

# Heavenly Ascents after Death

## Karma Chags med's *Commentary on Mind Transference*


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Wherefore we ought to fly away from earth to heaven  
as quickly as we can; and to fly away is to become like god,  
as far as possible and to become like him is to become just,  
holy and wise.

PLATO, *Theaetetus* (176b)

### *Celestial Journeys*

isionary accounts of heavenly ascents and descents by means of a ladder, a tree, a rope and so forth, play an integral part in the sacred narratives of religions around the world.<sup>1</sup> These varied experiences—which arguably represent an archetypal journey that connects the spiritual explorer to a supra-mundane reality—are often associated with notions of spiritual sublimation, divine kingship, and the transition of the soul from this life to a transcendent state, heaven or the underworld. Legendary reports of celestial travels reported by yogis, theurgists, and shamans are attested across traditions; for example, in Menelaus' transfer to the Elysian fields, Heracles' admission to Mt. Olympus, the assumption of Mithra into heaven by a celestial chariot, and the visions of Jacob and the prophet Muhammad of a ladder reaching towards God. Further to the East, Yudhiṣṭhira of the *Mahābhārata* rides on Indra's chariot to higher realms and the Buddha ascends and descends from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods.

Tibetan legends speak of the 'seven sky thrones' (*gnam la khri bdun*), the first line of kings descending from heaven to earth to act as rulers. Upon completing their task, by means of a sacred cord (*dmu thag*)—a white light beam—they ascended to heaven leaving no mortal remains on earth. In the *Pillar Testament*, it is said:

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<sup>1</sup> In his comprehensive study, *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (1958: 99–111), Mircea Eliade has noted the prevalence of sky myths and related hierophanies, commenting on their function and symbolism across diverse religious traditions.

With reference to those seven, they possessed, on their crowns, the so-called 'divine daemon-cord' (*mutak*). This was a ray of white light. When those seven passed from suffering and journeyed to the realm of the gods, they dissolved into light from their feet upwards, and after the light faded into the sky they left no corpses behind. So it is said that the mausoleums of the seven thrones were planted in space.<sup>2</sup>

Across the Eurasian continent, we encounter narratives of divine kingship. In China, the emperors were regarded as sons of heaven (*tian zi* 天子) and Tibetan rulers and hierarchs of various schools exploited, to their advantage, Buddhist sagas of celestial buddhas and bodhisattvas reincarnating as returning bodhisattvas (*sprul sku*) for the welfare of their polities, enjoying indisputable rights of secular and spiritual sovereignty over their subjects.

Tucci (1980: 246) has long noted that, for the Tibetans, the connection between heaven and earth was a primeval article of faith that found ritual expression in the worship of mountains as contact zones between this world and another, and as sacred places for pilgrimage. The symbiotic relationship between shamanism and clerical Buddhism has shaped the development and expression of Tibetan religion and society,<sup>3</sup> and resulted in the role of the Buddhist lama appropriating the functions of a shaman. He was thus expected to display mastery of supernatural forces when performing tantric rituals to extend life, summoning wealth and prosperity, interpret dreams and omens, defeating negative beings, and guiding the spirits of the dead in their transition to the afterlife. In time, ritual mastery, along with expertise in Buddhist doctrinal learning, became the highest Tibetan ideal embodied in the person of the 'scholar-siddha' (*mkhas grub*).

Despite attempts to purge Early Buddhism from mystical elements and repackage it as a rational system compatible with modern science, 'supernatural themes' are not altogether absent. In the Pāli sources, we read of miraculous events performed at Śrāvastī by Śākyamuni: the immediate growth of a mango tree; doppelgängers of himself manifesting in heavenly and terrestrial abodes; and the emissions of fire and water from his shoulders and feet as he rose into the air. Having performed these miracles, Śākyamuni ascended to Trāyastriṃśa, the Heaven of Thirty-Three, where he spent three months teaching his deceased mother, Māyā, while seated on the Armolika rock (*ar mo ling ka'i rdo leb*). The Armolika was later

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<sup>2</sup> *Bka' chems ka khol ma*, pp. 84–85; translation by Kapstein (2006:37). For an extensive discussion on Tibetan kingship and cosmogony, see Davidson (2003).

<sup>3</sup> The implication of the Central Asian or, rather, Eurasian roots of such themes have been explored by Geoffrey Samuel in *Civilized Shamans* (1993).

identified with the celestial seat of Buddha Vajradhara, an emanation of Buddha Śākyamuni teaching the tantras in non-human realms.<sup>4</sup>

His descent from Trāyastrimśa, by means of a bejewelled ladder provided by Śakra, is a cause for festivities in many Buddhist countries. In Tibetan societies, it is celebrated as the Buddha's descent from the gods (*lha babs dus chen*) commemorated on the twenty-second day of the ninth month. Astral journeys to celestial realms are, in fact, at the core of Buddhist lore. Śākyamuni is said to have resided in Tuṣita heaven as the bodhisattva Setaketu (Dam pa tog dkar po) before his final rebirth in our world, and the bodhisattva Maitreya is currently there waiting to descend to earth for his final birth as a buddha. The motif of heavenly arrivals and departures is common in Mahāyāna where it is believed that all bodhisattvas who have realized the tenth *bhūmi* will take birth in Tuṣita before their final birth in our human world to attain enlightenment. Nevertheless, bodhisattvas who descend to our world can take different forms. While early Buddhism did not promote the notion of the divinity of kings, in the twelfth chapter of the late Mahāyāna sutra, the *Suvarṇabhāsottama* ('Phags pa gser 'od dam pa mdo sde'i dbang po'i rgyal po; Noble Utmost Golden Light, King of Kings of Sūtra-s; Tōh. 557), a virtuous and moral ruler is a divine son who is said to have descended from the realm of the gods to our mortal world to teach us righteousness and justice.

#### *Transferring one's consciousness*

The tantric technique of *phowa* ('*pho ba*),<sup>5</sup> or transferring one's consciousness (*rnam shes*) at the time of death to a celestial realm, may very well be situated within the framework of comparative studies in religion; however, other than pointing at some profitable areas of comparison, a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of the present study. *Phowa*, also known as 'buddhahood without meditation' (*ma sgom sangs rgyas*),<sup>6</sup> belongs to the traditions of the highest yoga tantra

<sup>4</sup> The appeal of this motif for later tantric teachings is evident in the preparatory training required for the performance of *phowa*, where the yogi is instructed to repeatedly fly in his dreams to the celestial seat of Buddha Vajradhara located in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three; see *Dags po'i bka' 'bum*, Kragh (2015: 356).

<sup>5</sup> From the intransitive Tibetan verb '*pho ba*'; to pass, to change place, shift, migrate, eject, transfer or transit. The term is often used in the compound *tshe 'pho ba* (lit. 'transiting between lives'), referring to dying and transmigrating to another life. It is also attested in several tantric texts with reference to the transit of energy-winds ('*pho ba dbugs*) where during the course of 24 hours, 21.600 energy-winds flow in 24 transits.

<sup>6</sup> This phrase, in reference to *phowa*, is attested to in several works of a later date, such as the *Collected Works of Gampopa* (*Gsung 'bum*, vol. 32, 10b) and in the *Six Dharmas of Niguma* (*Ni gu ma chos drug*).

and it is the most popular post-mortem ritual performed in funerals by adepts on behalf of the deceased to ensure a favourable rebirth.<sup>7</sup> Its unique feature entails the visualization of an interiorized ‘ladder’ (i.e. a transparent channel) inside the subtle-body that serves as passageway for the transference of consciousness directed out of the crown of the head into a state subjectivized as a Mahāyāna deity, one’s guru (lama) or, more commonly, a ‘pure land’ (*dag pa’i zhing khams*) of one’s choice.



Illustration 1: Jade Burial Suit, Han Dynasty  
(Aurora Museum, Shanghai: photo by Georgios T. Halkias).

Although *phowa* is used in the higher tantras,<sup>8</sup> it constitutes the lesser of two ways to disconnect the coarse from the subtle levels of mind. Cozort (1986: 98) explains that mind-transference merely separates the coarse and subtle bodies but does not lead to the attainment of the

<sup>7</sup> According to Thubten Sangay (2011: 50), *phowa* is an important ritual performed by expert lamas on behalf of the dead who may also prescribe ‘consciousness transference pills’ pressed upon the crown of the deceased.

<sup>8</sup> Thubten Yeshe (1991: 1) has noted that, although mind-transference belongs to the highest level of tantra, “many skillful Tibetan lamas have extracted it from this context and have presented it in terms of the deities of the lower levels of tantra.”

illusory body (*sgyu lus*) realized during the completion-stage meditation known as the ‘final mental isolation’ (*sems dben*) that necessitates the intimacy of a physical partner, a tantric consort or ‘action-seal’ (*las kyi phyag rgya*; Skt. *karma-mudrā*). According to subtle body theory, one’s awareness circulates in the form of motility (*rlung*; Skt. *prāṇa*) across a plane comprising a thin, luminous network of conductors and circuits emanating from a trilateral axis visualized in the physical body. The middle axis, called the *avadhūti* (*dbu ma rtsa*), runs parallel to the cerebrospinal column joining the circuit-of-bliss in the crown of the head with the phallus or vagina. Two channels adjacent to the middle axis run in lateral courses or in a helix. The left (*rkyang ma*) and right (*ro ma*) channels bifurcate respectively at the left and right nostrils and join the central channel at the perineum. According to the *Condensed Kālacakra Tantra*, “when the winds of the two [channels] are stopped, an opening is made at the crown of the head, whereupon one goes to the cities of the supreme.”<sup>9</sup>

Consistent with general Buddhist thought, all sentient beings—propelled by the force of karma—are bound to experience a recurring cycle of deaths and rebirths labelled *saṃsāra*. The *phowa* technique enables the practitioner to evade the karmic consequences of his actions and free himself from this cycle, attaining either final release from *saṃsāra* or rebirth in a pure land. In line with tantric theory, when a person dies, his subtle-mind exits through one of nine orifices (*bu ga dgu*) that comprise the lower openings (urethra and anus) and the upper ones, namely the mouth, eyes, ears, nose, and the so-called aperture of Brahmā (Skt. *brahmarandhra*; *tshangs bug*) located on the cranium.<sup>10</sup>

For most individuals, consciousness exits through any of the eight openings leading to various rebirths in *saṃsāra*, whereas the *phowa* adept directs it to egress through the aperture of Brahmā. Among the signs of successful practice, a minute hole is said to appear at the anterior fontanelle on the crown of the head, enabling one’s subtle-mind to depart at the time of death. Concerning this process, Guenther (1963: 201) explains:

When a competent Guru imparts this instruction to his disciple, the region of the fontanel opening becomes highly sensitive to touch and remains so for some time. Moreover, when after the instruction he

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Butön’s *Rgyud sde spyi’i rnam par gzhag pa rgyud sde rin po che’i mdzes rgyan*; see Hopkins (2008: 237).

<sup>10</sup> In his massive encyclopaedic work, the *Tshig mdzod chen mo*, Dung dkar blo bzang ‘phrin las (1927–1997) lists the spot between the eyebrows (*smin mtshams*) and the navel (*lte ba*) in this enumeration. This corresponds to the orifices enumerated in the *Catuṣpīṭha-tantra* (4.3.37); see Szántó (2012: 458).

touches this region with Kusa-grass, symbolically representing the opening of the passage to the ultimate, the distinct sensation of being pierced from top to bottom is created. Needless to say, this practice is not without its dangers and under no circumstances can it be performed when there is any deformation in the bones of the skull or in the spinal cord.

This controversial esoteric technique (Skt. *utkrānti*), by which a tantric practitioner is able to sever his connection to the physical body, goes by the Indian reference to ‘yogic’ or ‘ritual’ suicide. It is attested in many Śaiva scriptures, in one *Vaiṣṇava Samhitā*, and a handful of Śākta Tantras.<sup>11</sup> It appears to be of non-Buddhist origin.<sup>12</sup> The *Catuṣpīṭha-tantra*, one of the earliest late ninth-century *Yoginī-tantras*, is likely the first Indian Buddhist scripture to contain teachings on this method. Mention of *utkrānti* is found in an earlier text, the *Dvikramatattvabhavānā Mukhāgama* of the siddha Buddhasrījñāna/Jñānapāda before the second half of the eighth century.<sup>13</sup> Yogic methods of ejecting consciousness out of one’s body and into the body of another (*parakāyapraveśa*) finds evidence in the *Mahābhārata*, such as when Vidura enters the body of Yudhiṣṭhira to strengthen him. Mallinson and Singleton (2017: 661) note that “the entry of one’s mind into another body (*cittasya paraśarīrāveśaḥ*) is listed as one of the special powers in *Pātāñjalayogaśāstra* 3.38 (10.4), and the commentator Vijñānabhikṣu notes that this process is accomplished along a particular subtle channel.”

Tibetan references to the different varieties of *phowa* are to be sought in post-imperial sources traced, for the most part, either to Indian masters or Tibetan revelations (*gter ma*). In his commentary, *Three Convictions: A Guide to the Stages of Training in the Profound Path of Naro’s Six Dharmas* (Tōh. 5317), Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) states that there are

<sup>11</sup> See White (2009: 114). Testimonia to the Śaiva tantra *Mālinīvijayottara* (17.25-34), contains a list of Śiva texts teaching methods for exiting from the physical body and it should be distinguished from the “fanatical practices of suicide practiced by the Māheśvara laity” (Somadeva Vasudeva, 2004: 437).

<sup>12</sup> According to Szántó (2012: 456), “the earliest sources to teach something akin to *utkrānti* are brahmanical. E.g. the *Brhadāranyakopaniṣad* describes the soul leaving the body through one of the bodily apertures (4.4.1 ff.) and its path to different levels of the Universe (5,10.1). A similar course is described in the *Chāndogyopaniṣad* (5,10.1 ff.), while another passage (8,6.1 ff.) also describes tubes in the body and an egress through which one obtains immortality.” It seems that the belief that the soul ought to depart from the upper top of the cranium, Brahmā’s aperture, may not be confined to Brahmanical sources. A jade burial suit (175 cm in length), sewn with gold wire, that dates to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE) shows all bodily apertures closed save of a hole in the fontanelle; see Illustration 1.

<sup>13</sup> Szántó (2012: 455). The Tibetan translation of *Catuṣpīṭha-tantra* (*Gdan bzhi pa*; Tōh. 428) by Gayādhara and Khug pa lhas btsas dates from the eleventh century.

a number of oral traditions on the method of transference. Its origins can be traced to the *Catuṣpīṭha-tantra* but it is also taught in the *Vajradāka* and *Samputa* tantras and their commentaries (Mullin 2005: 86, 209). All orders of Tibetan Buddhism practice it widely and trace it to different lineages, including the Bön.

For the Gelug and Kagyü schools, *phowa* is commonly included in the *Six Dharmas of Nāropa* (*Nā ro chos drug*).<sup>14</sup> Marpa's biography recounts that, when Marpa was to die, a rainbow appeared in the sky and flowers rained down. When asked by his attendant what was happening, he replied: "Prepare excellent offerings. Glorious Naropa surrounded by immeasurable hosts of dakas and dakinis has arrived to escort me as he promised. Now I must go to the celestial realm as his attendant." (Tsang Nyön Heruka, 1995: 200).

In the tradition of the Old Kadampa, we find reference to this practice in the manual, *The Hero Entering the Battle* (*'Pho ba dpa' bo g.yul 'jug pa*) and, in the school of the Sakya, it is based on the *Hevajra-tantra* included in the *Lamdrë* (*Lam 'bras*) teachings brought to Tibet by Gayādhara and Brog mi lo tsa ba in the late tenth to early eleventh centuries.<sup>15</sup> For the Nyingma and some of the Kagyü lineages, *phowa* is traced to revealed treasures (*gter ma*).<sup>16</sup> It also features in the independent lineage of Chöd (*gcod*) in the technique known as *opening the gates of space* (*nam mkha' sgo 'byed*). For the Bön there are several *phowa* lineages such as, the *Six Principles of Expediency* (*lam khyer drug*), the 'sphere of accomplishment' (*grub pa'i thig le*) found in the *Three Buddhahood Tantras* (*Sangs rgyas rgyud gsum*) rediscovered as *terma* by Gu ru rnon rtshe sometime early in the twelfth century.<sup>17</sup>

Although it seems that *phowa* became an integral part of the tantric repertoire of Tibetan schools from post-imperial times (*phyi dar*) onwards, there are allegedly earlier references to a unique Dzogchen procedure that leads the superior practitioner to bypass the process of dying and realize the 'Rainbow Body of the Great Transfer' (*'ja' lus 'pho*

<sup>14</sup> For an informative study of the *Six Dharmas of Nāropa* and the inclusion of *phowa* in selective textual lineages, see Kragh (2015).

<sup>15</sup> Related to the *Vase Initiation* in the *Lamdre*, the 'globe of light transference' (*'od kyi gong bu'i 'pho ba*) is mentioned as a transference technique (Stearns 2002: 221, fn. 64). The *phowa* practice of corpse-animation (*grong 'jug*) can be traced to Gayādhara, a mysterious and controversial figure said to have been the sole recipient of the *Lamdre* lineage in India (ibid: 48).

<sup>16</sup> There are several *terma* on the practice of *phowa*. The most well-known among these, the *Standing Blade of Grass* (*'Jag tshugs ma*), has been adopted by the Drikung Kagyü. It was revealed sometime in the late 14th century by Nyi zla sangs rgyas and appears to be the earliest Nyingma *terma* that links *phowa* with the cult of Padmasambhava and Sukhāvati; see Halkias (2013: 154–163).

<sup>17</sup> Martin (1994: 33) notes that four of these may be compared with the *Six Dharmas of Nāropa*.

*ba chen po*). For the Nyingma and Bön schools, there are a few individuals said to have attained the 'Great Transfer'; among them, Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, G.yu thog yon tan and the Bön adept Tapihritsa. The early Dzogchen masters, Garab Dorje, Mañjuśrīmitra, Śrī Siṃha, Jñānasūtra and Vairocana the translator, are reported to have realized a process akin to the 'Great Transfer' — that of dissolving their bodies into the essence of the elements at the time of death and manifesting as a 'rainbow body' (*'ja' lus*).

Despite the secretive nature of this esoteric practice, *phowa* has been popularized during a public event known as *Drigung Phowa Chenmo* (*'bri gung 'pho ba chen mo*). It was traditionally performed at Terdrom (Gter sgrom) in the district of Drigung in Central Tibet, every twelve-year calendrical cycle. Formalized by two Drigung Kagyü hierarchs, the brothers Dkon mchog rin chen (1590–1654) and Rig 'dzin chos grags (1595–1659), it was enacted in open space where initiations and instructions based on a *terma* by Nyi zla sangs rgyas, the *Standing Blade of Grass* or *Planting the Stalk* (*'Jag tshugs ma*), were granted to large number of pilgrims arriving from different parts of Tibet.<sup>18</sup>

*The Mind Treasure of the Sky Dharma:  
A Compilation of Extensive Instructions  
for Transferring to Sukhāvātī*

The seventeenth-century monk Karma Chags med Rā ga Asya (1613–1678) is an important figure, not only for the Kagyü school, but also for the Nyingma because of his close association with the Dpal yul lineage and his contribution to the redaction of the *Namchö* (*gnam chos*) collection of treasure-teachings revealed by his gifted disciple Gnam chos Mi 'gyur rdo rje (1645–1667). A disciple of the tenth Karmapa Chos dbyings rdo rje (1604–1674) and the Sixth Zhamar Gar dbang chos kyi dbang phyug (1584–1630), he is the founder of one of the two main branches of the Kamtsang Kagyü lineage, the Nēdo Kagyü that takes its name after his hermitage in Gnas mdo in Eastern Tibet.<sup>19</sup> Karma Chags med (hereafter KC) was a formidable scholar and prolific author who composed some sixty volumes of texts on a variety of subjects while in retreat. He is perhaps best-known for his

<sup>18</sup> For the background history and description of the 1992 celebration of the *Drigung Phowa Chenmo*, see Kapstein (1998: 95–119).

<sup>19</sup> The other branch is the Zurmang tradition. The Nēdo Kagyü developed into two systems, one emphasizing the Kagyü that is the Nēdo lineage, and one focusing on the Nyingma transmission of his students Palyul Rigzin Kunzang Sherab (1636–1698) and Padma Rigzin (1625–1697). For Karma Chagme's biography and that of lineage masters of the Nēdo system of practice, see *Rgyal ba gnas mdo pa'i bla brgyud dang dam pa'i chos kyi byung ba mdor bsdus dwangs shel me long*.



contributions to the Tibetan genre of Pure Land literature, with his *Aspiration Prayer to the Pure Land Sukhāvātī* and its commentary which are widely considered classic texts of the *demön* (*bde smon*) genre.<sup>20</sup>

As stated in the introduction of *The Mind Treasure of the Sky Dharma: A Compilation of Extensive Instructions for Transferring to Sukhāvātī* (*Gnam chos thugs kyi gter kha las bde chen zhing du 'pho ba'i gdams pa rgyas par bsgrigs pa*),<sup>21</sup> KC's commentary is included in the *Namchö* collection of scriptures dedicated to attaining Amitābha's pure land, Sukhāvātī (*bde chen zhing sgrub kyi skor*).<sup>22</sup> Even though nowadays Sukhāvātī features as the soteriological goal for the majority of *phowa sādhana*-s, this was not the case prior to the fourteenth century. To the best of my knowledge, it was first introduced in two treasure texts (*gter ma*): *The Standing Blade of Grass* (*Jag tshugs ma*), revealed by Nyi zla sangs rgyas, and the *Dying without Regrets* (*'Da' ka 'chi brod*) which was redacted by the Nyingma adept Sangs rgyas gling pa (1340–1396). The fact that there are no references to Sukhāvātī-*phowa* in India or East Asia would suggest that it is a unique Tibetan innovation of the *terma* tradition.

According to the colophon of the *Transferring to Sukhāvātī*, it was composed by KC at the behest of Gnam chos Mi 'gyur rdo rje to elucidate the *phowa-sādhana* as it was revealed to the latter during his visionary encounter with Buddha Amitābha in the year 1657. The *sādhana* titled *Means for Attaining Sukhāvātī: Empowerment and Oral Instructions* consists, in addition to the practice of *phowa*, instructions for visiting Sukhāvātī in one's dreams (*rmi lam du bde chen zhing mjal thabs*), an Amitābha long-life *sādhana* (*snang ba mtha' yas kyi tshes sgrub*), related empowerments (*bde chen zhing gi dbang*) and supplication-aspiration (*gsol 'debs dang smon lam*) prayers for taking rebirth in Sukhāvātī.<sup>23</sup>

In the opening passage to the *Transferring to Sukhāvātī*, KC presents Mi 'gyur rdo rje as a legitimate *tertön* citing prophetic proclamations from Ö ryan gling pa's fourteenth-century treasure-text, the *Five Chronicles* (*Bka' thang sde lnga*). He further relates that he is the single emanation of Vairocana the translator and the 'religious minister' (*chos*

<sup>20</sup> For an introduction and English translation of the *Rnam dag bde chen zhing gi smon lam*, see Skorupski (1994). For Karma Chagme's contributions to Tibetan Pure Land literature, see Halkias (2013: 113–116).

<sup>21</sup> The same text with a slightly different title, *Gnam chos thugs kyi gter kha snyan brgyud zab mo'i bskor las: bde chen zhing gi 'pho ba'i gdams pa rgyas par 'grel pa*, is found in the *Collected Works* of Karma Chags med, Vol. 6: 413–436. Skorupski (2001: 145–154) has brought attention to this text from a block-print manuscript he acquired in Nepal.

<sup>22</sup> For a list of various editions and liturgical texts of the *Gnam chos bde chen zhing sgrub kyi skor*, see Appendix II in Halkias (2013: 209–212).

<sup>23</sup> For an introduction and English translation of the *Bde chen zhing sgrub dbang las tshogs zhal gdams dang bcas pa*, see Halkias (2006).

blon) Päl-seng (Dpal gyi seng ge) of the Shud pu clan and concludes with a prophetic prediction (*lung bstan pa*) that Mi 'gyur rdo rje will become, in the future, the Buddha Jñāna-Samantabhadra (Ye shes kun bzang). Having situated his commentary within the *Namchö* corpus, he explains that, although there are many *phowa* lineages in the New and Old schools, Mi 'gyur rdo rje's transmission is fresh and 'warm with the voice' (*gsung dron mo*) of Buddha Amitābha and therefore it carries great blessings. This is a common strategy for the legitimation of *terma* since they are not only novel teachings but are more intimately connected to an 'enlightened source' in contrast to the 'oral lineage' (*bka' ma*) of canonical scriptures that may get diluted along the way.

Having presented the credentials of his lineage and its legitimate source, KC invokes the authority of Padmasambhava who endorses the method of *phowa* for 'lazy yogis' (*rnal 'byor le lo can*) and extolls the virtues of this practice for distracted and unconfident practitioners who do not find time to meditate. It is even applicable to those who have committed grave unvirtuous actions;<sup>24</sup> even if one is unable to complete the technique at the time of death, having received the *phowa* oral transmission ('*pho lung*) will make it easier for the lama to perform it on his behalf after death. He then goes on to reference the Tibetan version of the *Catuspīṭha-tantra*, the earliest source referring to this teaching in Buddhist scriptures, to substantiate his claim that this method is supreme for crossing over *saṃsāra* to the other shore.

Then follows an enumeration of six different kinds of transference: 1. *dharmakāya phowa* (*chos sku 'pho ba*); 2. *saṃbhogakāya phowa* (*longs sku 'i 'pho ba*); 3. *nirmāṇakāya phowa* (*sprul sku 'pho ba*); 4. common *phowa* (*tha mal pa 'pho ba*); 5. forceful *phowa* (*btsan thabs kyi 'pho ba*); and 6. entering other bodies *phowa* (*grong du 'jug pa*).<sup>25</sup> The *dharmakāya phowa* is

<sup>24</sup> He will return to this theme later in the commentary. It is said that even those who have committed the five inexpressible deeds entailing immediate retribution (i.e., matricide, patricide, killing an arhat, causing schism in the sangha and wounding a buddha) will take rebirth in the higher realms or attain liberation. Stated in a similar way in the *Catuspīṭha-tantra* (4.3.52cd-53): "[Even] a destroyer of gods [and a murderer] of brahmins, [even] one who performs the five [acts] of immediate retribution, [even] one who steals [and/or] relishes pleasures will become pure through this path (i.e. *utkrānti*). He shall not be tainted by sins, and [will be] far [removed] from the conditions of existence;" Szántó (2012: 467). This stands as a challenge to the long *Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra* where the bodhisattva Dharmākara declared that beings who aspire to be born in Sukhāvati and dedicate their merits for that purpose, will take rebirth there except for those who have committed the five heinous deeds; see his 19th vow in the Sanskrit version of the sūtra (Gómez 2002: 71).

<sup>25</sup> Jamgön Kongtrul (2007: 202–203) explains that many early works give three divisions (i.e., *dharmakāya*, *saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya phowa*), but according to Nāropa's *Bka' dpe phyi ma*, there are eleven divisions. In the *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, Rdza dPal sprul rin po che (1808–1887) enumerates five kinds of *phowa*,

intended for those practitioners who are able to unite the mother and son luminosities at the time of death because of their practice of Mahāmudrā or *trekchö* (*khregs chod*) of the Great Completion (*rdzogs chen*). Given that this is the highest of all kinds of *phowa*, free from concepts of agency and agent, it is said that there are no good or bad openings.<sup>26</sup>

As for the signs of successfully performing the *dharmakāya phowa*, the external sign (*phyi rtags*) is the appearance of a pure and clear sky, the inner sign (*nang rtags*) is that of one's body retaining a lasting lustre of radiance, and the secret sign (*gsang ba'i rtags*) is the appearance of a white syllable *āh*, a blue *hūṃ*, and so forth (on the skull or bones left behind after the cremation). Without explaining the workings of the *sambhogakāya phowa*,<sup>27</sup> KC lists the outer sign as a sky replete with rainbows and lights, and the inner sign as blood or pus emerging from the aperture of Brahmā, or as a dew-like moisture. From the cranial swelling, steam and heat will rise, and some hair will fall out. And as for the secret sign, relics of the five Buddha families (*gdung rigs lnga*), and either forms or hand gestures of deities will appear (on the bones and skull of the cremation). Concerning the *nirmāṇakāya phowa*, KC advises that one lies on his right side, breathes from his left nostril, and places in front of himself a representation of Śākyamuni, Padmasambhava, or another deity. While meditating on the image, he recommends the performance of transference from the left nostril with the intention of returning as a *nirmanakāya* (emanation) for the benefit of sentient beings and reciting aspiration prayers towards that end.

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starting with the common three divisions and adding 'ordinary transference using three metaphors' and 'transference performed for the dead with the hook of compassion;' Patrul Rinpoche (2010: 351–366).

<sup>26</sup> Dharmakāya *phowa* does not rely on any formal visualization and is free from notions of a subject transferring from one place to another, let alone of locating a pathway of transference. The recognition of one's own nature of mind is the 'son luminosity' (*'od gsal bu*) or the 'luminosity of the path' (*lam gyi 'od gsal*), that unites with what is innately present, the 'mother luminosity' (*ma 'od gsal*) or 'ground luminosity' (*gzhi''od gsal*). In effect, there is no actual transference here. It corresponds to the transference of consciousness into empty space, which is known in the Chöd tradition as opening the gates of space (*nam mkha' sgo 'byed*).

<sup>27</sup> In the *Quintessence of Nectar: Instructions for the Practice of the Six Dharmas of Nāropa*, the Zhwa dmar Chos kyi dbang phyug (1584–1630) explains that, during the *sambhogakāya phowa*, one transfers one's consciousness into the heart of a wisdom being, a Buddhist deity like Vajrayoginī visualized about an inch in size in the heart of a guru (Roberts 2011: 371). Jamgön Kongtrul (2007: 205) further explains: "This is for those of intermediate faculties who will not recognize the luminous clarity at the end of the three lights and the dissolution process of the death phase, or who might recognize it but cannot remain in it. They should revive themselves with their previous impetus by thinking, 'I will rise up in the illusory body of sambhogakāya,' and rise up as the deity's illusory form at the end of the three lights in reverse order."

During this session, the outer sign is seeing clouds or rainbows in the form of a tree and the raining of flowers. The inner sign is blood, pus, bodhicitta or mist coming out of the left nostril. And the secret sign comprises hand gestures of the deities on the skull or many small relics (*ring bsrel*) manifesting (after cremation).

As for the forceful *phowa*, it is not appropriate to rehearse it even if all the signs of impending death (*'chi ltas*) are present, for one should first carry out the ritual of ransoming death (Skt. *mṛtyu varīcana*; *'chi ba bslu ba*) three times.<sup>28</sup> Not doing so will incur the offence of 'killing the deities' (*lha bsad*). It is inappropriate to do so even if one is condemned to death by the king, is seriously ill or in pain. 'Deities' means the assembly of one hundred deities that reside inside the body.<sup>29</sup> This is the reason why it is inappropriate to perform the forceful *phowa* at any time other than when the lifespan has been exhausted. KC invokes the authority of the *Catuspīṭha-tantra* to illustrate this point<sup>30</sup> and the *Transference: Liberation through Recollection*, a treasure-text attributed to Padmasambhava.<sup>31</sup>

What follows is a brief mention of the *phowa* of entering other bodies (i.e. reanimating corpses). KC informs us that the textual tradition (*bka' ma*) exists but the lineage of practice has been lost.<sup>32</sup> KC

<sup>28</sup> The oldest Tibetan canonical Buddhist texts prescribing rituals for 'cheating' or 'ransoming' death are found in the Tengyur, indicating their Indian origins and dating from the eleventh century onwards. Namkhai Norbu asserted that these ransoming rites were part of Bön religion that date to Tibetan imperial times (Mengele 2010: 104). For an informative introduction on this subject, see Mengele (2010).

<sup>29</sup> This is in reference to the one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities (*zhi khro rigs brya*) said to reside throughout the body and the head.

<sup>30</sup> The relevant section in this tantra (4.3.55) is given by Szántó (2012:468): "[The yogin should perform] the egress only when the time [of death] is nigh. [Should he do it] at an improper time, [he will be tainted by the sin of being] a murderer of the deity. Therefore, the wise one should start [undertaking this procedure only after] the signs [of death have manifested] on the body." He further writes, "If [the yogin] performs *utkrānti* when the time of death is not yet nigh, he will become a murderer of the deities from the five [Tathāgata-]families. For the five skandhas have as their nature the five families." The *locus classicus* for this idea is the *Guhyasamāja* (17.50ab).

<sup>31</sup> Although not stated in the commentary, KC is quoting from the '*Pho ba dran pa rang grol*, a *gter chos* included in the Zhitro cycle discovered by Gar dbang rdo rje (1640–1685).

<sup>32</sup> In *Three Convictions*, Tsongkhapa appries that, should one wish to delve deeper into the principles of this extraordinary technique, he ought to consult the *Oral Tradition of the Body-Form of Glorious Guhyasamāja* (*Dpal 'du pa'i sku lus kyi man ngag*); see Mullin (2005: 218). Marpa Chökyi Lodro (1012–1097) was apparently a virtuoso of this practice as attested in his biography; see Tsang Nyön Heruka (1995: 146–155). It is traditionally believed that the transmission of "entering another's body" ended with the death of the son of Marpa, Darma Dodé, who transferred his

reserves the most detailed treatment for the so-called common *phowa*. Given that death may come unexpectedly because of a variety of causes and conditions (i.e., falling into a pitfall, drowning, killed by weapons and so forth), whenever one is scared or in a panic, he should direct his awareness towards Amitābha or Padmasambhava as visualized above his head. Through the force of familiarizing oneself with this, should the circumstances of mortality arise, one's consciousness will exit from the crown. For this type of transference, one should lie on his right side with his head facing north envisioning the Tathāgata Ratnaśikhin (Rin chen gtsug tor can)<sup>33</sup> or the Medicine Buddha above his head. By reciting the names of the Three Jewels, dhāraṇī-mantras and prayers, one will not take rebirth in the lower realms.

Quoting from *The Vajra Song that Captures the Six Dharmas* (*Rje btsun nā ro pas rje mar pa la gsungs pa'i chos drug dril ba rdo rje'i mgur*) attributed to Nāropa (956–1040), we read: "Eight doors are the cavities of *saṃsāra*, one door is the path to Mahāmudrā."<sup>34</sup> Then follows a quote from the *Profound Inner Principles* (*Zab mo nang gi don*), an extensive work on the subtle-body by the Third Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339), which draws from many tantras. It explains that if the 'ālaya-consciousness' (*kun gzhi rnam shes*) departs from the opening of Brahmā, it will lead to rebirth in the 'formless realms' (*gzugs med kham*s),<sup>35</sup> from the *bindhu* (*thig le*) to the Great Goddess (*lha mo che*),<sup>36</sup> from the navel as a god of the desire realm,<sup>37</sup> through the eyes as a powerful human being, from the nose as a *yakṣa*, from the ear as a god of accomplishment (*grup pa'i lha*),<sup>38</sup> from the 'door of existence' (*srid*

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consciousness, after being mortally wounded, into a pigeon and flew to India. However, as noted by (Roberts 2011: 9) "there are a number of instances in the biographies of medieval Kagyü master, where they display their mastery of this practice by briefly reanimating a dead animal or bird while in meditation. In any period, however, accounts of permanently abandoning one's body and continuing one's life in another body are rare."

<sup>33</sup> He is the last buddha in the line of buddhas of the first great eon. KC is likely referring to the story of Siddhartha's previous life as Jalavāhana who saved ten thousand fish by adding water in a dried-up pond. He then recited, for their benefit, epithets of the Buddha Ratnaśikhin having been told that anyone who hears the name of this Buddha will be reborn in the heavens; see the *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama-sūtra*, chapter 17.

<sup>34</sup> *sgo bryad 'khor ba'i skar khung can / sgo gcig phyag rgya chen po'i lam.*

<sup>35</sup> I.e., one of the four formless realms (Skt. *arupadhātu*).

<sup>36</sup> I.e., born as a god in one of the sixteen form realms.

<sup>37</sup> I.e., one of the six heavens of the desire realm.

<sup>38</sup> I.e., a vidyādhara in Trāyastriśa Heaven.

*pa'i sgo*)<sup>39</sup> a hungry ghost, from the urethra an animal, and from the lower door<sup>40</sup> in the hell realms.<sup>41</sup>

KC goes on to clarify the assertion that, if one departs from Brahmā's aperture, he will take rebirth in the formless realms as opposed to the oral instructions that assert rebirth in the pure lands. He quotes from Nāropa's *Vajra Verses of the Hearing Lineage* (*Snyan brgyud rdo rje'i tshig rkang*; Skt. *Karṇatantravajrapada*, Tōh. 2338)<sup>42</sup> which states that all nine doors should be blocked. In this case, the aperture that is located four fingers back from the hairline leads to the formless realms, whereas the actual Brahmā opening, located eight fingers back from the hairline, leads to rebirth in the celestial worlds (pure lands). Although these two traditions exist, according to Padmasambhava there are substantial differences with the paths of transference which are divided into superior, middle and lower.<sup>43</sup> The three superior pathways are egress from: (a) the aperture of Brahmā for rebirth in the pure realms (*dag pa mkha' spyod*); (b) the eyes for rebirth as a *cakravartin* king (*khos los bsgyur ba'i rgyal po*); and (c) the left nostril for rebirth in a purified human body. The middle paths include transference through the right nostril that leads to rebirth as a *yakṣa*, from the ears as a god in the form realm and from the navel as a god in the desire realm. The lower pathways involve the urethra for rebirth as an animal, from the so-called 'door of existence' for rebirth as a hungry ghost and the anus for rebirth in the hell realms.

KC then quotes instructions from the *Catuṣpīṭha-tantra* for employing the visualization of syllables and *prāṇa*, but his description is as obscure in the Tibetan text as it is in the Sanskrit.<sup>44</sup> Citing from the *Vajra Verses of the Hearing Lineage*,<sup>45</sup> he explains that the process of transference is transformative in that it brings buddhahood without meditation. It entails drawing inside the *avadhūti*, or subtle central channel (*rtsa dbu ma*), the syllable *hūṃ* that is indivisible with *prāṇa* and mind.<sup>46</sup> The transference to the buddha-field of the dharmakāya-lama is accomplished by propelling the syllable *kṣa* through the path of Brahmā. KC cites, from an unidentified source, a quote attributed to Padmasambhava: "If you are unable to attain *nirvāṇa* without

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<sup>39</sup> I.e., the mouth.

<sup>40</sup> I.e., the anus.

<sup>41</sup> The nine doors here correspond exactly to the after-death destinations prescribed in the *Catuṣpīṭha-tantra*; Szántó (2012: 458–461).

<sup>42</sup> See Jamgön Kongtrul's *Gdams ngag mdzod*, vol. 7.

<sup>43</sup> KC is quoting from the '*Pho ba dran pa rang grol*.

<sup>44</sup> Szántó (2012: 462–465).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Gdams ngag mdzod*, vol. 7, p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> According to tantric physiology, the central channel runs from the base parallel to the spine and ends at the crown of the head.

reminder in this life and desire to reach the pure lands apply yourself to the activities and training.” And also, “these teachings are a powerful method for bringing buddhahood even to those who have committed grave sins. They are like a miraculous dharma made of gold, through which a yogi will be liberated from the seal of the body and attain buddhahood.”<sup>47</sup>

The rest of the commentary is divided in two parts: (a) training in *phowa*; and (b) the application of the practice. These sections are detailed and are clearly intended for practitioners of this method. I will provide here only a general outline on the specific instructions for applying the method of transference. First, as for training in *phowa*, one should: (a) offer a maṇḍala to his guru requesting the teachings of transference; (b) go for refuge to the three jewels, the three roots<sup>48</sup> and all other sources of refuge; and (c) generate the mind of awakening (*bodhicitta*). The following visualizations for generating oneself in the form of Avalokiteśvara, namely the transference prayer, the aspiration prayer to Sukhāvātī and the long-life prayer, are taken from Gnam chos Mi 'gyur rdo rje's *Means for Attaining Sukhāvātī: Empowerment and Oral Instructions (Bde chen zhing sgrub dbang las tshogs zhal gdams dang bcas pa)*.<sup>49</sup> KC offers details for the visualization of the subtle central channel and of Buddha Amitābha envisaged above the crown of one's head. He continues with the prayer for successful transference and offers guidelines on the sealing of thirteen orifices<sup>50</sup> with light-rays in the form of the syllable *hrīh*. Then come the actual instructions on how to perform the technique of *phowa* utilizing breath and visualization. The practice ends with the recitation of an aspiration prayer to take rebirth in Sukhāvātī, a prayer to Amitāyus for longevity and the dissolution meditation. After practicing *phowa*, there will be signs of accomplishment visible on the aperture of Brahmā such as, swelling, numbness, heat, blood or pus.

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<sup>47</sup> *tshé 'dir lhag med ma grub na / 'pho tshé mkha' spyod 'grub 'dod pas / sbyang dang las la sbyar ba'o / zhes dang / sdig po che btsan thabs su sangs rgyas par byed pa'i gdams ngag / rnal 'byor pa lus rgya grol ba dang sangs rgyas pa dus mtshungs pa'i gser chos 'phrul zhun du gdams pa 'di ston par byed /.*

<sup>48</sup> I.e. the guru (*bla ma*), deity (*yi dam*), and *dākinī* (*mkha' 'gro*).

<sup>49</sup> See Halkias (2006: 115–116). For a depiction of Amitābha's pure land executed in Tibetan style, see illustration 2.

<sup>50</sup> I.e. the anus, urethra, secret place, mouth, navel, two ears, two nostrils, two eyes, spot between the eyebrows and the cranial opening that leads to rebirth in the formless realms.



Illustration 2: Tibetan depiction of Sukhāvati  
(courtesy of Himalayan Art Resources).

The next section deals with the actual application of *phowa* performed for oneself when all the signs of death are present and for others when their outer breath has ceased. It is well-known that the consciousness remains in the body for up to three nights and a day and, therefore, it is important that the transference is performed during this time. The *Book of the Kadam* (*Bka' gdams glegs bam*) explains that it may remain up to seven days so it acceptable to practice *phowa* until the seventh day. The village priests maintain that it is appropriate to invite the consciousness in a name-card used in death rituals since they have the tradition of summoning the consciousness into a corpse after the passing of many days and then transferring it from there.<sup>51</sup> KC states that he does not see any contradiction even though this method is not mentioned in the tantric scriptures.

KC concludes that there is great benefit in giving the oral transmission of the authentic *Namchö* root text,<sup>52</sup> and goes on to cite the root text of the stages of transference, the prayer for transference

<sup>51</sup> The tradition of village priests utilizing an effigy, after disposing of a corpse to ensure that the deceased goes to Sukhāvati, is also observed among the Sherpas of Nepal; see Furer-Haimendorf (1964: 235–237). The ritual for summoning the consciousness of the dead to an effigy-card (*byang chog*) and directing it to take rebirth in Sukhāvati is detailed in another *Namchö* text authored by KC, the *Gnam chos thugs kyi gter kha snyan brgyud zab mo'i skor las bde chen zhing sgrub gi byang chog thar lam dkar po*.

<sup>52</sup> See fn. 23 in this work.



and the prayer of aspiration. The colophon informs us that, having been urged to do so by the *nirmāṇakāya* (Gnam chos Mi 'gyur rdo rje), this elaborate commentary on *phowa* was composed by Rāgasya who takes on the responsibility for any mistakes and contradictions that may be found in the text.

The *phowa sādhana* is well-established in Hindu and Buddhist tantric scriptures but that should not deter us from searching for fruitful parallels in spiritual traditions across Eurasia relating visionary ascensions to celestial realms and shamanic transferences to other bodies. It is noteworthy that, for Tibetan Buddhists, the possibility of meeting Buddha Amitābha can be accomplished through the technique of transference, which might involve the visualization of a luminous hook attracting one's consciousness in the shape of an incandescent globe projected from Amitābha's heart. Tucci (1991: 365) explains:

Out of Amitābha's heart a hook of light is projected, which draws towards itself the devotee's conscious principle, represented by a luminous globe, the size of a grain, residing in his heart; the principle, thus attracted, disappears and is dissolved into the god's heart, with which it is substantially unified; next, it is once again emanated from it, in order to give birth to the new divine incarnation in the center of the lotus miraculously sprung up in front the of the god.

The popularity of one's own ascent to Sukhāvātī may explain why Amitābha's descent from Sukhāvātī to meet the pious in the hour of death—a widespread theme in Chinese Buddhist literature and art—occupies a surprisingly subordinate position in Tibetan culture.

Although the *Transferring to Sukhāvātī* was evidently written by KC, it is marked by *terma*-signs (*gter tsheg*) by virtue of its inclusion in the *Namchö* collection of treasures which, even if attributed to Mi 'gyur rdo rje, were presumably redacted by KC himself. KC labours to endorse Mi 'gyur rdo rje as a genuine *terton* suggesting that, in the early times of their inception, the sky-dharma *termas* had to undergo a process of legitimation and acceptance before being incorporated in the ritual corpus of the Nyingma and Kagyü traditions. Moreover, they stand witness to the creative collaboration between the Kagyü and Nyingma schools, and to an age-old symbiosis between lay ascetics (*sngags pa*) and monastic bodies (*dge 'dun*) which contributed to the revitalization of Buddhism in Tibetan history despite, or rather because of, the competitive tension that arises between individual creativity and institutional orthodoxy.

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