

The Philosophical Foundations of the Tibetan Buddhist Practice of Bodily Preservation

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Mardung of Kyabje Ling Rinpoche

Introduction

The principal purpose of this paper is to explore the philosophical foundations which underpin the little studied Tibetan Buddhist tradition of *mardung* (*dmar dung*).¹ I will begin this study by offering a brief overview of the phenomenon, before looking at previous work in this area and noting the shift in emphasis in relic studies from textual representations to a greater interest in what Buddhist practitioners actually think and do. As a result in an attempt to identify the philosophical influences for this tradition in Tibetan Buddhism this paper will not only take account of previous studies on Buddhist bodily preservation and Buddhist relics and their veneration, but also draw heavily on ethnographic data collected over a period of one year in Tibetan Buddhist communities in India, Tibet/China, and Buryatiya. Initially this paper will consider the Tibetan Buddhist rationale behind the process of ‘physical transformation’ which results in the body resisting decomposition after death, and latterly the philosophical justifications offered by Buddhists for maintaining and venerating the tradition. In summarizing it will be noted that for many Buddhists the immediate social, cultural, religious, and personal contexts play a significant role in determining views about *mardung* and the philosophical understandings which underpin these beliefs. This insight suggests a dynamic relationship between Buddhist beliefs and philosophy, and reveals how the lived experience and the practice of Tibetan Buddhists informs a continual reinterpretation of doctrine and philosophy.

¹ Wylie transliteration of Tibetan terms will be shown in brackets following phonetic versions, e.g. *tulku* (*sprul sku*), or more commonly known Sanskrit terms, e.g. *sambhogakāya* (*longs sku*). Where both Sanskrit and Tibet terms are placed in brackets I will use the prefixes S. for Sanskrit and W. for Wylie equivalents.

What is *mardung*?

The phenomenon of *mardung* or *kudung* (*sku gdung*)² is the post mortuary state whereby the bodies of advanced Buddhist practitioners remain intact after death; more commonly known in the west as mummification.³ It is possible to divide instances of *mardung* into two broad categories; revered practitioners that were ‘artificially’ preserved after death using complex mortuary techniques, and ascetics and practitioners that have become ‘spontaneously’ preserved as a direct result of their advanced spiritual attainments (*rtogs*).⁴ However as we will see, whilst a convenient division ‘artificial’ preservation is very rarely seen to preclude the spiritual adeptness or level of attainments of the individual. Instances of ‘spontaneous’ preservation can perhaps be divided into two further sub-sections; those individuals that have intentionally chosen to strive for bodily preservation during their lifetime; and those individuals whose bodies are believed to have remained as a by-product of extreme ascetic practices and/or spiritual attainments. Again whilst useful it is important to acknowledge the limitations of these categories. All forms of spontaneous preservation are typically attributed by Buddhist practitioners to spiritual attainment. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult if not impossible in many cases to assess to what extent intention can be attributed to the individual whilst alive, or is retrospectively invoked by practitioners after death. In my experience Buddhists themselves rarely draw distinctions.

Previous Studies on Buddhist Bodily Preservation

Broadly speaking previous scholarly work on the subject of Buddhist bodily preservation has been concerned with ascertaining the historical and philosophical origins of the phenomenon in Chinese and Japanese Buddhist traditions. Justin Ritzinger and Marcus Bingenheimer’s excellent article *Whole-body relics in Chinese Buddhism* (2006) offers a comprehensive outline of previous work in this area (see also Faure 1991, 1993; Sharf 1992; Franke 1957; Needham’s 1974). The relative prevalence of research into bodily preservation in Japanese Buddhism is attested to by the publication of five monographs devoted to the subject; four in Japanese and one in Italian (Andō 1961; Matsumoto 1985; Nihon Miira Kenkyū Gurūpu 1963 and 1993; Naitō 1999; Raveri 1992).

There has been a range of conjecture on the philosophical and doctrinal foundations of bodily preservation in China and Japan. There has been a propensity for some scholars to look at pre-Buddhist influences to explain the tradition, with Andō Kōsei in his 1961 *Nihon no miira* (Japanese Mummies), and more recently Doris Croissant (1990), arguing that Taoist afterlife beliefs were a stimulus for the tradition. However, arguably the most popular approach has been to situate the phenomenon of bodily preservation within the context of studies and understandings of Buddhist relics and their veneration. Kosugi Kazuo’s seminal study *Nikushinzō oyobi yuikaizō no kenkyū* (*Studies in “flesh-body icons” and “ash icons”*) published in 1937 “was the first to assert a relationship between portrait sculpture in China and Japan and the whole-body image; [Kazuo] also was the first to perceive a connection between the relic cult and

² Many Tibetans refer to a preserved body or the tradition of bodily preservation with the more general term for relics *kudung* (*sku gdung*). Many Buddhists suggest that the more accurate and honorific term for the phenomenon of bodily preservation is *mardung* (*dmar gdung*)

³ I have argued elsewhere that the term mummy is inappropriate because of the cultural connotations associated with it in the west, see Owen 2008: 217-8. Therefore in the course of this study I will use the Tibetan term *mardung*, or simply preserved body or bodily preservation.

⁴ The methods of preservation used in the Tibetan Buddhist traditions are one of the few areas of this phenomenon which has been relatively well documented. See David-Neel 2002; Demiéville 1965; Elias & Sofman 2002; Evans-Wentz 2000, 26; Johnson 1913; Owen 2008; Ramble 1988; Yetts 1911.

mummification” (Ritzinger and Bingenheimer 2006, 41). Ritzinger and Bingenheimer have also rejected attempts to link the rise of bodily preservation in China with pre-Buddhist Taoist beliefs and suggest that it can only be made sense of in the context of the Buddhist relic traditions (2006, 88). Robert Sharf has proposed a more multifaceted interpretation of the tradition and argued that there are a number of apparent stimuli for the practice from indigenous Chinese, Buddhist, and India sources. These include:

the ancient Chinese attempts to prevent the decomposition of the corpse, the pan-Chinese belief that the soul must be furnished with a suitable resting place ...the Indian Buddhist cult of relics, the evolution of the Chinese ancestral portrait as a focus of offerings to the dead, the ritualization of the charisma of the Ch’an master, the economics of Chinese Buddhist monasteries, and the logic of enlightenment (1992, 27).

In contrast scholarly work specifically addressing bodily preservation in Tibetan Buddhism is extremely scant. Most of the information that is available comes to us by way of asides in publications concerning more general investigations into Tibetan Buddhism or aspects of it (Evans-Wentz 1927; David-Neel 1929; Wylie 1964; Demiéville 1965; Ramble 1982; Mullin 1986; Kolmaš 2001; Sofman & Elias 2002; Gildow & Bingenheimer 2002). Yetts’s early study on Chinese bodily preservation attributes the practice to two main motives, “the ancient beliefs in corporeal immortality of persons who have attained great sanctity, and secondly, to a pious desire to keep, in their most perfect form, relics of revered and distinguished exponents of the faith” (1911, 709). Yetts suggests that the Tibetan tradition may well have been the origin of the practice in China thereby implying the motives are analogous; a view also taken by Reginald Johnston (1976) in his broader study *Buddhist China*. However this hypothesis has been rejected by Demiéville on the grounds that preservation techniques between the two countries differed significantly, and evidence therefore suggests independent origins (1965, 161).

Accounts by Evans-Wentz (2000) and Alexandra David-Neel (2002) have recognised the role status plays in determining bodily preservation; the bodies of revered monks often of prominent lineages, such as the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, were preserved. Customarily the *mardung* were left on display for an indeterminate period of time before being entombed in a *chorten* or less frequently enshrined and remaining on display at the principal seats of power of their respective schools and lineages. Wylie (1964) and Ramble (1982) have recognized that in some instances bodily preservation of infants in Tibet was traditionally believed to be linked to the continuation of fertility; an area of research which requires more work but one that I will not stray into in the course of this debate. More recently Gildow and Bingenheimer have understood the preservation of a Taiwanese *Kargyu-pa* nun as “an expression of the growing empowerment of women in the Sangha, and the increasing presence of Tibetan Buddhism on the island” (2005, 123).

Buddhist Relics and Methods of Study

As this brief exposition of previous work demonstrates, so far there has been relatively little work undertaken in attempting to specifically understand the philosophical motivation for bodily preservation specifically in Tibetan Buddhism. In attempting to more clearly understand the philosophical foundations of this tradition it seems prudent to draw on methodological developments from the related area of Buddhist relic studies. In recent times in this subject area there has been an increasing recognition of the

problems inherent in assuming the validity of textual representations of Buddhist traditions (see Germano & Trainor 2004; Lopez 1995; Schopen 1997; Strong 2004; Swearer 2004, amongst others). Gregory Schopen has argued that a conception of Buddhism predominantly derived from textual and scriptural sources historically resulted in an idealized notion of what constituted Buddhist practice (1997, Ch. 1). Robert Sharf has warned about “the dangers attendant upon the explication of “Buddhist” or “Ch’an” conceptions of death based solely upon the uncritical analysis of normative and prescriptive sources” (1992, 27). Whilst Ritzinger and Bingenheimer have acknowledged that:

canonical histories are of course elite, normative texts. They provide not simply descriptions but representations that their authors and editors hoped would be adopted. How broadly accepted were these understandings of the spiritual significance of mummification outside of educated monastic circles? (2006: 88).

As a result of these observations there has been a significant shift in emphasis towards examining what Buddhist individuals and communities actually think and do.

With this in mind in attempting to understand the philosophical foundations of the phenomenon of bodily preservation in Tibetan Buddhism I will draw heavily on contemporary Buddhists’ understandings of the tradition. Most of the data presented here was collected during a one year period of fieldwork in India, Tibet/China and Siberia, in several different Tibetan Buddhist communities and cultures where *mardung* existed. This approach will also enable us to at least briefly explore the relationship between the lived experience of Buddhism and its philosophical foundations. Whilst not all the Buddhist practitioners interviewed had personally witnessed the phenomenon of bodily preservation, typically in my experience when talking about the subject individuals frequently use particular cases as a point of reference for their views and beliefs. In recognition of this, and in order to make the debate less abstract, I will refer to historical and contemporary cases where relevant throughout the discussion.

Understandings of the Bodily Transformation Process

The ‘physical’ transformation of the body which results in its preservation is frequently understood by Tibetan Buddhist’s as result of the individual’s direct spiritual attainments or realisation (*rtogs*). Parallels can be drawn here with the work of Ritzinger and Bingenheimer who conclude their study of bodily preservation in Chinese Buddhism by proposing that evidence from historical sources support the assumption that “the origins of mummification are to be sought in a Buddhist notion of the transformative effect of attainment on the body” (2006, 88). Whilst the narrative of spiritual realisation is commonplace, there are a number of possible practices and philosophical explanations which inform these understandings.

Drukpa Kagyu *tulku* Choegyal Rinpoche attributes the phenomenon of *mardung* to the practice of *Dzogchen*, seeing it as a lower stage on the progression towards the ideal of attaining ‘*ja’ lus*, or a ‘Rainbow body’. Bodily preservation, “is not the very highest stage, it is quite a good stage, like relics they are about the same”.⁵ *Dzogchen* is itself part of the broader school of Tantra or Vajrayāna, whose practitioners strive to attain an understanding and control of the ‘Vajra body’ (*sku rdo rje*). Tantric teachings and practices place significant emphasis on the importance and potentiality of the physical body. Although in Mahāyāna Buddhism the attainment of human form is often seen as auspicious because it provides a vehicle for carrying out bodhisattva activities, “in

⁵ The interview with Choegyal Rinpoche was carried out at the Jangchub Jong Buddhist Institute of H.E. Dorzong Rinpoche, near Palampur, Himachal Pradesh on the 22nd May 2006.

Vajrayāna the value of the body lies in the very *structure* of the physical body itself. The human body is valuable not only because of what can be done with it, but also because of what it actually *is*” (Williams in Coakley 1997, 221).

The Vajra or ‘illusionary body’ “is not physical in the normal, gross sense but rather energetic or psychic in nature” (Ray 2002b, 231–2). It comprises of a series of ‘psychic centers’ of *chakras* (*'khor lo*) connected by *nadis* (*rtsa*) or subtle channels along which the *prana* (*rlung*) or energy currents of the body travel, and where *bindu* (*thig le*) or the ‘mind essence’ also manifests. Through inner yogic practice the practitioner works with the subtle energies and winds in the body, which are inextricably related to and condition the state of the mind, in an attempt to “loosen the karmic blockages” in the energy flow, which have accumulated over the course of numerous lifetimes (see Ray 2003b, Ch. 11). In short resolving or overcoming these karmic blockages results in increased spiritual development which in its most progressive form culminates in the attainment of ‘enlightenment’; “thus the winds are said to be the root of *samsāra* and *nirvāna*” (Williams in Coakley 1997, 22 from Donden 1986: 63–4).

As Paul Williams reveals, the understanding and control of the Vajra body is intimately related to deity yoga, during which the meditator visualizes the form and attributes of an enlightened deity or *yidam* and then integrates one’s own being with them (Williams in Coakley 1997, 224). When an individual has perfected this practice they are believed quite literally to transform both physically and mentally into the deity. As a result of this process they acquire a subtle ‘enjoyment body’, or *sambhogakāya* (*longs sku*), which resides in a celestial dimension only accessible to beings with high levels of realization. It is here that deities and Buddhas exist in glorious spiritual manifestations teaching and perfecting the dharma for the good of all sentient beings. As Choegyal Rinpoche suggests, these beings are believed to have attained profound realizations, one of which is an attitude of pure and boundless compassion, or *bodhicitta*.

The *sambhogakāya* is one of the three bodies, or *trikāya*, of an enlightened being; the other two being the *nirmanakāya* (*sprul sku*) a Buddha’s ‘physical’ presence and the *dharmakāya* (*chos sku*), or the ‘body of enlightened qualities’; although in fact at different points in history anywhere between two to five different bodies have been proposed (see Makransky 1997; Williams 1993). The relationship between the three bodies is complex and nuanced, however “even when one attains the pure illusory body and can rapidly reach Buddhahood it remains possible to use one’s coarse physical body if that would be of benefit to sentient beings” (Williams 1997, 225). A being of such high realization is widely believed to be able to manifest in a variety of different physical forms, such as in animal form as in the *Jatākas*, and perform various miracles or *siddhis*. It is relatively easy to see how Buddhists might then formulate the understanding that *mardung* is just one of a number of ways in which a highly realized being might employ their spiritual powers for the benefit of others.

However, according to Buddhist philosophy it would be wrong to simply to conceive of the transformation process as purely ‘physical’. The level and nature of spiritual realization required to achieve bodily preservation is believed to profoundly alter the practitioner’s view of the embodied state, the physical world, and conceptions of existence. Whilst by its nature the condition of enlightenment has historically proven challenging to conceive of and articulate, one of the primary ways in which this predicament has been attempted in Mahāyāna Buddhism has been through the highly influential ‘Buddha nature’ (*bde gshegs snying po*) or *Tathāgatagarbha* doctrine. In common with numerous Buddhist concepts the precise definition of Buddha nature is contested. Paul Williams has revealed discrepancies in germane texts such as the *Tathāgatagarbha* and *Mahāparinirvāna* Sutras and this has led to a number of

interpretations and understandings by different philosophical schools (Williams 1989, Ch.5).

However, whilst differences do exist, the *Tathāgatagarbha* doctrine is popularly interpreted as affirming that the true or primordial state of all beings is that of Buddha nature, and therefore all sentient beings possess the inherent potential for enlightenment. It is only obscuration by ignorance and defilements that prevents beings from realizing their true state, and in fact it is only in perception that *nirvāna* is distinguished from *samsāra* (*khora wa*). Subsequently, as Mills aptly summarizes:

[I]nstead of attaining enlightenment—or Buddhahood—meaning a departure from the world, Mahayana philosophers saw the nature of Buddhahood as an attainment of omniscience and, in certain respects omnipotence, whilst at the same time...Buddhas were seen as being able to ‘act’ in the world through localized manifestations, or ‘bodies’ (*sku*), whose actions responded to the sufferings of the world through ‘skillful means’ (2003, 267).

It is impossible to do complete justice to these intricate concepts in this short discussion, and in fact many Buddhists believe that the relationships between the different bodies of enlightened beings require a significant amount of time and practice to fully comprehend.⁶ However, as a means by which to attempt to explore Buddhists’ views on the physical state of *mardung* this outline does have some limited use. In perhaps overly simplistic terms, on attaining certain spiritual realizations the practitioner comprehends that he has always been a Buddha and always possessed the qualities and bodily manifestations of one. Consequently, rather than some sort of physical transformation taking place during the realization process, it is more accurate to suggest that the opposite is true. It is the practitioner’s understanding and mental state which alters to realizing that the ‘physical’ body is in fact inherently empty of any attributes, and exists in an array of increasing subtle forms and dimensions, which can be manipulated for altruistic purposes. The spiritual realizations are often conceived of and understood in terms of knowledge of the ‘nature of things as they truly are’, the realization of emptiness (S. *Śūnyatā*, W. *stong pa nyid*), and in its most extreme interpretation, the attainment of enlightenment or Buddhahood.

A less common conception of the ‘physical’ state of the *mardung*, but one that is not infrequent in communities where cases exist today, Itigelov Khambo Lama in Buryatiya and the *mardung* of Sanglak Tenzin in the Spiti valley, India being two examples, is the belief that a measure of consciousness of the individual remains in the body; in short they are still ‘alive’. A monk in a monastery on the outskirts of Lhasa revealed how this was believed to be possible:

There is also one practice called ‘*gog pa’i*. To describe this meditation is very hard but there are some practitioners who can go into this deep meditation, and they seem dead but they are not dead. They can stay like this for thousands of years. There is no time limit. When they come out of meditation they are just the same. It is extremely rare. (Monk, Nethang Drolma Lhaxhang 2007).

Some Buddhists believe the practitioner remains in this state in order to be reborn in a more auspicious place or time.⁷ The belief in advanced spiritual beings having the

⁶ For more information see Cozort 2005; Williams 1993, 1997; Ray 2002b; Hopkins 1990 amongst others.

⁷ A typical response in the village of Ghue in the Spiti valley where the body of Sanglak Tenzin remains would be something like the following; “He is dead but his *atman* remains inside his body. People of this power can chose their

ability to determine their rebirth is a common belief in Tibetan Buddhism, perhaps best exemplified by the vow of the practitioner *par excellence*, the Bodhisattva, who consciously rejects the attainment of enlightenment in order to be reborn to help the liberation of all other sentient beings. The notion of an eschatological motivation for bodily preservation also has precedents in Buddhist literature and other cases of bodily preservation. John Strong in his study of the relics of Buddha Śākyamuni reveals that that:

[T]he first “master of the Dharma,” the elder Mahākāśyapa, for example, is not even cremated after he parinirvānizes. Instead, his entire body (or alternatively, his whole skeleton [*asthisamghāta*]) is enshrined intact underneath the mountain Kukkuṭapāda, where it will remain until the advent of the next Buddha Maitreya (2004, 46).

Parallels can also be drawn here with the founder of the Shingon branch of Japanese Buddhism Kūkai, also known as Kōbō Daishi an honorary title meaning ‘Great Teacher who promulgated the true teachings’. The lifetime and achievements of Kūkai have achieved legendary status in Japan, and even in death he maintained his god-like status. Hakeda records how “in the memory of the faithful, the image of his death remained unearthly. Kūkai had not died but had merely entered into eternal Samādhi and was still quite alive on Mt. Kōya as a savior to all suffering people” (1972, 60). On death it was believed that Kūkai had become a ‘Buddha in this very body’ (*Sokushinjōbutsugi*). Bernard Faure suggests that:

[I]n Japan the cult of the so-called *sokushin butsu* had a distinct eschatological connotation. It was explicitly linked to the legend of Mahākāśyapa entering into *samādhi* to wait for the coming of the future Buddha, Maitreya. The legend of Kūkai’s “becoming a Buddha in this very body” on Kōyasan is based on that of Mahākāśyapa (Faure in Law 1995, 216).

Buddhist Understandings of the Tradition of Bodily Preservation

Having suggested several philosophical influences on which understandings of the transformation of the physical body are premised I will now attempt to establish some justifications for the widespread acceptance of the tradition and the reverence afforded to *mardung*.

A frequent explanation for bodily preservation often proposed by Tibetan Buddhists is that it is an indication of the advanced spiritual state of the deceased individual. This explanation however presents us with the first of several apparent inconsistencies. Evidently spontaneous preservation is invariably seen as a result of highly advanced spiritual attainments. However, although artificial preservation in no way precludes the spiritual adeptness of the subject, in fact all the evidence suggests that artificial preservation is invariably seen to indicate the advanced spiritual state of the individual. The argument that “only spiritually advanced individuals are preserved” would seem to be a relatively unconvincing justification for such a persistent and widespread belief. However, a more persuasive explanation becomes clearer if we assess the tradition of artificial preservation within the context of wider beliefs and accounts

place of rebirth and he remains deep down inside his body waiting for a more auspicious time to be reborn. We believe this age is not so good so he is probably waiting for *Sat yuga* to be reborn.” Extract from interview with Lobsang, Ki Gomba, Ki; 21/04/ 2006.

concerning the death process, and practitioners' views about the agency and role of *marlung*.

David Germano in his article 'Living Relics of the Buddha(s) in Tibet' reveals that according to the *dzogchen* teaching *The Blazing Relics Tantra*, natural manifestations such as lights and earthquakes are among "a quintet of signs marking saintly death", images on bones, small spheres emerging from cremated remains, and sounds being the other three (Germano & Trainor 2004, 51-91). Ling Rinpoche the senior tutor of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama died on the 25th December 1983. On the recommendation of the Dalai Lama his body was artificially preserved and is presently kept in the Dalai Lama's personal temple. The following account of his death is taken from an official biography on the FPMT website:

In the early hours of the morning of his entrance into the state of peace, on Christmas day, the weather became turbulent and strong winds swept across Dharamsala, with much agitation. The same phenomenon recurred after dark, with thunder and lightning, and left a blanket of snow. A few days later... there was a mild earthquake in the Dharamsala area... Wondrous cloud formations were seen throughout this period. (Sherpa Tulku 1984)

Another contemporary account of this phenomenon has been recorded during the death rituals carried out for the highly respected Kalu Rinpoche, who died on Wednesday 10 May, 1989. Kalu Rinpoche's body was also preserved and:

"[W]hen it was brought to the monastery, lots of lights and special rainbows appeared in the sky. It was an unusual day in this part of the country. This reveals that an awakened mind can affect nature" (Mullin 1986, 45).

'Official' reports and firsthand accounts also describe how on the point of death Ling Rinpoche entered into a state of meditative absorption which lasted for two weeks (Elias & Sofman 2002, 57; Kangyur Rinpoche 2006; Konchok Tenzin 2007; Sherpa Tulku 1984). During this period his body remained in perfect condition and sounds of celestial music and the melodious chanting of male and female voices were heard from the room where his body lay (Kangyur Rinpoche 2006; Sherpa Tulku 1984). This state is widely known in Tibetan Buddhism and "is the practice of *tuk-dam* (*thugs dam*)⁸, when a yogi retreats to the heart in death meditation" (Mullin 1986, 103). Biographical accounts of the death of accomplished masters often record this intermediate state when the physical body appears 'dead' but the consciousness remains present within the body (Blackman 1997; Sogyal Rinpoche 2002, 6). "If a person is an accomplished meditator, consciousness can sometimes remain for days or even months. For example, one of the previous Panchen Lamas remained in his body in meditation for almost a year after he stopped breathing. During this time the body showed no signs of decomposition" (Mullin 1986, 79).

In the case of Ling Rinpoche, reports also reveal that throughout the actual preservation process there were numerous indications of the advanced spiritual status of the deceased Rinpoche. Lisa Sofman who was responsible for the embalming of Ling Rinpoche recalls that although the Rinpoche was aged eighty-one when he died his body had an 'unnaturally' young appearance; "it was golden and it was wrinkleless and it was like a 16-year-old". Glen Mullin reveals that the youthful appearance of Ling Rinpoche's

⁸ My addition of term in extended Wylie transliteration.

body has a precedent in Tibetan history. The First Dalai Lama “remained in meditation for thirty days without any signs of death. His body transformed from that of an old man into that of a youth, and emanated lights so radiant that few could bear even to look upon him” (1986, 105–6).⁹ Kangyur Rinpoche relayed another instance whereby the spiritual attainments of Ling Rinpoche were believed to have been confirmed through a physical manifestation after death.

[A]fter a few months his body had become dry...and so one very special sign we have seen. We believe that Ling Rinpoche is the reincarnation of Yamāntaka Buddha. So we have seen Yamāntaka Buddha's name in Sanskrit on his forehead. Before it was not really clear, slowly, slowly the body dried and then it became very clear. The *mantra* of Yamāntaka. This is really amazing. It just came itself (2006).

Dan Martin also reveals a record of this phenomenon in the writings of Sanggye Dorje. He recounts that on examination of the Sakya scholar Kunga Gyaltzen’s remains, “[I]n the middle and top of his head were pure and vivid images of Hevajra and Manjugosa. In the area of his forehead was the divine assemblage of Cakrasavara” (1992, 188). Similarly the work of Pabongka Rinpoche also “refers to the ability of advanced yogins to condense their meditative realizations and absorptions on to and within their bodies, thus leaving behind bodily remains *inscribed* with their spiritual practice” (Mills 2003, 267).

The examples presented here suggest that even when a more spontaneous form of preservation does not take place there are often any number of other indications of the spiritual qualities of the individual that justify and legitimate the decision to keep the body. Typically unusual natural phenomena occur during the initial stages of the dying process, and evidence suggests that the state of *thugs dam* is a fundamental aspect of the decision making process. Whilst by no means are all practitioners who enter into *thugs dam* are preserved, all accounts of individuals whose bodies are kept include a report of this phenomenon. Indeed, even when artificial techniques are used in preserving the body, the state of preservation is often conceived of and talked about in terms of an extension of *thugs dam*; a point also recognized by Sharf in *The Idolization of Enlightenment: On Mummification of Ch’an Masters in Medieval China* (1999, 9).

Altruism

Many Buddhists also conceive of the phenomenon as an act of altruism by the deceased. Itigelov Khambo Lama in Buryatiya is a contemporary example whereby Buddhists believe that the preservation of his body was an event predetermined by the deceased Lama in order to assist in the revitalization and re-establishment of Buddhism following the demise of the prevailing Soviet communist ethos. This reading of bodily preservation is relatively common amongst Tibetan Buddhists, and can certainly be seen to be consistent with the qualities and characteristics of a spiritually advanced individual. There are obvious precedents in Buddhist tradition and history. One can draw parallels between this conception of *mardung* and Reiko Ohnuma’s work on the genre of writings she terms ‘*dehadāna*’ or ‘gift-of-the-body’ stories. In these accounts, many of which are found in the *jatākas*, bodhisattvas are often depicted as giving the gift of their body to others; “the bodhisattva's body is clearly intended to serve as a symbol for the Buddha's

⁹ According to Mullin (1986) references to this event can be found in the two main biographies of the 1st Dalai Lama ‘The String of Gems’ (*Norbu- pheng-ba*) and ‘The Twelve Wonderous Deeds’ (*mDzad-pa-ngo-mtshar-bcu-nyis*).

dharma, and thus, the bodhisattva's gift of his body (*dehadāna*) is made parallel to the Buddha's gift of dharma (*dharmadāna*)” (Ohnuma 1998, 325).

Ohnuma also notes that stories often recounting bodhisattva's gift of their body to others “were extremely popular in Indian Buddhism, appearing in innumerable variations throughout the history of the literary tradition and exerting a profound influence on Buddhist art, philosophy, and culture. They exist in the literature of all Mainstream Buddhist schools and (unlike many other types of stories) seem to fully retain their popularity within the literature of the Mahāyāna” (1998, 323). The accounts of predetermined resolutions (S. *adhiṣṭhānas*) made by the Buddha concerning the enshrinement of various bodily relics popular in South East Asia and Sri Lanka (Strong 2004, 150–1), and the *Ter* tradition in Tibetan Buddhism are two other notable examples; particularly when bodily relics are considered in terms of ‘seeds’ of dharma, as proposed by Swearer and Premchit in their *Legend of Queen Cāma* (1998).

Faith

Inextricably linked to altruism is the conception that the *mardung* can be used for the generation of faith both in the individual teacher, and more generally in the Buddhist philosophy and teachings. Buddhist monk Konchok Tenzin:

The Lamas have gone on beyond and we are no longer able to meet them directly. His Holiness has Ling Rinpoche's body in his private chapel and is able to pray to it and remember his teacher. They act as a basis for this. For example, we place pictures in our houses (of our Lamas) and also we place statues of our teachers which are made to resemble them, but it is not certain that they are really similar to the actual person. If you have the actual body then the faith of the mind will be much firmer. (2007).

Many Buddhists I have spoken with attest to a deepening of devotion in the deceased master as well as a strengthening of belief in the *dharma* after personally witnessing a preserved body.

Speaking more specifically about gratuitous accounts of Bodhisattvas sacrificing their physical body, but in many ways equally relevant to this discussion, Reiko Ohnuma suggests that the emotional response inspired by ‘sacrificing’ the human body plays an important role for many Buddhists in strengthening their faith and belief in the *dharma*:

The bodhisattva's gruesome and intensely physical gift of his body, I would argue, is used to concretize, instantiate, and “embody” the more abstract and bloodless notion of the Buddha's gift of dharma to living beings... despite being extolled over and over again throughout Buddhist literature, the Buddha's gift of dharma remains a fairly abstract notion that seems to lack emotional appeal. Because the Buddha is so perfected and so detached, we do not get a sense that the gift of dharma really costs him anything. From a doctrinal perspective, of course, perhaps there is no reason why it should, and yet, as human beings (and as readers), I believe, we demand that sense of cost, of deprivation, of sacrifice. Thus, I would argue that the Buddha's gift of dharma is not only concretized but also given the emotional weight it truly demands when it is symbolized by the bodhisattva's miraculous and unbelievable deed of sacrificing his own body (Ohnuma 1998, 357).

A similar strengthening of an emotional bond to the deceased was certainly an experience of many Buddhists I spoke to who had witnessed the phenomenon.

Merit & Blessings

A further facet inexorably related to the altruistic reading of the preservation process is the widely held belief that *mardung* provides a basis for the generation of merit. This conception evidently has strong resonances with beliefs about relics and Buddhist observances and practices more generally, and prayers and offerings made to the body are often believed to generate positive merit for the individual. A development on this theme is that some Tibetan Buddhists also believe that *mardung* retain the power to bestow blessings on devotees. Conceptions of the nature of the blessings again vary widely; ranging from merit which can assist with fortuitous future births, to significant interventions in an individual's present lifetime such as the 'miraculous' healing of serious diseases. Furthermore, opinions also differ over the extent of the agency of the *mardung* in conferring blessings, with some Buddhists believing that the blessings are: a) generated by the compassion of the teacher and the innate power of the *mardung*; b) are in fact a result of the power of one's own devotion; or c) are to varying degrees a combination of both these conceptions.

In talking with Buddhists many invoke the widely known tale of 'The Dog's Tooth' in order to qualify their beliefs about the power of the *mardung*. Kevin Trainor interestingly proposes that this popular story may well reflect a Mahāyānist critique of the relic cult, emphasizing the view that everything is believed to be imbued with Buddha nature. He goes on to suggest that this belief is in direct contrast to "the dominant ethos of the Theravāda relic cult... (which) has been concerned to trace the relics back to a historical person" (1997, 165), thereby implying that their efficacy is dependent on their authenticity. Although many Buddhists believe faith does play some role in the attainment of merit and blessings, many also suggested that the preserved body did retain some form of objective residual power. Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche outlines the scriptural support for this belief:

The tantras explain that after the passing of one's guru, and while his *kudung*, his body, is still kept, his mind of original wakefulness has departed into a state of unbound vastness. Many texts describe how during the first 49 days the *kudung* has power and blessings. Therefore, it is taught that when in the presence of the *kudung*, if we disciples supplicate him and mingle our minds with his we receive blessings swifter than if he was still in his body. In particular, someone who is a practitioner of mind essence can have great enhancement by sitting near the *kudung*, supplicating one-pointedly, and resting in the state of indivisible mind. This is described as the king of enhancements. Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thaye mentioned this in his writings many times (1996).

Despite the time limitations detailed by Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche many Buddhists I spoke to believed that the period when it is possible to communicate and receive blessings was indefinite. The level of conviction in this belief was aptly illustrated in a practice carried out during the preservation of Ling Rinpoche. The barley flour which was used to draw the oil from the deceased Rinpoche's body was rolled in small balls, or *tsha tsha*, and distributed to the Tibetan community. Many devotees then ate them believing that in doing so a small degree of the qualities of deceased Rinpoche would be transferred to them. Demiéville also recognized the existence of this practice in Tibet,

although he suggested the external application of the paste was a more common practice (1965, 160).

John Strong reveals that in *The Questions of King Milinda* the Venerable Nāgasena offers a threefold explanation for the residual power of bodily relics of Buddhist saints after they have ‘departed’ from the world; “by virtue of the resolve and faith of devotees, by virtue of the actions of gods, and by virtue of a resolution (*adhiṭṭhāna*) made by the parinirvāṇized saint in question *prior* to his death” (2004, 151). Whilst there is little evidence in my experience for practitioners considering the second of these stipulations, clearly a belief in a combination of the first and the third of these conditions are often held by Tibetan Buddhists. However, it would also seem fair to suggest that a precise understanding of how blessings were attained or bestowed was rarely articulated and participants usually did not express the extent to which they could be attributed to the individual or the power of the deceased. A perhaps typical response in this situation would be something like, “There are three factors that enable you to get a blessing from a mardung; your own faith, the power of the Lama, and karmic relationship. The main is the faith but the others also play an important part” (Monk, Sera monastery, Lhasa 2007).

The Role of Ritual Consecration

Many Tibetan Buddhists also believe that the ritual consecration of the body plays an integral role in the ‘re-empowerment’ of the *mardung* after preservation. Lisa Sofman who was instrumental in the embalming the Dalai Lama’s teacher Ling Rinpoche revealed that during the consecration ceremony (*rab gnas*) the ‘spirit’ of Ling Rinpoche was invited to return to the body. This description is comparable to a response given by Venerable Karma Gelek Yuthok to Chandra Reedy during his study into the opening of consecrated Tibetan bronze statues; “A capable holy Buddhist priest invites the real Buddha or Buddhist deity depicted by the statue in its spirit form to inhabit the statue and then seals it to abide permanently unto the end of the world” (1991, 30). As Donald Swearer notes, “In the Dge-lugs-pa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, the most widely used consecration manual was composed by Khri-byang Rin-po-che (1901–81) based on a text written by the first Panchen Lama in the early seventeenth century” (2004, 222).

In her study Reedy also describes how “The consecration ceremony first purifies an image in order to make it suitable for habitation by the Buddha or other deity involved. Then it invests the statue with the power and presence of that deity. Unless it has been consecrated, a statue is not considered suitable for use in religious practices” (Reedy 1991, 14). Yale Bentor in her work on ritual consecration proposes that in the transformation and subsequent empowerment of ritual objects:

“[T]hree central Mahayana philosophical notions underlie the ritual: the three bodies (*trikāya*) of the Buddha, emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and the doctrine of two truths” (Swearer 2004, 223).

Although perhaps not formally ritualized, practitioner’s justifications of bodily preservation often invoked comparable ideas and philosophies. As we have already seen the doctrines of *trikāya* and *śūnyatā* are integral to many Buddhist’s philosophical understandings of the preserved body and the maintenance of the tradition.

Interestingly in my experience the doctrine of two truths was most often invoked by participants when faced with the apparent contradiction between bodily preservation and the historical Buddha’s teachings. The existence of tradition has led some Buddhists such as Suzuuki Bokushui to suggest that:

“the whole idea is an insult to Sākyamuni’s teachings of the impermanence of all compound things, and cannot be praised” (1986, 283).

Kevin Trainor also recognizes an apparent contradiction in relation to the practice of relic veneration in his discussion of the argument over, and subsequent division of, the Buddha’s remains in the *Mahāparinibbāna –sutta*.

This episode lays bare a fundamental tension inherent in the Buddhist relic cult, even as it illuminates its appeal. Relics, as material objects that one can possess, fully engage the human capacity for attachment and manipulation. Therein lies part of the attraction... there is something potentially disturbing about this in the terms of the Buddhist ideal of nonattachment. Relics can be objects of desire; they encourage the human tendency to cling... The episode serves to instruct the faithful that the Buddha’s relics are worthy of veneration, while it simultaneously demonstrates the potential threat that the practice represents to the tradition’s fundamental religious ideals (1997, 119-20).

In my experience Tibetan Buddhists often cited the difference between ultimate and relative truths as a means by which to explain apparent contradictions between their views and beliefs and Buddhist doctrine. The ways of enlightened beings are simply beyond comprehension, and the belief that bodies of spiritual masters were not subject to the same ideals and rules as normal people were common explanations. Furthermore attachment to relics was seen as a relatively acceptable and justified response, but one ultimately of no significance when considered in relation to the emptiness of inherent existence. Others suggested that although the state of *mardung* might imply impermanence this was only the relative truth, and in fact in my experience most Tibetans did not seem to believe that the body would remain indefinitely.

In Summary

As this short discussion has attempted to demonstrate, a wide range of philosophical ideas and concepts are employed by Buddhists to understand the preservation process and the agency and authority of the preserved bodies. From the perspective of contemporary practitioners frequently the phenomenon of bodily preservation was seen to have its roots in tantric practices and the latent potential of Buddha nature inherent in every human being. Whilst it is impossible to generalize, and evidently in day to day life most Buddhists understand the body as having inherently ‘physical’ attributes, ethnographic evidence supports the assumption that *in certain conditioned contexts* many Tibetan Buddhists do display some willingness and level of understanding in accepting the inherently empty nature of the physical world and illusionary nature of embodiment. When faced with ‘unusual’ natural phenomena such as bodily preservation, many Tibetan Buddhists displayed no apparent difficulty in unquestionably accepting the relationship between Buddhist philosophy and apparently esoteric conceptions of embodiment and the physical world.

Whist understandings about how the process by which body becomes preserved are relatively uniform, as I have attempted to demonstrate contemporary perceptions about the function and role of the *mardung* are more diverse, and at times even contradictory. Philosophical ideas and concepts of emptiness, embodiment, eschatology, merit, blessings, and the nature of enlightenment are drawn on and negotiated in order to

create understanding and meaning about the tradition. Whilst the lack of any specific doctrinal or scriptural support for the tradition goes some way to explaining this variance, I would also strongly argue that context plays a significant role in shaping this process; a point also noted by Sharf in his study of the Chinese tradition (1992). The role and function of *mardung* were often understood in relation to a particular event or situation, and Buddhists appear to draw on existing knowledge and beliefs in order to give the *mardung* philosophical and doctrinal legitimacy in relation to existing contextual factors. Furthermore, the fact that the tradition can be explained by existing beliefs and knowledge in turn reciprocally validates pre-existing beliefs and philosophical understandings. Whilst certainly not intending to trivialize the matter, in short Buddhists make the best use of the knowledge they have at their disposal to make sense of a phenomenon of which they may have little direct experience, and this process maintains and validates existing knowledge.

However, due to the diversity of contexts in which *mardung* are situated or can occur perhaps inevitably in some cases it results in different, even mutually exclusive, understandings. In my experience Buddhists rarely suggested another conception was wrong, but understood and articulated these contradictions in the form of relative truths. Additionally, differences in understandings or practices were often attributed to the deceased's 'skill in means' (S. *upāya-kauśalya*; W. *thabs mkhas*); the body was left for different reasons for different individuals depending on their needs and predispositions.

In light of the process by which instances of bodily preservation acquires meaning and legitimacy it is also necessary to offer some initial observations on the relationship between the lived tradition of *mardung* and the philosophy which is used by Buddhists to legitimize and justify it. It seems apparent that in the process of formulating understandings and assimilating bodily preservation into existing belief structures, practitioners are continually re-interpreting the tradition and underpinning philosophy in a form that is appropriate to, and enhances the relevant and immediate needs and conditions. A simplistic and linear understanding of how knowledge is gained and exchanged appears to bear little resemblance to the fluid and dynamic process of negotiation and assimilation which serves to renew and make relevant the tradition in a wide variety of contexts. It also fails to recognize the integral and dynamic role practitioners play in informing and sustaining the tradition.

As highlighted at the outset of this discussion, bodily preservation in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition has so far been largely neglected by scholars. Whilst this study has attempted to understand the philosophy underpinning of the tradition predominantly from the perspective of Buddhist practitioners, there is evidently still considerable work to do in this area. Whilst ostensibly a subject of relatively limited relevance, as the burgeoning study of Buddhist relics and relic veneration has demonstrated, studies in this area have the rich potential to offer greater insights into a wide range of Buddhist concepts, and the complex relationship between Buddhist practice, philosophy and doctrine. It is hoped this study will go some way to stimulating further debate and developments in this fascinating area.

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