transmit and teach the practices, and to get a little experience, but that longer retreats are necessary to attain realizations.

Things have changed quite a bit with the transition from Tibet to India. Nowadays in Tibet, there are fewer people taking monastic ordination and more engaging in contemplation as *ngakpas*.¹³⁹

Outside of Tibet, Namdroling's monastery and nunnery provides a unique opportunity to young people from traditionally Buddhist families to go deep into Buddhist studies and contemplation. While they practice, some think of themselves as yogis.¹⁴⁰

Milarepa, Tibet's Most Famous Yogi

Jetsun Milarepa (*rje btsun mi la ras pa*; 1028/40–1111/23) is the paradigmatic Tibetan yogi. Milarepa attained enlightenment by means of the yoga of inner heat, and he gets special mention in the *Sky Dharma* teachings. With that practice, he was able to control his pulse, stop his heart beat, arrest hemorrhage, rapidly heal, and display many other supernatural powers (*siddhi*).¹⁴¹

Milarepa defined his success solely by his relationship to his guru Marpa who lived in Tibet, an irascible man who would be called abusive by contemporary standards. The pedagogy

¹³⁹ Khenpo Ngawang Dorje, personal communication, Charlottesville, VA, 2020. He lives in Charlottesville and was reflecting on his impressions of a recent visit to Tibet after a multi-year absence.

¹⁴⁰ Anonymous Namdroling lupon, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, January 2019.

¹⁴¹ Andrew Quintman, *The Yogin & the Madman: Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet's Great Saint Milarepa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), X.

at Namdroling is a far cry from the physically abusive techniques Marpa employed. Despite the fact that his guru tested him with physical and emotional hardships, Milarepa always treated Marpa with infinite respect, humble obeisance, and unquestioning devotion. This level of devotion to the guru is still important at Namdroling, and these ancient figures continue to provide an example for the young monks and nuns. Marpa made Milarepa build and tear down several houses with his bare hands.¹⁴² Milarepa is considered by many to be the first Tibetan-born Buddha, the first to be enlightened there instead of India.¹⁴³

This chapter examined the use of the Tibetan term for yoga—*naljor*—in order to point out the long tradition of yoga in Tibetan Buddhism. The rest of the dissertation focuses on the Namdroling tradition.

¹⁴² He-ru-ka Gtsang mnyon, *The Life of Milarepa* (New York: Dutton, 1977), 4.

¹⁴³ Quintman, *The Yogi & the Madman*, 9.

Chapter Three: The Theory and Practice of Vajra Body Techniques

Chapter Summary

Chapter three explores the ongoing tension between theory and praxis in an analysis of two important texts to the winds and channels yoga retreats at Namdroling. First, Migyur Dorje and Karma Chakme's *Sky Dharma (gNam chos)* contemplative manual on winds, channels, and inner heat (*rtsa rlung gtum mo*) practice guides the contemplative retreats by providing detailed instructions on postures and breath control and a limited amount of theory. Information on *Sky Dharma* presented here comes mostly from the oral tradition, which follows the texts closely. Second, Longchen Rabjam's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle (Theg mchog mdzod)* explores the *vajra* body in depth. It is an ancillary resource for further information on topics in the Great Perfection worldview. “Ethnography of a text” examines the ways this authoritative yet not-widely-read text is used at Namdroling. There is a significant amount of technical information in this chapter, including descriptions of the nine *Sky Dharma* contemplative sequences, as well as a discussion of Longchenpa’s mind-body philosophy in conversation with contemporary naturalistic mind-body dualism. The two texts are brought together through a comparison of their presentations of *cakra*-s, the bundles of channels central to *vajra* body theory.

Method: The Relationship between Theory and Praxis

Formal monastic lines of transmission and the isolated nature of monastery life curate a special set of theories and practices that are both authoritative for the group but also accessible. The monastic environment highly values knowledge, and what gets taught is controlled primarily via (1) the scholastic and contemplative curricula, (2) specially selected texts monastery leaders

select to teach, and (3) access to texts.¹⁴⁴

Contemplation is a particular way of knowing, and *Sky Dharma* has been practiced by the Palyul tradition since its founding in 1665. Longchenpa's *Supreme Vehicle*, on the other hand, transmits knowledge across generations but is not taught consistently. Small groups of monastery administrators typically meet together to decide which texts to teach and empowerments to give.¹⁴⁵ A request can be made of a famous khenpo such as the well-regarded teacher Khenpo Namdrol¹⁴⁶ to teach a particular text. He taught the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* twice at Namdroling in the past thirty years.¹⁴⁷ The other way that Longchenpa has been introduced at Namdroling is through the gifts of Taiwanese donors, who chose Longchenpa's works as important enough to print as a gift for all the monastics. Such a gift is a massive undertaking: his collected works consist of twenty-six volumes, and they distributed these sets to thousands of monks and nuns.

The monks and nuns living in India today strive to replicate a worldview established in Tibet, and these texts play a big role in upholding doctrine and tradition across generations. However, the basic presupposition that “real” Buddhism is textual Buddhism has been greatly destabilized in recent decades in light of archaeological, epigraphic, and ethnographic evidence of a range of religious practices largely absent from textual testimony, or quite different in nature.¹⁴⁸ If texts are no longer the exclusive static window into Buddhism, a methodological pivot is required that considers the complex relationships binding canonical texts to the practice

¹⁴⁴ Lama Pasang, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2019.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ <http://knamdrol.org/>

¹⁴⁷ Anonymous khenpo, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, April 2018.

¹⁴⁸ Schoepen, Gregory, “Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism,” in *Ones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks. Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 22.

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communities they inspire or reflect.¹⁴⁹ Ethnography that looks at the ways these texts are used and interpreted can help us to understand the influence of texts in context.

Namdroling's living yoga tradition exists within a clearly-defined religious philosophy as its backdrop where texts work together to build a complex set of knowledge. The monastic college is dedicated to the teaching and practice of Buddhist philosophy for ten months out of the year, but meditation and ritual activities punctuate the academic year, with the *Sky Dharma* retreats as the contemplative highlight of the year. The theoretical issue of the relationship between theory and praxis is longstanding in religious studies at large, and Namdroling's dual engagement with scholasticism and contemplative praxis provides an excellent entree through which to explore it.

Here I rely on *critical praxis theory* to show how theory and praxis work together. As applied to a living religious tradition such as at Namdroling, it highlights how texts and contemplative experiences come together in a process of poesis where each epistemic source has a unique function.¹⁵⁰ Taken together, yoga practitioners interpret the practices in retreat through the lens of their studies, but also as contemporary practitioners with unique backgrounds and cultures.

In his recent monograph *Critique & Praxis*,¹⁵¹ Bernard Harcourt describes the relationship between theory and praxis as a living source of hermeneutics that self-corrects based on context. Theories define what the values of a society are, and these get recorded in texts. However, texts do not prevent drift away from those values under certain social and historical conditions. A

¹⁴⁹ “To be compelling, soteriological practices must be presented within a narrative embodying values central to the tradition. Such narratives in turn require larger cosmological frameworks in which they can unfold.” Georges B. J. Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).179.

¹⁵⁰ Bernard E. Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis: A Critical Philosophy of Illusions, Values, and Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 8.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

critical theory is one that has specific and practical purposes: emancipation from bondage, both physical and mental; liberating acts; and the creation of “a world which satisfies the needs and powers” of human beings.¹⁵² In its emphasis on emancipation from bondage, Critical Praxis Theory shares goals with Buddhism’s quest for personal liberation, articulated here as liberation from the bonds of *samsāra*. Liberation from bondage is especially important in light of this contemporary study of Buddhism with the potential to impact real lives.

Longchenpa’s text represents the realm of *theory* in that it upholds a particular set of values for a community across generations. The monastics debate, discuss, read, and interpret it on a limited basis. When, for example, Khenpo Namdrol shows up and teaches the text, it gets a lot of attention.¹⁵³ Otherwise, it tends to collect dust on everyone’s bookshelves or gets picked up on an as-needed basis.¹⁵⁴ Either way, the text provides a touchstone for group value formation across generations. Longchenpa’s status as the systematizer of the Nyingma tradition, plus the respect he is given for his writing, situate the text as foundational for the tradition.

However, factors such as identity, economics, and gender all influence the reception of texts. Theories can define what the values of a society are, and it is upon these values that rules, social contracts, and political strategies are created and implemented. However, while documents such as authoritative religious texts express values, they do not prevent drift away from those values under certain social conditions. One cannot create a critical utopia through structures, organizations, or institutions. Rather, a community’s shared set of values sourced in its historical traditions come together to create the values of a society relevant to the present moment.¹⁵⁵ We will see this happen when opposing interpretations of Longchenpa’s views on women emerge in

¹⁵² Ibid., 15.

¹⁵³ Khenpo Tenzin, personal communication with the author, December 2018.

¹⁵⁴ Monks and nuns, private communication, Bylakuppe, India, December 2018 to February 2019.

¹⁵⁵ Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis*, 21.

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chapter six on the Namdrooling nuns.

For the sake of analysis, Migyur Dorje's text pertains to the realm of *praxis*, the activities, performance and contemplative *doing* of a religious life. This is not to say there is no theory in *Sky Dharma*—quite the contrary. Each postural sequence is accompanied by theoretical knowledge one must know in order to practice. Praxis is the process by which a theory, lesson, or skill is enacted, embodied, or realized, and contemplation is the enactment of theory.¹⁵⁶ *Sky Dharma* points to a specific set of theoretical information necessary to undertake Tibetan Yoga practice. Praxis refers to engaging, applying, exercising, realizing, or practicing of ideas. Body, speech, and mind all become tools in the internalization of theory and the generation of mental states.¹⁵⁷ Philosophy itself is a practice, and this is especially true in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries where they regularly study and debate philosophy.

Theory and praxis constantly confront each other and create a unified space. These two ways of living come together in the development of more robust modes of being. At Namdrooling, these epistemological modes are emphasized via the dual scholastic and contemplative curricula. Technically, there is only one formal monastic curriculum that the monastic college follows to teach Buddhist philosophy. However, meditation and ritual activities ongoing throughout the year teach philosophy through contemplation and contemplative experiences such as prayer. Namdrooling upholds the Great Perfection philosophical and contemplative traditions via these two forms of disruption and intervention—one scholastic and the other contemplative—that aim to upend normal conceptual tendencies and restore the natural purity of the mind.

The practice of winds, channels, and inner heat (*rtsa rlung gtum mo*) relates directly to the tantric embodiment theory of winds, channels, and vital essences (*rtsa rlung thig le*). *Cakra-s*

¹⁵⁶ Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis*, 23.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

are a main feature of the vajra body system. What follows is first a description of the nine sequences, and then information on the *cakra*-s from *Sky Dharma* and the *Supreme Vehicle*. While the two texts disagree on certain points such as the numbers of *cakra*-s, they do not undermine each other. On the contrary, they build upon one another while maintaining the validity of disparate presentations within the container that is contemporary Nyingma Buddhism at Namdroling. Tibetan Yoga is informed by a wide range of Buddhist theories and doctrines, not only its practice manual. The discussion of Longchenpa's work is an example of a single text within the vast philosophical milieu in which winds and channels practice unfolds for the monastics engaged in Namdroling's nine-year collegiate training program in Buddhist philosophy.

The *Sky Dharma* winds and channels yoga manual is divided into nine dharma teachings that correspond to nine sets of instructions on postures, breath control, and visualizations. The Namdroling teachers talk about these as “what you need to know, and what you need to do.”¹⁵⁸ The limited amount of philosophy presented in *Sky Dharma* defines a set of knowledge necessary for success in practice. If one wants to unpack any of the topics mentioned in *Sky Dharma*, they can search the exegetical literature which includes Longchenpa's *Supreme Vehicle*.

We will see that *Sky Dharma*'s *cakra* system is designed for use in practice, and is not nearly as detailed as Longchenpa's, whose account of the *cakra*-s describes a Buddhist view of the body based on karma theory and the reality of past and future lives. These two disparate sources of epistemic authority on Tibetan yoga—one textual and one empirical—¹⁵⁹ both feature

¹⁵⁸ Anonymous tulku, oral winds and channels yoga teachings, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

¹⁵⁹ Janet Gyatso, *Being Human in a Buddhist World: An Intellectual History of Medicine in Early Modern Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 195. “Darmo's desire to point directly to what he is trying to know

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the *cakra* system prominently. *Cakra*-s have a preeminent role in yoga in general and in these texts in particular, and nicely define a point of comparison.¹⁶⁰ Among the two texts, there are differences in the enumeration of *cakra*-s, as well as their functions and uses.

No one at Namdroling puts these two texts side-by-side to compare them. However, teachings on yoga, both theoretical and practice instructions, function within a complex network of resources that allows for disparate presentations to present themselves depending on context. Sources of information meet situational needs, and any text that is accessible and authoritative is fair game for study. Texts have lives of their own at Namdroling. The Nyingma tradition delineates what qualifies as an authoritative text, and the philosophical and religious discourses therein inform the practice of yoga. While within the “ideological nebula known as yoga... there exists a clear distinction between theory and practice,”¹⁶¹ on the ground and at the level of individuals, theory and practice support each other as two forms of knowledge that both contribute to the education of the monks and nuns.

The Yogic Model: Sky Dharma's Postural Yoga of Winds, Channels, and Inner Heat

What is it like to practice yoga at Namdroling? Imagine this scene: One-hundred and fifty Tibetan Buddhist monks are shrouded in a grove of palm trees at Namdroling on a hot day in March of 2018. Wearing only ritual skirts with shorts underneath, they jump up in unison from their 6” thick mats and shout a loud “Ha!” It reverberates across the monastery campus and spills into the surrounding refugee camp in Bylakuppe. The monks execute a complex series of

favors material display over discursively articulated system. It also separates two disparate kinds of epistemic authority—the textual and the empirical—which are accessed in different ways.”

¹⁶⁰ Following Ann Taves’ recommendation in *Religious Experience Reconsidered A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹⁶¹ Karl-Stéphan Bouthillette, “Hermeneutic Praxis: The Yoga of Reason(ing),” *Studia Religiosa* 50, no. 2 (2017): 103.

postures in unison that requires great physical exertion.¹⁶² This is one of several increasingly public displays of what has been up until now the secret yoga practices of Tibet. The monks, and thirty-five nuns at the sister institution just a kilometer away, are endeavoring to raise heat up the central channel using the *cakra*-s as visualized stopping points along the way. To do so, they learn the nine sequences of postures, breath retention, and visualizations scripted in *Sky Dharma*.



Figure 17 Namdroling monks in the monks' winds and channels practice space seated on practice mats. They are not dressed for Tibetan Yoga practice because the photo was taken at the end of the retreat when the female practitioners were invited to join them for final ceremonies.

In Tibet, the winds and channels retreat went on for 40-days, or longer.¹⁶³ At Namdroling, the annual month-long retreats have been orienting the community to this particular way of using the body in contemplation since 1973, and the retreats are only 30-days to match the length of the other two retreats. Namdroling hosts its annual, month-long retreats two weeks after the

¹⁶² Witnessed by the author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

¹⁶³ Anonymous lophonma, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

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Tibetan New Year. They follow the *Sky Dharma* manuals word-for-word and have done so since the seventeenth century in Tibet.

The main aim of winds and channels yoga is to experience blissful heat in the body. Through practice, the body is meant to become relaxed and the elements balanced.¹⁶⁴

Winds and channels yoga is designed to purify the winds, channels, and vital essences. These elements of the vajra body are likened to residents of the house of the three *kāyas*, the three bodies of a buddha. As one Namdroling teacher said about winds and channels yoga, “If you want to have a relaxed, nice time, first you have to clean your house.”¹⁶⁵ The house metaphor is common in tantric discourse on the body. The channels represent the stationary aspect similar to a house. The winds are the owner in that they are volatile and moving. The vital essences are likened to the wealth of the house.¹⁶⁶

According to formal oral teachings, the channels, winds, and vital essences are normally scattered, disbursed, and mismanaged. The yogic techniques gather the winds in the central channel, which straightens the body’s channels. When straight, the winds and vital essences run smoothly in them, and the mind becomes under control. Ideally, when the conditions arise for one to relax and remain in stillness, one understands the nature of their own body as a *vajra* body, and directly experiences their mind as the *dharmakāya*.¹⁶⁷

Winds and channels yoga is a gradual form of *tummo*, where one raises inner heat along the central channel. To do so, it employs *trulkhor*, or postural sequences. The retreat manual, *Winds and Channels: An Instruction Manual for the Mountain Dharma of the Victorious Palyul*

¹⁶⁴ Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on *Sky Dharma* winds and channels practice, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Miller, “Secrets of the Vajra Body: Dngos Po’i Gnas Lugs and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of Rgyal Ba Yang Dgon Pa,” 132-133.

¹⁶⁷ Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on *Sky Dharma* winds and channels practice, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

Early Translation [Lineage],¹⁶⁸ lays out a nine-fold sequence of practices whereby the winds are raised upward in the central channel in a gradual manner by visualizing fire. The fire moves up one *cakra* per sequence, although sometimes not, and the *cakra-s* extend above the head and outside of the body. Each of the nine sequences is its own discreet *trulkhor* practice, which means it is a closed set of postures with an accompanying thematic visualization. In retreat, practitioners do the sequences one-after-the-other in the order they are taught. What begins with simple breath control (*prānāyāma*), by the end of retreat the *trulkhor* sequences combine into an hour-long (or more) performance. Outside of formal retreats, practitioners can decide which of the *trulkhor-tummo* sequences to practice depending on their needs.¹⁶⁹

The Contemplative Manual

While information on the philosophy and practices taught in *Sky Dharma* mostly comes from the oral tradition in this dissertation, the lamas teaching the oral tradition themselves were relying on the text. In formal oral teachings, the *Sky Dharma* manual was read aloud and explained. An extra pdf document that I received in English at Palyul New is a rough translation of *Sky Dharma* with an emphasis on the second half that gives instructions on the postures and visualizations (rather than the doctrinal teachings). And also, Khenpo Sonam Tsewang generously shared his translation notes with me, which are based on the oral tradition. The *Sky Dharma* text is important to this study despite not being its basis. This section briefly tells the story of the lives of the treasure revealer Migyur Dorje and the commentator Karma Chakme, discusses the former's literary footprint, and describes their ongoing presence at Namdroling.

¹⁶⁸ gNam chos mi 'gyur rdo rje and Rig 'dzin kun bzang shes rab. *sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba 'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung/ Par gzhi dang po*, Si khron dpe skrun tshogs pa si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2007. *Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC)*, purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW1PD83965. [BDRC bdr:MW1PD83965]

¹⁶⁹ "Namchö Great Perfection: The Method for Accomplishing Self-Igniting Blissful Heat" (Palyul Ling International, n.d.).

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The Tibetan treasure revealer Namchö Migyur Dorje (*gNam chos Mi 'gyur rdo rje*, 1645-1667) was a child prodigy and Nyingma siddha who revealed *Sky Dharma* in the seventeenth century in Ngom, Kham, Eastern Tibet. His collected works are comprised of an array of scriptures on Tibetan Buddhism revealed to him through mystical visions.¹⁷⁰ Migyur Dorje attributed all of his revelations to the pure minds of the beings he saw, which not only included Padmasambhava but also the deity Avalokiteśvara, the central deity in winds and channels yoga.

Padmasambhava is an Indian credited with the transmission of Buddhism from India to Tibet in the eighth century CE. At that early stage in Buddhism's history in Tibet, he realized that beings in the future would endure great hardship. According to a hagiography of the Palyul tradition called *A Garland of Immortal Wish-Fulfilling Trees*, he “displayed his enlightened mind as the sphere of the five elements and therein concealed some hundreds of thousands of *termas*, placing them under the protection of the power-possessing dharma protectors”¹⁷¹ to be revealed later.

Migyur Dorje is one of many Tibetan figures who subsequently revealed these teachings, and is regarded as an incarnation of one of Padmasambhava's twenty-five disciples, Shudpu Palgi Sengi.¹⁷² This a typical attribution for a Nyingma treasure revealer, and Janet Gyatso describes such revelations as relying on a legitimating strategy.¹⁷³

The entire cycle of Migyur Dorje's works is known as *Sky Dharma* and is much longer

¹⁷⁰ Halkias, Georgios, “Pure-Lands and Other Visions in Seventeenth-Century Tibet: A Gnam Chos Sādhana for the Pure-Land Sukhāvātī Revealed in 1658 by Gnam Cho Mi 'gyur Rdo Rje (1645-1667),” in *Power, Politics, and the Reinvention of Tradition: Tibet in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 2003: Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Oxford, 2003. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 103-128.

¹⁷¹ Ven. Tsering Lama Jampal Zangpo, *A Garland of Immortal Wish-Fulfilling Trees: The Palyul Tradition of Nyingmapa*, trans. Sangye Khandro (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1988), 45.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁷³ Janet Gyatso, “Chapter 8: Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury: The GTer Ma Literature,” in *Tibetan Literature Studies in Genre*, ed. Jose Ignacio Cabezon (Boston: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 146.

than the trilogy of contemplative manuals central to this dissertation. His collected works consist of thirteen volumes or 7,462 folios (double-sided, oblong, loose pages commonly used to print Tibetan literature). The retreat manuals are a small portion of his collected works consisting of three texts in the genre of “Mountain Dharma” (*ri chos*), a classification that denotes instructions for deep retreat.¹⁷⁴ Karma Chakme's annotations and explanations are included in-line in the texts used at Namdroling.

Migyur Dorje's life story is often recounted at Namdroling. He was oriented toward the dharma from childhood, and naturally performed ritual hand gestures (*mudrā*) and yogic exercises as a baby and small child. He had a vision of Karma Chakme as his guru when he was only seven years old, and met him when he was ten. In turn, Karma Chakme is the one who recognized Migyur Dorje as a reincarnated lama. He also gave him many teachings, to which Migyur Dorje often replied, “I know,” signifying that he already knew the teaching in question. He had his first visions when in retreat with Karma Chakme. He saw Buddhas, protectors, arhats, and many deities, and received empowerments through his visions. He performed a yogic sign of accomplishment when he stopped a lunar eclipse by holding his vital air (*rlung*).¹⁷⁵ Karma Chakme was Migyur Dorje's teacher, distant relative, scribe, and disciple.¹⁷⁶

Despite attempts to keep Migyur Dorje alive past his prophesied early demise, he died at the age of 23 under controversial conditions. His death was investigated (through yogic

¹⁷⁴ For more on Mountain Dharma as a genre, see Jeffrey Hopkins, *Mountain Doctrine: Tibet's Fundamental Treatise on Other-Emptiness & the Buddha Matrix* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2006). Also, Cyrus Stearns, *The Buddha from Dolpo: A Study of the Life and Thought of the Tibetan Master Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

¹⁷⁵ Ven. Tsering Lama Jampal Zangpo, *A Garland of Immortal Wish-Fulfilling Trees: The Palyul Tradition of Nyingmapa*, trans. Sangye Khandro, 35-44.

¹⁷⁶ Halkias, Georgios, “Pure-Lands and Other Visions in Seventeenth-Century Tibet: A Gnam Chos Sādhana for the Pure-Land Sukhāvātī Revealed in 1658 by Gnam Cho Mi ‘gyur Rdo Rje (1645-1667),” 108-109.

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visualization) for potential poisoning, but ultimately attributed to illness.¹⁷⁷

The story of how the *Sky Dharma* cycle of teachings was revealed and recorded is told nicely by Ven. Tsering Lama Jampal Zangpom as translated by Sangye Khandro:

“Even in these degenerate, difficult times, sentient beings accumulate hundreds and thousands of virtuous deeds, which come to bear fruit according to the undeceiving law of cause and result. By the fruit of this virtue and merit, Migyur Dorje had a vision of the Primordial *Dharmakaya* Buddha, *Samantabhadra*. Through a sign, he gave Migyur Dorje the empowerment called *Tsewang Dudtse Gagsel* (Long Life Empowerment of the Nectar Which Clarifies Obstructing Forces). Then the *Sambhogakaya Avalokiteshvara* appeared and, according to the tradition of *Thugje Chenpo Gye-ii*, gave Migyur Dorje extensive empowerments. *Amitabha* gave him the empowerment and transmission of *Drubtab Gyatso* (Ocean of Accomplishment Methods), which includes some forty deities. This entire empowerment and transmission was written down. Then Padmasambhava directly transmitted the four empowerments, followed by a daily bestowal of empowerments, *sadhanas*, and oral instructions of the principal meditational deities who were manifestations of himself. All of these transmissions were written down. In addition, the primordial wisdom and worldly dharma protectors transmitted each of their individual *sadhanas* and authorization empowerments, which were written down individually. All of these writings were collected into thirteen great volumes called *Nam Chö* (Space Treasures). Then Tertön Migyur Dorje practiced, fully accomplished and realized each of these secret treasures. He predicted that the designated dharma keepers of these treasures were the realized Pedma Rigzin, the great Mahasiddha Raga Ah Sye (Karma Chagmed Rinpoche) and Trinley Döndrub.”¹⁷⁸

Thus, it was through these miraculous visions in seventeenth century Tibet that the Namdrooling community came to have its annual retreat practices. The winds and channels practice manual is comprised of *vajra* words (*rdo rje tshig*), aka *vajra* verses,¹⁷⁹ which are considered the root verses by Migyur Dorje, along with interlinear commentary by Karma Chakme that immediately follows the *vajra* verses. Migyur Dorje revealed the *vajra* verses for all three of the *Sky Dharma* contemplative manuals. The other two books in the series are not co-

¹⁷⁷ Karma Chagme, *The All Pervading Melodious Sound of Thunder: The Outer Liberation Story of Tertön Migyur Dorje*, trans. Khenpo Sonam Tsewang and Judith Amtzis (Pharping: Nyingma Palyul Retreat Center, 2008), 224-226.

¹⁷⁸ Ven. Tsering Lama Jampal Zangpo, *A Garland of Immortal Wish-Fulfilling Trees: The Palyul Tradition of Nyingmapa*, trans. Sangye Khandro, 49.

¹⁷⁹ This is how they are referred to in English at Namdrooling and Palyul New York.

authored by Karma Chakme, but rather by the founder of the Palyul tradition Kunsang Sherab (1636-1699). The three books share the same main title: *Palyul Mountain Dharma: The Three-Part Instructions from the Victorious Early Translation (sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig)*.¹⁸⁰ They each have short titles on the cover: *Foundations (sngon 'gro)*,¹⁸¹ *Winds and Channels (rtsa rlung)*,¹⁸² and *Great Perfection (rdzogs chen)*.¹⁸³

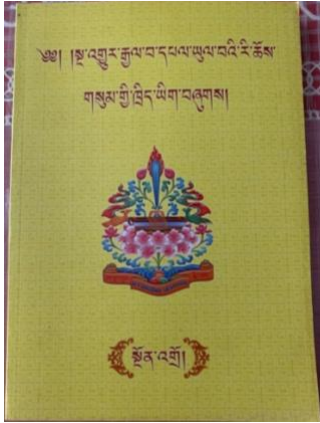


Figure 18 Sky Dharma Preliminary Practices Manual (gNam chos sngon 'gro). These books are distributed for free at Namdroling to anyone who does the retreats. The books are 6" tall and 4" wide.

¹⁸⁰ To search for these books on BDRC, a different version than the one in use at Namdroling can be found with the following citation. The BDRC version is copyrighted and access is limited to a select number of pages. The printed edition in use at Namdroling is not on BDRC. gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, *sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig*, gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Rig 'dzin kun bzang zhes rab, *sNga 'gyur Rgyal Ba Dpal Yul Ba'i Ri Chos Gsum Gyi Khrid Yig*, Par gzhi dang po, 3 vols., *sNga 'gyur dpal yul dar thang gzhan phan lnga rig sam bho ta'i dpe tshogs 13–15* (Khren tu'u: Si khron dpe skrun tshogs pa si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2007).

¹⁸¹ gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, *sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig bZugs/ sngon 'gro/* (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2010).

¹⁸² gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kar+ma chags med, *sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig bZugs/ rtsa rlung/* (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2010).

¹⁸³ gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, *sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig bZugs/ rdzogs chen/* (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2010).

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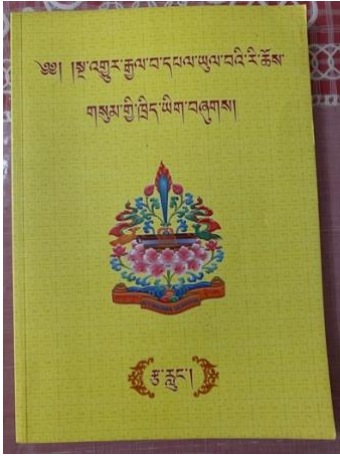


Figure 19 Sky Dharma Winds and Channels manual (*gNam chos rtsa lung*)

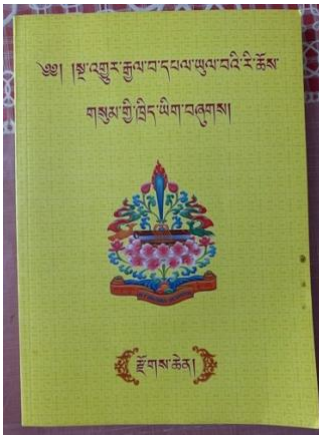


Figure 20 Sky Dharma Great Perfection practices manual (*gNam chos rdzogs chen*)

The root (*vajra*) verses are read alongside the commentary at Namdroling with an awareness of their difference. The root verses are called “vajra verses” (*rdo rje tshig*), an appellation that implies their status as a revelation of the words of a Buddha. The commentary is longer and explains more.

Karma Chakme himself is a remarkable figure. His hagiography describes him as an accomplished yogi of many lifetimes whose life was oriented toward the dharma. He made the famous Tibetan Buddhist offering of cutting off his finger on two separate occasions. One of those occasions was the death of the Karmapa, a sign of his deep affiliation with the Kagyu lineage. In his youth, he practiced the *Six Doctrines of Naropa* in long retreats and authored his

own text on *trulkuhor*¹⁸⁴ separate from *Sky Dharma*. From the ages of 37-50, he was in a thirteen-year retreat during which time he recognized the tulku Migyur Dorje and enthroned him. He bestowed upon the young “*Tulku Tertön*” (*sprul sku gter ston*) (a reincarnated realized being who is also the finder of hidden scriptures) profound empowerments and prayers for his long life in order to pacify prophesied obstacles to Migyur Dorje's longevity. He was one of many teachers to the founder of Palyul monastery, the holder of knowledge Kunzang Sherab. Thousands of people attended Karma Chakme's teachings and transmissions and showed signs of accomplishment.¹⁸⁵ He also goes by the name Raga Asya (*ra ga a sya*).

With these two influential figures as the authors of *Sky Dharma*, we now turn to the practice of *Sky Dharma Winds, Channels, and Inner Heat*.

How Practice Unfolds: Interpretation and Framing the Nine Sequences

There is much to be done in the formal retreat session before one begins the postural component of Tibetan Yoga. This section describes how the postural sequences are heavily framed with the empowerment ritual, numerous contemplative prayers, and chanting. These activities take up a significant portion of time in retreat.

Interpretation comes into play despite the teachers' and practitioners' efforts to stay as close to the texts as possible. The lamas (teachers) mediate between the text and students with great impact. They tend to follow their own interests and experience in what they emphasize for students. I received the oral teachings on *Sky Dharma* winds and channels yoga four times with three different teachers, and each time the emphasis was different, which influenced my interpretations and experience in retreat.

¹⁸⁴ Ven. Tsering Lama Jampal Zangpo, *A Garland of Immortal Wish-Fulfilling Trees: The Palyul Tradition of Nyingmapa*, trans. Sangye Kandro, 35-44.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

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While the text prescribes a limited set of topics, emphasis and social context can drastically alter one's experience in retreat. The following descriptions represent the teachings as presented in a particular place and time rather than universal views. Social realities contribute to the ways that lamas prepare to teach: teachers cannot help but think of their audience when preparing their lessons. This is evidenced by the ways they address the audience, connecting the practice to specific aspects of their lives. For example, at Namdroling, the teachers often remind the monks and nuns of their great fortune as monastics with access to Buddhist teachers and support for study and practice. They recall how easily that could be lost if they were to give up their status as monks and nuns. In New York, they emphasized the greatness of the lineage and how practitioners are part of it, and connected teachings to science and other popular ideas found on the internet.

At Namdroling and its branch institutions, the retreat is taught through the traditional threefold Buddhist trope of empowerment (*dbang*), transmission (*rlung*), and explanation (*'khrid*). This model is followed for most textually-based practices in the Nyingma tradition, and the monks and nuns are accustomed to the process. The elaborate and ceremonial empowerment (*dbang*) ceremonies grant permission to practice the text. The reading transmission (*rlung*) is meant to literally place each word of the text into the minds of practitioners, which adds them to the living lineage of practitioners. The explanation (*'khrid*) is where the teacher interprets the text for their audience. The genre of the *Sky Dharma* manuals, in addition to being “mountain dharma” (*ri chos*), is also an explanatory guide (*'khrid yig*).

The empowerment takes place on the first morning of the retreat. The social realities of lineage and power in tantric Buddhism are on full display in the empowerment ceremony. *Lamas* (practitioners who have completed three-year retreats), *Tulkus* (reincarnated teachers), and

Khenpos (scholars with the highest monastic degree, i.e., professors) arrange themselves hierarchically according to rank. During the empowerment, there is an understanding that this is an outer reflection of their inner access to power based on experience in practice, including in past lives. After everyone drinks saffron water for purification to make themselves fit to receive the transmission, the monks walk in a procession carrying holy objects. They gently tap participants on the head with initiation cards, Tibetan texts, vases, and statues.



Figure 21 Lamas, Tulkus, and Khenpos during empowerment ceremony.

After the empowerment ceremony, rhythmic group recitation of prayers and texts are the main way that the practice is formally framed with Buddhist philosophy and doctrine. The prayers come at the beginning of the three daily practice sessions and can take up to an hour. They are accompanied by drums, horns, and bells, and take up a significant portion of the day in retreat.

Chanting serves several functions. As a pedagogy, the prayers are philosophically rich

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and review Buddhist teachings. Socially, one recites the lineage list all the way back to the Buddha, including a review of the qualities of the masters that came before. This places the budding yogins in the company of greats and defines a boundary for in-group identity.

Physically, chanting itself is a contemplative practice. One well-known chanting master in the Palyul tradition told me that chanting is a form of *prāṇāyāma* breath control.¹⁸⁶ The work of Stephen Porges shows that chanting tones the vagus nerve.¹⁸⁷ Economically, the prayers are a source of income for the monastery. Lay people sponsor prayers as a way of accumulating merit to support their own practice, either in this lifetime or in the future.

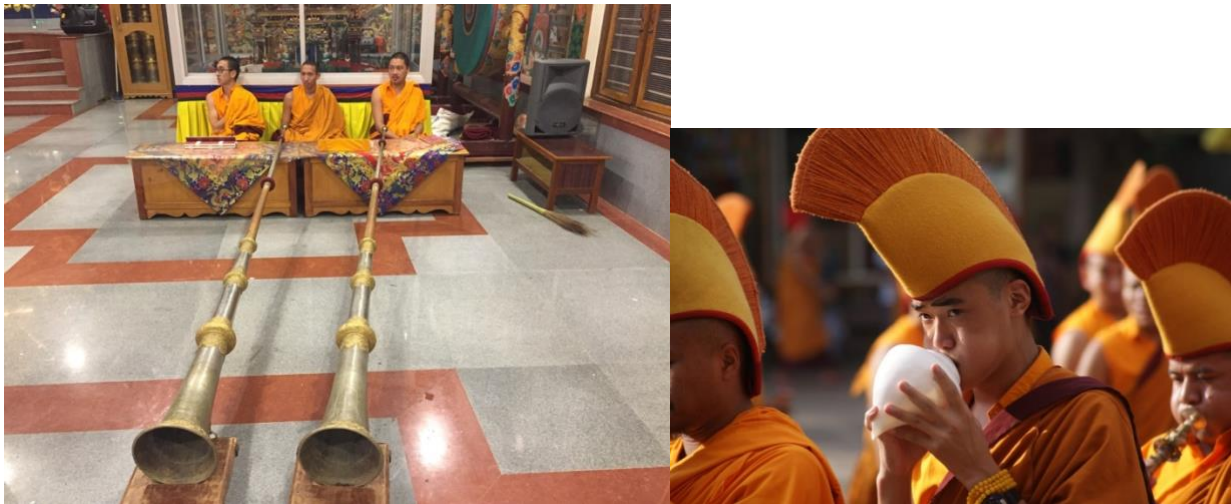


Figure 22 Left: Namdroling monks in the Golden Temple with ritual horns. Right: blowing ritual conch shell. Right photo credit: Sherab Yontan.

¹⁸⁶ Lama Pasang, interview by author, Mysore, India 2018.

¹⁸⁷ Stephen Porges, *Vagal Pathways: Portals to Compassion*, CCARE Science of Compassion 2014: The Psychophysiology of Compassion, accessed December 26, 2021, <https://youtu.be/VAL-MMYptQc>.



Figure 23 A large drum keeps the beat during chanting.

The prayers and chanting provide ample contemplative opportunities leading up to the actual yoga practices. The prayers provide a communal reminder of shared values around wisdom, compassion, and other topics. The prayer book is titled *The Victor of the East: Palyul's Stages of Dharmic Deeds*.¹⁸⁸

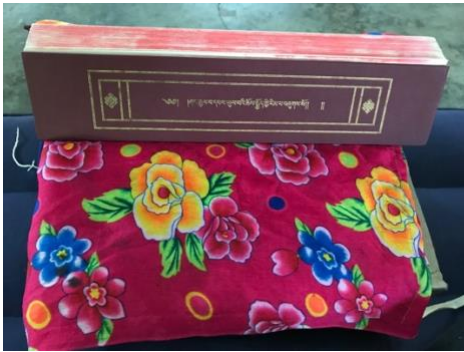


Figure 24 This is my prayer book from the winds and channels retreat. It sits on a makeshift desk made of a cardboard box covered with fabric, a common way to make a retreat table at Namdroling.

Explanations by Dolpo Tulku (b. 1981), a well-known Namdroling lama who lives in Germany, explain the importance of framing the practice with prayers. I met him in Delhi for

¹⁸⁸ *Shar rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i chos spyod kyi rim pa bzhugs so*// Publication information unknown. At Palyul New York they use *gTi mug gnyid dkrogs bzhugs so*// In *gNam chos thugs kyi gter kha las gtum mo'i khrid bde drod rang 'bar gyi dmigs rim ngag 'don bya tshul rig 'dzin zhal lung bzhugs so*/ *From the Profound Mind Treasure of the Namchö Great Perfection: The Method for Accomplishing Self-Igniting Blissful Heat*. Palyul Ling International: dates and compilers unknown. This is a translation of a selection of prayers done at Namdroling.

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interviews. I had heard about him at Namdroling, where he taught for many years and is well known for his teachings on Tibetan Yoga.

Our first meeting was serendipitous: I discovered him circumambulating the Buddha's relics exhibit at the Delhi Museum, an auspicious set of circumstances if there ever was one. He agreed to be interviewed for this research. When we met in Delhi, we spoke in the Tibetan language even though his English is quite good. His explanations arose in the context of him instructing me on how to conduct a winds and channels yoga retreat on my own, which I did for ten days in a private residence in Sikkim a few weeks after our time together. The following instructions and advice come from him.



Figure 25 Dolpo Tulku (far left) prostrating to the Buddha's relics in the Delhi Museum, September 1, 2018.

What Dolpo Tulku said highlights how different lamas emphasize different aspects of the teachings. What he says is easily located in the *Sky Dharma* texts, but there is much more

information that he does not emphasize. Dolpo Tulku is unusual in that he has spent more time reading and teaching the *Sky Dharma* winds and channels materials than most at Namdroling. Rather than rely on my own interpretations of what is important from the prayers, I use his words to guide my explanations.

The first prayer Dolpo Tulku pointed out is the first to be recited in the morning each day titled “Waking Up from the Deep Sleep of Ignorance.” One visualizes Guru Rinpoche holding a *damaru* drum and bell, surrounded by deities singing the text, and imagines themselves singing along with them. The prayer has two parts. First, it encourages practitioners to make a joyful effort in the dharma because everything is impermanent and the present moment is the only chance to practice. If practice is put off until later, it may never happen, so one should rouse the motivation to practice now. The second meaning is to remind practitioners that, in general, we are sleeping in the sleep of ignorance, which is the result of attachment. The prayer explains that, in reality, all phenomena are empty and free of the elaborate forms they appear to possess and that are the source of attachment. Delusions appear in the same way that dreams do. The prayer is meant to motivate practitioners to awaken from the dire situation that attachment and self-grasping create.

The next point of emphasis that Dolpo Tulku pointed out is the importance of holding the body in the seven-point posture of Vairocana, which the Namdroling lamas also emphasized in public teachings. This contemplative instruction is common in Tibetan Buddhism and relies upon the correlation between physical posture and the mind, in particular *vajra* body theory, which is unpacked in the next chapter on correlations (chapter four). The most important instruction is to have a straight back. If the body is straight, the channels will straighten, the winds will flow smoothly, and the mind will calm down. In *Sky Dharma*, there is a reminder to relax, and such

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reminders are common to Great Perfection instructions with its emphasis on relaxation.

The Blessing of the Speech is the next contemplative prayer Dolpo Tulku emphasized, which acknowledges the importance of speech, the power of words, and the role of vowels and consonants as the constituents of the dharma itself. Since all speech comes from vowels and consonants, one recites the alphabet as a mantra, honoring language itself as the source of the teachings. This addresses the speech aspect of Buddhism's three doors, as in body, speech, and mind,¹⁸⁹ and is also reparation for mistakes from mispronounced mantras. During the Blessing of the Speech, one visualizes the Tibetan syllable used to start the blazing of the *tummo* fire on the tongue, and transforms it into three *vajras* in the shape of a trident. One places three mantras there. The purpose is to “magnetize one's own speech” so that blessings come your way.¹⁹⁰ When speech is “magnetized,” whatever one reads or says becomes a powerful blessing, and one can attain *siddhis* (supernatural yogic powers) more easily. The tradition promises that this will make the prayers one recites, or dharma they read, to manifest as an actual truth. Causality is at the heart of this process, with the vowels and consonants as causal components of all of the language and its relationship to the dharma.¹⁹¹ The “*tendrel nyingpo*” (*brten 'drel nying po*), or “essence of dependent arising” mantra is also recited here as a representative of all the teachings of the Buddha.¹⁹²

In the prayer book, the following prayers appear next, which Dolpo Tulku did not emphasize with explanations, but implied they should be recited:

189 Willa Blythe Miller discusses the relationship body, speech, and mind as presented by the seventeenth century author Yang dgon pa. For example, “The vajra body is the cause of the so-called ordinary body. Vajra means that the ordinary body, speech, and mind, the heruka's enlightened body, speech, and mind are inseparable throughout the cause, path, and fruition.” Willa Blythe Miller, “Secrets of the Vajra Body: Dngos Po'i Gnas Lugs and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of Rgyal Ba Yang Dgon Pa,” 2013, 148.

¹⁹⁰ Lama Pasang, interview by the author, Mysore, India, February 2019.

¹⁹¹ Dolpo Tulku, interview by the author, New Delhi, India, October 2018.

¹⁹² Nalanda Translation Committee, “Tendrel,” Nalanda Translation Committee Website, accessed February 21, 2022, <https://www.nalandatranslation.org/choosing-the-right-word/dependent-arising-tendrel/>.

- Prayer to Guru Rinpoche
- Smoke Offering
- Refuge and Bodhicitta
- Seven Branch Offering Prayer
- Prayer to the Three Kayas (*sku gsum gsol 'thebs*)
- Prayer to Migyur Dorje
- Prayer to the Throne Holders of the Palyul Lineage
- Prayer to the Second Drubwang Pema Norbu Rinpoche, Thubten Chokyi Langpo¹⁹³

After these contemplative prayers, the practitioner arrives at the formal contemplation of the foundational practices, which Dolpo Tulku pointed out is a form of mind training.¹⁹⁴ In them, the practitioner reviews the primary motivating themes for practice, which are: (1) The preciousness of having been born as a human, and in the context of winds and channels yoga, the particular resources of the human body in terms of the *vajra* body; (2) impermanence, that everything changes; (3) karma, or the law of cause and effect; and (4) the benefits of *nirvāṇa* and the suffering of *saṃsāra*.¹⁹⁵ Dolpo Tulku casually rattled off that list. Below the *Sky Dharma* manual is quoted to show how teachings on a “precious human life” emphasizes embodiment in that suffering is the primary feature of continual rebirth in a body:¹⁹⁶

This body of freedoms and endowments is extremely difficult to obtain.

When one has the chance to fulfill the goal of life,

If one does not take this advantage,

How can you get this perfect opportunity again?

The three states of transmigratory existence are impermanent like clouds in the autumn sky.

Sentient beings are born and die like the whirl of a dance.

¹⁹³ These translated titles come from the English version of the prayer book “Namchö Great Perfection: The Method for Accomplishing Self-Igniting Blissful Heat” (Palyul Ling International, n.d.).

¹⁹⁴ Dolpo Tulku, interview by author, New Delhi, India, October 2018.

¹⁹⁵ This is a list that Dolpo Tulku casually mentioned in our meeting.

¹⁹⁶ Quoted from the English-language materials restricted to “Palyul Retreat Center Tsa Lung Students Only” titled “Nam Chö Tsa Lung Practice Manual,” 1st edition, 2016.

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The life span of beings is like a lightning flash in space,
Or like a waterfall quickly rushing down a steep mountain.
When the time of death arrives, even a king must go,
Unaccompanied by wealth and endowments, friends, relatives or associates.
Beings have no way of knowing where they will remain or where they will go.
Accompanied solely by the ever-present shadow of karma,
Due to ignorance and craving,
Beings in the classes of humans, gods, and the three lower realms,
Continually wander in the five realms without knowing,
Like a spinning potter's wheel.

In the three states of transmigratory existence, the suffering of old age and disease
is ablaze.

In the intense heat of this seemingly endless state, devoid of protection,

Beings in cyclic existence are always in confusion,

Similar to a fly trapped in a vase.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ *dal 'byor 'di ni rnyed par shin tu dka'/
skye bu don grub thob par gyur pa la/
gal te 'di la phan pa ma sgrub na/
phyis nas yang dag 'byor pa ga la 'gyur/
srid gsum mi rtag ston ka'i sprin dang 'dra/
'gro ba'i skye 'chi gar la blta dang mtshungs/
skyes bu'i tshe 'gro nam mkha'i glog 'dra ste/
ri gzar 'bab chu bzhin tu myur mgrogs 'gro/
dus kyi bsnyen nas rgyal po 'gro gyur na/
longs spyod mdza' dang gnyen bshes rjes mi 'brang /
skyes by dag ni gar gnas gar 'gro yang/
las ni grib ma bzhin du rjes su 'brang /
srid sred ma rig dbang gis skye bo rnams.
mi dang lha dang ngan song nam gsum po/
'gro ba lnga po dag tu mi mkhas 'khor/
dper na rdza mkhan 'phang lo 'khor ba bzhin/
srid gsum rga dang nad kyi sdug bsngal 'bar/
'di na 'chi me rab 'bar mgon med de/
srid las byung ba 'gro ba rtag tu rmongs/
bum par chud pa'i bung ba 'khor ba bzhin/
In gNam chos thugs kyi gter kha las gtum mo'i khrid bde drod rang 'bar gyi dmigs rim ngag 'don bya tshul rig 'dzin*

Teachings such as this inform practitioners about Buddhist cosmological realities where embodiment is a central theme. In the six possible types of rebirth, the body one is born with is dictated by one's karma. The type of body one gets in turn limits experience in certain ways. Each of the six realms has its own particular types of suffering mostly articulated according to the bodily sensations prevalent for that type of embodiment. For example, beings born in cold hells suffer from extreme cold. Those born in the god realms are so comfortable they lack motivation to practice Buddhism.

In addition to the contemplative prayers, there are other ways that doctrine is introduced in the retreat setting. For example, every retreat activity, whether a discourse, meditation, or yoga session at Namdroling begins with the generation of *bodhicitta*, the motivation to liberate sentient beings from the suffering of cyclic existence and lead them to enlightenment. Recognizing that motivation wanes over time, a major part of the lamas' job is to keep spirits high and inspire work toward this higher purpose. Because Namdroling adheres to the Great Perfection school of philosophy, they add the motivation to drop conceptual thoughts, which is considered necessary to receive the blessings for successful practice.

Sky Dharma's Nine Yoga Sequences

In retreat the yoga practices follow the texts using three pedagogies. First, every three days the most senior *khenpo* (professor) or *tulku* reads the instruction manual aloud and makes comments to the combined group of male and female participants. At Namdroling this role is often assumed by Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso. It happens in a medium-sized, well-appointed

zhal lung bzhugs so/ This is a modified translation based on the English-language retreat manual titled *From the Profound Mind Treasure of the Namchö Great Perfection: The Method for Accomplishing Self-Igniting Blissful Heat*. Palyul Ling International: dates and translators unknown.

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temple on the monks' campus where the monks, nuns, and lay people receive teachings together. There is a total of nine such teaching sessions, one for each yoga sequence.

The second pedagogy unfolds in a different venue, the gender-separated classrooms in the monastery and nunnery, respectively. The campuses are two kilometers apart from each other in Bylakuppe's fourth camp. At the monastery, if the Tibetan yoga lineage holder Lama Dorje¹⁹⁸ is present, he usually demonstrates the posture sequences and offers ample advice on the meditations, breath techniques, and postures. In 2018 at the nunnery, two young nuns who were skilled at the postures but not comfortable giving advice on the inner, contemplative methods led the practice sessions. The next year, the Lama Dorje made several trips to the nunnery despite the gender difference between him and the nuns. These practice sessions teach the postural sequences in detail. There are also technical skills drills such as the repetition of *bebs* (the special jumps); rehearsal of sequences; and student-led practice sessions. After three days of practice, when students lead sessions, they are examined and evaluated in a casual pass/fail system.



Figure 26 Nuns in the tsalung retreat space chanting. They wear their robes until the actual exercises begin.

¹⁹⁸ Pseudonym. Chapter four presents an ethnographic account of his life.

The third pedagogical model consists of open practice periods during breaks from formal sessions where more experienced practitioners coach newer students individually or in small groups. Here, retreatants learn by breaking sequences and movements down into smaller chunks and repeating them until they attain mastery. It is common to work on a particular *beb* (jump), or a particularly complex section of *trulkhor*. These groups also rehearse the posture sequences at large in order to commit them to memory. They can be complex. Some people use this time to focus on breathwork by trying to extend the amount of time they can hold their breath. Winds and channels practice is meant to be done entirely while holding the breath, and holding the breath longer promises greater results.¹⁹⁹

After the prayers, there is a short break where everyone changes clothes to don the winds and channels attire, which consists of a ritual skirt with minimal undergarments. The monks go bare-chested, while the nuns wear bras and tank tops. Everyone wears athletic shorts.

The actual practice begins with a formal meditation session with two important meaning-making segments that come at the beginning, guru yoga and the visualization of the self as the deity. These two contemplations are recommended to come before all practice sessions, even if one changes the order of the postural sequences or omits a section.

Sky Dharma's guru yoga practice is a visualization of Padmasambhava in union with his consort Madāravā. The union of the duality of male and female is representative of the union of all dualities.²⁰⁰ One visualizes that light gathers all the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other holy beings into oneself to be drawn upon as a source of refuge.²⁰¹ Next is the dissolution of all the beings into light and *bodhicitta* nectar, which represents the doctrinal teachings of *bodhicitta* and

¹⁹⁹ Autoethnography in winds and channels retreat, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

²⁰⁰ Khenpo Tsewang Gyatso, *Sky Dharma* winds and channels retreat, oral teaching, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

²⁰¹ "Nam Chö Tsa Lung Practice Manual," 3.

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emptiness, the twofold wings of a bird that practitioners metaphorically fly to enlightenment. These fall under the rubric of compassion and wisdom. After, one visualizes receiving the four tantric empowerments.

Next is the generation stage practice of visualizing oneself as Troworoza, the wrathful form of Chenrezig, the Buddha of compassion and central figure of *Sky Dharma* Tibetan Yoga. The first instruction is to check that one's posture is aligned with the Seven Points of Vairocana, which *Sky Dharma* repurposes to generate heat. The text reads: "By placing the legs in vajra posture blissful heat is generated."²⁰² It then describes the body of Troworoza with a detailed assignment of tantric semiotics to each body part.

After these generation stage practices with their characteristic focus on deities and buddhas, completion stage practices follow that focus on the central channel and the *cakra*-s. The central channel is the literal thread that appears throughout the nine postural sequences and ties them together via the gradual raising of fire up the central channel. Each sequence has its own themed visualization, unpacked below in the explanation of the nine sequences.

The nine postural yoga sequences share common features. One begins by sitting on the floor in half-lotus position²⁰³ on a stuffed cotton mat which is around 3'x3' and 6" high. Common elements include:

- Rigorous rubbing along meridian lines;
- Circular rotations of the waist;
- "Bep-s," which are five styles of jumps; and
- Retention of the inhalation as much as possible during the entire sequence.

Sky Dharma's way of practicing *tummo*, the process of raising heat up the central

²⁰² Ibid., 5.

²⁰³ Similar to a cross-legged position except without the cross at the ankles.

channel, is unique in that it gradually unfolds across the nine sequences. There are Great Perfection contemplative practices where this is done instantaneously rather than dragging it out in such a gradual manner.²⁰⁴ In *Sky Dharma*, the visualization of flame begins with a small fire near the base of the central channel, here located beneath the navel.²⁰⁵ With each postural sequence, the fire blazes one *cakra* higher along the central channel. Eventually, one visualizes fire blazing above the crown of the head, and only at that stage does the bliss of nectar drip down. More details follow in the sections below.

The text is divided into two parts: dharma sessions and instructions on the postural sequences. One Namdroling tulku described this as “things you need to know, and things you need to practice.”²⁰⁶ In the yellow manual in use at Namdroling,²⁰⁷ the dharma sessions are numbered one through nine and take up pages 11-120. Each dharma session has a corresponding *trulkhor* sequence, and these come next in the manual, from pages 121-152. The posture sequences are all *trulkhor* in that they are all sequences of poses, but the titles describe them as either *tummo* (*gtum mo*) (three sequences), *trulkhor* (*'khrul 'khor*) (five sequences), or *tangtap* (*stangs stabs*) (one sequence).²⁰⁸

While the *Sky Dharma* manual was consulted for this research, I mostly rely on oral teachings and English language materials given to me at Namdroling in India and Palyul New York. Future work would translate the *Sky Dharma* manuals. The main source relied upon here is a translation of Penor Rinpoche’s 2002 oral teachings by Khenpo Sonam Tsewang. Other sources the following details draw upon include (1) the oral teachings I received at Namdroling in

²⁰⁴ David Germano, personal communication, online, January 2022.

²⁰⁵ The central channel typically extends either four finger-widths below the navel or to the genitals, depending on the presentation.

²⁰⁶ Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on winds and channels practice, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

²⁰⁷ gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kar+ma chags med, *sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba 'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig b'zugs/ rtsa rlung/* (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2010).

²⁰⁸ See appendix two for the titles of the sequences translated.

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February and March of 2018, including Khenpo Tsewang Gyatso's teachings in Tibetan and a casual English translation later in the day by Rigzin Losel, a lupon in Namdroling's translation program; (2) English language teachings recorded at Palyul New York in July of 2018; (3) English language teachings by Khenpo Norgye in July of 2019 at Palyul New York, for which I was present.

Each discreet practice includes doctrinal teachings, instructions on posture and breath control, and advice on contemplative visualizations as well as the *tummo* fire. These pairings follow Migyur Dorje and Karma Chakme's manual, although the oral tradition tends to place emphasis in certain ways. For example, both Penor Rinpoche and a Namdroling tulku who gave doctrinal teachings emphasized the meaning of Troworoza and how to take a lama, while the *Sky Dharma* manual and Khenpo Tsewang Gyatso began with a review of the foundational practices. This dissertation emphasizes the oral tradition, although future projects would be to translate the *Sky Dharma* instruction manuals. Since that manual is widely used, I imagine that the translation would be read and used by practitioners. As a scholar, this is a sensitive issue that would have to be treated with great care.

1: Sky Dharma *Tsalung* Session One

The foundational practices, guru yoga, recitations, long and short forms of empowerment²⁰⁹

The first session begins with doctrinal teachings that introduce practitioners to Troworoza, the self-visualization deity. His outer meaning refers to a form assumed by Avalokiteśvara to tame an ancient violent king named Gurnapa. The inner meaning of

²⁰⁹ *chos thun dang po/ sngon 'gro bla ma'i rnal 'byor/ sngon 'gro'i ngag 'don/ ro za'i dbang rgyas pa'i ma gzungs dbang/ gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kar+ma chags med, sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung/* (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2010), 126.

Troworoza refers to the method aspect that makes use of appearances, and the wisdom aspect that recognizes the emptiness of appearances. The visualization is the method aspect of the path, and psychic heat (*gtum mo*) is the emptiness aspect. Together these extinguish impure karma and obscurations so one can realize the nature of phenomena as pure primordial wisdom. The secret meaning of Troworoza is the central channel, where the winds and mind are gathered in practice.

The next topic is the importance of the spiritual guide, the person who gives instructions on how to practice. There are four types of spiritual guides: outer, inner, secret, and ultimate. A guide, as in a religious teacher (*lama; bla ma*), is necessary to obtain the empowerment required for practice. There are both extensive and short forms of empowerment. In the retreats at Namdroling, only the short form of empowerment is offered. Technically, thus empowered practitioners cannot practice the *entire* path of generation or completion stage tantra, although it is not clear what is left out because the practice has elements of both generation and completion stage tantra.

The eight preliminary practices are reviewed, and the teachers instruct that these should be practiced according to the instructions on the eight preliminaries laid out in the first *Sky Dharma Instruction Manual*.

The first practice consists of the visualization with no exercises. The main meditation begins with guru yoga featuring Guru Padmasambhava and his consort Mandārāvā. The four empowerments are part of guru yoga. The visualization includes refuge, mandala offering, a confession, the prayer of the three wisdom bodies of a Buddha, and a lineage masters prayer. After this, one visualizes the channels, winds, and vital essences as perfect and oneself in a non-conceptual state. The meditation ends with a dedication of merit.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ “Nam Chö Tsa Lung Practice Manual.”

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In this first session, there is no visualization of *tummo* (inner heat) raising up the central channels, and there are no *trulkhor* exercises.

2: Sky Dharma *Tsalung* Session Two

The actual practice: breathing to clear obstacles and five branch [*trulkhor*]²¹¹

In the second session, the importance of setting an altruistic motivation to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings was emphasized in oral teachings.²¹² While they do this at the beginning of almost every teaching, in the second session a considerable amount of time is dedicated to stressing the importance of this motivation, which they claim must imbue the entire practice in order to make it effective.

The doctrinal teachings point out that Troworoza's inner heat (*gtum mo*) practice is both in the *kama* (*bka' ma*) and *terma* (*gter ma*) genres. It is *kama* because it was spoken by Troworoza himself to Tulku Migyur Dorje so qualifies as the words of a Buddha. It is *terma* because it is a mind treasure of Tulku Migyur Dorje. The practice itself is a completion stage practice.

The lamas explained that the oral lineage given by Nāropā to Tilopa has two parts pertaining to the nature of reality: the reality of the body and the reality of the mind. This extends buddha-nature theory into the body, instead of the way it is limited to the mind in the lower vehicles (see the sections on the Abhidharma in chapter four for more on this). This tantric view teaches that all six realms, plus the form and formless realms, are present in one's own winds, channels, and vital essences. Also, all outer phenomena are complete in the body, including the twenty-four sacred pilgrimage sites in India. The five *cakra*-s are in fact the five pure realms. All pure and impure phenomena are present within the *vajra* body. Nāropā to Tilopa are mentioned

²¹¹ *dnegos gzhi chos thun gnyis pa dang / gegs sel dbu nas/ yan lag lnga sbyang bar//* gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kar+ma chags med, *sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung/*, 126-127.

²¹² Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, oral retreat teachings on winds and channels yoga, Bylakuppe, India, February, 2018. Anonymous tulku, oral retreat teachings on winds and channels yoga, Bylakuppe, India, July, 2018.

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by name in *Sky Dharma*²¹³ despite that they are in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. This seems to align *Sky Dharma* winds and channels with its similar group of practices rather than with the Nyingma tradition.

There is a timeline for winds and channels practice. For some, realization of complete enlightenment can happen from this practice after six months. However, it could take three years and three months, six years, twelve years, or an entire lifetime. One must practice with perseverance.^{214,215}

Tummo is explained: “*tum-*” is the quality of the path that extinguishes the obstacles of bad karma and afflictive emotions, while “*-mo*” is the short syllable that generates heat. The *tummo* visualization begins in the second session. At first, the central channel is visualized as short, from beneath the navel up to the navel *cakra*. Practitioners visualize fire burning in the central channel in that region only, with a letter “A” as the base of the fire.

The visualization has three parts: outer, inner, and secret. The outer body is Troworoza where each body part represents an aspect of Buddhist doctrine. The inner body is the *vajra* body of channels, winds, and vital essences, including the three main channels and five *cakra*-s. Emphasis should be on the central channel. The central channel has three aspects: method, wisdom, and primordial wisdom. Here, the idea that the body is made of causes and conditions and is the basis of practice is introduced. Upon purification, the body transforms into primordial

²¹³ *te lo pas nA ro pa la gdams pa'i snyan brgyud kyi rtsa tshig las: dngos po'i gnas tshul lam dang ni: 'bras bus kye ba'i rim pa'o: gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung//*, 18.

²¹⁴ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat” (Namdroling Monastery, Bylakuppe-Mysore, South India, 2002).

²¹⁵ Yang dgon pa explains this further, translated by Willa Blythe Miller in her dissertation: “Until age twenty-five, the force of the winds’ inhalation is strong, so the body grows and develops. Between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five, the force of the winds’ abiding is strong, so that the body is complete and stable. After age forty-five, the force of the winds’ exhalation is strong, so the body ages and shrinks.” Willa Blythe Miller, “Secrets of the Vajra Body: Dngos Po’i Gnäs Lugs and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of Rgyal Ba Yang Dgon Pa” (Unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 2013), 221.

wisdom energy.

The postural exercises begin here with a traditional Tibetan nine-round breathing practice where one exhales to purify bad karma, obscurations, disease, and harmful spirits stored in the body and mind. On the inhalation, the five wisdoms are gathered into the body. This practice is seminal for the *tummo* practice in general. This is followed by the “Five-Branch Trulkhor,” a relatively easy postural sequence that serves as the entryway into the performance of dynamically active postures. One learns basic movements such as the lotus roll of the hands, a common tantric hand gesture that is repeated throughout *trulkhor*. The *trulkhor* includes rubbing the body’s meridians from the knee to the chest, and one does *beb*-s (the special jumps) for the first time.

3: Sky Dharma *Tsalung* Session Three

Removing obstacles, the six furnaces, the collected fires of the body, the middle, the six *trulkhors* ²¹⁶

The third session begins with a reminder for practitioners to watch their minds and protect against the arising of non-virtuous thoughts. One should avoid the selfish ego while practicing. These types of thoughts are considered to be the root of all suffering. The selfish ego has the power to cause external demons arise. The purpose of all practice is to cut through one's own ego.

The practice is called “the *tummo* of suffering.” The lamas teach that people suffer because the winds have not entered the central channel. Holding the breath while doing the

²¹⁶ *chos thun gsum pa dang / gegs sel/ me thab drug chings nas/ lus kyi me la bsdu'o/ /bar/ 'khrul 'khor drug pa/ gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung//, 127.*

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exercises makes the winds enter the central channel.

Signs of success in practice include fearful and anxious dreams, which are indications that negative karma is being released. This pertains to the filthy pot metaphor: when you first pour hot water into a filthy vessel to clean it, you see dirt and smell a foul smell. This is likened to how the practices release negative side effects while they cleanse away impurities. The conclusion is that practitioners should expect to suffer in practice. Physical and mental hardship are part of the process.

The three types of winds are introduced: the elemental winds, karmic winds, and primordial wisdom winds. The elemental winds are the winds in the external world; internally, the karmic and wisdom winds are mixed together. The winds generate life.

Holding the breath holds the winds, which purifies the karmic winds. When the karmic wind is purified, it transforms into wisdom wind. Buddhahood is when the wisdom winds enter the central channel, a mind-body implication with profound consequences. Winds and channels yoga exhausts the body's elements, which stops conceptual thoughts. Non-conceptual primordial wisdom then automatically arises. The practice entails entering, holding, and releasing the winds.

In terms of the visualization, this is the session where practitioners are instructed not to visualize the *cakra*-s because they are inherent in the central channel. The visualization is the typical sequence of guru yoga, recitations, and self as a deity with enlightened characteristics. In the *tummo* visualization, the central channel now extends to the heart and fire burns to that level.

The practice known as “*lung bum chen*” (*rlung 'bum chen*) is taught, which is a *prāṇāyāma* breath control technique helpful for long life.²¹⁷

The *Trulkhor* exercise is the “sixfold furnace” where one can optionally wear a meditation

²¹⁷ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat” (Namdroling Monastery, Bylakuppe-Mysore, South India, 2002), TummComm1.

strap to pull the knees up so the body take the shape of a small stove.

4: Sky Dharma *Tsalung* Session Four

The thirty-seven *trulkhor*²¹⁸

Once again, the lamas begin the session by reinforcing the importance of maintaining an altruistic mind throughout the practice. They then explain the limits of visualizing the *cakra*-s. In general, one benefit of meditating on the throat *cakra* is that one will automatically learn the art of literary composition and mellifluous words will flow for them automatically. However, if the visualization is done incorrectly, one could actually harm this energy center. Moreover, there is no need to visualize the channels in the *cakra* in detail. It is less dangerous if you leave out the details.

A *vajra* body metaphor explains that the channels are a house, the vital essences are the jewels inside, and the winds are the owner of the jewels.²¹⁹ Also, the channels are the wisdom body in nature. Buddha-nature is inseparable from our own bodies and also all the *dākiṇīs*. The winds are the *vajra* speech of the buddhas and are inseparable from our own speech, the five elements, and the five Buddhas. The vital essences are the *vajra* mind of the Buddhas and are inseparable from our own minds. All the sacred places of the world are present in the channels in everyone's bodies. Thus, there is no need to go on pilgrimage, because all those places exist within oneself.

People of any age can practice *tsalung*. The *vajra* bodies of those who are of ages 15-24 have not developed full potency for the practice. From 25-45, one can manifest signs swiftly.

²¹⁸ *chos thun bzhi pa dang / 'khrul 'khor so bdun/ gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung//, 127.*

²¹⁹ Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on Sky Dharma Winds and Channels practice, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

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Those who stay in good shape up to age 55 may experience the full benefits of the practice.

Certain people should not practice with their winds and channels because of pre-existing conditions. This includes sick people, those with leg problems, cancer, giddiness, leprosy, or other diseases. Also, people with certain mental obstacles, bad spirits, or of inferior mental capacity should not practice. They will not receive benefits if they practice, or could get wrong ideas.²²⁰

A complete practice would include the three basic *trulkhors*: the Five-Branch *Trulkhor*, the Six *Trulkhors*, and the Thirty-Seven. It could be extended by adding the Twenty *Trulkhor* or the vital essences practice.²²¹

In this session, the instantaneous generation stage is taught, where Troworoza appears in full form instantaneously rather than gradually.²²² The *tummo* fire raises to the level of the throat. The *trulkhor* is called “the thirty-seven.” The exercises are similar to what came before: rubbing the body, *beb-s* (jumps), tracing meridians, stomach rotations, and so on.²²³

5: Sky Dharma *Tsalung* Session Five

Teaching on a daily practice of obstacle clearing *trulkhor*; experiences that will occur in dreams; clarification on the objects of awareness in the text in advice given from the beginning²²⁴

The fifth session is a break from the physical challenges of the practices that come before to focus on healing. The purpose is to remove obstacles that have arisen due to the ripening of

²²⁰ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat,” TummComm1.

²²¹ gNam chos mi’gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, *sNga ’gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba’i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig bzugs/ Rtsa Rlung//*, 129.

²²² Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat,” TummComm1.

²²³ “Namchö Great Perfection: The Method for Accomplishing Self-Igniting Blissful Heat,” 19.

²²⁴ *chos thun lnga pa dang / rgyun khyer gyi gegs sel ston pa nas/ nyams rmi lam du ’byung ngo bar dang / zhal shes zin bris dbu nas dmigs pa rnams gzhung du gsal lo/ gNam chos mi’gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, sNga ’gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba’i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung//*, 127.

karmas during previous *trulkhor* exercises, and also elsewhere. For practitioners in solitary retreat environments, these techniques provide general healing methods so that they need not leave retreat to seek medical attention elsewhere, which would have been a huge inconvenience for practitioners in Tibet in isolated and remote retreat locations.

When obstacles arise in retreat, they should be interpreted as signs that bad karma has been purified through practice. Vajrasatva visualization and meditation should be done in between sessions to remove obstacles as well.

As a preventative measure, this is where teachings on avoiding external impurities during practice times appear, and a main recommendation is dietary restrictions. This includes not eating green-leafy vegetables, uncooked or unripe vegetables, spices, and chili. During retreat, one should not nap in the daytime or sit in the sun or close to a fire. One should visualize a wheel of protection around them at night, and do Kusuli chöd.²²⁵

Kusuli chöd is recommended as an additional practice during winds and channels retreat. In that practice, one mentally offers their own body by visualizing cutting off one's own head, chopping up the body, mixing it in with holy substances, and offering this up to a celestial pantheon of Buddhist holy beings. The oral tradition explained the difference between giving up one's body in Kusali chöd, versus the practices of winds, channels, and inner heat. While winds and channels practice is constructive in that it aims to improve the body's condition, the chöd practice is deconstructive in that it upends attachment to the body. Therefore, these practices complement each other, and both seek to alleviate attachment to one's own body.²²⁶

The removal of obstacles in the form of physical and mental pain and disease are divided

²²⁵ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, "Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat" (Namdroling Monastery, Bylakuppe-Mysore, South India, 2002).

²²⁶ Anonymous tulku, oral retreat teachings on winds and channels, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

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according to the upper, lower, and middle regions of the body. There are five exercises, and the postures are more static than other series. They address the following conditions, respectively: (1) Feeling unhappy, stroke, lack of concentration, back pain; (2) Excess heat in the heart or upper body (hard wind); (3) Stomachache and indigestion; (4) Joint pain; (5) Irritation, restlessness, uneasiness, tension, anxiety, and an unfocused mind.²²⁷ They each involve a unique visualization that aid in the healing process. For example, one imagines releasing joint pain at its location by placing three fingers on the spot and imagining the pain to be released from there.

During this exercise, the *tummo* fire raises to the level of the eyebrows. It seems apparent here that the *tummo* practice is separate from the *trulkhor*, because there is no reason why the fire should rise up during a healing session. The *tummo* fire represents progress in the contemplative process. In this sequence, one takes a break from that process in order to heal any harms incurred thus far. And yet, the *tummo* visualization continues to rise upward despite this break in the pattern of the *trulkhor* exercises and their accompanying theme to heal. And yet in the visualization of raising the *tummo* inner fire, the intensity of the contemplation continues to build. It seems to me that these processes are thematically misaligned here, which implies that Tulku Migyur Dorje's revelation may have superimposed the gradual *tummo* raising of fire upon otherwise discrete *trulkhor* sequences that he compiled from elsewhere. There are a few awkward moments like here where the *trulkhor* does not thematically match that of the *tummo*. There is one *trulkhor* in the sequences that is rumored to be authored by Ratna Lingpa, another indication that the *trulkhor* sequences were compiled rather than revealed all at once.²²⁸

The name of this practice “Obstacle Clearing Trulkhor” (*'geg bsal 'khrul 'khor*),²²⁹ and

²²⁷ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat,” TummComm1.

²²⁸ Further research is needed to verify which sequence was revealed by Ratna Lingpa.

²²⁹ “Nam Chö Tsa Lung Practice Manual,” 25.

again, the exercises that accompany the visualizations are much easier than the other sequences. Since this sequence is less physically challenging than others, it provides a physical break in the middle of the postural performance.

6: Sky Dharma *Tsalung* Session Six

Extracting the benefits from the beginning; absorption in A ham; the ten movements²³⁰

In the sixth session, one dives back into the physical challenges of *trulkhor* with full force, and this heightened tempo continues through the ninth sequence. The doctrinal teachings begin with another warning for practitioners: if they do not hold the winds (the breath— *rlung*) properly, they might get a headache or worse negative side effects. The ends of the channels are very thin and can give rise to *kapha* (*bad kan*) imbalance, a Tibetan medical term shared with Ayurveda for one of the three humors of the body.

To prevent harm, practitioners are reminded to only visualize the central channel and not the *cakra*-s. At the same time, more detailed information on the *vajra* body is offered. The Great Bliss *cakra* (*bde chen 'khor lo*) at the crown of the head has 360 branches, which condense into thirty-two large channels. If the breath could be held in these channels, primordial wisdom would arise. This is defined as the union of bliss and emptiness. However, if one were to attempt this and inadvertently send energy into another location in the *vajra* body, they would actually create mental and/or physical illness.²³¹

This sequence teaches practitioners to transform karmic winds into primordial wisdom winds by focusing on the central channel and certain syllables inside. Blissful heat arises

230 *chos thun drug pa dang / bogs 'don dbu nas/ a ham la bstim par bya 'o/ /bar/ stangs stabs bcu pa bya/ gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung//, 127.*

231 Anonymous tulku, oral retreat teachings on winds and channels, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

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naturally when karma and obscurations are cleared away, which transforms the body into a primordial wisdom body. Here, *bodhicitta* that has been rising in the central channel via the *tummo* visualization reaches the crown of the head, the new terminal site of the *tummo* visualization. Bliss begins its descent downward here as a trickle, but in the ninth sequence it will flow down more freely. This is not to be confused with the descent of the four blisses that happens in session nine. Here, bliss trickles down just a little.²³²

Three types of *tummo* make this a reality: karmic, meditative/experiential, and supreme. Experiential *tummo*, the second category, has two types: common and uncommon. Common experiential *tummo* refers to the generation of heat, bliss, and non-conceptuality, in that order. It begins like a foggy vision of a smoky place; then a mirage; then like fireflies; then the morning dawn; then a clear sky or mind. These signs of success in practice are typical Buddhist visions that indicate realization of emptiness. Supreme *tummo* is a spontaneously arisen *tummo* that is free from fabrications.²³³ The *tummo* visualization emphasizes the descent of *bodhicitta*, and this is the first time that it goes down instead of up.²³⁴

The *trulkhor* exercises are called the “ten *trulkhor*” (*'khrul 'khor bcu pa*), and consist of ten sequences to subdue ten different type of demons, including spirits, demons, poison, ghosts, nagas, and demonic gods. At the end of each posture sequence, one must shout a loud and long proclamation— a sentence—calling out the name of the type of demon.²³⁵

Again, there is a disconnect between the *tummo* and *trulkhor* practices in this session.

While the *tummo* visualization focuses on the initial stages of the descent of the four blisses, the

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat,” TummComm2.

²³⁴ From the oral tradition, so Tibetan is not provided. Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat,” TummComm2.

²³⁵ “Nam Chö Tsa Lung Practice Manual,” 27-31.

trulkhor sequence subdues the ten classes of demons. I imagine that when Migyur Dorje and/or Karma Chakme were composing or writing down the practice, they might have struggled to fit the *tummo* and *trulkhor* practices together at these points. Thematically, they do not match, making the differences between *tummo* and *trulkhor* most apparent.

7: Sky Dharma Tsalung Session Seven

The final obstacle clearing, the final extraction of benefits; notes on the blue-black ram; five types *trulkhor*²³⁶

The religious contextualization begins by reminding practitioners to examine their own minds and abandon harmful or selfish thoughts before practice. One should have a selfless motivation to practice the path for the benefit of all sentient beings. In general, one should gain stability in one practice before jumping to another.²³⁷ As one advances through the postural sequences, such statements remind one of previous instructions that might have been forgotten.

In this practice, the *tummo* extends to the crown of the head where babies have a boneless area at the crown fontanel. There are two related locations that are used in practice: one is four fingers from the hairline, and the other is eight fingers from the hairline. At death, if consciousness exits from the first location four fingers back, it causes birth in the formless realm. If consciousness exits the body through the second location eight fingers back, it causes rebirth in a pure realm. This second location is the peak of the central channel at the crown of the head, and when taken is the path of *Mahāmudrā*.

If one practices well, consciousness will be transferred to a pure realm of the

²³⁶ *chos thun bdun pa dang / gegs sel mtha' / bogs 'don mtha' / zin bris ram mthing nag nas mtha' bar/ rigs lnga'i 'khrul 'khor/ gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kar+ma chags med, sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung/,140.*

²³⁷ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat,” TummComm2.

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Sambhogakāya— the blissful buddha body— known as *Sukhavati* (*bde ba chen*). If one's practice is mediocre, they will be reborn among the assembly of *bodhisattvas*, *dākkiṅīs*, and *vidyadhara*s, which are all positive rebirths caused by good contemplative practice. If one's practice is inferior, they will be reborn as a god or human. If consciousness transfers through these areas out of karma rather than through practice, one will be reborn in a formless realm (no body).²³⁸ In these ways, these teachings connect the practice to rebirth. and directly imply that one's ability to control the mind dictates rebirth in a particular type of body.

In the visualization, letters have already been placed at the five *cakra*-s: below the navel, at the navel, heart, throat, and third eye. Here, a sixth letter is added that extends into the space above the crown of the head. Practitioners are advised to play with both the intensity of the heat, and also scale and size in the visualization of the self as Troworoza.²³⁹

The method aspect of the path is to either see the deity's form or the body as an empty tent, which is how the deity yoga visualization progresses in later stages. One quickly drops the image they have constructed of the body of the deity with all its doctrinal signs and see their outer form as a tent.²⁴⁰ The letters represent the wisdom aspect. The embodiment of the wisdom aspect is Dorje Pakmo, or Vajravarahi, a female tantric Buddha. She is the essence of the *dākkiṅīs*.

A practice is taught to purify the three types of impure conceptions— virtuous, non-virtuous, and neutral—into the three types of buddha bodies. Virtuous conceptions such as

²³⁸ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, "Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat," TummComm2.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Regarding the tent metaphor and *vajra* body theory, Willa Blythe Miller comments on its usage by Yang dgon pa as follows: "The appearance of the tent metaphor twice is interesting in that it intentionally locates his work in the Himalayan geographic region, a move that may be significant. The metaphors in this passage, in fact, seem to be serving two purposes simultaneously. First and foremost, they provide aesthetically evocative images that capture the meaning of inseparability for Yang dgon pa. In the case of a tent, it captures the sense of interdependence: a tent and its residents (body and wind-mind) rely on each other to function." Willa Blythe Miller, "Secrets of the Vajra Body: Dngos Po'i Gnas Lugs and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of Rgyal Ba Yang Dgon Pa" (Unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 2013), 274.

devotion, faith, and pure appearances can be offered to the innumerable pantheon of enlightened celestial beings by using the inhalation. Attachment, desire, anger, or other non-virtuous conceptions are dealt with using the exhalation, which cleanses them from body and mind and transforms them into deities. This is a form of the traditional Tibetan practice of giving and taking (*gtong len*). With neutral thoughts, one leaves the breath in its natural state but continues to visualize while the mind rests in a state free from elaboration.

The method for purifying the five poisons is to visualize the five Buddhas, which purifies the causes of rebirth in five of the six realms, excluding the human realm. One imagines that the channels, winds, and vital essences that cause the five types of afflictions are burned and purified with the *tummo* fire. Throughout this elaborate visualization process, one reviews their own mental afflictions, addressing the normal range of human emotions with specific antidotes.

Here, the *tummo* extends above the crown of the head.²⁴¹ Each *trulchor* within the sequence represents a Buddha who is used in the visualization and is also the result of practice.²⁴² The transformations from affliction to Buddha follow the chart below. The elements, colors, afflictions, and wisdoms assigned here all have the potential to become cues for remembering buddha-nature in daily life.

Affliction	Element	Deity	Color	Wisdom	Rebirth	Aggregate	Transforms body into Buddha	Transforms outer world into
Ignorance	Space	Dākinī Namkai Yingchug	dark blue	Primordial reality	Animal realms	form	Vairocana	Akanishta pure realm

²⁴¹ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat,” TummComm2.

²⁴² “Nam Chö Tsa Lung Practice Manual,” 31-33.

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		ma		wisdom				
Anger/ aversion/ hatred	Fire	Ḍākinī Mamaki	white	Primor- dial wisom of a mirror	hell realms	consci- ousness	Ngönpar Gawa and Vajrasatva	Ngönga or Vajrasatva's pure realm
Pride	Earth	Ḍākinī Sangay Chenma	golden yellow	Primor- dial wisdom of equality	god realm	birth, old age, sickness, death, and severe viola- tions	Ratnasam- bhava	Ratnasam- bhava's pure realm
Attachme- nt/ desire		Ḍākinī Gokarma	red	Primor- dial wisdom of discrimi- native awarene- ss	hungry ghost realm	sensorial percep- tion (dushe)	Amitabha	Sukhavati or Dewachen
jealousy		Ḍākinī Damtsig Drolma	green	Primor- dial all- accompli- shing wisdom	demi- god realm		Amogha- siddhi	Lerab Dzogpa

8: Sky Dharma *Tsalung* Session Eight

The Twenty *Trulchor*²⁴³

Again, the lamas began by instructing students to examine their own thoughts and motivation, to abandon harmful thoughts, and to generate a selfless motivation to practice for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Next are teachings on the 72,000 channels (*rtsa*) in the body through which wind (*rlung*), *bodhicitta* (*thig le*), and blood all flow. White *bodhicitta* fluid flows in the right solitary (*rkyang ma*) channel. Red *bodhicitta* flows in the left taste (*ro ma*) channel. If one visualizes the left and right channels, the five *cakra*-s, and the twenty-four special channels, virtue will arise. However, if these are visualized improperly, disease and demerit will arise. Thus, one should only visualize the central channel and not these specifics in order to avoid disease and demerit.²⁴⁴

Here the visualization extends the flame outside of the central channel, and one imagines that both the inner and outer worlds are transformed by the fire. The focus is on burning the fire even hotter, and there is a special practice to release illness by visualizing holes in the location of illness or pain with a flame that leads it out of the body. The level of heat is increased, and practitioners are invited to use this practice if they are cold.²⁴⁵

No further *cakra*-s are added to the *tummo* visualization. The *trulchor* exercises consist of an elaborate and challenging sequence that incorporates many exclamations of “ha” and additional visualizations broken down into twenty sub-sequences.

243 *chos thun brgyad pa dang/ /'khrul 'khor nyi shu/ gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung//*, 127.

²⁴⁴ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat,” *TummComm*3.

²⁴⁵ “Nam Chö Tsa Lung Practice Manual,” 36.

9: Sky Dharma *Tsalung* Session Nine

Removing obstacles; when to do vital essences; those things that are not shared; pulling 1,000 long huñg vital essences *trulkhor*; the entire unshared *trulkhor* ²⁴⁶

Much fanfare precedes the final practice to signal that it is the most important, profound, and impactful portion of the practice. The doctrinal view is to arouse a *bodhicitta* motivation by remembering that, because of countless rebirths, all sentient beings have been our mothers in one lifetime or another. During practice, one should have the motivation to benefit and liberate all mother sentient beings from the suffering of *samsāra*, and to dedicate the merits of the practice to the benefit of all sentient beings. Faith in the authenticity of the dharma is foundational for practice.

Information on the metaphysics of the *vajra* body instructs that there are two types of vital essences: relative/causal and ultimate/primordial wisdom. Primordial wisdom vital essences are the unchanging and self-realizing *dharmakāya* whose main quality is emptiness. As the *sambhogakāya*, its qualities are clarity and radiance. As the *nirmanakāya*, its quality is uninterrupted display.

The basis of the primordial wisdom vital essences are the causal vital essences, which flow through the 72,000 channels, and reside in the twenty-four main channels and five *cakra*-s. The causal *bindu* is semen, although this is problematic for women.²⁴⁷ If this factor increases, one is said to generate the mind of primordial wisdom. If it degenerates, then the accumulation of merit

246 *chos thun dgu pa dang / gegs sel/ thig le'i skabs su/ thun mong ma yin pa rnamso /bar/ thig le'i 'khrul 'khor huñg ring stong 'dren/ 'khrul 'khor thun mong ma yin pa cha tshang / gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa lung//, 127.*

²⁴⁷ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat” (Namdroling Monastery, Bylakuppe-Mysore, South India, 2002).

and wisdom also degenerate. The way to degenerate it by releasing semen, which is why semen works as a translation.

There was a general tendency repeated by many monks at Namdroling to refer to *bodhicitta* (*byang sems*) as semen. This point singles out women as incapable of achieving the highest results of practice. Despite textual references that indicate disagreement with this male-female characterization, these views are common and also confusing at Namdroling.

The seminal fluid is a type of *bodhicitta* because without it one cannot achieve Buddhahood. In that way, it is the essence of *bodhicitta*, the root of all teachings. Here, the lamas switch back to the meaning of *bodhicitta* as the altruistic intention to achieve enlightenment, although they do not say so explicitly. Desire as the organizing feature of the system is driven home here: one who degenerates seminal fluid by releasing it is someone who does not desire enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Releasing semen out of desire, attachment, or sexual bliss goes against the *bodhicitta* vows and is a root downfall. However, if it gets released by accident or against one's will, that is not a root downfall.

There are some greater purposes for which one can release semen, such as to perpetuate the teachings or to conceive a being who will uphold the teachings. Also, for those who the restraint of semen causes disease, they can release it. But for the sake of attachment and the desire to experience sexual bliss, one should not release it.

The vital essences (*thig le*) practice cleanses all the vital essences in the body, which increases the pure, untainted vital essences in the channels. This allows practitioners to actualize all the qualities of the path.

In terms of the visualization, here one visualizes a *cakra* with spokes and a vital essence as a drop in the center. One then sees numerous vital essences (*bindu*) descending along the

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cakra-s, stopping at each one in a prescribed manner not discussed here in respect for the secrecy of the practice. This is the descent of the four blisses. Each *cakra* has its own number of vital essences (*thig le*), and each vital essence has a specific referent from tantric Buddhist metaphysical semiotics, all taught in the practice. In the end, the bliss goes back up the *cakra*-s, and then descends again all the way to the base of the central channel in the secret place.

In the *tummo* visualization, no new *cakra*-s are added. The visualization unfolds within the space already delimited in the previous exercises, which begins four finger widths beneath the navel and ends above the crown of the head. The focus of this contemplation is for bliss to travel up and down the central channel.²⁴⁸

There is a tenth session, which summarizes the benefits of all the preceding practices. By then, practitioners are meant to do all the sequences together, one after the other.²⁴⁹

The *Cakra*-s in Sky Dharma

As we have seen in the above summaries of the nine sessions, the *cakra*-s are a central feature of the practice in that the *tummo* visualization moves up a single *cakra* in almost each of nine sequences. *Sky Dharma* does not explain the elements of the tantric body in great detail. It focuses on how winds and channels can be used to transform the inner tantric body as well as the external world of appearances. According to the *Sky Dharma* oral teachings, there are three categories of existing things: outer, impure phenomena; the inner channels, winds, and essences; and pure phenomena.²⁵⁰ This worldview places the tantric body as the intermediary between purity and impurity. By transforming the winds from karmic winds to wisdom winds, one fills up

²⁴⁸ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat,” TummComm3.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on winds and channels practice, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

the vital essences with wisdom, and one “effortlessly” achieves the qualities of the path.²⁵¹

The main takeaway regarding *cakra-s* in *Sky Dharma* is the recommendation of a cautious approach when meditating on the *cakra-s*. Over and over again, practitioners are enjoined to only meditate on the central channel, which represents the ultimate goal of non-conceptuality, i.e., emptiness. Meditating on the specific details of the *cakra-s* such as their number of branches, colors, and qualities is considered dangerous because the winds and vital essences might move into an unfavorable location, which would create mental or physical illnesses.²⁵² The mind goes wherever the yogin focuses, and strengthens the qualities of whatever is focused upon. Because of the causal relationship among mind, winds, and vital essences, one could place their attention incorrectly and create imbalance.

For example, in the third sequence, the visualization of *tummo* fire reaches the *cakra* at the heart, which has thirty-two spokes. Even though Migyur Dorje and Karma Chakme discuss the number of spokes, practitioners are advised not to visualize the spokes. While proper visualization of the spokes would increase both wisdom and intelligence and generate realizations if done correctly, if one meditated improperly, they might become mentally ill, unpleasant, or create a wind disease.²⁵³ These are common illnesses in both Buddhist medicine and tantric contemplative traditions associated with too much wind in the region of the heart.

The same is true in the fourth sequence, where the visualization of fire reaches the throat *cakra*. Meditating on the throat *cakra* causes one to be able to write poetry and compose beautiful, meaningful texts without learning or effort. Ultimately, one should attain the *vajra* speech of a Buddha. However, improperly focusing on this *cakra* could cause jaundice or

251 Ibid.

252 Ibid.

253 Ibid.

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deafness.²⁵⁴

The remedy for these potential pitfalls reflects the Great Perfection's rhetoric of simplicity, naturalness, and letting be. Migyur Dorje recommends to meditate only on the central channel, which has the quality of simplicity. Because the *cakra*-s are comprised of channels contaminated by karma, if one meditates on them, they might actually force the winds and vital essences to move into the wrong place.

Since the central channel is located inside of the heart *cakra* (and runs through all the *cakra*-s), practitioners can confidently do these practices without focusing on the details of the *cakra*-s²⁵⁵ while still receiving the benefits of having meditated on that *cakra*.

The practice itself requires effort. The purpose of practice is to unknot the *cakra*-s, which are subtle physical obscurations that block energy from flowing freely through the central channel. Like many yoga systems, *Sky Dharma* claims a fixed list of *cakra*-s typical to Tibetan Buddhism: the crown, throat, heart, navel, and secret place. These correspond to the five pure realms. Inside the channels, the vital essences are in the shape of five seed syllables, Tibetan letters that correspond to the five buddha families. The five *cakra*-s also contain five syllables that correspond to five of the six realms (minus the human realm) and corresponding types of beings.

Sky Dharma presents what I call the “yogic body,” which pertains to the ways *Sky Dharma* focuses on instructing practitioners in yoga practice.

Next, we turn to Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, a taxonomic description of tantric anatomy and physiology. I call this the “anatomical body.” These two names describe the different ways the body is represented, one in the context of practice and the other more

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

theoretical. Longchenpa's text supports winds and channels yoga by providing detailed philosophy, while the *Sky Dharma* winds and channels practice manual tells practitioners how to take advantage of the body's resources in contemplation. The two texts each present information on how saṃsara and nirvāṇa, one afflicted and the other perfected, exist side-by-side in the body.

Ethnography of a Text: Reading About Winds and Channels at Namdroling

Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* provides detailed information on winds, channels, vital essences and *cakra*-s, the core components of *Sky Dharma* winds, channels, and inner heat practice. This section explores how such a revered text is used at Namdroling in the contemporary setting.

In 2018, the principal of Namdroling's Junior High School (*slab grwa*) Yeshe Wodsal Sherab Raldriling was Khenpo Tenzin,²⁵⁶ a well-respected scholar and administrator. For three months during my fieldwork at Namdroling, we met daily to read chapters²⁵⁷ eleven and twelve of the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (*Theg mchog mdzod*). Longchenpa authored seven treasury texts known as *The Seven Treasuries* (*mDzod bdun*) which are compilations of philosophy and poetry²⁵⁸ that systematically survey Buddhism in ways that shaped the identity of the Nyingma sect. He employed channels and *cakra*-s to describe how the body is the storehouse of mental habits. This relationship is described in the title of chapter eleven, "the way in which the body of mental impressions takes form."²⁵⁹

Longchenpa's presentation is detailed and systematic, and invited further discourse with

²⁵⁶ Pseudonym.

²⁵⁷ Literally, "stages" (*rim khang*).

²⁵⁸ David Germano and Gregory Hillis, "Klong Chen Rab 'Byams Pa (Longchenpa)," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2005, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/klong-chen-rab-byams-pa-longchenpa>.

²⁵⁹ *bag chags lus kyi grub tshul bstan pa ste rim khang bcu gcig pa/ Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 179a.

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contemporary philosophy of mind and the mind-body relationship. Thus, this section presents ethnographic information on the life of an authoritative philosophy text on a monastic campus. This is followed in the next section by comments on bringing Longchenpa's mind-body philosophy into conversation with contemporary philosophy of mind outside of the Tibetan tradition.

Texts are a form of currency in a monastic environment. As a scholar visiting a Buddhist monastery, doors are opened in the scholastic culture of monasteries in a literal way if you have a text to read. Khenpo Tenzin taught me the *Supreme Vehicle* in a one-on-one tutorial similar to the ways the monks and nuns tutor each other. Within this familiar setup, I was able to discuss topics brought up in the text in greater depth than a formal interview would have allowed. Most of the interviews I conducted at Namdroling were an hour long consisting of open-ending, non-leading questions. However, I spent around 100 hours reading Longchenpa with each of two khenpos. During that time, it was Longchenpa who introduced specific topics, and I merely asked for elaboration. Many academic scholars rely on insiders to traditions to explain the meaning of the texts they translate. Most do not consider their work ethnographic, but rather philological in nature. There are varying degrees to which insiders are given credit, ranging from not at all to quite generously.²⁶⁰

The format for my tutorial with Khenpo Tenzin was traditional in that it replicated a model in frequent use in the monastery. He would read each passage aloud and comment where he saw fit. He drew occasional pictures of the channels and *cakra*-s. I often asked questions, but sometimes he rushed us through long sections without taking questions. When we read passages

260 While I do have specific people in mind, naming them would be a distraction from the main point. Some scholars do this quite well, such as the way Ann Klein very clearly cites who she works with in her research. This claim pertains to the prominence with which scholars attribute input based on personal conversations versus what appears in footnotes and introductions.

that singled out women, he was aware of my own interests and often leveled with me about social inequities he had witnessed in Tibet as a child. Once, he told me about a Tibetan marriage practice that he saw as particularly unjust where women were kidnapped from their own homes and brought to a new husband's home without warning or their own permission (although their families often gave permission for this).²⁶¹ He talked about how customs like that are changing. For the most part it was a generic oral transmission (*rlung*) where he read the text aloud with explanations (*khrid*) when he felt moved to explain or in response to questions.

At Namdroling, Longchenpa is revered as an omniscient founding figure. Namdroling's allegiance to Longchenpa, and also to the Nyingma philosopher Rongzom Chokyi Zangpo (1012-1088), are expressed outwardly by two small but centrally placed stupas (Buddhist reliquaries) at the front of the main temple popularly known as the "Golden Temple." Migyur Dorje has a less centrally-located but much larger stupa in an area on the monks' campus near a row of several other stupas. Migyur Dorje's stupa is circumambulated by itself as a practice that brings good health. Longchenpa and Rongzom's stupas are not venerated with circumambulation, but their position makes a statement about the philosophical identity of the

261 Khenpo Tenzin, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, January 2019.

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Palyul/Namdroling tradition.



Figure 27 Longchenpa's stupa is on the left and Rongzom's stupa on the right, both in front of the curved staircases on either side of the stage.

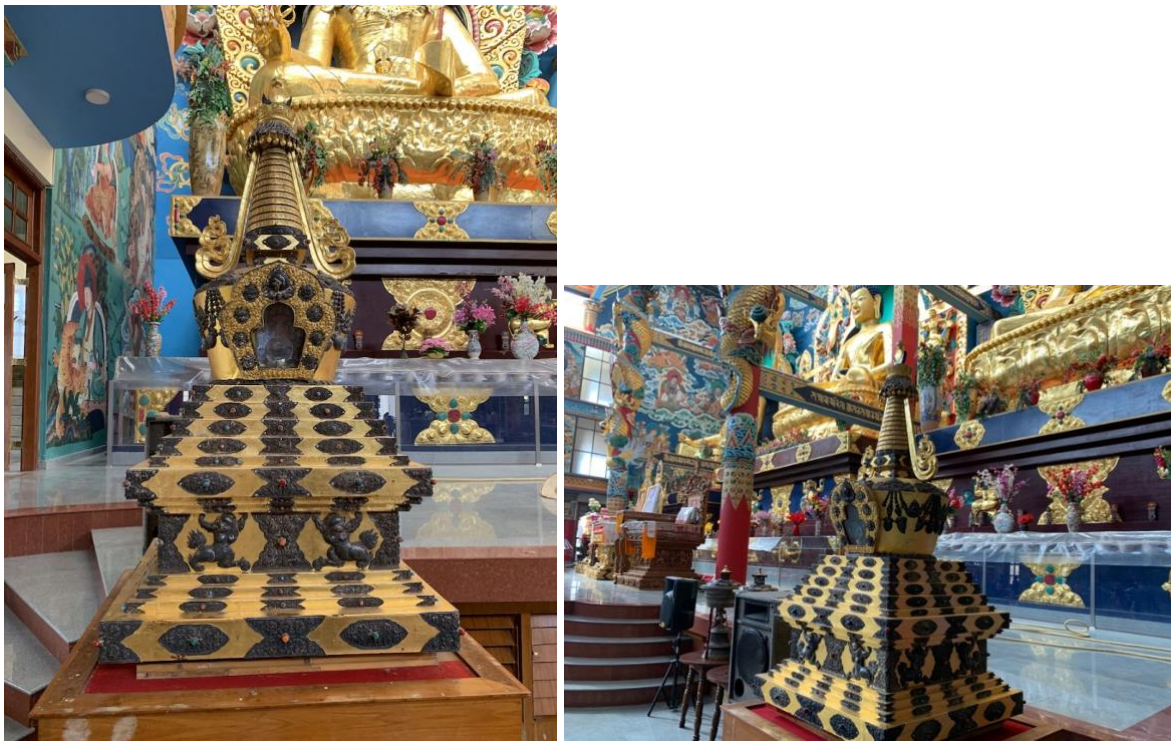


Figure 28 Longchenpa's stupa (reliquary) (left) and Rongzom's stupa (right)



Figure 29 Migyur Dorje's stupa being circumambulated by lay people and monastics.

During my year at Namdroling, I mentioned my interest in Longchenpa's *Supreme Vehicle* to numerous monks and nuns and the response was, in general, that it is an extremely important text. One person who was enthusiastic about the text was a nun acting as the main disciplinarian (*gi ku*) at the nunnery in 2018. I needed permission from her to join the Tibetan Yoga retreat, and in casual conversation, she expressed her passion about Longchenpa's writing and the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* in particular. I later translated sections of the text with her. She is an excellent translator, and her understanding of the unique terminology was good but at the end of the day the monastics are not typically experts in any one author. Her knowledge of esoteric terminology was familiar but not deep.²⁶² The monks and nuns at Namdroling tend to be generalists in the Nyingma tradition but not specialists in any one area unless they seek outside training.

Another person interacting with Longchenpa's works at Namdroling was the nun from Dolpo who was about to enter three-year retreat and who introduced me around when I first arrived. She took Longchenpa's collected works in with her as primary reference materials

²⁶² Ethnographic observation, online Tibetan language class, February 2022.

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during retreat.²⁶³

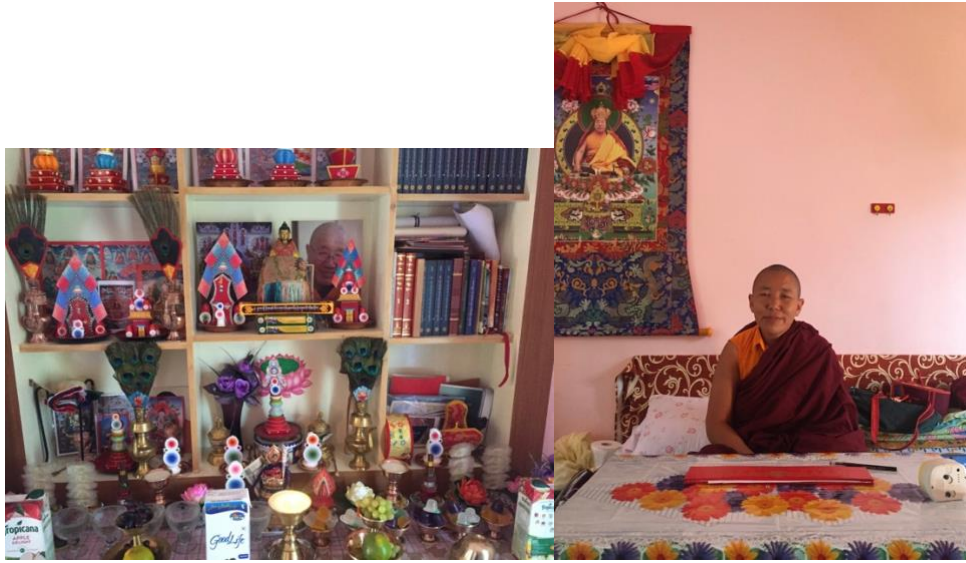


Figure 30 The nun from Dolpo who was about to enter three-year retreat is pictured on the right, with her retreat altar on the left. Longchenpa's works have blue covers. By now her retreat is finished.

Surely many more of the monastics at Namdroling read Longchenpa's texts, but also many never crack open the books but rather use them to decorate their shelves and as a symbol of the dharma on their altars.

This text is one of many detailed Buddhist philosophical treatises that is authoritative for the Nyingma tradition. Among Longchenpa's collected works, the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* is his most encyclopedic work in that it is long and covers many topics in detail. It systematically traverses and defines the philosophical range of the Great Perfection tradition. While it is not technically an encyclopedia, it is able to function that way in that it gives information on many subjects unique to the Great Perfection tradition and defines its metaphysical and ontological categories.

Some of Longchenpa's other texts contribute core elements to the monastery's curriculum during the last three years that focus on tantra and the Great Perfection. In the eighth

263 Namdroling nun, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, January 2018.

year, they study the *Precious Treasury of Wish-Fulfilling Gems (Yid shin rin po che'i mdzod)*,²⁶⁴ and in the ninth year the *Great Perfection Trilogy of Self-Liberation (rDzogs pa chen po rang grol skor gsum)*.²⁶⁵

Thanks to Taiwanese donors whose practice of accumulating merit led them to publish and distribute texts to the monastics at Namdroling, Longchenpa's complete set of works decorates nearly everyone's bookshelf,²⁶⁶ which makes them accessible. Since everyone has a copy, it is accessible and gets referred to on an as-needed basis.²⁶⁷

Khenpo Tenzin said to me, "Longchenpa is never wrong," and this view was widely shared. His epithet is the "Omniscient One" (*kun mkhyan*). As philosophers, the preeminent status of both Longchenpa and Rongzom make their works more likely to be referred to among the vast number of choices in the Tibetan canon.

In the realm of winds and channels yoga, the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* gets picked up by monastics who seek further details about the practice, and only if they have time. I heard about it from a khenpo at Namdroling who did just that to support his understanding of winds, channels, and vital essences the year he did the Tibetan Yoga retreat.

Khenpo Tenzin was the second Khenpo I read the text with, and the more senior of the two. Known for his clarity in teaching, he was at times quite stern, serious, and scholarly, and other times both frustrated and in awe of the profundity and great detail of the text. I went to his quarters almost daily for around two months, which were the school principal's residence at the end of a huge dormitory hall in the Junior High School section of Namdroling's main campus.

²⁶⁴ klong chen rab 'byams pa dri med 'od zer, "Yid bzhin mdzod/," in *Kun Mkhyen Klong Chen Rab 'byams kyi gsung 'bum/*, vol. 2, 26 vols. (dpal brtsegs: dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe nying zhib 'jug khang, 2009).

²⁶⁵ klong chen rab 'byams pa dri med 'od zer, "Rang grol skor gsum/," in *rDzogs pa chen po ngal gso skor gsum dang rang grol skor gsum bcas pod gsum/*, BDRC W23760.

²⁶⁶ This is only true for those who were present in 2012.

²⁶⁷ One Khenpo, one luponma, interviews by author, Bylakuppe, India, January 2018.

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All the doors to rooms are outside, and he would often sit on the balcony and watch over the young monks below in a huge courtyard, making his presence known.



Figure 31 Residence halls at Yeshe Wodsal Sherab Raldriling Junior School where Khenpo Tenzin sat overseeing the monks.

He repeatedly questioned my motivations for reading the text, and often reminded me of Longchenpa's warning in the colophon: these materials should be handled carefully, lest the serious consequences incurred by uncaredful scholars and practitioners promised in the text should befall both of us, nothing less than untimely death and rebirth in hell.²⁶⁸ These colophons were written by Longchenpa himself.

One story Khenpo Tenzin told me to explain the text describes the power of the mind in the mind-body relationship in a practical way:

“Most diseases of the body come from the mind. If you see a beggar, they don’t have good food or a place to sleep, but they hardly ever get sick. Once you get some money, then all you do is worry about your stuff and get sick. We Tibetans take solace in karma. We have a song, ‘If I have good stuff, it is because of the three jewels. If bad

²⁶⁸ Khenpo Tenzin, conversation with the author, Bylakuppe, India, January 2019.

things happen to me, it is because of my karma.’ It helps a lot.”²⁶⁹

What Khenpo Tenzin said here, that “most diseases of the body come from the mind,” is supported by Longchenpa’s description of the body as a storehouse for karma and mental afflictions, and simultaneously as a gnostic resource. This theory is at the heart of winds and channels yoga, whose main intention is to purify impure karmas and clear obstacles that reside in the body.²⁷⁰ By locating karma in the body, the body becomes the intermediary between the experience of *samsāra*, characterized by continual rebirth and suffering, and *nirvāṇa*, experienced as bliss, clarity, and non-conceptuality.

The Anatomical model: The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle (*Theg mchog mdzod*)

Longchenpa's chapter on embryology describes how karma is located in the body — and also has a role in constituting the body— beginning from the point of conception. Titled “the way in which the body of mental impressions takes form,”²⁷¹ chapter eleven carefully describes how karma and the elements come together to create the body and mind. It begins with conception and details each stage of development of the embryo into a fetus. Chapter twelve is titled “A detailed explanation on ascertaining the key points”²⁷² and describes the three main channels, five *cakra*-s, and makes recommendations for practices.

Together these two chapters describe how both the body and subtle body develop in dependence upon winds, channels, and vital essences. The narrative begins at conception and continues through the first half of gestation, at which time the foundations for all the body’s

²⁶⁹ Khenpo Tenzin, translated by author, personal communication with author, Bylakuppe, India, January 2019.

²⁷⁰ Anonymous tulku, *Sky Dharma* winds and channels yoga retreat oral teachings, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

²⁷¹ *bag chags lus kyi grub tshul bstan pa ste rim khang bcu gcig pa*// kLong chen rab ’byams pa dri med ’od zer, *Theg pa’i mchog rin po che’i mdzod*/, Tibetan and Himalayan Library Digital Edition, mDzod bdun (dkar mdzes bod rigs rang skyong khul, dpal yul rdzong, a ’dzom chos sgar: a ’dzom chos sgar, 2009).

²⁷² *gnad nges pa bye brag tu bshad pa ste rim khang bcu gnyis pa*/ 2.12 kLong chen rab ’byams pa dri med ’od zer, *Theg pa’i mchog rin po che’i mdzod*/, Tibetan and Himalayan Library Digital Edition, mDzod bdun (dkar mdzes bod rigs rang skyong khul, dpal yul rdzong, a ’dzom chos sgar: a ’dzom chos sgar, 2009).

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organs and mental components have been laid down. In Longchenpa's vivid description of embryology, the subtle and coarse bodies develop alongside one another. Much has been written about embryological narratives. Tantric discourse on embryology is not uncommon, especially in research on the subtle body, and further work would place Longchenpa's works in conversations with scholarship by Willa Blythe Miller, Janet Gyatso, Frances Garrett, and Amy Langenberg. Frances Garrett already relies on Longchenpa in her work on embryology.²⁷³

Longchenpa's tantric account of embryology begins by describing male-female attraction and then sex. Longchenpa is explicit: "They embrace, and due to the organs joining, in reliance upon the body's earth [element], they experience bliss. The natural sound of *saṃ* arises."²⁷⁴ Reading such passages with khenpos at Namdrooling provided moments of awkward pause from my own side. As a female scholar in private audience with a similarly-aged celibate male monastic, I would not have felt comfortable asking about sex. The khenpos took it up as a matter of business and plowed through, although they displayed varying levels of comfort. Thus, early on in reading the text I realized that whatever topics Longchenpa himself introduced were open for discussion. In these cases, the authority and power of texts in Tibetan Buddhist society supersede other levels of social influence such as gender and rank.

The text describes how the father and mother's initial contributions in the form of white and red vital essences come together with a "scent eater"—a being in between lives—in search

273 Frances Mary Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008); Janet Gyatso, *Being Human in a Buddhist World: An Intellectual History of Medicine in Early Modern Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Willa Blythe Miller, "Secrets of the Vajra Body: *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of *rgyal ba Yang dgon pa*," unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 2013; Amy Paris Langenberg, *Birth in Buddhism: The Suffering Fetus and Female Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

274 *'khyud cing dbang po sbyar ba las/ lus kyi sa'i brtan pas bde ba myong ste/ saṃ rang sgra 'byung / Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 179a.*

of a body and mind.²⁷⁵ From these foundational components, causality unfurls the organs of the body and perception via the functions of the elements.²⁷⁶ Bodily substances, channels, organs, and eventually each aspect of a human body and mind develop, and the narrative stops at four months.

The text discusses *cakra-s* and how to stimulate the elements of the body in the next chapter, or level twelve of the text, “A Detailed Ascertainment of the Key Points.”²⁷⁷ According to the Khenpos, when Longchenpa discusses passages on massage, this also applies to winds and channels yoga.²⁷⁸ That is a somewhat contested interpretation in that Longchenpa did not address winds, channels, and inner heat practice specifically.

In *Being Human in a Buddhist World*, Janet Gyatso discusses passages that refer to tantric presentations of the channels alongside traditional Tibetan medical remedies such as moxibustion in both tantric and medical accounts of the body. She describes reluctance from both the medical side and the religious side to separate medical realities from religious ones.²⁷⁹

Longchenpa’s presentation of the *cakra-s* is unique because each of the four main *cakra-s* are divided into sub-*cakra-s*, one for each of the three main channels. He defines the four *cakra-s*

²⁷⁵ *dang po dri za bar 'jug pa'i sems lus 'tshol ba'i phyir 'ongs pa dang / pha ma 'du 'phrod byed pa 'dzom nas ma'i bshang lam nas zhugs te/ pha'i dwangs ma dkar po yungs 'bru tsham mig chung 'tsher ba dngul chu lta bu/ 2.11.1 Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 179a.*

²⁷⁶ The elements driving the actions of the developing body appear throughout the lengthy account of embryology, such as in the following passage in the same section following conception. “At that time, one takes on a body by means of the wind element. It is impelled upwards by force of the pulsations of the inner winds. Thus they are present like the scattering drops of mercury, present in a coiling manner.” *de'i dus na 'byung ba rlung gis lus bzung ba de nang gi rlung 'phar ba'i stobs kyis gyen la 'phar nas dngul chu'i thigs pa yar ba ltar khрил khрил gnas te/ 2.11.1 Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 179b.*

²⁷⁷ *gnad nges pa bye brag tu bshad pa ste rim khang bcu gnyis pa/ 2.12 Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 190b.*

²⁷⁸ *'phen pa 'phur ba las rtog pa che yang bsam gtan myur du skye bar byed do / 2.12.1.2.2 Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 196b.*

²⁷⁹ Janet Gyatso, *Being Human in a Buddhist World: An Intellectual History of Medicine in Early Modern Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 198.

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as “four subtle knots,”²⁸⁰ which are bundles of channels through which the winds run. The taste (*ro ma*) *cakra*-s describe the interdependent and conventional aspects of the *cakra*-s. From relative causes, blood, flesh, ligaments, fat, marrow, semen, and the physical body develop. In chapter twelve of the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* it says:²⁸¹

A vital essence of winds is present in the taste [throat] knot the size of one-tenth of a mustard seed. It distinguishes between the vibrant aspects and the dregs. It discards externally excrement, urine, and so forth. It generates the vibrant aspects of the body such as the luster and glow. Therefore, this is called the “tastes” [knot]. The natural vital essence of luminosity of the mind is present in the peak [knot]. Therefore, it is called “the peak.” These are called “the support of the relative.”

The solitary (*rkyang ma*) *cakra*-s act as intermediaries between *samsara* and *niṛvāna*.

In dependence upon [kyangma], an immaculate uncontaminated primordial knowing that is ultimate manifests. Therefore, it is called the natural vital essence. With a pure gateway, it is the four lamps. When impure, it becomes the four elements. By relying upon them, one will naturally attain Buddhahood. For that reason, they are called the natural vital essences.²⁸²

The central channel’s (*dbus ma*) *cakra*-s are the basis of the four buddha-bodies central to buddha-nature theory.

In the center is *kundarma*. It comprises the nature of all the channels gathered together. Moreover, it vibrates with the propulsions and contractions of the winds. Since it becomes the basis of *samsara* and *nirvana*, it is called “ma” [(mother or foundation)]. The vital essence of ultimate reality moves through it. If we look at the *kundarma* in accordance with the knots, then in the generativity navel knot, there is clearly present the basis of all the buddha-bodies, which is a mustard seed size body and shines with hands and face of

²⁸⁰ *de la mdud pa phra mo bzhi yod de/ lte ba dang / dran pa dang / ro rnam dang / rtse mo bzhi na/ dang po rgyas skyed byed kyi rtsa bskyed pas rtsa'i nang du pha'i rgyu thig le dkar ba yung 'bru la bcur bgos pa'i cha tsam cig gnas so/ 2.12.1.1.3 Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 191a.*

²⁸¹ */ro rnam na rlung gi thig le yungs 'bru'i bcu cha tsam du gnas te/ des dangs snyigs 'byed par byed la/ snyigs ma dri chen dri chu la sogs pa phyr 'dor zhing / dwangs ma lus kyi bkrag dang gzi mdangs skyed pas na ro rnam zhe bya'o/ rtse mo na/ sems kyi rang bzhin 'od kyi thig le yungs 'bru'i bcu cha tsam du gnas pas rtse mo zhes bya'o/ 2.12.1.1.3 I have changed sems kyi to sems kyi. Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 191a.*

²⁸² *de la brten nas don dam zag pa med pa'i ye shes mngon du 'char ba'o/ de la brten nas rang bzhin du sangs rgya ba'o/ de'i phyr rang bzhin gyi thig le zhes bya ste/ sgo dag pas sgron ma bzhi/ ma dag pas 'byung ba bzhir 'gyur ro/ 2.12.1.1.3 Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 191a.*

light.²⁸³

What follows represents the beginnings of future conversations that engage Tibetan Buddhist philosophy in contemporary philosophy of mind. I hope to show that Longchenpa's Great Perfection presentation of the tantric body converses well with contemporary naturalistic presentations of the mind and body. Buddhism in general, and Longchenpa in particular, have much to say on this topic. Longchenpa's heavy reliance on the elements situates this presentation nicely within naturalistic and physicalist ways of viewing the world. The additional feature of an accompanying meditation system invites first-person phenomenological insights, bringing philosophy to life. Chapters such as these demonstrate how tantric Buddhism— as opposed to non-tantric presentations— is particularly conversant with contemporary naturalistic ways of understanding the world.

The Mind-Body Connection in Great Perfection Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy

The vajra body theory that supports winds and channels yoga relies heavily on the functions of the natural elements— earth, water, fire, and wind— as the constituent parts of a body and mind. The philosophical points that follow help us to understand winds and channels yoga practice by exploring the connection between the body and mind. When Longchenpa speaks about *relative truths*, reliance on the elements make the theory conversant with other naturalistic schools of thought. This refers back to the original question that inspires the dissertation, how does yoga work? The question could be reframed here as, does yoga work in a way that is comprehensible to contemporary ways of knowing that favor naturalistic

²⁸³ *dbus ma kun 'dar ma ni/ rtsa thams cad kyi rang bzhin 'dus pa/ de yang rlung gi 'phen bsdud kyis 'dar ba/ 'khor 'das kyi gzhir gyur pas ma zhes bya la/ de nas don dam pa chos nyid kyi thig le rgyu ste/ de'i mdud pa bzhin/ skyed byed na/ sku thams cad kyi rten sku yungs 'bru tsam la 'od kyi zhal phyag tu gsal bar gnas so/ 2.12.1.1.3 Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 191a.*

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explanations?

What are naturalism and physicalism? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines naturalism as “the philosophical belief that everything arises from natural properties and causes, and supernatural or spiritual explanations are excluded or discounted.”²⁸⁴ Physicalism is defined as “the doctrine that the real world consists simply of the physical world.”²⁸⁵ The contemporary philosopher Jaegwon Kim defines naturalism as, “The doctrine that the natural world is the whole world.” He defines physicalism as, “The physical world is the whole world.” In this scenario, physicalism entails naturalism but naturalists need not take a stand on physicalism. Naturalism is a claim about causality, namely that the ontological world is ontologically self-sufficient. This excludes the possibility of supernatural explanations. Kim further defines the natural world as the “spacetime world populated by objects and events connected by causal relations.”²⁸⁶

To be frank, Longchenpa is deeply concerned with supernatural explanations, for example the three bodies of a buddha that constitute the buddha nature schema underlying the body do not have naturalistic explanations. Although this is the case, Longchenpa’s presentation of the body relies on causal relationships among the natural elements relevant to the spacetime world. Within this map of causality that constitutes the body with the elements, Longchenpa stakes out a naturalistic terrain within a greater presentation of reality that is not naturalistic. Despite this seeming contradiction, the relative-truth aspect of Great Perfection philosophy is naturalistic, and

²⁸⁴Oxford Dictionary, “naturalism (noun),” accessed April 23, 2022

<https://www.google.com/search?q=naturalism+definition&oq=naturali&aqs=chrome.0.35i39j69i57j46i13i175i199i433i512j0i433i512i17.3231j1j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=physicalism+definition&oq=physicalism+definition&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i22i3013j0i10i22i30j0i22i30i5.3365j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

²⁸⁶ Jaegwon Kim, “From Naturalism to Physicalism: Supervenience Redux,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 85, no. 2 (November 2011): 109–34.

this has the unintended result of making the system conversant with scientific theories. Willa Blythe Miller's research on the seventeenth century Tibetan thinker Yang dgon pa presents a similar situation:

“Yang dgon pa naturalizes the central channel, and all of the other channels as well, as an innate, locatable structure within the human body....²⁸¹ The naturalizing of the channels as a part of the physical body, or even a precedent for the physical body, is a theoretical move found in some tantras of the niruttara class.... If the central channel is neither imaginary nor a physical structure such as the spine, what is it? On what level of materiality does the central channel exist? What does it mean to say it is the “the subtlest of the subtle”?...

Apparently, the central channel (and by extension the vajra body) is not just real; it has the quality of some sort of materiality (dngos po) and substance (rdzas), at least according to Spyang snga ba's understanding....

Furthermore, it is existent on a relative (kun rdzob) level, a level that usually applies to the conventional world, not the exalted realizations that are normally said to ensue inside the central channel. This also provides us with a strikingly clear gloss for dngos po. It is not merely a thing; it is a thing that seems to have form, materiality, or substance. With this understanding, the meaning of dngos po'i gnas lugs leans towards a gloss of “the nature of matter” or “the nature of substance.”²⁸⁷

Longchenpa makes a similar assertion in chapter eleven²⁸⁸ titled “The Body Made from Karmic Impressions.” In his account of embryological development. He describes how normal, afflicted consciousness arises from physical processes, namely the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air. For example, this moment occurs just after conception:

It dissolves into the mother's pure lineage channel, which is red. The milk and blood mix in the mother's womb and become a single entity. The manner in which the body initially forms is that the four elements are the support for the development of the body. They arise as if out of empty space, like the sky.²⁸⁹

Descriptions such as this one place the elements as the primary force behind the

²⁸⁷ Willa Blythe Miller, “Secrets of the Vajra Body: Dngos Po'i Gnás Lugs and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of Rgyal Ba Yang Dgon Pa” (Unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 2013), 199-201.

²⁸⁸ The term for chapter here is “*rim khang*,” which is actually “stage” or “level.”

²⁸⁹ *ma'i rigs can gyi rtsa'i dwangs ma dmar po la thim pa/ ma'i mngal du khrag dang 'o ma 'dres pa ltar gcig tu gyur pa las/ lus 'grub pa'i tshul bshad na thog ma lus chags pa'i rten ni 'byung ba bzhi las stong pa nam mkha' ltar gnas pa las/ 2.11.1 Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 179a.*

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development of the body and mind. While the body is highlighted here, subsequent passages address the mind. The elements proceed from this put to work together from this tiny embryo to developing a fully-formed body and mind.

Such passages place Longchenpa's description of *vajra* body theory as in line with *naturalistic mind-body dualism* put forth by philosopher of mind Brie Gertler²⁹⁰ in conversation with David Chalmers. This theory claims that consciousness is an aspect of the natural world explainable by the laws of nature.²⁹¹ Naturalistic dualism goes beyond simple causality to make the intuitive organizational claim that lower-level phenomena constitute higher-level phenomena. This argument pertains to causality.

While Buddhism has long averred that parts construct wholes in its classical paradigm of emptiness that relies on the chariot metaphor, here that schema is applied to the body's natural elements at an atomic level of analysis. In particular, the *vajra* body paradigm explains how channels, winds, and vital essences come together to constitute the body's organs, emotions, and functions of both body and mind.

Longchenpa's embryology narrative describes the causal continuum of the structures and dynamics of the body that begins at conception and develops into a human fetus. One develops a complex human body out of basic and minute initial seeds from the father and mother, which provide the foundational physical elements. This combines with wind, which carries a form of disembodied sentience in from in-between lives in the greater scheme of reincarnation. In *vajra* body metaphysics, the winds must be present for any activity to happen because they are the element of motility and change. The other elements have their own sets of functions but motility

²⁹⁰ Brie Gertler, "Dualism: How Epistemic Issues Drive Debates about the Ontology of Consciousness," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²⁹¹ David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, Philosophy of Mind Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 128.

is necessary for all action. Action is the constituent of karma in general.

Naturalistic dualism maintains that there is a connection between physical structures and their dynamics, on one hand, and consciousness on the other. It holds that while “consciousness is not physical, it may arise from physical processes,” but ultimately “it is something over and above the physical.”²⁹² Consciousness is qualitative in nature—it pertains to “what it is like” to be, which cannot be addressed by structural dynamics. To argue that Great Perfection *vajra* body theory conforms to naturalistic dualism, its metaphysics must:

1. be dominated by natural laws;
2. have structure and dynamics;
3. have structural dynamics that affect consciousness.
4. describe consciousness in *epistemological* terms.

Subtle body theory is dominated by the laws of nature in that it is governed by the interaction of the natural elements—earth, water, fire, and wind.²⁹³

Just how does this qualify as a physical system? Brie Gertler provides us with a definition of a physical thing: “A property is physical if and only if it is, or is necessitated by, the sort of property that physical theory tells us about.” Also, a physical thing must be “characterized in terms of structure and dynamics.”²⁹⁴ And, this is important: there is no consensus on what type of phenomena constitute all physical phenomena. Therefore, it follows that the Great Perfection model is a physical model because the natural elements provide basic structures, and their functions inform a *specific* set of dynamics. I am accepting the elements as physical without philosophically questioning this statement. In the realm of dependent origination, the elements

²⁹² Brie Gertler, “Dualism: How Epistemic Issues Drive Debates about the Ontology of Consciousness,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

²⁹³ This list is either comprised of four or five members. In the latter case, ether is the fifth element.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

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are physical things.

In its description of winds, channels, and vital essences, the *Supreme Vehicle* establishes the functions that the elements perform. Namely, water binds things together; fire transforms by burning; earth provides stability; wind moves things along. These combine with each other to perform other functions and in that way, the body is constructed progressively based on pre-existing structures in causal relationships. Within the first seven days after conception, the embryo possesses the seed form for all physical, emotional, and transcendent experiences of body, speech, and mind. Standard Nyingma Great Attainment practice²⁹⁵ likewise take seven days following this model.²⁹⁶

The chapter on embryology locates resources and opportunities within the human body. Buddha-nature is stitched in at every stage along the way via the ubiquitous placement of letters, lights, self-emergent sounds, and consort pairs alongside the more coarse five psycho-physical aggregates. As buddha-nature is established as a natural and local phenomenon, it follows that one feels quite “born for Buddhist practice.” The entire setup is to describe how the body and mind are perfectly designed and attuned for contemplative practice because buddha-nature already exists in the body.

At the same time, the structure and dynamics provide thorough descriptions of human anatomy and psychology including consciousness; the sense powers; the limbs; flesh, blood, heat and breath; bone, marrow and lymph; skin, pus, and mucus; ligaments, tendons, and fascia; spinal fluid; and sexual reproductive fluids.

Chapter twelve of the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* goes on to describe how lower-

²⁹⁵ *sgrub chen*. A Great Attainment practice is a contemplative ritual that takes place continuously for seven days and seven nights and is said to accumulate great stores of merit and purify significant amounts of karma.

²⁹⁶ Namdroling monk, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2019.

level subtle body structures developed in chapter eleven are organized into organs and the various functions of mind and body. It emphasizes the three main channels and four *cakra*-s. The *cakra*-s organize and locate functions such as digestion, excretion, and the full-spectrum emotional life. Minute subtle body structures provide the nuts and bolts for processes such as memory, thoughts, the removal of waste, the body's luster, and organ function, to name a few.

The efficacy of yogic practices such as winds, channels, and inner heat or sexual yoga are explained by Longchenpa: “The striking of the crown *cakra* brings about a clear mind that accomplishes whatever it wishes.”²⁹⁷ It is the stimulation of the channels and *cakra*-s that incites change, and numerous medical remedies prescribe pressing channels. He also mentions other therapies such as blood-letting.

Vajra body theory provides terminology for structures that make Buddhism conversant with science. According to Gertler, a “metaphysical standard for physical science” conceives of higher “level” phenomena such as biological features as “explained by identifying phenomena at lower “levels,” such as chemistry or physics, as constitutive. Thus, higher level phenomena cannot vary independently of more fundamental phenomena. Similarly, in *vajra* body theory, the “subtle” and “coarse” could be replaced by naturalistic dualism's “lower level” and “higher level.” An example of how manipulating lower-level structures of the winds, channels, and vital essences affects consciousness is as follows from the *Supreme Vehicle*: 298

²⁹⁷ *rtse mo'i 'phen pa dag pas sems dag bsam pa 'grub par byed/ 2.12.1.2.2.2.1.1* Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 196b.

²⁹⁸ Here Longchenpa is in the midst of a long quote from the text *The Location of the Channels, the Precious Cakras* (*rtsa gnas rin po che'i 'khor lo*)
gnas pa'i rlung dang thig le dang //
shes pa'i rta ni 'di lhar yod//
gtem du rung ba'i rtsa bzhi la//
shar du rung ba'i rtsa bzhi yod//
snang ba thig le bzhi gnas pa'o//

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In these channels are the abiding winds and drops
and also the horse of consciousness.

You can press on four of the channels;

Four are able to rise up.

The four drops abide there.

Via the correct pressing of the winds,

Fifty channels are activated,

and there are 50 results that can be achieved.

The dynamics of subtle body theory are explained using the common Abhidharma philosophical terms to describe causality throughout Longchenpa's presentation. Abhidharma explains causal dependence, a key topic in the debate on mind-body dualism. The language of main causes (*rgyu*) and contributing conditions (*rkyen*) pervades Longchenpa's presentation of how the body's phenomena come together. Also, the language of support (*rten*) and supported (*brten pa*) is used widely throughout this tantric presentation.

That vajra body structure and dynamics affect consciousness is best illustrated by a commonly cited subtle body metaphor: the mind and winds are like horse and rider. This emic representation of the mind-body relationship demonstrates a self-consciousness of the non-congruity of the epistemological status among the parts of a person. The physical winds act as horse, carrying the rider, which represents the mind or consciousness. Their roles are unique and vital to the constitution of a single person.

Direct knowledge about the subtle body is accessible only via the extremely rarefied state

gtem du rung ba'i rlung sgo nas//

'jug pa'i rtsa ni lnga bcu'o//

thob pa'i 'bras bu de nyid do//

Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 207a.

of yogic direct perception.²⁹⁹ This fact may explain why there are striking aspects of the vajra body model that have been discovered by science only recently. Most notable are the fact that the embryo takes the shape of a tadpole, and that there is bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract. “*Srinbu*,” which could be translated as “insects” or “bacteria” play a significant role in the stages of embryological growth. Did they know about the gut microbiome in fourteenth century Tibet long before the advent of the microscope? Buddhism claims that these things are known via “yogic direct perception,” which is non-conceptual, un-erring, and comes about through rarefied states of mind brought about through contemplative training. If this is true, yogic practices promise to modify consciousness to see these unknown realities directly.

This has been a taste of the complex presentation of the body that Longchenpa provides in chapters eleven and twelve in the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*. The main takeaway is that the text is strangely scientific in that it describes a clear structure and dynamics where lower level phenomena inform upper level realities. This language based on Abhidharma causality makes Longchenpa's presentation readily conversant with science and/or a physicalist worldview. For yoga practitioners in the contemporary period, at the very least this appeals to a modern way of thinking oriented toward science. When I read this text with the two Khenpos, they were both impressed with Longchenpa's ability to reason using physical properties, and repeatedly asked me if parts of the text presented scientific facts.

Cakras Theory in Longchenpa's Treasury.

Cakras feature prominently in chapter twelve of the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*.

²⁹⁹ See Eli. Franco, “Meditation and Metaphysics,” in *Yogic Perception, Meditation and Altered States of Consciousness*, ed. Dagmar. Eigner and Eli. Franco (Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009). Franco refutes Lambert Schmithausen and other scholars' assertion that all Buddhist philosophy is based on meditative experiences.

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The most striking aspect of Longchenpa's presentation of *cakra-s* compared to that in *Sky Dharma* is the sheer amount of detail. This is the exact opposite of what Migyur Dorje and Karma Chakme recommend for practitioners. One has to wonder, why does anyone need such a detailed presentation of the *vajra* body? Longchenpa's description reads like an anatomy and physiology text, and is evidence of demand for such granular levels of information to explain the physical world and the body's place in it. Longchenpa's account sounds scientific in its taxonomic lists of the features of the body and how they develop with the elements, performing only their own limited functions.

Longchenpa's explanation fills in vital information that *Sky Dharma* practitioners could use if needed, especially when he unpacks the naturalistic elements-based theory. The explanations shed light on an otherwise unknown aspect of reality. Specifically, when the Namdroling lamas talk about the correspondence between the inner *vajra* body and the external world, they claim that this works because both systems are comprised of the natural elements. While *Sky Dharma* does not elaborate further, Longchenpa, on the other hand, unpacks each point carefully.

The most striking aspect of this system is that the three main channels— *roma* (*ro ma*), *kyangma* (*rkyang ma*), and *uma* (*dbus ma*)— each have their own set of four *cakra-s*. These channels have many names, and it is easier to refer to them by their location— right, left, and central, respectively. Below is a brief synopsis of Longchenpa's lengthy description of the *cakra-s* from chapter twelve of the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*.

The Roma Cakra-s

The roma *cakra*-s describe how conventional vital essences exist in the body.³⁰⁰

Longchenpa notes that if these were moved elsewhere, the mind and body (*lus sems*) would separate into two. Thus, these *cakra*-s are the cause for the unity of the ordinary body (*lus*) and mind (*sems*). From these relative vital essences, blood develops. From there, flesh, ligaments, lymph, fat, bone marrow, spinal fluid, and semen all develop.³⁰¹

The roma *cakra* at the navel is called the “causal-generating channel” (*rgyus skyed byed kyi rtsa*). It is brought about by the father’s white seed, and it causes the body to grow.³⁰² The second *cakra*, the “memory *cakra*” (*dran pa*), arises in dependence upon the mother’s red vital essence. It is the main *condition* for existence, and supports memories and thoughts. This presentation as main cause and main condition uses language from Abhidharma's logic of causality where a main cause and its supporting conditions bring an object to fruition. The throat *cakra* is called the “tastes” (*ro rnams*) *cakra* and is associated with wind, the element responsible for movement and action. It oversees impure functions such as discarding bodily waste, and pure functions such as the body’s luster. The fourth *cakra* at the crown of the head has the nature of the ordinary mind.

Roma’s navel cakra (*skyed chos dang po’i ‘khor lo*). At the navel, the father’s white seed, 1/10 the size of a mustard seed, is the initial cause for the body to expand and grow. The

³⁰⁰ *g.yas na kun rdzob kyi thig le’o/ de’ng g.yas kun rdzob kyi thig le la brten nas lus smin par byed la// 2.12.1.1.3. Klong chen pa Dri med ’od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-’byams-pa’s Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 191a.*

³⁰¹ *de dag ni kun rdzob kyi rten zhes bya’o/ de dag ’phos pas ni lus sems gnyis ’bral bar ’gyur ro/ kun rdzob kyi rgyu de las khrag tu smin la/ khrag las sha/ sha las chu ba/ chu ba las tshil bu/ tshil las rkang / rkang las rkang mar/ rkang mar las rgyungs pa/ rgyungs pa las kun rdzob kyi thig ler smin pa’o/ 2.12.1.1.3. Klong chen pa Dri med ’od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-’byams-pa’s Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 191b.*

³⁰² *dang po rgyus skyed byed kyi rtsa bskyed pas rtsa’i nang du pha’i rgyu thig le dkar ba yungs ’bru la bcur bgos pa’i cha tsam cig gnas so// 2.12.1.1.3. Klong chen pa Dri med ’od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-’byams-pa’s Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 191a.*

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“production channel” is the causal factor, and is created by the father’s white vital essence, which splits off a portion. It is called the cause because the body grows and increases in size in dependence upon the father’s white vital essence.

Roma’s heart Cakra (dran pa ‘dus pa’i ‘khor lo). The second cakra, the memory cakra, arises in dependence upon the mother’s red vital essence. When it splits off a portion, it creates the main *condition* for existence. It is called memory because its main functions are to support memories and thoughts.

Roma’s throat Cakra (ro nam ‘dus pa’i ‘khor lo). The cakra of taste at the throat is also split off from one-tenth of a mustard seed like the previous two, but is neither a main cause or condition. It is associated with wind, the element responsible for all movement and action in the elemental system. It oversees functions to do with impurity such as discarding bodily waste, excrement, urine and so forth. It oversees functions having to do with purity such as the body’s luster and radiance.

Roma’s crown Cakra (rnam par gos pa’i ‘khor lo). At the peak of the head, i.e. the “crown,” there is a vital essence made of light the size of a mustard seed that has the nature of the ordinary mind (sems).

The Kyangma Cakra-s

The *kyangma* channel has its own four *cakra-s*, which act as intermediaries between *samsara* and *niṛvāna*. If practiced upon, these become the four lamps, a special gnostic feature of the tantric body unique to Great Perfection Buddhism. If not, they remain as the four elements. These *cakra-s* are the basis upon which self-arising insight and the realization of emptiness can manifest through practice.

The first *cakra* is the place of the far-reaching water lamp, and is likened to small and

shining eyes that twinkle and glitter. At the navel's memory *cakra*, there is a very subtle fire vital essence that supports self-arising insight. At the throat's taste *cakra* is the support of the expanse of the five lights vital essence. The crown vital essence supports emptiness. The light of each vital essence is the size of a thumb. If one uses these *cakra*-s in practice, ultimate uncontaminated wisdom manifests for real and one can naturally become a buddha. For that reason, it is called the “natural vital essence.”³⁰³

The Uma Cakra-s

Finally, the *cakra*-s of the central channel, *kundharma*, are the basis of the four bodies of a buddha. This is the natural state of the mind itself, or buddha nature. *Kundharma*, the central channel, is called “kun” because it is the nature of all the channels. The “dar” is because it gathers and impels the winds. It is called “ma” because it is the basis for both samsara and nirvana. The buddha bodies all rely upon the seed here, which is the causal vital essence of the ultimate nature of reality. This is the natural state of the mind itself, which is tantamount to buddha nature.

At Kundharma’s memory *cakra* are the four doors to the celestial mansion of the five types of wisdom. There are four archways and the deities at each door have their own color and mudra. Each deity has its own mansion, and this is how practitioners make a connection with a deity in the maṇḍala. At the crown *cakra* is the abode of wrath that all the lights depend upon.

The central channel does not have blood or pus. It is empty and unimpeded by karmic

³⁰³ *rkyang ma'i mdud pa bzhin skyed byed na/ rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma'i sa na mig chung rab tu 'tsher ba gnyis so/ /dran pa na/ shes rab rang byung gi sgron me'i rten me'i thig le rab tu 'phro bar gnas so/ ro rnams na/ dbyings nam dag gi rten 'od lnga'i thig le yung 'bru tsam mu khyud dang bcas par gnas so/ rtse mo na/ thig le stong pa'i rtong pa'i rten 'od kyi thig le'i so so'i mtshon gang du gnas so/ de la brten nas don dam zag pa med pa'i ye shes mngon du 'char ba'o/ /de la rten nas rang bzhin du sangs rgya ba'o/ /de'i phyir rang bzhin gyi thig le zhes bya ste/ sgo dag pas sgron ma bzhi/ ma dag pas 'byung ba bzhir 'gyur ro/ 2.12.1.1.3. Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 191b.*

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winds. From *roma* on the right, the vital essences of water, blood and semen are produced. From *kyangma* on the left, the purity of the elements and wisdom move, which make the channel work.

In summary, the central channel is for wisdom winds, *roma* is for blood, water, and semen, and *kyangma* does the work. Khenpos Tenzin told me the following passage refers to winds and channels yoga. “When pressure is applied to the Taste *cakra* in a way that encourages purity, one’s speech becomes euphonious, their words are clear, and the sound is knowledgeable. If pressure that encourages impurity is applied, speech is clear but even if the person has courage, they have no ability to achieve things. If there is purifying pressure on the Crown *cakra*, the mind becomes clear and they accomplish whatever they wish.”³⁰⁴

The Role of the Elements in the Cakra-s

Longchenpa's description of how sentient beings depend upon the *cakra*-s to have a body unfolds relying upon the elements. To get a clearer picture of how the elements drive the system, selected descriptions from the *Supreme Vehicle* on the elements and the *cakra*-s are summarized below. These descriptions show how karma drives both sickness and also liberation.

Water. The body of any given sentient beings is based upon the *cakra*-s. However, the body is formed from many elements that are not the wheels. The manner of origination of external existence, depending on the winds, there is water. From water, earth and so forth are based. Like the external world takes shape with the elements based on each other, there is the origin of the internal body. That happens from water, which gathers into one. The wind and mind of the bardo being gather into the vibrant, lucent essences of the father and mother. Water is the

³⁰⁴ *ro rnams kyi 'phen pa dag pa las ngag stan tshig gsal sgra mkhas par byed/bsdus pas ngag mi stan no/ 'phel ba ma dag pas ngag stan spobs pa che yang ngag la nus pa med par byed do/ rtse mo'i 'phen pa dag pas sems dag bsam pa 'grub par byed//* 2.12.1.1.3. Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 196b.

initial element that gathers together all four things into one. Out of that, there is origination in terms of the internal body.

The first *cakra* takes form from the activities of water. Thus, it emerges and occurs as the place where there is the maturation of blood, pus, saliva, tears, and so on. Blood performs the activity of the waxing and waning of the body. When the elements are hot, the blood gets dry and the body can become sick. When blood is increased, illness gets cleared up. When the elements are cold, the blood becomes icy and other illnesses arise. This can be remedied by heating the blood.³⁰⁵

Earth. The second *cakra* is primarily the functions of the earth element because the earth depends upon water. Earth is the flesh of the body. There are different kinds of flesh, such as bad flesh and tight flesh. All types of flesh spread out from the heart and depend on it. If you cut, beat, or pierce that flesh, you die.³⁰⁶

Fire. Trees and so forth grow from earth. They become the cause of fire. It is similar to how wood and other things are produced from the earth, and if you burn it, it changes. The activities of fire are central for the third *cakra*. It produces the body's warmth, sensory faculties, and color. When there is too much heat, the elements in the body heat up. By virtue of that, disease and death arise. Likewise, if there is not enough heat, it causes the conditions of cold

³⁰⁵ *dang po ni/ 'gro bag cig gi lus la 'khor lo la brten pa dang / 'khor lo ma yin pa brten pa'i chos du ma las grub pa yang / phyi srid pa'i chags lugs rlung la brten nas chu/ chus las sa la sogs pa brten pa ltar/ rlung sems dwangs mar 'dus pa chus gcig tu bsdud pa las nang lus su chags pa yang / 'khor lo dang po chu'i las las grub pas/ khrag dang chu ser dang kha chu mig chu la sogs pa'i smin sor byung ba'o/ lus kyi 'phel 'grib khrag gis byed las/ 'byung ba tsha ma'i dus na khrag skams pas lus kyi nad du 'gro la/ khrag spel bas nad sel lo/ / grang spel bas nad sel lo/ / grang dus khrag 'khrags pas nad du 'gro la/ sros pas nad grol lo/ / 2.12.1.2.2.1. Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 195b.*

³⁰⁶ *de lta bu'i chu la sa brten pas na/ 'khor lo gnyis pa sa'i byed las gtso ba yin no/ /sas lus kyi gnyan sha dang / gnyan grims sha dang / sha sna tshogs pa snying nas mched cing rten pa ste/ 'di rnams bcad pa dang / 'thems pa dang / brdungs pa dang / phug pa las tshe'i dus byed la/ gtar bsreg gi rten 'brel gyis nad las thar ro/ / kLong chen rab 'byams pa dri med 'od zer, "Theg Mchog Mdzod/," 2.12.1.2.2.1. Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 195b.*

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disease, which might cause sickness and/or death. When the elements are balanced, you are free because it serves as the interdependent support of reality.³⁰⁷

Wind. From fire, warmth is fanned by the moving binds so that it blazes ever greater. The heat is moved by the moving winds. Just like that, the fourth *cakra* is the performance of the action of wind. By it, the breath moves in and out, and it performs the upward moving and downward clearing functions. The karmic winds perform as the root of samsara. Winds agitate the individual activities of the elements in the body. The winds, dormant and activated, disrupts the individual activities of the body's elements. By virtue of that it serves as the condition for disease and death. One is free via the interdependent connections of striking to the key points.³⁰⁸

Space. Flesh originates in dependence upon water. Therefore, water causes the body's flesh to expand. Water originates in dependence upon something that is like the nature of the empty sky. Therefore, it causes blood to expand. In dependence upon earth, there is a ripening of fire, and that causes the body's warmth and glow to expand. In dependence upon fire, there is the origination of winds. That causes the expansion of the breath, luster, presence, and physical strength.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ *de ltar sa las shing la sogs pa skyed pa me'i rgyur song ba dang/ 'khor lo gsum pa me'i byed las gtso bo/ 'dis ni lus kyi drod dang dbang po dang kha dog skyed pas/ drod ches na tsha ba'i 'byung bar 'gyur pas/ lus kyi na ba dang 'chi ba'i rkyen byed la/ drod chung na grang ba'i nad kyi rkyen byed pas na ba dang 'chi ba'i rkyen byed cing / 'byung ba cha mnyam pas chos nyid kyi rten 'brel byas las grol lo// de yang me las drod gyos rlung gi skyod pas cher 'bar ba dang 'dra bar/. 2.12.1.2.2.1. Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 196a.*

³⁰⁸ *de yang me las drod gyos rlung gi skyod pas cher 'bar ba dang 'dra bar/ 'khor lo bzhi rlung gi byed pa'i las byed pas/ dbugs phyi nang du rgyu ba dang / gyen rgyu thur sel gyi las byed/ las kyi rlung gis 'khor ba'i rtsa ba byed/ bag la nyal ba dang kun nas ldang ba'i las kyi lus kyi 'byung ba so so'i las 'khrugs pas na ba dang 'chi ba'i rkyen byed pa ste/. 'byung ba gnad la bor ba'i rten 'brel gyis grol lo// 2.12.1.2.2.1. Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 196a.*

³⁰⁹ *stong pa nam mkha'i rang bzhin lta bu la brten nas chu chags pas khrag rgyas par byas/ sa ;a nrten nas mer smin pas lus kyi drod dang mdangs rgyas par byas/ me la brten nas rlung du chags pas dbugs dang bkrag dang gzi brjid dang stobs rgyas par byas so/. 2.12.1.2.2.1. Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg mchog mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 196a.*

Conclusion

Despite their differences, each of these texts represents a deep dive into a practice of sorts. Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* is a serious philosophy text and to read it, one must already possess a significant amount of learning plus take in a large amount of technical information. Longchenpa describes how karma creates experience through the channels, winds, vital essences, and *cakra*-s, and also how the elements power the body-mind complex as the lower-level structures that inform the upper-level structures and dynamics of the body and mind.

Sky Dharma requires that practitioners go into retreat and practice three or four sessions per day. By applying physical poses to breath control and elaborate visualizations, *Sky Dharma* aims to get the winds into the central channel.

Implicit in the contradictions between these two texts are certain critiques. One is the Great Perfection's rhetoric of simplicity so prominently displayed in the *Sky Dharma* text, exemplified by the scaled-down version of the tantric body represented by the central channel. The *Supreme Vehicle*, on the other hand, is complex and sets its gaze upon establishing the body within the greater cosmological paradigm. It also describes a medical model for yogins to use in retreat. Both texts offer correctives that use the *cakra*-s to address a different aspect of Buddhism.

While they both tackle the problem of karma, the practice text's rhetoric of simplicity could be a way for this lineage of winds and channels yoga to stand out in juxtaposition to other Tibetan Yoga systems. Longchenpa's theory, on the other hand, ties karma theory to the Great Perfection view.

In terms of the naturalistic themes found in Longchenpa, I believe that these are what makes Buddhism so palatable to scientists. There are many parallels between science and

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Buddhism, and subtle body theory includes a few areas that are strikingly similar. Two features of embryological development are particularly noteworthy. First, the embryo assumes the shape of a tadpole in its early stages. This was initially documented in the first century CE in India, but is discussed at length by Longchenpa. It is simply not possible to know this without a microscope, and yet Longchenpa and many other Buddhists knew. Khenpo Tenzin explained this as the result of having yogic direct perception.

Second, “*srin bu*,” which could be translated as “insects” or “bacteria” play a significant role in the stages of transformation during Longchenpa's account of embryology. These may be a very early account of bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract. In these ways, the subtle body alludes to an emic way of knowing in Buddhism. While it could not have been “science” since that category did not exist, in the contemporary episteme, it converses well with science, a reality that is not lost on the monastics at Namdroling. The monastics with whom I read the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* pointed out such apparent similarities on many occasions, but always as a question rather than a statement: “Is this science?” While they do not have a good education in science, they know enough to spot analogs to science when they appear in their own literature. Such conversations make the works of Longchenpa more readable to a contemporary audience. This is especially important in the world of Tibetan refugees and in the refugee camps, where the Dalai Lama's popularization of scientific views have been drawn out in other similar conversations via the Mind & Life institute.

However, another point of emphasis could easily fill another chapter, and that would be the ultimate reality level of vajra body anatomy. Drawing out the specifics of the aspects of the system that are *not* naturalistic is an essential task relevant to such interdisciplinary dialogue that remains to be done. One of the main roles of the vajra body is to highlight the union of relative

and ultimate entities in the location of the body itself. This microcosm of the greater macrocosmic world is certainly naturalistic in that it is made of the natural elements, but at every turn, there are characteristics that cannot be explained by science, nature, structure, or dynamics. These are the gnostic features of the body that Longchenpa weaves into his descriptions of anatomy and physiology, and that Migyur Dorje and Karma Chakme allude to in the winds and channels practices. The winds, channels, and vital essences all have a relative and an ultimate aspect. It is the relative aspect that converses well with science. The ultimate aspects of the *vajra* body are the main motivating force that justifies practice at all.

Chapter Four: Mind-Body Correlations in Sky Dharma Winds and Channels

Yoga

Chapter Summary

Chapter four presents ethnographic accounts of monks and nuns who practice *Sky Dharma* at Namdroling collected in one-on-one interviews. This chapter further explores the ways the body is connected to the mind by isolating mind-body correlations found in *Sky Dharma*. First, Migyur Dorje and Karma Chakme claim that the *vajra* body is an extension of the Abhidharma presentation of the body, which locates the tantric tradition among Buddhism's most classical paradigm for the mind-body connection. Second, the central channel provides a specific site for correlations between mind and body. The convergence of science and Buddhism are explored through questions posed by the monks and nuns themselves, which is attributed to the influence of the current Dalai Lama's leadership. The logical thread of some of the ways the *vajra* body practices and philosophy *seem like science* are examined. The main aim of the chapter is to investigate how physical practices influence the mind according to the Great Perfection system presented in *Sky Dharma* oral and written teachings.

Whatever is Inside is also Outside

Ani Lhamo's³¹⁰ skill with which she practices Tibetan yoga is impressive. Small in stature and in her early-twenties, the Bhutanese nun executes the complex postural sequences perfectly, jumps high, and lands confidently with a loud *thwack!* on her thick stuffed mat. Her movements are quick, strong and agile. The only thing she does not do is shout loudly. Although she is

³¹⁰ Pseudonym.

masterful at yoga, you will never see her moves on Instagram or in the public eye. In February of 2018, I joined the private Tibetan yoga retreat tucked away at the back of the nunnery at Namdroling. To do so, I had completed the prerequisite month-long retreat a year prior, was able to participate in the Tibetan language due to my graduate studies, and had traveled to rural India. I was the only non-nun in the retreat that year. Ani Lhamo was the main student-teacher (*chos dpon*) of the retreat, in which capacity she modeled the yoga postures unique to Tibetan Buddhism, led drills and conducted practice sessions. In an interview about *tsalung* (winds and channels) yoga practice, she said:

“*Tsalung* is actually about the winds and channels. Don't you think? The postures are much easier than the meditation. Everyone can perform the poses well. In that way, it is similar to yoga. For me, I find the meditation difficult. The first few days is easy, but as we start doing more exercises, it becomes increasingly complex. The meditation [we do during the yoga practice] is all about focusing on the winds and channels. While the exercises may appear similar to yoga, they are totally different. Yoga is seemingly just for the benefit of the body in this lifetime, whereas *tsalung* practice is for removing mental habits (*bag chags*) and the perfection of winds, channels, and *bindu*.”

This chapter showcases how winds and channels make Tibetan yoga a path for the transformation of consciousness by relying on the body. Interviews with Ani la³¹¹ and three other monastics at Namdroling address big questions about how Tibetan Yoga works in the context of mind-body philosophy. The stories of monks and nuns, all students in the monastery and nunnery and in their twenties, demonstrate how individuals hone in on aspects of the oral and written teachings on Tibetan Yoga. Often, their understanding and interpretations of the practices correlate with what they study in the monastic college, which provides evidence for the importance of a background education in the interpretation of contemplative practices. This is evidenced by how the lower year students discuss more about psychophysical components of the

³¹¹ “Ani la” is an honorific appellation for a nun widely used in Tibetan. It is common around the monastery and nunnery.

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body from Abhidharma, as well as teachings on emptiness. The upper-level students comment more on esoteric phenomena related to tantra and the Great Perfection worldview.

The philosophical teachings described in this chapter have been selected to emphasize the unique connections that *Sky Dharma* points out among mind, body, and the natural and supernatural world. This set of correlations showcases a Tibetan Buddhist perspective on how yoga transforms an individual's psychophysical components embedded in a relationship with the external world. The axiomatic paradigm central to such correlations is the subtle body made of channels, winds, and vital essences, concepts that are common to yoga traditions across the globe. In the Tibetan tradition presented here, winds, channels, and vital essences provide a mechanism to describe how a yogin becomes powerful when they master their own body. The basic principle at play is that whatever is interior to the body is a reflection of the exterior world and vice versa. An examination of the subtle body in the context of Tibetan yoga shows that this largely illusionist³¹² philosophy³¹³ has a deeply physical explanation, a statement that only pertains to the body's level of relative, conventional truth.

A basic presupposition from tantric Buddhist philosophy is a common refrain in *Sky Dharma*: Whatever is inside the body is also outside in the world and vice-versa. In Great Perfection tantric philosophy, the world is a projection dictated by karma stored in the body's winds and channels system. This correlation between the inner world of the subtle body and the external, physical world is emphasized in *Sky Dharma* oral teachings.³¹⁴

³¹² The locus classicus for Buddhist illusionism is the *Diamond Sūtra*, which states, “A shooting star, a clouding of the sight, a lamp, an illusion, a drop of dew, a bubble, a dream, a lightning's flash, a thunder cloud—This is the way one should see the conditioned.” Translation from Sanskrit by Paul Harrison. Paul Harrison, trans., *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā: A New English Translation of the Sanskrit Based on Two Manuscripts from Greater Gandhāra* (Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2006).

³¹³ Illusionism here is used both the way that Buddhist philosophy commonly proclaims that reality is an illusion, but also to the way that David Chalmers describes Illusionism in David Chalmers, “The Meta-Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 25, no. 9–10 (2018): 6–61.

³¹⁴ Anonymous tulku, *Sky Dharma* winds and channels oral teachings, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

The rather complex relationship between mind and body are unpacked using four examples from *Sky Dharma* oral teachings as well as interviews with monks and nuns. First, *Sky Dharma* relies claims that the Abhidharma categories that describe mind and body were expanded on in tantra using winds, channels, and vital essences. The first section of this chapter shows how Abhidharma is extended into the physical world with tantra. This stands in juxtaposition to the Abhidharma's own description of the psychophysical aggregates, which is only discussed using epistemology.³¹⁵ That makes it a theory about knowledge without making claims about the body's physical realities, which left a lot of room open for new claims to be made by tantra.

The other important set of mind-body correlations happens at the location of the central channel. The second section looks at the central channel as an analogue to the central nervous system and the peak experiences that could result from making use of that special feature of the subtle body.

Another angle through which mind-body correlations are explored is an examination of the ways the mind is used to heal physical ailments. The third section looks at practical medical techniques that rely on contemplation alone as an intervention for physical healing.

The final section unpacks the traditional "signs of practice" from Tibetan Yoga and how they pair mental and physical functions with supernormal powers that are the ideal results of practice.

The stories of three young monastics at Namdroling who endeavor to put this Great Perfection philosophy into practice at the annual monthlong yoga retreats help to explain these

³¹⁵ David Germano and William Waldron, "A Comparison of Ālaya-Vijñāna in Yogācāra and Dzogchen," in *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research*, ed. D.K. Nauriyal, Michael Drummond, and Y.B. Lal (New York: Routledge, 2006), 36–68.

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philosophical concepts. When they come close to a concept that explains how mind-body philosophy works, it is placed in relief with contemporary philosophy on consciousness.

Sky Dharma is a living practice tradition and questions arise for modern practitioners that come from outside of Buddhism. While *Sky Dharma*'s ideas laid out in the text originated in the seventeenth century at the latest, they are alive today at Namdroling. The monastics live in a globalized world. Monastics living in Tibetan Buddhist institutions in India under the Dalai Lama's influence are aware of the ways he advocates for the convergence of Buddhism and science. Tibetan Yoga is fertile ground for the exploration of such concepts because of its emphasis on the body and uniquely Tibetan philosophical ways of understanding the body and its relationship to the world that encourage physical explanations, or at least roughly physical ones.

The young monastics explore how concepts common to traditional yoga traditions throughout Asia—winds, channels, and vital essences—function in their own bodies and minds. We will see how they use attention and intention to manipulate the experience of their bodies and the world. At the same time, as mostly neophytes to yoga, their experiences lack the depth of the philosophical tradition, and their understanding varies according to how much education in tantra they have. They interpret through the lens of their monastic education and the contemporary world for monks and nuns living in a Tibetan refugee camp in India. In a globalized world where everyone is on the internet, these practices no longer exist in a bubble for them, and the questions that arise in this chapter arose for them too.

A Nun and the Abhidharma Presentation of the Body

When I met Ani Lhamo, she was a rising fourth year student at Namdroling nunnery's monastic college (*bshad grwa*). She was twenty-one at the time, and a native of Bhutan. Small in

stature and pretty, it was her third time in the *tsalung* retreat. In recognition of her skill in Tibetan Yoga practice, she was acting as the review teacher (*skyor dpon*) for the retreat. She was also one of the chanting masters. In this second role, she set the pace and kept track of the numerous chants we performed each day.

In a moment of doubt early on in the retreat I said to her, “Why are we doing these difficult postures?” She beamed back at me with a simple answer, “You have channels (*rtsa*) in your body. You want to make them better.” “Is this your direct experience.” “Yes!” she replied heartily. Her story exemplifies someone in the middle of a multi-year process of taking on an elaborate set of meaning through she was being taught to interpret her emotional life and its relationship to the external world. We will see examples of this below.

A few weeks prior she had completed the third year of the monastic college, and her recent studies were dedicated to understanding *emptiness*. This fundamental Buddhist philosophical concept explains the difference between appearances and reality. A main pedagogy in the monastery to learn about emptiness is rigorous debate of Buddhism’s four main philosophical tenet systems (*Vaibhashika*, *Sauntrantrika*,³¹⁶ *Chittamatra*, and *Madhyamaka*). These are four variations in explaining that the way the world appears to us is deceptive, and the role of the mind in its creation.³¹⁷

In an interview, Ani la³¹⁸ explained to me how the study of emptiness helps her manage

³¹⁶ For a good introduction to these concepts in English, see Alexander Berzin, “Sautrantika and Vaibashika: The Two Truths,” Study Buddhism, October 14, 2021, <https://studybuddhism.com/en/advanced-studies/abhidharma-tenet-systems/the-indian-tenet-systems/the-four-buddhist-tenet-systems-regarding-the-two-truths/vaibhashika-and-sautrantika-the-two-truths>.

³¹⁷ Much has been written about this topic elsewhere. For a basic introduction to the history and philosophy of this rich concept with an extensive literary and living trail, see Jan Christoph Westerhoff, “Nāgārjuna,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/nagarjuna/>. For an explanation more closely aligned with the Nyingma school of Great Perfection practiced at Namdroling, see Heidi L. Koppl, *Establishing Appearances as Divine: Rongzom Chokyi Zangpo on Reasoning, Madhyamaka, and Purity* (Boston: Snow Lion Publications, 2013).

³¹⁸ This is a general way of referring to Tibetan nuns that means “revered nun.”

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her emotions, especially to combat the problem of attachment.

“I enjoy studying emptiness but it is difficult to understand because it is profound. First, we have to understand [the emptiness of] things. This thing is empty. If my teacher says that about something I love, I don't believe them, because I love it very much. Since we are ordinary beings, we are bound to our emotions. We have many desires and are attached to the things we love.... When we think about things that are impermanent, we must think about emptiness. Nothing lasts forever in this world and it is meaningless to get attached to worldly materials because in the end we cannot take anything with us. *Things have no essence, and they are impermanent.* [This is a common functional definition of emptiness]. We have to think like that especially with the things we are most attached to, that we love the most, that we want most. It is said that we humans have immense desire because of our attachments. It is OK to get attached to books and such things because they help you gain knowledge. But we get attached to things that have a negative impact on our life, like mobile phones. This not only wastes our time but also disturbs our studies.”³¹⁹

Ani La's discussion of attachment touches upon clearing away mental afflictions, which is a primary justification for winds and channels yoga practice. Instead of being a direct path to seeing the nature of the mind like Great Perfection meditations such as direct transcendence (*thod rgal*), winds and channels yoga is considered an optional detour for those who need to purify their emotions. In Buddhism, attachment is one of the three root afflictions, the others being ignorance and aversion. While she has sat through the winds and channels retreat three times, and each time the teachers have clearly stated that the purpose is to purify karmic obscurations and mental habits including attachment, in our interview she did not explicitly connect her scholastic study of emptiness and attachment to winds and channels practice. After telling me about her studies, I asked what the benefit of *tsalung* practice is. She replied, “It makes the winds and channels good.” When asked how that works, she referred to the physical benefits of Tibetan yoga: “It is said that the exercises help to cure our diseases. Apart from that I don't have any exceptional experiences of my own. I know that it benefits the crucial points (*gnas la phan*). Other than that, I don't have any experience.”³²⁰

³¹⁹ Ani Sonam Lhamo, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

³²⁰ Ibid.

The monastics connect Buddhist philosophy to contemplative practice in non-linear ways across multiple years of scholastic and contemplative training. Gradual learning is built into the curriculum, and the type of knowledge being constructed at Namdroling unfolds slowly and in layers. Her lack of awareness of the overlap between her scholastic studies and her contemplative practice does not mean she will never make those connections. She was only finishing her third year when we spoke, and was already expert in the practices. Students I interviewed in higher years in their education all came around to these conclusions, like the lopon featured later in this chapter.

The contemplative and scholastic education on offer at Namdroling provides unique opportunities to slowly integrate Tibetan Buddhist philosophy's many layers of meaning. Topics such as emptiness as an antidote for attachment become the focus for a while when they take center stage via the monastic curriculum. Then they move on to other topics, only to circle back around to the same topic from a different angle sometimes years later.

Other layers of meaning are added through various modes of learning, not only scholastic or contemplative. This happens in the classroom, in chants, in a scripted contemplation like those performed at the beginning of the winds and channels practice sessions, or through interactions with other monks and nuns. The monastics typically reside at Namdroling for up to twenty years or more, although the minimum time is twelve years: nine years of education in Buddhist philosophy to get a lopon degree, and three years of post-graduation service to the monastery.

In the last three years of the nine-year course of formal study, Ani la will study emptiness theory as it applies to the tantric body. For now, she has not formally studied the philosophy of the Great Perfection to back up what she is learning in the retreat. The retreat teachings contain a barebone version of Great Perfection philosophy compared to what she will get in the classroom.

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And yet the classroom teachings will be quite fast. Upon graduation, she will be equipped with these two sets of experiences as a foundation upon which she can go deeper into either contemplation or as a teacher.

If we look for emptiness in winds and channels practice, its main site is in the central channel. The *Sky Dharma* text and oral teachings instruct practitioners to see the central channel as a representation of emptiness. Some monks told me that when emptiness is mentioned in the meditation that precedes each postural yoga session, their scholastic study of emptiness gets sparked. To elaborate on what Ani la said about emptiness, things have no fixed nature of their own in that they are impermanent. They function according to the Buddhist law of causality, also known as dependent origination.

The main natural elements at play in winds and channels yoga are wind and fire. In the last chapter we saw how the elements explain underlying causal processes and the functions of the subtle body. In yoga practice, wind and fire are the main conceptual mechanisms used in contemplation to move energy to key locations in the central channel. The winds are associated with movement, and there is a relationship between wind and mind. The tradition avers that controlling the winds through the breath or through moving the mind allows one to control the winds. In *tsalung* practice, one places the mind in the central channel to gather the winds there. Fire is added with the visualization of fire burning upward in the central channel following the path of the *cakra*-s. All conjectures aside, this creates real heat in the body, shown in a 2013 study by Kozhevnikov, et al.³²¹

Practitioners are taught to interpret the fire metaphor as burning off karmic obscurations

³²¹ Maria Kozhevnikov et al., “Neurocognitive and Somatic Components of Temperature Increases during G-Tummo Meditation: Legend and Reality.,” PLoS ONE 8, no. 3 (March 1, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0058244>.

to enlightenment.³²² It is exegetical works like Longchenpa's that do the work of systematically locating karmic obscurations in the body in reliance upon philosophy via Buddhist empirical ways of knowing, namely contemplation. In *Sky Dharma* itself, declarative statements such as karma is located in the body are lightly explained but not at the same depth as in Longchenpa.

Sky Dharma orients practitioners to the body in its doctrinal teachings in other ways. One important connection is to the well-known Abhidharma presentation of psychophysical categories. For example, this quote from oral teachings in the second session of the winds and channels yoga retreat at Palyul New York in 2018:

“In accordance with lower sutrayāna, it instructs on how the mind is the buddha, and the mind is emptiness. They have this idea and path of meditation upon emptiness and a method to meditate on buddha-nature. But within those instructions, they didn't instruct on the how the *body's* nature is the buddha. Therefore, those paths take a long time to achieve enlightenment because they are lacking this method, which is in the inner tantras, the mahāyoga tantra. They instruct [here] not only that the mind is the buddha, but also the aggregates, elements, and the six sense sources and six sense objects.”

The philosophy behind Tibetan Yoga practice extends the *sūtrayāna* (causal vehicle)³²³ teachings into tantra by adding tantric categories onto the Abhidharma's psychophysical model. The Abhidharma teachings are a systematic phenomenology of experience³²⁴ written in the fourth or fifth century in India as a way to systematize the Buddha's forty-five years of teachings.

³²² Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on winds and channels practice, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

³²³ The idea that there are “shared” and “unshared”, or “common” and “uncommon” teachings is a Tibetan Buddhist concept that allows for the prevalent teachings from different epochs and locations to be integrated into a complete, stagewise and progressive philosophical and practice system. For example, the eight Preliminaries (*sgnon 'gro*) in *Sky Dharma* are divided into common and uncommon, with the “common” or “shared” preliminaries all falling into the “Causal Vehicle” or more literally the Vehicle of the Sūtras (*sūtrayāna*). The four uncommon preliminaries are all tantric in philosophical view. As Tulku Thondup says, “Ngondro means 'preliminary practice,' that which goes before the main training. Although its main focus is the foundation of the training, it includes the highest practice of unifying oneself with Buddhahood through dissolving into ultimate nature.” This is yet another example of how fragments of the higher teachings are found in seminal form in lower teachings, and the Tibetan Buddhist project is constantly driving toward a Tantric philosophical worldview that builds upon the Causal (sūtra-based) vehicle.” Tulku. Thondup and Harold. Talbot, *Enlightened Journey: Buddhist Practice as Daily Life* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), xx.

³²⁴ David Germano and William Waldron, “A Comparison of Ālaya-Vijñāna in Yogācāra and Dzogchen,” in *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research*, ed. D.K. Nauriyal, Michael Drummond, and Y.B. Lal (New York: Routledge, 2006), 36 and 41-44.

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The process was deeply influential in subsequent Buddhist movements, including Mahāyāna in India and tantra in Tibet. Abhidharma philosophy reframes Buddhism toward an explanation of the mind according to the body by describing how the mind and body react to stimuli within the window of consciousness. While this paves the way for the tantric focus on the subtle body, Abhidharma is an *epistemology*. The categories of mind and body laid out in Abhidharma classify the ways individuals *experience* the mind and body but do not comment on physical properties.³²⁵ Ani la was to study the *Abhidharmakosha* (*mngon pa mdzod*) in the academic year after we met via the famous *Gateway to Knowledge* (*mkhas pa'i tshul la jug pa'i sgo*), a twentieth century commentary by Ju Mipham Rinpoche.³²⁶

When *Sky Dharma* references common Abhidharma categories, it is a Tibetan Buddhist presentation of Abhidharma. Here, the five aggregates (*phung po lnga*; Skt: *pañcaskandha*), the twelve sense bases (*skye mched bcu gnyis*; Skt. *dvādaśāyatana*), and the eighteen sense spheres (*kham s bco brgyad*; Skt. *aṣṭadaśa dhātu*) are included as “information that must be understood” in order to undertake the yoga practice. As in the above quote from formal oral teachings, this classification of the psychophysical makeup of individuals is described as the buddha in reality in the Mahāyāna teachings. However, he points out that while in the causal vehicle one visualizes the nature of *mind* as the Buddha and meditates on emptiness, the *body as the Buddha* is not included.

There is a critique of the Mahāyāna presentation of the doctrine of buddha-nature at play here: because the Abhidharma presentation does not include the winds, channels, and vital essences in its description of buddha-nature, relying upon Abhidharma concepts alone would

³²⁵ For a discussion of the presentation of the physical world in Abhidharma, see Charles Goodman, “The Treasury of Metaphysics and the Physical World,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* (1950-) 54, no. 216 (July 1, 2004).

³²⁶ The English language curriculum cites “Rinpoche Doshel” (Jewel Necklace) as a commentary on Vasubhandu's *Abhidharmakośakārika*.

make the path to Buddhahood quite long. *Sky Dharma* promises a system where practitioners can directly make use of the subtle body, a much faster path to enlightenment because of this expanded view of the body as the nature of the buddha. The causal vehicle (*sūtrayāna*) is critiqued as limited because it applies the doctrine of buddha-nature only to the mind.

The Abhidharma's focus on the mind likely influenced related practices to also focus on the mind, although more research needs to be done to verify that. In Abhidharma, the sixth mental type of consciousness is aware of the other five sense-based forms of consciousnesses. This model could help to address the question of how yoga works. Tibetan Yoga practice engages all the senses, not only the mind sense. Could not such an employment of one's natural resources be more effective on the contemplative path? The argument based on time and efficiency on the path to enlightenment is a standard justification for the need to practice tantra, and it gets an explicit explanation here that is unique to the Great Perfection. Many Great Perfection contemplations employ the body, rather than the mind alone, through the integration of posture, gazing, hearing, and so forth, throughout the path. This recognition of the body as a gnostic resource—buddha-nature— makes those activities all the more impactful.

According to the oral *Sky Dharma* teachings, Śākyamuni Buddha taught in the causal vehicle teachings that everything comes out of your mind, but he did not explicitly teach the role of the winds in the production of reality. Since the winds and the mind are always together, by manipulating the winds, the mind is able to manipulate both internal (body and mind) and also external (the world) levels of reality. One side of this coin is Buddhist idealism: the minds and winds create reality. The other is naturalistic: the winds and mind function according to the physical laws dictated by the functions of the natural elements.

In the winds, channels, and vital essences schema, the importance of the winds is

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highlighted because they provide motility for both consciousness and matter. Willa Blythe Miller summarizes this relationship as:

Rang 'byung rdo rje, in his autocommentary on the *Profound Inner Principles* (Zab mo nang don), a work that echoes and cites Yang dgon pa's opus, goes so far as to reduce the definition of wind to movement itself, within the human body and mind: As he puts it, "Movements are called wind." Yang dgon pa's description of wind as the force behind human movement, change, and development is rather consistent with Rang 'byung rdo rje's definition.³²⁷

Rather than contradicting the *Causal Vehicle*, the *Sky Dharma* teachings provide *more* information to explain how the winds go together with the mind. One would need to rely on philosophy texts such as Longchenpa (or Jigme Lingpa, Rangjung Dorje, or many others) to get a fuller picture of the subtle body. The *Sky Dharma* teachings nonetheless do the work of connecting the Abhidharma to both what Śākyamuni Buddha taught and to the wind-mind paradigm central to tantra.

The subtle body teachings in *Sky Dharma* extend the individual into the cosmos with a common refrain: all outer and inner phenomena are present in one's own winds, channels, and vital essences. The Namdroling teachers paraphrased Migyur Dorje's root text by saying, "Whatever outer phenomena exist, in the same way inner phenomena also exist." This Buddhist theory adds a cosmological layer to the tantric conception of the body. For example, the formless realm exists in a channel at the crown of the head, and the hell realms exist in the toes. The three worlds (desire, form, and formless) all have locations in the subtle body. The six ways of being born in the desire realm refer to six types of embodiment driven by the shared problematic of desire that delimit the range of perceptual experiences. For example, when one is born with a human body they experience a mix of happiness and suffering. Gods suffer very little, and hell

³²⁷ Willa Blythe Miller, "Secrets of the Vajra Body: Dngos Po'i Gnas Lugs and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of Rgyal Ba Yang Dgon Pa" (Unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 2013), 214.

beings a lot. In the form realm, one continues to have a body but no desire. The formless realm is both disembodied and desireless.³²⁸

Willa Blythe Miller defines subtle wind in the following way that helps to understand this cosmological paradigm:³²⁹

“Wherever space pervades, the mind pervades. Because mind and wind are inseparable, all external and internal phenomena are the embodiment of wind-consciousness.... Furthermore, The Prophesied Intention (*Dgongs pa lung ston*), says, ‘It is said that from the unmanifest subtle, [appearances] are constantly manifesting. The functioning of beings and objects depends on just that. So far as the world is imagined, there are various other imaginings. This continually arises from wind. The essence of bodhicitta is non-dual with the skandhas and so forth, and is equal to space. It is not inside and it is not outside.’ Here, Yang dgon pa— with the support of a selection of tantric sources— presents us with an ontology that understands all external and internal phenomena as the expressions of wind. His exposition mirrors a view that all external phenomena are a reflection of mind, in line with the Buddhist idealist philosophy found in many of the tantras he relies on....”

This cosmological subtle body is supernatural but resolves a practical issue. Yoga practitioners need not go on pilgrimage since everything is contained within. Freed from such time-consuming endeavors, they can remain in retreat.

Sky Dharma lists the following features of the cosmological subtle body: “At the heart is Vajrāsana, the indestructible seat of all the Buddhas. The central channel is the bodhi-tree where Lord Buddha attained Buddhahood. The twenty-four special nodes (*gnas*) of the channels are the twenty-four tantric sacred places. The knots of the channels have the shape of syllables and are the twenty-four *ḍākinīs* in nature. The vital essences flowing in the channels are the Bodhisattvas. The Dharma Wheel at the heart is the Pure Land called Extremely Enduring. The

³²⁸ Damien Keown, “Triloka,” in *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, Oxford Reference, October 14, 2021, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803105721221>.

³²⁹ Willa Blythe Miller, “Secrets of the Vajra Body: Dngos Po’i Gnas Lugs and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of Rgyal Ba Yang Dgon Pa” (Unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 2013), 230.

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five *cakra*-s are the five Pure Realms.”³³⁰

A Modern Take on the Abhidharma

In contemporary consciousness studies, observable ways that the mind controls the body and vice versa are subsumed under what is called “the easy problem of consciousness.” Fields such as cognitive science and neuroscience use scientific methods to observe how the brain's mechanisms correlate to behavioral phenomena. While such research is usually not actually easy, it is referred to as easy because it is achievable.³³¹

When Buddhist Abhidharma pairs a perceptual stimulus with a conscious experience, this would be classified as the easy problems of consciousness. Modern views on consciousness talk about “what it is like” to refer to subjective phenomenal states. In Abhidharma, a visual stimulus paired with a visual experience and an organ of perception is a Buddhist description of the minimum mechanisms for a conscious event. Unlike neuroscience, Abhidharma does not discuss the granular level of neurons or specific locations in the brain. It accounts the organs of perception—the eyes, ears, nose, skin, and tongue—but does not address their connections to the brain.

³³⁰ *'dir ni phyi nang snod bcud thams cad gsang ba rtsa rlung thig le gsum du gtan la 'bebs pa ste: phyi rol ci bzhin nang de (18) bzhin zhes gsungs pa ltar spyi gtsug gzugs med khams nas rkang mthil dmyal ba'i gnas yan chad phyi rol na gang snang thams cad lus la tshang: snying rdo rje gdan rtsa dbu ma byang chub kyi shing la sogs pa phyi'i gnas thams cad kyang lus la tshang ste: rtsa gnas nyi shu rtsa bzhi yul nyer bzhi: de dag gi rtsa mdud yig 'bru'i tshul du yod pa dAkki nyer bzhi: rtsa de dag tu gnas pa'i thig le ni dpa' bo: gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kar+ma chags med, sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba 'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig b'zugs/ rtsa rlung/ (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2010), 18-19.*

This is Khenpo Sonam Tsewang's translation, and I supply a modified translation based on his below. Ven. Sönam Tsewang, “Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat” (Namdroling Monastery, Bylakuppe-Mysore, South India, 2002).

³³¹ See David Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 200–219. Also, David Chalmers, “Moving Forward on the Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 4, no. 1 (1997): 3–46.

Sky Dharma discusses the twelve *ayatana*-s³³² (sense bases) and the eighteen *dhatu*³³³ (sense spheres) common to Abhidharma philosophy as the bodily basis for consciousness. These two lists are almost always referred to alongside each other in Tibetan Buddhist tantra. The twelve *ayatana*-s are comprised of six pairs that document both outer and inner sources of cognition. An outer source would be a sight, and the corresponding inner source would be the sense organ of the eyes. The eighteen *dhatu* are essentially the same list of twelve but with the addition of the six consciousnesses that represent experience. Buddhism's take on consciousness presents the mind as a form of consciousness separate from the five sense consciousnesses, which makes six types of consciousness altogether. The sixth type of consciousness pertains to mental acts without a sensory basis, while the other five represent the five senses.

Six Sense Objects	Six Sense Faculties	Six Sense Consciousnesses
visible forms	eye faculty	eye consciousness
sounds	ear faculty	ear consciousness
smells	nose faculty	nose consciousness
tastes	tongue faculty	tongue consciousness
textures	body faculty	body consciousness
mental objects	mental faculty	mind consciousness

These classifications account for all knowable things, and are considered the

³³² *skye mched bcu gnyis*. Alexander Berzin translates this as “cognitive stimulators,” which nicely expresses the meaning. See Alexander Berzin, “The 5 Aggregates, 12 Cognitive Stimulators, 18 Sources,” Study Buddhism, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://studybuddhism.com/en/advanced-studies/lam-rim/the-five-aggregates/the-5-aggregates-12-cognitive-stimulators-18-sources>.

³³³ *kham s bco brgyad*. Berzin translates this as “eighteen cognitive sources.” Differences between the twelve and the eighteen are a popular subject of debate in detailed scholastic studies of the Abhidharma. In tantra, they tend to be listed next to each other without extensive explanation, like in *Sky Dharma*. There are Abhidharma teachings built into the curriculum at Namdroling.

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“components of perception.”³³⁴ While they originated in the Abhidharma teachings, they were integrated first into the Māhayāna teachings and eventually into tantra. According to *Sky Dharma*, they became part of the winds and channels yoga teachings via the oral lineage passed from the Indian siddha Tilopa to Nāropa. Tilopa's instructions for how to achieve Buddhahood discusses “the reality of the body and the reality of the mind.”³³⁵ Tilopa and Nāropa's teachings are vital for Tibet's *tummo* tradition of yoga. According to the oral *Sky Dharma* teachings, Tilopa taught “the path of everything being natural”³³⁶ including the body.

Buddhist teachings on causality from the causal vehicle³³⁷ focus on impermanence and the momentariness of things to emphasize a lack of a substantial reality, or emptiness. The flipside of momentariness is dependent origination, where moment to moment appearances are causally dependent upon multiple factors including a main cause and supporting conditions. In the ongoing stream of causality, no single moment provides a substantial picture of reality. This fleeting quality is explained by the doctrine of emptiness. With this philosophy, earlier Buddhist philosophers such as Dharmakīrti critiqued physicalism as solipsistic and causalist.³³⁸ *Sky Dharma* makes the point that in the Causal Vehicle, subjective experience is a constituent cause of reality, but it does not have a physical explanation. In these contexts, buddha-nature applies only to the mind but not the body.

The Namdroling teachers who presented *Sky Dharma* winds and channels doctrinal

³³⁴ Richard Barron's translation according to “Eighteen Dhatus,” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, January 12, 2022.

³³⁵ Anonymous tulku, recording of oral teachings on winds and channels, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ For the sake of providing a specific example of what the Namdroling teachers might be referring to, I have used this example from Dan Arnold because he is specifically addressing dualism in the Buddhist tradition. However, at Namdroling the reference to “sūtrayāna teachings” was vague and unspecific.

³³⁸ Daniel Anderson Arnold, *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing: The Problem of Intentionality in Classical Buddhist and Cognitive-Scientific Philosophy of Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 20-22. See also Dan Arnold, “Dharmakīrti’s Dualism: Critical Reflections on a Buddhist Proof of Rebirth,” *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 5 (September 1, 2008): 1079–96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00175.x>.

teachings acknowledged that in the causal vehicle and even the lower Tantras, the nature of the mind is described as the buddha, and one meditates on emptiness. The five aggregates, the eighteen spheres of perception, and the twelve sources of perception are all factors of *perception*. They are not physical realities, despite their links to the physical senses. Rather than contradicting the Buddha Śakyamūni's teachings, *Sky Dharma's* worldview is presented as an extension of these causal vehicle teachings.³³⁹

Winds and channels theory makes it possible for the body to also naturally be the buddha by locating buddha nature throughout the body. The phrase popularized by Evan Thompson et al³⁴⁰ works well here—the embodied mind. The channels, winds, and vital essences show how the mind functions throughout the body, and even consciousness gets a physical manifestation as *vital essences (thig le)*.

The details of the subtle body are found in exegetical literature such as the works of Longchenpa discussed in the previous chapter. He shows how buddha-nature extends into the body by relying on the functions of the natural elements. For example, fire burns and spreads. Therefore, the presence of fire in a channel allows that channel to spread, which accounts for growth and extension.³⁴¹ The elements perform their functions, but often metaphorically. Sometimes the presence of fire spreads without actually burning anything. At the same time, supernatural elements are weaved in alongside physical matter.

Sky Dharma lacks this granular description of the causes of the channels, but it still points out that the channels and so forth are made of the elements, and that deities and holy places

³³⁹ Anonymous tulku, recording of oral teachings on winds and channels session one, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

³⁴⁰ Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

³⁴¹ For a detailed presentation of the functions of the elements, see rim khang bcu gcig, kLong chen rab 'byams pa dri med 'od zer, "Theg Mchog Mdzod/," in *Kun mkhyen Klong chen Rab 'byams kyi gsung 'bum/*, vol. 2, 26 vols. (dpal brtsegs: dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang, 2009).

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reside therein. Both the tantric exegetical literature and the *Sky Dharma* practice manual hold a naturalistic worldview alongside a supernatural one.

A popular subtle body metaphor is helpful here: the winds and mind go together like a horse and rider. If the mind is the vital essences, practitioners learn to control the winds as a proxy to them. Because the winds control the movement of vital essences through the pathways of the channels, wind is singled out as that which is most accessible to control the entire system. In winds and channels yoga, the factor of wind is controlled by controlling the breath. The main purpose of the practice is to remove the karmic obscurations that reside in the body and travel on the winds. Thus, the winds are a main focal point in *tsalung* practice.

Contemplative visualizations are key, and anthropomorphism of the process helps practitioners keep the contemplative narrative unfolding in order. One visualizes oneself as the wrathful form of Chenrezig, a deity whose name means “Corpse Eater” in Tibetan. In practice, as the central channel literally devours karma and afflictions by burning them with the fire of *tummo*, the outer shell of the body is visualized as this deity. This deity in particular is motivated by eating the impure aspects of the body, which is symbolized by the burning of fire up the central channel. This is one way the elaborate contemplative aspect of winds and channels yoga stands out among contemporary yoga systems.

The tantric innovation to buddha-nature theory is the winds, channels, and vital essences, which *Sky Dharma* presents as an extension of the Abhidharma psychophysical components. While causal vehicle teachings pair the mind with emptiness, tantra accepts this pairing but takes it further by including the body. Causal vehicle teachings on emptiness and buddha nature make it possible for the five aggregates, the eighteen spheres of perception, and the twelve sources of

perception to be the Buddha in nature.³⁴²

Winds, channels, and vital essences are not featured in Abhidharma literature, and yet they take on a main role in the tantric version of buddha-nature theory. Buddha-nature is the primary justification for how individuals can become buddhas, and in tantra, buddha-nature is located within the body's channels, winds, and vital essences.

The Abhidharma categories of personhood including the five psychophysical aggregates are considered to be impure. However, upon enlightenment, these are the internal source of the five Buddha families.³⁴³ Winds and channels yoga claims to purify what is impure in the body, and the twelve sense sources and eighteen sense spheres are the impure manifestations of karma that resides in the body.³⁴⁴

At this stage in her practice, Ani Lhamo is far from having an experience of these correlations. Like many young yoga practitioners throughout the world, she enjoys the challenging physical postures and breath retentions, which are great physical feats. Like most people attempting meditation, she struggles to control her mind in the meditations. As a monastic, she will not pursue Tibetan Yoga forever. The year we met was her third time in the Tibetan Yoga retreat, and she planned to join the Great Perfection contemplative retreat in the following year.

[An Advanced Monk Tries Not to Tell Me About Tsalung](#)

I met Lupon Tinley on Namdroling's campus. His room was near a main thoroughfare, and

³⁴² For a Nyingma presentation on buddha-nature rooted in Great Perfection philosophy, see Douglas S. Duckworth, *Mipam on Buddha-Nature: The Ground of the Nyingma Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

³⁴³ Anonymous tulku, recording of oral teachings on winds and channels session one, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

³⁴⁴ Tantric embryology paints a detailed description of how karma and buddha-nature exist in the body side-by-side. In the future, I plan to write more about this in the context of Longchenpa's presentation of embryology in the *Theg mchog mdzod*.

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he practiced his English with me when he saw me lingering nearby at the campus store.³⁴⁵ A big guy with an even bigger smile, sparkly eyes, dimples, and facial hair in the style of Padmasambhava, he was quick to share Buddhism's compassion teachings but guarded about the secrets of tantra. He is from Pema Kōd, a traditionally Buddhist region in Northern India. He agreed to talk with me, but of all the people I interviewed, he was the most cautious about not revealing the secrets of the *vajrayāna*. He countered almost all of my questions with a cross-examination about my qualifications to discuss tantra, my practice experience, and admonitions to complete the foundational practices (*sngon 'gro*). While he did not unpack details, he nicely laid out mind-body correlations in tantric philosophy that reflect the advanced level of his studies. At the time of our interview, he was twenty-seven years old and had just completed the ninth year of monastic studies. It was his second time in the *tsalung* retreat; he did the 500,000 (*bum lnga*) foundational practices a few years before, and had sat through the Great Perfection retreat once.

When I asked him what the benefit of the winds and channels retreat is, he replied, “In the body there are winds, channels and *bindu*. If you rely on them [with practice], you can become a buddha. That's why this is a precious teaching. If you do not rely on them, you cannot become a buddha.” Me: How do you rely on them? “First of all, if you are a sentient being (*semchen*), you have winds, channels, and vital essences. There are three main channels: central (*dbus ma* in the middle), flavor (*ro ma* on the right), and solitary (*rkyang ma* on the left). The one called *uma* [the central channel] is emptiness practice. The central channel (*rtsa dbu ma*) has the

³⁴⁵ Lopon Pema, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, May 2018. He told me, “Anything you need you can buy in the campus store.” They have milk, tea, snacks, incense, offering envelopes, shoes, undershirts, underwear, food, drinks, etc. I took this as a critique of our materialistic ways. The store is not that big. Pema often had something profound to contribute in our exchanges in the kitchen where I lived and he served, and I think he meant that you don't need anything else, at all.

nature of emptiness (*tong pa nyid*). On the other hand, if you get angry, the *roma* channel gets activated.”³⁴⁶ The left channel represents the activation of desire.

In practice, he advised that when a mental affliction arises, that is when you have to meditate on emptiness. The five mental afflictions (attachment, aversion, ignorance, pride, and jealousy) correlate to the five *cakra*-s located at five places along the central channel, in front of the spine. When you feel attachment, one must contemplate that its nature is empty, which refers to the qualities of impermanence and dependent origination. At the same time, contemplate that it is *bindu*, the physical stuff of consciousness in the body that can be moved with the winds. For example, if jealousy arises, one can meditate on the emptiness of that feeling located at the navel.

He also emphasized another level within the practice, the personification of the central channel as Dorje Pakmo,³⁴⁷ the goddess of fire, who burns up the afflictions as the fire blazes. When a practitioner has visualized themselves as the wrathful Chenrezig, the male aspect of the visualization is the outer form of the body. As male and female represent duality, the female fire goddess of wisdom appears inside as the destroyer of afflictive emotions. Like with most contemplative practices, this symbolically rich drama is meant to be repeated over and over.³⁴⁸

The teachers pointed out in *Sky Dharma* oral teachings that all sentient beings have ninety-five million channels, but that the three main channels are all that is needed for practice. In fact, in *Sky Dharma* practitioners are encouraged to see the central channel as representative of all the channels and to practice using only that. This is a unique aspect of Migyur Dorje's system because most Tibetan systems meditate on at least the three main channels. The reason given implies a clear correlation between mind and body: if one meditates on the channels, their

³⁴⁶ Anonymous Lopen, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2019.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ “Nam Chö Tsa Lung Practice Manual,” 2016.

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qualities are increased. The logical consequence of this is that if one only meditates on the central channel, because its main quality is non-conceptuality, the meaning of emptiness, it provides the most efficient path to realization.³⁴⁹

The central channel maps Buddhist philosophy and human psychology within the body. Each of the *cakra*-s corresponds to one of the five main mental afflictions to be purified. Winds and channels yoga begins with a contemplation of the three levels of the central channel, outer, inner and secret. The three layers, visualized as white, red, and blue, correspond to bliss, clarity, and non-conceptuality, respectively. The central channel is a stand-in or placeholder that represents all the body's channels, as well as the five main *cakra*-s. Practitioners visualize going through each of the *cakra* locations within the central channel. By focusing on the central channel alone, the practitioner can avoid inadvertently sending their energy to other locations in the body that represent qualities other than non-conceptuality.³⁵⁰

Again, I rely on Willa Blythe Miller's research on Yang dgon pa to demonstrate what happens when the winds enter the central channel, the goal of winds and channels yoga:³⁵¹

de rnam dbu mar 'jug cing 'gro 'ong med pa/ rnam rtog dang bral ba ni ye shes kyi
rlung/ nyi zla nas rgyud/ 'byung 'jug dang bcas/ rnam rtog sna tshogs su g.yo ba las kyi
rlung ste/

When the [coarse winds] enter the central channel, they stop moving. The freedom from conceptual thinking is the gnosis wind.⁶⁰¹ When there is movement in the sun and moon and respiration, many thoughts move. This is karmic wind.

We see here that while the karmic wind is movement and the resultant conceptuality, gnosis wind is not so much a distinct wind as it is a state of stillness, and its resulting freedom from conceptuality.

³⁴⁹ Anonymous tulku, recording of oral teachings on winds and channels, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Willa Blythe Miller, "Secrets of the Vajra Body: Dngos Po'i Gnas Lugs and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of Rgyal Ba Yang Dgon Pa" (Unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 2013), 227-228.

On the Convergence Between Science and Buddhism

Research on the convergence of Buddhism and neuroscience has led to the claim that “the notion of Wind is analogous to the propagation of neural impulses.”³⁵² This hypothesis appears compelling because of undeniable similarities. First, the subtle body's main thoroughfare, the central channel, sits in the same location as the spinal column or just in front, and has a similar shape. This “walks like a duck, talks like a duck” logic appeals to common sense. Second, the winds that course through the subtle body function in similar ways as neural impulses in that they move energy. Various schools of tantric philosophy depict the subtle body in different ways, and the Great Perfection's system is remarkable in that it focuses on how the central channel sends information to the brain.³⁵³ The inclusion of the brain is largely unprecedented in other Tibetan traditions.

The *Sky Dharma* contemplative system originated in seventeenth century Tibet and if this were a historical project, comparisons with neuroscience could be unfair because seventeenth century Tibetans themselves were not addressing the concerns of neuroscience. However, this project is ethnographic and looks at the reception of *Sky Dharma* in modernity. Nowadays, the Dalai Lama has popularized conversations among Buddhist philosophy and science and among monastics and scientists to a great extent. The living community of monks and nuns at Namdroling have literally grown up under the leadership of the Dalai Lama in India and expressed interest in the convergence of science and Buddhism to me on many occasions. Thus, I

³⁵² Antoine Lutz, John Dunne, and Richard Davidson, “Meditation and the Neuroscience of Consciousness: An Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness*, ed. Philip Zelazo, Morris Moscovitch, and Evan Thompson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 505. See also Matthieu Ricard, *Beyond the Self: Conversations Between Buddhism and Neuroscience* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2017). And, J. P. (Jagannath Prasad) Das, *Consciousness Quest: Where East Meets West : On Mind, Meditation, and Neural Correlates* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2014).

³⁵³ David Germano and Klong chen pa Dri med od zer, “Poetic Thought, the Intelligent Universe, and the Mystery of Self: The Tantric Synthesis of RDzogs Chen in Fourteenth Century Tibet” (University of Wisconsin- Madison, 1992), xx.

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examine the philosophy behind Tibetan Yoga while highlighting areas of convergence with contemporary ways of understanding the body-mind connection. When I do this, I am modeling and expanding on what is happening on the ground in India. I am trying to answer the questions that my research subjects posed to me when they would look up from Longchenpa's text and ask, "Is that science?" This happened on several occasions during passages from Longchenpa that clearly jive with what we know about human embryological development, for example.

In the interviews I conducted, I usually invited the *tsalung* practitioners, the Khenpos I read philosophy with, and the monks and nuns in the English classes I taught at Namdroling to "ask me anything." The most frequent question I received was about Buddhism's connection to science, and I even gave an introductory lecture in the English class I taught on the scientific method based on my undergraduate studies.

With globalization, migration, and exile from Tibet, the cultural gap between foreigners (*phyi rgyal ba*) and Tibetans is narrowing. While the monastics at Namdroling speak Tibetan, most are not from Tibet and must learn the Tibetan language at the monastery. They come from regions in Nepal, Bhutan, and India with longstanding Tibetan Buddhist influence. These factors of modernization and globalization nuance the reception of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. While the origins of *Sky Dharma* are in seventeenth century Tibet, nowadays the teachings exist in a globalized, modern world with access to technology, science, and the internet.

As a researcher steeped in the Western academic tradition, another reason I make these connections because they helped me understand Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. When I read the works of David Chalmers and Kristof Koch, for example, points of inquiry become alive that allowed me to look at Tibetan Yoga and its effects on consciousness from more angles than I would have thought of on my own. Some contemporary Tibetan Buddhist philosophers are

against putting ancient philosophy in juxtaposition with contemporary, non-Asian ideas, and I have been grilled in the Q&A of conference presentations by such nay-sayers. I disagree. My position as a researcher is indelibly informed by my interests and proclivity toward certain ideas rooted in the ways I have been influenced as an American, a long-time yoga practitioner, and a woman. I used an interview technique called Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to ask open-ended, non-leading questions and to interpret the responses without projecting my own views. I have been careful not to frame the interviews out of context. I have also been deeply influenced by Tibetan Buddhism as it is taught and practiced in India and Tibet for almost twenty years. All of these factors come into play in my interpretations, and it would be impossible to write myself out of this study.

On the other hand, I chose the mind-body problem as a theoretical lens because I think Buddhism has something valuable to contribute. Buddhists have been observing the mind and body in contemplative retreats at least since the time of Nāropa in the eleventh century. When the mind is pressed into a certain shape through repetition of a practice four times a day for extended periods such as a month, three months, or three years, one intentionally produces mental habits. Such mental states are even more rarefied than the habits we pick up by accident because of the frequency of repetition and also the exclusion of other states due to the isolated conditions of contemplative retreat. When focused on the body and buddha-nature embodiment theory, certain experiences arise. For example, when one adds bliss as a concept to the equation of bodily practices, physical bliss tends to manifest. That observation has real implications for our understanding of human happiness. I would be interested in collaborating with psychologists to survey happiness as a result of the *Sky Dharma* retreats.

It is fascinating to me that the traditional explanation of such experiences is physicalist in

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that winds, channels and vital essences are all made of matter. Willa Blythe Miller comes to a similar conclusion:³⁵⁴

“The central channel (and by extension the vajra body) is not just real; it has the quality of some sort of materiality (*dngos po*) and substance (*rdzas*), at least according to Spyan snga ba’s understanding. Furthermore, it is existent on a relative (*kun rdzob*) level, a level that usually applies to the conventional world, not the exalted realizations that are normally said to ensue inside the central channel. This also provides us with a strikingly clear gloss for *dngos po*. It is not merely a thing, it is a thing that seems to have form, materiality, or substance. With this understanding the meaning of *dngos po’i gnas lugs* leans towards a gloss of the ‘nature of matter’ or ‘the nature of substance.’”

It seems that pre-modern Tibetans were as interested in claims about mental states in physical terms as we are today. At the same time, the physical reality is undermined by the idealist philosophy that says that phenomenological states are projections based on karma and mental habits. That is a new type of dualism, if you will, where the two ontologies exist in the same location as layers of reality that are simultaneously true—Buddhism's two truths.

And yet it is the supernatural components of the system that I worry about. The realization of one's own buddha-nature as an experience—as opposed to a theory—can only unfold in a state of yogic direct perception that is the mark of true mastery in practice. The Khenpo who taught me Longchenpa’s text cited yogic direct perception as the way Longchenpa was able to perceive such hidden realities about the body.³⁵⁵ At that level, the texts say that buddha-nature is as obvious as the body itself.³⁵⁶ The other way to know such truths is indirectly as they are passed down through the lineage in oral or written teachings.³⁵⁷

At the level of praxis, the subtle body model focuses on the central channel, and special

³⁵⁴ Willa Blythe Miller, “Secrets of the Vajra Body: Dngos Po’i Gnás Lugs and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of Rgyal Ba Yang Dgon Pa,” 202.

³⁵⁵ Khenpo Tenzin, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, January 2019.

³⁵⁶ Khenpo Sonam Tsewang, communication with author, Bylakuppe, India, December 2018. While teaching me the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, I asked him how Longchenpa knew about the subtle body. He replied that he understood through yogic direct perception.

³⁵⁷ Willa Blythe Miller, “Secrets of the Vajra Body: Dngos Po’i Gnás Lugs and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of Rgyal Ba Yang Dgon Pa,” 139-140.

subtle body correlates to consciousness cited in *Sky Dharma* and common in Tibetan Buddhism are discussed. When contemporary scholars working on Buddhism and neuroscience see the subtle body as “roughly analogous to the contemporary understanding of the nervous system”³⁵⁸ the comparison rings true because the subtle body's approximately 72,000 channels appear to be similar to nerves and dendrites in location and function. In terms of location, they run throughout the body with the central channel sitting just in front of the spinal column, and the other channels branching out from there. In terms of function, subtle body channels carry wind (*rlung*) and consciousness (*thig le*) similar to how neurons fire and carry messages. These analogies are rough but at the same time, the similarities are striking.

Winds and Consciousness

Wind energy accounts for *activity* in the tantric Buddhist model of the embodied mind.³⁵⁹ A movement of wind is tantamount to a movement of mind as in a thought, a conception, or a perception. At the same time, a movement in the body is likewise driven by the force of wind. Wind is the element of motility and change that. It bridges both mind and body, and must be present for an event of body or mind to occur. Consciousness cannot move about one its own without wind. In this way, tantric Buddhism's theory of consciousness is embedded in its definition of the physical world system, where the elements cover both physical and mental functions.

Most yoga systems possess a theory of consciousness interpreted against the theological

³⁵⁸ Lutz, Antoine, John D. Dunne, and Richard J. Davidson. “Meditation and the Neuroscience of Consciousness: An Introduction,” 505.

³⁵⁹ To borrow the term “embodied mind” from Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

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backdrop prevalent in the region of practice.³⁶⁰ Buddhist postural yoga makes use of the embodied theory of consciousness to advance practitioners toward typical Buddhist goals, i.e. the path to enlightenment. The theory of consciousness presented here is unique to Tibetan Buddhism and the Great Perfection sub-field of Buddhism, and is similar to how *sāmkhya* explains the metaphysics of yoga in India.

In terms of methodology, I agree with Evan Thompson when he says that Buddhism and science work better as a conversation rather than attempts to point out equivalences among them.³⁶¹ In religious studies we are methodologically bound to a specificity in place and time that invites caution around grand comparisons not rooted in shared cultural experiences. The bases of terms are culturally rooted and historically embedded so that while two systems that are ancient and modern, or Indian and Tibetan might seem similar, their points of reference are comprised of different cultural constructs. For example, the way wind is used here not the same way wind is discussed in contemporary scientific discourse.

At the same time, glaring similarities such as the central channel's likeness to the spinal cord invite exploration, discussion, and comparison. The goal here is to unpack the Buddhist side in detail. Future collaborative research could be done in a shared project undertaken by a team of scientists and scholars of religion. Tibetan yoga's unique contribution would be clearly defined functions that should impact consciousness—postures, breath retentions, and visualizations.

I imagine a scientist reading this might be taken aback by sheer the number of processes involved, and object that there are too many manipulated variables for a study on consciousness. However, it is not possible to slim down Tibetan practices and have them remain intact. The

³⁶⁰ For examples from India, Tibet, and Europe, see Eli Franco and Dagmar Eigner, eds., *Yogic Perception, Meditation and Altered States of Consciousness* (Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009).

³⁶¹ Thompson, “Buddhist Philosophy and Scientific Naturalism,” 4.

body is not a machine where you can push levers and compassionate states of mind arise, despite the way buddha-nature is theoretically located inside the body. Tibetan Yoga coordinates the body, mind, and subtle body rich with meaning from Buddhist semiotics to produce its effects.

In 2007, Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson wrote that that “the notion of Wind is analogous to the propagation of neural impulses.”³⁶² In Buddhism, the principle that wind and the central channel relate to consciousness is demonstrated through the behaviors that incite changes in consciousness. In neuroscience, behaviors are explained with the “neural correlates of consciousness,” which “involve relating behavioral correlates of consciousness to the neural mechanisms underlying them.”³⁶³

Popular literature from Tibet on the subtle body describes how consciousness unfolds as behavioral patterns in vivid descriptions of how the body's channels inform mental states. Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle (Theg mchog mdzod)*,³⁶⁴ Rangjung Dorje's *The Profound Inner Principles (Zab mo nang don)*,³⁶⁵ and Jigme Lingpa's *Treasury of Precious Qualities*³⁶⁶ (*Yon tan mdzod*) are three popular texts among many Tibetan exegetical commentaries that describe how consciousness functions throughout the body as the system of winds, channels, and vital essences and manifests as the range of human emotion and perception. As a practice manual, *Sky Dharma* does not describe the subtle body on a granular level like

³⁶² Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson, “Meditation and the Neuroscience of Consciousness: An Introduction,” 505.

³⁶³ Christof Koch et al., “Neural Correlates of Consciousness: Progress and Problems,” *NATURE REVIEWS NEUROSCIENCE* 17, no. 5 (May 1, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn.2016.22>, 307.

³⁶⁴ kLong chen rab 'byams pa dri med 'od zer, “Theg Mchog Mdzod/,” in *Kun mkhyen Klong chen Rab 'byams kyi gsung 'bum/*, vol. 2, 26 vols. (dpal brtsegs: dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang, 2009).

³⁶⁵ See Rangjung Dorje, the Third Karmapa, Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Taye, and Elizabeth M. Callahan, *The Profound Inner Principles, with Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Taye' Commentary Illuminating “The Profound Principles”* (Snow Lion Publications, 2014).

³⁶⁶ See Longchen Yeshe Dorje. Kangyur Rinpoche, *Treasury of Precious Qualities: The Rain of Joy, with the Quintessence of the Three Paths*, Treasury of Precious Qualities, Book Two (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2013).

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those philosophy texts, but rather provides the behaviors with which one can manipulate that system. One main difference between the philosophy and practice literature on the subtle body is that philosophical texts are quite detailed in describing complex arrays of channels, while practice manuals tend to emphasize three main channels, or even one, and focus on how to use those three channels.

As a practice manual, *Sky Dharma* teaches practitioners to visualize fire burning up the central channel in order to gather the winds and vital essences inside of it. Attention is the main mechanism to make this happen. Attention is gathered via a locative function. By placing one's attention in the central channel, the mind is gathered in one place. The visualization of fire creates actual heat, and one imagines it consuming both the karmic winds and the mind. The visualization becomes quite real in the sense that the body's temperature actually rises.³⁶⁷

The goal of the practice is to clear away the karmic winds, and the theoretical results of that would be the automatic production of supreme bliss. This ideal ultimate correlation between body and mind requires the coordination of both mind and body laden with meaning and in a narrativized process. The mind must expertly move the winds in the body, and the location of the winds in the channels incites an experience of bliss.³⁶⁸

Tsalung practice is designed to manipulate the winds in order to access to vital essences (*thig le*). The winds spread vital essences, the physical component of consciousness, throughout the body.³⁶⁹ The mind, or *thig le*, rides upon the winds. Yoga practice is an attempt to force the winds and vital essences to enter into the central channel. When this happens, ideal mental states

³⁶⁷ Maria Kozhevnikov et al., "Neurocognitive and Somatic Components of Temperature Increases during G-Tummo Meditation: Legend and Reality.," *PLoS ONE* 8, no. 3 (March 1, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0058244>.

³⁶⁸ Ven. Sönam Tsewang, "Tsalung Notes 2002 – Transcript of the Recorded Commentary Tummo – Generation of Self-Burning Blissful Heat" (Namdrooling Monastery, Bylakuppe-Mysore, South India, 2002), tummmcomm2.

³⁶⁹ Kangyur Rinpoche, *Treasury of Precious Qualities: The Rain of Joy, with the Quintessence of the Three Paths*, 67.

commonly referenced in the Great Perfection should emerge: bliss, clarity and non-conceptuality. At the same time, *tsalung* practice promises to inhibit afflicted mental states, namely the five mental poisons of attachment, aversion, jealousy, pride, and ignorance.

When I spoke with Lopon Tinley, he described holding several levels of meaning during his contemplative practice. These might shed light on the role of the central channel in the transformation of consciousness. First, he told me that the central channel represents emptiness and the *dharmakāya*. This is one of many tantric correlations contrived through semiotics rather than physical matter and yet visualized in the physical body. Second, the visualized letter inside the central channel is inseparable from Dorje Pakmo, the goddess of fire. The fire is the fire of emptiness, which also makes it the fire of wisdom. As fire blazes through each of the *cakra*-s, the five elements get purified.³⁷⁰ Either of these processes could incite a response detectable in either the neural or endocrine system, although specific research is necessary.

The Namdroling teachers pointed out that when we rely on our mundane faculties of body and mind in daily life, this is not a karmically neutral act. It perpetuates the cycle of suffering characteristic of being human because the desire-attachment-addiction continuum is always activated to some degree. Already established habitual ways of thinking perpetuate self-grasping and self-centeredness, and cause us to react to sensory input in afflicted ways. Stuck in these patterns, one will never get out from cyclic existence. Habitual indulgences become addictions, a reality that has hit home for some of the monastics at Namdroling. They witness addiction in their families at home, in their own pre-monastery lives, and in subtle ways like an unhelpful mobile-phone habit within the monastery walls.

The monks and nuns apply multiple levels of meaning as they practice. Another main

³⁷⁰ Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on winds and channels practice, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

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antidote to interrupt the attachment to addiction continuum from Tibetan Yoga centers on *bodhicitta*. The mention of *bodhicitta* cues both tantric³⁷¹ and non-tantric meanings. When Lopon Tinley told me that yoga practice is hard for him but *bodhicitta* is easy, he was likely referring to the causal vehicle where one generates the wish to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. The non-tantric Buddhist practice of *bodhicitta* involves checking one's motivation over and over again and reminding oneself to maintain an altruistic intention in order to overcome self-centeredness and self-grasping. This is a main method in Buddhism for the development of compassion.

In tantra, *bodhicitta* (*byang chub*) is another word for vital essences (*thig le*). Lopon Tinley will extend his understanding of what *bodhicitta* is in winds and channels practice to locate it inside of his body. *Thig le* has two forms, coarse and subtle. The coarse form of *thig le* is sexual fluids,³⁷² a much bigger issue. The subtle form of *thig le* is consciousness in the body. *Bindu* is the Sanskrit term for the Tibetan *thig le*, and this concept gets extensive treatment in yogic literature. This area has promise in consciousness studies, and further exploration is warranted.

Reductionism and Consciousness

Recent thinking on how to solve the mind-body problem is that it can only be done with a non-reductive theory of experience. The previous chapter showed how the subtle body is reductive because lower-level structures and dynamics inform upper-level phenomena. The

³⁷¹ See Minoru Kiyota, Nāgārjuna [active 2nd century], and Kūkai [774-835], *Tantric Concept of Bodhicitta: A Buddhist Experiential Philosophy (an Exposition Based Upon the Mahāvairocana-Sūtra, Bodhicitta-Śāstra and Sokushin-Jōbutsugi)* (Madison, Wis: South Asian Area Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1982).

³⁷² One might also say the coarse version is semen, although women have coarse *thig le* as well, which gets explained as menstrual blood.

subtle body system's reductive qualities are what makes it so appealing to conversations among Buddhism and science. Most of science is reductive, and this is not a negative quality. The key explanation needed to solve the mind-body problem, i.e. the explanatory gap, is for mental terms and physical terms that refer to the same state to be explained using the same concepts.³⁷³ However, there is nothing within scientific reductionist knowledge based on what we know currently about the physical properties that can explain why we have consciousness. Why do we need to experience “what it is like” in order to exist?

In solving the mind-body problem, David Chalmers' Chalmers recently said, “A non-reductive theory of experience will specify basic principles telling us how experience depends on physical features of the world. These *psychophysical* principles will not interfere with physical laws, as it seems that physical laws already form a closed system.”³⁷⁴ I will break Chalmers' qualifications into three points of analysis.

1. Is this a non-reductive theory of experience?
2. Does it specify basic principles that tell us how experience depends on physical features of the world?
3. Do these *psychophysical* principles interfere with physical laws or not?

First, for a theory to be reductive, lower-level properties must realize higher level ones. The reason Chalmers calls for a non-reductive theory of conscious experience is because the structure and dynamics at hand within contemporary science are unable to account for why we have consciousness. There is no physical justification for the “what it is like” factor of being

³⁷³ “Even if our mental terms and neural terms refer to the same states, if the former pick them out using mental concepts that cannot be neurally explained, we will not have reduced the mental to the neural. There will be a residual explanatory gap.” Raphael van Riel and Robert Van Gulick, “Scientific Reduction,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, accessed February 23, 2022, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/scientific-reduction/>.

³⁷⁴ Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” 14.

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conscious, in this case the what it is like to be a Tibetan Yoga practitioner. Winds, channels, and vital essences are reductive in that they provide structure and dynamics for the body. Like the teachers at Namdroling say, they extend Abhidharma theory into the realm of the physical. These elements, however, are not readily accepted parts of human anatomy in our current understanding of the body.

The subtleness of the subtle body refers to the fact that these structures are not gross anatomical features. Historically, they explained the body long before the development of the scientific tools we have today. If they indeed represent the pathways (channels) of neural impulses (winds), and hormones (vital essences), nothing has been discovered over and above what we already know in contemporary science.³⁷⁵ Therefore, what remains for the current analysis is aspects of the threefold components of the subtle body not already explained by normative science. These leftover parts are typically explained away as supernatural. The question remains, does the physicalist explanation of vajra body theory open doors for a physicalist explanation of the supernatural? And, when the supernatural is explained, does it contribute something to our understanding of the mind-body connection?

To Chalmers' second point, the vajra body theory tells us how experience depends on physical features of the world in that the physical stuff of experience—*vital essences*—move correlative to the movement of winds. The control of vital essences in *tsalung* can be summarized as follows. The winds are controlled with the mind via a locative function—placing the mind. The winds can also be controlled with the breath, which is why Tibetan Yoga has such a strong emphasis on breath control, especially holding the breath. Finally, the winds can be

³⁷⁵ For a discussion of the science of acupuncture, see “A Pointed Question: Can Science Study Acupuncture?,” *Understanding Science: how science really works*, November 18, 2021, <https://undsci.berkeley.edu/article/acupuncture>.

controlled by the outer elements, a phenomenon that gets significant attention in Tibetan medicine. For example, an external environment that would overstimulate the inner winds would be a dry and windy place. Such a locale would affect both mind and body systems, possibly resulting in dry skin (body) and anxiety (mind). *Sky Dharma* does not discuss the qualities of the external environment because as a practice text, it is presumed that a practitioner would stay inside in retreat.³⁷⁶ There is extensive literature on the qualities of a retreat location elsewhere in the Tibetan canon. *Sky Dharma* does mention the opposite effect, which is the ability to control the weather—especially weather brought by winds—when one is able to control the subtle body. This supernatural effect based on the internal-external equivalence principal highlights a physical explanation for a seemingly supernatural effect. This effect has been observed on numerous occasions within the Tibetan tradition. For example, it is common to hear stories about Tibetan lamas controlling the weather so that teachings can take place. Such an effect is outside of our normal expectations for human power outside of the Tibetan tradition³⁷⁷.

Chalmers' third point is that the “*psychophysical* principles will not interfere with physical laws, as it seems that physical laws already form a closed system.”³⁷⁸ That means that nothing non-physical can interfere with the laws of physics. It seems likely that the Buddhist presentation does not satisfy this condition, but further research is needed.

In Tibetan Yoga, physical laws are described with the functions of the natural elements. These explain supernormal powers such as the yogic control of the weather. In my opinion, wind is the easiest thing to control in the external world because wind has a direct influence on

³⁷⁶ There is extensive literature on the qualities of the environment for contemplative practice within the Tibetan canon. See, for example, the *Lam rim chen mo*.

³⁷⁷ Other cultures attempt to control the weather with their minds, such as rain dances in Native American traditions, or praying to certain gods in Hinduism.

³⁷⁸ Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” 14.

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weather patterns. It is common to hear stories of great Tibetan lamas controlling the weather in order to facilitate dharma teachings, but most of the monastics at Namdroling are new to yoga and cannot perform such feats. There are, however, numerous stories about Penor Rinpoche controlling the weather.

If not focused on the reductive aspects of this system, what can winds and channels practice tell us about the mind-body connection? Lopon Tinley pointed out that in terms of winds, channels, and vital essences, the channels are the body. The body is a reflection of the layout of the channels. It metaphorically forms like ice on a twig.³⁷⁹ The vital essences are the mental stuff of consciousness, and in that way, *thig le* are the mind. The winds move *thig le* along the paths of the channels. Thus, experience is mapped onto the body's channels by way of *thig le* riding on the winds through the channels. In yoga, the central channel is the primary location where drastic changes in perception and human experience can take place. The mark of a successful yoga practitioner is that they move the winds into the central channel. When karma and afflictions are cleared out of the central channel by moving the winds deliberately into the central channel, the wisdom winds naturally appear. The three layers of the central channel that correspond to bliss, clarity, and non-conceptuality naturally emerge through practice.

Perhaps it is the social applications of vajra body theory that expand its reaches beyond structure and dynamics. *Tsalung* is designed to use the nature of one's own winds, channels, and vital essences in order to reveal the enlightened state that exists within. The deepest recesses of an individual's body highlight their relationship to the external world and people. The main thrust of the vajra body is that all the world's inner and outer phenomena exist within.³⁸⁰ This

³⁷⁹ This metaphor comes from Gelukpa tantric Buddhism, but I use it here to explain this point of doctrine that is clearly present in *Sky Dharma*.

³⁸⁰ Khenpo Norgye, winds and channels oral teachings, McDonough, NY, July 2019.

contemplative move depersonalizes the individual and expands their sense of self to include everyone else. In this way, the goal may not be to put forth an idealist philosophy, but rather to modify one's definition of the self.

Social applications crop up throughout tantric contemplations. Another socially oriented vajra body practice is to use vital essences in the body as the focal point for tantric refuge practice. Refuge is a basic Buddhist concept that begs practitioners to turn away from worldly enjoyments and hedonistic indulgences as an antidote to suffering. Grasping at sensory enjoyments doesn't work: Buddhism points to desire as the main problem in the desire realm because it leads to self-centered behavior. Such behaviors create karma, which increasingly bind one to and perpetuate the cycle of suffering. In *tsalung*, the human body is a refuge because it is endowed with materials (*kham s su ldan*) that can be used in practice. Practitioners are encouraged to feel lucky for being born human.³⁸¹

The *tsalung* teachings remind practitioners that Buddhist cosmology is made up of three realms: desire, form and formless. One's experience in each of these realms is built out around one's karma, which directs the type of embodiment one is born with. For those born in the form or formless realms, it is not possible to do these practices because only beings with a biological body can practice *tsalung*. Within the desire realm, being born with a human body is superior to even the bodies of gods because the configuration of human channels (*rtsa*) lends itself to success in practice. Embodiment is the axiomatic feature of Buddhist cosmology used in practice to encourage practitioners to have an attitude of gratitude for their current circumstances.

The six realms of samsara are all about embodiment. Propelled by their own karma, one is born with one of six types of bodies, and each body type limits perception and sense function

³⁸¹ Ibid.

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in certain ways. It is easy to observe this phenomenon through the example of animals, whose intelligence is limited by the size of their brains and also their limited ability to communicate. Beings born with the other four types of bodies are not so visible. Those born in the “hungry ghost” realm have huge bellies, and long, tiny necks that don't allow food or drinks to pass down. As ghosts, they exist in the same place as humans but we cannot see them. Even when they get food, they are always hungry and never satisfied. Only the human body possesses the configuration of channels ideal for practice and able to achieve enlightenment. Practitioners are taught to take refuge in the resources available in the body.

The tantric concept of *bodhicitta* is also applied outwardly in social contexts by contemplating that all beings have a body endowed with buddha-nature. Upon meeting other people, practitioners are encouraged to remind themselves that all humans share the quality of buddha-nature within, and are simply not able to recognize it.³⁸² Much of Great Perfection practice aims toward recognition as a precursor to realization. The enlightened body contained within the winds and channels needs only to be recognized to be experienced. One metaphor for recognition is like a child returning to their mother's lap.

Lopon Tinley pointed out another layer of semiotics designed to alter the sense of self, the three types of *tummo* (*gtum mo*). Outer *tummo* is the self-visualization as the wrathful Chenrezig deity. This is typical generation stage tantric practice comprised of the visualization of one's body, or outer form, as the wrathful Chenrezig. Inner *tummo* is the visualization of the central channel as red, white and blue, with the correlative meanings of bliss, clarity, and non-conceptuality. At this level of practice, one works on the *cakra*-s, all of which have a place in the central channel and are therefore included when one meditates on the central channel itself. In

³⁸² Maybe it is like looking for your glasses when they are on your head.

Sky Dharma, one need only meditate on the location of the *cakra*-s but not their form in terms of number of petals, color, shape, and so on. The secret level is the practice of *thig le* itself. These three levels of visualization are meant to be held simultaneously during practice, which involves toggling between them.³⁸³

The secret level of *tummo* is the hollow mind of the letter “A”³⁸⁴. In practice this involves focusing on a Tibetan letter at each of the *cakra*-s in the central channel.³⁸⁵ This is called vital essence yoga (*thig le rnal 'byor*; Skt: *bindu yoga*), or secret *tummo*. The very last postural sequence in *Sky Dharma* is entirely dedicated to *thig le* practice.

One pro-tip that likewise alters the sense of self is to play with scale in the visualization of the central channel. Typically, one meditates on the central channel as the width of a bamboo reed, but practitioners are taught to expand that to the size of the entire body, or even to pervade all of space. Rather than a simple anatomical visualization, practitioners intentionally cue a virtuous state of mind by seeing the central channel mingle the impure energies of the body and the universe with the purity of buddha-nature. In the visualization of the central channel as pervading all of space, the mind of non-conceptuality comes into direct relief with the variety of appearances.³⁸⁶

At the end of our talk, Lopon Tinley seemed to regret that he had not provided me with many details about *tsalung*, and gave me some pith advice. “*Thig le* is emptiness practice. When

³⁸³ Khenpo Norgye, winds and channels oral teachings, McDonough, NY, July 2019.

³⁸⁴ The “a tung”.

³⁸⁵ I have been asked not to disclose instructions on how to practice, so omit details out of respect for the Namdroling/Palyul community. One could argue that I am getting dangerously close to revealing practice instructions here. To be clear, I have not included sufficient information to practice. If you wish to practice Tibetan yoga, one need only attend the retreats at Namdroling, Palyul New York, or another branch monastery. The stages of practice are widely accessible and typically offered by donation. There are Palyul teachers throughout the world. Nowadays, with determination one can easily engage an experienced teacher from Namdroling and need not use this dissertation as practice instructions. If you would like help finding a teacher, please email me at nw3ca@virginia.edu and I will connect you with someone.

³⁸⁶ Khenpo Norgye, winds and channels oral teachings, McDonough, NY, July 2019.

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you have desire, anger, ignorance, all the afflictions, those are *thig le*. In practice, the main thing is the winds. *Tsalung* is actually breath and body training. The channels are the body, and the breath is the winds. There is a relationship between emptiness, the central channel, and the *dharmakāya*. [The letter we visualize at the base of the central channel] is Dorje Pakmo in essence. The ram that burns there is the *thig le* of the fire of wisdom. That is the fire of emptiness. Go to America and meditate on that.”³⁸⁷

Vajra Body Cosmology and Buddhist Idealism

Tibetan Yoga practice hinges upon the idea that all bodies are ultimately vajra bodies made of channels, winds, and vital essences.³⁸⁸ If the vajra body makes it possible for all outer phenomena to exist within an individual, it begs the question of whether tantric Buddhism is an idealist philosophy.

The inner-outer cosmological correspondence commonly referred to in the *Sky Dharma* teachings would be classified as ontological idealism. In contemporary philosophy, this is defined as “reality is a form of thought and human thought participates in it.” Ontological idealism means that something mental is the foundation of all of reality.

The vajra body paradigm is interesting because it supports idealism and physicalism at the same time. The winds, channels, and vital essences are all made up of physical properties: the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and ether. The winds and mind always go together. The vital essences are the physical matter of consciousness and are the mind itself. Since winds, channels, and vital essences are all made up of the five physical elements, it is a physicalist system. However, this material mind is causal for all of reality, making it an idealist

³⁸⁷ Anonymous lupon, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2019.

³⁸⁸ Khenpo Norgye, winds and channels oral teachings, McDonough, NY, July 2019.

philosophy.³⁸⁹ Tibetan Buddhist philosophy embraces parallel levels of reality such as these.

In contemporary philosophy, the other type of idealism is epistemological idealism, a much more palatable claim because it does not reach across the physical-mental divide. In epistemological idealism, only human *knowledge* is determined by human thought. It declines to comment on what else might exist. All knowledge is self-knowledge but other things could exist outside of that system.³⁹⁰ That model is more akin to Abhidharma.

The example the Namdroling teachers usually point out to make the case for idealism is jaundice. They assert that when one has jaundice, the world appears to be yellow, a claim that is not actually true. Nevertheless, the example asserts that what is white in color appears yellow because the eyes are literally tinted with yellow. They conclude that metaphorically, the world is similarly an illusion in that one's own body forces one to see the world incorrectly as yellow. In this way, individuals are literally the source of their own illusory projections, but we are not aware of this. Our ability to project onto reality is as natural as using our own eyes. While the metaphor seems flawed, the important feature is that it depends heavily on physical matter. The yellow tints perception because of a yellow substance in the body. In this system, the body itself is deeply involved in the creation of illusory perceptions.

The teachers point out that this is not a new philosophy in Buddhism, but rather that it is commonly found in the Mahāyāna teachings. One teacher said, “Yes we do have teachings that Buddha taught that it is all a projection of your mind. But [the presentation is] not as detailed in the causal and lower vehicles (*yānas*). The teaching of the Buddha in the causal vehicle instructs those outer phenomena are the projection of your mind, but does not teach that in such detail as

³⁸⁹ While a full engagement with other philosophical traditions is beyond the scope of this dissertation, that is an area of interest for my own future research.

³⁹⁰ Paul Guyer and Rolf-Peter Horstmann, “Idealism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/idealism/>.

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is presented here [with the winds, channels, and vital essences]. The mind is very related with the winds. Our wind is very related to the channels. If there are no channels, there will be no wind. No wind, then no mind. No mind, then no mental projection. If there is no mental projection, then there are no phenomena.”³⁹¹

In lived practice, these causal correlations between the body, mind, and world allow practitioners to control the external environment. The outer world is considered to be comprised of impure phenomena while the inner channels, winds, and vital essences are pure. Their secret innermost level is the three bodies of a Buddha (*dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya*, *nirmanakāya*). Thus, if a practitioner uses *tummo* practice and train well by using the intermediate levels of channels, one can use their own body to become a Buddha.

In the Tibetan language, the pure-impure paradigm is not as literal as in English. The Tibetan terms distinguish between the normal body (*lus*), speech (*ngag*) and mind (*vid*), which is considered to be impure, and the pure body referred to with the honorific register of body (*sku*), speech (*gzung*), and mind (*thugs*). In English, the concepts of purity and impurity are introduced to clarify the philosophy embedded in the linguistic application of the honorific tone.³⁹²

The Namdroling teachers insist that understanding this information is key to success in practice. The minimal amount of knowledge is presented in *Sky Dharma*, but practitioners are encouraged to seek out the Buddhist tantras if they want more information.

This begs the question, why does one need this physicalist, naturalistic explanation of the body in order to practice? From a twenty-first century perspective, its naturalistic leanings are pleasing to our widespread preference for scientific explanations. *Sky Dharma* was written in seventeenth century Tibet, and moreover authors like Longchenpa were writing about

³⁹¹ Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on winds and channels practice, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

³⁹² Ibid.

physicalism in the fourteenth century. I suspect that the deeply physical nature of our bodies and the external world led to natural searching for physical explanations of the mind long before science advanced to its current level.

In contemporary naturalistic philosophy, the aim is to explain away the supernatural with natural phenomena. In these Great Perfection teachings on the body, naturalistic elements exist alongside the supernatural. The structure and dynamics of the physical body and consciousness get explained with the concepts of winds, channels, and vital essences. But at the same time, these concepts introduce supernatural layers of the body such as the existence of celestial beings within the channels. The more granular explanations of the body that rely on natural phenomena help practitioners locate the supernatural within the everyday lived reality of the body. The reliance on the physical limits of the five elements and their functions makes these presentations more aligned with a scientific worldview. That level of explanation seems to have been needed even when these texts were written. However, what appears to be scientific and naturalistic actually obscures supernatural phenomena located at the deeper recesses of the vajra body.

In Buddhism, the normal mind is incapable of observing yogic realities unless one has transformed the mind to extremely rarefied states. Since yogic ways of knowing the world—yogic epistemologies—are inaccessible by those who have untrained minds, the supernatural planes of existence only become apparent for accomplished yogins able to see them directly.

At the same time, if one can accept the supernatural as part of the phenomenological horizon, then the explanation makes a lot of sense. By doing these practices, the practice itself exhausts the elements within the body. Automatically, conceptual thoughts should stop arising, and non-conceptual primordial wisdom should arise. The practice should exhaust outer appearances, both good and bad, and all dualistic perceptions. In this way, the cause of all good

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and bad appearances and perceptions is the winds.³⁹³

Vajra body philosophy makes tantric practices such as postural yoga and its sister practice sexual yoga³⁹⁴ philosophically feasible.³⁹⁵ In Tibetan culture, the subtle body is alive among communities of practitioners as a hermeneutical device for understanding certain experiences. No one that I interviewed made real-life claims about the subtle body, but again, the Namdroling monks and nuns are novice practitioners and spend more time focused on scholasticism than contemplative practice. Many aspire to do longer retreats after graduation, or like Lopon Tinley is doing now, go home to teach these practices to their local communities as clergy members.

A Nun on Clearing Obstacles

Ani Karma Yonten³⁹⁶ became a nun at twenty-five, which is late but not unusual at Namdroling. There is a contingent of people who ordain as children through the influence of their families or because of their life situation, and another group of monastics who self-select a life of renunciation based on their experience of the world as young adults. The age cutoff for beginning studies at the monastery is forty.

Before coming to Namdroling, Ani Karma lived and worked at Khenpo Namdrol's

³⁹³ Lama Dorje, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

³⁹⁴ Sarah Jacoby, *Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro*, Kindle Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). “To understand how sexuality could be a part of Vajrayāna Buddhist contemplative practice requires an introduction to the physiology of the subtle body akin to that Sera Khandro reports receiving from the Indian Tantric master Kukkuripa.¹⁹ In her autobiography she wrote that while she was celebrating the New Year in 1906, which marked her fourteenth birthday, at her brother’s house in Lhasa, she dreamed that she traveled to a place called Siddhi Ling, Place of Accomplishment, in southern India. Recalling that in a past life she had been Kukkuripa’s “secret consort who generates bliss” (bde bskyed kyi gsang ba’i grogs), she saw a mountain at the junction of two rivers blanketed with trees and houses in which Sanskrit letters stood. Kukkuripa explained that this was not an outer location in the world, but an appearance of her inner subtle body.”

³⁹⁵ Christopher Hatchell, *Naked Seeing: The Great Perfection, the Wheel of Time, and Visionary Buddhism in Renaissance Tibet* (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 4.

³⁹⁶ Psuedonym.

dharma center outside of Kathmandu, where she attended teachings with the renowned master. Khenpo Namdrol is known for his knowledge of Great Perfection philosophy in the Namdroling/Palyul world. He is one of the three Khenpos on the council at Namdroling, and gives public teachings regularly in Nepal, at Namdroling, in Taiwan, and in the United States and Europe. He is a master of Longchenpa's works in particular.

During her time working at his dharma center, Ani Karma developed such deep reverence for dharma teachings and practice that she decided to give up her life as a layperson and ordain. This meant she would never marry and have a family of her own. Instead, at Namdroling, she would get an excellent education, learn to debate according to the system of Tibetan dialectics, teach, and participate in contemplative retreats like *tsalung*. It was her third time in the *tsalung* retreat in her five-year tenure at the nunnery, indicating an affinity for the practice. She underwent a profound physical healing, which she cited as her impetus to repeat the retreat three times.³⁹⁷

When she spoke about her education in the monastic college, she talked about it as both an academic struggle to catch up to the nuns who had ordained as children, but also as a wonderful experience. A life dedicated to Buddhist philosophy was clearly a treat, and she was grateful for her good fortune. In the winds and channels retreat, her mat was in the front row and she coached other students during practice sessions.³⁹⁸ Her moves were precise and brave, and it was obvious she was enjoying the physical capacity gained through practice.³⁹⁹

She said that her monastic studies had a little bit of a relationship to the winds and channels retreat. She wasn't expecting to have any realizations in *tsalung*, but was happy to

³⁹⁷ Ani Karma Yontan, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2019.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Observation by author.

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receive the empowerment, explanations from the Khenpos, and the opportunity to commit the practice to memory. She called the practice deep and profound, and reported getting better each year she participated. “It gets easier, more fun, but I don't understand anything in particular.” The nuns were humble about their accomplishments. When I asked her about her meditation, she said, “Some people get to meditate over and over again. We don't do that. We mostly study here. We don't do deep research in the subjects or the meditations. There is not enough time.”⁴⁰⁰

The one area when Ani Karma had clearly benefitted from Tibetan Yoga was in her physical health. “Now my body feels good and is comfortable. Before, I was bowlegged. It hurt so much. Now my legs are straight. This happened in *tsalung*. Medicine didn't work for this. *Tsalung* did it.”

While the previous sections discussed how the body informs consciousness according to the vajra body model, *tsalung* contains a special set of practices dedicated to healing the body by directing the mind. This area bridges both contemplation and medicine, and was designed for practitioners in long retreats in remote locations with no access to health care. Traditionally practitioners have needed ways to heal themselves and be completely self-sufficient in long periods of isolation. The fifth postural sequence in *tsalung* is dedicated to self-healing as a preventative measure, and to illnesses as they arise.

These practices introduce contemplations to influence the body, shifting away from the reductive world of the vajra body with its emphasis on structure and dynamics. They are the flipside of a physicalist dynamic seeking to modify experience from the ground up. They ask, how can the mind heal the body?

Research on the placebo effect shows that thoughts of healing can trigger meaning

⁴⁰⁰ Ani Karma Yontan, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2019.

making centers in the brain linked to the release of endorphins, stress reduction, and immune responses. Perhaps a similar effect is at play here. The same experience can be explained according to changes in the brain or changes in the endocrine system. Endocrine functions have neurological footprints. It is possible that the brain is not the best way to explain the vajra body model. A Tibetan medical doctor and professor at the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) in Sarnath told me that vital essences are actually hormones.⁴⁰¹ A well-known yoga teacher working on the convergence between science and yoga told me neuroscience is no longer the predominant view of the subtle body, but that endocrinology explains more.

According to *Sky Dharma*, the body's winds need to stay in balance in order to maintain health. Both mental and physical illnesses can arise when too much, or not enough, wind gathers in certain locations in the body. Locations of gathered wind incite common conditions, like for example too much wind at the heart produces anxiety. Special wind disorders can arise as the result of contemplation itself, and these can be particularly serious for practitioners in deep retreat.

The fifth *Sky Dharma* sequence takes a break from the project of raising the winds up the central channel to focus on the prevention of physical and mental obstacles. Halfway through the nine postural sequences, this special healing session is a welcome reprieve in the middle of the challenging postural sequences.

The Namdroling teachers warn that one never knows when physical or mental problems will arise, so a yogin should take measures to be prepared in advance. Winds and channels yoga practice might even cause physical and mental obstacles that would prevent one from continuing their practice. A main metaphor of *tsalung* practice is a dirty pot. The postures, breath retentions,

⁴⁰¹ Professor Lobsang Tenzin, communication with the author, Sarnath, India, September 2018.

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and visualizations are designed to stir up the impurities in the body. When the winds carrying the five poisons move, they can ripen into experiences. In the process of cleaning up negative karma, one might inadvertently trigger its effects. The practices in the fifth postural sequence do maintenance on the system so that unwanted obstacles do not impede practice. Practitioners are encouraged to clear obstacles before they arise, or to apply these practices once obstacles have arisen.

Thus, the fifth *Sky Dharma* sequence is classified as an obstacle clearing (*gegs gsal*) practice. Obstacles are grouped according to location: upper body problems, lower body problems, and systemic problems.

The two types of upper diseases address alleviating mental unhappiness and depression due to stale vital energy in the heart, and too much vital energy at the heart. With the first condition, when vital energy gets stuck in the heart, the mind becomes unhappy and one may feel faint. The remedy is to visualize a letter in a certain color in the space in front, and then repeat a syllable visualizing the syllable extending from one's own heart, through their mouth, to land on the visualized letter in front. In this way, one gives form to the stale energy and quite literally removes it from the body.

When there is too much vital energy at the heart, the body can become hot, the breath short, and the pulse rapid and hurried. The antidote for this is to visualize a different letter in a cool tone at the heart. One imagines that the letter is as cold ice water, and sees this ice water flowing downward into the organs of the torso, cooling them. This cleanses the internal organs, alleviating the condition of too much heat that they cause.

In another upper body practice, one visualizes the same letter but leaves it in place at the heart. The practitioner extends their arms with a finger out, and literally sucks in cool air toward

the heart. At the end of this sequence, the practitioner shakes off any residual energy and moves on to the lower body.⁴⁰²

Digestion problems are the first issue addressed in the lower body practices. During the *tsalung* retreat, a set of dietary restrictions are designed to curtail digestive ailments, although they are tailored to a Tibetan cuisine. However, practitioners cannot always avoid eating bad foods, and some people have sensitive digestion. As a remedy, one can forcefully hold the winds in the stomach and visualize the burning off of problems and illness. In Tibetan medicine just as in Ayurveda, heat is the source of good digestion so the visualized heat already in use in the central channel becomes a digestive remedy.

Bad food and evil spirits are common sources of illness in the Tibetan tradition. Such negative experiences can cause a practitioner to lose their motivation to practice, cause one to not experience bliss in practice, or could even bring about death. The teachers remind practitioners that the real cause of obstacles and illnesses is karma. The vajra body stores all prior actions and experiences (karma) in the body.⁴⁰³

For general problems or those not listed, there is a practice where one can target pain in any location whatsoever in the body. One places their own hands in the location of the pain and visualizes three holes there. They visualize that steam or smoke comes out of that location, and literally release the pain caused by the vital energies trapped there.

⁴⁰² These are incomplete instructions. You cannot do the practice by following these instructions. If you want to practice, there are many teachers available in person and online. You can email nw3ca@virginia.edu for a recommendation. If anything, I hope this work makes it clear that Namdroling teachers are plentiful and reside locally throughout the world.

⁴⁰³ Although this did not come up in the classes I attended, I imagine that when pressed, even external obstacles such as evil spirits would have to be explained according to the laws of karma. As a student of Buddhism, I have studied teachings by another fourteenth century master, Tsongkhapa, that acknowledge that not all experiences come from karma. There are external sources of experiences outside of karma, and evil spirits are explained that way. This is a hotly debated subject on the monastic debate ground. I believe that the vajra body presentation sides with the position all appearances originate in the karmic resources located in the body. Tsong kha pa, Lam rim chen mo.

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Restlessness is defined in *tsalung* as the inability to stay seated. One has to wonder if this practice would work for ADHD. Here, one visualizes a huge cup of hot golden ghee in front of them, and sucks it up through a straw in their big toe, filling the body entirely all the way to the top with the hot golden liquid. Another option is to visualize a very heavy golden stupa at the heart.⁴⁰⁴

Ani Karma Yontan never referenced these particular practices as part of her healing. It would be impossible to know whether it was her mind that influenced the healing of her body via these exercises, or simply the postural sequences themselves that straightened out her bowleggedness. There is nothing in the postural sequences that stands out as something that would straighten one's legs, but physiologically it might be the mere act of getting exercise. However, exercise is not a typical remedy for bowleggedness, and moreover, she is not the only monastic who reported healing bowleggedness. A vajra body explanation for healing bowleggedness would be that when one straightens out the channels through the visualizations and exercises, the physical body mirrors that inner state.⁴⁰⁵

Signs of Practice as Mind-Body Correlations

Contemplative literature from Tibet commonly features “signs of practice” that practitioners can expect to achieve through practice, and the list from *Sky Dharma* nicely illustrates the mind-body connection. The *tsalung* philosophy and practice point out how the body effects the mind and vice versa in ideal conditions. This is a list of what should happen when one practices in retreat conditions, which means for a long time (months or years), with three or four sessions per day, and in relative isolation.

⁴⁰⁴ Anonymous tulku, oral teachings on winds and channels practice, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

⁴⁰⁵ Ani Karma Yontan, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

There is no story of a monastic to accompany this section because none of the practitioners spoke about the signs of practice listed in *Sky Dharma*. As mentioned, the monks and nuns at Namdroling are mostly beginners, although a handful do the retreat several times and become masterful. I imagine some people have experienced signs of accomplishment, but if they had, it would be unlikely for anyone to volunteer that information in an interview. Tibetan culture discourages bragging about achievements, especially those garnered through contemplative practice. Also, I did not ask them directly if they had any of the traditional signs of practice. I intentionally kept my questions open-ended and instead asked what benefits they achieved through practice. Most claimed to experience physical benefits, benefits from meditation, and a greater understanding of Buddhist philosophy. I think most do experience bliss from practice, but in non-literary contexts people tend to say “I enjoy it” or “it’s fun” (“*skyid po 'dug*”) rather than “I experience bliss.”

One traditional sign of practice is the increase of bliss and healing due to visualizations of the body and the world as blissful. In Buddhism, the normal human condition is suffering, so all appearances in the world are tainted by suffering of some kind. This can be actual suffering as in pain, or the suffering of impermanence as in when good things come to an end.⁴⁰⁶ To increase bliss with *tsalung*, one visualizes white *bodhicitta* nectar endowed with the quality of bliss emanating out of their own pores and filling the body and the entire world with bliss. One imagines incinerating all the impurities in the world, leaving behind only primordial wisdom.

On one level, such practices inspire faith by pointing out that a pure, blissful state exists. They set a high bar for what is possible, creating new boundaries for the realm of possible experiences. By imagining that one has reached that state, one gets hope and even a glimpse of

⁴⁰⁶ Or the third type of suffering, death.

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what it is like. At the same time, the visualizations are pedagogic in that they instruct on the nature of the body as the source of external appearances. At Buddhahood, in theory these visualizations should become a reality.

A mental state of perfection is a commonly referred to expected outcome, but no one I spoke with reported it unfolding like that. Practitioners reported having glimpses of bliss from their practice. In the realm of human psychology, there are real benefits in overall happiness for many due to these tantric contemplations. For me, the happiness crept up on me. I tended to be miserable at the beginning of the retreats, grapple with physical or mental unease during the retreat, and then end up with at least a week of pure joy after the retreats ended before settling back into a more normal state. I am always left with the memory of a significant life event, and believe the long-term effects have a lasting impact on overall happiness. Happiness is an understudied aspect of research on Buddhist contemplation and would be an ideal mental state to include in a research hypothesis on *anuyoga* practices such as *tsalung* that explicitly aim to incite bliss.⁴⁰⁷

Mental transformation is not a linear process. The philosophical representation of the vajra body nicely depicts the complexity of human psychology. The map itself indicates that the path is not straightforward. If you can incite bliss with these practices, the limits to that process depend on the mind's ability to continue on a trajectory. Several factors intervene with that possibility, including accessibility to retreat, which is not so easy in a modern world, access to teachings, interpersonal and social conditions, as well as temperament and mental traits.

On the other hand, according to the teachings, success in practice can actually increase anxiety and fear, which typically manifests as bad dreams during retreat. Such dreams are

⁴⁰⁷ Anonymous tulku, recording of oral teachings on winds and channels, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

understood to be signs of purification of misdeeds and obscurations. Dreams of vomiting, washing one's body, wearing white clothes, flying, and seeing the sun and moon are particularly good signs, and the dream has to recur at least twice to be included as a sign of success in practice.⁴⁰⁸

One expected outcome of retreat is a feeling of uneasiness, disquiet, or anxiety. The teachers explain this using karma theory.⁴⁰⁹ When the karma and mental habits stored in the body get released from where they are stuck, they can get activated. The purpose of the practice is to purify the misdeeds and obscurations that have accumulated from beginningless time. If one notices this happening a lot, the recommendation is to do the “obstacle clearing” practices described above.⁴¹⁰

The flipside of having dreams as signs is seeing life as if it were a dream, which is another outcome of practice. With conviction that outward appearances are a manifestation of inner realities, the yogin who has control of their winds is able to apply this interpretation to all appearances and see them as illusions. Technically, those who have succeeded in moving the winds into the central channel will know this reality directly, through the conviction of their own firsthand experience, and without further theoretical interpretation.

Several intermediate signs result from holding the breath/winds properly. First, one produces heat in the body. At advanced levels, heat physically manifestations as twitches, pulses or trembling in the body.⁴¹¹ One might notice that they are faster when they travel about, work faster without getting tired, that the body feels light, and that the breath is very quiet.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Lama Dorje, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ This is a common phenomenon in communities of Buddhists doing subtle body practices, although at Palyul New York, when a practitioner inquired about this, the response was discouraging. The lama said you have to be an advanced practitioner for this to occur, and we are only learning.

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Desire for food and clothes will decrease because when the mind feels blissful through practice cravings naturally disappear. If you fall into a precipice or off a steep rock you will not get hurt. You will not drown in a river. These last two signs are reminiscent of common problems in Tibet and one wonders what the South Indian equivalent might be.

Milarepa's story exemplifies this effect and is recounted in the retreats. He once fell in a river and did not drown, and when someone tried to burn him in a fire, he did not burn. The explanation for his feats is that he overpowered the elements with his practice. By mastering the breath, he ultimately was able to control all the elements.

Other miracles that resulted from his practice of *tsalung* are that when Milarepa was asked for advice, he spoke the true words of the dharma exactly according to the person's needs without any effort. His spontaneous ability to do so is known as the power of vajra speech. It is said that when reaches this level of achievement in practice, whatever one says becomes in accordance with the dharma, and all their words benefit others. One never lies, and whatever prayers they make on behalf of others come true. This came as the result of Milarepa's ability to hold the winds in the central channel.⁴¹²

The Namdroling teachers admit that one could gain this power of speech without tantric practices by simply not lying because of the laws of karma. However, in *tummo* practice, holding the winds at the throat *cakra* grants access to the power of vajra speech. Yoga practitioners are still bound to the Buddhist code of ethics such as the ten non-virtues, which includes not lying. The point here is to increase power, not to circumvent ethical behavior.

For practitioners who are able to control the winds, they can control the mind and in turn they can control outer phenomena. Instead of being in the throes of karma and mental habits and

⁴¹² Anonymous tulku, recording of oral teachings on winds and channels, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

endlessly reacting to external stimuli, one should be able to take charge of their world and change it. In practice, this translates to the mental state of adamantite meditative concentration (*rdo rje thag pa'i ting ngan 'dzin*). In this sense of the word vajra is taken literally from its etymology of the “king of stones,” a diamond. On the ground, if one were to have such firm mental fortitude, the implications would be profound. However, this is a faraway reality for beginners. One month of practice is not enough to attain adamantite concentration.

There are social implications that result from *tsalung*. If external appearances are the projection of inner realities, then whatever needs to be changed about the world can be accomplished by rearranging one's inner world. If such statements are to be effective in a contemporary social justice milieu, they have to be received in the spirit of self-improvement rather than shifting blame. These are the very same justifications tantric lamas have used recently to blame victims, as they provide a tantric hermeneutic that empowers the gaslighting of victims. Specifically, if one's own projections are caused by the state of the inner winds, then any harmful appearances are also internally sourced. A victim could twist this into a justification for self-blame, and a perpetrator could likewise blame victims.⁴¹³ The act of localizing the system of projections simply provides a physicalist justification for the illusionist theory of reality.

I think a healthy interpretation of these teachings is for practitioners to get curious about the contents of their own karmic storehouse when negativity arises in their lives, and to examine the ways they contribute to and participate in challenging situations. The interpretation of the

⁴¹³ Take, for example, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's public response to allegations of sexual abuse against Sogyal Rinpoche. He says, “One of Buddhism’s fundamental practices is that of working with our own projections. It’s a practice that is particularly emphasized in the Vajrayana. I know many of you will roll your eyes and accuse me of coping out when I say this, but everything Sogyal Rinpoche’s critical students are accusing him of is based on their projection. I know it’s hard to accept, I know it seems very real, but even so, it is a projection.” Craig Lewis and Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, “Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche Issues Public Statement on Recent Criticism of Sogyal Rinpoche,” *Buddhist Door Global News* (blog), August 15, 2017, <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/dzongsar-khyentse-rinpoche-issues-public-statement-on-recent-criticism-of-sogyal-rinpoche>.

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recipient of harm does not, however, forego karmic repercussions to an assailant when there is harm.

It would be overly simplistic and also an additional act of harm to blame victims for manifesting crimes through their subtle body. I think it would be a wrong and solipsistic interpretation of Buddhist philosophy. The main purpose of the teachings on karma is to incite confidence in the role of the mind in appearances. That does not imply that one is responsible for all heinous appearances. Such a conclusion would be an additional conceptual frame that diagnoses and judges. If non-conceptuality is the goal, another layer of judgment such as self-blame is just another layer of delusion.

The teachers at Namdroling point out that Shakyamuni Buddha taught the doctrine of karma so that disciples would know what to take up and what to cast aside. The vajrayāna teachings on karma show a way for everything to come out of the mind and also have a physicalist, naturalistic explanation. In this worldview, all phenomena are fundamentally the projection of one's internal existence. Since all these phenomena have buddha-nature, even the omniscience and endless compassion of the Buddhas is a projection whose source exists within the body. Buddha-nature is indivisible in essence from ordinary realities. The difficulty in practicing these teachings is having confidence that the source of all phenomena is the mind, and the further explanation provided to resolve this difficulty is that mind is the winds, channels, and vital essences.⁴¹⁴

Conclusion: Rebirth as a Mind-Body Correlation

The most consequential mind-body correlation in Buddhism is rebirth itself. Practitioners

⁴¹⁴ Anonymous tulku, recording of oral teachings on winds and channels, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

are reminded that if they do not attend to the presence of non-virtuous karma, the result will definitely be rebirth in the lower realms—in hell, as a hungry ghost, or as an animal. *Tsalung* practice addresses the habits, afflictive emotions, and cognitive obstructions that cause suffering through a purification of body and mind. The body is necessary because karma and mental tendencies are stored in the body, and the body is in fact made as a reflection of these subtle substances. Practitioners commonly suffer through the physical exertion of *tsalung*, but the teachers cheer them on by reminding them that they are purifying countless eons of what would otherwise ripen as experience in the hell realms.⁴¹⁵

This chapter has addressed the question of how yoga works by examining the correlations between mind, body, and subtle body cited in the *Sky Dharma* yoga manual. The physical depiction of mind through the vajra body model lends itself readily to conversation with neuroscience, particularly with the central channel as the main “subtle nerve.” The sections on healing are particularly interesting and invite further reflection on the endocrine system as the place of greatest change in the body.

While the vajra body model is reductionist, the practice of *tsalung* goes beyond the structure and dynamics of the body. The experiences incited through visualization work together with the structure of the body to incite change, making a purely reductionist explanation possible. While reductionist models that explain structure and dynamics are necessary to our understanding of how the world works, the practice of Tibetan yoga demonstrates that it takes a combination of physical matter plus experience to incite real change.

⁴¹⁵ Anonymous tulku, recording of oral teachings on winds and channels, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

Chapter Five: The Lamas: Top-Down Teachings on Tibetan Yoga

Chapter Summary

Chapter four takes a close look at the top-down leadership in the winds and channels yoga retreats at Namdroling through ethnographic accounts of two of its main teachers, Lama Dorje Wangchuk⁴¹⁶ and Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso.⁴¹⁷ While winds and channels yoga asks great physical feats of its practitioners, these teachers provide the philosophical context through which such practices are interpreted. They continually shift the focus to the mind, to society, and to the environment. Compared to the previous chapter, which focuses on monks and nuns in the process of learning winds and channels yoga, these two figures are considered to be masters. When they speak about the practice, they constantly connect it to Great Perfection philosophy. As teachers they are instrumental in scripting ways the mental component of the postural yoga practices. As an example of clarity and intentionality of the mental component of yoga training, *Sky Dharma* winds and channels yoga serves as one end of the spectrum of religious contextualization among yoga systems in that it is deeply religious. This example invites reflection on the degree to which postural yoga systems are religiously indoctrinated through an examination of the ways the mind is directed during practice.

Meditating in a Monastery?

Contemporary Tibetan Buddhist monasteries are often seen as centers for scholastic learning and ritual performance with few opportunities for meditation.⁴¹⁸ In contrast, Namdroling

⁴¹⁶ Pseudonym.

⁴¹⁷ This is his real name and he is a popular teacher in the US with a formidable internet presence.

⁴¹⁸ See David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press,

Monastery and Nunnery institutionally prioritizes the integration of both philosophy and contemplative practice under one roof. Life in refugee camps has fostered a great deal of sharing among the sects of Tibetan Buddhism, and contemporary Nyingma institutions including Namdroling engage in scholastic practices such as debate more than ever.⁴¹⁹ However, the vestiges of the Nyingma sect as the clan of yogis⁴²⁰ in Tibet continues to pervade this lineage. At Namdroling, monks and nuns really do meditate, evidenced by the monastery's dual scholastic and contemplative curricula throughout the year. This chapter takes a close look at the philosophy and practice of winds, channels, and inner heat (*rtsa rlung gtum mo*) yoga through the eyes of the leaders who teach at Namdroling.⁴²¹ Ethnographic accounts of Khenpo Tsewang Gyatso and Lama Dorje Wangpo,⁴²² two important figures in the teaching and transmission of the practice both at Namdroling and abroad, are combined with oral teachings on winds and channels yoga given during the annual retreats at Namdroling. This chapter highlights top-down instructions given by two of Namdroling's great living masters who present idealized versions of winds and channels yoga.

2008). Also, Georges B. J. Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2003). Dreyfus points out that it is possible to meditate in a monastery, and that is true. Namdroling has “practice houses” (*sgrub khang*) for both monks and nuns where they engage in three-year meditation retreat. However, during the course of the lengthy study of Buddhist philosophy, many Tibetan Buddhist monastics do not meditate. Take, for example, Sera Je Gelukpa monastery nearby to Namdroling. Over the course of twenty-five years of training in philosophy, there is little to no training in meditation, although the monks engage in ample rituals. At Namdroling, on the other hand, the Sky Dharma contemplative retreats are offered for one month annually, plus two annual “great accomplishment” (*sgrub chen*) weeks of practice, summer retreat (*yar gnas*), which is not particularly contemplative, plus more depending on what is needed. Moreover, I heard several accounts of Namdroling monks and nuns meditating on their own. The monastics are not immune to the influence of Buddhist modernism, and some take up mindfulness or breath meditation in preparation for their future roles as teachers in international dharma centers.

⁴¹⁹ When I was at Namdroling, the organizing council of Khenpos were debating whether they should add more time for debate to the monastic college's daily curriculum. There is a sense of pride that the Nyingmapas are as good at debating as the Gelukpas down the street, but also a self-consciousness that they neither spend as much time debating, nor do they use the same curriculum. The Gelukpa monks at Sera Me and Sera Je monasteries, for example, debate the same text for a year. Namdroling's curriculum studies a wide range of texts.

⁴²⁰ Namdroling Khenpo, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

⁴²¹ See chapter one for a disambiguation of the terms “Tibetan Yoga” and “Tibetan yoga.”

⁴²² Pseudonym

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A theme that naturally arises through the ways the lamas speak about winds and channels yoga is that the practice is oriented around the mind, mostly evident via the generation and completion stage contemplations central to the practice. The term for Tibetan yoga, *tsalung tummo* (*rtsa rlung gtum mo*), translates as winds, channels, and inner heat [yoga].⁴²³ These terms refer to aspects of the subtle body that are loaded with tantric semiotics and historically embedded meaning. Despite being a body-oriented technique like other forms of modern postural yoga, winds and channels yoga stands out in that it is not divorced from its religious and historical roots. While much of this dissertation looks at how the body and physical matter take center stage in winds and channels yoga, this chapter turns to the history, mythology, and philosophy of the Great Perfection that stands behind the practice to show how the mind is actually more important than the body to the Buddhist tradition. Especially in a dissertation that argues elsewhere for a physicalist interpretation of the Buddhist realm of dependent reality, and that foregrounds how the body is used in the contemplative process, it is important to not lose sight of what the body does for the mind. While the body and physicalism are important parts of the puzzle, at the end of the day, embodied practices are embedded within Tibet's rich history and culture, and these supporting narratives shape the ways the practice is interpreted. Winds and channels yoga emphasizes the mind by relying on a Tibetan Buddhist philosophical worldview rooted in the Great Perfection school of philosophy.

The second aim of this chapter is to place Tibetan postural yoga on a spectrum among contemporary yoga systems according to alignment with a religious worldview. *Sky Dharma* yoga is a quintessential form of contemporary postural yoga in that it is clearly linked to a

⁴²³ I prefer to translate *gtum mo* as “inner heat” because this term has been popularized by contemporary Tibetan teachers such as Lama Yeshe, who actually calls the practice “inner fire.” Also, it is an accurate description of the practice. However, a translation of *gtum mo* more loyal to its Tibetan etymology is “fierce woman.” Thubten Yeshe et al., *The Bliss of Inner Fire: Heart Practice of the Six Yogas of Naropa* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1998).

traditional religious philosophy. While the body is a main tool in the practice, it works in service of the mind to experience Buddhist philosophy in real ways. The chapter’s conclusion will discuss the implications of this research. Namely, contemporary debates on yoga as a secular versus religious practice criticize yoga systems as vehicles for religious doctrine. This manifests as a view that equates the presence of yoga with the presence of religion.⁴²⁴ For *Sky Dharma* yoga, this relationship is unequivocal. Winds and channels yoga is deeply steeped in the Great Perfection worldview, upheld by the carefully-planned scholastic education within which the practice unfolds at Namdroling, discussed below.

However, winds and channels yoga as practiced at Namdroling is an example of only one end of the spectrum for yoga systems and their relationship to religious ideas. Winds and channels yoga precisely scripts its postural sequences with religious doctrine. With these liturgical scripts in hand for a postural yoga system, it is easy to see how any postural system can likewise be carefully scripted, pairing yoga poses such as stretches or jumps with whatsoever ideology is deemed appropriate for its own audience, and not necessarily “religious” in nature at all.

Modern Tibetan Buddhist Postural Yoga

The popular global hub for modern Ashtanga yoga sits just two hours from Namdroling in Mysore, Karnataka. Unlike Mysore’s fame among contemporary yoga practitioners, Namdroling monks, nuns, and Tibetan refugees have been quietly practicing *Sky Dharma* (*gNam chos*)⁴²⁵ in Bylakuppe since 1973. It took ten years after the establishment of the monastic

⁴²⁴ Candy Gunther Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools: Reforming Secular Education or Reestablishing Religion?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 6.

⁴²⁵ gNam chos mi’gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, *sNga ’gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba’i ri chos gsum gyi khrid*

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college (*bshad grwa*) for the visionary lama Penor Rinpoche to get the yoga retreats going at Namdroling. Penor Rinpoche and other refugees went through grueling physical challenges to escape Chinese military rule in Tibet. In light of that, the fact that they were ready for the physical feats required by winds and channels yoga is impressive and a sign of Penor Rinpoche's dedication to carrying on the practice lineage in India. Nowadays, the practice is well-known among the monastics at Namdroling as a form of physical fitness and opportunity to get fit in addition to being an opportunity for deep contemplation. The Tibetan elders continue to have a presence on Namdroling's campus. You can often find them circumambulating the grounds, and when it comes time for the annual contemplative retreats, many participate in the foundational practices or the third and highest tier, the Great Perfection contemplations.



Figure 32 (Left) An older Namdroling monk who emigrated from Tibet. (Right) A Tibetan refugee in the Great Perfection retreat.

The monks and nuns at Namdroling practice Migyur Dorje's three-tiered contemplative program mostly unaware of Namdroling's relatively recent and traumatic origins. The elders who escaped from Tibet are few in number, although there has been a constant trickle from Tibet to Namdroling since its establishment. The young monastics hail mostly from regions of Nepal, Bhutan, and Northern India with long traditions of deep influence from Tibetan Buddhism.

yig/ Rtsa Rlung//, Par gzhi dang po, sNga 'gyur dpal yul dar thang gzhan phan lnga rig sam bho ta'i dpe tshogs 13–15 (Khren tu'u: Si khron dpe skrun tshogs pa si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2007).

These young people have no memory of the refugee crisis, which stopped being a crisis before they were born. The Tibetan refugee situation is common knowledge at Namdroling but not a pressing issue. The monks and nuns have to deal with their own citizenship issues, and lead busy lives as students and teachers. Nowadays many do not know Penor Rinpoche personally, who passed away in 2009, although his presence looms. The majority of the monastics continue to see him as their root guru (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*). One monk who never met Penor Rinpoche but saw him as his root guru said, “Everything I received here came out of Rinpoche.”⁴²⁶

In the world of modern postural yoga, it is not common knowledge that Tibetan Buddhism has an ancient tradition of yoga that continues to be practiced today. Historically, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries provided homes for the stable transmission of practice techniques across generations, and the yoga tradition at Namdroling is a prime example. *Sky Dharma* yoga was revealed in the seventeenth century by the visionary figure Migyur Dorje who died as a young man, and commented on by his disciple and caretaker Karma Chakmé (*kar+ma chags med*, 1613–1678). These texts are taught and practiced precisely at Namdroling, a living lineage carried from Tibet to India. Thus, this research opens a window onto a continuous practice lineage with origins in seventeenth-century Tibet. The monastic practitioners of the Palyul lineage have been following the same detailed set of instruction manuals until today.

However, the *Sky Dharma* practices at Namdroling unfold in the significantly different cultural context of South India in modern times. Migration and change are constant features of yoga traditions, much to the chagrin of contemporary yoga enthusiasts who crave essentialized and mystical origins to modern postural yoga lineages. Spiritual seekers would be quite pleased with the way the monastic system in Tibet, combined with Tibet’s relative isolation from

⁴²⁶ Anonymous monk, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, January 2019.

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political interference from outsiders for hundreds of years,⁴²⁷ allowed for the preservation of the textual lineage of *Sky Dharma* yoga.

Being part of a prescriptive contemplative tradition makes Tibetan Yoga stand out among modern yoga systems.⁴²⁸ Tibetan Yoga is specific, clear, and unwavering in the ways that it *directs the mind*. Each posture is accompanied by a prescribed mental contemplation that refers back to the religious semiotics of Tibetan Buddhist tantra. This guides the practitioner toward Buddhist goals, namely mental purification of the five afflictions (attachment, aversion, ignorance, pride, and jealousy), the accumulation of merit, and ideally enlightenment itself. Cognitive procedures standard to Tibetan Buddhist contemplation such as guru yoga, purification through imagined and real tantric empowerments, and visualization of the tantric body consisting of channels, winds, and vital essences are integral to the performance of the nine postural sequences that make up *Sky Dharma's* yoga system.⁴²⁹ All of this is accompanied by simultaneous breath retention. While Tibetan Yoga involves the execution of a complex series of postures and breath retentions, the highly prescribed visualizations and accompanying rituals before, during, and after the practice constantly orient the mind to the reification and internalization of Buddhist philosophy.

The following quote provides an example. When I first received the winds and channels yoga teachings at Namdroling, a bright monk from Namdroling's translator program took notes on my behalf and delivered the teachings to me in English later in the day in as close to an oral

⁴²⁷ It would be naïve to assert that Tibet was completely untouched by outside political influences. However, compared to India to the South, Tibetan yoga traditions did not undergo the massive upheaval that Indian yoga traditions underwent due to shifting religious and political influences. In the Land of Snow, the monastic lineages maintained continuity across generations, and the *Sky Dharma* series of instruction manuals is an example of continuity across centuries.

⁴²⁸ The Nāth tradition of Hindu yoga is similarly prescriptive. It also centers around fire, although the fire is often external. James Mallinson gave presentations at the University of Virginia in 2016 on Nāth haṭh yogins doing practices around actual fires.

⁴²⁹ The nine postural sequences are described in detail in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

translation that such a setup would allow. He said:

“Khenchen said that even in the Hinduism and other religions they also have this kind of *tsalung* practice. They even get specific realizations, like they can read others minds, they can fly, or even, he especially gave the example that with a trident they could make holes in rocks as if they were mud. Even *they* can gain these kinds of realizations, *siddhi*-s. But whatever kind of realization they get, they can't reach enlightenment, or nirvana, freedom from *samsara*. Because the very fact is that whatever practice they are engaging in, it isn't held by the intention of *bodhicitta*. That is the method part. And, the wisdom part is the practice. If your actions are bound and focused on *bodhicitta*, then you are doing that action out of *bodhicitta*. Their [referring to other forms of yoga] practice is not focused on the view of emptiness. Without having the view of emptiness, you will never be free from *samsara*, the wisdom part. So *jangchub kyi sem* (*byang chub kyi sems*), *bodhicitta*, Khenchen quoted a verse. If it is there, it is enough to get enlightenment. If it is not there, then you won't have that. This is what *bodhicitta* does. Whatever you practice, you should have the *bodhicitta* mind. That is the main thing. Then, upon having that intention, *bodhicitta* has two aspects, the intention and the action part. With that intention, if you engage in the practice of *tsalung*, it becomes the ability to attain buddhahood.”⁴³⁰

The quote differentiates the *Sky Dharma* yoga tradition from other yoga traditions because of its emphasis of the generation of *bodhicitta*. This is one of many mental applications required in the practice of winds and channels yoga that are explored in this chapter.

The quote also situates the *Sky Dharma* tradition within Hindu yoga practices. *Tsalung tummo* (*rtsa rlung gtum mo*; winds, channels, and inner heat yoga) is a Tibetan Buddhist analogue to Indian *haṭhayoga* because the tradition considers itself as a part of that class of practices. The Tibetan tradition shares common features with Indian *haṭhayoga*, a term that applies to physical methods used for religious ends.⁴³¹ Not only did Khenpo Tsewang Gyatso connect the practice of winds and channels yoga to the Indian tradition, but *Sky Dharma* shares unique characteristic features with those described in early Indian *haṭhayoga* texts.

The *Sky Dharma* tradition shares the *haṭhayoga* lineage's fondness for *siddhi*-s, which

⁴³⁰ From my notes of a translation by Rigzin Losel of Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso's winds and channels yoga retreat, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

⁴³¹ James Mallinson, "Haṭhayoga's Early History: From Vajrayāna's Sexual Restraint to Universal Somatic Soteriology," in *Hindu Practic*, ed. Gavin Flood, Oxford History of Hinduism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1.

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are highlighted throughout the literature on *haṭhayoga*.⁴³² *Siddhi*-s are likewise features of traditions outside of *haṭhayoga* such as alchemy other forms of tantra where the body has a main role.⁴³³ In the Palyul tradition, a type of contemplative practice called “Great Accomplishment” (*sgrub chen*) refers to a seven-day or more intensive period of practice. When these finish, they do special pujas to gather the *siddhi*-s, or achievements, at the end. The word commonly used to describe the positive outcomes of tantric contemplative techniques, and especially in the context of postural yoga, are the supernormal powers Khenchen describes.

The scholar of *haṭhayoga* James Mallinson⁴³⁴ recently argued that “*haṭhayoga* originated as a Vajrayāna (Buddhist tantric) term for the restraint of orgasm”⁴³⁵ and went on to develop in Indian *haṭhayoga* traditions that emphasize posture, breath control, and moving breath into the central channel. Mallinson argues that the *Amṛttasiddhi*, an early-medieval Indian Buddhist text, is the first text in the *haṭhayoga* lineage.⁴³⁶ While the *Amṛttasiddhi* describes sexual practices, it shares the same means for realization as *Sky Dharma*, namely raising substances up the central channel. In the case of the *Amṛttasiddhi*, the substance is semen, but the later development of the *haṭhayoga* corpus of literature raises only wind up the central channel. The *Sky Dharma* yoga techniques practiced at Namdroling are likewise Buddhist tantric methods for raising wind up the

⁴³² For more on siddhis and yoga, see James Mallinson, “Siddhi and Mahasiddhi in Early Haṭhayoga,” in *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained through Meditation and Concentration*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 328.

And David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.

And Eli Franco and Dagmar Eigner, eds., *Yogic Perception, Meditation and Altered States of Consciousness* (Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009).

Also, Loriliai Biernacki, “A Cognitive Science View of Abhinavagupta’s Understanding of Consciousness,” *Religions* 5 (2014): 767–79. Biernacki argues that siddhis are central to the subtle body and reincarnation (pp. 768).

⁴³³ André Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 84.

⁴³⁴ He builds on the research of Kurtis Schaeffer, “The Attainment of Immortality: From Nāthas in India to Buddhists in Tibet,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 30, no. 6 (202AD): 515–33.

⁴³⁵ Mallinson, “Haṭhayoga’s Early History: From Vajrayāna’s Sexual Restraint to Universal Somatic Soteriology,” 2.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-9.

central channel. Further research is warranted on the connection between these two texts and their lineages.⁴³⁷

It is commonly acknowledged in Tibetan Buddhism that inner heat yoga and sexual yoga are alternatives for each other, and the Namdroling Khenpos teach that inner heat yoga is a more accessible way of raising the winds up the central channel than sexual yoga. It is less prone to human error because it avoids sexual engagement, which has a way of distracting practitioners from their goals.⁴³⁸ The Namdroling teachers pointed out that this makes it better suited for monastics with celibacy vows.

These features situate *Sky Dharma*'s nine postural sequences among other body-oriented *haṭhayoga* practices. What is unique among modern yoga traditions is that *Sky Dharma* has been preserved intact and practiced continually since being recorded by Migyur Dorje and commented upon by Karma Chakme. The monastery states in its oral history, as well as on its website, that Palyul monastery's first throne-holder in 1665 was Migyur Dorje's disciple Rigzin Kunsang Sherab, established the monastery as the seat of the *Sky Dharma* treasure teachings. The monastery's history claims that the practice lineage is unbroken and continuous.⁴³⁹

While scholarship on yoga sees posture practice as the primary feature of modern yoga traditions, the primacy of postures was brought into question by Mark Singleton in his 2009 monograph *Yoga Body*. Mark Singleton's monograph *Yoga Body* argued that "The primacy of āsana is new and has no parallel in premodern times."⁴⁴⁰ This statement has since been

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 3. "The eleventh- to twelfth-century *Gūḍhapadā* and the c. 1200 *Yogimanoharā* commentary on the *Pañcakrama* identify *haṭhayoga* with controlling the breath and, in the *Gūḍhapadā*, moving it into the central channel, but make no mention of semen in its context."

⁴³⁸ Khenpo Norgye, winds and channels oral teachings, McDonough, NY, July 2019.

⁴³⁹ This was presented in the history of the Palyul monastic lineage in various public talks.

⁴⁴⁰ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

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destabilized for the Indian tradition by scholars such as James Mallinson⁴⁴¹ and Seth Powell⁴⁴² but is also quite untrue for the Tibetan lineage.⁴⁴³ Mallinson and Powell do so in reliance upon textual and visual material. The current study provides an example of a living postural yoga tradition with clear roots in the seventeenth century. The difference is that at Namdroling there is a group of yogis who continue to execute the exact postural practices recorded in seventeenth century Tibet.

Singleton characterizes the practice of hathayoga by the elements of breath control, purification, and meditative concentration,⁴⁴⁴ which are all features of Sky Dharma. In my many exchanges in the field of yoga studies, it has come into question whether the Tibetan tradition should be considered a haṭha tradition. One of the main findings of the five-year, multi-million-dollar project on hathayoga at SOAS was the discovery of Buddhist texts as the earliest sources of literature to mention hathayoga, documented by James Mallinson.⁴⁴⁵ This research connects the seventeenth century Tibetan text Sky Dharma to the hathayoga corpus by highlighting shared features such as postural practice, *bodhicitta* (*byang sems*) to refer to semen and semen retention, breath control and moving breath along the central channel, and the descent of the four blisses.

While this project is not a historical one overall, I have pointed out these historical ties

⁴⁴¹ James Mallinson, "Hathayoga's Early History: From Vajrayāna's Sexual Restraint to Universal Somatic Soteriology," in *Hindu Practice*, ed. Gavin Flood, Oxford History of Hinduism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁴⁴² Seth Powell, "Etched in Stone: Sixteenth-Century Visual and Material Evidence of Śaiva Ascetics and Yogis in Complex Non-Seated Āsanās at Vijayanagara," *Journal of Yoga Studies* 1 (2018).

⁴⁴³ Mark Singleton's claim has likewise been upended by Seth Powell. Seth Powell, "Etched in Stone: Sixteenth-Century Visual and Material Evidence of Śaiva Ascetics and Yogis in Complex Non-Seated Āsanās at Vijayanagara," *Journal of Yoga Studies* 1 (2018). See also James Mallinson, "The Oldest Depictions of Complex Yoga Postures. Hatha Yoga Project Fieldwork at the Mahudi Gate, Dabhoi, Gujarat," Academia.edu, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.academia.edu/video/jYv2X>. The video documents complex yoga postures from the thirteenth century in India to refute claims that early yoga is mostly static or only pertains to seated meditation.

⁴⁴⁴ Mark Singleton, "Transnational Exchange and the Genesis of Modern Postural Yoga," in *Yoga Traveling: Bodily Practice in Transcultural Perspective*, ed. Beatrix Hauser (New York: Springer, 2013), 37.

⁴⁴⁵ James Mallinson, "Hathayoga's Early History: From Vajrayāna's Sexual Restraint to Universal Somatic Soteriology," in *Hindu Practice*, ed. Gavin Flood, Oxford History of Hinduism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

between the Tibetan tradition and the hatha yoga lineage.

Tibet's Secret Yoga Practice

This section details how Tibetan Yoga is doctrinally framed via two main modes. First, the oral tradition highlights how practitioners should interpret yoga practices through religious doctrine, Second, as the second stage of the contemplative path laid out in the *Sky Dharma* trilogy, winds and channels yoga rests upon the foundational practices. Those practices instruct practitioners on what philosophical worldview to uphold, and also how to perform basic tantric contemplations.

Winds and channels yoga is not common in the same way that Indian postural yoga has taken hold across the globe. One reason is that there are many barriers to entry. Tibetan Buddhism is pervasively characterized by tantra, a form of practice that is guarded as an “open secret.” It is open in that tantra is the prevalent practice mode of Tibetan Buddhism. Tantra is ubiquitous in the uniquely Tibetan Buddhist images, mantras, ritual gestures, and semiotics that pervade its contemplative practice systems and philosophy. However, access to tantric practices is guarded through prerequisites and initiation. Without those, outsiders to the tradition are likely to pick up on what Buddhism emphasizes outwardly, the non-tantric Buddhist teachings on wisdom and compassion. In reality, tantric practices are common Tibetan techniques that aim to generate wisdom and compassion. A reference to *bodhicitta* in tantric contexts could refer either to the generation of compassion for the sake of all beings, or to raising semen or winds upward in the central channel, two very different meanings. All three of these meanings get referenced in *Sky Dharma*, evidenced in oral teachings. Whereas one can openly practice the generation of compassion in the sense of *bodhicitta* without initiation, Tibetan Yoga is one among many of

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Tibetan Buddhism's secret practices that require preliminary practice and initiation and likewise aims to raise *bodhicitta* up the central channel.

Let us continue with the example of *bodhicitta* in winds and channels yoga, as it nicely demonstrates how practitioners must hold many meanings at once, and also the scripting of the mind characteristic of Tibetan Yoga. Tantric forms of Buddhist contemplation often engage the body, subtle body, and mind simultaneously during contemplation. In winds and channels yoga, one generates the mind of *bodhicitta* as in the wish to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings at the beginning of every practice session. This component of the practice appears in all contexts, whether one is practicing the postures or sitting through an explanatory dharma teaching. These quotes are from the beginning of a formal teaching on winds and channels yoga at Namdroling:

“Whenever you are going to start to practice or listen to the dharma, or whatever virtuous thing you will start, analyze your intention. Make it into *bodhicitta* mind. That is very important. Otherwise, the action will be influenced with negative intentions.”⁴⁴⁶

And

“Analyze your intention. If there is a negative mind or thinking present, abandon that, transfer that into a positive one, arouse *bodhicitta* in yourself, and have the view of the secret *tantrayāna*. The view, from the very beginning, the purity of buddhahood is always there, present, within yourself. The qualities [of a Buddha] have always been there. Due to our *marikpa*, ignorance, it veils the inner self. This practice is not to create buddhahood. Wind and channels visualization, and the gestures and exercises, we are subduing and making them transform into reality. It is not a transformation; it is always there. If a utensil is dirty, we wash off the dirt. Clear away the dirt that obstructs us from seeing buddhahood within ourself.”

These passages highlight the importance of directing the mind in winds and channels yoga, and also describe how the practice affects the mind through clearing away what obscures buddha-nature.

⁴⁴⁶ From my notes of a translation by Rigzin Losel of Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso's winds and channels yoga retreat, Bylakuppe, India, March 23, 2018.

Winds and channels yoga sits within the *Sky Dharma* contemplative cycle with the foundational tantric practices (*sngon 'gro*) as requisite preliminaries to the practice. It is there that the intense program of mental training begins. The first lessons in *Sky Dharma* are in basic Buddhist philosophy, known as the “four thoughts that turn the mind.” These are contemplations on (i) the preciousness of being born as a human, (ii) death and impermanence, (iii) the sufferings of cyclic existence, and (iv) the law of karma, or cause and effect. Through philosophy teachings, the Namdroling lamas guide practitioners to analyze and adopt these basic Buddhist views, which they claim are universal among all forms of Buddhism worldwide.⁴⁴⁷

Thus, this tantric meditation techniques that engages posture along with the mind begins with a review of the “extraordinary preliminaries.” Here, practitioners train in tantric contemplation and ritual, which separates these techniques from the shared, universal Buddhist principles found in the common preliminaries. Techniques such as refuge with prostrations and *maṅḍala* offerings require the coordination of physical movements with complex visualizations.

The final tantric foundational practice highlights one’s ability to access their own tantric body. “Transference of consciousness” (*pho ba*) is a preparation for the time of death where one rehearses ejecting their own consciousness out of the crown of the head to rebirth in a pure land. Practitioners are instructed to perform this at the actual time of death should they die an accidental death and have no opportunity for other techniques.⁴⁴⁸

The foundational practices also prepare practitioners for winds and channels yoga by establishing a worldview that features the subtle body. Conceptually, there are prayers that posit winds, channels, and vital essences as the inner level of the Three Jewels of refuge. Amidst numerous prayers and recitations that must be recited daily, these lines are almost subliminal but

⁴⁴⁷ Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, oral teachings given at Palyul New York, McDonough, NY, July 2017.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

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they include the tantric body as a basic component of a Buddhist worldview. This is a back-door introduction to the tantric body. At this stage of practice, they remain largely unexplained. For example, this is one of the many daily prayers that discusses the tantric body:

OM AH HUNG

In the immeasurability of one's own body of pure channels and elements,

I supplicate to the tutelary deities and female sky-goers.

May (you) bless me to attain the dissolution of the aggregates⁴⁴⁹.

The foundational practices make a person skilled in tantric visualizations and also Buddhist philosophy. In these ways they are like “tantric boot camp,” although in reality they take even longer than boot camp. Dedicated monks, nuns, and lay people at Namdroling complete 100,000 of each of five foundational practices, for a total of 500,000 repetitions known as “the five-hundred thousand” (*bum lnga*), over the course of six months. The practices are: refuge (*kyab dro*; Skt. *śaraṇa*) in the Three Jewels; the generation of *bodhicitta* (*byang chub kyi sems*; Skt. *bodhicitta*); *maṇḍala* offering (*maṇḍal 'bul ba*); Vajrasattva purification (*rdo rje sems dpa'*); and *guru yoga* (*bla ma'i rnal 'byor*). For those unable to commit themselves full-time for six-months, this process can take years. The goals of the foundational practices are to develop an attitude of renunciation toward worldly life, faith in the Buddhist teachings, and an enduring wish to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. According to one Namdroling monk, “without these factors, enlightenment is impossible.”⁴⁵⁰ It is with these motivations that practitioners endeavor the winds and channels retreats, at least ideally.

⁴⁴⁹ *om ah hung*:

rang lus rtsa kham dag pa 'I gzhäl yas na:

yi dam mkha' 'gro la gsol ba 'debs:

phung po lhag med 'grub par byin gyis rlobs:

“Palyul Daily Prayers” (Palyul Ling International, 2017, 117. Translation modified by the author. This is one of a set of several prayers and recitations read daily during the Sky Dharma retreats.

⁴⁵⁰ Anonymous monk, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March, 2018.

The training in tantric visualization established in the foundational practices is carried forward into the winds, channels, and inner heat retreat. While the ability to visualize deities is integral to winds and channels practice, the main training is in *anuyoga*, or completion stage (*rdzogs rim*) tantra. Here, students learn a detailed map of the *cakra*-s, channels, winds, and vital essences. The main mental techniques are visualizations of the central channel and deity yoga. These common tantric practices are combined with physically challenging postures (*'khrul 'khor*; Skt: *mudra*) and breath retention (*srog tsol*; Skt: *prānāyāma*) for as long as possible. The goal for practice is to clear away karmic obstacles stored in the body and tap into inner buddha-nature as a resource. This is hidden deep in the recesses of the tantric body.

A hallmark of *anuyoga* techniques is that they take advantage of buddha-body theory, which states that ordinary minds have a natural state—the mind-as-such (*sems nyid*)—tantamount to a Buddha's mind present throughout the body. This “primordial awareness” (*ye shes*) of a Buddha flows as embodied awareness through the *vajra* body's channels. The tantric model of embodiment maps the mind across the body via three pan-tantric elements: channels, winds, and vital essences (*rtsa rlung thig le*; Skt: *nadī vāyu bindu*). Cosmologically, the wisdom winds (*ye shes kyi rlung*) emerge out of the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra (*Kun tu bzang po*). At the level of the individual, the karmic winds obscure the wisdom winds. The yogin's task is to reveal the natural presence of the wisdom winds by clearing away the karmic body through yogic techniques.⁴⁵¹ Ultimately, the human body is the problem: it is constituted by karma (*las*)

⁴⁵¹ David Higgins describes this philosophy in a passage by Longchenpa who is writing about a related contemplative practice, *'khregs chod*. “Mind in essence is ignorance. Open awareness in essence is primordial knowing. Mind in essence is based on karma and latent tendencies. Open awareness in essence is not based on karma and latent tendencies. Mind in essence is of the nature of the error [of believing in the reality of] subjects and objects. Open awareness in essence is of the nature of non-error since it is free from subject and object. Mind in essence is subject to the extremes of discursive thought. Open awareness in essence is free from all discursive elaborations. Mind in essence is the all-ground and the eightfold ensemble [of cognitions]. Open awareness in essence transcends the all-ground and its eightfold ensemble. Mind in essence is *samsāra* with its dualism. Open

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and habitual tendencies (*bag chags*; Skt: *vāsanā*). However, the body is also the source of the solution in that it is the location of buddha-nature and internal gnosis.

The use of the tantric body model comes full circle in *atiyoga*, “supreme yoga,” the third level of the *Sky Dharma* retreats. There the yogin engages in the Great Perfection’s most well-known path of meditation, the practice of “crossing over” (*thod rgal*). One continues to employ the tantric body model learned in winds and channels yoga, but it is no longer the main focus. The contemplative path shifts to techniques where the body is the central location for the purification of karma in another round of preliminary practices known as “transforming *samsāra* into *nirvāṇa*” (*‘khor ‘das ru shan*).⁴⁵² Next one practices the hallmark Great Perfection contemplative techniques.

If Tibetan yoga is such an ancient yet ongoing tradition, why do we not we know about it? Several factors contribute to its lack of fame. First, Tibetan yoga is a secret practice that requires tantric initiation. The secrecy factor makes the monks, nuns and lay people with initiation close-mouthed about the practice. Second, it is usually practiced in retreat. Such experiences are a far cry from the “yogacation”⁴⁵³ model so popular in the contemporary yoga world. Tibetan yoga is practiced in the same format in which strict meditation retreats are conducted. Practitioners typically undertake three or four long contemplative sessions per day.

Another reason the yoga of winds, channels and inner heat is not popular even among Tibetan Buddhists, especially those who are older, is because it is quite physically challenging. It

awareness in essence is *nirvāṇa* without duality. Mind in essence is the outward effulgence of open awareness riding on the [karmic] energy currents. Open awareness in essence is self-lucancy without [karmic] energy currents (*[las] rlung*). Mind in essence is constructed and conditioned. Open awareness in essence is unconstructed and free from conditions.” David Higgins, “The Philosophical Foundations of Classical RDzogs Chen in Tibet: Investigating the Distinction between Dualistic Mind (Sems) and Primordial Knowing (Ye Shes)” (Universität Wien, 2013), 54.

⁴⁵² Sam Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection: Simultaneous and Gradual Approaches to Dzogchen Practice in Jigme Lingpa’s Longchen Nyingtig* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 98.

⁴⁵³ This term was coined by scholar of contemporary yoga Patrick McCartney. I heard it in his talk at the Japan Yocascapes conference in 2018 in Osaka.

involves bodily feats that not everyone cares to endeavor, or they simply lack the physical fitness to do so.⁴⁵⁴ Some of the monastics and lay people at Namdroling told me they avoid Tibetan yoga due to concerns for their health. On Namdroling's monastic campus, the monks and nuns lack the required space and privacy to practice outside of the retreat setting.

In Tibetan Buddhism at large, a plethora of other contemplative practices may take precedence based on the culture of a lineage. Tibetan Buddhism is simply not experiencing a yoga craze like much of the rest of the world.

Unlike modern yoga retreats, Tibetan yoga retreats have not picked up on the luxury aspect. Quite the contrary. At Namdroling, the retreats are offered freely or by donation within the monastery walls. While the setting is idyllic, the food is basic at best, there is no alcohol and no extravagant location, and the genders are separated. Another factor that differentiates Tibetan yoga from other modern yoga traditions is that it does not include much stretching. While it is physically dynamic and potentially improves health and cardiovascular fitness, it involves a significant amount of "*bebs*," a jump from seated or standing in which one must land in the lotus or half-lotus position. This can be hard on the knees and is not relaxing, at least at first.⁴⁵⁵ Finally, similar to other forms of Tibetan Buddhist contemplation, Tibetan yoga requires extensive visualizations of deities or the tantric body endowed with Buddhist principles and doctrine. This living lineage comes with its own terms, and is resistant to conforming to contemporary yoga conventions or trends. It is a deeply religious practice, and does not pretend to be secular.

⁴⁵⁴ Anonymous lopon, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

⁴⁵⁵ To be clear, many forms of modern yoga are not relaxing. For example, the practice of Ashtanga yoga in the Mysore tradition is also quite dynamic.

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Figure 33 (Left) Monks serving rice during a ceremony in the main temple, the Golden Temple, at Namdroling. (Right) Monks and nuns at a picnic during the winds and channels retreat. The nuns were still getting their food when this photo was taken.

The Lamas

What follows are accounts of teachings and personal conversations that I had with Lama Dorje and Khenpo Tsewang Gyatso during my research from 2017-2019. These two figures are important contemporary teachers who act as mediators between the text and the practitioners. They travel the world, and I met them first at Palyul New York, and then at Namdroling in India. In their roles as teachers, they are the conduits through which doctrine is delivered to the community of practitioners. Because of their public roles, they are highly motivated to adhere to the *Sky Dharma* manuals and other sources of Nyingma Buddhist philosophy. The teachings they highlighted for me offer a glimpse of the richness of teachings in which winds and channels yoga unfolds.

Beyond their roles as teachers, both Lama Dorje and Khenchen have internalized *Sky Dharma* through years of practice. Lama Dorje in particular has done the winds and channels yoga retreat almost yearly for the past thirty years, sometimes twice a year. Khenchen's practice history is unknown to me, but he has been teaching the retreats and studying the materials for many, many years. He has been the main Khenpo filling in for Penor Rinpoche since his death in 2009, and prior to that, he was Penor Rinpoche's main English translator. Before 2009, Penor

Rinpoche taught most of the retreats at Namdroling himself.

The lamas, or teachers, who transmit contemplative practices are integral to the experience itself. Social hierarchies shape the lives of the monastics. Everyone's role and duties at the monastery are clearly defined, and within the small society of the monastery and nunnery, one can garner respect simply by fulfilling their duties. These sections highlight interviews and formal teachings from two teachers whose job is to read, interpret, and pass on the textual lineage of *Sky Dharma* and support students in their practice.

The exchanges I had with Lama Dorje Wangpo⁴⁵⁶ and Khenpo Tsewang Gyatso⁴⁵⁷ showcase how the categories of mind and body work together under the umbrella of yoga practice in service of the generation of specific states of mind. Their accounts highlight how in Tibetan Buddhism, the mind is primary over the body, despite the heavy orientation to the body in winds and channels yoga. The role of the teachers is largely to define the parameters of the practice and its effects, and to serve as living examples.

A Namdroling Khenpo recounted to me that there are two types of *dharma*, the Sanskrit term for Buddhist doctrine. One is the actual teachings, which are relatively easy to trace through the extensive textual history of Buddhism. The vast majority of the academic field of Buddhist studies has been dedicated to the close examination of texts through philology and textual analysis to unpack their meaning. The second type of dharma is the realizations and cessations in the minds of dharma practitioners.⁴⁵⁸ The words of these two contemporary masters offer a glimpse into the minds of dharma practitioners with a significant amount of experience in Tibetan yoga in the monastic tradition.

⁴⁵⁶ Out of respect for the teachers, I will continue to use their formal titles throughout the chapter.

⁴⁵⁷ This is his real name.

⁴⁵⁸ Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, public oral teachings before an empowerment, McDonough, NY, July 2017.

Lama Dorje, a Contemporary Master of Tibetan Yoga in the Monastic Tradition

Lama Dorje Wangpo (born 1971) is an artist par excellence. He is one of those rare people who has both natural talent and extensive training. He is handsome and full of grace. In addition to being the main yoga teacher at Namdroling, he teaches lama dancing and oversees the creation of intricate sand *manḍala*-s. He often takes the lead in the performance of the chöd ritual when abroad, and his chanting is moving. When he is not teaching, he laughs a lot, jokes with the other monks, and naturally has the demeanor of a surfer. He is cool. He also has a timid side. Lama Dorje spends most months living in New York City these days, where he teaches at a Palyul dharma center in Queens, and leads the *Sky Dharma* summer retreats in McDonough, near Binghamton. For about two months a year, he usually returns to Namdroling to lead the winter retreats at the monastery and nunnery. He is the default winds and channels yoga teacher in that he always assumes the role of main teacher when a course is offered and he is present. Technically, when he does so, his title is assistant teacher or review teacher (*chos dpon*). Within the monastic system, he cannot outrank the Khenpos. However, I witnessed Khenpos deferring to his explanations of the text while they gave public teachings on the practice.⁴⁵⁹ He has a special status as Namdroling's in-house yoga master. Even Khenchen, whose story appears next, refers to Lama Dorje as "Rinpoche," an honorific title meaning "a great gem."⁴⁶⁰

Lama Dorje has undertaken the winds and channels retreats more than anyone else I met at Namdroling. I did not have the opportunity to take his classes in India because he taught only the monks the year I participated. Due to the separation of genders, I did the winds and channels

⁴⁵⁹ In particular, I saw Khenpo Norgye do this at Palyul New York in 2019 on a regular basis when reading the text. Khenpo Norgye would often woefully confess to his lack of actual experience with the winds and channels yoga practice, but that his job as Khenpo was to deliver the teachings. At Namdroling, Lama Dorje is well-known as the highest authority on winds, channels, and inner heat (*rtsa rlung gtum mo*) practice.

⁴⁶⁰ Khenchen Tseang Gyatso, oral teaching on winds and channels practice, McDonough, NY, July 2019.

retreat with the nuns in the nunnery, which had its own advantages since I was the only outsider at the nunnery. Despite not being in his class, he knew me from Palyul New York and agreed to meet with me around twice a week during that time to answer my research questions. He has been teaching winds and channels yoga internationally since he graduated from the monastic college in 1999, and I later did the mixed-gender retreat with him in New York in 2019, where he also allowed me to ask questions. There, he often answered to the entire group, and everyone enjoyed the extended storytelling that year.

Lama Dorje was born in Pema Kōd, “the hidden land shaped like a lotus.”⁴⁶¹ Pema Kōd is one of Tibetan Buddhism’s most holy sites, a location so remote and deep in the Himalayas that legend claims it has been preserved intact since the time when Guru Rinpoche himself dwelled there. Pema Kōd is extremely difficult to access. Even today, it requires extensive overland travel followed by a two-day trek on foot, or you can take a helicopter. It is one of the twenty-four sacred pilgrimage sites said to be located in the tantric body in winds and channels yoga teachings, including in *Sky Dharma*. Such sacred sites are examples of how the inner tantric body is a mirror reflection of the external world.

Lama Dorje is considered to have good karma, i.e., the correct circumstances for practice. This is evidenced by the culture of yogis in Pema Kōd that surrounded his early life. As a child, he knew yogis who talked about and performed winds and channels yoga. He would listen to them and emulate their jumping techniques with his friends, in particular the *beb*-s, the jumps unique to Tibetan yoga.⁴⁶² His childhood best friend is a well-known *tulku* (*sprul sku*)⁴⁶³ in the

⁴⁶¹ Ian Baker, *The Heart of the World: A Journey to the Last Secret Place* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 3.

⁴⁶² Filmed in the movie by director Jeffrey Pill, *The Yogis of Tibet*, Documentary, 2002, <https://youtu.be/GrWhX1BixBk>. Photographed throughout Ian Baker’s recent monograph. Ian A. Baker, *Tibetan Yoga: Principles and Practices* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2019), 139-141.

⁴⁶³ A reincarnated lama in the Tibetan tradition.

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Dudjom Tersar tradition, and the two of them used to chase each other by hopping around in the full-lotus position, using the raised door jam in his house as a hurdle. In the Tibetan tradition, all these circumstances—being born in a holy place such as Pema Köd, being surrounded by practicing yogis, learning Buddhism through their example, and having a *tulku* as a childhood companion—would be interpreted as a strong karmic connection with the practice of Tibetan yoga and esoteric Buddhism.

He was able to sustain his good karma by accumulating merit through the traditional means: the accumulation of spiritual practices. At just nine years old, he performed “the five hundred thousand” (*bum lnga*), the accumulation of repetitions of the foundational tantric practices alongside his *tulku* friend.⁴⁶⁴ At age eleven, he completed the Dudjom Tersar version of these practices. Thus, he had performed the foundational tantric practices twice before he became a monk. The place in his old wooden house where they did their prostrations still has imprints in the wood. When he later became a monk, he did the foundational tantric practices twice more in the *Sky Dharma* tradition, for a total of four times. As the foundational practices train one in tantric contemplation and ritual, this is an extremely strong foundation for contemplative practice. It is often also said that the foundational practices are a main practice, which is why I have chosen the translation “foundational” following Ann Klein⁴⁶⁵, rather than the more direct translation of the Tibetan word “*ngondro*” (*sngon ‘gro*) as preliminaries. “*Ngondro*” translates as “to go before,” which is etymologically correct but can reduce the practice to something to get out of the way rather than the rich foundational training it provides.

⁴⁶⁴ I am not sure which version of the Foundational practices Lama Dorje did first. I would assume it was not *Sky Dharma*, since it happened before he ordained in the Palyul monastic lineage.

⁴⁶⁵ Ann Klein says, “The practices known as foundational—and too easily dismissed by the limited self as merely preliminary—are brilliantly designed to reveal that the self that grasps or disdains them is in profound tension with the awakened state from which the practices themselves emerge and to which they can open us.” Anne Klein, “Fully Engaged in Body, Speech and Mind,” *Lion’s Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for Our Time* (blog), accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.lionsroar.com/fully-engaged-in-body-speech-and-mind/>.

Even with such favorable circumstances for practicing the *dharma*, like many practitioners, historical and contemporary alike, Lama Dorje was motivated to take up the dharma more seriously because of his own suffering. His father was what Lama Dorje calls “strict.” When Lama Dorje had difficulty understanding his schoolwork, his father would hang him upside down by his feet, beat him until he bled, and then put chili powder on the wounds. One time, his father hung him upside down and went looking for nettle, a plant with stiff hairs on its branches that releases a stinging chemical when touched. He managed to break the ropes and run away. These adverse childhood experiences only increased his focus on the dharma as a quite literal refuge from the suffering of his early home life.

At age thirteen in 1985, his father went to Bodh Gaya, the famous location of the Buddha’s enlightenment and a popular pilgrimage site among Buddhists in India. The Dalai Lama was giving the Kālacakra empowerment. Lama Dorje told his father he wanted to become a monk and was allowed to accompany him. Penor Rinpoche was in attendance at the event, and a Namdroling monk named Lopon Pema Rigdzin made the request to ordain on Lama Dorje’s behalf. When Penor Rinpoche accepted, he was so happy that he told all his friends from his village.

Together, sixteen of them became monks, although today only two or three are still ordained. Disrobing is a common occurrence among contemporary monastics. Especially in India, monastics live as refugees or foreigners. While the monasteries and nunneries become home to them for many years, most do not integrate into the surrounding villages and cities. When their education is finished, they must either return to their villages to teach as a local clergy member, or travel abroad as a teacher. International teaching positions are not available for everyone. Lama Dorje was hand-picked by Penor Rinpoche, who promoted him to the retinue

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of monks who accompanied him to international teaching events at an early age.⁴⁶⁶

Lama Dorje began his education in Namdroling's *dratsang* (*grwa tsang*), the monastic equivalent of a primary school, and later entered the monastic college (*bshad grwa*). Altogether, his education at Namdroling took seventeen years. During that time, he had the distinct feeling that he was under the care and protection of Penor Rinpoche himself. Penor Rinpoche was famous for being physically strong and often on the move to care and provide for the Namdroling monks. One time Lama Dorje got sick with some type of pox, and Penor Rinpoche came to his side, carried him to the car, and drove him and a few other sick monks to the doctor. He vomited in the car on the way.⁴⁶⁷

Lama Dorje is of the opinion that it is fortunate that in the seventeen years that he studied at Namdroling, he did not have money to go into town. Some monks are well resourced with pocket money from their families or donors. Without pocket money, he had to stay inside the monastery where food and housing are provided, but no frills. This gave him both the time and resources to practice the yogic arts that are the cornerstone of his teaching career. He practiced *beb-s*—the jumps that are the hallmark of Tibetan Yoga—every night alone or with one other person in the grove of trees where the monks now hold the winds and channels yoga retreat.

When Lama Dorje graduated from Namdroling in 1999, he presented Penor Rinpoche with a maṇḍala he had painted. Penor Rinpoche checked the accuracy and approved. He blessed it and allowed Lama Dorje to keep it. Soon after his graduation, Penor Rinpoche requested that he go with him on his teaching tours around the globe. It was a special honor to be asked at all, let alone so quickly—most monks had to wait until after the three-year period of service the monastics typically perform for the monastery after graduation. In his first year on tour with

⁴⁶⁶ Lama Dorje, interview by author, McDonough, NY, July 2019.

⁴⁶⁷ Lama Dorje, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

Penor Rinpoche, Lama Dorje prepared the Kālacakra sand maṇḍala three times: in Singapore, Canada, and at Namdroling. He traveled with Penor Rinpoche from 1999 until his passing in 2009, and continues to teach in many of the locations where Penor Rinpoche brought him today. One highlight for Penor Rinpoche’s retinue of attendants is the annual month-long retreats at Palyul New York, where they bring Penor Rinpoche’s vision alive for the international dharma community each year by replicating the ways Penor Rinpoche taught. Lama Dorje sees the time he spent with Rinpoche as an honor, and believes that he carries a seed of his teachings inside of him that will continue to grow with practice.⁴⁶⁸

Of all the people that I spoke with at Namdroling, Lama Dorje was the most knowledgeable about winds and channels yoga in its theoretical, historical, and practical aspects. He also has a lot of experience teaching “English-speakers.”⁴⁶⁹ As I was the only non-monastic practicing with the nuns in 2018, he granted me interviews during the two winds and channels retreats I participated in. My particular social position likely influenced the amount of detail I was given, and also the types of information to which I was privy. What follows are explanations of winds, channels, and inner heat practice from Lama Dorje. Most of it can be cross-referenced to the *Sky Dharma* manuals. Lama Dorje usually spoke to me in half Tibetan and half English. I allowed my own doubts and interests as a practitioner to inform the questions I asked. The first time I attended the winds, channels, and inner heat retreat, it was a grueling experience. The second time I attended, I was able to relax and had some basic skills to work with.

One of the first questions I asked Lama Dorje was: why did Avalokiteśvara, the Buddha of Compassion, manifest in his wrathful form as the central deity of winds and channels

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Inji (*ain ji*) is the Tibetan word for English that has been used for many years to refer to people of European descent. I got called an inji many times, although I believe the term is decreasing in prevalence as the Tibetan diaspora community becomes more aware of its inaccuracy in applying to all foreigners.

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practice? He responded by recounting the history found in the first lesson of the *Sky Dharma Winds and Channels Manual*.⁴⁷⁰ Like many Tibetan fables, it is a story about taming demons, a type of transformation that involves killing and consuming.⁴⁷¹

The winds and channels deity is a wrathful form of the Buddha of Compassion, Avalokiteśvara (*spyan ras gzigs*). In the practice, he has a special name—Trowaroza, (*khro ba ro za*), which means “Wrathful Corpse Eater.” An important early source supporting the cult of Avalokiteśvara in Tibet is the *Mani Kabum* (*Ma ñi bka' 'bum*), a collection of three treasure texts (*gter ma*) revealed by three different Treasure revealers (*gter ston*) from the mid twelfth to thirteenth centuries. They each claimed authorship by King Songtsen Gampo (*srong btsan sgampo*), and were adopted by both the Kadampa (*bka' dam pa*) and Nyingma sects. The texts focus on the activities of the central figure, Mahākāruṇika-Avalokiteśvara, and his relationship with religious kings, a narrative that empowered spiritual leaders to take leadership roles in worldly affairs.⁴⁷²

The *Mani Kabum* is a complex orchestration of myth, history, ritual, and a unique meditation system. The Namdroling Khenpos talk about it as a religious history text.⁴⁷³ The story of Avalokiteśvara and the overwhelming need for his presence in Tibet is told by Karma Chakme himself in *The Melodious Sound of Thunder*:

“When Buddha Shakyamuni lay dying, Buddha Amitabha, in the western pure land of Sukhavati, asked the exalted Avalokiteśvara to go to Shakyamuni Buddha and supplicate him not to pass away. Although Amitabha sent Avalokiteśvara with a thousand-petalled golden lotus, when Avalokiteśvara made his plea, the Buddha replied that since he had

⁴⁷⁰ gNam chos mi'gyur rdo rje and Kun bzang zhes rab, *sNga 'gyur rgyal ba dpal yul ba'i ri chos gsum gyi khrid yig/ rtsa rlung//*, Par gzhi dang po, sNga 'gyur dpal yul dar thang gzhan phan Inga rig saṃ bho ta'i dpe tshogs 13–15 (Khren tu'u: Si khron dpe skrun tshogs pa si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2007).

⁴⁷¹ Jacob Dalton, *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 24-31.

⁴⁷² Matthew. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). 144-162.

⁴⁷³ Karma Chagme, *The All Pervading Melodious Sound of Thunder: The Outer Liberation Story of Tertön Migyur Dorje*, trans. Khenpo Sonam Tsewang and Judith Amtzis (Pharping: Nyingma Palyul Retreat Center, 2008).

already tamed the beings he was to tame, he would pass away.

Avalokiteśvara insisted, saying that the Buddha had not walked in the Land of Snows and that the light of his body had not reached Tibet. The Buddha answered, ‘That land is not to be subdued by me; it is the land you are to subdue. You should tame the people of Tibet’.⁴⁷⁴

This story is told as a way of positioning Avalokiteśvara, the central winds and channels deity, as the primary buddha for Tibet.

As a syncretic teaching, the *Mani Kabum* touches upon the Kadampa presentation of compassion and emptiness as two indivisible aspects of enlightened awareness on the Mahāyāna sūtra path. At the same time, it defines the true Mahākārūṅika (great compassion) as “the play of intuitive awareness and continuous, fresh gnosis,” language distinctly characteristic of the Nyingma tradition. In addition to typical topics such as Buddhist psychology and philosophy, it teaches about “the nine vehicles, the two truths, the Great Seal, Great Perfection, the sequence of the path, the trio of ground, path and result, the trio of view, meditation and action, the three bodies of buddhahood”, and more.⁴⁷⁵

By the seventeenth century in the *Sky Dharma* revelations, the wrathful form of Avalokiteśvara took his place as the central figure in Tibetan Yoga practice in the *Sky Dharma* winds and channels manual. This “Corpse-Eating” deity does not have a main role in the other phases of *Sky Dharma*, either in the tantric preliminaries and the Great Perfection contemplations. He is also not found outside of *Sky Dharma*.

In practice, this wrathful form of Chenrezig has three meanings subsumed within the classical trope of outer, inner, and secret. According to legend, his outer form arose in reaction to a demonic king of yore named Gurnapa who was violent and harmed many people. All the

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory*, 145.

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teachers at Namdroling recounted this story as part of the oral teachings, as did Lama Dorje. The Tibetan way of dealing with harmful, imposing, and demonic figures is to tame them by manifesting a form more terrifying than that of the demon to be subdued⁴⁷⁶. Thus, Avalokiteśvara manifested himself as this particularly wrathful form in order to liberate Gurnapa and eat his corpse.

Lama Dorje explained that Avalokiteśvara's wrath is not anger, but rather compassionate wrath. He is called the corpse eater because he eats the sources of death, i.e. the mental afflictions that enable the cycle of rebirth and suffering. When yoga practitioners imagine themselves as this wrathful deity, they should think that all the buddhas' compassion is within them. Because of the universal existence of inner buddha-nature, the deity has compassion for each and every sentient being, and at the same time he is there within each person. According to these teachings, these levels of reality are already inseparable with who we are. However, because individuals have so many afflictive emotions, we appear to be different from our compassionate nature. This teaching on karma theory highlights how our true nature as buddhas is obscured by karma and afflictions.

One gives rise to this inner buddha-nature in practice via the popular and ubiquitously Tibetan Buddhist method of generation stage (*skyed rim*) deity yoga (*lha yi rnal 'byor*). In deity yoga, one visualizes oneself arising in the form of a tantric deity while simultaneously contemplating one's own empty nature. This elaborate visualization is modularized also to appear at the beginning of the *tsalung tummo* practice when one imagines themselves as Trowaroza.

During retreat time, Lama Dorje told me it is good to perform this visualization of the

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 147.

self as the deity all the time. Penor Rinpoche used to emphasize that the *tsalung* practitioners should not think that they are performing the exercises, but rather that the deity is performing the exercises through them. For example, when the wrathful Avalokiteśvara raises his hand, practitioners are encouraged to think of one's own hand emitting fire. While performing the exercises, because the psychic heat is rising upward in the central channel, they should imagine themselves as becoming very hot and burning up their karma, obscurations, and afflictions. This compassionate nature of the deity is the *method* aspect of the practice. In tantric Buddhism, the pair method and wisdom are equally represented in practice. These are the two wings of a bird that carry one to enlightenment, and these themes are actualized in myriad ways according to sect and practice tradition.

In *Sky Dharma* yoga, the wisdom, or emptiness aspect, comes into play in the *inner* meaning of the deity. In *tsalung* practice, one visualizes the outer form of the body as the deity, but the inner area is radiant, empty, and appears as the five colors. As one becomes more experienced with the practice, one comes to see psychic heat (*gtum mo*) as the emptiness aspect, and the flame as the primordial wisdom that realizes the nature of phenomena. For the wrathful corpse-eating deity, it is the form of the flame, not the outer image of the deity, that consumes the mind's impure karma and obscurations.

The secret meaning of the deity is a completion stage (*rdzogs rim*) technique. Completion stage methods center on the tantric body. The visualization scripted by Migyur Dorje and Karma Chakme proceeds in stages from the outer form of the deity, to inner heat, and finally to the central channel itself. The practitioner gathers the wind–mind (*rlung sems*) complex inside the central channel in a visualization, and then the central channel consumes the impure karmic winds. An element of the theory of tantric embodiment common to many Tibetan traditions

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including the Great Perfection points out that the winds (*rlung*) and the mind (*sems*) travel together like a blind horse and a lame rider. Eventually, because of this mutually dependent relationship, through practice, the karmic winds are cleared away and the wisdom winds naturally predominate. When that occurs, enlightenment becomes the natural state. The secret level of the deity is the central channel itself. The central channel will eat the winds and vital essences, which are tantamount to the mind.⁴⁷⁷

The meditation script from *Sky Dharma* prescriptively endows each part of the body with doctrinal qualities. The first meditation begins by seeing oneself arise as the wrathful form of Avalokiteśvara. The deity's body is replete with tantric semiotics. For example, his four fangs symbolize how he conquered four evil spirits. His bodily red color represents his compassionate attachment toward all sentient beings. Such ritual attempts to evoke associated meaning are common in generation stage tantric techniques. All the while, the practitioner is expected to contemplate the doctrine of emptiness. The simultaneous presence of these three levels of reality—outer, inner, and secret—points to multivalent truths present in personhood and manifest reality. While Buddhist philosophy constantly attempts to point out the multivalence of appearances, Tibetan Yoga practices aim to draw the practitioner's awareness to the union of relative appearances with the ultimate truth of emptiness.

Sky Dharma gives the outer, inner, and secret instructions in a single contemplative sequence, thereby combining generation and completion stage practices into a single contemplative technique. While the deity yoga aspect of *tsalung* is a generation stage (*mahāyoga*) practice, the de-personified visualizations of the central channel and the tantric body are completion stage (*anuyoga*) techniques. Such practices have bliss as the final goal. The

⁴⁷⁷ Anonymous tulku, recording of winds and channels oral teachings, McDonough, NY, July 2018.

mechanism is simply stated: when the central channel has “consumed the karmic winds,”⁴⁷⁸ the result is supreme bliss.

For the Great Perfection, the threefold bliss, clarity, and non-conceptuality are the hallmark realizations and are represented by the three main channels. Unlike other yoga systems such as those found in the Gelukpa lineage—including the analog practice of the Six Yogas of Nāropa—here bliss is not the highest state. The Nyingma version of completion stage practices sits within a philosophical milieu that values non-conceptuality as the ultimate realization, rather than bliss.

Lama Dorje informed me that the purpose of visualizing fire is that it is a strong force that can make the inner channels open. By jumping in *beb* (*'beb*—see next paragraph), or “descents”, moving briskly through the dynamic postural sequences, and rubbing the body vigorously within the posture sequences, the wind energy moves, which opens the channels. The force of wind has the ability to untie the knots—the *cakra*-s.

During the nine years that Lama Dorje studied in the monastic college, in the evenings, he would go to a grove of trees in the middle of the monastery in the same spot where the monks practice *tsalung* today. There, he practiced his *beb*-s for an hour after his duties as a student were finished. *Beb*-s are the most unique and challenging aspect of the *tsalung tummo* practice, at least for beginners.⁴⁷⁹ They consist of jumping up from half lotus and landing on the perineum while holding the breath. Catching air with every part of the body is the mark of success. Like most advanced yoga postures, this maneuver seems impossible at first, but becomes easier with

⁴⁷⁸ Again, this references the way Troworoza is described as the “Corpse Eater.” He eats unwanted contents of the subtle body. Thus, the consumption reference.

⁴⁷⁹ In Ian Baker’s *Tibetan Yoga*, the photos of practitioners in the air with crossed legs appear to be practicing *beb*-s, either alone or as part of a postural sequence. Ian Baker, *Tibetan Yoga: Principles and Practices*, 132-141. Additionally, the movie “The Yogis of Tibet” has footage of *beb*-s, among other practices. Pill, *The Yogis of Tibet*, beginning at 44:40. However, it is worth watching the entire sequence that begins a minute before. <https://youtu.be/GrWhX1BixBk?t=2680>.

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practice.

There are five different types of *beb-s* in the Sky Dharma yoga sequences. The lamas warn that without breath retention, the maneuver easily leads to injury. I found this advice to be helpful. The most often performed *beb* is the basic one, a jump up from a seated half-lotus position. The most difficult *beb* is the *dorje* (*rdo rje*; Skt. *vajra*) *beb*, where one begins in a standing position, jumps up and into full-lotus position in mid-air, and lands seated in full-lotus. Other *beb-s* include the circle *beb*, where one spins around from seated, and the extended *beb*, where one alternatively jumps and extends each leg. This is why the *tsalung* practice is executed entirely on a six-inch thick stuffed mat. However, Lama Dorje is so experienced with *tsalung* that he recounted a story when one time he performed *beb-s* on a rock in a demonstration.

Beb-s are the most rigorous part of *tsalung*, and I often wondered whether they were meant to clear the mind. It was difficult for me to hold the postural sequence in mind when performing the *beb-s*. The *beb-s* require intense physical exertion, and I would often forget everything in the process. This is the place where I suspect that physical techniques support states of mind in the most linear fashion.

By the sixth postural sequence in *Sky Dharma*, the visualized flame reaches the upper part of the central channel, and the practitioner has some experience under their belt. Success is marked by a clear and stable visualization, and the result is that the body becomes quite hot. A sign of success in the yoga of winds, channels and inner heat is that the body might tremble or have uncontrollable impulses, that one's work becomes more efficient, and that one feels less tired. When the practitioner wants to go somewhere, they are able to go quickly. If one were to check the inhalation and exhalation of an advanced practitioner, it would be extremely subtle. Moreover, one's desire for food or clothes will decrease.

Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso



Figure 34 Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso (left) with Lama Pasang, a chanting master who served Penor Rinpoche on international tours, pictured in Bhutan. Lama Pasang provided invaluable support for this research by introducing me to people at Namdroling. When such introductions are made, it is a way of vouching for new people. Photo credit unknown.

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While Penor Rinpoche alone used to transmit the *Sky Dharma* teachings at Namdroling, nowadays the highest lama on campus gives the empowerment (*dbang*) and textual transmission (*'khrid*), which often falls to Khenchen, who is featured next. Practitioners must literally hear the text read aloud by a person who holds the lineage as a necessary prerequisite to be able to read and practice the text themselves. Khenchen's story highlights the education that the monastics at Namdroling undergo in the course of their education, which provides them with invaluable knowledge with which to receive the winds and channels yoga techniques.

Khenpo Tsewang Gyatso is one of five members that make up the Supreme Board of Council at Namdroling, which is the board of directors comprised of the three reincarnated lamas (*sprul sku*) recognized and raised by Penor Rinpoche himself, and three Khenpos, or professors. As a scholar, he welcomed my presence and granted me at least six private interviews during my time at Namdroling. He spoke to me in Tibetan, so the quotes that follow are my translations.

Khenchen, as he is often called, walked from Tibet, to Bhutan, to India when he was around six years old to flee from Chinese military rule. He has a residence inside of Namdroling monastery, an apartment on the second floor in an area in the center of campus in the same building where many other monks live. He makes himself available to meet with students there regularly.

Khenchen recalled his story of leaving Tibet. While danger and death are always a part of the many stories Tibetan refugees have recounted to me, the degree of peril is unique in each account. For Khenchen as a young boy, he recalls that most of the journey was easy. He did not suffer too much, except for one time when he slipped and fell down some ice. Luckily, he got caught on a bush, or he would have plunged to his death.

When he and his family arrived in India, they experienced the shock of a hot country

where disease was rampant in the refugee camps. Whatever the illness was, it killed people when they slept for long durations so his mother did not allow her four children to sleep for very long.

Khenchen was put in school in Mussoorie, Uttarakhand, one of the first Tibetan refugee camps established in India. By the time he started school, his parents had already spoken with him about becoming a monk. One day someone came to his school and offered ordination, and he signed up. However, there was a logistical problem for the ordination: the aspiring monks didn't have any way to get robes. They finally were able to borrow yellow robes (not the trademark Tibetan maroon) from monks in the Tamil monastery down the hill. The robes were enormous—about twice the size they needed. Decades later in the US, Khenchen ran into the Gelukpa lama who ordained him, but the guy didn't remember the situation.

After Mussoorie, Khenchen went to Varanasi to study at the famous Tibetan university in Sarnath, the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies. CIHTS was founded by India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru in partnership with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1967. Nowadays, the vision of CIHTS is “to ensure traditional education to Tibetan Refugee students and students of Indian Himalayan regions and others who lost the opportunity of studying in Tibet for advanced studies in Buddhism and Tibetan Studies, which is the intact legacy of ancient Nalanda, Vikramshila, Takshashila etc., the greatest learning centres in ancient India.”⁴⁸⁰ When Khenchen completed the nine year MA course of study at CIHTS, his parents subsequently moved to Bylakuppe and he followed, having heard about the famous Nyingma lama Penor Rinpoche. By then it was the 1970s.

When he met Penor Rinpoche, he enthusiastically told him about the nine-year course of study in “Varanasi,” the nickname for CIHTS among Tibetans in India, a reference to the nearest

⁴⁸⁰ “Vision, Mission & Core Values of CIHTS,” Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.cihts.ac.in/webpage/cmspage.aspx?catid=2&postid=235&BrCode=>.

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major city. Penor Rinpoche was initially skeptical to accept the new system. In Tibet, the teaching tradition was for lamas to travel around among monasteries, practice communities, and local villages. They would stay for a few months and teach an entire text from cover to cover by literally reading the text aloud and giving explanations where they felt necessary.⁴⁸¹ Everyone who was around would join together for these events.

The new model at Namdroling based on CIHTS separates students by year of study, with texts assigned to each year in the curriculum. Khenchen made the case to Penor Rinpoche that while in Tibet there were no exams, nowadays people need formal paper and pencil exams. In the end, Khenchen and a few other monks from Varanasi persuaded Penor Rinpoche to accept the new system, which includes a fixed curriculum of texts spread out across the years, and updated pedagogies for presenting the literature.⁴⁸² They still give the oral transmission of the texts at Namdroling, but classes consist of a mixture of prepared lessons from the texts as well as the reading and explanation model.

Khenchen began at Namdroling as a teacher. Unlike the other Namdroling Khenpos, he never went through the program himself because he designed it. While it follows after the model of study in Varanasi, he assured me that at Namdroling, the education is much, much deeper than that of CITHS. In 1980, he and some other leaders at Namdroling met with Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Chatrul Rinpoche, two giants among the twentieth century Nyingma lamas instrumental in the relocation of Tibetan Buddhism outside of Tibet. They discussed the

⁴⁸¹ Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018. This is how Khenchen related this story to me. I am aware that Nyingma monasteries also had formal curricula prior to the presence of Tibetan monasteries in India. I am not sure if the way Khenchen de-emphasizes the role of a formal curriculum indicates that such curricula had less influential roles than they do not, although that seems like a viable explanation. For information on Nyingma curricula in Tibet see the scholarship of Christopher Hiebert.

⁴⁸² For the full curriculum, see <https://namdroling.net/Portal/Page/Academic-Curriculum-NNI>

curriculum more, and revised the literature list to what it is today.⁴⁸³ One newly minted Lopon reflected on his experience of this curriculum nearly forty years after its initial design:

“All the texts we learn in each level of the years of shedra were chosen by His Holiness Penor Rinpoche and many other Nyingma masters. I feel they really made great choices. Buddhism is a very profound subject. Everything can be condensed into those texts, which are included as a syllabus for the monastery here in each year. The texts have a great impact. I do not have such a great intellect like others here, but I just go in the middle path. We participate in the three scholarly activities: debate, discourse, and composition. Plus, we take exams. We go through the three scholarly activities to make sure we understand the texts in different ways. If I do that, I will be a good teacher, and I will be able to put the teachings into practice. Also, then it helps my mind.”⁴⁸⁴

The monastic practitioners constantly draw from their education when practicing Tibetan yoga. The monastic curriculum provides the educational backdrop upon which the *Sky Dharma* retreats unfold. The visualizations required to perform Tibetan yoga depend upon a complex network of Buddhist semiotics. For example, in the deity yoga practice several dissolutions occur between visualized scenes. Such dissolutions make room for the complex layers of meaning imbued in each contemplative visualization. They mutually undermine the inherent existence of one another: nothing is ever only one thing; it has the ability to be many things. All the Buddhas and bodhisattvas come forth and dissolve into the guru, who dissolves into you, and you eventually dissolve into Tibetan letters. Such practices are much more accessible to the monastics than they would be to an uneducated practitioner. These scholar-practitioners have a well-developed understanding of the concept of emptiness from their studies that they apply during contemplation.

When Khenchen leads the *Sky Dharma* contemplative retreats at Namdroling,⁴⁸⁵ he is

⁴⁸³ “Academic-Curriculum-NNI,” Namdroling Monastery, accessed February 25, 2022, <https://namdroling.net/Portal/Page/Academic-Curriculum-NNI>.

⁴⁸⁴ Anonymous lopon, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, February 2019. At the time of the interview, this newly minted lopon was dedicating his time in the winter break to the accumulation of 100,000 prostrations in order to complete his preliminary practice commitment of the 500,000.

⁴⁸⁵ Khenchen likewise leads the same retreats in English in the Upstate New York branch of Namdroling, Palyul New York in McDonough.

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carrying on the Palyul lineage that began in the seventeenth century. Khenchen's role fulfills the first of three pedagogical modes through which students learn Tibetan yoga. In a large and well-appointed temple/teaching hall on the monks' (male) campus, he reads the text aloud and makes comments to the combined group of male and female practitioners every three days, for a total of nine times. These formal teachings connect Buddhist doctrine to the Tibetan yoga practices. This is the oral transmission (*rlung*) and guidance (*'khrid*).

Khenchen summed up the goals of practice in a formal teaching at Namdroling in 2018.⁴⁸⁶

“We are all training in engaging in the teachings and practices exactly according to how it was transmitted from the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra to the five dhyāni Buddhas to the Dzokchen masters to the late guru Penor Rinpoche. The teachings are 100 percent validating as a method or solution for all the problems, sicknesses, difficulties, obstacles, disturbances, afflictive emotions, ego, and pride. These methods are how we train the mind so it feels more peaceful, relaxed, calm, and gains all the noble qualities such as immeasurable compassion, loving kindness, joy, and equanimity. We train in not falling into attachment and aversion. This is the entire deity maṇḍala of the root teacher.”

My first one-on-one meeting with Khenchen was in the summer of 2017 in the Upstate New York center. Part of his role as a lama includes meeting with students regularly, where he offers personal advice on practice. As a Khenpo, he serves as a gateway to the textual and philosophical world of Buddhism.

When I posed my initial research question about the relationship between the mind and body, Khenchen fired back at me, “Mind (*sems*) and body (*lus*), are they one and the same or not?”⁴⁸⁷ He went on:

⁴⁸⁶ Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, public oral teaching, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

⁴⁸⁷ I did not manage to answer his question. At the time, my Tibetan language skills were still developing. Knowing that I knew some Tibetan, Khenchen was always eager to speak Tibetan with me, and encourage me to speak and listen in Tibetan. I infer that he recognizes the value in perpetuating the Tibetan language by whomever is willing to engage. After spending a year in the moansterymonastery, my Tibetan is much better despite that the monks and nuns really tried to practice their English with me. When I translated this interview in November of 2020, I caught that Khenchen was trying to engage me in a debate. The Khenpos that taught me often went into the dialectic mode with me.

“They are not one thing, but they are also not separate. The body in samsara is the fruit of karma (*las kyi 'bras bu*). The minds of sentient beings are made of karma and afflictions (*las dang nyon mongs*). The body is coarse (*rags pa*), it is solid. But the mind is subtle (*phra ba*), it has no form, no materials, and no colors. It is insubstantial. And yet, the mind is powered by karmic propensities (*bag chags*). It all exists like the reflection in a mirror. The rainbow body is also an illusion. The mental habits (*bag chags*) are like the appearance of a rainbow. In that same way, the mind has many feelings—liking, disliking, pride, jealousy, and anger. They are experienced toward parents, family, and others. The body and mind rely upon each other like an illusion. The best example is the *bardo* body. In Tibetan it is called the “mind body” (*gid lus*). That body in the *bardo* seems to be real, but it is like a dream. At the time of death, all the elements—earth, water, fire, wind, and space (*sa chu me rlung nam mkha'*)—dissolve into consciousness (*rnam shes*). They all cease to exist. In that moment, the radiant display of intrinsic awareness’s wisdom (*rig pa'i ye shes*) appears. If a practitioner can see this, they will succeed. However, without practice, when one enters the *bardo*, they will just take rebirth in one of the six realms.”

Khenchen’s explanation provides a tidy synopsis of one of the main purposes of Tibetan Buddhist contemplative practice. It is often emphasized that the greatest opportunity lies in the moment of death when the body’s functions cease and intrinsic awareness (*rig pa*) becomes naked and able to be seen, a process that demonstrates the many ways consciousness depends on the body. Death practices are at the heart of Tibetan Buddhist contemplation: death must be prepared for in life by training awareness through the yogic techniques such as those taught in *Sky Dharma*. These preparations for death are one of the main venues by which Namdrooling monks and nuns learn about the tantric body. As part of their duty to the local community as Buddhist clergy, they frequently recite the *Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State* (*Bar do thod grol*). The text details the way the body shuts down and how this affects consciousness at the time of death, pointing out the physical limitations the body places on consciousness. When the monks and nuns practice Tibetan yoga at Namdrooling, they have reviewed the details of the tantric body’s winds, channels, and vital essences via this text literally hundreds or even thousands of times.

While it is possible to recognize the nature of the mind while embodied, the perceptual activities of the body’s senses (including the mental sense) actually obscure consciousness from

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seeing its own nature. Tibetan Buddhism advocates for a “conscious death” following a yogic lifestyle intent on training awareness, including Tibetan yoga. The trained yogin remains alert through the stages of dying and passes into the intermediate state between lives—the *bardo*, in Tibetan—with continuous awareness. To prepare for the special moment of death, one must train assiduously in a lifestyle replete with meditation and ethical practices that drive toward increasingly conscious awareness of consciousness itself via contemplation. During a normal death, the body gradually shuts down, and people are alert up to a predictable point. Tibetan Buddhist contemplative techniques teach how to remain aware even after the body ceases to function. When the physical sense organs and associated sensory perceptions cease to function, previously obscured states of consciousness become apparent that present special opportunities for liberation. Such death practices highlight the relationship between body and mind via detailed correlations between the shutting down of the body’s sensory organs during dying and related shifts in perception.

Khenchen’s impromptu lesson points to how the body is instrumental in enlightenment as the source of naturally existing wisdom. Embodied contemplative practices are reinforced in contexts outside of Tibetan yoga, and rituals conducted outside of the main yoga practice reinforce the primacy of the tantric body for yoga practitioners. He stated, “The morning rituals that we do (smoke offering, Vajrakīlaya, and Tāra) all help to purify obscurations, karma, and negativity.” At the same time, each moment one tries to involve their awareness in the nature of the deity, which is a purer sense of oneself based on one’s primordial nature, they access the buddha nature that exists in the subtle body. “That is important to feel. If we feel, think and do it, we can become exactly like that.”⁴⁸⁸ All of these contemplative procedures contribute

⁴⁸⁸ Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, oral public teaching, McDonough, New York, July 2019.

experiences that layer into the contemplative retreats at Namdrooling. The set of daily rituals are the unofficial warmup for the practice.

Like most Tibetan Buddhist meditative systems, Tibetan yoga has a well-defined beginning, middle, and end in the form of preliminaries, main practices, and concluding practices. This triad helps to integrate sequential techniques, and also connects various historically separate meditation systems together as a single system. In *tsalung*, this is evident in the presence of the relatively standard set of the refuge prayer, bodhicitta motivation, and guru yoga as the preliminaries. The main practice is the *tsalung trulkhor* itself. The end is the final dedication of merit to all living beings.⁴⁸⁹

All the retreat activities at Namdrooling, whether a discourse, meditation, or yoga session begin with the generation of *bodhicitta*, the motivation to liberate sentient beings from the suffering of cyclic existence and lead them to enlightenment. According to Khenchen, without the threefold set of views—a compassionate motivation, pure perception of the world as populated by deities, and a view of emptiness—there is not much use for yoga practice. While yoga may be good for the body, if someone does yoga and it increases their attachment to the self, it is of no use. Even if a practitioner becomes skilled in breath retention or meditation, it is possible for the advanced yogic skill and the state of self-grasping to co-exist. The typically Buddhist antidote to this is the view of emptiness. It is taught that the emptiness worldview and selfishness are like fire and water. Only emptiness has the power to cut through the strength of selfishness. The view of emptiness invoked during the dissolution in *tsalung* practice is largely learned in the countless hours of classroom time over several years in the college curriculum.

Recognizing that motivation wanes over time, a major role for lamas like Khenchen is to

⁴⁸⁹ David Germano, “The Elements, Insanity, and Lettered Subjectivity,” in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 313.

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keep spirits high and inspire the monks and nuns to work toward these higher purposes. Because Namdroling adheres to a Dzokchen philosophical worldview, they add the motivation to drop conceptual thoughts, which is necessary to receive the blessings for successful practice.

As the main preceptor and teacher at Namdroling, Khenchen has a special role in *guru yoga*, a main feature of Tibetan yoga. Khenchen explained, “In *guru yoga*, we visualize the external appearance of the *guru* as Guru Padmasambhava and the internal essence as the root teacher Penor Rinpoche, who are inseparable in nature. At the same time, Guru Padmasambhava is the condensed nature of the past, present and future Buddhas.... The lama is the external physical manifestation in human form who benefits all sentient beings, like Shakyamuni Buddha,⁴⁹⁰ Guru Rinpoche, and Penor Rinpoche. That is the level of the external guru from whom we learn, get an education, and receive empowerments.” The reality is that many of the Namdroling monks and nuns get empowerment from Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, but it is up to the individual to decide which of these levels of the guru he fulfills.

While Khenchen often teaches inside the monastery to visualize Penor Rinpoche as the main guru, he explained that the inner level of the guru is self-awareness itself. “One's own primordially pure nature is inseparable with the guru's essential nature. We should feel as though we are always connected with the guru, never separated. When we do the '*lama khyen no*' prayer, it means 'Lama, please know me, please heed me!' Externally you are praying, but internally you are awakening your own true nature.” The “*lama khyen no*” prayer is among the most oft recited prayers at Namdroling, including at the beginning of each of the yoga sessions. While externally it seems as if one is beseeching a guru figure, on another level, they are praying that they recognize their own buddha nature.

⁴⁹⁰ The first and most famous buddha from India; the founder of Buddhism.

The ultimate level of the guru is the *dharmakāya*, the wisdom body of a Buddha that is included in the buddha nature schema central to tantric embodiment theory. When chanting the seven-line prayer, the *vajra guru* mantra, or visualizing the four empowerments, you visualize the field to purify your own body, speech and mind. Khenchen pointed out in a teaching that other contemplative activities that unfold within the context of retreat are also methods for purifying karma and obscurations. For example, when a practitioner receives the four empowerments—vase, secret, wisdom, and word—they receive the blessings of the guru's body, speech, and mind tantamount to the *dharmakāya*. From the practitioner's side, they should try to feel completely purified as they practice.⁴⁹¹

Guru yoga is the initial mechanism within the practice of Tibetan yoga designed to purify karma and obscurations and accumulate merit. The beginning of each yoga session begins with meditation on *guru yoga* with Padmasambhava as the central figure in union with Mandāravā, the less-famous of his two consorts.

In guru yoga, one's own body takes center stage as the site of exchange of ideas and transformation. The guru is visualized as sitting on top of one's head, and everything that ensues unfolds outwardly from that focal point. Quickly, the visualization shifts from Padmasambhava and his consort to calling forth the entire celestial pantheon of Buddhist deities. All the imagined figures unite with the guru and consort, and together they bestow the four tantric empowerments on the practitioner through visualized streams of light. For the lamas, monks, and nuns at Namdroling, this is one of the most crucial aspects of the practice without which results cannot manifest. One monk said in an interview:

“Tsalung is a kind of guru yoga. Through it we accumulate merit and purify our negativities. To accumulate merit and purify negativity, that is the purpose of practice. Guru yoga is the main thing to get ourselves purified. During tsalung we visualize guru

⁴⁹¹ Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, winds and channels oral teachings, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

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yoga. The thing is that we should visualize that our guru, like for me, my guru is Penor Rinpoche, that his essence is the root guru. I never met Penor Rinpoche, but he is my root guru. Everything that we do here is passed down from him. The other lamas here like Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, I consider them as lineage lamas (*rgyud pa'i bla ma*). Everything came from Penor Rinpoche to the other lamas here.”

Because he frequently assumes the role of head lama, Khenchen is an oft-quoted voice at Namdroling. One nun⁴⁹² told me after the *tsalung* retreat, “In the end, when Khenchen and Rinpoche⁴⁹³ arrived and gave us advice, it made me so emotional. They always talk about impermanence, and only think about good things for us. Although they have become aged,⁴⁹⁴ they are always thinking of good things. Sometimes we get angry and cannot control our minds. Then I feel so bad about not controlling my mind. I think Khenchen has control of his mind. Even though he is old, he does not have any anger. I am hoping to advance like him in every way.”⁴⁹⁵

Khenchen has a positive view of the outlook for Namdroling. He encourages the students by reminding them that Penor Rinpoche’s reincarnation (*yang rtsi*) is currently growing up in Tibet under the tutelage of Karma Kuchen, one of the three tulkus that Penor Rinpoche raised. Jangkhang and Muksam Tulku, the other two who were raised by Penor Rinpoche himself, remain at the monastery in India. The Palyul lineage has been incredibly successful worldwide.

⁴⁹² Anonymous nun, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018. This nun was in her late twenties and had ordained at age twenty-five. Thus, she was considered not entirely new to Namdroling, but not an old student. I think her statement reflects a bit of the naïveté of a new person still in awe of the teachers and the tradition. I do not think the sentiment of awe goes away. It seems like an almost necessary factor to remain a celibate renunciate, especially for young people. I think the awe develops into a deep reverence for many of the monks and nuns, which is a necessary factor to enjoy their lives as monastics. Such sentiments also present themselves differently among the genders. The nuns are more likely to be grateful to be away from traditional Himalayan society where they are often relegated to house work and raising children, which provides little autonomy compared to the nunnery. The monks, on the other hand, require reverence in order to continue to abstain from sexual life. While it is difficult to make such broad generalizations, I noticed these two trends among the motivations of the monastics.

⁴⁹³ Ibid. Here she is referring to Jangkhang Tulku, who visited the nuns’ classroom at the end of the *tsalung* retreat and offered personal advice.

⁴⁹⁴ They are not actually old. Jangkhang Tulku is only around fifty. Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso is sixty-six as of this writing. However, he looks and talks like Yoda and it is hard to guess his age.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

Khenchen often encourages the students at Namdroling with motivating speeches like this one:

“The main thing is to train the mind. The entire contents of the sūtra and tantra teachings is bodhicitta [the wish to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings]. The main activity is to benefit others, to help, to be kind, to be compassionate, and to be patient with any harms that may come from beings or non-beings. You also need to have the patience to go through the practices. Always think to yourself, I want to try bodhicitta. No matter who harms me or causes problems, I want to follow this commitment of the bodhisattva’s path, to benefit all sentient beings. If one benefits beings, one will attain enlightenment. There is no other more powerful method other than bodhicitta.”⁴⁹⁶

The monastics like Khenchen who are in teaching roles at the monastery talk about the altruistic state of mind more than anything else over the course of the monks’ and nuns’ training, which can last from 10-20 years. This is the basic frame for life at Namdroling. Students are constantly reassured that their simple, celibate, robed lives as monks and nuns are more meaningful than family or work life.

Conclusion: Making Meaning with Postures

I participated in two month-long Tibetan yoga retreats between February 2018 and August 2019. When I arrived at Namdroling, I had no firsthand experience of Tibetan yoga. However, my years of engagement with the philosophy and practices of both modern yoga and Buddhism equipped me with certain expectations about the tantric body, including about *prāṇa* (*rlung*), the energetic life force central to its functions. The subtle body is a quasi-material level of embodiment⁴⁹⁷ comprised of three main features: winds, channels, and vital essences. Kerry Skora describes the subtle body as “where Reality enfolds at once both Consciousness and

⁴⁹⁶ Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, winds and channels oral teachings, Bylakuppe, India, February 2018.

⁴⁹⁷ Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston, eds., *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West: Between Mind and Body* (New York: Routledge, 2015), xiiiv.

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matter.”⁴⁹⁸ In practices designed to manipulate the subtle body directly such as Tibetan yoga, the breath (*rlung*; Skt: *vāyu*) and the body provide the main supports for the scripted contemplations.

The yoga of winds, channels, and inner heat is an example of a physically challenging postural system that is intentionally designed around the transformation of the mind and embedded within a specific religious worldview. The teachers at Namdroling, especially Lama Dorje Wangpo, do much to interpret the text and techniques for practitioners. Throughout our conversations, we discussed many ways that the philosophy and history of Tibetan Buddhism play active roles to support the mental transformation promised by the practice. Three areas stood out that were discussed in this article. First, the history and legacy of the wrathful form of Avalokiteśvara are associated with *Sky Dharma* yoga, and this is an indispensable component of the practice. Avalokiteśvara, and also the treasure revealer Migyur Dorje, tie Namdroling and its branch institutions to the history and myths of Tibet. Second, when practitioners arise as this deity during yoga practice, this all-consuming inner performance creates the context in which new meaning is assigned to one’s body and mind. At the same time, one performs intense physical feats. Visualization, tantric semiotics, and physical performance all work together in tandem to support mental transformation. Third, Tibetan yoga is framed within karma theory and its relationship to Buddhist cosmology. The overall project of *Sky Dharma* yoga is for practitioners to burn their own karmic seeds to stop the cycle of rebirth in the six realms of *saṃsāra*. Such religiously framed goals are on one end of a spectrum among modern yoga systems, where the other end might be the physical prowess gained through physical accomplishments.

⁴⁹⁸ Kerry Martin Skora, “The Subtle Body of Vital Presence in Contemplative Practices of Abhinavagupta’s Trika Śaivism and Longchenpa’s Great Perfection,” in *Transformational Embodiment in Asian Religions: Subtle Bodies, Spatial Bodies*, ed. George Pati and Katherine C. Zubko (Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), <http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780429356056>, 16.

Chapter Six: The Advantages of Being a Namdroling Nun

Chapter Summary

This concluding chapter documents the winds and channels yoga retreat from the perspective of the Namdroling nuns through ethnography and interviews. The initial research question of how does theory inform practice is examined based on how Longchenpa defines the limited functions of women's bodies in juxtaposition with how women's bodies are used in practice nowadays.

Namdroling Nuns

“We are happy. With no babies, no husband, we are free. We just think about our lives, do puja, and do our own studies. I never feel bored. I feel so happy.”— Namdroling nun and graduate of the monastic college (Loponma).



Figure 35 Namdroling lophonmas in the English translation program with the author. Pictured in the nunnery on June 28, 2018.

An elite group of Namdroling nuns that have graduated from the nine-year MA program in

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Buddhist philosophy and who hold the *loponma* (*slop dpon ma*) title hold a special place in my mind. Along with other contemporary female practitioners in the Palyul lineage, I want Namdroling nuns to teach in international contexts outside of the nunnery. While it is their life's work to teach Buddhism, there is no pipeline from the completion of the nuns' education into positions outside of the nunnery. The monks are assigned to teach internationally, including a handful at the Palyul New York retreat center but primarily somewhere Asia. This chapter is not at all a defense of the nuns, who speak for themselves and did not elect me as their spokesperson. Rather, it criticizes the world of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism for its lack of female teachers.

For reasons that will imminently be unpacked, there is a lack of institutional practices in the monastic network that place women in teaching roles outside of the nunnery itself. *Loponma* is the female moniker for the male “lopon” (*slop dpon*), a term that means teacher, master, or *ācārya* in Sanskrit. The graduates of Namdroling nunnery make up a new cohort of female scholar-practitioners whose training in philosophy, ritual, and contemplation is largely unparalleled in the world of Tibetan Buddhism for women. Namdroling provides one of the best educations in Tibetan Buddhism available to women, and at a relatively large scale. There were 700 nuns in residence during my research at Namdroling in 2018 and 2019, while most Tibetan Buddhist nunneries have far lower enrollment. Larung Gar (*bLa rung sgar*) in Tibet, whose population of nuns exceeds that of Namdroling, is an exception. Larung Gar is also exceptional in that they award the Khenmo (*mkhan mo*) degree, the most advanced Buddhist degree in the Nyingma tradition. Recently the Khenmo degree was institutionalized at Palyul in Tibet, indicating a trend in Tibet but not outside of Tibet. While Khenmo is not awarded to the nuns at Namdroling, the nuns in South India learn and practice a curriculum that exactly replicates that of the monks. Moreover, they do so within the context of religious freedom and a good deal of

autonomy in South India, conditions that are not present in modern-day Tibet.

This chapter looks to the Namdroling nuns as a case study of the effect of subtle body theory on the practice of winds and channels yoga. After a narrative ethnography of the winds and channels yoga retreat at the nunnery, the ways Longchenpa's writings place limits on the expected outcomes of contemplation for those who have a female body are explored.

While Namdroling provides an equal education for men and women, opportunities for Tibetan Buddhist nuns continue to be limited compared to the monks. The nuns are monastics, but without full-ordination. The highest degree at the monastery of khenpo is reserved only for men. The female version khenmo exists in Tibet but not in India. Very few female reincarnated lamas (*sprul sku*) are recognized except a handful of special cases. Without these titles, they cannot rise up in the hierarchy of monastic life. I will rely on their own strengths in textual analysis to interpret what Longchenpa wrote about the female body and how this affects their situation today.

There are many ways that contemporary women are not free despite our privileges, and it is impossible to write this chapter without acknowledging my own lack of freedom as a woman. The nuns' situation at Namdroling could be described as a "natural experiment" in that the genders are treated separately. When I was there as a researcher, I had a renewed interest in social justice. I arrived in India fresh from the 2016 #metoo protests in Washington D.C., a pivotal moment that shed light on the realities of women everywhere. New-to-me truths about gender paradigms were becoming widespread simultaneously while this research was undertaken. This made understanding how the nuns deal with gender issues even more important. Do these highly educated Buddhist nuns, masters of dialectics, contemplation, and

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ethics, have anything to tell us about navigating gender-based inequities?⁴⁹⁹ How do they deal with these issues while maintaining a high level of respect for others, including the hierarchies in which they exist, which are the bedrock of monastic culture?

If I were to paraphrase the nuns' situation as a #metoo story, it would be like this: The Namdroling nuns stay inside the nunnery with its high walls and a gate that is closed all day and locked from 6 pm to 9 am. Down the street, the monks' campus is open to the public as a tourist attraction. The nuns enjoy a top-notch education, camaraderie, and fellowship in an idyllic environment where their basic needs for housing and food are guaranteed. When they leave the nunnery walls, the gaze of others becomes salient and they shift their attention to self-protection. They genuinely like the local Indians who they live amongst, but like many women, they have a generalized fear of men. They try to always go out in pairs of two or more to avoid being attacked and raped, and in fact traveling in pairs is one of their vows.⁵⁰⁰ This says much about views of men.

The stark contrast in this natural experiment is the nunnery wall itself. Inside and away from the male gaze the nuns do not have problems related to their gender other than menstruation (more below). It is only when they are seen as different and also inferior or vulnerable that problems arise. They are free to pursue their scholastic and contemplative education within the nunnery walls, and to rise to the top inside the nunnery. Outside, in their home villages and communities, there is little demand for their services as female clergy because the monks fill those roles. They are the first generation of highly educated clerical nuns, and as a result of the lack of teaching positions, after graduation they mostly aspire to serve the nunnery internally or

⁴⁹⁹ Gender is the only paradigm discussed here. If this research had been undertaken on in the US, I would have asked about anti-Asian sentiments. In India, this is less of an issue, although there is certainly an awareness of ethnicity at Namdroling.

⁵⁰⁰ Anonymous lophonma, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2019.

go into three-year retreat. Some chose to become nuns as a reaction to the prescribed roles of South and East Asian women in rural villages, whose days, weeks, months, and years are filled with cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. Many became nuns as children and their families made those choices for them. While male-female relationships vary, and it is possible to get a husband who is fair and kind, the nuns are aware that husbands sometimes beat their wives, cheat on them, and bring home other women. They witnessed many unpleasant situations in their early lives, and continue to know these realities through their occasional visits with family or in conversations with female kin. Regardless of whether they ordained by choice or someone made the decision for them, they are aware of what they are free from.⁵⁰¹

In terms of upgrading the degrees and titles they can get from the nunnery to match the monks, an oft-repeated statement was that the nuns want the highest degree of Khenmo to be available to other nuns but for not themselves.⁵⁰² They are humble. As of this writing, the khenmo degree is still not offered at Namdroling. Self-advocating for their own rights would be frowned upon within the Buddhist social milieu.

The vast majority are not fully ordained nuns because the lineage of female monastics never arrived in Tibet. This situation has been going on in Tibet since the order of monks was established there in the eighth-century when the Indian Śāntaraṣita came to Tibet with a requisite quorum of monks needed to establish an order. A few Namdroling nuns have undergone full ordination with Chinese nuns by going to China, and most of them are from China, Europe, or the US, but there is a technical problem because the lineage is different. Securing these institutional titles must be done in a manner that is respectful of the fact that they are a branch of the monastery and subject to its counsel and administration by the monks. Since

⁵⁰¹ Anonymous nuns, interviews by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

⁵⁰² Anonymous lophonma, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, January 2018.

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there is no requisite quorum of fully ordained nuns to ordain other nuns, it would have to be sponsored either by the monks, or by nuns from another lineage like the fully-ordained nuns in China. These scenarios were seen as problematic enough to halt progress when I was at Namdroling,⁵⁰³ although a powerful figure could endorse such an action like what the Karmapa recently did this for the Kagyu lineage. The outcome of that situation remains to be seen.⁵⁰⁴

In character, the nuns tend to be strong, wise, and exceedingly capable. They are often soft-spoken. They are aware that the nunnery provides them an education that is challenging and fulfilling, that they have many pleasant relationships with other nuns, that the food is decent, the housing is sufficient and free, and that they are respected in Buddhist communities. The ones who choose to remain as nuns, for it is always a choice, are quite happy at Namdroling.

Namdroling nuns are ready and willing to teach, and while they teach all the courses and meditation retreats inside the nunnery, they are relatively cut off from the rest of the world. They rarely come to the US or abroad, simply because there is no precedent—yet. And there is no infrastructure for them to come—yet. Despite the fact that the majority of convert practitioners of Buddhism in the US are women, there are few women teachers in the Palyul tradition. As a student at Palyul New York, I expressed my concerns about the lack of female teachers and role models to the Khenpos and Tulkus in charge. They were received respectfully, but with no discernable impact. In my graduate studies, I became aware of how female mentorship is important to women because PhD programs similarly lack female mentorship, while research shows that same-gender mentorship is important to overall success.⁵⁰⁵ In the Palyul lineage, they

⁵⁰³ Khenpo Gawang, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, November 2018.

⁵⁰⁴ Swati Chawla, “From Illiteracy to PhD: How Exiled Tibetan Buddhist Nuns Are Ensuring Gender Parity,” *The Wire*, September 25, 2018, <https://thewire.in/religion/from-illiteracy-to-phd-how-exiled-tibetan-buddhist-nuns-are-ensuring-gender-parity>.

⁵⁰⁵ Amy Aldridge Sanford et al., “Finding Courage and Confirmation: Resisting Impostor Feelings through Relationships with Mentors, Romantic Partners, and Other Women in Leadership,” *Advancing Women in Leadership* 35 (January 1, 2015),

prioritize replicating Penor Rinpoche's vision. The people who teach in the US are mostly the ones he hand-selected and brought on tour with him, a moment frozen in time at his passing, and he did not bring any women.

It is possible that Penor Rinpoche placed his aspirations for the progress of women outside of Himalayan society. He recognized a female American tulku, Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo, and she has a significant following of students who attend the retreats at Palyul New York.⁵⁰⁶

When I first met the Namdroling nuns, I could not immediately tell them apart from monks. They wear the same robes as their male counterparts, have shaved heads, and no ornamentation except for the occasional pair of ultra-feminine sandals. Their *zen (gzan)*, the top robe, does a good job of concealing their bust. When lay women came around the nunnery, their makeup, hair, and dress appeared garish in contrast, a stark difference compared to the simplicity of the nuns' dress. I began to experience viscerally how hairstyles, makeup, clothing, and jewelry are primary indicators of femininity. These masks are placed upon the body to invoke the symbols of femininity, a practice that the nuns have given up.

In February of 2018, I attended the Tibetan Yoga retreat at Namdroling nunnery. To do so, I had done the foundational practice retreat a year before at the Palyul New York retreat center, plus five years of graduate study in the Tibetan language. Although that is not a requirement, the retreat was entirely in Tibetan.

The annual *Sky Dharma* retreats began two months after my arrival at Namdroling, and I was the only lay person in the yoga retreat along with thirty-five nuns on their campus. Among the three *Sky Dharma* retreats that run simultaneously, only in the yoga retreat do lay women practice at the nunnery because of the required change in clothing that precludes women from

⁵⁰⁶ Observations by the author, McDonough, NY, July 10-August 10, 2017 and 2019.

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practicing with the monks. In the foundational practices, and also in the Great Perfection retreats, lay people stay with the monks on their campus. In general, the monks' campus is open to the public, whereas the nunnery is closed to visitors and one must gain permission for entry.

A motivating research question for this dissertation was, how do contemporary female ascetics adapt practices traditionally designed for male bodies to their own? The answer to that question was apparent by the end of the retreat and not so interesting: *they just do the practices in the exact same way as the men do*. There are no modifications whatsoever for the female body, and this makes sense in light of the ways texts are interpreted at Namdroling. Practices are not adapted to new audiences based on cultural changes that shift access to practice. While women are new to winds and channels yoga, they stay close to the *Sky Dharma* texts, which they learn from the monks.

Different prescriptions for practice based on gender are common in Tibetan Buddhist *vajra* body theory,⁵⁰⁷ which describes subtle differences in male and female anatomy.⁵⁰⁸ The prescribed outcome can be crossing legs or hands on the right or left depending on if one is male or female, for example.

However, it was not until I interviewed a well-known yogi—a *ngakpa* (*sngags pa*)—who is a popular teacher of Tibetan Yoga for Namdroling lopons and khenpos post-graduation that I witnessed how this could affect female practitioners. A year after I did the retreat at Namdroling, I was in Bodh Gaya, the modern-day pilgrimage site where the historical Buddha attained enlightenment in Bihar state, India. There, a well-connected lama who I befriended at Palyul

⁵⁰⁷ I first received such instructions as a lay practitioner at the Tushita retreat center in Dharamsala in a course for beginners in 2004.

⁵⁰⁸ Longchenpa discusses these differences in several locations in chapters eleven and twelve of the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*. I have run out of time to update this dissertation, but one need only search a digital copy for *bud med*. Email nw3ca@virginia.edu if you need a digital, searchable copy.

New York brokered interviews for me with a revered contemporary Tibetan Yoga teacher and lama (*sngags pa*). Once again, I was assisted by the translator Rigzin Losel, the same monk who translated for me at my first winds and channels retreat at Namdroling. The yogin is renowned among the Namdroling community as a non-monastic expert able to guide practitioners in winds and channels yoga beyond the education they receive at Namdroling. He has his own retreat center in Tso Pema (*mtsho pad+ma*), Himachal Pradesh, Northern India, one of Guru Rinpoche's holy sites.

This yoga teacher had many gems to share from his understanding of winds and channels yoga, and it was clear that he was an expert. I thoroughly enjoyed the wisdom that came through his words, as well as his mastery of the textual literature. As a practitioner and teacher, he seemed to know Longchenpa's texts better than the khenpos at Namdroling knew them. I attributed this to the fact that he had been applying them to practice, a type of active learning, rather than the more passive scholastic study the monks and nuns might engage in. The *ngakpa* made it clear how different Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* is when merely studied from an intellectual perspective, as opposed to understanding it in terms of practical applications. He referred to the text on several occasions.

When asked about women as practitioners, he said that while it is beneficial for women to practice winds and channels yoga, they would never be able to achieve the highest results of practice because of a reversal of certain channels in the vajra body.⁵⁰⁹ He cited Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* as the source of this information.

After hearing this from the yogin, when I returned to Namdroling I translated a section of the *Supreme Vehicle* guided by Khenpo Tenzin, who had his own response to what the yogi said.

⁵⁰⁹ Ngakpa, interview by author, Bodh Gaya, India, December 2018.

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First, I will give my translation, and then the Khenpo's explanation and response. The rest of the chapter will focus on how the nuns at Namdroling actually practice winds and channels yoga, with information about issues related to women. Other than menstruation, all the problems are socially-caused and informed by cultural practices.

Longchenpa's text, here interpreted through this popular yogi-teacher, is one source of limiting beliefs about women. It is impossible to externally verify what Longchenpa said about the vajra body because the subtle body is imperceptible to an untrained eye. However, Longchenpa's writing impacts cultural beliefs about women that affect women today. Direct experience of the subtle body is limited to advanced yogins who experience success in practice and use the language of the subtle body to describe their experiences. However, Tibetan culture discourages discussing one's own spiritual realizations, so even if one were to see such truths, they would be discouraged from talking about them. But also, if someone nowadays were to directly perceive the subtle body, it is doubtful they would take much interest in detailed accounts of embryology such as Longchenpa's simply because embryology is not a popular topic among practitioners nowadays. And yet, texts such as this one continue to negatively impact views about women across generations because they are authoritative and portray women in a negative light.

What Longchenpa Says about Women

“As for the solitary channel (*rkyang ma*), because a non-conceptual experience of reality arises, that is why it is called solitary.⁵¹⁰ By virtue of leaving it in its own nature, it remains alone and is not related to anything else. This [channel] is on the left side for men, and for women it is on the right.

The all-vibrating channel (*kun 'dar ma*) is in the center for both men and women. When pressed, the clarity of primordial wisdom arises. If left in its natural state, it performs

⁵¹⁰ The khenpo said this is a reference to winds and channels yoga practice.

actions sustaining the triad of body, speech, and mind.

Since those three channels are the basis of all the channels, they are designated as “ma [the mother].”⁵¹¹

In that the taste channel (*ro ma*) comes on the right side for men, it is that which produces the mind of enlightenment. Being that it appears on the left side for women, it chokes off the mind of enlightenment, and they cannot satiate desire.

The solitary channel (*rkyang ma*) comes on the left for men. It holds the force that propels blood. The dripping of blood through the nose is the moment of identifying primordial wisdom.

It comes on the right for women, which involves splitting [from that channel] at its lower end into the channel of the fivefold lineage possessing [women], so that there are illnesses that men do not have. These indicate the distinguishing features of the five types.

To expand on that, [the first lineage are those who are] purplish in color, short, with good teeth, a round form, and a round face. Her main channel is like a deer. For example, like a hoofed animal’s calve, she has a thick base and an especially large amount of desire, because the channel’s tip is slender, it is unable to emit directly the bodhicitta. She never satiates the desire. Here, if you want to take the key point of the vital essence onto the path with this [woman], the important pith instruction is to move the channel.⁵¹²

Longchenpa goes on to describe four more types of women here with whom encounters as consorts produce failed outcomes in the practice of sexual yoga.

Thus, in women, the channels of the five lineages comes from the ample coarseness of the five poisons in women. From that, there emerges thirty-two different kinds of deceit and therefore thirty-two specific illnesses.⁵¹³ “

⁵¹¹ The Khenpo said they are designated as “ma” which makes more sense since everyone has a mother. However, here it clearly states *na ma*.

⁵¹² *rkyang ma ni/ gcud pas chos nyid rtog bral gyi nyams skye ba'i phyir rkyang ma la/ rang bzhin du bzhag pas gzhan dang mi 'brel zhing reng bur gnas pa'o/'di nyid skyes pa'i gyon bud med kyi gyas na yod do//kun dar ma ni/ skyes pa dang bud med gnyis ga'i dbus na gnas te/ btsher bas ye shes gsal ba'i nyams skye la/ rang bzhin du bzhag pas lus ngag yid gsum gyi skyong ba'i las su byed pa'o/ rtsa gzum po de rtsa thams cad kyi gzhi yin pas na ma zhes btags so//ro ma skyes pa'i gyas su 'ong ba ni/ byang sems skyed par byed pa yin la/ bud med kyi gyon du byung ba ni/ byung sems 'thums te 'dod pa la tshim pa med pa'o/ rkyang ma skyes pa'i gyon du 'ong ba ni/ khrag gi 'phen pa'i stobs 'dzin pa ste/ sna nas khrag tu 'dzag pa'i las kyis ye shes kyi dus 'dzin par byed pa'o/bud med kyi gyas su 'ong ba ni/ de las rigs can lna'i rtsar gyes pas skyes pa la med pa'i nad dang rigs kyi bye brag mtshon byed du byung ba'o/ de yang kha dog smug cing bong thung so legs la byad zlum pa ri dwags can gyi rtsa gtso bas/ rtsa de yang dper na ri dwags ae na ya'i byin pa ltar rtsa ba sbom pas 'dod chags lhag par che la/ rtse mo phra bas byang sems dngos su 'byin par mi nus pa'o/'di la thig le'i gnad lam du byed na rtsa spo ba'i man ngag gtso che'o/ 2.12.1.2.1.1 Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg Mchog Mdzod: Facsimilie Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints, 192a.*

⁵¹³ *de ltar bud med la rigs can lna'i rtsar 'ong ba ni dug lnga lhag par rags pa las byung la/ de las gyo sgyu mi 'dra*

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I cannot be sure if the yogin in Bodh Gaya was referring to these exact passages, although he referred to passages about women in the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* in a general way. In chapters eleven and twelve, which are the main chapters where Longchenpa describes the body, these and the following topics about women are discussed at length:

- At conception, the male is the main cause (*rgyu*) while the female is the supporting condition (*rkyen*).⁵¹⁴ The language of main causes and supporting conditions is a typical way to talk about causality and interdependence in Buddhist logic and causality theory. For something to come into existence, both causes and conditions are necessary. It is common to use farming metaphors here, where a causal seed dictates what type of plant actually grows. The supporting conditions such as sun, soil, and water are necessary for the process to unfold.
- Men and women have reverse configurations of channels in some key locations in the vajra body,⁵¹⁵ which is stated in the first translated line above.
- Because of this reversal, women cannot access *bodhicitta*, or cannot release it. The coarse form of *bodhicitta* is semen, which was told to me on numerous occasions by the monks at Namdroling. There is some confusion about what women have, and this is not to be taken as a fact found in the text. The multivalence of the term *jangsem* (*byang sems*; Skt: *bodhicitta*) led many monks to question whether women could achieve *bodhicitta*, as in

*ba sum bcu rtsa gnyis byung bas/ gyo sgyu nad kyi bye brag mi 'dra ba sum bzu rtsa gnyis yod pa ni rigs can gyi rtsa las byung ba'o//de yang tsa ye shes kyi rigs mi 'dra ba brgya dang rtsa gcig las/ bud med la mngal za ba srin bu'i mdze rang la'ng nad kyi rigs mi 'dra ba bcu/ kun tu 'jug pa so so'i nad lnga/ 'dzin pa snod kyi nad lnga/ gnas pa sa bon gyi nad bdun te/ bsdoms pas sum bcu so gnyis ni skyes pa la med pa lhag tu yod pa'o/ 2.12.1.2.1.1 Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg Mchog Mdzod: Facsimile Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 193a.*

⁵¹⁴ 2.12.1.1.3 in THL digital version. Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg Mchog Mdzod: Facsimilie Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 191a.

⁵¹⁵ 2.12.1.2.1.1 in THL digital version. Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg Mchog Mdzod: Facsimilie Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 192a.

the altruistic mind of enlightenment, in its spiritual sense since they do not have semen.⁵¹⁶

- Lists of consort types: in the *Supreme Vehicle*, the list of consorts includes five types where only include the first type is described above. This list happens to be the characteristics of women who *are not suitable as consorts*. It is not a list of the qualities of a good consort who would help one to attain realizations.⁵¹⁷ What is most important is that there are no parallel portrayals of the negative qualities of men. Even if these are special cases, the negative qualities of men never get highlighted in these ways.
- Because women have wombs and menstruate, they have more illnesses than men.⁵¹⁸ The nuns treat menstruation as an illness, as we will see below.

The list of consorts in particular highlights the negative qualities that women can have.

They are limited to the types of women who have those configurations of channels, which itself is an imperceptible reality in that the *vajra* body cannot be seen by non-realized people.

The text draws attention to the possible ways that women can be unattractive, infertile, and incompetent as consorts. If there were lists of the faults of men, at least the genders would be equally disparaged. Although there are lists of the negative qualities of lamas, who are typically men, that is still an elite group— not “men” at large.

Drawing attention to negative qualities of women creates negative associations with women in general. The circulation of passages such as this one limits women's ability to have gender equality in Tibetan Buddhist societies, as evidenced by the way the yogin referred to women's inability to achieve the highest results of winds and channels yoga because of their reversed channels. Such authoritative literature canonizes negative views of women, despite the

⁵¹⁶ Anonymous Khenpo, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, April 2018.

⁵¹⁷ 2.12.1.2.1.1 in THL digital version. Klong chen pa Dri med 'od zer, *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa's Theg Mchog Mdzod: Facsimilie Edition of Early Tibetan Block Prints*, 192a.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

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fact that Longchenpa is not necessarily talking about all women.

One of the Namdroling lophonmas had a different interpretation of this passage. Some of the last interviews I did at Namdroling were with the Lophonmas, and in my search for answers about women, I requested that they read these sections. She pointed out that there are many types of women, not only the five types Longchenpa discussed.⁵¹⁹ She rejected the idea that all women are incapable of achieving the highest results of winds and channels practice, and localized the negative qualities of women to only those who qualify as the five types of women that Longchenpa singled out. This opened up the possibility that it could refer to a marginal group.

However, she was more perceptive in her interpretation than others. Neither of the Khenpos with whom I read the text caught that. The text is extremely long, and there is always the issue of covering enough ground when reading. It employs highly specialized technical vocabulary from the fourteenth century. Both khenpos I read with openly declared that they were *not* experts in this text. They agreed to read it as generalists in the Great Perfection tradition at large. Likely, this is why they did not pick up on the specificity with which Longchenpa ascribed negative qualities to only five types of women. The khenpos read the text as “there are five types of consorts,” which aligns with the ways consorts are commonly presented.

The Khenpo with whom I read this text was defensive about the status of women. He wants women to have equal opportunities and conditions, and pointed out many inequities in Tibetan society from when he was a child. He tried to steer my understanding to something much more egalitarian. He made the following points to me:

1. Women can definitely get enlightened. The Buddha said that. When the Buddha made rules for women, it was a reaction to society, not to women themselves. The Buddha was aware

⁵¹⁹ Anonymous lophonma, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2019.

that women would have more obstacles than men.

2. Anyone who thinks that women cannot practice winds and channels yoga is wrong. (To be clear, the *ngakpa* said only that women cannot achieve the highest results of winds and channels practice because of a different configuration of their channels. He did not say they should not practice.)

3. In his experience, women actually have more stamina than men. When monks and nuns sit on the councils at Namdroling together, the nuns tend to persevere when dealing with difficult issues more than the monks, who tend to get lazy and give up if they cannot do something right away.⁵²⁰

In general, the Khenpo's main sentiment was that whoever makes effort in the dharma will get results. It is society that forces the monastics to make more rules for women, not their own views about women. Moreover, the texts were written for men in a time when women were not a significant portion of the population of practitioners. While men and women are certainly different in that they have different anatomy, this has no implication for their ability as practitioners.

Before hearing from the lophonmas, the next section will detail what it was like to practice winds and channels yoga with the nuns at Namdroling.

Practicing *Tsalung* in the Nunnery

On March 3, 2018, I began the Tibetan Yoga retreat at Namdroling nunnery, which I intended to study using ethnographic methods. The nunnery is a few hundred meters down the

⁵²⁰ Anonymous khenpo, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India January 2019.

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street from the monks' campus, which itself is a major tourist attraction visited by hundreds of mostly Indian tourists daily. The nunnery is a quieter place, with an enormous iron gate and an office that I had to be delivered through by my initial contact, a nun from Dolpo (*Dol po*). I had made friends with the chanting master at Palyul New York, also originally from Dolpo, and he introduced me around Namdroling via text and WeChat since he was not present. Thus, my initial contacts at Namdroling were all from Dolpo, a traditionally Tibetan Buddhist region in western Nepal that borders on Tibet. It is remote and high in elevation.

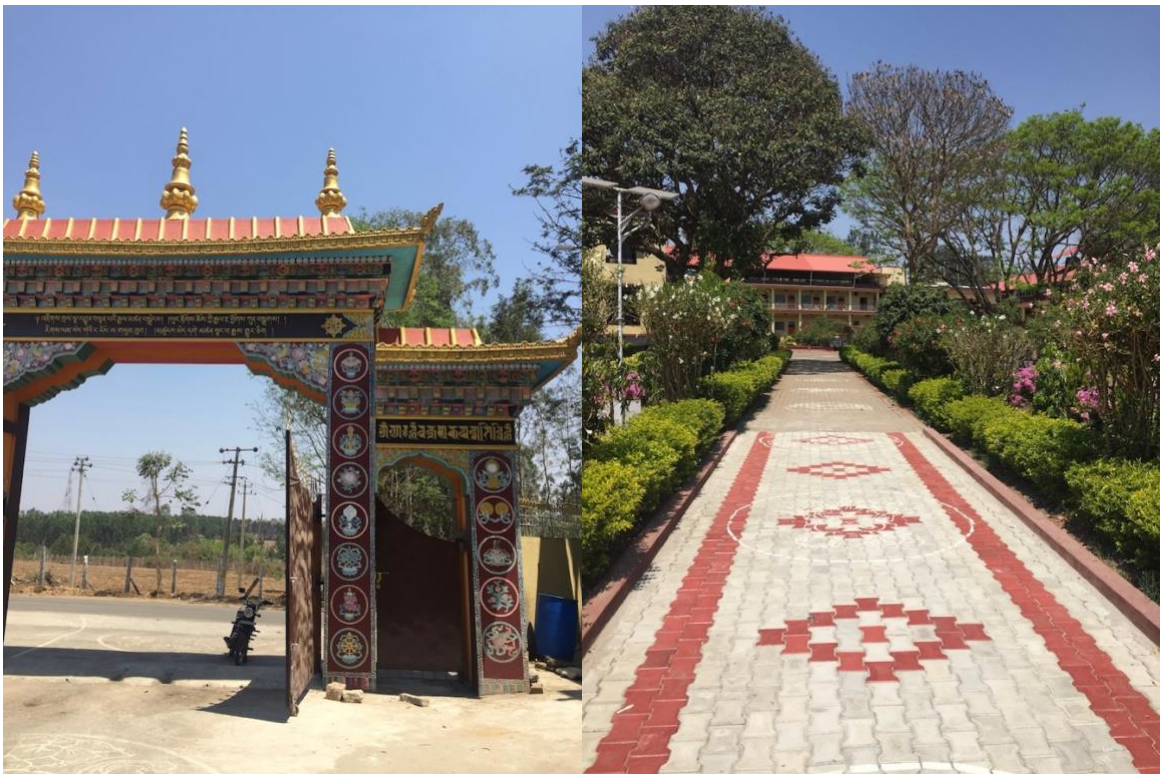


Figure 36 Left: The nunnery gate, seen from inside the nunnery. Right: A walkway inside the nunnery. The gardens are idyllic.

This nun from Dolpo whose care I had fallen under was on her way to three-year retreat in less than a month, and the need to accumulate merit to have a successful retreat was manifest for her. Once in retreat, there would be no one to help or serve, a situation in which it is harder to

accumulate merit. Helping me was also a way of helping her cousin, the chanting master who teaches in the US. She was friendly and made important connections on my behalf to other nuns. On my first day at the nunnery, she introduced me at the office to let them know that I would be around campus for a while, and also indicated that this would be where I could make donations should I so desire.

She introduced me to another nun, Loponma Tsering from the famous Shukseb (*Shug gseb*) nunnery in Tibet, home of Longchenpa's retreat cave. That nunnery has a special connection to Namdroling, and Loponma Tsering was selected as my teacher because Tibetans are known to have better pronunciation of the Tibetan language compared to the monastics from Nepal, Bhutan, and India. Loponma Tsering prepared me for the winds and channels yoga retreat by reading about the relationship between body and mind in Ju Mipham's commentary on Dharmakirti's *Commentary on Valid Cognition (Tshad ma rnam grel)*. She identified a lengthy dialectical section on the relationship between mind and body that unfolds in the context of a proof of how the Buddha is an omniscient teacher. Over the course of our month together, I went to her room every day to learn the text, and she introduced me to the ways of nuns. She was small and quiet, but when she taught philosophy, she was well-spoken, erudite, and passionate.

When I first told Loponma that I came to participate in the winds and channels retreat, she and several nuns remarked that my previous experience as a yoga teacher would make the retreat easier for me. Once we knew each other a little bit, she leveled with me: “Are you sure you want to do it? It's hard. And, you need a special skirt and a good mat.” She was trying to caution me as to what I was in for, but I had come a long way, and knew two other female scholars who had done the retreat.

During my time learning from Loponma Tsering in her room, the nunnery was entirely

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quiet as most of the nuns were out of station. It was winter break, the only time of year that the monastics can travel freely. If they have the funds, they visit family or go to Dorje Den, the Tibetan term for Bodh Gaya, the site of the famous Bodhi Tree. She was the first to introduce me to a main pedagogical mode in the monastery, which is one-on-one private tutoring, a common way the monastics teach each other.

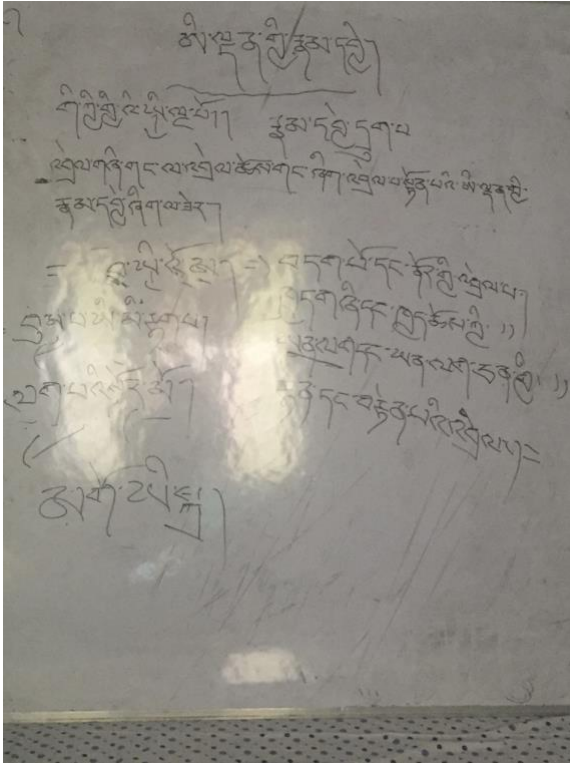


Figure 37 Whiteboard from my first private class at Namdroling, where a 7th year nun taught me Yangchen Drubpe Dorje's Magical Wish-Fulfilling Tree (legs bshad ljon dbang) on Thunmi Sambhota's (Thon mi sam+b+ho ta) Thirty Verses on Tibetan Grammar. That text is the first to be studied in the monastic college, and the nuns chose it for me.

The first day of retreat finally arrived. I inquired with my contacts from Dolpo, who also included the chanting master's nephew who is now a khenpo, and was directed to wait outside of a medium-sized temple toward the back of the monks' campus. I waited with the four lay men doing the retreat, two from Bhutan including a young medical doctor, and two from the nearby Tibetan refugee camp in Hunsur. One of them was staying at the same house as me, just outside of the male monastic college, and he had recently completed all 500,000 of the Foundational

practices and was doing the winds and channels yoga retreat with much anticipation. I myself had only done that retreat for one month, where I accumulated around 30,000 repetitions, a number that pales in comparison. I had requested permission from Khenpo Tsewang Gyatso to join the retreat on this basis, which I was granted. Khenchen seemed a little amused by my efforts and presence at Namdroling because it is rare for Palyul New York students to show up there, and because of my ability to speak Tibetan.

The nuns were nowhere to be found on the first morning. They would walk over to the monks' campus every three days to receive the empowerment and teachings from Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso, while the rest of the practice sessions happened in the nunnery. On this first day of retreat, they must have been running late and they all poured in at once after Khenchen had done his parade from his residence to the temple with attendants in tow, greeting students along the way. The monks would flank either side of the path and stand with heads bowed and palms together as a sign of respect for this teacher who would deliver the jewel of the dharma to them.

The nuns carved out a side of the temple near the door to sit together, not exactly behind the monks the way they would have done in Namdroling's main temple. There is a rule in the monastic code of conduct that even the most novice monk outranks any nun, so they always sit behind the monks. That setup is also a matter of convenience, as everyone at Namdroling is invested in keeping the genders separated. Limiting contact among the opposite sexes is one of the main methods they use to maintain the celibacy vows. The nuns often told me that they were more comfortable in each other's presence without men around.

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Figure 38 Left: mostly monks, and a single nun in the bottom left facing the camera, all pouring into the temple after Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso's arrival. Right: monks waiting for Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso to arrive.

We received the empowerment on the first morning, which granted practitioners in the retreat the requisite permission to visualize themselves as Troworoza, the winds and channels yoga deity. Without empowerment, it is forbidden to do the practices. This is a form of kinship making, as anyone who receives empowerment together is in the same vajra family for life and beyond.

Empowerment in the lineage at all implies kinship, although more loosely so. The fact that I had empowerment in the Palyul lineage upon arrival at Namdroling opened more doors for me than being a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism on several occasions. I could tell by the ways people introduced me to others when they were speaking Tibetan. Even though they knew I spoke Tibetan, there was a sort of unspoken contract that the monks and nuns would talk about me in Tibetan in front of me. Maybe they didn't believe me, or maybe it was their way of granting me access to a more familiar world. On rare occasions they introduced me as a scholar, but mostly I was announced as a student of Palyul New York. The monastics value scholarship because Tibetan Buddhism is a scholastic tradition, and this worked in my favor on many occasions. But empowerment in the lineage held more weight. The reality was that my presence at Namdroling was always tenuous. I had to be careful not to step out of line or create problems,

but rather to contribute to the community. At such a large institution charged with the education and care of thousands of students, there is simply not time or infrastructure to support a problematic outsider who does not fit neatly into the monastery's mission of upholding and spreading the dharma.

The empowerment relies on the body and the senses in several ways. The tulkus (reincarnated Buddhist masters), lamas (those who completed a three-year retreat), and khenpos (monastic professors) all walked around in a procession tapping everyone on the head with a ritual vase. Everyone had to make physical contact with the vase so people were scrambling around to make sure their heads were in the path, but much less so than in the foundational or Great Perfection retreats. The monks and nuns are able to order themselves nicely and the few lay persons minimized the chaos compared to the other retreats.

Then the monks symbolically purified us by offering a sip of saffron water. This was followed by tapping everyone on the head again, this time with initiation cards, which are a step away from real, physical holy objects. This usage of pictures in lieu of real holy objects, combined with the physical contact, both asserts and rejects a physical world. On one hand, the empowerment requires physical contact. On the other, such stand-in objects rely on the imagination for success. Khenchen reminded us at the closing of the ceremony that enlightenment with these methods is possible in a single lifetime, with a single body (*tshe gcig lus gcig*).

We met in that same temple every three days for Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso to read the *Sky Dharma* text and instruct us on the different series of practices. He explained one series per teaching for nine sessions. All other practice sessions were held in a warehouse in the back of the nunnery that functions as a large, makeshift classroom and exam hall for the nuns on an as-

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needed basis.

When I first arrived at the warehouse practice hall, the nuns were still putting the finishing touches on the space to ensure 100% privacy. A few nuns were doing light construction on top of a two-story ladder. I watched them with bemusement as they did construction, a job that is often gendered as male. Of course, they were doing it all effortlessly. I saw them do many such jobs, such as lawn work and the maintenance of their own grounds. I feel that I should apologize for even writing about that, because it is about my own surprise.



Figure 39 Nuns blackening the windows in preparation for the winds and channels retreat.

The nuns had a nice rapport with each other, and it was a relief to be amongst a group endowed with cooperation, support, and friendship. Much of the days were spent in the recitation of prayers, as it took us an hour to cover the necessary prayers in the morning, and then around 30-45 minutes in the subsequent two sessions. There were three sessions per day. The nuns' chanting was melodious, rhythmic, and beautiful. The youngest nun in the retreat was only sixteen years old and the chanting seemed to help her manage her energy. When not chanting, her eyes would dart around the room, but the chanting appeared to calm her down. Throughout the retreat, it seemed that the prayers we chanted on a daily basis unified us. The act of chanting

together, of joining in song, and of following each other's pace, was unifying. The prayers are rich in philosophy and their contents are daily reminders of what our purpose and goals were as Buddhists. They include goals that reach beyond mundane realities into supramundane realms, and invite reflection on Buddhist cosmology that is beyond what the naked eye sees. They reinforced the Buddhist principle that daily life and the thrills of the world are not the goal, but rather are the sources of suffering. And, they placed us as the very end of a long lineage of Great Perfection masters, traced all the way through the ages in Tibet, to the founders of the Palyul lineage, to India, and to the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra. This framed our own identity as practitioners with the aim of realization, and in the lineage prayers, we reviewed the qualities of the realization of those masters.

The second teaching session by Khenchen was the first time we learned actual *trulkhor* exercises. From then on, in our practice sessions in our classroom we all had to take turns leading the sequences, or at least leading some *beb-s* (the jumps). This meant that everyone took a turn being embarrassed at the front of the class, or so it seemed.

Whenever the nuns would make a mistake, they giggled. Despite the fact that I was judging them for being what I saw as overly feminine with their giggles, when it was my turn to lead the class and I made a mistake, I also giggled. I was unable to rise above the local culture. Some nuns had a hard time following me and chose to stare at me instead, although I am not sure if it was because I was a foreigner, or just not a nun. One time, my hair band came out during a particularly spirited head roll, leaving my long hair to fly all around my head. This was the cause for a complete meltdown of laughter amongst the group, since all of them have shaved heads. Throughout the retreat, it seemed that the nuns expressed every emotion with giggling. They giggled when nervous, upset, or instead of crying.

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We learned the meditations in the first days of retreat, and one of the chanting masters would read out the instructions at the beginning of every session. Through this, we got to rehearse the guru yoga and deity yoga visualizations at least three times per day, all meditating together. I was both shocked and offended at the gendered roles in the visualizations, an attitude that was not at all shared by the nuns. In the guru yoga visualization, first all male holy beings come forth and melt into the mouth of the guru, and then all female beings come forth and melt into the mouth of the consort.⁵²¹

While I am aware that the gender binary represents duality in general, I wondered if this separation of genders in the contemplative space influenced the ways the nuns to identify as females. How do such contemplations affect their self-image? Female holy beings are often “Khandro” (*mkha 'gro*), literally Sky-Goers. This term for celestial beings is also what religious sexual consorts are called in the Tibetan tradition. Do the nuns have fantasies aspiring to be consorts in this context where the only named female is Guru Rinpoche's consort? I never got to ask them such candid questions. In fact, when I pressed one of the nuns about how in the visualization, the guru's consort is only sixteen years old and she is “in union” with the guru, she laughed at my sexualization of the process. “It's not sex!” She said, “Union is different.”⁵²² It was not easy to get the nuns to answer such direct questions. As an ethnographer I am aware of imposing my beliefs on those I study. Still, that the consort is only sixteen-years old and is in union with Guru Rinpoche by sitting on his lap, to my modern sensibilities where we look down on marriage for such young women (but not sex), I struggled with this and worried about its effects on the nuns' self-image as women. I worried about my own struggles as a lay female

⁵²¹ “Nam Chö Tsa Lung Practice Manual,” 2016.

⁵²² Everything in this section is from ethnographic field notes from the winds and channels yoga retreat in 2018 unless otherwise noted.

from my own highly sexualized culture.

Sexuality became salient in new ways in this environment where it was forthrightly shunned with celibacy. Under their robes, I found the nuns' attire to be more attractive than expected. About halfway through the retreat the assistant teacher showed up with a sexy new yoga outfit and I wondered why she had been holding out on us all along. I wondered why the nuns suffered through wearing bras, although I am sure that they would draw more attention without them. To my initial surprise, each day when the nuns removed their robes to practice winds and channels yoga, they revealed pink bras, cute short-shorts, and lacy racerback tops underneath. Inside the enclosed warehouse with the windows blacked out and the door covered, they exchanged the straight faces that they wear outside the nunnery for more feminine gestures, dancing and singing to popular songs. Surely my shock was a testimony to my own ignorance. After all, they were not born nuns; some of them were even married or became nuns in adulthood, although many did so as children or in their teens. The age range in the retreat was 16-44.

We practiced for three sessions per day, starting at 5:30 am. The first session was mostly prayers, and often ended with a hearty breakfast of Indian-style curried potatoes, fresh unleavened bread, and sweet Indian chai. It was quite pleasant to enter into the hall and join the nuns in my place in the back, chant, do a little posture and breathing practice, and be rewarded with a hot breakfast. The nuns were most relaxed in these early morning sessions, a familiar space for them. One nun told me that on religious holidays when they must chant for the entire day, she quite enjoys just sitting back and relaxing. There is never a shortage of food, hot tea, and snacks at the monastery. There is a constant procession of food and drink. In the retreat, we were in their home place, reciting melodious chants together as a community, while the sun rose,

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with great purpose. The afternoon and evening sessions tended to have fewer prayers and be more physically active, although this pattern changed depending on whether we had to go to the monks' campus to receive teachings from Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso.

The nuns had been teaching each other the practices exclusively for about two years in 2018. Before then, there were not enough skilled nuns so monks came to the nunnery to teach. The year that I was there, two nuns were assigned as *chorpon* (*skyod dpon*), which is technically a review teacher. These were our yoga teachers.

In the formal transmission of the practices in the temple on the monks' campus, Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso would teach the postural sequences once including gestures, but amidst a lot of commentary and without much explanation of how to do the postures. These two nuns were charged with teaching us the postures. Over on the monks' campus, Lama Dorje was doing this job for the monks. These two pretty nuns in their early twenties would go to his residence before each class to review the practices before teaching us. I know from my time with the translator Rigdzin Losel, who was doing the retreat with the monks, that Lama Dorje offered ample advice in conjunction with the physical practices, both on the profound meaning of the religious semiotics and visualizations, as well as practical advice on postures. These two nun teachers, both students in the monastic college, offered no such advice. They were good yoga teachers nonetheless, and reminded me of the ways young women tend to teach yoga in the US.

The yoga teachers had both been nuns since childhood. One was from Himachal Pradesh, a state in Northern India with a long history of Buddhism. She was strikingly beautiful and with a long scar on her cheek. The more confident of the two teachers, her teaching style was to demonstrate the postures in the most impressive way, and it was her who gave me the impression that winds and channels yoga looks like kung fu. More research on the potential for martial arts

as one stream of origin for Tibetan winds and channels postures is promising. The movements involve a lot of crouching, jumping, and snapping one's head back in addition to circular rotations of the abdomen and rubbing along the meridian lines in the arms, legs, head, and abdomen. We would imitate her movements, and when we failed, she would mirror our errors and correct them. She was in her third year in the monastic college.

The other nun was Bhutanese and had also been ordained as a child. She appeared nervous to lead the class, and relied on a pedagogy that made use of repetition, a practice by which I dubbed her “drill sergeant ani.” I resented being told what to do in this forceful manner, but the nuns did not have a problem with it. There were many ways that the retreat was harder for me because I was not used to living the disciplined life of a nun. The nuns seemed to effortlessly follow the rules and instructions where I resisted. Also, the postural sequences were physically challenging to my motor skills, balance, coordination, endurance, and flexibility. I often got frustrated at my inability to do them, or fearful about protecting my knees, and once the youngest nun asked me, “Are you ok? You seem upset.” I was immediately embarrassed at my lack of ability to hide my mental afflictions. The nuns seemed open-minded and willing to make their best effort possible while accepting their own limitations.

The nuns laid down the basic skills of winds and channels yoga through repetition. In between practice sessions, we often repeated the sequences of poses to commit them to memory in small groups. The *beb* jump up from a seated half-lotus posture was the most difficult initial hurdle to the postural aspect of the practice, and we practiced these in drills both together and on our own between sessions. A seated, cross-legged posture is not an easy place from which to lift oneself off the ground and catch air because you have to figure out how to get leverage. Initially, it requires a significant amount of energy to get up. Repetition helps because one gets

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momentum, but it is exhausting. When learning this move, it is common to hit your shins and thighs with your feet, which causes bruising. Because nuns sit on the floor all the time, their legs were strong and flexible compared to mine, despite my years of yoga practice.



Figure 40 My own bruises from learning bebs, plus the knee brace I wore.

On the eleventh day of the retreat, the more confident teacher from Himachal Pradesh introduced a new kind of *beb* that was even more dramatic and challenging. We were to jump to standing, quickly throw our heads all the way back almost touching the back, bend the knees and stand on our toes, and bend at the elbows all at once. This was to be done quickly, followed by slamming ourselves down on the cushion into a seated position. This was the moment that I officially gave up trying to be good at Tibetan Yoga, and decided to just make it through the retreat. It was an impressive move, to say the least. All these *beb-s* are much more accessible the second time one does the retreat, an experience that is shared by the monks and nuns.

We all had our own cushion and took the same seat in the practice hall each day. More proficient nuns who had done the retreat before sat in the front so that they could demonstrate for others sitting behind them. Also, nuns who were more advanced in their studies tended to sit towards the front. There was one loponma in the entire group, and three nuns who were in the

eighth and ninth years in the monastic college. A smattering of years was represented, the vast majority in their third or fourth year.

As the retreat progressed, it became clear that some nuns were really good at the postural sequences. After chanting the prayers, we took a quick break where the nuns changed from their monastic robes into practice clothes. Once seated on our six-inch thick mats stuffed with cotton and coconut husks, the actual practice began. One of the chanting masters read aloud the meditation recorded in the revelation by Migyur Dorje, passing through guru yoga, the four empowerments, the seven-point posture of Vairocana, and then the visualization of the self as the semi-wrathful deity Troworoza.⁵²³ We reviewed mentally the three levels of the deity, which are outer body as his semi-wrathful appearance, inner body as the central channel, and the secret level as a Tibetan syllable that represents either the consort Sangwa Yeshe, Vajra Varahi, or the goddess of fire Padaravasini.

We then did the traditional Tibetan form of breath control called nine-round breathing, which is a purificatory visualization. One sees all their own obscurations and misdeeds accumulated since beginningless time being eliminated through the nostrils and all the pores of the body along with the exhalation. Thus, ready to practice, from here out the thematic postural sequences described in chapter three unfolded.

As the retreat went on, we practiced everything from beginning to end. The order was meditation, breathing practices, and then posture practices. With repetition, we began to perform in sync with each other, and everyone did every move to the best of their own ability.

The energy in the practice sessions was elevating, and the nuns were literally flying off their mats into the air and landing confidently. However, many of us were starting to limp with

⁵²³ “Nam Chö Tsa Lung Practice Manual,” 2016.

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various foot and leg injuries. From my position in the back of the hall, I was wearing two soft knee braces by mid-retreat as a preventative measure.

One day, a nun with great physical acumen was experiencing success practicing the “circle beb” (*'khor bebs*) between sessions by jumping from one mat to the next. In this move, one leaps up from seated, spins around either 180 or 360 degrees, and lands in a half-lotus cross-legged posture. This nun began by running to catch more air so she could make the 360 degree turn. It was truly a sight to behold, until she landed slightly off the mat and broke her foot. To see this nun fall from grace was sad because she had clearly been enjoying her practice. I went to visit her a few days later in her room to drop off peanut butter, a favorite treat of the nuns that is available locally, as the grocery stores are tiny. She seemed depressed by her sudden descent into a stagnant state. She was unable to even get up to walk around because crutches had yet to be located for her. With the freedom and joy she had been experiencing in the retreat lost, she was transposed to a reality without much mental or physical stimulation at all. Without a TV to watch, she had to just lay there all day. She tried to return to the retreat a day after her injury to recite mantras in order to keep the commitment everyone makes at the beginning of the retreat to finish, but it was too challenging for the nuns to support her transportation to and from the hall. Divergence from what everyone else is doing tends to be hard in terms of resources within the monastery. She would have to wait until the next year to practice again, and only then if the right circumstances presented themselves.

Another nun was quite overweight, but her faith was so strong that she did not hold back in her performance of the postures. It was a remarkable to see her lift up and slam down on her mat for the *beb-s*. Any body type can do the other parts such as rubbing meridians, rotating the stomach, and so on. With my yoga teacher’s sensibilities, I was worried that her jumping and

landing with extra weight would stress her joints and cause injury. Sure enough, she hurt her knee pretty badly halfway through the retreat.

She told me that she was advised not to protect her own body, but rather to imagine she was using Troworoza's body, and to be brave with the practices.⁵²⁴ There is a general belief in the winds and channels retreat that seeing a doctor will not benefit injuries and illnesses contracted during the retreat itself because they are problems with winds and channels and not the coarse body. Illnesses are attributed to obstacles (*bar chad*) already present in one's mindstream that live in the body and manifest during retreat because of the ways the practice agitates the body. In this way, illness and injury are signs that practice is working. For me, I was invested in my body's ability to do my yoga practice after the retreat was over, but the nuns were focused on the retreat itself and brave in their practice. Especially for this nun, her bravery rested upon her faith in the teachings.

After a week of grappling with the knee injury, one day when I entered the practice space this nun was being dragged along under her arms by two other nuns. This seemed to be a way of “running it off,” and she later explained that the other nuns were trying to help her release the stuck energy in her body causing the pain. She managed to persevere in her practice and never missed a day. By the end of the retreat, her pain was reduced to only behind the knee, although she was still limping. I checked in with her about eight months after the retreat, and she still had knee pain, but not much.⁵²⁵

The only reason nuns ever missed sessions was due to menstrual pain. The nuns complained a lot about menstruation, and several saw it as their biggest obstacle in life and the

⁵²⁴ Anonymous Namdroling nun, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

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only real difference between them and the monks.⁵²⁶ Nuns frequently sat out while menstruating, and this was the only acceptable reason to not attend a session. This stood out especially when compared to the way female yoga practitioners in the Mysore yoga tradition, who have very different approaches to menstruation. While the Hindu tradition as taught in the Ashtanga yoga lineage recommends abstaining from practice during menstruation, women frequently practice despite the prohibition. Menstruation culture in the nunnery strongly reinforced it as a time of illness.

Like most yoga traditions, performance is a significant aspect of this spiritual practice despite a generally condemnatory attitude about vanity. We had to regularly complete examinations where we performed the postures, and everyone tried their best. These tests are likely a way of managing large groups and keeping people motivated.



Figure 41 Namdroling nuns outside of winds and channels retreat hall.

⁵²⁶ Anonymous lophonma, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, January 2019.



Figure 42 (Above and below) Namdroling nuns at the final ceremony for winds and channels practice at the monks' campus.



Some nuns were competitive with their practice. One day we had a “big beb” (*bebs chen*) contest to see who could do the most. While this *beb* looks impressive, it was actually the easiest one for me because one simply jumps up to a full standing position, and then uses gravity to slam down into half lotus. Since gravity works to your advantage, and there is no special contortion of the body requiring flexibility or significant motor skills, it was easier for me. The small Bhutanese chanting master who was assisting the class was determined to win but was overpowered by her competitor, a pretty nun who was just really good at postural yoga. By my estimate, the Bhutanese chanting master was exhausted by around her thirty-fifth *beb*. She actually stopped at one point and seemed like she would quit, only to rouse herself again. She had been wrapping her back because of pain, which I think was menstrual pain, but then

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performed this super human feat. She looked miserable in the process, and it was clear the other nun had more energy and would win. When they finished, the chanting master was so physically taxed that the blood around her mouth had left and her lips were white. The two competitors limped off to the bathroom together, and returned several minutes later in the midst of a friendly banter.

The nuns are first and foremost students, and even those who have done the winds and channels retreat more than once are aware that practicing for a single month is not enough time to expect radical transformation. At the same time, everyone has their own experience, and Lama Dorje told me that he got something different out of each monthlong practice. In retreat, lessons about life present themselves in their own time in the quiet space of contemplation. It is impossible to know the inner world of the nuns through my observations from the outside, and in interviews they did not volunteer much information that would contribute to a phenomenological description of Tibetan Yoga. From the outside, they are skilled in the same way that advanced yoga practitioners can contort their bodies and perform postures.

There was a disciplinarian designated for the nuns in the *tsalung* retreat. She was a quiet nun who kept the books, and collected ten rupees whenever a nun was late or missed a session. The punishment never needed to be severe because the social contract of the nunnery was entered into willingly. I am certain there have been cases where it was necessary to lay down the law, but in the winds and channels retreat, everyone showed up on time and participated earnestly.

For the nuns, the winds and channels yoga retreat is one experience among many different scholastic, contemplative, and ritual endeavors that take up their education. Among these experiences, the winds and channels yoga practice is unique in the ways they get to use

their bodies, and the practice's ability to heal their bodies (see chapter four for more on healing with Tibetan Yoga). Gastrointestinal illnesses and bowleggedness were the most commonly remedied ailments. The practice is contemplative without a doubt, but the nuns know that deeper experiences will arise for them if they practice for longer periods of time. For now, these contribute a uniquely Tibetan physical exercise culture to their repertoire of skills, give them a chance to get fit or lose weight, and provide ample contemplative experiences in which they can internalize their philosophical studies. The practice also invites the integration of buddha-nature theory into one's own experience, but the nuns did not have much to report on that.

Ideas about Himalayan Women

To understand being a twenty-first century nun, it is important to acknowledge the societies they are renouncing. Despite the fact that they are Tibetan Buddhist nuns, only a handful are from Tibet. Thus, they are not fighting for the freedom of Tibet or its people directly. The boundary between Tibetan and not Tibetan is fluid in these regions where Tibetan Buddhism has such a great influence.

In Himalayan society, gender is the primary factor that determines what one does with their time: males work outside of the home, while women typically stay at home to do the housework and care for children. Of all the monks and nuns I interviewed from Himalayan cultures, 100% of their mothers were housewives.

Men have their own challenges. For example, one particularly erudite monk had been saved from a life of being a farm laborer when he was suddenly orphaned. At just six years old, his parents died and he was forced to work the fields in Bhutan as a laborer. His cousin, a Namdroling monk from his hometown, took notice of him and brought him back with him to the

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monastery.⁵²⁷

Enrollment at Tibetan Buddhist nunneries has traditionally been lower due to their limited financial support by the Tibetan community: monks have been seen as higher karmic objects to whom making donations would produce a greater payoff in terms of the accumulation of merit. Much of Jigme Phuntsok's work was to undo this belief, which was a motivating force behind his establishment of the khenmo program at Larung Gar.⁵²⁸ Until Namdroling, most Tibetan Buddhist nunneries offered women fewer scholastic opportunities, a lack of residency, and a limited education due to a paucity of educated nuns to teach them. They largely relied on monks as teachers.⁵²⁹ These are areas where Namdroling is making great strides in providing equal opportunities for men and women. Many monks expressed a desire for gender equality, and are excited about Namdroling's contributions in that direction.⁵³⁰

One way that gender is working in the nuns' favor is that they have become well-known performers of the female Buddha Tara's puja, a ritual to bring wealth, protection, and remove obstacles. This generates a significant stream of income for them. As women, the nuns are now more popular than the monks despite the fact that technically either gender can perform the ritual. When a local lay person requests a puja from the nunnery, it is usually the loponmas and students enrolled only in the ritual college who are able to attend. The nuns in the monastic college are too busy with their studies. The host family must provide the nuns with breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks, so it becomes an occasion where the householders do a lot of cooking and preparation. They also give each of the nuns a few hundred rupees. In return, the nuns walk

⁵²⁷ Anonymous lopon, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, January 2019.

⁵²⁸ Jue Liang and Andrew Taylor, "Tilling the Fields of Merit: The Institutionalization of Feminine Enlightenment in Tibet's First Khenmo Program," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 27 (2020): 231–62.

⁵²⁹ Kim Gutschow, *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 34-36.

⁵³⁰ Anonymous Namdroling lopon, interview by the author, online, February 2022.

over from the nunnery or take one of their two trucks. They pile in carrying ritual instruments, including drums and huge trumpets, and bring all the regalia, pomp, and circumstance of the nunnery to someone's home for the day. The Namdroling nuns have acquired a reputation as fastidious ritualists, which gives lay donors faith that the rituals they perform on their behalf are effective.⁵³¹ Sponsoring such rituals is a common intervention on which lay people rely in situations that they want to influence. Sponsoring such a ritual accumulates merit, which is like putting gas in the car. The belief is that all subsequent actions will be empowered by their intention combined with the power of the ritual.



Figure 43 Left, nuns in the nunnery truck. Right, two nuns from the monastic college.

While this popularity among the lay people is a sign of respect for the nuns, plenty of gender-based beliefs abound. The Namdroling monks shared some common conceptions about women which they felt were paradigmatic. They reported that women are seen as physically and mentally weak, emotional, anxious, having more negative thoughts than men, fickle, and unable

⁵³¹ Anonymous lophonma, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2019.

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to make decisions on behalf of their families. They are gullible and lack intellectual discernment. Their physical weakness means that they are incapable of protecting a household or monastery from intruders. In Tibet, it was common practice for eight or nine brothers to all marry the same woman so as not to divide a family: robbers would be wary of entering a home protected by such a band of brothers.⁵³²

As students, the nuns are known to be less discerning. They are more prepared for class than the monks and less likely to be lazy, but they do not push boundaries or question the Buddhist teachings deeply in the ways monks do. One monk teacher told me that his experience of teaching monks was that they do not accept the teachings easily, but for the nuns, as long as you speak sweetly, they accept things readily.⁵³³

Within the confines of the nunnery, the nuns have a unique social microclimate. They are brilliant teachers of philosophy but soft-spoken. Unless they are teaching Buddhism, they struggle to speak up to outsiders. When I was trying to get interviews from monks, they wanted to be interviewed as a group. When I expressed that I wanted them to feel comfortable to open up, one monk replied, “We are not like the nuns! We are not afraid to speak.” One nun summed these internalized attitudes up as “We lack courage.”⁵³⁴

A day after I had been conducting an interview with a khenpo who was informing me about the emotional nature of women compared to men, we went on a day trip. It was a religious holiday and we went on pilgrimage to a nearby mountain to send paper prayer flags flying through the air and make aspirational prayers for our practices and our lives. This was another merit-making activity.

⁵³² Anonymous khenpo, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, December 2018-March 2019.

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Ethnographic field notes, Bylakuppe, India, April 2018.

I was leaving Namdroling soon and was a little emotional. I found myself questioning my own behavior because of what the monk had shared with me. “Am I just being emotional because I am a woman? Is this because I am going to menstruate soon?” I felt that his proclamations about women was an invitation for me to be even more emotional. I cried a little, then consoled myself with “It is ok for me to cry because it is expected of me as a woman.”⁵³⁵ While living at Namdroling, I internalized these beliefs even if only temporarily. There is a prayer recited daily at Namdroling to not be born as a woman.⁵³⁶

Power Dynamics in the Nunnery

At the same time that such negative portrayals of women flow through the community as beliefs, the nuns undergo constant ritual coronation through the bestowal of the vows, the joining of the nuns’ order, and the series of ongoing rituals and initiations in which they partake throughout the year. They know the meaning of the rituals well, supported by their education. The divinized view of oneself they develop in generation stage meditation techniques is meant to be confined to certain places, like in the meditation space. It would be arrogant to walk around as if one is the deity, according to one nun. These nuns are closely associated with the living divine being Penor Rinpoche, and also the other great Nyingma lamas of this time, which bestows a sense of purpose onto their activities. And yet at the same time, they know that they will never take on those roles themselves, as very few women become lamas and those who do are usually recognized as special through the reincarnation recognition system. The nuns create hierarchies within the nunnery itself so that the most senior nuns are treated *as if* they are Khenmos. But, at the end of the day, there is a sentiment that it would be nice if some of the nuns *actually were*

⁵³⁵ Ethnographic field notes, Bylakuppe, India, January 2018 to April 2019.

⁵³⁶ Anonymous lophonma, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2019.

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khenpos. The incongruent classificatory system creates a dissymmetry of power between the monks and nuns.



Figure 44 (Top) Khenpos seated on the stage inside the Golden Temple. (Bottom) Nuns seated in the back of the Golden Temple.

In both male and female campuses, the monastic environment is powered by an atmosphere of mutual respect and deference that keeps things functioning nicely. The hierarchies uphold the entire system because everyone knows what is expected of their role, as well as who

must defer and who outranks others. This is a monastic version of “principles above personalities,” where one can lead a quiet and safe life within the monastery walls if they uphold their duties. The sense of purpose and direction maintains order within the monastic walls, and also happiness to a degree. Every room you walk into, there is a silent ordering of the hierarchy, acknowledged through seating and serving arrangements, as well as titles. Everyone knows their place and their duty, and the young people playfully call each other by their titles. When one steps out of line in this system, the first form of punishment in the community is public scorn and gossip. Otherwise, the monastics are free to maintain their private lives as long as they uphold external appearances.

At the top of the hierarchy is Namdroling's council of six members: the three tulkus and three khenpos that run the monastery by committee and who are always the highest people in the room. Karma Kuchen is the highest tulku, and Khenpo Pema Sherab seems to be the highest khenpo but I never saw them together for visual confirmation of their order. While Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso performs many duties for the monastery, he is the lowest ranking Khenpo on the supreme council. A Tibetan refugee, he is self-made and that does not come with a lineal or divine status. Next are the tulkus, the group of reincarnated lamas, of which there are there are hundreds of male tulkus. There was once a female tulku at the nunnery, and they made her abbot, but she has since returned to Bhutan. These figures are considered blessed and realized, at least in their past lives, and sit in the front. However, the tulku system can be hit or miss in that some who are recognized are not great scholars or practitioners. After the tulkus are the Khenpos, the Nyingma equivalent to a full professor or holder of a PhD, all male. Next comes all the monks and nuns enrolled in the monastic college.

Tibetan Buddhist nuns are not fully ordained. The order of nuns never made it to Tibet,

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which means that in the long history of Buddhism in Tibet, there have never been fully ordained nuns. One of the rules for full ordination in the monastic order is that you need a quorum of fully ordained nuns to perform the ordination, which means twelve nuns who hold full ordination vows. This loophole seems to have been tripping up Tibetan Buddhists for 1,200 years. When Śāntarakṣita (725-788) brought the order of monks from India to Tibet, one Khenpo at Namdroling explained to me that he simply did not bring women along on the journey. One can hardly blame Śāntarakṣita, because it was dangerous to travel with women even then.⁵³⁷ The situation was never rectified, so that while the nuns study the *vinaya* (code of conduct) for fully ordained nuns, they cannot receive it.

This situation is the source of an ongoing debate in the Tibetan Buddhist community. The Dalai Lama has been outspoken in his support for the establishment of the order of nuns, and in 2017 the Karmapa took the first steps ordaining nuns in the Tibetan tradition. However, nothing has happened since. While the *vinaya* is loosely upheld in many ways, there has been strict adherence to this particular facet. The nuns' vows are the very intervention designed to protect them. They are reputed to need more protection because of their vulnerability, and yet the tradition does not afford them this protection by bestowing the full set of vows.

The reality is that the Namdroling nuns are quite happy, and they see their lives as privileged. With their education and the convenience and support the nunnery provides to them, they enjoy academic pursuits, teaching, and a warm and loving community. Over and over again in interviews, the nuns reported being happy. It is easy to see how they do not want to cause problems, or stir the pot. Not yet anyway. They are taking their time, and the monastics are masters of patience in general. There is always something to wait for in such a society.

⁵³⁷ Anonymous Khenpo, interview by author, Bylakuppe, India, March 2018.

To conclude, there are many ways this analysis seems unfair. Does Buddhism have a responsibility to be egalitarian more than other groups because of its proclaimed morality of compassion and non-harmfulness? The lives of nuns are shaped not only by their vows and the dharma, but in relation to the cultural context in which they live. The male gaze has been dictating when, where, and with whom they can walk around for thousands of years. The layperson gaze ensures they adhere to the codes laid out for them by previous generations within the purview of life in a Tibetan refugee camp. The monks have greater power bestowed by the institution itself. Does this ordering of the world need to reflect the advances in modern society? Probably. We will see how they do in coming years.

The textual authority of books like the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* cements their fate, and such texts set the precedent and uphold it across generations. The *Supreme Vehicle* canonizes the inferior functionality of women's bodies, making it impossible for them to actualize the highest fruits of practice. One will always be left to wonder, what did Longchenpa, the "Omniscient One" really know about women if he has made such statements and continues to be upheld as all-knowing? Was he right? It is an uncomfortable position to try to soften his statements, and at least the yogin I encountered was not motivated to advocate on behalf of women. The nuns, in their roles as women, were more motivated to do a closer reading of the text.

Conclusion: Sexual Assault of the Nunnery Wall

To end this dissertation, I will return to the beginning. When I got to India on a Fulbright, I bought a brand-new 100 CC Honda scooter in Mysuru and drove it to Bylakuppe. I was the only woman on the roads. Women are still not out and about in rural India in the ways men are.

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Not that they are missing anything by not hanging out at chai shops and staying in the home.

However, I know that being told you have to remain at home can feel limiting to women by the simple fact that they are constrained. They lack the freedom to roam about.

Shortly after that, I was in the private room of a Lopenma who was teaching me Buddhist philosophy. Suddenly the unmistakable (for me) sound of male moaning interjected from outside. At first it was difficult to identify what it was: are people having sex outside? No. A man was freely, slowly masturbating on the back wall of the nunnery. He took his time. I sunk down, trying to pay attention to the Lopenma, who had no idea what the noises were. She lacked the experience to identify what such male cries are the sign of, but not me.

A monk shared a Bhutanese saying with me: “A woman takes her enemy with her everywhere— her body.” This guy did not need a woman’s body, he only needed the idea of women. The nunnery wall represented women in general. Such incidences of sexual assault point to the importance of the ways we ascribe meaning to women. They also highlight something more hopeful if we carefully associate the idea of the female gender with positive, powerful qualities rather than weak, inferior, or highly sexualized themes.

The nun who interpreted Longchenpa to see that he was only talking about a fraction of the population— only certain women— did so out of necessity. This is yet another case where vision from the top is limited. She was motivated to see nuance and discover the truth because of her position as a woman— her astute reading validated her own role in a way that the Khenpos, as egalitarian as they are, were not motivated to do. This is an example of how subaltern voices speak truths because of their position, not despite it. Because she is a woman, the very object of the negative qualities that Longchenpa lists about bodies that do not serve well in spiritual union, she read the text more carefully and was able to discern the meaning in a way that singles out

only a smaller group of women. It is no longer a general claim about women.

Why didn't the Khenpos see this in their reading? It is impossible for them to see it.⁵³⁸ Again, it is a very long, complex text and the reading culture at Namdroling is fast, probably especially when you are trying to meet the needs of a foreign researcher whose ties to the monastery's mission are tenuous at best and suspicious at worst. Also, they might have felt put on the spot insofar as I voiced some of my disappointment about these passages.

My main concerns about what Longchenpa wrote is that there are no similar lists of the negative qualities of men (only lamas), and such lists about women create an easily accessible and authoritative set of adjectives about women that disparage them. I cringe to use the word disparage, because disparaging women is actually forbidden in the tantric code of conduct. I think that scholars from within the tradition would defend Longchenpa and say such comments are not disparaging.

The nuns at Namdroling are in a pivotal moment. Nestled comfortably in their home in the Tibetan refugee camp, they are not free from its repercussions. The massive upheaval of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and migration to India has upended the social milieu within which these belief systems used to exist, and there is opportunity to carve new streams into the landscape of Tibetan Buddhism. Within the social milieu of South India, if they are to respond in kind or as a reflection of it, then they have a lot of work to do to raise women up. But the nuns are not limited to South India. With their smart phones and the internet, they participate in the global world. That social milieu has rocketed everyone at Namdroling into a globalized world, and the lack of historical context that living in Tibet would have represented has created a vacuum for new ways of connecting with the outside world. The Namdroling monks are their

⁵³⁸ Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Maxmillian, 1988), 24.

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partners insofar as they often passionately express egalitarian hopes for society. The nuns continue to be shy but earnest in the ways they hope for the same degrees and also post-graduation teaching and clerical positions. Namdroling's culture of respect that keeps things going, combined with Buddhism's rule number one to do no harm, can support social justice movements both inside and outside of that dusty and aging refugee camp. The internet and other forms of media create new platforms for everyone at Namdroling to speak, to be heard, and to exchange ideas. This creates new expectations for what "do no harm" means, and this will play out in years to come.

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