

A TANTRIC UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN POTENTIAL: THE BODIES OF A  
BUDDHA, THE PATH OF ATTAINMENT, AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO TIBETAN  
SELF-IMMOLATION

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to the long life of vajra masters around the world who—driven by bodhicitta—teach the dharma for the benefit of all.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my kind teachers who have nurtured my understanding of both the open and secret teachings of the Buddha. In particular, Gyume Khensur Lobzang Jampa, Wilson and Sharon Hurley, and the many scholars and practitioners who have inspired me along the way. Additionally, I would like to thank my mother, whose immeasurable kindness and support has benefited me enormously over the years. I pray ceaselessly for her happiness, prosperity, and long life.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
Literature Review.....	5
Methodology .....	12
Chapter One: The Bodies of a Buddha .....	15
The Four Divisions of the Two Bodies .....	15
The Svabhāvikakāya .....	17
The Dharmakāya .....	18
The Sambhogakāya .....	22
The Nirmānakāya.....	27
The Bodies of a Buddha and Their Relevance to Tibetan Self-Immolation.....	32
Chapter Two: The Basis of Purification .....	33
Ordinary Death .....	34
The Properties of Mind and Wind at the Moment of Death .....	34
The Dissolution of the Elements .....	36
The Dissolution of the Subtle Mind .....	38
The Movements of the Subtle Body at the Moment of Death.....	38
Ordinary Bardo .....	42
Ordinary Rebirth.....	43
The Basis of Purification and its Relevance to Tibetan Self-Immolation .....	43
Chapter Three: The Path to the Bodies of a Buddha .....	45
The Generation Stage: A General Description .....	46
The Generation Stage: Taking the Three Bodies as the Path.....	48
Taking Death as the Path to the Dharmakāya.....	49

Taking the Bardo as the Path to the Saṃbhogakāya .....	51
Taking Rebirth as the Path to the Nirmāṇakāya .....	53
Mirror-like Wisdom and Sameness Wisdom .....	53
Discerning Wisdom .....	56
Performance Wisdom .....	57
The Wisdom of the Dharmadhātu .....	58
The Completion Stage: A General Description .....	58
The Completion Stage: The Six Levels of Guhyasamāja .....	61
The Three Isolations .....	62
The Illusory Body .....	63
The Actual Clear Light and the Final Level of Union .....	65
The Completion Stage: Taking the Three Bodies as the Path.....	66
Conclusion .....	69
Bibliography .....	72

## **ABSTRACT**

A TANTRIC UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN POTENTIAL: THE BODIES OF A BUDDHA, THE PATH OF ATTAINMENT, AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO TIBETAN SELF-IMMOLATION

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This thesis examines the tragedy of Tibetan self-immolation through the perspective of Tantric Buddhism's understanding of human potential. Such a perspective includes three topics that formulate the individual chapters in this work. They are (1) the result of the tantric path in the form of the bodies of a buddha. (2) The basis of purification in the form of the human body's mental and physical properties, which tantric aspirants manipulate to produce an enlightened mind and body, and (3) the path—or the specific sequence of yogas—that culminates in the attainment of complete buddhahood. Altogether, these topics emphasize the profound potential of human life, and its ability to generate an altruistic, eternal, and god-like embodiment of enlightenment. Thus, this thesis argues that—when understood from the viewpoint of tantra—the sacrifice of self-immolation has a deeper and more significant meaning than it initially appears.



## INTRODUCTION

Since 2009, the Tibetan Plateaux and its surrounding regions have hosted the most significant wave of self-immolations<sup>1</sup> since the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> In opposition to China's ever-expanding control over Tibet, hundreds of individuals—primarily consisting of monks and nuns—have set fire to themselves as a form of political protest. While such acts remain intensely controversial in the cultural fabric of the region, after an incident of self-immolation, Tibetans often gather in solidarity to show their support for the victim and engage in peaceful protest.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, each act of self-immolation garners a deepening sense of community in Tibetan circles, which has fostered unparalleled respect for the victims and the life-ending sacrifices they made. It is, however, impossible to fathom the depth of their sacrifice without understanding the extraordinary potential ascribed to human life in Tibetan Buddhism.

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<sup>1</sup>(Tib: *rang lus mer bsreg*). In Tibetan, this term literally means 'one's own body consumed by fire.'

<sup>2</sup>A Report by the International Campaign for Tibet. *Storm in the Grasslands: Self-Immolations in Tibet and Chinese Policy*. (Washington DC, 2012), 7.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*,

In contrast to the Theravāda<sup>4</sup> and Zen<sup>5</sup> traditions of East Asia, Tibetan Buddhism is a Mahāyāna<sup>6</sup> tradition that emphasizes the use of tantra.<sup>7</sup> While all Buddhist traditions seek enlightenment to escape the suffering of *samsāra*,<sup>8</sup> Mahāyāna Buddhists forego the attainment of nirvana—the central goal of the Theravāda tradition—for the altruistic intentions of a complete buddha.<sup>9</sup> In this enlightened state, a buddha single-mindedly works to accomplish the interests of others through the manifestation of his mystical bodies. These bodies—known as the *dharmakāya*<sup>10</sup> and *rūpakāya*<sup>11</sup>—are the resultant culmination of a buddha’s mental and physical qualities. The dharmakāya—often translated as ‘truth body’—refers to the mental condition of a buddha’s transcendent wisdom that has purged itself of the afflictions<sup>12</sup> and eliminated the obscurations to omniscience.<sup>13</sup> The rūpakāya—often translated as ‘form body’—refers to a buddha’s physical embodiments that can manifest a variety of dispositions to guide spiritual

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<sup>4</sup>Translated as the ‘School of the Elders,’ this is the school of Buddhism that preserves its teachings in the Pāli Canon. Today, the school is synonymous with the Hīnayāna, or ‘Lower Vehicle’ of Buddhism, which seeks the complete peace of *nirvāṇa*. The tradition primarily resides in South East Asia and Sri Lanka.

<sup>5</sup>This is the school of Mahāyāna Buddhism that one finds in China, Japan, Vietnam, and Korea. The school is known for its intense focus on silent meditation, discipline, and self-control.

<sup>6</sup>(Tib: *Theg pa chen po*).

<sup>7</sup>(Skt: *tantra*. Tib: *rgyud*). This aspect of Tibetan Buddhism is a system of practice that uses deity yoga, guru devotion, mantra recitation, breath manipulation, and other skillful techniques to attain the Mahāyāna goal of buddhahood.

<sup>8</sup>Tib: *khor ba*). The continuous cycle of birth and death kept in motion by the force of karma and the afflictions.

<sup>9</sup>(Skt: *samyaksambuddha*; Tib: *rdzogs pa’i sangs rgyas*). This is a term used to indicate that a buddha has ‘completed’ all the qualities associated with the path to enlightenment, which climaxes in the attainment of the two bodies.

<sup>10</sup>(Tib: *chos sku*).

<sup>11</sup>(Tib: *gzugs sku*).

<sup>12</sup>(Skt: *kleśa*; Tib: *nyon mongs*). These are the negative mental states that are the cause of suffering and rebirth.

<sup>13</sup>(Skt: *jñeyavarāṇa*; Tib: *shes bya’i sgrib pa*). These are the subtle traces of the afflictions that hinder a practitioner from attaining the omniscient state of a buddha.

seekers on the Buddhist path. For these reasons, the aforementioned two bodies<sup>14</sup> represent the most effective mode of existence to implement the Mahāyāna principle of *bodhicitta*<sup>15</sup>—the intention to become enlightened for the welfare of others.

While the concept of the two bodies in the sutra branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism—also known as the Pāramitāyāna—works in theory, its actual application falls short of providing a systematic method to accomplish them. Instead, the Pāramitāyāna merely states that the two bodies arise from the gathering of merit<sup>16</sup> and wisdom<sup>17</sup>—known in the tradition as the two accumulations.<sup>18</sup> Thus, to achieve the two bodies and fulfill the central concept of *bodhicitta* in the Mahāyāna tradition, an aspirant must eventually enter the path of tantra,<sup>19</sup> where he or she can use its skillful yogas to transform the ordinary mind and body into the mental and physical attributes of a complete buddha—e.i., the *dharmakāya* and *rūpakāya*<sup>20</sup>.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the various grounds and paths of the tantras provide specific yogas that work with the body’s vital energies to generate extraordinary states of mind and body. For example, during the completion stage yogas of Guhyasamāja,<sup>21</sup> the

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<sup>14</sup>(Tib: *sku gnyis*).

<sup>15</sup>(Tib: *byang chub kyi sems*).

<sup>16</sup>(Skt: *puṇya*. Tib: *bsod nams*).

<sup>17</sup>(Skt: *jñāna*. Tib: *ye shes*).

<sup>18</sup>(Skt: *sambhāradvaya*. Tib: *tshogs gnyis*).

<sup>19</sup>(Tib: *rgyud*).

<sup>20</sup>It is important to note that among the four classes of tantra, only anuttarayoga tantra offers a complete path to the bodies of a buddha. Thus, when this thesis mentions the word ‘tantra,’ it is referring to anuttarayoga tantra.

<sup>21</sup>(Tib: *gSang ba 'dus pa*). This is a manifestation of the Buddha Akṣobhya. As a tantric practice, it is revered as the ‘King of Tantras,’ because its yogas provide the clearest system to attain a buddha’s two bodies.

practices require a yogi to use a variety of methods that can awaken the dormant mind of clear light<sup>22</sup> and arise from that state in the form of an illusory body.<sup>23</sup> The clear light—a state of conciseness used to realize emptiness<sup>24</sup>—is the primordial level of mind, and therefore the root-consciousness, that serves as the primary basis for the production of a dharmakāya and its exalted-wisdom. The illusory body, on the other hand, is a form consisting entirely of wind-energy that can engage in actions outside the ordinary body and perform an array of enlightened activities. Once a yogi develops these refined states of mind and body to their ultimate completion, they have the potential to transcend the traditional boundaries of mundane existence and become the dharmakāya and rūpakāya, respectively.

With this understanding of the two bodies, and by connecting them to the issue of Tibetan self-immolation, the following thesis will explore several avenues of inquiry—broken-down into three chapters and a conclusion—that highlight the fulfillment of human potential from a Buddhist perspective. In this way, the first chapter will detail the ontological dimensions of the two bodies by presenting their overarching purpose as the divine embodiment of the Mahāyāna tradition. The second chapter will explain the tantric understanding of death, bardo,<sup>25</sup> and rebirth, which skilled adepts use as a transformative-

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<sup>22</sup>(Skt: *prabhāsvara*; Tib: *'od gsal*).

<sup>23</sup>(Skt: *māyādeha*; Tib: *sgyu lus*).

<sup>24</sup>(Skt: *śūnyatā*; Tib: *stong pa nyid*). As the hallmark of the Mahāyāna tradition, 'emptiness' is a term used to indicate the lack of inherent existence in all phenomena.

<sup>25</sup>(Skt: *antarābhava*. Tib: *bar do*). This is the intermediate state experienced by a person between death and birth. In tantra, this juncture has extraordinary significance, because it can be used as an expedient method to attain enlightenment.

basis on the path to the two bodies. The third chapter will survey the levels of attainment on the tantric path by examining the yogas that actually transform an aspirant's mind and body into a tantric deity. Finally, the conclusion will provide an account of the resultant features of the two bodies and how they impact the noteworthiness of Tibetan self-immolation.

While religious freedom, human rights, and other issues related to Tibet's political plight are worthy of decisive action, they lack the altruistic purity of the two bodies, which exist for the sole purpose of liberating others from saṃsāra. Ultimately, the dharmakāya and rūpakāya represent an ordinary individual's transformation into a perennial divinity that can fulfill the temporary and ultimate hopes of living beings. With such potential embedded in a person's continuum, self-immolation—when performed without the necessary qualifications—denies the emergence of a buddha in the world and therefore stifles the spiritual growth of others. Thus, when understood from this point of view, the symbolism of self-immolation has extreme implications that go far beyond the mere loss of life.

### **Literature Review**

As of this work's completion, no examination of Tibetan self-immolation has covered the viewpoint of human potential in Tantric Buddhism. Most of the scholarly work on the subject stems from the oppression of the Chinese government on Tibetans and their religious institutions. It is, however, a viewpoint that scholars have repeatedly examined to the point of insignificance. This thesis, therefore, seeks to explain the

problem of self-immolation from within the esoteric view of Tibetan Buddhism. Moreover, it will do this by avoiding the political aspects of the issue, as well as the legitimate conclusions of others, whose method of inquiry misaligns itself with the doctrinal-perception of Tantric Buddhism.

The first and most comprehensive account of Tibetan self-immolation is the International Campaign for Tibet's<sup>26</sup> 2012 publication entitled *Storm in the Grasslands: Self-immolations in Tibet and Chinese Policy*. It presents the issues associated with self-immolation from a variety of angles, which includes a person-by-person account of every victim and their tragic backstory. It rightly positions the protests after the Losar riots of 2008 and does a fantastic job of explaining the background and religious precedents that have caused so many to take their lives combating Chinese oppression.

Because it is the product of an organization dedicated to bringing awareness to the Tibetan cause, *Storm in the Grasslands* makes direct recommendations to the Chinese government based on their repressive actions. While this is certainly a valid approach and one worth pursuing, the book examines the religious significance of self-immolation from a non-tantric view of the Buddhist tradition—such as the value of human life and the self-

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<sup>26</sup>This is a non-profit organization that advocates for Tibetan issues around the world. Primarily, they focus their attention on China's human rights violations in Tibet and the related struggles of the Tibetan people in exile.

immolation of the Bodhisattva<sup>27</sup> Medicine King.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, its conclusions and policy recommendations are distinctly one-sided and make no attempt to offer a balanced position outside the International Campaign for Tibet's political agenda. In taking into account these considerations, *Storm in the Grasslands* is an excellent examination of Tibet self-immolation, albeit with a clear political-bend that frequently falls beyond the scope of this thesis.

With a similar stance on the issue—despite an overt nationalist tone—is the Tibetan writer known as Tsering Wooser.<sup>29</sup> Her beautifully constructed poems, articles, and blogs are extremely popular—in both Tibet and the broader diaspora—as writings that often provoke feelings of nationalism among Tibetans. These sentiments—while useful in documenting the collective frustration in the region—often serve to exacerbate the already emboldened problem of self-immolation. Her words regularly praise the self-immolators as ‘heroes’ who sacrificed their lives for the Tibetan cause of freedom and autonomy. With this exuberance, she frequently invokes the unanimity of Tibetan society to garner support for the victims and further the political effectiveness of their sacrifice.

For example, the following excerpt is typical of her evocative writing:

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<sup>27</sup>(Tib: *Byang chub sems dpa'*). This is a term used to describe a spiritual aspirant who forgoes the total peace of nirvāṇa for the state of a complete buddha. A bodhisattva is someone who has developed the full realization of bodhicitta and seeks to accomplish the bodies of a buddha as the most effective existence to achieve its aims.

<sup>28</sup>(Tib: *sMan rgyal ba*). This is a prominent figure in the so called *Lotus Sutra*—or the *White Lotus of Sacred Dharma Sutra* (*Dam chos pad ma dkar po'i mdo*). This sutra refers to him as ‘Medicine King,’ because he has miraculous healing abilities. For more information on this topic, see the following article: Eskridge, Mark David. “Setting Fire to the Sacred: Esoteric Suicide and its Relation to Tibetan Self-Immolation.” *Mason Journal of Graduate Research* 5, No 2 (2018): 128-147, <https://journals.gmu.edu/jmgr/article/view/1971/1398>.

<sup>29</sup>(Tib: *Tshe ring 'od zer*).

I am recording the names, backgrounds, and achievements of each of these compatriots in my diary, as well as deep within my memory. I want to remember the names of these heroic sons and daughters of our nationality. I want to light a lamp and recite mantras for them, as an expression of my deepest reverence and respect.<sup>30</sup>

By conveying her somewhat intimate thoughts on the question of self-immolation, Woeseer echoes the frustrations of her people who otherwise lack an expressive-medium for political action. Given her incredible popularity in the social-strata of Tibetan life, Woeseer's relatable style lacks the sophistication to investigate the deeper complexities of self-immolation.

In contrast to Woeseer, Janet Gyatso's article—entitled “Discipline and Resistance on the Tibetan Plateau”—integrates the rigors of monastic life with the confrontation of self-immolation. This approach examines the mobility of power between China's modern resources (economic, legal, military, and others) and the disciplined-resistance of Buddhist monastics. As she explains:

[Self-immolation] is a spectacle that purports to demonstrate with deadly precision where real power resides: in the vision and skill of the virtuoso who masters his own destiny.<sup>31</sup>

The virtuoso, in her estimation, is the monastic who shows exceptional strength over the outer-affairs of worldly life by dominating the inner-realm of the afflictions. Thus, in

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<sup>30</sup>Tsering Woeseer. *Tibet on Fire: Self-Immolations Against Chinese Rule*. (Trans. Kevin Carrico. Brooklyn, New York: Verso, 2016), 26.

<sup>31</sup>Janet Gyatso. 2012. "Discipline and Resistance on the Tibetan Plateau." (Hot Spots, *Fieldsights*, April 8. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/discipline-and-resistance-on-the-tibetan-plateau>. Accessed May 8, 2019).



mastering his destiny, the virtuoso can escape to a spiritual sanctuary of power untouched by China's authoritarian policies.

With this unique insight into the religious significance of self-immolation, Gyatso can link Tibet's political situation with the fundamentals of Buddhist theory and practice. These fundamentals, however, are rooted in the non-tantric demeanor of Tibetan Buddhism, which ultimately fails to encompass the tradition's highest perspective. While her analysis lacks an esoteric interpretation, Gyatso's article—in relation to this thesis—stands as a complementary work, because her approach aligns itself with the meditative character of Tibet's religious identity.

In continuing with Gyatso's philosophical point of view, Tenzin Mingyur Peldron—in his article entitled "Virtue and the Remaking of Suffering"—finds meaning in self-immolation by understanding it as an act of immense sacrifice. While most people would agree that any act of self-immolation requires a degree of sacrifice, when examined in the context of its spiritual repercussions, the term takes on a more profound inclination.

Under Buddhism's ethical-structure, suicide—unless performed under specific circumstances—is equal to taking a human life, and therefore serves as the cause for a miserable rebirth. Accordingly, the sacrifice of self-immolation not only includes the pain of setting oneself on fire, but also the intense and sometimes unimaginable suffering of the lower realms.<sup>32</sup> At the same, however, Mingyur Peldron understands the phenomenon

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<sup>32</sup>(Tib: *ngan song gsum*). There are three lower realms: (1) the hells, (2) the realm of hungry ghosts, and (3) realm of animals.

of Buddhist self-immolation to be a virtuous act performed in the service of a greater good. As he describes:

Pain here does not refer to guilt, responsibility, or punishment. Rather its presence suggests a certain kind of virtuous action in which an intimate encounter with pain is integral to the virtue of the deed.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Mingyur Peldron argues that even though the consequences of self-immolation are extreme, its end-result would improve a victim's spiritual prospects within the broader scheme of the sacrifice.

Although Mingyur Peldron's conclusions are worthy of deeper reflection, they run counter to the tradition's emphasis on the value of human life. Furthermore, he says nothing about the qualifications required of a spiritual aspirant to turn the destructive act of suicide into a virtuous deed. With these gaps in his presentation of the issue, Mingyur Peldron's argument seems rather weak when compared to the life-preserving foundations of Buddhist philosophy.

Perhaps the most far-reaching book on Tibetan self-immolation is John Whalen-Bridge's *Tibet on Fire: Buddhism, Protest, and the Rhetoric of Self-Immolation*. In this substantial work, Whalen-Bridge interprets the images and stories of self-immolation as a theatrical event on a public stage. By referencing Kenneth Burke's<sup>34</sup> *A Rhetoric of*

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<sup>33</sup>Tenzin Mingyur Peldron. 2012. "Virtue and the Remaking of Suffering." (Hot Spots, *Fieldsights*, April 8. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/virtue-and-the-remaking-of-suffering>. Accessed May 8, 2019).

<sup>34</sup>Kenneth Burke was an American literary theorist who wrote extensively on the nature of knowledge and the role of 'symbolic action' in issues related to human agency. Symbolic action, therefore, refers to non-verbal communication that signals information to onlookers.

*Motives*,<sup>35</sup> Whalen-Bridge seeks to understand the dramatism of death as a means to reach the essential meaning of self-immolation.<sup>36</sup> He, therefore, posits such political theater as a useful tool to provoke a more profound sense of reflection on its symbolism, cultural significance, and impact on the global arena. In doing so, Whalen-Bridge turns the tragedy of self-immolation into an affirmation of justifiable suicide that has little representation in Tibetan Buddhism. Even though he references a considerable amount of Buddhist sources, Whalen-Bridge connects them to self-immolation with a poignant eye towards the political and cultural dynamics of the present era. Without a level of critical distance from the ebb-and-flow worldly life, any examination of Buddhist doctrine would lack credibility, because the entire tradition grounds itself on the concept of renunciation.<sup>37</sup>

Concerning the conclusions presented in this thesis, *Tibet on Fire* holds a contradictory stance on the issue of Tibetan self-immolation. In the end, Whalen-Bridge understands self-immolation to be an affirmation of Tibetan identity in the face of cultural genocide. The very idea of an ‘identity’ is precisely the opposite approach to the transcendent persona of tantric practice. Nevertheless, the book is an exciting study that primarily situates itself outside the so-called ‘inner-science’ of yogic practice, and therefore retains little relevance to the work at hand.

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<sup>35</sup>This book explains Kenneth Burke’s understanding of ‘symbolic action,’ which Whalen-Bridge uses to contextualize Tibetan self-immolation.

<sup>36</sup>John Whalen-Bridge. *Tibet on Fire: Buddhism, Protest, and the Rhetoric of Self-Immolation*. (Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7.

<sup>37</sup>(Tib: *ngas ’byung*). In Buddhism, an aspirant has developed renunciation when his or her every thought links-back to the desire to be free from saṃsāra.

Thus, the above presentation has been a general account of the literature concerning the topic of Tibetan self-immolation. Even though they provide valid perspectives on the issue, Janet Gyatso's article is the only one that takes the steps needed to address the inner-dynamics of self-immolation. It will, therefore, be the task of this thesis to expand upon her approach by introducing the sophistication of tantric practice, which ultimately provides a broader feeling of tragedy to the problem of Tibetan self-immolation.

### **Methodology**

Because of its secretive nature and relative obscurity from the mainstream of Buddhist thought, the somewhat tricky topics of tantra tend to confront its scholars with an interpretive predicament.<sup>38</sup> As David Grey<sup>39</sup> explains in his article "Disclosing the Empty Secret: Textuality and Embodiment in the Cakrasaṃvara Tantra":<sup>40</sup>

The Buddhist Tantras, a genre of literature very significant in the history of Asian religions, have received little serious study until recently. This is largely because these texts, unlike earlier Buddhist genres such as the sutras and philosophical shastras or commentaries, are highly resistant to interpretation, and thus present a serious hermeneutic challenge to the interested scholar, due to their deliberate and often playful obscurantism, undertaken in the name of secrecy. Yet they play a very important role in the history of Buddhism, and represent an alternate mode of textuality, one which we are only now beginning to learn how to read.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Christian Wedemeyer. *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 68.

<sup>39</sup>David Grey is one of the foremost scholars on the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*.

<sup>40</sup>(Tib: *'Khor lo bde mchog gi rgyud*). The *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* is one of the most important and commonly practices tantras in Tibetan Buddhism. Its yogas focus on the development of bliss through the use of *caṅḍāli*, or inner-heat. It was also widely practiced by the India mahāsiddhas—including Saraha, Tilopa, Nāropa, and others.

<sup>41</sup>David B. Gray. "Disclosing the Empty Secret: Textuality and Embodiment in the Cakrasaṃvara Tantra." (in *Numen*, vol. 52 [2005], 417-444), 419.

As one of its distinct features, the tantras use a complex web of terms, symbolism, and manners of conveying its meanings that are often difficult to interpret.

To better illustrate Gray’s point, the following example—attributed to the Mahāsiddha<sup>42</sup> Virūpa<sup>43</sup>—is typical of tantric literature:

Resorting to food, behavior, the vital wind, the drop, and the mudra consort. The bliss of the five clear essences, the five sense organs, and resorting to the nectar without parting from the experience.

Total release in the four samsara channels and the cakras, and others, and by opening the channel knots at each of the first and last spiritual levels, and through ten triads in between.<sup>44</sup>

Owing to the centrality of tantra’s guru-disciple relationship, such “playful obscurantism” requires the guidance of a qualified teacher to decipher texts that would otherwise be nonsensical.<sup>45</sup> This form of verbal expression—often called ‘twilight language’—is more than an attempt to confuse the uninitiated. Instead, it holds significant meaning for understanding tantra’s philosophical complexities.

In order to maintain the ‘twilight’ tradition, this thesis will use the dense terminology found in tantric literature, but will also provide definitions, extended commentary, and language equivalencies as footnotes to the main text. This approach will

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<sup>42</sup>(Tib: *grub chen*). This is a term used to describe a tantric adept who has attained high levels of realization. Tantric traditions traditionally recognize eighty-four mahāsiddhas who thrived in India during the latter half of the first millennium.

<sup>43</sup>(Tib: *Bi ru pa*). The Mahāsiddha Virūpa (ca. 7th-8th century) was one of the eighty-four mahāsiddhas of India. He is known as the founder of the Path and the Result (*Lam ‘bras*) cycle of instructions, which he received directly from the Dākinī Nairatmya in a visionary experience. His life story is also one of the most epic and entertaining among the mahāsiddhas of Buddhist India.

<sup>44</sup>Virūpa. “Vajra Lines of the Path and Result.” (Trans. Cyrus Stearns in *The Library of Tibetan Classics, Vol. 4: Taking the Path as the Result: Core Teachings of the Sakya Lamdre Tradition*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 13.

<sup>45</sup>Grey, “Disclosing the Empty Secret,” 419.

not only maintain the traditional medium of tantric expression but also advance a more natural flow of ideas by using its essential terms. To this end, the footnotes will serve as an ‘explanatory mechanism’ for the interested reader to better grasp the esoteric concepts presented in this text.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE BODIES OF A BUDDHA

To come-to-terms with the hidden meanings behind Tibetan self-immolation, it is important to understand the divine and other-worldly characteristics of the two bodies. As a key element in the Mahāyāna tradition’s devotional praxis, a buddha—in the combined form of a dharmakāya and rūpakāya—has the power to act in the world as a god-like entity that possesses the omniscience to hear prayers in a phantasmic body. This ability comes with a plethora of extraordinary qualities that speak to the Tibetan tradition’s affirmation of human divinity. While it is unclear whether the self-immolators understood their potential in this way, they would have undoubtedly encountered it in their monastic courses on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*.<sup>46</sup>

### The Four Divisions of the Two Bodies

As a staple of monastic education in Tibet, the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* is a commentarial *śāstra*<sup>47</sup> that clarifies the often difficult subject matter of the

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<sup>46</sup>(Tib: *mNgon rtogs rgyan*). This text is one of the *Five Treatises of Maitreya* (*Byams chos sde lnga*) which was revealed by the fourth century Indian scholar Asaṅga through his visions of the Buddha Maitreya.

<sup>47</sup>(Tib: *bstan bcos*). This is a suffix used in Indian literature to denote a specialized branch of knowledge in a specific area of study.

*Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*.<sup>48</sup> More than any other treatise, the *Abhisamayālamkāra* contains the most precise explanation on the ontological dimensions of the two bodies. It does this by dividing the dharmakāya and rūpakāya into a system of four bodies—two wisdom bodies and two form bodies. Under this structure, the *Abhisamayālamkāra* can better distinguish the aspects of a buddha’s mind and body that relate to milestones on the Buddhist path—such as eliminating the obscurations to omniscience, projecting countless emanations, and other qualities linked to full enlightenment.

This chapter will, therefore, examine the dharmakāya and rūpakāya through the *Abhisamayālamkāra*’s presentation of the two bodies in four divisions. Under this system, the dharmakāya’s two divisions are (1) the *svabhāvikakāya*<sup>49</sup> and (2) the *dharmakāya*,<sup>50</sup> while the rūpakāya’s are (3) the *sambhogakāya*<sup>51</sup> and (4) the *nirmāṇakāya*.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>(Tib: *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa*). Translated as the ‘Perfection of Wisdom,’ these texts are a collection of Mahāyāna sūtras that were discovered by Nāgārjuna in the second century. These sūtras have five textual traditions of various lengths and formats. They are as follows: (1) the *Heart Sūtra* (*prajñāpāramitā hṛdaya*), (2) the *Perfection of Wisdom in One Hundred Thousand Lines* (*Śatasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*), (3) the *Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-five Thousand Lines* (*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*), (4) the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*), and (5) the *Verse Summary of the Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajñāpāramitāratnaguṇasañcayagāthā*).

<sup>49</sup>(Tib: *ngo bo nyid sku*).

<sup>50</sup>(Tib: *chos sku*).

<sup>51</sup>(Tib: *longs sku*).

<sup>52</sup>(Tib: *sprul sku*).



### *The Svabhāvikakāya*

As the first component of the dharmakāya's two divisions, the svabhāvikakāya—often translated as 'essence body'—is the quality of a buddha's mind that possesses two aspects of purity:<sup>53</sup> (1) innate purity,<sup>54</sup> and (2) adventitious purity.<sup>55</sup>

Innate purity refers to the emptiness of a buddha's transcendent wisdom that neither arises, passes away, or abides.<sup>56</sup> Like all other phenomena from a Mahāyāna perspective, the mind of a buddha is also characterized by emptiness, because it lacks any semblance of an inherent self-nature. Similarly, because arising, passing away, and abiding are three qualities defined by impermanence and causal existence, they represent the antithesis of an enlightened mind's permanent and uncreated essence. Consequently, a svabhāvikakāya's innate purity is an emblem of the eternal consciousness that constitutes a buddha's unoriginated, pure, and natural condition.

Adventitious purity refers to a buddha's complete removal of the two types of obscurations:<sup>57</sup> (1) the obscurations related to the afflictions,<sup>58</sup> and (2) the obscurations to omniscience.<sup>59</sup> The first—obscurations related to the afflictions—stipulates that a buddha has eliminated the hindrances to liberation and is no longer subject to the suffering of

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<sup>53</sup> (Tib: *dag pa gnyis ldan*).

<sup>54</sup> (Tib: *glo bur bral dag*).

<sup>55</sup> (Tib: *ngo bo ye dag*).

<sup>56</sup> Lobzang Tharchin and Artemus Engle, "Classifications of a Buddha's Body, Speech, and Mind." (In *Liberation in Our Hands, Part Two: The Fundamentals*, Appendix E. Trans. Sermey Khensur Lobsang Tharchen and Artemus B. Engle. Howell, New Jersey: Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1994),

<sup>57</sup> (Tib: *sgrib pa gnyis*).

<sup>58</sup> (Skt: *kleśāvaraṇa*; Tib: *nyon mongs pa'i sgrib pa*).

<sup>59</sup> (Skt: *jñeyavarāṇa*; Tib: *shes bya'i sgrib pa*).

cyclic existence; the second—obscurations to omniscience—specifies that a buddha has purged himself of both the afflictions and their subtle traces, which would otherwise cause objects to appear self-existent. As a result of the obscuration’s two-fold purification, the mind’s natural and stainless-essence becomes synonymous with a svabhāvikakāya upon an aspirant’s attainment of buddhahood.

### ***The Dharmakāya***

In the *Abhisamayālamkāra*’s system of four bodies, the dharmakāya represents the second component of a buddha’s wisdom-aspect (dharmakāya) under the two-bodied formulation. In differentiating itself from the svabhāvikakāya’s stainless-essence, the dharmakāya—in the system of four bodies—is the combination of two accumulated attributes that have reached a transformative condition beyond all states of purity: (1) ultimate wisdom,<sup>60</sup> and (2) the immaculate qualities.<sup>61</sup>

Although there are contrasting ways to enumerate the dharmakāya’s ultimate wisdom, the Indian scholar Sthiramati<sup>62</sup>—in his commentary to the

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<sup>60</sup>(Skt: *jñāna*; Tib: *ye shes*).

<sup>61</sup>(Tib: *zag pa med pa'i chos sde tshan*).

<sup>62</sup>(Tib: *bLo gros brtan pa*). The Indian scholar Sthiramati (ca. 510-570) was renowned for his knowledge of the *Abhidharma* basket of the *Tripitaka*. Sthiramati wrote several well-regarded texts such as his *Analysis of the Five Aggregates* (*Pañcaskandhaprakaraṇa*), as well as several commentaries on selected texts within the *Five Treatises of Maitreya*.

*Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*<sup>63</sup>—categorizes them into four groups: (1) mirror-like wisdom,<sup>64</sup> (2) sameness wisdom,<sup>65</sup> (3) discerning wisdom,<sup>66</sup> and (4) performance wisdom.<sup>67</sup>

Mirror-like wisdom is the immutable ground that remains fixed on the pure nature of emptiness and establishes the *dharmadhātu*<sup>68</sup> as the basis for the other forms of wisdom.<sup>69</sup> In other words, this aspect of the dharmakāya reflects—like a mirror—the sameness, discerning, and performance wisdom of a buddha through the perceptual context of phenomena’s space-like emptiness. Furthermore, in-line with the basis of the ‘immutable ground,’ mirror-like wisdom has a variety of characteristics that spiritual aspirants use to gain an approximate understanding of enlightened perception.

Traditionally, they are as follows:

- (1) It is devoid of attachment because it does not conceive of the mind and its objects as real, and because it does not generate any sense of “I” or “mine.” Thus, it is also free of any impulse to strive after things.
- (2) It is unlimited in that it perceives all objects as existing in the infinity of space.
- (3) It extends over all objects of the three times.<sup>70</sup>
- (4) It is free of bewilderment toward, and comprehends, all existent things.
- (5) It perceives all things while forever remaining free of discrimination.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>(Tib: *Theg pa chen po'i mdo sde'i rgyan*). As one of the *Five Treatises of Maitreya*, this text is one of the foundational works for the study and practice of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is also widely studied in Tibet’s monastic institutions.

<sup>64</sup>(Skt: *ādarśajñāna*; Tib: *me long lta bu'i ye shes*).

<sup>65</sup>(Skt: *samatājñāna*; Tib: *mnyam pa nyid kyi ye shes*).

<sup>66</sup>(Skt: *pratyavekṣanājñāna*; Tib: *so sor rtoḡ pa'i ye shes*).

<sup>67</sup>(Skt: *krtyānuṣṭhānajñāna*; Tib: *bya ba nan tan du sgrub pa'i ye shes*).

<sup>68</sup>(Tib: *chos kyi dbyings*). The essence—or expanse—of all phenomena.

<sup>69</sup>Tharchin and Engle, 292.

<sup>70</sup>(Tib: *dus gsum*). These are (1) the past, (2) present, and (3) future.

<sup>71</sup>Tharchin and Engle, 292.

Sameness wisdom is a buddha’s realization that both samsara and *nirvāṇa*<sup>72</sup>—like water and ice—share the “same” essential nature.<sup>73</sup> By eliminating the subtle traces of ‘I’ or ‘mine,’ an aspirant develops a level of equanimity that perceives his or her samsaric condition to be the same as other forms of sentient life.<sup>74</sup> Through understanding their shared suffering, an aspirant can engender a strong sense of love and compassion, which will blossom into a buddha’s sameness wisdom at the end of the path.

Discerning wisdom is related to the unenlightened consciousness that ‘discerns’ the individual identities of people, objects, physical sensations, and other distinctions associated with everyday life.<sup>75</sup> A buddha, however, can use his discernment while in a non-conceptual state. While this may seem like an impossibility given the contradictory nature of these qualities, authoritative voices over the centuries—such as Sthiramati, Haribhadra,<sup>76</sup> Tsongkhapa,<sup>77</sup> and others—assert that a buddha never experiences an obstacle in recognizing the various properties of all phenomena.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>(Tib: *mya ngan las 'das pa*). This is the final goal of accomplishment on the Hīnayāna path of Buddhism. A term that literally means ‘extinguished,’ *nirvāṇa* is a state of complete peace beyond all states of suffering.

<sup>73</sup>Tharchin and Engle, 292

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*,

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>76</sup>(Tib: *Seng ge bzang po*). Haribhadra (ca. eighth century) was an Indian scholar who became one of the foremost authorities on the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*. His commentary on the *Abhisamayālamkāra* is one of the most renowned in Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>77</sup>(Tib: *Tsong kha pa*). Tsongkhapa Lobzang Drakpa (*Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*) was the founder of the Geluk (*dGe lugs*) school of Tibetan Buddhism and the author of the famed *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (*Lam rim chen mo*). Tsongkhapa is credited by his followers as a reformer whose philosophical positions restored the non-contradictory union between *sūtra* and *tantra*. His writings are known for their considerable scholastic prowess, with his work on the illusory body yogas in the context of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* as his most praiseworthy.

<sup>78</sup>Tharchin and Engle, 293.

Performance wisdom is the aspect of a buddha’s mind that has the power to project incalculable emanations and perform activities inspired by bodhicitta.<sup>79</sup> This division of the dharmakāya has an intimate link to a buddha’s rūpakāya because it acts as the mental-source for his every emanation.

The immaculate qualities—the second attribute of the dharmakāya—has twenty-one categories that include components of knowledge acquired through either of the two vehicles: (1) Hīnayāna<sup>80</sup> or (2) Mahāyāna. Since a buddha’s wisdom contains the teachings of both traditions, the immaculate qualities help to clarify the supremacy of his omniscience when compared to the attainments on the Hīnayāna path. This superiority is indicative of a buddha’s ability to understand the qualities of these paths through the lens of his transcendent wisdom—a state which eludes those of lesser attainments. For

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>80</sup>(Tib: *Theg dman*). This term refers to the vehicle of Buddhism that seeks the complete peace of nirvāṇa. In Tibetan Buddhism, this goal is a ‘lesser’ attainment when compared to the altruistic benefits of attaining buddhahood—a state that foregoes the peace of nirvāṇa to pursue the aims of bodhicitta.

instance, a buddha’s understanding of the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment<sup>81</sup> exceeds that of arhats,<sup>82</sup> because he experiences them without any trace of conceptual elaboration. In such a way, Mahāyāna sources have used the word ‘immaculate’ to convey this unique distinction of a buddha.

### ***The Saṃbhogakāya***

Like the dharmakāya’s two divisions, a saṃbhogakāya—often translated as ‘enjoyment body’—is the first of two components related to the physical qualities of buddha’s rūpakāya. Here, the term ‘enjoyment’ refers to a saṃbhogakāya’s ecstatic-existence that ‘enjoys’ the ceaseless experience of Mahāyāna *dharma*.<sup>83</sup> According to traditional accounts, this material form—usually described as a body of light—has a

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<sup>81</sup>(Skt: *saptatrimśadbodhipakṣadharmā*; Tib: *byang chub kyi phyogs kyi chos sum cu rtsa bdun*). The thirty-seven factors of enlightenment are divided into seven categories: (1) the four foundations of mindfulness, (2) the four types of right effort, (3) the four bases of mental power, (4) the five faculties, (5) the five powers, (6) the seven elements of enlightenment, and (7) the noble eightfold path. The four foundations of mindfulness are (i) mindfulness of body, (ii) mindfulness of feelings, (iii) mindfulness of mind, and (iv) mindfulness of mind-objects. The four types of right effort are (i) the effort to prevent the arising of unwholesome mental states, (ii) the effort to abandon unwholesome mental states that have already arisen, (iii) the effort to cultivate wholesome mental states, and (iv) the effort to maintain wholesome mental states that have already arisen. The four bases of mental power are (i) the desire to act, (ii) effort, (iii) consciousness or mind, and (iv) discrimination. The five faculties are (i) faith, (ii) effort, (iii) mindfulness, (iv) concentration, and (v) wisdom. The five powers are (i) faith, (ii) effort, (iii) mindfulness, (iv) concentration, (v) wisdom. The seven elements of enlightenment are (i) mindfulness, (ii) investigation of phenomena, (iii) effort, (iv) joy, (v) tranquillity, (vi) concentration, and (vii) equanimity. The eight qualities of the noble eightfold path are (1) right view, (ii) right intention, (iii) right speech, (iv) right action, (v) right livelihood, (vi) right effort, (vii) right mindfulness, and (viii) right concentration. It is also important to note that—while many of these factors repeat themselves—they have subtle differences that make them distinct from each other.

<sup>82</sup>(Tib: *dgra bcom pa*). This is a person who has eliminated the afflictions that keep one in cyclic existence. For this reason, such a person has liberated himself from saṃsāra and has achieved the final goal of accomplishment in the Hīnayāna tradition—e.i., nirvāṇa.

<sup>83</sup>(Tib: *chos*). In its Buddhist context, the term ‘dharma’ is a generic word used to refer to Buddhist teachings. This term is not to be confused with its Vedic/Brahmanical understanding, which denotes a sense of duty or responsibility.

refined ontological status that can reveal manifestations, speak the dharma, perform mental activities, act without effort, and appear in expedient forms.<sup>84</sup> More specifically, a saṃbhogakāya is a buddha's ultimate physical body that possesses five certainties:<sup>85</sup> (1) certainty of location,<sup>86</sup> (2) certainty of retinue,<sup>87</sup> (3) certainty of physical attributes,<sup>88</sup> (4) certainty of dharma,<sup>89</sup> and (5) certainty of duration.<sup>90</sup>

The certainty of location points to the continual presence of a buddha's saṃbhogakāya in the pure-land<sup>91</sup> of Akaniṣṭha.<sup>92</sup> From this place, a buddha can issue and retract a variety of emanations as the physical-epicenter of his enlightened activities. Usually, like that of Sukhāvati<sup>93</sup> and Amitābha,<sup>94</sup> a pure-land serves—among other things—as the primary location for a buddha's *nirmāṇakāya*, or 'emanation body.' Akaniṣṭha, however, is known as an 'enjoyment-body-pure-land' because it represents a buddha's place-of-dwelling for his more elusive saṃbhogakāya identity.

The certainty of retinue stipulates that a saṃbhogakāya's entourage consists entirely of high level bodhisattvas who have reached the path of seeing<sup>95</sup>—a stage

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<sup>84</sup>Tharchin and Engle, 307.

<sup>85</sup>(Skt: *pañcaniyata*; Tib: *nges pa lnga*).

<sup>86</sup>(Tib: *gnas nges pa*).

<sup>87</sup>(Tib: *'khor nges pa*).

<sup>88</sup>(Tib: *sku nges pa*).

<sup>89</sup>(Tib: *chos nges pa*).

<sup>90</sup>(Tib: *dus nges pa*). Tharchin and Engle, 307.

<sup>91</sup>(Tib: *dag pa 'i zhing*).

<sup>92</sup>(Tib: *'Og min*). Tharchin and Engle, 307.

<sup>93</sup>(Tib: *bDe ba can* or *bDe ba chen*). This is the pure-land of Amitābha.

<sup>94</sup>(Tib: *'Od dpag med* or also *snang ba mtha' yas*). As one of the buddhas of the five families, Amitābha is the central buddha of the Lotus Family. Today, Amitābha is the primary object of devotion in Pure Land Buddhism—a school whose devotees pray to be reborn in his Pure Land of Sukhāvati.

<sup>95</sup>(Skt: *darśanamārga* ; Tib: *mthong lam*).

equated with the realization of emptiness.<sup>96</sup> This stipulation reflects a saṃbhogakāya's complex nature, which exists as a purified body that can only be seen by those with advanced attainments. Once a bodhisattva gains the necessitated accomplishment, he or she can abide in the presence of a saṃbhogakāya and receive the blessings that come from its association.

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<sup>96</sup>Tharchin and Engle, 307.



The certainty of physical attributes refers to the inseparability of a sambhogakāya and its thirty-two major marks<sup>97</sup> and eighty minor signs.<sup>98</sup> The major marks indicate that a buddha has completed the path to full awakening, while the minor signs demonstrate

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<sup>97</sup>(Tib: *mtshan bzang po sum cu rtsa gnyis*). They are as follows: (1) a thousand spoked wheel sign on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet, (2) feet that are placed well, (3) fingers and toes which are webbed like the feet of a king goose, (4) soft and youthful hands and feet, (5) seven fleshy body parts, (6) long fingers and toes, (7) wide heels, (8) a large and straight body, (9) knees and ankles that do not protrude, (10) body hairs that point upward and curl to the right, (11) calves are straight and tapered, like those of an *eneya* deer, (12) long and powerful arms that extend as far as the knees, (13) a male organ concealed within a beautiful sheath of flesh, (14) a golden body, (15) smooth skin, (16) body hairs that turn to the right, (17) a face adorned with the “treasure hair,” (18) a lion-like upper body, (19) well rounded shoulders, (20) a broad upper chest, (21) experiencing all taste as supreme, (22) a body this is perfectly symmetrical, (23) a crown protrusion on the head, (24) a long tongue, (25) supreme speech that has five qualities (intelligible and distinct, delightful and agreeable to hear, deep and resonant, pleasant and incapable of being abandoned, and clear and not confusing), (26) checks that are round and beautifully formed, (27) extremely white teeth, (28) even teeth, (29) teeth free of gaps, (30) forty even teeth, (31) eyes with intensely dark irises, and whites that are both clear and well-defined, and (32) eyelashes that are well-placed and free of tangles (Tharchin and Engle, 307-309).

<sup>98</sup>(Tib: *dpe byed bzang po brgyad bcu*). They are as follows: (1) copper-colored nails, (2) smooth nails, (3) prominent nails, (4) round fingers, (5) amply developed fingers, (6) tapered fingers, (7) veins that do not protrude, (8) veins free of knots, (9) ankles that do not protrude, (10) even-sized feet, (11) a lion-like gait, (12) an elephant-like gait, (13) a goose like gait, (14) a bull-like gait, (15) a gait in which he turns to the right, (16) an appealing gait, (17) and upright gait, (18) magnificent limbs, (19) a well-cleansed body, (20) regularly shaped limbs, (21) a bright body, (22) soft limbs, (23) a pure body, (24) fully-developed physical marks, (25) a large and beautiful body, (26) an even-spaced step, (27) clear eyes, (28) youthful limbs, (29) a body exalted in it bearing, (30) prominent limbs, (31) very firm limbs, (32) well-proportioned limbs and appendages, (33) a radiance that is pure and free of all dimness, (34) a round belly, (35) a clean belly, (36) a belly that is not large and unshapely, (37) an evenly shaped belly, (38) a deep-set navel, (39) a navel that turns to the right, (40) a conduct that is beautiful on all sides, (41) pure conduct, (42) a body free of moles and dark spots, (43) hands that are extremely soft, (44) hands with lines that are resplendent, (45) deeply lined hands, (46) hands marked with long lines, (47) a face that is not extensively long, (48) lips as red as the *bimba* fruit and so glassy that objects are reflected in them, (49) a supple tongue, (50) a slender tongue, (51) a red tongue, (52) a thunderous voice, (53) a sweet, beautiful, and gentle voice, (54) a round eyeteeth, (55) sharp eyeteeth, (56) white eyeteeth, (57) eyeteeth of equal size, (58) eyeteeth that are tapered, (59) a prominent nose, (60) a clean nose, (61) wide eyes, (62) thick eyelashes, (63) eyes that resemble lotus petals with well-defined whites and irises, (64) long eyebrows, (65) soft eyebrows, (66) smooth eyebrows, (67) eyebrow hairs of even length, (68) long and well-developed arms, (69) ears that are equal in size, (70) an unimpaired ear faculty, (71) an unwrinkled forehead, (72) a broad forehead, (73) a large head, (74) jet-black hair, (75) thick hair, (76) soft hair, (77) hair that is free from tangles, (78) hair that is not rough, (79) sweet smelling hair, and (80) hands and feet marked with the auspicious signs such as endless knots, swastika's, and circles marked on the inside with swirling lines (Tharchin and Engle, 310-314).

that he has reciprocal inner qualities.<sup>99</sup> These include—serving a guru for the mark of dharma-wheels on the hands and feet, giving beautiful clothing and other types of amenities for the mark of a golden body, developing a sense of detachment for the sign of copper-colored nails, teaching the doctrine of dependent origination for the sign of well proportioned limbs, and the list goes on.<sup>100</sup> As follows, a saṃbhogakāya—endowed with its various marks and signs—is the embodiment of moral perfection, because it is the result of extraordinary virtues performed on the Buddhist path.

The certainty of dharma signals that a saṃbhogakāya teaches exclusively from a Mahāyāna perspective.<sup>101</sup> This particular distinction illustrates the intention of a bodhisattva who avoids the extremes of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa by creating a physical form to pursue the resolve of bodhicitta. As one facet of this manifestation, the saṃbhogakāya—which is the embodied source of a buddha’s enlightened activities—exists for the single purpose of leading others to liberation, and thus personifies the goals established on the Mahāyāna path. For this reason, a saṃbhogakāya refrains from teaching outside the doctrinal-vehicle that plants the seeds for its own creation.

The certainty of duration refers to the length of time that a saṃbhogakāya will remain in cyclic-existence and act for the liberation of others.<sup>102</sup> Because it is a composite of the subtle energies that follow beings in every rebirth, a saṃbhogakāya is an eternal

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<sup>99</sup>Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo. *Liberation in Our Hands, Part Two: The Fundamentals*. (Trans. Sermey Khensur Lobsang Tharchin ad Artemus B. Engle. Howell, New Jersey: Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1994), 190-191.

<sup>100</sup>Tharchin and Engle, 310-314

<sup>101</sup>Ibid, 307.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid,.

entity designed to function until each-and-every continuum reaches enlightenment.

Considering that living beings are infinite within the religion's cosmological structure, a saṃbhogakāya must also continue to manifest for an equal duration of time.

### ***The Nirmāṇakāya***

The second type of physical body—one which acts by appearing directly to ordinary beings—is the nirmāṇakāya.<sup>103</sup> While this body has many forms that play an integral role in a buddha's activities, the most consequential of these is the supreme nirmāṇakāya.<sup>104</sup> Like the historical Buddha, this enlightened configuration of flesh and bone introduces—or reintroduces—the dharma in a particular world-system.<sup>105</sup> In order to accomplish this objective, a buddha uses his supreme nirmāṇakāya's fantastic and skillful qualities to attract disciples and establish the teachings. These include—(1) qualities of body,<sup>106</sup> (2) qualities of speech,<sup>107</sup> (3) qualities of mind,<sup>108</sup> and (4) qualities associated with a buddha's enlightened activities.<sup>109</sup>

A supreme nirmāṇakāya's qualities of body consist of supernatural-features that set a buddha apart from ordinary individuals and inspires them to take up the path. For

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<sup>103</sup>Tharchin and Engle, 314.

<sup>104</sup>(Skt: *uttamanirmāṇakāya*; Tib: *mchog gi sprul sku*).

<sup>105</sup>The term 'world-system' denotes the Buddhist assertion that there are infinite worlds were buddhas can teach the dharma.

<sup>106</sup>(Tib: *sku'i yon tan*).

<sup>107</sup>(Tib: *gsung gi yon tan*).

<sup>108</sup>(Tib: *thugs kyi yon tan*).

<sup>109</sup>(Tib: *'phrin las yon tan*).

example, if one were to peer into a buddha’s body—much like Yaśodā<sup>110</sup> to Kṛṣṇa<sup>111</sup> in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*<sup>112</sup>—the whole of existence would become visible. Other qualities include—feet that never touch the ground, clothing that floats about four inches from the body, and pores that can perceive the nature of all knowable things.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, much like a saṁbhogakāya, it possesses each of the major marks and minor signs—albeit in the form of a renunciate monk.<sup>114</sup>

A supreme nirmāṇakāya’s qualities of speech primarily refer to a buddha’s capacity to effectively teach beings of various dispositions.<sup>115</sup> While there are many ways

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<sup>110</sup>The foster mother to the Hindu god Kṛṣṇa.

<sup>111</sup>A major god in the Hindu pantheon, Kṛṣṇa is considered to be the eighth avatar of Viṣṇu who manifested in the world to restore the balance of dharma during the Mahābhārata War. He is also one of the central deities in the bhakti movement of Hinduism where devotees worship him as the god of compassion, tenderness, and love.

<sup>112</sup>One of Hinduism’s eighteen great histories, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is a text that promotes the worship of Kṛṣṇa by detailing various events concerning his origins, divinity, and cosmological significance.

<sup>113</sup>Pabongka, *Liberation in Our Hands*, 191.

<sup>114</sup>Even though its marks and signs are the same as an enjoyment body, the supreme emanation body wears the robes of a fully ordained monk rather than the jeweled ornaments associated with an enjoyment body.

<sup>115</sup>Tharchin and Engle, 193.

to present these qualities, Pabongkha Dechen Nyinpo<sup>116</sup>—in his classic Stages of the Path<sup>117</sup> text entitled *Liberation in Our Hands*<sup>118</sup>—offers a profound explanation:

...even if a great variety of beings were to ask many different questions of a *tathāgata* simultaneously, he could answer them all at the same time with a single declaration that would be heard in each of these beings separate languages, and in a manner befitting their individual mental capacities.<sup>119</sup>

To elaborate, Pabongkha goes on to reference the different lengths of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*<sup>120</sup> as evidence of these abilities. This example asserts that, even though the Buddha taught them at the same time, the *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings were recorded in extensive, intermediate, and abbreviated forms, because he had the power to connect with each audience member on a tailor-made level.<sup>121</sup>

A supreme *nirmāṇakāya*'s qualities of mind has two divisions: (1) compassion, and (2) knowledge. The first division calls attention to a buddha's bodhicitta-motivation

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<sup>116</sup>(Tib: *Pha bong kha bde chen snying po*). One of the most important Tibetan lamas of the twentieth century, Pabongka was an orthodox Gelukpa who wrote many of the the Stages of the Path, Mind Training, and deity yoga texts widely used in the Geluk tradition. He is also known for bringing about a revival of the Geluk tradition in the early part of the twentieth century.

<sup>117</sup>(Tib: *Lam rim*). Founded by the Bengali scholar and yogi Atīśa Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna (ca. 980-1054), the Stages of the Path presents a step by step method designed to guide its practitioners to enlightenment. Several centuries after Atīśa, Tsongkhapa—the founder of the Geluk school Tibetan Buddhism—later expanded the tradition in his *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. Consequently, the Stages of the Path tradition occupies a central place of importance in Gelukpa circles.

<sup>118</sup>(Tib: *Lam rim rnam grol lag bcangs*). This is an extraordinary text which combines the various Stage of the Path traditions into one easily understood book. The text is also known for its clarity and relatable language.

<sup>119</sup>Pabongka, *Liberation in Our Hands*, 194.

<sup>120</sup>(Tib: *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa*). Translated as the *Perfection of Wisdom*, it is a body of texts of varying lengths that form the core of the Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism. It focuses on the production of wisdom through understanding the empty nature of reality which leads to a non-abiding nirvana. It is also the last of the six perfections found in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

<sup>121</sup>Pabongkha, *Liberation in Our Hands*, 194.

which is driven by his compassionate-concern for living beings—a quality of mind stronger than a mother’s love for her only child. At the same time, the second division deals with a buddha’s all-pervading knowledge that can understand even the most subtle distinctions of a person’s life. When taken together, these qualities give a buddha the capability to intimately understand the needs of his disciples and offer them guidance from a place of exceptional compassion.

A supreme *nirmāṇakāya*’s enlightened activities manifest in a world-system as a buddha’s twelve deeds.<sup>122</sup> In the present era, Buddha Śākyamuni<sup>123</sup>—just as others before him—enacted the twelve deeds to establish a foundation for Buddhist teachings on earth. For this purpose, the twelve deeds provide the necessary backstory of someone destined to usher in a new area spirituality aimed at eliminating the suffering of beings.

The twelve deeds are as follows: (1) descent from Tuṣita,<sup>124</sup> (2) entering the mothers womb,<sup>125</sup> (3) taking birth,<sup>126</sup> (4) becoming skilled in various arts,<sup>127</sup> (5)

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<sup>122</sup>(Skt: *dvadaśabuddhakārya*; Tib: *mdzad pa bcu gnyis*).

<sup>123</sup>(Tib: *Sangs rgyas shAkya thub pa*) This is the honorific name of the historical Buddha.

<sup>124</sup>(Tib: *dga' ldan gyi gnas nas 'pho ba*). After giving rise to bodhicitta, the Buddha performed—while still a bodhisattva—a variety of spiritual acts to generate a buddha’s two bodies through the accumulation of merit and wisdom. The Buddha then arose as a bodhisattva in the pure land of Tuṣita where he recognized the need to subdue beings in Jambudvīpa by descending from the celestial realms.

<sup>125</sup>(Tib: *lhums su zhugs pa*). After making the resolve to descend from Tuṣita, the Buddha revealed a series of auspicious signs to his future mother—Māyādevī—and entered her womb.

<sup>126</sup>(Tib: *sku bltams pa*). On her way back to the Śākya kingdom of Kapilavastu, Māyādevī gave birth to the Buddha at the Lumbinī Grove in modern-day Nepal.

<sup>127</sup>(Tib: *bzo yi gnas la mkhas pa*). As he grew into maturity, the Buddha—known as Siddhārtha Gautama before his enlightenment—learned the skills associated with his caste and defeated a litany of opponents in scriptural study, mathematics, archery, and other forms of worldly knowledge.

delighting in a queen and retinue,<sup>128</sup> (6) becoming a renunciate,<sup>129</sup> (7) performing austerities,<sup>130</sup> (8) approaching the essence of enlightenment,<sup>131</sup> (9) overcoming *Māra*,<sup>132</sup> (10) manifesting perfect enlightenment,<sup>133</sup> (11) turning the wheel of dharma,<sup>134</sup> (12) passing into *māhāparinirvāṇa*.<sup>135</sup>

While each of these acts is essential for the emergence of Buddhist teachings in the world, it is the eleventh deed—that of ‘turning the wheel of dharma’—which holds the most significance. In Buddhist circles, the phrase ‘turning the wheel of dharma’ refers to a buddha’s first discourse that sets in motion his doctrinal positions.<sup>136</sup> In Śākyamuni’s case, once he reached the pinnacle of enlightenment, he ‘turned the wheel of dharma’ by

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<sup>128</sup>(Tib: *btsun mo'i 'khor dgyes rol ba*). With the skills acquired in his youth, Siddhārtha was able to take a queen and establish a royal entourage.

<sup>129</sup>(Tib: *rab tu byung ba*). By the time he was in his late twenties, Siddhārtha had witnessed the ravages of samsaric existence which marked the beginning of his search to find a release from the suffering birth, old age, sickness, and death. Thus, seeing the futility of his worldly affairs, Siddhārtha renounced the comforts of royalty to become a spiritual seeker.

<sup>130</sup>(Tib: *dka' ba spyad pa*). After cutting his hair and shedding his finely tailored clothes, Siddhārtha practiced a variety of extreme austerities—such as eating a single grain of rice a day—which only left him emaciated and further distant from his goal of enlightenment.

<sup>131</sup>(Tib: *byang chub snying por gshegs pa*). After he abandoned the extremes of asceticism—Siddhārtha set-out to practice a spiritual path between the excessive reaches of comfort and self-denial. This path—known as the Middle Way—is one of the defining features of Buddhist philosophy, because it is the path the Buddha used to bring himself to complete enlightenment.

<sup>132</sup>(Tib: *bdud btul ba*). When the Buddha made the resolve to stay under the bodhi tree until he achieved enlightenment, Mara—a devil-like figure in Buddhism—attempted to prevent him from doing this by manifesting a variety of illusions.

<sup>133</sup>(Tib: *mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas pa*). After overcoming Mara, the Buddha attained full enlightenment under the bodhi tree. He famously touched the earth beneath him to serve as a ‘witness’ to his enlightenment.

<sup>134</sup>(Tib: *chos kyi 'khor lo bskor ba*). The definition of this term will be explained below.

<sup>135</sup>(Skt: *māhāparinirvāṇa*; Tib: *yongs su myang 'das chen po*). To inspire faith in his teachings, the Buddha manifested the attainment of final nirvana at the town of Kuśinagara in the Indian state of modern day Bihar.

<sup>136</sup>It is important to note that Tibetan traditions of Buddhism generally recognize three ‘turnings of the wheel:’ (1) that of the Four Noble Truths, (2) that of the Prajñāpāramitā, and (3) that of the tantras. Each of these events represent one of the doctrinal positions of the three vehicles: (1) Hīnayāna, (2) Mahāyāna, and (3) Vajrayāna respectively.

teaching the four noble truths<sup>137</sup> to his former companions in the holy life.<sup>138</sup> This singular event marks the source from which twenty-five hundred years of Buddhist thought has benefited countless individuals. For this reason, the act of ‘turning the wheel’ represents the height of a buddha’s enlightened activities and therefore signifies the ultimate result of bodhicitta.

### **The Bodies of a Buddha and Their Relevance to Tibetan Self-Immolation**

This chapter has sought to highlight the two bodies and their respective divisions as the crowning achievement of human potential. Without the possibility of producing a dharmakāya and rūpakāya, a buddha’s enlightened-activities would remain limited to the confines of an ordinary lifespan. Although this is the doctrinal-stance of the so-called ‘Lower Vehicle,’ Mahāyāna aspirants—under a different set of goals—seek the two bodies in order to go beyond the impediment of mortality. In this sense, the combination of a dharmakāya and rūpakāya ensures a buddha’s continued ability to benefit living beings for a ceaseless-eternity. Thus, without the ability to transcend the physical basis of human identity through the path that leads to the two bodies, the act of self-immolation carries limited benefits, in that it temporarily halts an aspirant’s progress to the extraordinary qualities of a dharmakāya and rūpakāya.

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<sup>137</sup>(Skt: *catvāryāryasatyā*; Tib: *'phags pa'i bden pa bzhi*). The four noble truths are (1) the truth of suffering, which is to be understood, (2) the truth of the origin of suffering, which is to be abandoned, (3) the truth of the cessation of suffering, which is to be actualized, and (4) the truth of path that leads to the cessation of suffering, which is to be relied upon.

<sup>138</sup>These former companions were a group of five individuals who practiced with the Buddha when he was searching for enlightenment through extreme asceticism. When the Buddha renounced this method of practice in favor of a more balanced approach, they severed their connection with him.



## CHAPTER TWO: THE BASIS OF PURIFICATION

At the outset of any tantric practice, it is crucial to identify what the tradition calls ‘the basis of purification.’<sup>139</sup> On the non-tantric path of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the cause that keeps living beings in saṃsāra is the ignorance of self-grasping.<sup>140</sup> On the path of anuttarayoga tantra, however, the cause that keeps living beings in saṃsāra is ordinary death, ordinary bardo,<sup>141</sup> and ordinary rebirth. Accordingly, tantric yogas work to purify these experiences by transforming them into a threefold division of the two bodies—the dharmakāya, saṃbhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya.<sup>142</sup> Rather than fighting against the natural occurrences of samsaric life, the path of tantra uses them to expedite the journey to buddhahood. This chapter will, therefore, present the stages of death, bardo, and rebirth as an indispensable preliminary to understand the tantric yogas that produce the two bodies. Without this insight into the basis of purification, the tantric path—which is the focus of chapter three—would offer little to those attempting to grasp the sophistication of esoteric Buddhism and its relevance to Tibetan self-immolation.

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<sup>139</sup>(Tib: *gzhi sbyangs*).

<sup>140</sup>Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo. *The Extremely Secret Dakini of Naropa: Vajrayogini Practice and Commentary*. (Trans. David Gonzales. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2011), 104.

<sup>141</sup>(Tib: *bar do*).

<sup>142</sup>In this threefold division of the two bodies, the dharmakāya has the same meaning as its distinction in the two body formulation. However, like the four body division, the saṃbhogakāya and nirmāṇakāya collectively make up the characteristics of the rūpakāya.

## Ordinary Death

The first object of purification in anuttarayoga tantra is ordinary death. In the tantric tradition, aspirants seek to manipulate the various levels of mind and wind that naturally reveal themselves during the final moments of death. For this reason, tantric aspirants rehearse the stages of the dying process in an effort to transform them into an enlightening experience. While the other objects of purification are essential for the production of the two bodies, the process of ordinary death is by far the most significant, because its transformation is a prerequisite for the refinement of the bardo and its resultant rebirth. In keeping with this proportionality, the complexities of the dying process will occupy the brunt of this chapter, while limiting the comparatively simple dynamics associated with the remaining objects of purification.

### *The Properties of Mind and Wind at the Moment of Death*

In its broad context, the tantras understand the mind to have four levels—rough,<sup>143</sup> medium<sup>144</sup> subtle,<sup>145</sup> and most-subtle.<sup>146</sup> The rough level of mind consists of the input received from the sense faculties, which accounts for the majority of a person's mental activity. The medium level of mind includes the root afflictions of ignorance,<sup>147</sup> hatred,<sup>148</sup> and desire,<sup>149</sup> which have an intimate connection with the concept of a self-

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<sup>143</sup>(Tib: *rags pa'i sems*).

<sup>144</sup>(Tib: *'bring ba'i sems*).

<sup>145</sup>(Tib: *phra ba'i sems*).

<sup>146</sup>Sermey Khensur Lobsang Tharchin. *Sublime Path to Kechara Paradise: Vajrayogini's Eleven Yogas of Generation Stage Practice as Reveled by the Glorious Naropa*. (Howell, New Jersey: Mahayana Sutra and Tantric Press, 1997), 142.

<sup>147</sup>(Skt: *rāga*; Tib: *'dod chags*).

<sup>148</sup>(Skt: *pratigha*; Tib: *khong khro*).

<sup>149</sup>(Skt: *avidyā*; Tib: *ma rig pa*).

existent identity. The subtle level of mind consists of the mental states known as white luminosity,<sup>150</sup> red radiance,<sup>151</sup> and black near-attainment,<sup>152</sup> which usually remain dormant until the final moments of death. Finally, the most-subtle level of mind is the clear-light consciousness that ordinary individuals experience during the final stage of the dying process. And it is this clear-light mind that has the potential to become the dharmakāya aspect of a buddha.

Under the physiological structure of tantra, each level of mind—rough, medium, subtle, and most subtle—functions in relation to a corresponding wind that flows through the body. Similar to a horse and a rider, both mind and wind act in dependence upon each other to provide movement, warmth, blood circulation, and other physical properties associated with a human form. Consequently, when the winds cease to move at the moment of death, the body is considered clinically dead because the mind has lost its ability to dictate the movement of the winds. Moreover, since they play an essential role over a person's physical constitution, the winds also share a relationship with the body's four elements,<sup>153</sup> each of which operates in connection with a specific wind. Thus, as the winds recede their influence during the process of death, the elements sequentially cease to function, and a person begins to experience a series of outer and inner signs.

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<sup>150</sup>(Tib: *snang ba dkar lam pa*).

<sup>151</sup>(Tib: *mched pa dmar lam pa*).

<sup>152</sup>(Tib: *nyer thob nag lam pa*).

<sup>153</sup>(Tib: *byung ba chen po bzhi*). In the Buddhist tradition, the physical properties of a human form can be broken down into four elements: (1) earth, (2) water, (3) fire, and (4) air.

### *The Dissolution of the Elements*

The first element to lose its power during the process of death is the earth element. This experience occurs when the wind directly responsible for the element's function ceases to have its usual effect on the body.<sup>154</sup> At this point, a dying person is unable to move, and the outer sign of heaviness—as if the body were a stone or a log—becomes prevalent.<sup>155</sup> Since the rough level of mind—which functions in dependence upon the senses—begins to recede with the dissolution<sup>156</sup> of the earth element, a dying person loses his or her ability to see and hear. While these outer experiences occur, the corresponding inner sign shows itself to the dying person's consciousness as a mirage-like appearance. This sign appears because the water element becomes dominant over the earth element, which causes solid objects to look like waves.

After the dissolution of the earth element, the next element to lose its power in the body is the water element. Since this element is synonymous with the variety of fluids found in the human body, a dying person experiences the outer sign of dryness, usually related to the mouth and nose.<sup>157</sup> These sensations come about by the increased dominance of the fire element, which causes the liquids in the body to evaporate.

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<sup>154</sup>Tharchin, *Sublime Path to Kechara Paradise*, 143.

<sup>155</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup>(Tib: *thim*). While the traditional literature uses this term, the elements do not actually 'dissolve' into each other. Instead, they lose their power to function. As each element 'dissolves,' the remaining elements gain greater prominence in the body for a brief period.

<sup>157</sup>Tsongkhapa (Lobzang Drakpa). *The Six Yogas of Naropa: Tsongkhapa's Commentary Entitled A Book of Three Inspirations: A Treatise on the Stages of Training in the Profound Path of Naro's Six Dharmas commonly referred to as The Three Inspirations*. (Trans. Glenn H. Mullin. Boston: Snow Lion Publications, 1996),

Similarly, the inner sign parallels this experience by presenting a dying person's consciousness with a thin veil of blue smoke, like steam coming off hot pavement.

When the water element has entirely dissolved, and the fire element begins to retract, the body starts to lose its warmth and a cold sensation begins to permeate a dying person's experience. As this happens, the mind perceives the inner sign of 'sparks,' which appear like fireflies floating against the backdrop of a night sky.<sup>158</sup>

For the final physical dissolution, the air element in the body ceases to function when it dissolves into the subtle level mind. At this stage, a dying person experiences the outer sign of a long exhaled breath, followed by an inability to inhale, until he or she feels the eventual release of all physical pain. Similarly, the correlating inner sign manifests itself as a vision of light, like that of a single candle flame undisturbed by the wind.<sup>159</sup> Once this appearance arises, the physical components of a living body—such as breathing, heartbeat, blood circulation, and so forth—have ceased to function. And it is at this point that mainstream medical-science would consider a person clinically dead. In tantric physiology, however, the winds that support conceptual thought, and therefore the rough and medium levels of mind, have merely dissolved themselves into the subtle consciousness—leaving several more stages until actual death.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>159</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>160</sup>Ibid.,

### ***The Dissolution of the Subtle Mind***

Once the air element has dissolved itself into pure consciousness, a dying person experiences the previously dormant activity of the subtle mind's three phases: (1) white luminosity, (2) red radiance, and (3) black near-attainment. During the first phase of white luminosity, a dying person perceives a vision of 'whiteness,' often compared to seeing moonlight in a cloudless sky.<sup>161</sup> When this state of consciousness subsides, the phase of red radiance manifests like a clear sky covered by an expansive red light.<sup>162</sup> And for the final phase of black near-attainment, the mind experiences an 'utter darkness,' often compared to a night sky permeated by a thick blackness.<sup>163</sup> This phase of the subtle mind then dissolves into a period of unconsciousness, after which the most-subtle mind of clear light arises, free from all darkness, and bright like a clear sky at early dawn.<sup>164</sup> Thus, the dawning of the clear light signals the final moment before actual death, when an ordinary person's continuum is thrown uncontrollably into the Bardo.

### ***The Movements of the Subtle Body at the Moment of Death***

In addition to the physical and mental signs associated with death, there is yet another dimension of activity that occurs within the subtle body.<sup>165</sup> Such a body—consisting of a network of channels, winds, and drops<sup>166</sup>—exists in the tantric tradition as a psychophysical system that acts as an intermediary between the mundane body and the

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<sup>161</sup>Ibid.

<sup>162</sup>Tharchin, *Sublime Path to Kechara Paradise*, 144-145.

<sup>163</sup>Tsongkhapa, *Six Yogas of Naropa*, 77.

<sup>164</sup>Ibid.

<sup>165</sup>(Tib: *lus phra*).

<sup>166</sup>(Skt: *bindu*; Tib: *thig le*).

mind. Because the inner workings of the physical body cease to function when the subtle levels of mind begin to emerge, it is the movements of the subtle body that causes a dying person's consciousness to experience the phases of white luminosity, red radiance, black near-attainment, and the final dawn of clear light. It is, however, impossible to comprehend the philosophical profundity of these experiences without an understanding of the subtle body's metaphysical structure.

As already mentioned, the subtle body generally consists of three components—(1) channels, (2) winds, and (3) drops—each of which has a unique function to the body and mind. While the system of tube-like channels in the subtle body is extensive, the most important of these is the central channel,<sup>167</sup> which runs from the point between the eyebrows, up to the crown of the head, and then vertically down the middle of the body to the tip of the sex organ. At different points along this channel are *cakras*<sup>168</sup> where the winds of the subtle body can be gathered to produce deep meditative states. These winds, sometimes better understood as 'energies,' consist of five root winds<sup>169</sup> and five branch

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<sup>167</sup>(Tib: *rtsa dbu ma*). This is the main channel that runs through the center of the subtle body. It is about the diameter of a stalk of wheat, and its texture is soft like a flower petal.

<sup>168</sup>(Tib: *rtsa 'khor*). This term is sometimes literally translated as 'channel wheel.'

<sup>169</sup>(Tib: *rtsa ba rlung lnga*). The five root winds each support a particular part of the body and support the function of an element in the physical body. The five root winds, their location in the body, and the bodily function they support are as follows: (1) the life-supporting wind (*srog 'dzin rlung*) which is located in the brain and supports swallowing, inhalation, and concentration, (2) the upward-moving wind (*gyen rgyu rlung*) which is located in the chest and supports a variety of things such as speech, memory, and energy, (3) the all-pervading wind (*khyab byed rlung*) which is located in the heart and supports the movement of the body, (4) the fire-accompanying wind (*me mnyam gnas rlung*) which is located in the stomach and supports digestion and metabolism, and (5) the downward-clearing wind (*thur sel rlung*) which is located in the bowels and supports the expulsion of urine, feces, semen, and menstrual blood.

winds<sup>170</sup> that flow through the channels and provide the life-functions associated with a living body—inhalation and exhalation, digestion, the expulsion of urine and feces from the body, and so forth. The drops, in this case, are the subtle white<sup>171</sup> and red<sup>172</sup> bodhicitta substances that move and abide as small droplets in a direct relationship with the flow of the winds.<sup>173</sup>

Among the different aspects of the subtle body, the most important and philosophically consequential is the indestructible drop<sup>174</sup> which resides in the heart cakra. This drop—about the size of a small pea—is a shell-like orb that houses the white and red bodhicitta substances in its upper and lower halves. These substances—bestowed at the moment of conception—come directly from the union of a person’s father and mother, which remain in the subtle body until the continuum enters the intermediate state.<sup>175</sup> At the point between these substances, encased within their larger shell, is the resting place of the most-subtle mind—a level of consciousness synonymous with a person’s primordial continuum which has the potential to grow into a dharmakāya.

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<sup>170</sup>(Tib: *yan lag gi rlung lnga*). The five branch winds each support the function of a particular sense faculty. The five branch winds and their respective influence on the sense faculties are as follows: (1) the *nāga* wind (*klu'i rlung*) which is responsible for the function of sight, (2) the tortoise wind (*ru sbal gyi rlung*) which is responsible for the function of hearing, (3) the lizard wind (*rtsangs pa'i rlung*) which is responsible for the function of smell, (4) the *devadatta* wind (*lhas byin gyi rlung*) which is responsible for the function of taste, and (5) the king of wealth deities wind (*nor lha rgyal gyi rlung*) which is responsible for the function of touch.

<sup>171</sup>(Tib: *khams dkar po*). The white bodhicitta substance is male ejaculate.

<sup>172</sup>(Tib: *khams dmar po*). The red bodhicitta substance is menstrual blood.

<sup>173</sup>Generally, most people would associate the red and white bodhicitta substances with their respective genders (red bodhicitta for women and white bodhicitta for men). However, tantric traditions maintain that all human beings possess both in the subtle body, regardless of their sex.

<sup>174</sup>(Tib: *mi zhig pa'i thig le*).

<sup>175</sup>Tsongkhapa, *Six Yogas of Naropa*, 77.



When the three phases of the subtle mind start to manifest, the subtle body begins a series of movements aimed at penetrating the indestructible drop at the heart. These movements occur after the elemental properties of the body have dissolved, and the subtle mind of white luminosity begins to reveal itself to a dying person's consciousness.

The first phase of white luminosity begins when the upper winds enter the opening of the central channel at the crown of the head. Because this part of the body—except for the indestructible drop's upper half—is the seat of white bodhicitta in the body, the dissolution of the winds in this area loosens the knots at the crown cakra, which allows the bodhicitta to flow down the central channel towards the heart.<sup>176</sup> Once this happens, it is the movement of the white bodhicitta that acts as the direct cause for the appearance of 'whiteness' experienced by a dying person's consciousness.

As the next stage in the sequence, the second phase of red radiance follows a similar pattern to the movements of white luminosity—albeit in the opposite direction. In this case, the lower winds—rather than those at the upper part of the body—collect into the central channel at the navel chakra. In the same way as the relationship between the crown cakra and white bodhicitta, it is the navel cakra that holds the principal source of red bodhicitta in the body. Again, similar to the previous phase, the gathering of the winds at the navel chakra causes the channel knots to loosen—this time allowing the red bodhicitta to move towards the heart in an upwards direction, and thus account for the inner sign of red light.

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<sup>176</sup>Tharchin, *Sublime Path to Khecara*, 150.

For the third phase of black near-attainment, the red and white bodhicitta converge on the heart cakra, which causes the channel knots to untangle in this area of the body. With the central channel now perfectly straight, the two substances can dissolve into the heart cakra and produce the sign of utter darkness. Once the red and white bodhicitta and their subtle winds have completely dissolved into the indestructible drop, the process of ordinary death—after a brief period of unconsciousness—comes to its climax with the emergence of clear light, where ordinary individuals fail to recognize its potential to produce a full-blown dharmakāya.

### **Ordinary Bardo**

Not long after the emergence of the clear light, the subtle mind and wind begin to stir, and a person's continuum arises in the Bardo. During this period of transition, a continuum involuntarily arises in a translucent wind-body (similar to an illusory body) that manifests in the image it will take in its next life.<sup>177</sup> For example, if a continuum's next rebirth is that of an animal, a Bardo-body's outer form will manifest in the appearance associated with that destination. Moreover, each continuum—regardless of its past or future form—possesses a series of miraculous abilities that include extrasensory perception, the power to travel great distances without effort, and the ability to pass freely through solid matter.<sup>178</sup> These characteristics can persist for a maximum of seven days, at which time a continuum is either reborn into the destination of its newly acquired

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<sup>177</sup>Tsongkhapa, *The Six Yogas of Naropa*, 184.

<sup>178</sup>Ibid, 185.

appearance, or experiences another form of death that results in a second birth in the Bardo. In this way, before moving to a final destination in one of the six realms, this cycle of birth and death can repeat itself up to seven times.

### **Ordinary Rebirth**

Once a continuum possesses the foundation of a Bardo-body, its karmic-determined attractions and aversions decide the circumstances of its next life. For instance, if a continuum's rebirth is that of a human, it develops both attraction and aversion for its future parents. These emotions arise when the Bardo confronts a continuum with the image of its parents in the act of sexual intercourse. When this happens, if a continuum is destined to be born as a female, it will experience lust for the father, while simultaneously holding an aversion for the mother.<sup>179</sup> Conversely, if a continuum is destined to be born as a male, it will experience lust for the mother, while simultaneously holding an aversion for the father. After a continuum makes this connection, it enters the mother's womb and progresses through the normal stages of fetal development.

### **The Basis of Purification and Its Relevance to Tibetan Self-Immolation**

So far, the stages of death, bardo, and rebirth, have been presented in the way ordinary individuals experience them. The goal of the tantric path, however, is to transform them into practices designed to produce the bodies of a buddha. In contrast, by applying a series of yogic methods, tantric aspirants can learn to capture the subtle levels

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<sup>179</sup>Ibid.,

of mind and wind that the basis of purification naturally exposes. Thus, the content of chapter three will use the foundational knowledge presented in this chapter to explain the yogic-methods that counteract the so-called ‘certainty’ of ordinary death, bardo, and rebirth.

In considering the connection between Tibetan self-immolation and the concepts presented in this chapter, the very idea of a basis of purification suggests that there is a fundamental nature to human existence that everyone possesses. To recap, while the Pāramitāyāna positions the basis of purification with the ignorance of self-grasping, the Vajrayāna—under its anuttarayoga tantra distinction—recognizes it as the transformation of ordinary death, bardo, and rebirth.<sup>180</sup> As a reality of samsaric existence, these objects of purification, despite their general unpleasantness, connect living beings to their ultimate potential—a stipulation that includes the mental and physical properties of the self-immolators. And it is this potential—seated in the basis of purification—that speaks to the enormity of self-immolation as a deadly protest.

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<sup>180</sup>Pabongkha, *The Extremely Secret Dakini of Naropa*, 104.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE PATH TO THE BODIES OF A BUDDHA

As ordained individuals immersed in the particulars of their tradition, the self-immolators would have had a plethora of root texts, commentaries, and qualified teachers to guide them on the tantric path. These resources—as seen in the daily praxis of the tradition—have a dominant presence in the institutional ambiance of Tibet’s religious centers. There are even entire monasteries—such as Gyuto<sup>181</sup> and Gyume<sup>182</sup>—where nearly every facet of the curriculum focuses on the study of Vajrayāna texts. With this infrastructure for tantric education and practice, the self-immolators had access to a storehouse of knowledge that would have laid-out a direct path to realizing their potential by attaining the two bodies. Whether or not they made-use of this infrastructure so that they could turn an act of suicide into a positive step on the Buddhist path will probably remain a mystery.

This chapter will, therefore, present the complete path of anuttarayoga tantra by detailing its grounds of attainment that lead to buddhahood, and the final transcendence of ordinary death, bardo, and rebirth. With this esoteric knowledge, the systematic

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<sup>181</sup>(Tib: *rGyud stod*). Translated as ‘Upper Tantric College,’ it is one of the two main tantric colleges in the Geluk tradition. It was founded in 1474/5 by Jetsun Kunga Dondrup (1419-1486).

<sup>182</sup>(Tib: *rGyud smad*). Translated as ‘Lower Tantric College,’ it is the other main tantric college in the Geluk tradition. It was founded in 1440 by one of Tsongkhapa’s disciples—Sherab Senge (1384-1445).

sophistication of the tantric path make the goal of producing a dharmakāya and rūpakāya seem possible. And it is this possibility that lends credence to the tantric view of human potential, which ends in aspirant's ability to discard his or her mundane body for that of a divine form.

### **The Generation Stage: A General Description**

The first stage of anuttarayoga tantra is the generation stage. In his *Paths and Grounds of Guhyasamāja According to Nāgārjuna*,<sup>183</sup> the Gelukpa scholar Yangchen Gawai Lodoe<sup>184</sup> defines the generation stage as follows:

A yoga that is a meditation that accords with any of the aspects of death, bardo, or rebirth. It is also a factor for the ripening of the mental continuum for its resultant state, the completion stage, not arising through the actual meditation practice of the winds entering, abiding, and dissolving in the central channel.<sup>185</sup>

Thus, the purpose of the generation stage is to ripen an aspirant's continuum for the higher yogas of the completion stage.<sup>186</sup> To prepare the mind for this next level of practice, generation stage aspirants use a series of detailed visualizations to transform

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<sup>183</sup>This is an abbreviated title. The full title is as follows: *A Presentation on the Paths and Grounds of Mantra According to the Superior Nāgārjuna's Interpretation of the Glorious Guhyasamāja, A Good Explanation Serving as a Gateway for the Fortunate* (dPal gsang ba 'dus 'pa phags lugs dang mthun pa'i snag kyi sa lam rnam gzhag legs bshad skal bzang 'jug ngogs rnam rgyal grwa tsang).

<sup>184</sup>(Tib: dByangs can dga' ba'i blo gros).

<sup>185</sup>Yangchen Gawai Lodoe (eighteenth century). *Paths and Grounds of Guhyasamāja According to Nāgārjuna*. (Modified, quoted in Geshe Tashi Tsering. *Tantra: The Foundation of Buddhist Thought; Volume 6*. Somerville, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2012). 79.

<sup>186</sup>Daniel Cozort. *Highest Yoga Tantra: An Introduction to Esoteric Buddhism*. (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2005). 41.

their ordinary identifications of mind and body into that of a meditational deity.<sup>187</sup>

Through this process, an aspirant can bring his or her meditative image of the deity to such a height of clarity and power that it begins to become real.<sup>188</sup> At this initial level, an aspirant's divine assimilation has the power to purify the mind of two conditions related to unenlightened existence—ordinary concepts<sup>189</sup> and ordinary appearances.<sup>190</sup>

To purify ordinary concepts, an aspirant must cultivate a level of divine pride<sup>191</sup> that flawlessly identifies itself with a meditational deity. In such a way, he or she can learn to perceive the reality of samsara as being utterly pure and filled with bliss-wisdom. If an aspirant can produce and maintain these states of divine perception into the affairs of daily life, they can purify the mind's habit of apprehending the world and its environment as mundane.

To purify ordinary appearances, an aspirant must learn to wed his or her divine pride with the deity's visualized image. To accomplish this, an aspirant has to meditatively review the deity's distinctive features, until it develops into an all-encompassing object of concentration. Thus, by sequentially repeating this visualization for months, years, or even decades, the entire image can become more radiant and vividly-present than a physical form seen by the eye.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>187</sup>(Tib: *yi dam*). This is a yogi's chosen tantric deity which serves as his or her central object of devotion, meditation, and object of accomplishment.

<sup>188</sup>Cozort, *Highest Yoga Tantra*, 41.

<sup>189</sup>(Tib: *tha mal gyi zhen pa*).

<sup>190</sup>(Tib: *tha mal gyi snang ba*).

<sup>191</sup>(Skt: *devamana*; Tib: *lha'i nga rgyal*).

<sup>192</sup>Tsongkhapa, *The Six Yogas of Naropa*, 124.

Within the division of the generation stage, there are two stages that aspirants must negotiate before they can fully devote themselves to the higher yogas of the completion stage: (1) rough generation stage<sup>193</sup> and (2) subtle generation stage.<sup>194</sup> During the rough generation stage, an aspirant cultivates—as already discussed—the combined methods of divine pride and clear appearance by meditating on the visualized image of a deity and its broader maṇḍala. During the subtle generation stage, an aspirant must learn to visualize that same maṇḍala condensed into a drop at the upper opening of the central channel—a place roughly located between the eyebrows. This drop—about the size of mustard seed—can then be moved to the tip of the sex organ where a virtuoso-yogi can generate sensations of bliss. Once he or she can maintain these visualizations for one-sixth of a day<sup>195</sup>—or a period of about four hours—an aspirant has actualized the first stage of anuttarayoga tantra and can move-on to completion stage yogas.

### **The Generation Stage: Taking the Three Bodies as the Path**

Because tantra uses visualized images to breakdown an aspirant’s understanding of reality, the generation stage occurs at an imaginative level. It is not until the second stage of anuttarayoga tantra that an aspirant’s imaginative-vision can become a reality. For this reason, during the generation stage, the yoga of taking the three bodies as the path operates as a dress rehearsal for the actual transformation of the basis of

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<sup>193</sup>(Tib: *bskyed rim rags pa*).

<sup>194</sup>(Tib: *bskyed rim phra mo*)

<sup>195</sup>The term ‘one-sixth of a day’ is the traditional method of measurement used to indicate when a an aspirant has completed the generation stage.



purification.<sup>196</sup> The practice, therefore, consists of three major components that correspond directly to the production of the threefold division of the two bodies: (1) taking death as the path to the dharmakāya,<sup>197</sup> (2) taking the bardo as the path to the saṃbhogakāya,<sup>198</sup> and (3) taking rebirth as the path to the nirmāṇakāya.<sup>199</sup>

### ***Taking Death as the Path to the Dharmakāya***

To begin the practice of taking death as the path to the dharmakāya, an aspirant imagines that his or her body and the surrounding environment dissolve into a seed syllable<sup>200</sup> located at the heart chakra. This syllable is usually in the form of a Tibetan *hūṃ*,<sup>201</sup> whose fundamental nature is bliss-void wisdom. As the next stage in the meditation, an aspirant then sequentially dissolves the *hūṃ*, until it disappears into space-like emptiness.<sup>202</sup> While this happens, an aspirant reflects on the dissolutions associated with an ordinary death in an effort to transform them when the appropriate moment of application presents itself.

Before one can understand how an aspirant meditates on the dissolution process, it is essential to know the features of the *hūṃ* syllable. In the heart chakra, an aspirant

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<sup>196</sup>Pabongkha, *The Extremely Secret Dakini of Naropa*, 104.

<sup>197</sup>(Tib: *'chi ba chos sku' lam 'khyer*).

<sup>198</sup>(Tib: *bar do longs sku' lam 'khyer*).

<sup>199</sup>(Tib: *skye ba sprul sku' lam 'khyer*).

<sup>200</sup>(Skt: *bījā*; Tib: *sa bon yig*) This is the syllable that is synonymous with a particular meditational deity.

<sup>201</sup>(Tib: *hUM*) This is a syllable that is often used to indicate a buddha's enlightened mind. It is also the seed syllable of many anuttarayoga tantra deities.

<sup>202</sup>Ngulchu Dharmabhadra. *Source of Supreme Bliss: Heruka Chakrasamvara Five Deity Practice and Commentary*. (Trans. David Gonzalez. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2010), 46.

visualizes the hūṃ, about the size of a mustard seed, and made of light. When meditational manuals mention the ‘head’ of the hūṃ, they are referring to the uppermost part of the syllable, as it usually appears in non-tantric texts. In contrast, when referring to a seed syllable, the hūṃ—at the top of its head—has a crescent moon,<sup>203</sup> a circular dot,<sup>204</sup> and a three-curved flame<sup>205</sup> staked on top of each other. Within this structure, each part of the hūṃ represents a specific dissolution that correlates itself with the process of ordinary death.<sup>206</sup>

Thus, after the body disappears into the hūṃ, an aspirant begins to reflect on the dissolution of the elements by gradually dissolving each segment of the syllable. For example, when the body of the hūṃ disappears into its ‘head,’ an aspirant imagines that the earth element has dissolved into the water element, and the mind perceives the sign of a mirage-like appearance. When the ‘head’ of the hūṃ disappears into the crescent moon, the water element has dissolved into the fire element, and the mind perceives the sign of a smoke-like appearance. When the crescent moon disappears into the circular dot, the fire element has dissolved into the wind element, and the mind perceives the sign of a firefly-like appearance. Finally, when the circular dot disappears into the three-curved flame, the wind element has dissolved into the consciousness, and the mind perceives the sign of a candle-lame-like appearance.

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<sup>203</sup>(Tib: *zla tshes*). The crescent moon sits on its back with the opening of the crescent facing up.

<sup>204</sup>(Tib: *thig le*). The circular dot rests on the opening space within the crescent moon.

<sup>205</sup>(Tib: *na da*). The three-curved flame rises out of the circular dot.

<sup>206</sup>Dharmabhadra, *Source of Supreme Bliss*, 47.

After the different parts of the hūṃ have dissolved into the three-curved flame, an aspirant begins to reflect on the death-time dissolution of the subtle and most-subtle mind. Again, for example, when the first curve of the three-curved flame disappears into the second curve, the mind of white luminosity arises. When the second curve disappears into the third curve, the mind of red radiance arises. When the third curve disappears into emptiness, the mind of black near-attainment arises—followed by a period of unconsciousness. Finally, when this phase ends, an aspirant imagines that he or she has awakened into the highest level of clear light—i.e., the dharmakāya.

***Taking the Bardo as the Path to the Saṃbhogakāya***

While the visualizations related to death are generally the same from system-to-system, the yoga of ‘taking the bardo as the path to the saṃbhogakāya’ can differ—sometimes considerably—among the varieties of anuttarayoga tantra. Even though they all possess the essentials of the practice, the self-generation liturgies<sup>207</sup> associated with the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* are particularly relevant to how the qualities of the two bodies come into existence.

In the five deity system of Cakrasaṃvara,<sup>208</sup> the yoga of ‘taking the bardo as the path to the saṃbhogakāya’ starts during the experience of clear light.<sup>209</sup> While abiding in

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<sup>207</sup>(Tib: *bdag bskyed*). These ‘self-generation liturgies’ are meditation manuals that—when recited—guides an aspirant through the visualizations required to imagine oneself as a meditational deity.

<sup>208</sup>(Tib: *bDe mchog lha lnga*). This is the system of Cakrasaṃvara that originates from the mahāsiddha Ghaṅṭāpa. The five deities of the maṅḍala are (1) Cakrasaṃvara in union with his consort Vajrayoginī—and the four ḍākinīs: (2) Ḍākinī, (3) Lāma, (4) Khaṅḍharohi, and (5) Rūpiṅī.

<sup>209</sup>Dharmabhadra, *Source of Supreme Bliss*, 49.

this state, an aspirant develops the intention to arise from the bliss of the dharmakāya to benefit others. Driven by this motivation, he or she then springs from the clear light like a fish leaping out of water and takes on the outer appearance of a three-curved flame—white, with a touch of red.<sup>210</sup> This ‘leaping’ sensation is the same movement that an ordinary continuum undergoes after it exits the unenlightened clear light and emerges in the form of a bardo-body.<sup>211</sup> Conversely, at the level of the generation stage, an aspirant imagines that he or she has taken control of that same post-clear-light-wind, which he or she then molds into a three-curved flame.

Like the visualizations connected with the transformation of death, the three curves of the flame represent the subtle mind’s three levels—this time, however, in reverse order: clear light into black near-attainment, black near-attainment into red radiance, red radiance into white luminosity, and so forth. During an ordinary bardo, the subtle mind’s inverse manifestations signal a continuum’s reemergence into a realm of appearance—i.e., the Bardo.<sup>212</sup> During the generation stage, however, the subtle mind’s inverse sequence marks the inception, and subsequent attainment, of Cakrasaṃvara’s saṃbhogakāya in the form of a three-curved flame.

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<sup>210</sup>Dharmabhadra, *Source of Supreme Bliss*, 50. The white characteristic of the three-curved flame represents the wind that arises from the clear light. The flame’s white color is because the wind from which it appears is white. The red characteristic of the flame represents the transcendence of a bardo-being’s attachments that keeps it in saṃsāra.

<sup>211</sup>(Tib: *Bar do slu*). This is the ghost-like body that arises out of the unenlightened clear light and enters the Bardo.

<sup>212</sup>Dharmabhadra, *Source of Supreme Bliss*, 49.

### *Taking Rebirth as the Path to the Nirmāṇakāya*

During an ordinary bardo, the wind that arises from the clear light takes on the ghost-like transparency of a bardo-body. Since it originates from the clear light, this refined form carries a continuum's karmic propensities into the next life, and this includes the pure basis of the mind and its primordial wisdoms. Thus, while performing the yoga of 'taking rebirth as the path to the nirmāṇakāya,' each step of the process aligns itself with one of the primordial wisdoms.<sup>213</sup> In reiterating the contents of the first chapter, the dharmakāya's primordial wisdoms are as follows: (1) mirror-like wisdom, (2) sameness wisdom, (3) discerning wisdom, (4) performance wisdom, and (5) the wisdom of the dharmadhātu.<sup>214</sup>

#### *Mirror-Like Wisdom and Sameness Wisdom*

In keeping with the context of Cakrasaṃvara, the yoga of taking rebirth as the path to the nirmāṇakāya begins with a series of meditations that symbolize the reemergence of the four elements.<sup>215</sup> Because the object of purification is an ordinary rebirth, the new set of elements replace the previous composition of an aspirant's body with that of Cakrasaṃvara. Like the dissolutions of the subtle mind, the elements also arise in reverse order, because they constitute the recreation of an aspirant's body—albeit

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<sup>213</sup>With respect to the five wisdoms, some tantras—such as Vajra Bhairava—accomplish some of the five wisdoms during 'taking the bardo as the path to the saṃbhogakāya, and others during 'taking the rebirth as the path to the nirmāṇakāya.' However, the concept of carrying these wisdoms into the full manifestation of a buddha is the same among the major tantric-systems of Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>214</sup>(Skt: *dharmadhātujñāna*; Tib: *chos kyi dbyings kyi ye shes*). In the system of five wisdoms, the wisdom of the dharmadhātu is the quality of the dharmakāya that realizes the natural state of all things.

<sup>215</sup>Dharmabhadra, *Source of Supreme Bliss*, 50.

in a god-like form. At the time of taking rebirth as the path to the *nirmāṇakāya*, however, the elements come into existence as varied-shaped *maṇḍalas* that serve as the foundation for *Cakrasaṃvara*'s celestial environment. Furthermore, these *maṇḍalas* stack themselves one-above-the-other, and abide in the area directly below *Cakrasaṃvara*'s *sambhogakāya*—i.e., the three-curved flame.<sup>216</sup> In this way, the elements emerge in the following order: air out of emptiness, fire on top of air, water on top of fire, and earth on top of water. Upon this foundation, the distinctive features of *Cakrasaṃvara*'s broader *maṇḍala*—such as its charnel grounds,<sup>217</sup> vajra fences,<sup>218</sup> Mount Meru,<sup>219</sup> and others—can emerge.

With the preparatory building blocks of the four elements, an aspirant is ready to generate the symbolic manifestation of the *dharmakāya*'s mirror-like wisdom. This meditation starts when an aspirant imagines that a vast lotus-flower opens up on the double vajra<sup>220</sup> that rests on the peak of Mount Meru—the central and most prominent feature of *Cakrasaṃvara*'s *maṇḍala*. From the opening of the lotus, an aspirant—abiding above it in the form of a three-curved flame—imagines that two sets of sixteen Sanskrit vowels<sup>221</sup> appear on its surface.<sup>222</sup> The two sets of vowels—which are the color of white pearls—arrange themselves on the lotus in a circular formation, which creates a thirty-

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<sup>216</sup>Ibid.

<sup>217</sup>(Skt: *śmāśāna*; Tib: *dur khrod*).

<sup>218</sup>(Tib: *rdor rje ra ba*).

<sup>219</sup>(Skt: *Sumeruparvata*; Tib: *Ri rab*).

<sup>220</sup>(Skt: *vishva vajra*; Tib: *rdor rje rgya gram*).

<sup>221</sup>(Tib: *a li*).

<sup>222</sup>Dharmabhadra, *Source of Supreme Bliss*, 53.

two syllable circle. Since the present yoga seeks to produce a fully realized *nirmāṇakāya*, the vowels symbolize the nature of a buddha's thirty-two major signs.

Following the emergence of the vowels, the next event in the process of 'taking rebirth as the path to the *nirmāṇakāya*' is the manifestation of two sets of forty Sanskrit consonants.<sup>223</sup> Similar to the vowels, the consonants arrange themselves in a circular formation and stand upright on the surface of the lotus. This time, however, the syllables—totaling eighty in all—are red and stand outside the circle of vowels. Like the first circle of syllables and their relationship to the thirty-two major signs, the consonants symbolize the nature of a buddha's eighty minor marks.<sup>224</sup>

After the placement of the vowels and consonants, they completely transform into a flat 'moon-disc'<sup>225</sup> that sits on the petals of the lotus. Its color is a combination of white and red, not only because it signifies the result of the vowels and consonants transformation, but also because they represent the mixing of a father and mother's bodhicitta substances (white ejaculate and red menstrual blood), which occurs at the moment of conception.<sup>226</sup> In addition to its red and white hue, the circular sets of vowels and consonants reemerge on the surface of the moon-disc. When this happens, the syllables appear as if they were reflections in a mirror, rather than standing upright as they did on the lotus. For this reason, the reflection of the white vowels symbolize the

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<sup>223</sup>(Tib: *ka li*).

<sup>224</sup>Dharmabhadra, *Source of Supreme Bliss*, 55.

<sup>225</sup>(Tib: *zl ba dkyil 'khor*).

<sup>226</sup>Dharmabhadra. *Source of Supreme Bliss*, 56.

mirror-like wisdom of a buddha's dharmakāya, while those of the red consonants symbolize its sameness wisdom.

### *Discerning Wisdom*

As the next phase in the sequence, an aspirant—abiding above the moon-disc in the form of a three-curved flame—sees the representations of a buddha's major and minor marks and develops the resolve to take birth into such an existence. In that only high level bodhisattva's can actually see a saṃbhogakāya, the benefits of remaining in this form are extremely limited.<sup>227</sup> Instead, an aspirant—driven by the strength of bodhicitta—contemplates the situation in the following manner:

“While in this illusory body (the three-curved flame), ordinary beings are unable to see me with their eyes, therefore, I must enter into the coarse white and red bodhicitta of the Buddha Father and Mother and take up the nirmāṇakāya to accomplish the welfare of impure living beings.”<sup>228</sup>

Armed with this intention, an aspirant lowers his or her saṃbhogakāya onto the substance-laden moon-disc, in a move to purify the basis of an ordinary continuum's entrance into a womb. Then, in a step-by-step manner, the three-curved flame transforms itself—along with an aspirant's continuum—into a white and red hūṃ, which stands on the moon-disc like a towering obelisk. With its complete manifestation, where the entirety of the syllable has come into existence, the hūṃ becomes the embodiment of a buddha's discerning wisdom, because the process of its creation requires an aspirant to

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<sup>227</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>228</sup>Ibid.,



‘discern,’ or identify, the signs that lead to an enlightened rebirth—such as the placement of the vowels and consonants, the white and red color of the moon-disc, and so forth.

### *Performance Wisdom*

With the complete manifestation of the hūṃ, the process of taking rebirth as the path to the nirmāṇakāya begins to turn its attention to visualizations that represent a buddha’s enlightened activities—hence the term ‘performance’ wisdom. From its position at the center of the maṇḍala, light rays issue-forth from the hūṃ and touches every living being in saṃsāra. This action purifies them of their negativities,<sup>229</sup> faults,<sup>230</sup> and downfalls<sup>231</sup>—including the two obscurations—until they achieve a state of complete purity. Then, through the power of this blessing, each-and-every living being arises in the form of Cakrasaṃvara, embraced by his consort, and dripping with bliss-wisdom. Next, those same light rays callback the endless manifestations of Cakrasaṃvara, which then reabsorb into the central hūṃ. Through this process, the visualizations remind an aspirant of his or her bodhicitta-intention as the principal aim of tantric practice. For this reason, the sequence of issuing and retracting light-rays work in a reciprocal relationship, where the cause of bodhicitta directly affects the potency of the deity’s blessings and the overall success of its implementation.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>229</sup>(Tib: *sdig pa*).

<sup>230</sup>(Tib: *sgrib pa*).

<sup>231</sup>(Tib: *ltung ba*).

<sup>232</sup>Dharmabhadra, *Source of Supreme Bliss*, 58.

### *The Wisdom of the Dharmadhātu*

As the final phase of the *nirmāṇakāya*'s self-generation, the yogic-techniques employed at this stage seek to transform the seat of an aspirant's continuum (i.e., the red and white *hūṃ*) into the divine pride and clear appearance of *Cakrasaṃvara*. To accomplish these crucial elements of generation stage practice, an aspirant utters a series of mantras that remind him or her of the deity's body, speech, and mind—as well as the need to maintain the view of divine pride and clear appearance.<sup>233</sup> Finally, from within this pure state of mind, the moon-disc, vowels and consonants, and central *hūṃ* melt into an orb of light, which eventually transitions itself into the appearance of *Cakrasaṃvara* and his exterior *maṇḍala*. With this final transformation, an aspirant reflects on his or her imaginative-vision of the deity and its *maṇḍala* in the following way:

“I am pure, and my vajra-like mind of simultaneously born great bliss is inseparable from the lack of inherent existence of all phenomena.”<sup>234</sup>

Thus, this last phase of taking rebirth as the path to the *nirmāṇakāya* connects itself with the wisdom of the *dharmadhātu*, because the practice seals the entirety of the *maṇḍala* with bliss-wisdom.

### **The Completion Stage: A General Description**

During the generation stage, the deity-systems of *anuttarayoga* tantra have little variance when compared to its overall theory and objectives. During the completion stage, however, these systems confront spiritual aspirants with different structures, goals

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<sup>233</sup>Ibid, 58-59.

<sup>234</sup>Ibid., 59.

of attainment, and philosophical distinctions—not found, not emphasized, or merely implied in generation stage practice. For example, while the completion stage yogas of Guhyasamāja stress the necessity of producing an illusory body, those of Cakrasamvara focus their attention on developing states of bliss through the creation of *caṇḍāli*.<sup>235</sup>

Despite these differences, all completion stage yogas share a single commonality that defines its function as a higher level of practice. As Yangchen Gawai Lodoe explains:

[The completion stage is] a yoga in the mind-stream of a trainee that has arisen from the winds entering, abiding, and dissolving in the central channel by the power of meditations.<sup>236</sup>

Thus, within the visualized perspective of a deity, completion stage yogas seek to withdraw the winds into the central channel, with the end-goal of dissolving them into the indestructible drop—a process of meditative focus that mimics the flow of the winds during actual death. By inducing this process through various techniques that include vajra repetition,<sup>237</sup> vase breathing,<sup>238</sup> and *caṇḍāli*, an aspirant can generate the ability to access the clear light and attain the dharmakāya by wedding it with the wisdom of emptiness.

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<sup>235</sup>(Tib: *gtu mo*). Often translated as ‘inner-heat,’ this term refers to the meditative generation of heat in the body. The purpose of this practice is to melt the white bodhicitta at the crown of the head, cause it to drip down the central channel, and produce the four joys (*catvārimuditā / dga’ ba bzhi*)—defined as four successive states of bliss that increase as the bodhicitta drips down and up the central channel.

<sup>236</sup>Lodoe, *Paths and Grounds of Guhyasamāja According to Nāgārjuna*, 134.

<sup>237</sup>(Skt: *vajrajāpa*; Tib: *rdo rje’i bzlas pa*). This work will address the particulars of this practice in the section entitled ‘verbal isolation.’

<sup>238</sup>(Skt: *kumbhaka*; Tib: *rlung bum pa can*). A method of breath retention that is analogous to filling a vase. This method consists of taking deep breaths and trapping the air, like a vase, at one of the chakras points—usually at the navel. By doing this practice, the mind gains greater clarity, because it helps move the winds into the central channel. It is also an essential element in the practice of *caṇḍāli*.

While all systems of anuttarayoga tantra seek to accomplish the dharmakāya through the emergence of clear light, its path to the rūpakāya is more varied and generally takes one of two forms: (1) the rainbow body<sup>239</sup> or (2) the illusory body. The rainbow body—as practiced in the yogic-systems of Dzogchen,<sup>240</sup> Kālacakra,<sup>241</sup> and Naropa’s system of Vajrayoginī<sup>242</sup>—uses a variety of systematic methods designed to dissolve the physical body into rainbow light.<sup>243</sup> In a completely different way, the illusory body—as practiced in the yogic-systems of Guhyasamāja and Vajrabhairava<sup>244</sup>—uses the subtle wind that arises from the post-clear-light-mind and shapes it in the image of a tantric deity.<sup>245</sup> Because both the rainbow and illusory bodies exist as undying forms of light and

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<sup>239</sup>(Tib: ‘ja’ lus).

<sup>240</sup>(Skt: *Mahāsaṅdhi* or *Atiyoga*; Tib: *rDzogs chen*). Translated as ‘Great Perfection,’ Dzogchen is a system of yogic practice that works to realize the innermost nature of mind. This system of training is the highest practice in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which was founded by the Indian yogi known to history as Padmasambhava.

<sup>241</sup>(Skt: *Kālacakratantra*; Tib: *Dus kyi ’khor lo*). An anuttarayoga tantra deity whose name means ‘Wheel of Time.’ It is one of the tantras commonly found among the Kagyu, Sakya, and Geluk schools of Tibetan Buddhism. H.H the Dalai Lama regularly gives the Kālacakra initiation to large audiences, because the practice supports world peace.

<sup>242</sup>(Tib: *NA ro mkha’ spyod ma*). A system of tantric practice dedicated to the consort of Cakrasaṃvara—Vajrayoginī. The practice stems from the mystical experience of the Indian Mahāsiddha Naropa (*Nāropa / NA ro pa*) (ca. 956-1040) who beheld Vajrayoginī in a vision where she instructed him in specific yogas associated with her as a meditational deity. Other widely practiced lineages of Vajrayoginī include those descended from the Indian adepts Inrdabhūti (*rGyal po in+d+ra+b+hu ti*) and Maitripa (*Mai tri pa*).

<sup>243</sup>At its most basic level, a rainbow body is a method of yogic practice designed to dissolve the physical body—except for its hair and nails—into a body of light (*’od sku*). Under this system, the attainment of a rainbow body is equivalent to the rūpakāya aspect of a buddha.

<sup>244</sup>(Tib: *rDor rje ’jigs byed*). An anuttarayoga tantra deity who is the wrathful manifestation of Mañjuśrī. One of Vajrabhairava’s unique features is that it has both the illusory body and caṅdāli yogas. For this reason, a yogi who holds Vajrabhairava as his or her primary practice does not need to incorporate other tantras to realize the two bodies and their bliss nature.

<sup>245</sup>Cozort, *Highest Yoga Tantra*, 65.

wind, they fulfill the qualification of a transcendent rūpakāya, which moves freely and lacks the physical constraints associated with a body of flesh and bone.

Even though the rainbow body systems are complete in their ability to produce the two bodies, the commentarial traditions of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*—particularly those of Tsongkhapa and his descendants—have praised its yogic-system for offering the most explicit path to the dharmakāya and rūpakāya.<sup>246</sup> For this reason, the remainder of this chapter will present the completion stage yogas of *Guhyasamāja* to explain their relevance to the transformation of ordinary death, bardo, and rebirth.

### **The Completion Stage: The Six Levels of *Guhyasamāja***

While the exact number of *Guhyasamāja*'s completion stage levels can vary among its different interpretations, the system used here, however, will follow a six-stage structure. This way of formulating the levels aligns itself with the root tantra of *Guhyasamāja* in general, and the commentarial exegesis of Candrakīrti<sup>247</sup> in particular. Under this rubric, the six levels are as follows: (1) physical isolation,<sup>248</sup> (2) verbal

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<sup>246</sup>Tsongkhapa goes to great lengths to prove this in his *Lamp to Illuminate the Five Stages (Rim lnga gsal sgron)*. As Gavin Kilty reiterates in his introduction to Tsongkhapa's text: "The *Guhyasamāja Tantra* holds a special place in the tantric tradition. It is referred to as the root of all other classes of tantra. Tsongkhapa says, 'In the *Root Tantra*, in the section on the title, it states that every secret of the body, speech, and mind of every *tathāgata* is contained within this tantra.' He devotes a whole section on its merits. There he recounts how just to read, study, or even come into contact with this tantra is of immense benefit, and that as long as the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* remains, the teachings of the Buddha remain also, because 'it is the amulet carrying the Buddhadharmā.'" (Kilty, "Translator's Introduction." 9). For this reason, scholars and practitioners alike often refer to the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* as the 'king of tantras'—especially for its second-to-none understanding of the illusory body as the ultimate fulfillment of the rūpakāya.

<sup>247</sup>(Tib: *Zla ba grags pa*).

<sup>248</sup>(Skt: *kāyaviveka*; Tib: *lus dben*).

isolation,<sup>249</sup> (3) mental isolation,<sup>250</sup> (4) illusory body, (5) actual clear light,<sup>251</sup> and (6) union.<sup>252</sup>

Because the focus of this thesis centers around the production of a dharmakāya and rūpakāya, there is no need for an elaborate description of the three isolations. Instead, the presentation provided here will highlight them as preliminaries to Guhyasamāja's fourth and fifth levels—i.e., the illusory body and actual clear light.

### ***The Three Isolations***

The three isolations are yogic-states that isolate the body, speech, and mind from the unenlightened perception of mundane existence.<sup>253</sup> This level of practice is different from the visualized yogas of the generation stage, in that they have the ability to condense the winds at various power-points in the subtle body—especially the heart cakra.

For instance, during physical isolation, the yogas—such as caṇḍāli— isolate the body from its ordinary sensations by generating states of physical bliss, which arise when an aspirant develops the ability to bring the winds into the central channel. During verbal isolation, the yogas—such as vajra repetition— isolate the wind responsible for an aspirant's speech faculty by linking it with the sound of a particular mantra. During

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<sup>249</sup>(Skt: *vāgviveka*; Tib: *ngag dben*).

<sup>250</sup>(Skt: *cittaviveka*; Tib: *sems dben*).

<sup>251</sup>(Tib: *don gyi 'od gsal*).

<sup>252</sup>(Skt: *yuganaddha*; Tib: *zung 'jug*). Tashi Tsering, *Tantra: The Foundation of Buddhist Thought; Volume 6*. (Somerville, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2012). 135.

<sup>253</sup>Gavin Kilty. "Translator's Introduction." In Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa. *A Lamp to Illuminate the Five Stages: Teachings on the Guhyasamāja Tantra*. (Trans. Gavin Kilty. Somerville, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2013), 4.

mental isolation, the yogas—such as *karmamudrā*<sup>254</sup>—isolate the mind from its dualistic propensities by yogically inducing the non-conceptual states of consciousness—i.e., white luminosity, red radiance, black near-attainment, and the most-subtle mind of clear light.

As their primary objective, the step-by-step sequence of the isolations culminates in the dissolution of the winds into the indestructible drop at the heart, which ultimately induces the appearance of clear light. In this way, the three isolations—physical isolation, verbal isolation, and mental isolation—respectively work to bring the winds into the central channel, loosen the channel knots at the heart, and cause the winds to dissolve into the indestructible drop. Thus, it is at the level of mental isolation that an aspirant experiences his or her first vision of clear light, outside its natural and unenlightened occurrence during the ebb-and-flow of samsaric existence.<sup>255</sup>

### ***The Illusory Body***

Once an aspirant has experienced the clear light during mental isolation, he or she uses it to provide a foundation for the creation of an illusory body. This body consists of the same wind that begins to stir after the experience of clear light. Like an ordinary continuum's emergence in the Bardo, the reemergence of its consciousness causes the inner signs of the dissolution process to manifest in reverse order—clear light into black

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<sup>254</sup>(Tib: *las kyi phyag-rgya*).

<sup>255</sup>There are several occasions during a person's life where he or she can experience a mundane level of clear light. Some examples include: when having an orgasm, when sneezing, when falling asleep, or when experiencing an ordinary death.

near-attainment, black near-attainment into red radiance, red radiance into white luminosity, and so forth.<sup>256</sup> Usually, this reemergence of wind would throw a person's continuum into the Bardo without any control over its ultimate destination. When yogically induced, however, a skilled aspirant can take control over that same wind and transform it into the appearance of his or her meditational deity.

Moreover, because this body manifests as a ghost-like entity of light and wind, it is entirely unobstructed, in the way that a Bardo-body can walk through walls and travel great distances in an instant. The illusory body is, therefore, often equated to a dream, mirage, or phantom-like body, in that its manner of existence is unhindered by external objects. With such a body, an aspirant can not only transcend the experience of an ordinary Bardo but also produce an undying and magical form that can eventually become a buddha's rūpakāya.

Once an aspirant can generate an illusory body, he or she can use it to enhance the potency of the clear light. During mind isolation, an aspirant achieves what authoritative sources call 'simulated clear light,'<sup>257</sup> which represents—as previously mentioned—the first meditative glimpse of the most-subtle mind. This level of clear light, however, merely 'simulates' the clear light's highest manifestation, because an aspirant experiences it through the indirect use of dualistic images.<sup>258</sup> Consequently, since it lacks the potency of direct non-duality, the illusory body that arises from this level of clear light is only in

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<sup>256</sup>Tsongkhapa, *Six Yogas of Naropa*, 184.

<sup>257</sup>(Tib: *pa'i od 'gsal*).

<sup>258</sup>Cozort, *Highest Yoga Tantra*, 107.



its first stage of maturity. To bring the clear light to its next stage of development, an aspirant must learn to withdraw the illusory body into the ‘simulated’ level of the most-subtle mind. By doing so, the illusory body acts as a purifying agent to transform the first level of clear light into its non-dual potential—i.e., actual clear light.

### ***The Actual Clear Light and the Final Level of Union***

As the most advanced form of the most-subtle mind, actual clear light is the mind of great bliss that realizes emptiness.<sup>259</sup> Together with its manifestation, this level of clear light completely purges the mind of its subtle-notions of inherent existence.<sup>260</sup> Thus, by dismantling the mind’s tenuous concepts about reality and conjoining it with a direct understanding of emptiness, an aspirant’s attainment of actual clear light serves as the direct mode of accomplishment for the dharmakāya’s exalted wisdom.

Like simulated clear light, an aspirant must learn to emerge from the mind of actual clear light in the form of an illusory body. This time, however, the illusory body appears in its most mature aspect, because the level of clear light from which it arises is fully developed. As follows, there are two types of illusory body: (1) the impure illusory body<sup>261</sup> and (2) the pure illusory body.<sup>262</sup> The first arises from the dualistic mind of ‘simulated’ clear light, while the second arises from the direct non-duality of ‘actual’ clear light. Once an aspirant can produce these purified forms of mind and body, he or

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<sup>259</sup>Ibid, 106.

<sup>260</sup>Ibid,.

<sup>261</sup>(Tib: *ma dag pa'i sgyu lus*).

<sup>262</sup>(Tib: *dag pa'i sgyu lus*).

she spends the remainder of the path working to unite the clear light and illusory body into a seamless ‘union’—the sixth and final level of Guhyasamāja’s completion stage yogas.<sup>263</sup>

### **The Completions Stage: Taking the Three Bodies as the Path**

With a foundation in the six levels of Guhyasamāja, the yoga of ‘taking the three bodies as the path’ is relatively straight forward. Unlike the generation stage, the dissolutions associated with the dying process actually happen, as opposed to their mere rehearsal. And it is through the completion stage practices of Guhyasamāja—or those of another deity—that such accomplishments of human potential can become a reality.

Since the natural process of death ultimately reveals the so-called ‘fundamental ground’ of the dharmakāya, a completion stage aspirant can use this quality of mind at the time of death and develop it into the wisdom aspect of a buddha. Conversely, the same is true for the rūpakāya, in that a continuum’s emergence into the bardo provides an aspirant with the basis of subtle wind to produce a buddha’s physical embodiment.

At the time of death, realized aspirants can use such an occasion to eject their consciousness out of the body—a process of yogic-application known as ‘phowa.’<sup>264</sup> Often translated as ‘transference of consciousness,’ there are generally two kinds of phowa. The first is a practice that seeks to project an aspirant’s continuum into a pure

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<sup>263</sup>The stage of union has two phases: (1) learner’s union and (2) non-learner’s union. During learner’s union, an aspirant can unite the experience of the clear light and illusory body, but only while in meditative equipoise. Once an aspirant learns to imbue every activity with their ultimate union, he or she has realized the full extent of the two bodies and therefore accomplishes the pinnacle of Buddhist attainment.

<sup>264</sup>(Tib: *pho ba*).

land of a buddha. The second is a direct transformation of anuttarayoga tantra's basis of purification into the three bodies of a buddha. Such practices—when performed under the appropriate circumstances—regularly end in the yogic-feat called 'tukdam.'<sup>265</sup>

As a relatively common occurrence in Vajrayāna communities, tukdam is a term used to indicate the period after a virtuoso aspirant's clinical death, where he or she abides in the experience of clear light. Because the dawn of the most-subtle mind occurs before a continuum leaves the body, the physical form of an aspirant—which has reached a state of clinical death while sitting upright in meditation—begins to manifest a series of unusual signs. In addition to their posture, these signs include skin that remains soft and flexible, the absence of rigor mortis, a face that glows like the color of gold, and a coalescence of warmth at the heart cakra. Once an aspirant reaches this state of absorption on the clear light, he or she can stay in such a condition for days, weeks, or—in rare cases—up to thirty days.<sup>266</sup> After this duration, an aspirant's continuum moves out of the physical body, which signals the moment of actual death according to anuttarayoga tantra.<sup>267</sup>

To achieve tukdam and transcend an ordinary death, an aspirant must follow the prescriptions related to Guhyasamāja's six levels. To begin, a tantric aspirant must develop the intention to leave his or her body when its life-essential functions signal an

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<sup>265</sup>(Tib: *thugs dam*).

<sup>266</sup>Those in the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism often state that Tsongkhapa stayed in tukdam for thirty days.

<sup>267</sup>As a signal to those around a body engaged in tukdam, the exit of the subtle mind causes the body to slump-out of its upright position.

irreversible decline towards death. Shortly after this recognition, he or she starts to induce the dying process with the determination to permanently abandon the coarse physicality of his or her present existence for the more refined attributes of an illusory body. Once the induction process climaxes with the dawning of clear light, an aspirant arrests the wind that provides the basis of a bardo-body and continues to pursue the tantric path in its purified form—i.e., the first type of illusory body. From within this state, an aspirant can then complete the remainder of Guhyasamāja's levels outside the limitations of an ordinary body. Accordingly, the remaining levels and their respective movements are as follows: (1) the impure illusory body into the actual clear light, (2) the actual clear light into the pure illusory body, and (3) their ultimate convergence into a perfect union, which completes the entirety of the Buddhist path.

Thus, through the medium of tukdam, the induction of the clear light purifies the experience of an ordinary death, which leads to the actualization of the dharmakāya. Similarly, an aspirant can counteract the ordeal of an ordinary bardo by creating a sambhogakāya from the illusory body's two stages. Since these attainments offer complete control over the mind and body, an aspirant can consciously choose the circumstances of his or her next life, and therefore provide the necessary conditions for the flesh and bone manifestation of a buddha's nirmāṇakāya.

## CONCLUSION

In an effort to summarize the yogas of anuttarayoga tantra and their relevance to Tibetan self-immolation, it is helpful to have a scriptural-example that illustrates their relationship. Such an example exists in the *Sutra of Golden Light*,<sup>268</sup> where the Buddha recounts a past-life experience that culminates in the act of suicide. In the text's version of the incident, the Buddha—while still an unenlightened bodhisattva—offers his body to a starving tigress who is unable to feed her cubs. Despite its immediate impression, the sutra does not describe an act of suicide, but rather a profound gift of generosity brought about by the transcendence of the physical body. In order to do this without breaking the precept of taking life, the bodhisattva exchanges his ordinary form for a body of golden light—as the title of the sutra suggests.

As one may infer from the content in this thesis, the image of 'golden light' presented in the sutra is that of an illusory body. For this reason, the *Sutra of Golden Light* is an example of how suicide—when performed under its proper conditions—can serve as a positive step towards enlightenment. With an illusory body, the boundaries of a human body cease to have a life-determining impact on an aspirant's consciousness, which makes it useful in the pursuit of bodhicitta. Without such high attainments, the

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<sup>268</sup>(Skt: *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra*; Tib: *gSer od dam pa mdo* ).

benefits—no matter how well-intentioned—are comparatively small to the negativities that arise from breaking the religion’s life-affirming principles. Thus, on the one hand, the act of self-immolation can serve as valid means to accomplish a worthy cause, while—on the other—it can result in a spiritually damning consequence.

Given that the tantric tradition represents a small and sometimes outcast position in the Buddhist world, the self-immolators—as practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism—had access to the rare and even endangered teachings that fulfill the ultimate intention of the Mahāyāna path.<sup>269</sup> Furthermore, the philosophical and yogic know-how needed to navigate the complex web of tantric practices encompasses nearly every aspect of monastic life. With such an incredible resource at their fingertips, they—more than any other—had the best probability of reaching their tantric-potential.

As individuals endowed with the human condition of the basis of purification, the self-immolators had the necessary platform to transcend the experiences of ordinary death, bardo, and rebirth. When an aspirant applies the yogic-methods of taking the three bodies as the path, he or she can transform the basis of purification into the bodies of a buddha. Since this practice uses the naturally occurring most-subtle mind and wind to produce the clear light and illusory body, an aspirant attains the dharmakāya and rūpakāya by bringing them to a state of full maturity. Accordingly, and by harkening back to the *Sutra of Golden Light*, the combination of the clear light and illusory body is what

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<sup>269</sup>Many authoritative voices over the centuries have called the tantric teachings ‘endangered’ because several lineages associated with specific deities are dying-out. Moreover, many less popular tantras have already died-out since the late first-millennium—the period of Indian history were the tantras rose to prominence.

allows a realized aspirant to shed his or her mundane physicality for a body of light and wind. Moreover, it is this attainment that leads to the transcendence of the basis of purification—i.e., ordinary death, bardo, and rebirth.

When considered in its entirety, this thesis has sought to explain—from a tantric point of view—the dynamics of human potential at play in the act of self-immolation. It would, however, be impossible to comprehend the profound implications of this stated-ambition without a detailed exposition on the yogas that turn an aspirant's potential into a reality. This strategy has not only yielded specific accounts on the procedures to produce a dharmakāya and rūpakāya but has also given the reader a glimpse into how tantric adepts understand the mind and body. In the end, this perspective reveals the hidden potential for every human being to reach the level of a complete buddha. As a resultant state that is both eternal and brought into existence for the singular purpose of benefiting others, buddhahood is the most effective personification of Buddhist ideals, and therefore the best hope for the Tibetan cause. In such a way, while the spiritual results of their actions are unknown, the self-immolators—when seen through the eyes of the tantric path—represent a litany of consequential meanings that go unnoticed by lesser informed individuals.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Mark David Eskridge is a practicing Buddhist pursuing an academic career in religious studies. After earning his BA degree from The American University in Washington DC, he traveled extensively through places like India and Nepal where his connection to Buddhism grew. A day after his 25th birthday, he took ordination as a monk in the Geluk tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, during which time he studied closely with his root guru and preceptor Gyume Khensur Lobsang Jampa. After returning to life as a layperson after almost five years, he devotes himself to an equal share of meditative practice and academic study. His area of academic interest rests heavily on Tibetan mysticism and elements of tantric practice, which he feels are underrepresented in academic circles.

