Why Did the Cannibal King Fly?
Tantric Transformations of an Indian Narrative in Tibet

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Stories featuring Kalmāṣapāda, the human-flesh devouring king with "spotted feet" (*kalmāṣa-pāda*), have been told throughout Indian literature ranging from Vedic, Epic, and Purāṇic narrative traditions to Jain and Buddhist narrative traditions in both Pāli and Sanskrit. With the spread of Buddhism from India, renditions of the Kalmāṣapāda story circulated across Central Asia, China, Japan, Tibet, and the rest of the Buddhist world. This paper traces the transformations of this narrative that took place in Tibet through the introduction of tantric Buddhist elements from the 11th to the 17th century. I argue that these tantric transformations of the Kalmāṣapāda story enabled it to serve in Tibet as a charter narrative for a tantric practice featuring the consumption of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara's flesh that survives to the present. In so doing, I seek to show how the transformations of this narrative in Tibet reflect changes in the rhetorical and material relationships to the practice of human-flesh consumption as Tibetans assimilated Indian Buddhist tantric traditions and made them their own.

The discussion draws from a broader book project tracing the history of the seven-times-born flesh in Tibetan Buddhism from the 11th century to the present. This avenue of research would likely be unthinkable without Dan Martin's pioneering contributions to the study of Tibetan material culture, polemics, and the complex interactions between Tibetans and their neighbors. I am particularly grateful for Dan Martin's studies of relics, reliquaries, and pills of power in Tibet, and the polemical discourses about them among some of Tibet's leading intellectuals.[1] These studies have made new inroads into the study of Tibetan material religion that have only recently begun to surface and gain traction. The present discussion, and the broader project of which it partakes, draws inspiration from Dan's capacious historical approach to material culture to explore what tracing the historical trajectory of a single narrative vignette featuring the consumption of human flesh can contribute to our knowledge of

[1] Martin 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1996.

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how Tibetans have received and adapted Indian Buddhist tantric traditions in the formation of distinctly Tibetan systems of Buddhist theory and practice.

1. Kalmāṣapāda in Indian Narrative Literature

Our story begins by considering a particular rendition of one of the most widespread narratives in the history of Indian literature: the story of the king Kalmāṣapāda who is cursed by a sage to eat human flesh. King Kalmāṣapāda, otherwise known as the "son of Sudāsa," appears as a character in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, *Bhadrakalpāvadāna*, *Jātakamālā*, *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā*, **Damamūkāvadāna* and other Buddhist texts. In a 1909 article, Watanabe traced the narratives featuring Kalmāṣapāda throughout these and other scriptural sources to demonstrate that core features of the Buddhist accounts also appear in many non-Buddhist Indian narratives of Jain, Purāṇic, Epic, and even Vedic provenance. [2] Watanabe's brilliant work of charting the relationships between these various renditions has enabled us to isolate for analysis his "second group" of Buddhist narratives—the versions from the *Siṃhasaudāsamāṁsabhakṣanivṛtti*, *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, *Jātakamālā*, *Bhadrakalpāvadāna*, the **Damamūkāvadāna*—for the particular influence they may have exerted on the Tibetan narrative traditions associated with the tantric practice of eating human flesh.[3] Ironically, this group of narratives, according to Watanabe, teaches the evils of eating meat, in addition to honesty, generosity and other virtues.

For the present purposes, elements found in the **Damamūkāvadāna*, otherwise known as the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish* (*mDzangs blun zhes bya ba'i mdo*, **Damamūkanāmasūtra*) stand out as particularly significant. [4] The Tibetan text of the **Damamūkanāmasūtra* was translated based on a Chinese source text in the first half of the 9th century by the Sino-Tibetan translator 'Gos Chos grub, or Wang Facheng in Chinese, who has active in Dunhuang during this period.[5]

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[2] Watanabe 1909. Nearly a century later, Zin (2006) departs from Watanabe's work to argue that the character Aṅgulimāla is a literary transformation of the cannibal king Kalmāṣapāda (Pāli Kammāsapada). Zin claims to trace this development from the *Mahābhārata* character Saudāsa / Kalmāṣapāda to the *Mahāsutasoma-jātaka*, and from there to the *Aṅgulimāla-sutta* in the *Majjima-nikāya*, and on to Pāli commentaries and Chinese translations. For a critical discussion of Zin's work in the context of a narratological reading of the *Aṅgulimāla-sutta*, see Galasek-Hul 2015.

[3] Watanabe 1909, 261–270.

[4] Watanabe 1909, 266–268.

[5] Terjék 1969, 289; Stein 2010, 8. The Tibetan translation of this *sūtra* can be found in *Bka' 'gyur* (*dpe bsdur ma*) 2006–2009, Tōh. 341, Mdo sde, A (vol. 74), 399–803. For an

The Chinese source text was translated and compiled no later than the year 445 based on Indian source materials by Chinese and/or Central Asian monks active in Khotan.[6]

The Kalmāṣapāda narrative therein is part of the back story of Aṅgulimāla, "Finger-Necklace," the brahmin boy, who, cursed by a *ṛṣi*, killed 999 people, and wore a necklace made of their fingers until he encountered the Buddha, renounced his murderous ways, and entered the monastic order. The Aṅgulimāla story forms chapter 36 of the Tibetan canonical translation (Tōh. 341) and chapter 51 of the Chinese translation in the Taishō canon (Taishō 202).[7]

Kalmāṣapāda enters the story when king Prasenajit, in pursuit of the serial killer Aṅgulimāla, is shocked to discover that he has given up non-virtue and entered the Buddhist saṅgha. In response to king Prasenajit's extraordinary surprise, the Buddha offers an account of their previous lives together, in which the Buddha also tamed Aṅgulimāla.

The Buddha tells the story of king Brahmadatta (Tib. *ba la ma da*, Ch. 波羅摩達[8]), a past ruler of Vārāṇasī, who had intercourse with a passionate lioness to produce a son that was human in form, but had the spotted feet of a lion, thus earning him the name Kalmāṣapāda, or "Spotted-feet" (Tib. *rkang bkra*, Ch. 駮足). After Kalmāṣapāda grows up and assumes his father's throne, he prompts his two queens—one of brahmin caste and the other of *kṣatriya* caste—to compete for his attention by chasing him through the park, promising that whichever one catches him can spend the day with him. The brahmin queen gets upset one day when her piety for the deva of a local shrine slows her pace, allowing the *kṣatriya* queen to get the better of her and catch up to the prince. The brahmin queen, out of anger against the deva for not coming to her aid, has the shrine destroyed, leaving the local deva angry and bewildered.

Seeking his vengeance against the king and his house, the deva notices that the king makes regular food offerings to a certain *ṛṣi*, and one day, when the deva gleans that the *ṛṣi* is not set to arrive, he transforms himself into the *ṛṣi*'s form and refuses the king's food,

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English translation of this *sūtra*, see Frye 1981. For an English translation of the *Jātakamālā* story featuring this character, see Āryaśūra 1983, 309–329 ("Sutasoma").

6 Mair 1993, 18. For comparison between the Chinese and Tibetan versions, see Takakusu 1901, Stein 1914 and 2010, and Mair 1993.

7 For the Tibetan version, see chapter 36 of the *sūtra*, entitled "Undistressed Aṅgulimāla" (*mi gdung ba sor 'phreng can*), *Bka' 'gyur* (*dpe bsdur ma*) 2006–2009, vol. 74, 698–733. For the Chinese translation, see chapter 51 of *Xianyu jing* 賢愚經, entitled *Wu nao zhiman* 無惱指鬘 (Taishō 202, 423b06–427c28). For an English translation of this chapter, based primarily on the Tibet, see Frye 1981, 186–201.

8 Mair 1993, 90.

asserting that he would henceforth eat only meat and fish. When the actual *ṛṣi* arrives the next day to an offering of meat and fish, he is offended and curses the king, "May you eat nothing but human flesh for twelve years!"

This sets the stage for a vignette that bears a striking resemblance to later narratives in Tibet:

> Then, one day, the king's cook ran out of meat for the king to eat, so he went out in search of some but could find nothing. Along the road he encountered the corpse of a dead child. Thinking, 'This will do,' he cut of its head, hands and feet, cooked it, and, seasoning it well, served it to the king. The king ate the meat and found it to be the most delicious meat he had ever tasted. He thus asked the cook: 'We have never had meat like this before. It is particularly delicious. What kind is it?' Terrified, the cook prostrated himself and said: 'Your Majesty, if you promise not to punish me, I shall tell you.' When the king had promised that there would be no punishment, the cook told him that since they were suddenly out of meat, he prepared the corpse of a dead child he had found. The king said: 'Still, the meat was particularly delicious. In the future prepare only such meat.'[9]

With the meat of the dead child now consumed in this initial feast of human flesh, the king commands the cook to start kidnapping the children of the kingdom under the cover of night to cook and serve their flesh to him each day. When the king's ministers discover that the king is responsible for the spate of missing children, they surround him with an army and prepare to kill him. The king cleverly buys a few moments to invoke his past virtuous deeds and thereby transforms himself into a *rākṣasa* (*srin po*) that can fly through the sky. The king thus escapes into the sky to continue wreaking havoc on the kingdom until he captures prince Sutasomaputra, the Buddha in this

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[9] *Bka' 'gyur* (*dpe bsdur ma*) 2006–2009, vol. 74, 713–714: */de nas nyin gcig rgyal po'i g.yos mkhan gyis sha ma 'byor nas 'phral du sha gzhan ma rnyed de/ byis pa'i ro zhig dang phrad nas/ sha 'di yang rung ngo snyam bsams nas mgo dang rkang lag bcad de g.yos su byas te/ spos sna tshogs kyis btab nas rgyal po la byin no/ /rgyal pos kyang sha de zos nas sngon gyi sha bas lhag par zhim mo/ /g.yos mkhan la sngan cad kyi sha 'di lta bu ro med do/ /sha 'di ni lhag par zhim na ci'i sha zhes dris pa dang / g.yos mkhan skrag nas lto ba sa la phab ste/ rgyal po la 'di skad ces gsol to/ /gal te rgyal pos gyod mi rmo na drang por gsol lo zhes smras pa dang / rgyal pos kyang khyod kyis drang por smras dang / gyod mi rmo'o zhes bsgo'o/ /g.yos mkhan gyis smras pa/ bdag cag 'phral brtad pas sha gzhan ni ma rnyed de/ byis pa chung ngu 'gum pa'i ro zhig rnyed de de g.yos su bgyis te gsol ba las rgyal pos mkhyen par gyur to/ /rgyal pos bsgo ba sha 'di lhag par zhim gyi da phyin cad sha 'di lta bu rtag tu sbyor cig /ces bsgo ba dang /*. For my rendering of this passage, I consulted the translation in Frye 1981, 194. For the corresponding passage in the Chinese version, see *Xianyu jing* 賢愚經 (T202), 425c08–425c17.

previous lifetime, while the prince is receiving a Dharma teaching from a brahmin. Prince Sutasomaputra convinces king Kalmāṣapāda, turned flying *rākṣasa*, to spare his life for seven days, promising that he will return to meet his fate once he has finished receiving the Dharma teaching. Returning after seven days as promised, Kalmāṣapāda is impressed by prince Sutasomaputra's honesty and his courage to face death equipped with the Dharma instruction he had received in the meantime. Kalmāṣapāda thus asks the prince to repeat the Dharma teaching that was so important to him. Instantly upon hearing it, Kalmāṣapāda feels remorse, renounces his murderous ways, and resumes his righteous rule as king, never to eat human flesh again.

There are a few core features of this narrative that should be kept in mind as we compare it to its subsequent transformations: 1) the curious origin of the king from his father's union with a lioness; 2) the king's consumption of human flesh; 3) that the king is first served the flesh by a deceitful cook, in response to running out of meat to serve; 4) that the cook procures the flesh from the corpse of a child and seasons it; 3) that the cook is frightened of punishment but nonetheless divulges the source of the meat; 4) and that this leads to the power of flight. With these core elements of the story in mind, we turn now to consider the transformations that this narrative underwent in subsequent tantric retellings.

2. Kalmāṣapāda Goes Tantric

Hevajratantra Commentary in Tibet and its Indian Precedents

The 12th century Tibetan scholar rNgog Zhe sdang rdo rje composed a *Hevajratantra* commentary called the *Rin chen rgyan 'dra* in which he narrates a story that appears to be an adaptation of the Kalmāṣapāda vignette featured in the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish*.[10] He presents it in his commentary on verses 9, 10, and 11 of chapter 11, part one of the *Hevajratantra*.[11] These verses of the tantra recommend that success in the practice of *Hevajra* requires practitioners to consume the five ambrosias, and, specifically, the flesh of a "seven timer" (Skt. s*aptāvarta*, Tib. *lan bdun pa*), that is, a person born for seven successive lives as a human being.[12] The verses also tell how to identify a "seven-timer" by virtue of their traits of a pleasant voice, beautiful eyes, a fragrant body, and a fine physique, which casts seven shadows," before promising that consuming their flesh will instantly confer flight.

[10] Zhe sdang rdo rje 1976.
[11] Zhe sdang rdo rje 1976, 218.1–219.7.
[12] Snellgrove 2010, 86–87.

Zhe sdang rdo rje titles his discussion of these verses "the teaching on the *samaya* of eating (*bza' ba'i dam tshig bstan pa*), which he divides into two sub-sections: 1) "the teaching on eating the five fleshes and the five ambrosias as *samaya* supports;" and 2) "the teaching on eating the seven-timer, along with its benefits."[13] After briefly glossing the five fleshes (Tib. *sha lnga*, Skt. *pañcamāṁsa*) as human flesh, elephant flesh, horse flesh, dog flesh, and cow flesh; and the five ambrosias (Tib. *bdud rtsi lnga*, Skt. *pañcāmṛta*) as feces, urine, blood, semen, and marrow, Zhe sdang rdo rje tells that consuming these substances leads to accomplishment of the two-fold *siddhi*, that is, the mundane feats and ultimate awakening itself.[14]

Zhe sdang rdo rje dwells longer on the flesh of the seven-timer.[15] Introducing it as "another specialty of *samaya* substance taught in the *Hevajratantra*," he explains that it is the flesh of someone born for seven successive lives as a human being, before elaborating some on their identifying traits as listed in the *tantra*. Importantly, he explains that since such beings have embarked on the practice of a bodhisattva, when they are identified, we should circumambulate and prostrate before the bodhisattva *yogin*, toss flowers in their direction, and supplicate for their flesh, whereupon the seven-timer *yogin* bodhisattva will transfer their consciousness elsewhere and forfeit their body to be of benefit to not only the *mantrin* with *samaya*, but to many other beings as well. Zhe sdang rdo rje continues that the practitioner should then form pills out of their entire flesh and skin. Just eating one, he adds, will instantly confer flight and a lifespan equal to the longevity of the sun and moon.

Zhe sdang rdo rje then offers an illustrative story.[16] He refrains from identifying his source, but the core features bear a striking resemblance to the Kalmāṣapāda narrative. According to Zhe sdang rdo rje's rendition, one night, a king by the name of Siṃha (Seng ge), who is served each day's meals by his queens in turn, orders his youngest queen to go buy meat for the following day's meal. The next morning the rains are too heavy, so she cuts off some flesh from the corpse of a three or four-year old child cleansed by the rain which she incidentally encounters in a nearby charnel ground. Upon returning, she cooks it, sprinkles it with fine seasoning, and goes to offer it to the king. As soon as he is struck by the steam wafting from the flesh his feet lift off the ground. The king becomes suspicious, grabs the queen, and threatening her with his sword, commands her to tell him the

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[13] Zhe sdang rdo rje 1976, 218.1–.2.

[14] For analysis of the use of these substances in Indian Buddhist tantra, which does not touch upon the flesh of a seven-timer, see Wedemeyer 2013.

[15] Zhe sdang rdo rje 1976, 218.5–219.7.

[16] Zhe sdang rdo rje 1976, 219.3–.7.

truth about the flesh's origin or he'll kill her. She reports what happened, and the king has her retrieve the corpse in its entirety. They make pills out of it, using even the skin and bones, and feed them to the entire court, including the king, his queens and ministers, and even his horses, oxen, and other animals. All of them take flight to the celestial realms.

Zhe sdang rdo rje's narrative shares several elements with the Kalmāṣapāda vignette from the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish* presented above. The most conspicuous commonalities are 1) the character of a human-flesh eating king; 2) that he was first served human flesh by a deceitful cook, who procures it from the corpse of a child before cooking and seasoning it; 3) that the cook is frightened of punishment but nonetheless divulges the source of the meat; 4) and that it leads to the power of flight. Less direct parallels are that the king is here called Siṃha, "Lion," thus obliquely preserving Kalmāṣapāda's association with his lioness mother; the detail that the king's two queens take turns spending time with the king; and, of course, that the number seven in "seven-timer" might reflect the number of seven days it took prince Sutasomaputra to receive the Dharma teaching before he returned to Kalmāṣapāda.

Notwithstanding these commonalities, the complete revaluation of human-flesh consumption witnessed here, from a cursed act that leads to depravity in the *sūtra* telling above, to a desired act that confers flight and longevity in Zhe sdang rdo rje's version, signals a new context and direction for the Kalmāṣapāda story. In the *Hevajratantra* context of Zhe sdang rdo rje's commentary, the flesh of the seven-timer is a special substance to be consumed by practitioners alongside the other transgressive tantric sacramental substances of the five ambrosias and five fleshes. However, for Zhe sdang rdo rje, the seven-timer flesh does not signal pollution, but purity, as it is embodied in bodhisattva *yogin*s with pure features who have vowed to enlist their body, speech, and mind in the service of beings.

Bodhisattva flesh to be consumed by others is not the only gloss that Zhe sdang rdo rje gives the seven-timer. Earlier in Zhe sdang rdo rje's commentary, when commenting on verses 21 and 22 of chapter seven, part one of the *tantra*, he relates that he understands the "seven timer" not only in the literal sense of a special substance to be eaten, but also in the figurative sense of the seven-stage digestive process that results in seminal fluid, the physiological "conventional bodhicitta" (*kun rdzob byang chub kyi sems*) which serves as a basis for the experience of bliss-emptiness elicited through sexual yoga.[17] Zhe sdang rdo rje also understands the flesh as "conventional bodhicitta"

[17] Zhe sdang rdo rje 1976, 153.4–.7. 154.6.

itself, glossed here as "the elemental seven-born" (*khams kyi skye ba bdun*) which results from this digestive process.[18] These more abstract senses are its "internal meaning" (*nang don*), which in no way compromises its meaning as the flesh of bodhisattvas on the external level.[19]

In its diversity of interpretations, Zhe sdang rdo rje's comments reflect knowledge of the broader field of late Indian tantric commentarial literature that discusses the seven-timer's flesh.[20] The influential 10th or 11th century *Kālacakratantra*-inspired commentary on the *Hevajratantra* called the *Ṣaṭsāhasrikā Hevajrapiṇḍārthaṭīkā* (Tōh. 1180), attributed to the bodhisattva Vajragarbha, best represents the range of senses that Zhe sdang rdo rje evokes in his commentary.[21] The *Vajrapadasārasaṃgrahapañjikā* attributed to Yaśobhadra (Tōh. 1186), probably among other late *Hevajratantra* commentaries, cites Vajragarbha's commentary to offer much the same interpretation.[22]

Vajragarbha's commentary first mentions the "seven-times-born" in its explanation of the term *mahāpaśu*, or "great sacrificial victim," in chapter five.[23] This term, David Gray argues, is a vestigial reference to the practice of animal and human sacrifice which tantric Buddhists partially adapted and absorbed in the slightly less objectionable form of the consumption of meats, including human flesh, as tantric

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18 Zhe sdang rdo rje 1976, 153.4–154.5.

19 Zhe sdang rdo rje 1976, 154.3.

20 The *Cakrasamvaratantra* and its explanatory tantras, among other Indian Buddhist tantric scriptures, also give a range of interpretations of the flesh of a seven-timer, several of which overlap with the those in the *Hevajratantra* commentarial literature. Here my concern is to situate Zhe sdang rdo rje's narrative within its broader doctrinal context, so I will only treat the *Hevajratantra* commentarial interpretations that relate to Zhe sdang rdo rje's interpretations. For more on how the flesh figures in the *Cakrasamvaratantra* tradition, see Gray 2005; and 2007, 206–208, 209, 219, 226–231, 367–369.

21 For a critical edition of the Sanskrit text and the Tibetan translation, as well as an English translation, see Vajragarbha and Shendge 2004. For further analysis of this commentary, see Sferra 2009a, Sferra 2009b. Vajragarbha's commentary is famously part of the "bodhisattva corpus" of Indian *Kālacakratantra* commentaries. For more on the "bodhisattva corpus" (*byang chub sems dpa'i skor*) or the "bodhisattva commentaries" (*byang chub sems dpa'i 'grel rnams*)—consisting of the *Ṣaṭsāhasrikā Hevajrapiṇḍārthaṭīkā* attributed to the bodhisattva Vajragarbha, the *Vimalaprabhā* attributed to the bodhisattva Puṇḍarīka, and the *Laghutantraṭīkā* attributed to the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi, and its instrumental role in the formation and promulgation of the *Kālacakratantra* tradition, see Sferra 2005.

22 *rDo rje'i tshig gi snying bsdus pa'i dka' 'grel*, *Bstan 'gyur* (*dpe bsdur ma*) 1994–2008, vol. 2, 887–1100.

23 Vajragarbha and Shendge 2004, 29–30, verses 23–36, and 185–186. The canonical Tibetan translation is located in Vajragarbha, *Kye'i rdo rje bsdus pa'i don gyi gya cher 'grel pa*, *Bstan 'gyur* (*dpe bsdur ma*) 1994–2008, vol. 1, 823–824.

sacrament.[24] Here this process of sanitizing the "great sacrificial victim" reaches another level, as the term is enlisted to describe a combination of yogic techniques and human physiological processes.

The commentary starts out by citing the long lost *Hevajra* root *tantra*, which glosses the "seven-timer" broadly in terms of the yogic subtle-body contemplative practice of arousing and manipulating the flow of subtle seminal fluid and the internal warmth characteristic of sexual pleasure. This citation connects this yogic practice with the seven-stage process of digestion by which the human body is formed and fortified according to Indian Āyurvedic medical theory.[25] The citation from the root *tantra* gives special attention in this regard to the "drop" (Skt. *bindu*, Tib. *thig le*)—seminal fluid, in its coarse and subtle dimensions—which is the most refined product of this digestive process. Manipulating the flow of such drops, which form only with the full maturation of the physical and subtle body, is integral to tantric subtle-body yoga.

In keeping with Āyurvedic theory, the commentary implies that all humans are "seven-timers," since everyone undergoes the seven-stage process of digestive formation. Moreover, it also outlines how this gross physiological process maps to the physiology of the subtle body, the yogic practices by which it and its seminal fluid/*bodhicitta* are enlisted, and how these correspond in turn with the *maṇḍala* of tantric *sādhana* practice. This abstract treatment of the act of "ingesting" the "seven-timer" means that it not only confers flight (Skt. *khecaratvaṁ*, Tib. *mkha' la spyod nyid*), but also vanquishes all illness, signals the yogic "melting of the aggregates and constituents," bestows "universal rule" (Skt. *cakravartitvaṁ*, Tib. *'khor los sgyur ba nyid*), and, finally, "swiftly grants buddhahood" (Skt. *buddhatvaṁ dadate kṣipraṁ*, Tib. *myur du sangs rgyas nyid ster byed*).

However, when glossing the mention of the "seven timer" in part one, chapter seven of the *Hevajratantra*, the commentary starts with more detail on the literal sense of the term.[26] Here it simply defines a "seven-timer" as any man or a woman who has transmigrated in human form for seven consecutive lifetimes. Such people, the text goes on to relate, are identifiable by their unique traits of casting seven shadows, having unblinking eyes, three creases on the forehead, and wafting a pleasant body odor. Once such a person has been identified, the text tells us, one should offer them flowers, circumambulate them,

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[24] Gray 2005, 62–65.

[25] Wujastyk 1998, 5 and 320–327; Maas 2008, 131, 135–136, 142.

[26] Vajragarbha, *rDo rje snying po'i 'grel pa*, *Bstan 'gyur* (*dpe bsdur ma*) 1994–2008, vol. 1, 919–921. Vajragarbha and Shendge (2004, 232–233) provides partial English translations but mostly summaries of this section and the rest of the commentary in the absence of a Sanskrit source text.

and, kindly addressing them as *yogeśvara*, that is, "lord of yoga," ask them to forfeit their body for the benefit of others. Once they comply and their flesh is procured, it should be made into pills "the size of a juniper seed" and eaten. Consuming such a pill, the commentary promises, averts the aging process, and, most importantly, confers flight.

Immediately thereafter, however, the commentary slips into the "definitive meaning," revisiting the gross and subtle body physiology of Indian Āyurvedic theory and the yogic manipulation of the body previously cited in reference to the "great sacrificial victim." Here, consuming the "seven-timer" means internally "ingesting" the "flesh" of *bodhicitta*, or seminal fluid, in its gross and subtle senses. The commentary buttresses this interpretation by reiterating the seven-stage digestive process of the body's formation using slightly different phrasing.[27]

In this way, the commentary interprets the flesh on the levels of both expedient meaning (Skt. *neyārtha*, Tib. *drang don*) and definitive meaning (Skt. *nīthārtha*, Tib. *nges don*). This rubric works to correlate the practice of eating human flesh with the gross and subtle physiological processes of the person, on the one hand, and with the yogic manipulation of these processes and the pragmatic and soteriological results of doing so, on the other. This reflects the *Kālacakratantra*'s correlative logic of linking cosmos, human physiology, and the yogic path designed to transform these (its interlinked frameworks of "external," "internal," and "alternative"), while weaving into this intricate system of macro-micro-mesocosmic homologies the literal practice of anthropophagy prescribed in the *Hevajratantra*. In this way, the commentary combines in the "seven-timer" medical, alchemical, and soteriological registers.

The passage in Vajragarbha's commentary that discusses the occurrence of the flesh in chapter eleven, part one of the *Hevajratantra* follows a similar pattern.[28] It begins by reciting the traits of a seven-times born person, expanding some on the list of characteristics, and reiterating the directive to form the flesh into pills and consume them.

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[27] Vajragarbha and Shendge (2004, 233) translate this particular passage as follows: "That body which is the body of all embodied beings is the seven born. From the eating and drinking, the food and drinks with six flavours are digested and the body is nourished. That is the first birth. Then the blood is formed and that is the second birth. The formation of the flesh is the third. The formation of the skin is the fourth and the formation of veins is the fifth. From it come the bones which is the sixth and the formation of fat and marrow is the seventh." For another English rendering and reproduction of the Tibetan, see Snellgrove 2010, 71.

[28] Vajragarbha, *rDo rje snying po'i 'grel pa*, *Bstan 'gyur* (*dpe bsdur ma*) 1994–2008, vol. 1, 973–974; Vajragarbha and Shendge 2004, 232–233.

But it concludes by expanding the result of flight to include loftier Buddhist goals:

> By eating it one will take flight and live for immeasurable eons; with a body ripened into such a form, that body will purify whoever has committed the deeds of immediate retribution and veered from the exalted bliss of the expanse of reality. Thus, it is taught:
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> > Through just eating it
> > one will instantly take flight.'[29]

The text thus glosses the goal of flight from the *Hevajratantra* in literal terms, as actual ascent into the sky; and figuratively, as the purification of particularly heinous karma and the consequent ascent into the "expanse of reality," another way of saying ultimate reality. Moreover, the commentary reminds us, the power of the flesh to effect such transformations hails from the purity of the being in which it was once incorporated—one with a body that has been ripened, or cooked, over the course of seven lifetimes, to become a form that can bring benefit to others.

It seems that these and other details of the seven-timer according to the "interpretable meaning" proposed by the likes of Vajragarbha's commentary led Zhe sdang rdo rje to understand the seven-timer as a bodhisattva. The conception that it is primarily bodhisattvas who possess this kind of flesh reflects mainstream Mahāyāna conceptions regarding the perfection of the bodhisattva's body in conjunction with the perfection of their mind. When coupled with the bodhisattva's compulsion to perfect their practice of generosity in fulfillment of their bodhisattva aspiration to make the ultimate sacrifice of offering even their flesh and blood for the welfare of others, this conception that it is not just the mind but the body too that transforms through the path of training becomes closely associated with relic veneration, among other devotional aspects of Buddhist practice.[30] There is certainly ample material in the various lists of the qualities of seven-times-born people presented in Indian *tantra*s to interpret seven-timers as bodhisattvas.

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[29] Vajragarbha, *rDo rje snying po'i 'grel pa*, *Bstan 'gyur* (*dpe bsdur ma*) 1994–2008, vol. 1, 974: *bskal pa dpag tu med par 'tsho la de lta bu'i rnam par smin pa'i lus kyis ni/ gang dag mtshams med pa byas pa dang / gang gis chos kyi dbyings kyi bde ba khyad par du gyur pa las bshung ba yang lus de nyid kyis 'dag par bsungs so/ /de bas na/ de ni zos pa tsam gyis kyang / skad cig la ni mkha' spyod 'gyur/ /zhes gsungs pa yin no/*. The citation of the *Hevajratantra* here is the final part of verse 11, chapter 11, part one; cf. Snellgrove 2010, 42–43: Skt. *tasya prāśitamātrena khecaratvaṃ bhavet kṣaṇāt//*. Tib. *de ni zos pa tsam gyis ni // skad cig la ni mkha' spyod 'gyur //*.

[30] Mrozik 2007, Ohnuma 2007.

But one of the few Indian commentators to make this connection explicit was the famous 11th century Indian Buddhist scholar Abhayākaragupta, who picked up on this interpretative possibility to put it forth in chapter 17 of his *Sampuṭatantra* commentary, the *Āmnāyamañjarī* (Tōh. 1198).[31]

The *Sampuṭatantra* includes only one reference to the flesh, in a passage drawn directly from chapter seven, section one of the *Hevajratantra*. The *Sampuṭatantra* includes this passage in chapter five, but its context and phrasing correspond very closely to that of the related *Hevajratantra* passage.[32] Abhayākaragupta comments on this as follows:

> Only bodhisattvas who have made the vow "I will accomplish the aim of all beings even through my own flesh, bones, marrow, and so forth," are 'seven born,' after reaching the very end of seven consecutive lives as a human being. It is such a one, who can be identified by the seven shadows they have obtained, that 'should be consumed specifically;' 'when they die of natural causes' remains [to be supplied].[33]

Abhayākaragupta thus understood seven-timers not just as beings whose purity unwittingly propels them through seven successive human rebirths, but more specifically as bodhisattvas, whose bodies become potent forces of beneficial activity through the stabilization and materialization of their bodhisattva vow and its attendant ethical conduct.

In keeping with this interpretation, Abhayākaragupta also reflects on the ethical implications for beings who might eat a bodhisattva's flesh and what that could entail for Buddhist propriety and precept.

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31 Abhayākaragupta 2015, vol. 1.

32 For a new edition of the Sanskrit text and an English translation of this *tantra,* see Dharmachakra Translation Committee, 2020. Abhayākaragupta's commentary concerns verse 5.1.21 and verse 5.1.22, *saptajanma*...).

33 Abhayākaragupta 2015, vol. 1, 886.5/6–887.3/4: Skt. *svamāṃsāsthimajjābhir api sarvasattvābhilaṣitārthaṃ kariṣyāmīti kṛtapraṇidhir bodhisattva eva nirantarāṇāṃ mānuṣajanmanāṃ saptānām anta eva vartanāt saptajanmā yasya sapta chāyā bhavanti sa tābhir lakṣayitavyaḥ svayaṃ yadā mṛtas tadā sa viśeṣato bhakṣayitavya iti śeṣaḥ / naiva mārayitavya iti //*; Tib. *rang nyid kyi sha dang rus pa dang rkang la sogs pa rnams kyis kyang sems can thams cad kyi mngon par 'dod pa'i don bdag gis bya'o zhes smon lam byas pas'i byang chub sems dpa' rnams kho na bar ma chad par mi'i skye ba bdun rnams kyi mthar 'jug pa'i phyir na skye ba bdun pa'o/ /gang gi grib ma bdun rnams su 'gyur te/ de ni de rnams kyis mtshon par bya'o//de gang gi tshe rang nyid shi ba de'i tshe khyad par du bza' bar bya'o zhes pa lhag ma'o// gsod du gzhug par bya ba ni ma yin pa kho na'o zhes…* For the canonical Tibetan version, see A 360–362; D 311.1–312.6; and Q 172b.3–173b.2 (*rang nyid kyi sha* to the end of the chapter).

> If the bodhisattva gives their own flesh, and so forth, because they are requested, the supplicants will not be blamed for harming a living being. Otherwise, bodhisattvas would not be endowed with the perfection of generosity, because, out of concern about sin for the person requesting, there would be no giving [of their body]. Other than the ill-intentioned, it is unheard of that supplicants go to hell.[34]

Although Zhe sdang rdo rje makes no explicit reference to Vajragarbha's or Abhayākaragupta's interpretations in his related glosses, the combination of meanings he proposes for the seven-timer nonetheless reflects knowledge of all these interpretative strands. Nowhere in these Indian commentaries, however, is there a narrative vignette resembling that of Zhe sdang rdo rje's tantric retelling of Kalmāṣapāda's story. Nonetheless, the different valences that Zhe sdang rdo rje and his Indian Buddhist predecessors associated with the flesh of the "seven timer" would come to be reflected in different retellings of this tantric rendition of the Kalmāṣapāda story in Tibet. As we will see below, the story's selective foregrounding of certain strands of interpretation at the expense of others can provide insights into changing conceptions of human flesh consumption in Tibet.

Pha Dam pa sangs rgyas's Pacifying (Zhi byed)

Another tantric inversion of the Kalmāṣapāda story featuring the flesh of the seven-timer appears in the literature of Pha Dam pa sangs rgyas's (b. 11th c–d. 1117) *Zhi byed* tradition. This rendition, which probably first surfaced in Tibet in the 11th or early 12th century, appears in an instructional manual called *Dam chos zhi byed gyi ngo mtshar brgyud pa'i rnam bshad*.[35] The narrative appears in the context of the "instruction of king sTobs ldan snying po" as the "story of how this king attained accomplishment." According to this version, there was a universal emperor called Āryasiṃha ruling over Uḍḍiyāna in western India. He had a blind son named sTobs ldan snying po who was

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[34] Abhayākaragupta 2015, vol. 1, 887.5/6–888.1/2: Skt. *yadā tu sa bodhisattvo yācitaḥ svamāṃsādikaṃ dadāti tadā yācakānām avadyaṃ sattvapīḍākṛtam / anyathā bodhisattvānāṃ dānapāramitā na syād yācakajanapāpaśaṅkayā dānābhavāt / na ca kvacic chrūyate yācakā narakaṃ yānti duṣṭāśayebhya iti //*; Tib. */gang gi tshe byang chub sems dpa' bslang bar bya ba des rang gi sha la sogs ps ster ba de'i tshe slong ba po rnams la sems can gdung ba byas pa'i kha na ma tho ba med do/ gzhan du na byang chub sems dpa' rnams kyis* [D=*kyi*] *sbyin pa'i pha rol tu phyin mi 'gyur te/ slong ba po'i skye bo la sdig par dogs pas na/ sbyin pa med pa'i phyir ro/ /gdug pa'i bsam pa can rnams las gzhan slong ba po* [D omits *po*] *dmyal bar 'gro ba ni gang du yang ma thos so/*

[35] Thugs sras kun dga' 1979, vol. 2, 73.7–74.5; Dam pa sangs rgyas 2012–2013, vol. 1, 664.1–.6.

eventually enthroned as king. Residing with a harem of 1,000 queens, they would take turns serving king sTobs ldan snying po. One day it was the turn of the youngest queen, only 16 years old, to feed the king, but they were out of suitable meat. She therefore took some flesh from a fresh corpse in a local charnel ground, sprinkled it with seasoning, cooked it, and served it to the blind king with a container of beer.

Since the meat was in fact the flesh of a seven timer, he opened his eyes and could see. He then questioned the queen and praised her effusively before he took off in flight the following dawn. The flesh of the seven-timer, the story concludes, is revered to this day. Then comes a verse, cast in the voice of Pha Dam pa himself:

> *Siddhi* was found from charnel ground flesh,
> igniting experience with spring beer.
> The qualities of the ten bodhisattva levels were attained at dawn.
> Amazing how Tārā prophesied
> that this too would be my guru.[36]

After detailing the contemplative practice that accompanies this vignette and verse, the text continues with the story of how the young queen also attained accomplishment.[37] It narrates that after the king had flown away, the queen eats from the remainder of the flesh and gives a piece each to the horses and cattle, but it does not work to confer flight. Considering how it happened that the king is able to take flight, the queen recalls that a drop of her menstrual blood had fallen into the flesh before she served the king. Thus replicating the formula, she consumes her menstrual blood, combining it with the semen of the king, and also takes off into the sky instantly. This is why, the story concludes, the menstrual blood (*sindhura*) of a sixteen-year old girl is so revered to this day. The following culminating verse from Pha Dam pa is then given:

> By sprinkling the catalyst with the two *bodhicitta*s
> [of menstrual blood and semen]
> in the substance of the seven-timer,
> the supreme *siddhi* was attained
> by means of the ambrosia of nonduality.
> Amazing how Tārā prophesied
> that this too would be my guru.[38]

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[36] Thugs sras Kun dga' 1979, vol. 2, 74.5–.6; Dam pa sangs rgyas 2012–2013, vol. 1, 665.1–.2.

[37] Thugs sras Kun dga' 1979, vol. 2, 75.5–76.1; Dam pa sangs rgyas 2012–2013, vol. 1, 666.1–.4.

[38] Thugs sras Kun dga' 1979, vol. 2, 76.2–.3; Dam pa sangs rgyas 2012–2013, vol. 1, 666.4–.5.

The final story connected to this episode is how the sage dPal gyi zla ba, a teacher to the king, also attains accomplishment when he visits the palace following the disappearance of the king and queen.[39] The story relates how the sage witnesses the king's palace flooded with light for three days. Coming to the palace to investigate, he is told that the king and queen have flown away and are no longer present. When he asks the ministers what happened, they tell him that they flew away by means of an amazing substance, but that it does not work when they eat it. The sage understands that it happened through a concoction, so he reconstitutes the dregs of the flesh, forms it into a pill with the five ambrosias, and eats it. Immediately, his defilements are exhausted, the eye of wisdom dawns, and he takes off into the sky. This is why, the story once again concludes, ritual practitioners esteem the pill so highly. The concluding verse from the mouth of Pha Dam pa goes as follows:

> From accomplishing a pill the defilements were exhausted,
> intelligence became astute and virtues perfected,
> and the sage possessed control over the clouds.
> Amazing how Tārā prophesied
> that this too would be my guru.[40]

Much like Zhe sdang rdo rje's telling, the *Zhi byed* rendition enlists core features of the Kalmāṣapāda vignette as a charter narrative for consuming the flesh of the seven-timer. In the *Zhi byed* tradition, however, the scene shifts to Uḍḍiyāna, in western India. The names of the main characters also change. King Siṃha in Zhe sdang rdo rje's rendition changes to sTobs ldan snying po here, although the *Zhi byed* retelling similarly preserves a trace of Kalmāṣapāda's origins in the name of sTobs ldan snying po's father, Āryasiṃha, meaning "Noble Lion." Moreover, the narrative is expanded further in the *Zhi byed* rendition to provide charters for mixing in with the flesh menstrual blood, seminal fluid, and the five ambrosias. The range of outcomes also expands, from ordinary flight to the curing of blindness, the conferral of wisdom, and the accomplishment of the Buddhist path. In these *Zhi byed* narratives, however, it is never stipulated what exactly it is about the seven-timer that makes their flesh so efficacious.

In another narrative drawn from the biographical corpus of Pha Dam pa sangs rgyas (d. 1117?), the source of the power of a seven-timer is implied to be the extraordinary purity of having been born as

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[39] Thugs sras Kun dga' 1979, vol. 2, 77.2–.7; Dam pa sangs rgyas 2012–2013, vol. 1, 667.5–668.2.

[40] Thugs sras Kun dga' 1979, vol. 2, 77.7–78.1; Dam pa sangs rgyas 2012–2013, vol. 1, 668.2–.3.

a brahmin for seven consecutive lifetimes "endowed with the Dharma." The setting of this story is the cremation ceremony of Pha Dam pa sangs rgyas at Ding ri in La stod, Tibet, presided over by his Tibetan students.[41] Three Indian students suddenly arrive at the cremation and notice to their great sadness that their master's body had already been so thoroughly consumed by the fire that not even his bones remain. When asked by the Tibetans why they are so disturbed by this, they remark that there are three special techniques for reaching awakening without having practiced the Dharma: 1) the practice of sexual yoga, 2) the practice of the transference of consciousness (*'pho ba*), and 3) the ingestion of the flesh and blood of someone who has lived for seven consecutive lifetimes as "a brahmin endowed with the Dharma" (*bram ze chos ldan*), or a "pure brahmin" (*bram ze gtsang ma*). "Dam pa was such a seven-born one," they lament; "now not even his cremated bones remain."

This funerary narrative implies that the seven-timer's flesh is efficacious in the way a bodily relic is thought to be, due primarily to the purity of its source in realized buddhas or bodhisattvas. Here this is Pha Dam pa himself. But in the *Zhi byed* stories of the flesh's origin explored further above, the source is unspecified. Moreover, other elements of the narrative, such as the mixture of the flesh with menstrual blood, semen, and the five ambrosias, among other details, clearly imply the transgressive and antinomian context of the *mahāyoga* and *yoginī tantra*s, where the injunction to eat human flesh is part of its evocation to transcend the dualisms of precept and prohibition, purity and pollution, in the realization of nondual gnosis. Similarly, the range of effects experienced by the king, queen, and sage—flight, renewed eyesight, exhaustion of conceptual defilements, enhanced wisdom, and buddhahood—spans medical, alchemical, and epistemic registers, thus reflecting the combination of interpretations of the earlier *Hevajra-tantra* commentarial literature. Throughout, however, greater emphasis is placed on the epistemic transformations of insight into nondual gnosis, completion of the Buddhist path, and perfect awakening. In this, the *Zhi byed* narratives place greater weight on the ultimate soteriological senses of the flesh than on its more provisional alchemical or health effects.

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[41] This story is told with different details in several sources. This rendition follows 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981, 548.4–549.1; and Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan 1975, vol. 2, 112.6–113.3, which also differ slightly on the details. For a later version, which expands the list of "special techniques" to four, see Chos kyi seng ge 1992, 158–160. For an English translation of this later version of the episode, see Molk 2008, 134.

3. Kalmāṣapāda Revealed as the Flying Cannibal King of Za hor

By the middle of the 14th century, the Kalmāṣapāda narrative, as filtered through the tantric revisions of Zhe sdang rdo rje's *Hevajratantra* commentarial tradition and Pha Dam pa sangs rgyas's *Zhi byed* tradition, was transformed yet again to find its way into a Tibetan biography of Padmasambhava: U rgyan gling pa's (b. 1323) *Padma bka' thang*. Purported to be a Treasure text revealed from its site of concealment in 1352, the narrative of the *Padma bka' thang* is arguably the most widely read biography of Padmasambhava in Tibetan history.[42]

The appearance of this narrative in the *Padma bka' thang* can be better understood in light of developments in rNying ma flesh practice that took place prior to the 14th century. In the 13th century, and likely well before, Tibetan visionaries started to excavate the seven-timer flesh directly from Tibet's landscape and ancient temples, together with ritual manuals through which to collectively consecrate it, form it into pills, and distribute it to the wider public. The 13th century visionary Guru Chos kyi dbang phyug (1212–1270) was a key figure in this movement.[43] He is credited with first popularizing the flesh through revealing it together with a major Treasure cycle and widely propagating it throughout Tibet.[44] This Treasure revelation is known as the *Thugs rje chen po yang snying 'dus pa*.[45] It includes a *tantra* and commentaries featuring the flesh, short histories detailing the flesh's initial emergence and transmission to Tibet, and ritual manuals centering on the flesh that range from collective initiations and great accomplishment rites to *sādhana*s and daily practices. As its title suggests, the cycle centers on Avalokiteśvara, the Great Compassionate One (Tib. *Thugs rje chen po*). The seven-times-born flesh is construed therein to be none other than that of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, who willingly took seven consecutive rebirths to offer his body for the benefit of countless beings. The flesh-pill great accomplishment (*sgrub chen*) of the *Thugs rje chen po yang snying 'dus pa* is a group *sādhana* practice in which participants mix the flesh with other ingredients to form pills while performing intensive visualization practice and mantra recitation focused on further consecrating the substance as Avalokiteśvara made flesh.[46]

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42 *chu 'brug*. U rgyan gling pa 1985, 726.

43 For details on the life and legacy of Guru Chos dbang, see Gyatso 1993 and 1994, and Phillips 2004.

44 Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 482.4–.5.

45 Guru Chos kyi dbang phyug 1982.

46 Comparison with Guru Chos dbang's *Accomplishing Nectar Medicine* (*bDud rtsi sman bsgrub*) cycle, which Garrett (2010, 311) has pointed out in her excellent work

Guru Chos dbang's revelation and propagation of the *Thugs rje chen po yang snying 'dus pa* marks a major turning point for flesh practice in Tibet. Bradford Phillips has shown how Guru Chos dbang was instrumental through his development and dissemination of the *Maṇi bKa' 'bum* cycle of his predecessor Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192) in popularizing the cult of Avalokiteśvara and the recitation of his mantra throughout all strata of 13th century Tibetan society.[47] When viewed in light of these wider efforts, which Phillips highlights as "more evangelistic and sociopolitical in nature" than those of his predecessors, Guru Chos dbang's Avalokiteśvara flesh cycle emerges as a way to quite literally materialize the bodhisattva from within the Tibetan landscape. [48] Propagation of the collective "great accomplishment" rite, culminating with the distribution and consumption of Avalokiteśvara's body, can then be seen as a way to induct as wide an audience as possible into his vision of Avalokiteśvara's intimate involvement with the Tibetan populace as Tibet's destined spiritual patron. This stands out as a particularly visceral instance of what Matthew Kapstein has described as a shift among Tibetans from the 12th century on toward finding India, the sacred source of Tibet's Buddhist traditions, within Tibet and Tibetans. [49] With Guru Chos dbang's flesh practice, the Indian Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion Avalokitśvara, turned seven-times-born brahmin, could now be found not only within the past lives and mindstreams of Tibet's ecclesiastical elite, as made known through their writings. He could also be found scattered throughout the Tibetan landscape, such that his body, formed into pills, could be directly sensed on the tongues and in the mouths and stomachs of Tibetans from all walks of life.

Guru Chos dbang's cycle set the gold standard for the Treasure tradition's seven-timer flesh practice to the present. Many subsequent Treasure revealers followed Guru Chos dbang's lead, claiming to unearth fragments of the seven-times-born Avalokiteśvara's flesh in their own Treasure revelations. The most influential among them were Ratna gling pa (1403–1479), who revealed the flesh in the 15th century as part of his cycle called the *Thugs rje chen po gsang ba 'dus pa*, which is far more voluminous than Guru Chos dbang's earlier revelation and awaits detailed comparison with Guru Chos dbang's cycle; and Padma gling pa (1450–1521), who revealed the flesh in the late 15th century as

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on this and related practices incorporates the flesh of a seven-times-born brahmin and other shared ingredients and procedures in its "inner practice," must be left aside for a future study.

47 Phillips 2004, 343–346.

48 Phillips 2004, 344.

49 Kapstein 2003, 774–776.

part of his cycle called the *Bla ma nor bu rgya mtsho*, and later, more extensively, as part of his *Thugs rje chen po mun sel sgron me*.[50] The popularization of collective consecration rites invariably accompanied the revelation and propagation of the flesh over the centuries. This ritual came to be known as *maṇi ril sgrub*, "the *maṇi*-pill accomplishment;" *ril bu bum sgrub*, the "pill-vase accomplishment;" or simply *bum sgrub*, the "vase accomplishment," after the vase containing the pills in the rite.[51] It also came to be associated with collective *maṇi dung phyur*, or "one hundred million *maṇi* recitation session," since mass intensive mantra recitation is considered an integral facet of the flesh's consecration process.[52]

The popularization of rNying ma flesh practice from the 13th century on did not escape criticism. Judging by the circulation of polemical texts, falsely attributed to famous 13th and 14th century Tibetan scholars, that specifically target Guru Chos dbang and his flesh practice, rNying ma seven-timer flesh revelation and practice had become widespread by that time and was perceived as a threat to Buddhist decorum by certain sectors of Tibetan ecclesiastical society.[53] The *Padma bka' thang* Treasure rendition of the Kalmāṣapāda story can be interpreted in part as a response to these polemical attacks. In one of its chapters, it traces the origins of the flesh in South Asia back to the court of the king of Za hor; and in another chapter it connects its spread to Tibet back to the Tibetan imperial period of the 8th and 9th centuries, specifically to the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava's interactions with emperor Khri srong lde'u btsan and his court.

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[50] Ratna gling pa 2014, vols. 5 and 6; Padma gling pa 1975–1976, vols. 2 and 7. For more on Padma gling pa's involvement with the seven-born flesh, see Gayley 2007.

[51] The *maṇi ril sgrub* (*maṇi rimdu*) ritual has been documented in detail by Kohn 2001. However, Kohn (2001, 114–115) was not privy to the ingredients of the "pill's [sacred] substance" (*ril dzas*); he reports that his main informant, 'Khrul zhig Ngag dbang chos kyi blo gros (1924–2011), expressed "reticence and vagueness on the subject" of the pill's active ingredient when asked.

[52] Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 451–496.

[53] Guru Chos dbang and his flesh practice are singled out for criticism in an attack on the authenticity of *gter ma* that appears in a short polemical writing attributed to Bu ston Rin chen grub (1290–1364), in *sNgags log sun 'byin gyi skor* 1979, 25.6–31.6. For compelling arguments for the false attribution of this work, see Kapstein 2000, 253–254n35; and Raudsepp 2009, 296n70. Guru Chos dbang is also targeted in a polemical writing attributed to Chag *lotsāwa* Chos rje dpal (1197–1264), in *sNgags log sun 'byin gyi skor* 1979, 13.5–14.2. See Raudsepp (2009) for compelling evidence of this work's false attribution. However, Raudsepp (2009, 288) also wrongly identifies Gru gu dBang phyug (*sNgags log sun 'byin gyi skor*, 10.5) as Guru Chos dbang, when here he is more likely Gru gu Yang dbang, who is credited for having revealed Hayagrīva and other fierce deity cycles. For more about this figure, see Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Taye 2011, 186–187; and Jamgön Kongtrül 2012, 233–234.

The *Padma bka' thang* stands out as the most famous text to include these two narratives. But Sangs rgyas gling pa (1340–1396) also revealed a nearly identical pair of narratives in his *bKa' thang* biography of Padmasambhava and Padma gling pa (1450–1521) followed suite nearly a century later to include these in his own revealed *bKa' thang* Padmasambhava biography. The two narratives constitute chapters 38 and 102 in U rgyan gling pa's *Padma bKa' thang shel brag ma*; chapters 34 and 99 in Sangs rgyas gling pa's *bKa' thang gser phreng*; and chapters 34 and 97 in Padma gling pa's *bKa' thang mun sel sgron me*.[54] Accurately deciphering the contents of these chapters, their larger *bKa' thang* narratives, and the relationships between them, is significantly complicated not only by inconsistencies between these three *bKa' thang* narratives, but also by textual problems between different versions of each. Nevertheless, to give a preliminary glimpse into these two narrative vignettes, particularly as they appear in U rgyan gling pa's telling, which has enjoyed the most enduring popularity, I will present below the Tibetan text and English translation of the first, followed by a summary of the second.

The Kalmāṣapāda narrative is clearly detectable in the first of these two narratives, in the chapter called "Princes Mandāravā Discovers Brahmin Flesh."[55] The chapter begins with the king of Za hor pondering with whom his daughter Mandāravā should be betrothed. Frustrated by the prospect of displeasing any of the neighboring kingdoms with their choice, he sends the princess to ponder her own preference in private. The princess, however, pines only to practice the Dharma. After delivering a spirited soliloquy in which she takes stock of her curious mixture of freedom and worldly entanglement, and reinforces her fervent wish to accomplish the Dharma and gain true freedom in this and future lives, she approaches her father for a word:

lha lcam yab kyi drung du phyin nas su:
'di phyi gnyis sdug khyim thab nga mi byed:
byed dbang byung na dam pa'i chos shig byed:

The princess went before her father and said:
"I'm not getting married—it'll bring misery in this and future lives!
If I have the freedom to do so, I will practice the Dharma."

byed dbang ma byung lus 'di spangs nas su:
chos byar yod pa'i lus shig smon lam 'debs:

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[54] U rgyan gling pa 1985, 255–261, 644–654; Sangs rgyas gling pa 1985, 231–237; 685–693; Padma gling pa 1981, vol. 1, 210–216, vol. 2, 298–306.

[55] U rgyan gling pa 1985, 255–261; Sangs rgyas gling pa 1985, 231–237; Padma gling pa 1981, vol. 1, 210–216.

de skad zhus pas rgyal po ma dgyes nas:
lha lcam g.yog mo lnga brgya'i dkyil bcug nas:

"Without the power to do so I'll discard this body
and aspire for a body in which I can practice the Dharma."
The king, displeased with her words,
put the princess in the care of five hundred female servants.

pho brang nang nas phyi ru ma btang byas:
gal te 'di nyid lcebs sam bros pa na:
g.yog mo lnga brgya gson por khyis zar 'jug:
ces pa g.yog mo rnams la ngag bcug go:

Forbidding her from leaving the palace,
he commanded the servants:
"If she kills herself or runs away,
I will feed you five hundred servants alive to the dogs."

rgyal po'i yul lugs btsun mo re re yi:
pho brang zhag re mal re sdod pa la:
bzhes pa 'dren pa gzob pa'i re mos byed:
btsun mo rgan pa ha'u ke'i res la:

According to royal custom, each queen had a quarters
and each night [the king] slept in one or another of their beds in turn,
such that they took turns with the responsibility of feeding him.
When it was the old queen Ha'u ke's turn,

phyogs kyi gnye po mang nas rgya ri zad:
bzhes pa 'dren pa'i lpags ni med par gyur:
rgya ri nyo bar gzhan gtong blo ma khal:
lha lcam tshong 'dus rgya ri nyo ru btang:

there were too many retainers from the surrounding realms, so she ran out of meat,
leaving no skin with which to feed [the king].
She did not trust anyone else to send to buy meat,
so she sent the princess to the market to buy it.

char pa che nas tshogs 'dus ma 'dzoms par:
log nas 'ongs pa'i lam ka zhig tu ni:
khye'u lo rgyad pa zhig shi nas 'dug:
char pas dag nas skya lgang 'dug pa de:

The rain was heavy, so the market did not convene.
On a path during her way back
there was an eight-year old boy who had died.
Cleansed by the rain, he was perfectly white.

lha lcam nywa bzhi thams cad legs par bregs:
snod du bcug nas pho brang nang du 'ongs:
btsun mo'i ngag nas rgya ri rnyed dam zer:
lha lcam rnyed smras khyod kyi tshos shig zer:

The princess cut off all the calf flesh,[56]
put it in a container and returned to the palace.
The queen asked, "Did you find meat?" The princess replied, "Yes I did find some."
[The queen then told her:] "Then you can cook it!"

lha lcam btsos shing khu ba yang yang phos:
spod kyi rigs byed mang po btab nas su:
a ma sha tshos bzhes pa drongs shig gsol:
rgyal por btsun mos gzhes pa drangs pa yis:

The princess cooked it and drained the juices repeatedly.
She added many kinds of spices,
and when the king ordered, "Mama, feed me the meal of cooked meat!"
the queen fed the king his meal.

bzhes pa 'ju bar gyur pa'i dus skabs na:
rgyal po'i lus la bde ba me ru 'bar:
stan gyi kha nas 'dom gang 'phags nas su:
nam mkha'i dbyings la bya bzhin 'phur la khad:

When he had digested the meal,
the king felt the fire of bliss blaze forth in his body,
he began to levitate a full fathom off his seat,
and he was on the verge of flying away into the expanse of the sky like a bird.

de ltar byung ba'i skye bdun sha ru rig:
rgyal po lkugs pas mi la 'bod pa bzhin:
nga ro'i sgra yis ha'u ke[57] *zhes bos:*
rgyal po'i mdun du btsun mo shog zer phyin:

Knowing it to be seven-born flesh that gave rise to such,
the king beckoned for Ha'u ke with a roar,

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[56] Krang dbyi sun, et al. 1993, 974: *nywa bzhi/ rkang lag gi nywa'i sha ril/*. However, below in this vignette the term reappears as *nywa sha*; additionally, Sangs rgyas gling pa (1985, 235.2) has *nya sha*, which is likely *nywa sha*, "calf flesh;" and Padma gling pa (1981, vol. 1, 213.5) has *nywa sul*, also meaning, "calf flesh."

[57] This was emended from *ki* in light of the consistent appearance of *ke* above in U rgyan gling pa (1985,259.4) and its appearance in Sangs rgyas gling pa (1985, 235.4) and Padma gling pa (1981, vol. 1, 214.4).

like a deaf-mute calling out for someone.
Commanding the queen to come, she went before him.

lag pa g.yon pas gtsun mo'i thong rtsa bzung:
g.yas pas gri bzung rtse chung ba la btsugs:
ma mgal khar brdzangs sna gong bzhin gner nas:
khyod kyis da nang nga la drangs pa yi:

He grabbed the queen by the jugular with his left hand
and holding his knife in his right hand, he stuck it against her throat,
and with his teeth clinched and his brow furrowed, he said:
"The meat that you fed me today—

sha de gang byung 'chad dam mi 'chad zer:
mi 'chad gyur na khyod nyid gsod do zer:
btsun mo bred cing sngangs nas ma bzod de:
nga la rgyud med mandā ra bar dris:

will you tell me where it comes from or not?
If you won't say, I will kill you!"
The queen was terrified and couldn't bear it,
so she replied, "I don't know. Ask Mandāravā!"

'bras bskur tshong 'dus nyo ru btang ba yin:
de skad smras pas rgyal pos phyag btang nas:
'o na mandā ra ba khrid shog gsung:
btsun mos lha lcam khrid nas yongs pa yis:

"I sent her to buy it carrying rice."
Thereupon, the king unhanded her and demanded,
"Well then, bring me Mandāravā!"
The queen returned escorting the princess.

rgyal pos phyag g.yon lha lcam thong rtsa bzung:
g.yas pas gri bzung rtse'u chung la gtsugs:
bdag la drangs pa'i sha de gang nas nyos:
'chad dam mi 'chad mi 'chad gsod do zer:

He grabbed the princess by the jugular with his left hand
and holding his knife in his right hand, he stuck it against her throat
and said:
"Where did you buy the meat that was fed to me?
Will you tell me or not? If you don't say I'll kill you!"

lha lcam bred sngangs rdzun smra ma shes par:
nga la a mas māṁ sa nyor song zer:
char pa che pas tshong 'dus mi 'dug nas:
log nas 'ongs pa'i lam ka zhig na ni:

Terrified and unable to lie, the princess said:
"Mother told me to go buy meat,
but since the rain was heavy there was no market,
and on a path while I was returning,

khye'u'i ro zhig char pas dag nas 'dug:
ras sgye'i 'bras pho nywa sha bregs nas bcug:
tshos par btsos nas chu pho spod btab drangs:
sha dug byung ngam ci byung gsol pa dang:

"there was the corpse of a child that was cleansed by the rain.
I cut off the calves and put it in the rice sack.
I cooked it, drained the juices, added spices, and served it.
Was the meat poisoned or what?"

'o na ro de dgangs po khyer shog gsungs:
lha lcam ro de yod dam med na snyam:
bya dang gcan gzan zos sam ma zos sam:
mgyogs par myur du lus bkol phyin pa dang:

The king said, "Well then, bring me the whole corpse!"
Wondering whether the corpse was still there,
or if the birds and wild animals had eaten it,
the princess quickly made her way back.

ro de 'dug pas lha lcam khur nas 'ongs:
yab kyi drung du bskyal bas yab nyid mnyes:
rkang lag mgo lus sha lpags ma lus kun:
rdo yis btags nas ril bu dpag med byas:

The corpse was still there, so the princess brought it back,
and carried it before her father; her father was pleased.
He used a stone to pulverize the whole body,
including the flesh and skin of the legs, arms, head, and torso, and made innumerable pills out of it.

rin che sna bdun sgrom gyi nang du bcug:
kha la rin chen sna bdun rgyas btab nas:
dur khrod dga' ba'i tshal du gter du sbas:
ma mo mkha' 'gro rnams la gnyer byang gtad:

He placed it inside a box made of the seven precious substances,
sealed the lid with the seven precious substances,
and concealed it as treasure at Pleasure Grove charnel ground.
He entrusted a stewardship certificate to the *mātṛkā ḍākinī*s.

mkha' 'gro bdud 'dul ma la bya ra bcol:

dus mtshan ko sha de yi btsas su bzhag:

He entrusted the *ḍākinī* Tamer of Demons as its sentinel,
and left it as a harvest for the treasury of temporal signs [to come].

u rgyan gu ru padma 'byung gnas kyi skyes rabs rnam par thar pa rgyas par bkod pa las:
lha lcam mandā ra bas bram ze'i sku sha rnyed pa'i le'u ste so rgyad pa'o:

This concludes the 38th chapter of the extensive past-life stories and biography of Padmasambhava of Uḍḍiyāna: "Princes Mandāravā Discovers Brahmin Flesh." [58]

The commonalities between this narrative and the *sūtra* Kalmāṣapāda core are readily discernible. Still featured here are the elements of a human-flesh eating king; that the flesh originates from a child; that it is found, prepared, and served by a cook who is deceitful, frightened, and truthful, in turn; and that consuming the flesh leads to flight. The revaluation of these elements, however, reflects commonalities with the previous tantric transformations of this narrative core registered in the 11th and 12th century renditions of Zhe sdang rdo rje and the *Zhi byed* tradition. Eating human flesh directly brings only positive effects for the king in these tantric revisions. The flesh's conferral of flight remains a constant throughout these iterations, even while the *Zhi byed* tradition expands this to include the loftier epistemic transformations of heightened wisdom and accomplishment of the Buddhist path. In the *Padma bka' thang* telling, the king additionally feels the "fire of bliss blaze forth in his body," but he experiences this and begins to levitate off his seat only after he has digested his meal, not instantly, as in the *Hevajratantra*, Zhe sdang rdo rje, and the *Zhi byed* tradition.

It also evident in other ways that the *Padma bka' thang* narrative is by no means a straightforward retelling of the previous tantric revisions. Firstly, it is more complex than what we have encountered thus far. The character of the young queen in the previous tantric versions is replaced by two female characters—princess Mandāravā and her mother Ha'u ke—the former finds and cooks the flesh, while the latter serves it. Stylistically, it is also more lyrical than the previous tantric versions. The vividness of its imagery harkens back to the style of the *sūtra* Kalmāṣapāda rendition considered above.

But the most conspicuous differences in the *Padma bka' thang* rendition are perhaps its overall framing, along with different and additional placenames and personal names. The king's arrangement

[58] U rgyan gling pa 1985, 257.6–261.3; Sangs rgyas gling pa 1985, 234.3–237.2; Padma gling pa 1981, vol. 1, 212.4–216.2.

of princess Mandāravā's marriage, in light of her wish to only practice the Dharma, sets the stage for the flesh vignette. Once the magical potency of the flesh is discovered, it is concealed by the king in a charnel ground for posterity under the guardianship of *ḍākinī*s. This framing effectively situates the flesh of a seven-timer as a forerunner to narratives that tell Padmasambhava's involvement with the court of Za hor, his relationship with Mandāravā, and his subsequent role in bringing the flesh to Tibet and concealing it as Treasure throughout the Tibetan landscape.

The placenames of Za hor and Pleasure Grove charnel ground (*dur khrod dga' ba'i tshal*), and the personal names of gTsug lag 'dzin, Mandāravā, and the *ḍākinī* Tamer of Demons harken back to the *Zang gling ma* biography revealed by the Treasure revealer Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192). This is probably the earliest revealed Treasure biography of Padmasambhava and thus an early precursor of the 14th century *bKa' thang* biographies.[59] The *Zangs gling ma* also features these places and this cast of characters. However, it only includes them in the context of Padmasambhava's conversion of the court and all its subjects to Buddhism, which features the narrative vignettes of Padmasambhava's first trip to Za hor to practice meditation at Pleasure Grove charnel ground, where he is empowered and blessed by the *ḍākiṇī* Tamer of Demons; his return to Za hor to secure the 16-year old princess Mandāravā as his yogic consort; the failed attempt by the people of Za hor to burn the couple alive, featuring the famous image of Padmasambhava and Mandāravā comfortably in union on a cool lotus seat engulfed in flames above the surface of a lake; and the subsequent embrace of Buddhism by the people of Za hor and their king gTsug lag 'dzin.[60] But nowhere does it mention the flesh of the seven-born, or any narrative vignette from the episode that features it in the *Padma bka' thang*. Therefore, also missing from the *Zangs gling ma* is any mention of queen Ha'u ke. The name Ha'u ke, which on the surface appears to be a transliteration of an unknown Chinese name, is peculiar. Odd too is that the name gTsug lag 'dzin is given in Tibetan, while Mandāravā is given as the transliteration of a Sanskrit name. Za hor, moreover, is said in the *bKa' thang* to have its own unique language. This cosmopolitan mélange of personal names stands out as an intriguing story element—a window into the Tibetan imaginaire of the multiethnic court life of Za hor—that appears to lack any clear precedent in other renditions.

Whatever their origins and significance, by drawing most of its placenames and personal names from the *Zangs gling ma* biography,

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[59] Doney 2014.
[60] Tsogyal 1993, 39–40, 45–51.

the *Padma bka' thang* flesh episode effectively inscribes Padmasambhava into the tantric transformations of the Kalmāṣapāda human-flesh eating story witnessed in the renditions of Zhe sdang rdo rje and the *Zhi byed* tradition. In this, the *Padma bka' thang* bridges through the figure of Padmasambhava the Treasure tradition of revealing seven-timer flesh in Tibet with the South Asian origins of the flesh in Za hor. More significantly, by locating the origins of the flesh in Za hor, and nowhere else, this narrative evokes older associations that link the land of Za hor and its king Indrabhūti and his court with the mythical origin of the Buddhist *tantra*s on earth.[61]

The culmination of this narrative threading of seven-timer flesh between Za hor and Tibet can only be witnessed in the unfolding of the broader *Padma bka' thang* narrative. This comes to a head in chapter 102, titled "The Chapter that Prophesies Lha rje and Teaches the Benefits of the Seven-Born Flesh" (*Lha rje lung bstan cing skye bdun sha'i phan yon bstan pa'i le'u*).[62] This chapter is the second of the two *bKa' thang* tradition's flesh-centered narratives introduced above. It weaves the flesh into Tibet through a speech delivered by Padmasambhava to the Tibetan prince rGyal sras lha rje mChog grub rgyal po, the grandson of emperor Khri srong lde'u bstan and son of prince Mu tig btsan po. The scene takes place after the emperor has died and Mu tig btsan po has assumed the throne. It begins, tellingly enough, after the letting out of an accomplishment rite, when Padmasambhava beckons for rGyal sras lha rje to be brought before the assembly so that the master can deliver a prophecy about his future incarnations for all to hear. Padmasambhava opens his prophecy by associating the prince with the king of Za hor gTsug lag 'dzin himself, who, accepted as a disciple by Padmasambhava's own past emanation, will go on to inaugurate the tradition of Tibetan Treasure revelation by returning as a Treasure revealer for thirteen successive incarnations.[63] These incarnations include, by Padmasambhava's account, Sangs rgyas bla ma (1000–1080), usually regarded by the rNying ma tradition as Tibet's first Treasure revealer, and the 14th century Treasure revealer U rgyan gling pa himself.[64]

The second part of the chapter consists of Padmasambhava narrating that the prince is in fact a seven-timer himself, whose flesh—in this and his next thirteen lifetimes—will yield a staggering range of

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61 Garson 2004, 151–173; Kuijp 2010.

62 U rgyan gling pa 1985, 644.6–654.3. Corresponding chapters are in Sangs rgyas gling pa 1985, 685.6–693.3; and Padma gling pa 1981, vol. 2, 298.5–306.7.

63 U rgyan gling pa 1985, 645.6–646.5.

64 Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Taye 2011, 73–75; and 122–126. For details on subsequent identifications of the king of Za hor gTsug lag 'dzin pa's reincarnations, see Kuijp 2010, 145.

pragmatic, karmic, and ultimate benefits to all who consume it. Padmasambhava then declares that the prince will die at the young age of 15 and commands that after his passing the body be concealed as Treasure for later generations of Treasure revealers to excavate when most needed.[65] He goes on to detail the future signs of the times by which to identify the appropriate moments for its revelation. In this, the *Padma bka' thang* extends the earlier tantric revision of the Kalmāṣapāda flesh-eating narrative to Tibet, enlisting it to associate rGyal sras lha rje with king gTsug lag 'dzin, the flesh-consuming king of Za hor, as a charter for the prince's identity as a seven-timer and his future incarnations as a prophesied revealer of his own and others' seven-timer flesh in Tibet. These associations effectively relate through the flesh the origin of *tantra* in Za hor with the origin of the Treasure tradition in Tibet, by means of the flesh and its intermediary, Padmasambhava.

4. The Apotheosis of Kalmāṣapāda and his Flesh through Polemic

In the middle of the 16th century, the *Padma bka' thang*'s tantric transformation of the Kalmāṣapāda story, as inflected by the earlier renditions of Zhe sdang rdo rje and the *Zhi byed* traditions, came under criticism in what was the most extensive polemical attack ever waged against Treasure seven-times-born flesh practice. This polemic was only a small part of a much broader literary critique of the rNying ma school's most revered scriptures, histories, doctrines, practices, and sacra. It was attributed to none other than Karmapa VIII Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–1554), perhaps the most powerful hierarch in Tibet at the time. The discussion that follows considers this polemic's criticisms of the *Padma bka' thang* narrative, alongside four rebuttals to this critique composed within roughly 25 years of the polemic, to chart how this literary argument prompted further transformations of the core Kalmāṣapāda narrative.

Before we delve into the polemic and its rebuttals, a few observations are in order. First, it is important to note that credible doubt has been cast on whether Mi bskyod rdo rje in fact composed the polemical text or it was only falsely attributed to him.[66] Perhaps the most compelling evidence to suggest its false attribution is that a rebuttal was also attributed to Mi bskyod rdo rje, and in it, the author, presenting himself as Karmapa VIII, denies having written the original polemic and defends against its critiques point for point.[67] Mi bskyod

[65] U rgyan gling pa 1985, 652.3.
[66] Gentry 2017, 181–182; Kuijp 2018, 93.
[67] Mi bskyod rdo rje 2004.

rdo rje's rebuttal was likely composed in 1552 or 1553.[68] In addition to it, there were three other rebuttals composed in response to the original polemic. One rebuttal was likely composed in 1555 by a figure identified in the colophon as Lho pa Bya bral ba, "the renunciate from the south," whose identity is somewhat obscure, save his claim to have been a direct disciple of the Treasure revealer Padma gling pa.[69] Another was probably composed in 1557 by 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho, from g.Yag sde in gTsang, who by his own account was also a lineage holder primarily of the Treasure revelations of Padma gling pa, among others, one generation removed from the great Treasure revealer.[70] If the figure by the name of Lho pa Thams cad mkhyen pa listed in 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho's lineage records refers to Lho pa Bya bral ba, then 'Dul 'dzin claims to have received the Pad gling Treasures directly from Lho pa himself.[71] Finally, there is a rebuttal composed in 1576 by Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, whose links to the tradition of Padma gling pa, among other Treasure revealers, I have discussed elsewhere at length.[72]

The polemic targets not only the flesh's charter narrative from the *Padma bKa' thang*. It also attacks the flesh's nature and capacity too. In the interest of space, however, I will only touch on the narrative.

After claiming the narrative "source" of the flesh to be "inauthentic," the polemic summarizes it before attempting to pick it apart on a few fronts. Beginning with the summary:

> [1] Concerning the source of the pill of the seven-times-born, you state the following:
>
> > There was a girl called Mandāravā, who was the daughter of the universal monarch of Za hor called gTsug lag 'dzin. There were many retainers through which the surrounding kings of India, China, and elsewhere were requesting her as their queen. Her parents, without acknowledging to whom she should be betrothed, had Mandāravā sent to the turret of the castle to consider for herself whom she preferred. Meanwhile, once, the king ran out of meat, so Mandāravā was sent to buy meat at the market fair,

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68 Rheingans 2017, 106 and fn185; and Kuijp 2018, 94 and fn28.

69 Lho pa Bya bral ba. For some suggestive traces of Lho pa's life, see Kuijp 2018, 92.

70 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981 and Chu smad snag tsang manuscript. For evidence of his associations with the tradition of Padma gling pa, see 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981, 4.3, 387.6–388.1, 388.2, etc. For some of this figure's additional associations, see Kuijp 2018, 91.

71 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981, 388.2.

72 Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan 1971, 1–173; 1975, vol. 2, 1–143; 1999, 5–250. Gentry 2017.

> giving her rice as payment. But the rain was too heavy, so the market fair did not convene. [Having veered] the wrong way, [Mandāravā] spotted the corpse of a dead child. She shaved off some of its flesh and offered it to the king. This is known as the seven-times-born [flesh].[73]

After thus paraphrasing the *bKa' thang* narrative, the polemic adopts a common-sense approach to the presumed cultural practices and culinary habits of the royal court and populace of ancient Za hor to attack the feasibility of this account:

> There are three reasons why this is untenable: [1] teaching that the king of Za hor had the power like that of a universal monarch, it would be impossible for him to run out of meat to eat; [2] even supposing it were possible for him to run out, teaching that he had an immeasurable number of servants, it is impossible that he would send the princess, whom he would have cherished like his own eyes, to the market fair with a sack of rice on her back; and [3] even had he sent her, generally, none of the people of Za hor had the tradition of eating human flesh, and in particular, it is impossible [for the princess] to introduce to the king meat through which he would be consuming another person. Therefore, the source for obtaining the seven-times-born is inauthentic. One should thus know that it was the invention of tantric priests. If there were any proof why those [stories] should be [deemed] faultless, then it would behoove you to explain it.[74]

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[73] Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan 1975, vol. 2 [Sd], 106.5–107.2; 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981 [Kd], 541.6–542.2; Lho pa Bya bral ba [L], 88a.7–88b.5: */de la skye bdun ril bu'i khungs ma dag pa ni [Kd, L dang po skye bdun sha ni] / za hor rgyal po [Kd, L po'i] gtsug lag 'dzin zhes [Kd, L ces] bya ba 'khor los [K lo] bsgyur ba'i rgyal po [L + lta bu] zhig gi bu mo mandā [Kd, L manda; Sd mandh] ra ba [Kd + zhes, L + ces] bya ba gcig [K, L zhig] yod pa la/ [Kd - /] rgya dkar [Kd gar] nag [Kd – nag] la sogs pa [Kd – pa] phyogs kyi rgyal pos [Kd, L po'i] btsun mor slong ba'i gnye [Kd skye, L snye] bo mang [L mangs] ste [L te] / [Kd - /] yab yum gyis [L kyi] byin ngo ma shes par [L + /] mandha [Kd, L manda] ra ba nyid su la [L ma] dad [Kd, L dad; Sd dang; Sg, Sk, Sm, Sr gtong] [L + gtong gi] pho brang gi yang rtser bsam gzhigs [Kd, L gzhig] btong [Kd - btong, L stong] bcug pa las/ [Kd - /] lan gcig rgyal po'i skrums [Kd srung, L krum] sha 'thogs te [Kd ste] [L + /] mandha [Kd, L manda] ra ba [L – ba] la rin [L rid] du 'bras bskur te [Kd + /] tshong 'dus su sha nyor btang [Kd gtong] ba [Kd pa] na [L + /] char ches nas tshong 'dus ma 'dzoms/ log pa'i lam na byis pa shi ba'i ro zhig 'dug pa las [Kd - las] sha bregs [Sd breg] te [Sd ste] [L + /] rgyal po la zhus pas [Kd pa na, L pa] skye bdun du rig [L rigs] ces smra/.*

[74] Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan 1975, vol. 2 [Sd], 107.2–.5; 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981 [Kd], 542.2–.5; Lho pa Bya bral ba [L], 88b.5–89a.4: *de la mi 'thad pa'i rgyu mtshan gsum ste/ za hor rgyal po 'khor los bsgyur ba [L ba'i rgyal po] lta bu'i [L bu] mnga' thang yod par bstan nas [Kd pa] [L + /] gsol ba'i [Kd - ba'i] skrum [Kd, L krum] sha la thogs [L 'thogs] pa mi srid/ gal te thogs [Kd, L 'thogs] srid [Kd - srid] kyang bran g.yog dpag tu med par [Kd pa] bstan nas [Kd pa]/ lha lcam [Sd mo] mig 'bras [Kd, L - 'bras]*

Most noteworthy in this critique is the polemic's appeal to commonsense assumptions among Tibetans of the cultural practices of ancient Za hor and its royal court. It is not credible as an authoritative historical account, by the standards of the polemic, because the details in no way conform to known South Asian courtly practice and decorum. Anthropophagy, the polemic additionally declares, was not an accepted custom among the Za hor people. The critic goes on to interpret the seven-timer flesh and the tantric injunction to consume it not as calling for the literal consumption of human flesh, but as a figurative expression that signals the physiological development of seminal fluid. This interpretation recalls one of the many interpretations supplied in Zhe sdang rdo rje's and Vajragarbha's *Hevajratantra* commentaries considered above.

The first rebuttal to this polemic was probably that attributed to Mi bskyod rdo rje himself. After paraphrasing the polemic's rejection of the rNying ma history of Treasure flesh, he counters with an analogous history of his own: that of king Mūrdhaja (sPyi bo skyes), who once had control over the four continents but subsequently fell from power.[75] "If this is possible," states Mi bskyod rdo rje, "it is not impossible that with the power of only the king of Za hor, he would not find the mere enjoyment of meat."[76] Mi bskyod rdo rje offers little more on this aspect of the polemic. Interestingly, however, like Kalmāṣapāda, king Mūrdhaja appears in several different *sūtra*s; he is even the feature character in chapter 45 of the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish* named after him.[77]

Lho pa Bya bral ba's rebuttal to the polemic was likely the next to circulate. In response to the rejection of the narrative's authenticity, Lho pa first has this to say:

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ltar gces [Kd ces] pa de la 'bras kyi sgye'u zhig rgyab du sbrags te tshong 'dus su btang [Kd gtong] ba mi srid/ gal te btang [Kd gtong] du [Kd srid] zin [Kd - zin] na'ang [Kd, L kyang] spyir za hor ba kun la mi sha za ba'i srol dang [Kd med] mi ldan [Kd - mi ldan] zhing [Kd cing] / khyad par rgyal po la gzhan gyi [Kd gyis] mi sha [Sd - sha] bza' [Kd, Sd za] ba'i zas [Sd sha] 'dren pa [Kd - pa] mi srid/ des na [Kd - na] skye bdun rnyed [L, Sd snyed] pa'i khungs ma dag ste/ 'di yang [Kd 'ang] sngags btsun skye bo dag gis [Kd, Sd gi] blo bzor [gzur bor] rig par bya'o/ de dag skyon med du 'gro ba'i sgrub byed yod na smra bar rigs so/.

[75] Mi bskyod rdo rje 2004, 441.2–.3. This section of the rebuttal can also be found in Mi bskyod rdo rje 2009, 87–89; Mi bskyod rdo rje 2013, 76; and Mi bskyod rdo rje 2013?, 171.2–.3.

[76] Mi bskyod rdo rje 2004, 441.3–.4.

[77] *Bka' 'gyur* (*dpe bsdur ma*) 2006–2009, Tōh. 341, Mdo sde, A (vol. 74), 767–775. For an English translation of this narrative, see "King Forehead-Born," in Frye 1981, 229–233.

> It is feasible that the deeds of all buddhas and bodhisattvas can find expression, appear, and manifest in any way whatsoever. For natural *nirmāṇakāya*s, supreme *nirmāṇakāya*s, *nirmāṇakāya*s that tame beings, born *nirmāṇakāya*s, fabricated *nirmāṇakāya*s, the emergence of medicine and fruit trees, and so forth, appear anywhere whatsoever and act for the welfare of the teaching and beings.[78]

Thus appealing here to standard Mahāyāna buddha-emanation theory, Lho pa buttresses this statement with a pertinent citation from the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṁkāra*.[79] This serves as a platform for him to declare that all the characters featuring in the *Padma bka' thang* charter narrative partake of different identities on the external, internal, and secret levels.[80] For instance, Lho pa continues, although king gTsug lag 'dzin was externally adorned with the signs and attributes of a universal monarch, internally he was a manifestation of Padmasambhava, secretly, he was Avalokiteśvara, and exceedingly secretly, he was Amitābha. The princess too, he adds, was already a *ḍākinī* in her external form, but was Vajravārāhī internally and Samantabhadrī secretly. Likewise, the seven-times-born humans themselves—whom he names here as the brahmins Padma dkar po, Dung rna can, and mChog sred—were in actual fact *nirmāṇakāya*s of the noble bodhisattvas, emanated illusory forms to benefit illusory beings out of their compassion and skillful means. Further in this vein, Lho pa makes an allusion to chapter 102 of the *Padma bka' thang* to argue that the Buddha himself also underwent 500 pure rebirths and 500 impure rebirths to enact benefit, and, moreover, that Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, out of his compassionate vow to benefit beings until *saṃsāra* is emptied, had his head fragment into a thousand pieces and his arms multiply into a thousand arms to thus become the thousand buddhas and thousand universal monarchs of the Bhadrakalpa.[81]

Lho pa concludes his defense of the historical source's authenticity by adding that buddhas and bodhisattvas diversify their forms because beings can only be properly benefited by something of similar kind. After providing the example of how a famous past Indian king assumed the body of a fish to bring a famine to an end, he supplies a pertinent verse from the *Uttaratantraśāstra*:

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78 Lho pa Bya bral ba, 92a.1–.3.
79 Lho pa Bya bral ba, 92a.3–.4.
80 Lho pa Bya bral ba, 92a.5–92b.3.
81 Lho pa Bya bral ba, 92b.3–.5. This is a clear reference to the passage in U rgyan gling pa 1985, 650.1–.3.

> The constituent of a buddha, the qualities of a bodhisattva,
> the qualities of a buddha, and the activities of a buddha
> cannot be conceived of even by pure beings.
> They are the purview of [only] the guides.[82]

Lho pa thus confronts the polemic's claim of inauthenticity by invoking Mahāyāna emanation theory and relegating the actual dynamics of the charter narrative to the rarified sphere of the inconceivable wonder-working activities of buddhas. It could be argued that by thus removing the story from the domain of ordinary conceivability, and hence falsifiability, he effectively seals the narrative off from any cross-examination that might disprove it. Lho pa's identification of gTsug lag 'dzin as an emanation of Padmasambhava would indeed appear to be a detail that frustrates "ordinary" narrative expectations, since the two meet and interact as separate beings during Padmasambhava's stay in Za hor. The effect of Lho pa's counterargument is a thoroughgoing apotheosis of the seven-timer flesh and all the characters who handle it.

As delineated above, 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho's rebuttal was likely the next one to follow. Addressing the flesh's source, he divides his discussion into two subdivisions: an explanation of the example of other kings, and an explanation of the significance of the king of Za hor himself.[83] In the first subsection, 'Dul 'dzin invokes as an example the story of the Indian king Prasenajit, in which the king ended up homeless and starving despite his previous power and wealth.[84] 'Dul 'dzin remarks that stories of such dramatic turns of fortune for Indian kings are common, thus countering the polemic's claim that the Za hor king's peculiar circumstances are unheard of in the historical record. In this he seems to have taken a page from Mi bskyod rdo rje's rebuttal, which similarly invokes the fall from power of an Indian king—king Mūrdhaja—as a counterexample to the polemic's claim that the king of Za hor would never run out of meat and send his daughter to fetch some.

'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho's next move, in subsection two of his defense of the flesh's historical source, mimics Lho pa Bya bral ba's remarks on the topic nearly to a tee.[85] Like Lho pa, 'Dul 'dzin dips into Mahāyāna buddha-emanation theory to declare that all the

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[82] Lho pa Bya bral ba, 92b.7–93a.1. This citation appears nearly verbatim in *Bstan 'gyur* (*dpe bsdur ma*) 1994–2008, vol. 70, 975.

[83] 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981, 544.5–.6. For another version of this portion of the rebuttal, with minor variations, see the Chu smad snag tshang manuscript, 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho, 287b.5–288b.1.

[84] 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981, 544.4–545.2.

[85] 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981, 545.2–.5.

characters featured in the *Padma bka' thang* charter narrative partake of different identities on the external, internal, and secret levels. However, 'Dul 'dzin's identifications are somewhat different from Lho pa's. 'Dul 'dzin declares that although king gTsug lag 'dzin was externally adorned with the signs and attributes of a universal monarch, internally he was a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara, and secretly, he was Amitābha. The princess too, he continues, while being a *ḍākinī* in her external form, was in fact internally Vajravārāhī, and secretly Samantabhadrī, who is the indivisibility of the expanse of reality and non-dual awareness. The flesh itself, moreover, he identifies as the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara as well, who manifested as the seven-born brahmins Padma dkar po, Dung rna can, Dri med snying po, and mChog sred to bring benefit to beings through surrendering their bodies.[86]

Notably absent from 'Dul 'dzin's discussion is the identification of Padmasambhava with the king's internal identity. In this it seems that 'Dul 'dzin was more concerned than Lho pa to maintain some consistency with the narrative rationale of the *Padma bka' thang*. Another difference is 'Dul 'dzin's addition of a fourth brahmin emanation—Dri med snying po—and, most importantly, his identification of these as emanations of not just any bodhisattva, but of Avalokiteśvara in particular.

Aside from these details, and 'Dul 'dzin's inclusion of a final flourish to qualify Samantabhadrī, his phrasing is identical to Lho pa's. 'Dul 'dzin even ends this section of the rebuttal with nearly the same remark that Lho pa closes his discussion with:

> In this way, it is feasible that the activity of buddhas and bodhisattvas can find expression, appear, and manifest in any way whatsoever. This is because natural *nirmāṇakāya*s, supreme *nirmāṇakāya*s, born *nirmāṇakāya*s, fabricated *nirmāṇakāya*s, and *nirmāṇakāya*s of material objects act to tame in whatever way is called for.[87]

The only major differences here from Lho pa's similar remarks come at the end, where Lho pa's "medicine and fruit trees" is subsumed under the category of "*nirmāṇakāya*s of material objects" (*gdos bcas sprul sku*), along with the slightly simplified conclusion that follows, whose "act to tame" replaces Lho pa's category of "*nirmāṇakāya* emanations that tame beings."

Toward the close of his rebuttal on the issue of rNying ma seven-timer practice, 'Dul 'dzin returns to the issue of the flesh's narrative

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[86] 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981, 545.5–.6.
[87] 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981, 545.4–.5.

source to reference and paraphrase the narratives of Zhe sdang rdo rje's *Hevjaratantra* commentary and the *Zhi byed* tradition considered above: "These stories," he declares at their conclusion, "have emerged at the origin of this teaching" (*'di rnams ni bstan pa 'di'i thog ma la byung ba yin no*).[88] In this, 'Dul 'dzin claims to have identified these as the earliest narrative literary sources of seven-times-born flesh consumption, and by implication perhaps, the source of U rgyan gling pa's *Padma bka' thang* narrative as well.

Finally, we turn to the rebuttal of Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, the final one known to have been composed.[89] To counter the polemic's criticisms of the *Padma bka' thang* charter narrative Sog bzlog pa adopts an approach that is somewhat different from those of his predecessors. He provides three reasons for the narrative's authenticity, namely that 1) the king had an unfathomably virtuous mind, such that he had the requisite fortune to attain liberation based on this flesh; 2) the brahmin flesh spoken of in the story originated from none other than Avalokiteśvara, who deliberately incarnated for seven consecutive lifetimes to benefit beings through its powers; thus the princess was none other than a *ḍākinī*, with the nature of a goddess, who alone had the fortune to take hold of it; and 3) the kings of India would eat their morning and evening meals in the company of their queens in turn.[90] In other words, implies Sog bzlog pa, the critic understood neither the extraordinary, awakened nature of the figures involved, nor the cultural practices in which these figures were participating at the time. In this we can see resonances with the rebuttals of Lho pa and 'Dul 'dzin, but Sog bzlog pa exhibits less concern with mapping out layers of identity for each character on the external, internal, and secret levels. Sog bzlog pa also declines to enlist Mahāyāna emanation theory, as Lho pa and 'Dul 'dzin do, even as he claims that the seven-times-born are in fact Avalokiteśvara. Interestingly, on this note, Sog bzlog pa here elects to describe the bodhisattva of compassion's process as one of willfully "taking birth seven times" (*skye ba lan bdun bzhes pa*) rather than "emanating" (*sprul pa*), as Lho pa and 'Dul 'dzin describe it.[91]

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88 'Dul 'dzin mKhyen rab rgya mtsho 1981, 553.2.

89 *Lung rig 'brug sgra*. Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan 1975 (D), vol. 2, 109.3–110.3. See also Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan 1971 (G), 129.4–130.5; and 1999 (K), 188.3–190.1. Also consulted were several unpublished versions. For their details and proposed sigla, see Gentry 2017, 449–451.

90 Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan 1975, vol. 2, 109.4–110.1.

91 Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan 1971, 129.6; 1999, 186.6–190.1. Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan 1975 (vol. 2, 109.5) is missing the number seven (*bdun*) in this passage.

Sog bzlog pa does, however, appear to follow 'Dul 'dzin's lead in attempting to enlist an alternative and uncontroversial scriptural source that more or less mirrors the *Padma bKa' thang* Treasure narrative. But unlike 'Dul 'dzin, who references Zhe sdang rdo rje's Tibetan *Hevajratantra* commentary and the Tibetan *Zhi byed* corpus, Sog bzlog pa attempts to go further back to draw his narrative source from an unnamed *sūtra*. Sog bzlog pa's cognate narrative goes as follows:

> When it came time for the lowliest queen to serve king Kalmāṣapāda, she could not find any meat, so she shaved some flesh from the corpse of a dead child in a cemetery and cooked it at home. When its steam wafted into her face, her feet lifted off the ground. Seeing that, he [the king] was amazed. He scolded her, so she became frightened and offered up the best of it, and then explained. He then told her to bring the rest to him. Upon eating it, he flew into the sky.[92]

Striking here is that the Tibetan name of the king featuring in this story, *rkang bkra (*here, spelled with *khra)*, translates the Sanskrit Kalmāṣapāda. [93] In this, Sog bzlog pa certainly appears to have correctly identified the narrative source of the seven-timer charter narrative in Tibet. However, it is immediately apparent that this rendition more closely resembles the tantric revisions of the Kalmāṣapāda narrative than the *sūtra* version in the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish* examined above. I have been unable to identify this citation or anything else resembling it in any *sūtra* or *tantra* in Tibetan translation. This raises the question of whether Sog bzlog pa's citation truly does provide the narrative missing link of the tantric transformations of the Kalmāṣapāda in Indian Buddhist literature, or whether Sog bzlog pa, on his own or following some unacknowledged precedent, might have reworked the tantricized form of the narrative to include the name Kalmāṣapāda, thus enabling him to ascribe its source to an unnamed *sūtra* and thereby lend Treasure seven-timer flesh an added air of Indian Buddhist authenticity. That Sog bzlog pa's attempt to supply an authoritative *sūtra* source for the narrative follows on the heels of 'Dul 'dzin's similar endeavor to identify the

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[92] Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan 1975, vol. 2, 110.1–110.3: *rgyal po rkang khra [D-khra] btsun mo chung ba ngan shos kyi bsnyen [K,P,S=bsnyan] bkur [N=bskur] res la bab pa na/ sha gzhan ma rnyed [A,D,N=snyed] pas [A=na] dur khrod na [N=nas] byis pa shi ba'i ro zhig 'dug pa las sha bregs te khyim du btsos pa dang/ de'i rlangs pa [G,R=ba] byad bzhin la phog pas mo rkang pa sa la ma reg par 'gro'o/ /de khos mthong nas ngo mtshar te/ mo la sdigs pas skrag ste/ mchog byin nas bshad pa dang/ lhag ma kun yang khyer shog zer te zos pas kho nam mkha' la 'gro'o/.*

[93] Negi 1993, vol. 1, 134.

narrative's origin certainly suggests, in light of the criticisms Treasure flesh was then facing, an overzealous editorial intervention more than an actual untraceable *sūtra* source. However, in the absence of further evidence, it is difficult to know for certain if the tantric transformations witnessed in Zhe sdang rdo rje's commentary and the *Zhi byed* literature are not in fact rooted in previous tantric transformations of the core Kalmāṣapāda narrative in India.

When we step back to consider the trajectory of the polemic and its rebuttals together, there is a noticeable progression that takes place. First, in Mi bskyod rdo rje's rebuttal there is no attempt to link the character to exalted buddhas or bodhisattvas. Mi bskyod rdo rje simply references an analogous tale of a king fallen from power. However, that he selects the story of king Mūrdhaja, who, although appearing in several sources, famously features only a few chapters after the story of Kalmāṣapāda in the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish*, raises the question of whether Mi bskyod rdo rje might have been obliquely referring here to this *sūtra* as the source of the *Padma bka' thang* narrative.

Lho pa Bya bral ba adopts the very different approach of enlisting Mahāyāna emanation theory to identify the narrative's characters as multilayered manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas. He thereby frames the narrative as part of the inconceivable activity of awakened beings, well beyond ordinary reckoning. Avalokiteśvara, Amitābha, Padmasambhava, Vajravārāhī, and Samantabhadrī all figure in these equations, whereas the flesh itself is identified as bodhisattvas manifest as the three brahmins Padma dkar po, Dung rna can, and mChog sred.

'Dul 'dzin starts by following the same approach as Lho pa, but with slightly different details. He subtracts Padmasambhava from the identifications, presumably because he appears as a character in the *Padma bka' thang* narrative alongside the others. 'Dul 'dzin also adds a brahmin manifestation, Dri med snying po, and explicitly identifies his list of four brahmins as manifestations of Avalokiteśvara. 'Dul 'dzin also sharply departs from Lho pa by endeavoring to supply the narrative sources of the *Padma bka' thang* rendition with reference to Zhe sdang rdo rje's *Hevjaratantra* commentary and Pha Dam pa sangs rgyas's *Zhi byed* tradition.

Sog bzlog pa, unlike Lho pa and 'Dul 'dzin, refrains from identifying all the narrative's characters as emanations of buddhas and bodhisattvas—for him, it is the brahmin flesh in particular that originates from an exalted bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara, who does not "emanate" brahmins, but willfully takes rebirth in their form for seven successive lifetimes. Moreover, inspired perhaps by 'Dul 'dzin's quest for the narrative's origin, he includes a citation from an unnamed *sūtra*

that appears to be a reworked version of the tantric rendition, but with the name Kalmāṣapāda (*rkang bkra/khra*) standing in as king.

Discernible in all this as perhaps the most defining common threads are the mounting apotheosis of the seven-timer flesh as Avalokiteśvara and the related search for the narrative precedent of the *Padma bka' thang* charter narrative in authoritative Indian scriptural sources. We turn now to consider how these two tendencies find more elaborate expression in a 17th century iteration of the narrative told by Karma chags med.

5. Flesh Made History, History Made Flesh

The final transformation of the Kalmāṣapāda story we will consider is narrated by the famous 17th century scholar and contemplative Karma chags med (1613–1678).[94] Karma chags med's interest in the flesh was part of his decades-long passion for Avalokiteśvara and his mantra. Sometime late in Karma chags med's life he composed a brief text about the history of the seven-times-born flesh in India and Tibet and the virtues of ritually consecrating and eating it.[95] We learn from a brief autobiographical vignette there that after discovering the virtues of Avalokiteśvara's mantra from the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra* when he was 28 years old, he plunged himself into the study and practice of Avalokiteśvara-related teachings and even devoted 13 years of his life to the practice of only Avalokiteśvara.[96] During those years, he received inspiration to institute seven-times-born flesh consecration rites in a dream encounter with none other than Karmapa X Chos dbying rdo rje (1604–1674).[97]

Throughout his subsequent writings Karma chags med vigorously promoted the consumption of seven-times-born brahmin flesh as a way to unite with Avalokiteśvara and reach the pure land of Sukhāvatī, even as he sternly warned his fellow Buddhists of the ethical infractions incurred from eating meat.[98] In addition to his text on the history and benefits of the seven-times-born flesh, he also composed several ritual manuals devoted to it and compiled copious

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94 For a brief biography of Karma chags med, see Halkias 2013, 113–116.

95 *Thugs rje chen po gsang ba 'dus pa'i maṇi bum sgrub ril bu'i lo rgyus dang phan yon*. Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 451–496. See other versions in Karma chags med 1974–1984, vol. 1, 431–483; and Karma chags med 1999?, vol. 5, 409–466.

96 *Za ma tog bkod pa, Bka' 'gyur* (*dpe bsdur ma*) 2006–2009, vol. 51, 529–640. For an English translation of this *sūtra*, see Roberts and Yeshi 2013. For a study of this *sūtra*, see Studholme 2002.

97 Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 491.2–492.1.

98 Karma chags med 2010, *Sha yi nyes dmigs dang gnang bkak gi sa mtshams dbye bay ul byang phyogs rgyud kyi paṇḍita 'jam dbyangs bla ma'i zhal lung*, vol. 35. See Barstow (2019, 181–205) for a complete English translation of this text.

notes outlining the procedures for how to properly form it into pills and "accomplish" it through these ritual proceedings.[99]

Among all of Karma chags med's writings on the flesh, his writing on the flesh's history and benefits stands out as an important overview of seven-times-born flesh practice as it was received in mid- to late-17th century Tibet. There the Kalmāṣapāda narrative core is transformed yet again through being embedded in the broader historical trajectory of the pill's main ingredient—brahmin flesh. Karma chags med structures his retelling according to how 25 brahmins formed by the Great Compassionate One first came into being; how three brahmins among them emerged as emanations of the Great Compassionate One's awakened body, speech, and mind; and how their flesh first arrived in Tibet.[100]

Starting with the story of the 25 initial emanations, he relates that a group of the five families of Avalokiteśvara manifested from the *dharmakāya* Buddha Amitābha's awakened body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities, making 25 in total; these manifested further emanations; and they all taught innumerable gateways of the Dharma to beings afflicted with the five poisons.[101] Karma chags med then draws from the Mahāyāna narrative tradition associated with the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara to explain how it happened that he first manifested as brahmins whose flesh would be intended for human consumption:

> Upon leading limitlessly innumerable beings by so teaching them, he (i.e., Avalokiteśvara) thought that *saṃsāra* had been emptied. But looking out, he saw that there had been no fluctuation in the field of beings and that most were still engaged in nonvirtue and would thereby experience unbearable suffering in the lower realms. He also saw that even those born in the higher realms would have difficulty encountering the Dharma, and even were they to encounter the Dharma, it would be difficult for them practice it. Thus seeing that it would be difficult to benefit beings by teaching them the Dharma, the Great Compassionate One beseeched all the buddhas throughout the ten directions, asking them to give him a method by which one could attain buddhahood

[99] Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 373–400 constitutes the notes, while the numerous ritual manuals make up much of the rest of volume 14; Karma chags med 1999?, vol. 5, 409-466 is the notes, and the numerous ritual manuals constitute much of the rest of volume 5; Karma chags med 1974–1984, vol. 1, 311–340 is the notes, whereas the associated ritual manuals, fewer than in the other editions, are in volume 1, 261–284, 285–310, 341–364, 365–430, and 485–522.

[100] Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 456.4–.6.

[101] Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 456.5–.6.

> without needing to gather the accumulations and purify the obscurations, and without needing to put the Dharma into practice.
>
> To that all the buddhas rose from the state of the empty *dharmakāya* in a form body and consented:
>
> "Excellent! Excellent! There are many means to attain buddhahood without needing to meditate or practice. In particular, the regent through whom all buddhas confer initiation and entrust realization for the benefit of beings is none other than you, noble Avalokiteśvara. Thus, manifest three brahmins from your awakened body, speech, and mind. Ensure that their awakened bodies come in the form of material bone, flesh, and blood. All beings in whose stomach a mere morsel of their flesh and bones enters will no longer wander in *saṃsāra*, and after their present existence they will attain the fruition of unexcelled buddhahood."[102]

It is here where Karma chags med weaves into his biography of Avalokiteśvara a variation on the *Padma bka' thang* narrative considered above.[103] By his account, Avalokiteśvara's emanation of awakened body (*sku'i sprul pa*) manifests in Za hor as a brahmin child called Dri med snying po. Dri med snying po announces to everyone gathered at the market that if any among them have the requisite fortune and karma, then by taking up his body they will surely attain the *siddhi* of the two-fold benefit of self and others. Thereafter, he displays a semblance of his death, but no one comes to take his corpse.

This is when Mandāravā enters the scene. Inspired by the compassion of all the buddhas, she sees the young brahmin's corpse on the way home from an unsuccessful trip to the market to buy meat for the king. Shaving off some flesh from the rain-washed corpse of the brahmin child, she cooks and serves it to king gTsug lag 'dzin. The king's obscuration of ignorance is instantly dispelled, he attains the great illumination of wisdom, and with the warmth of bliss blazing forth in his body like fire, he starts to levitate a full cubit off the ground. Understanding this to be because of the flesh of the seven-born, continues Karma chags med, king gTsug lag 'dzin takes the corpse and makes pills out of it, puts them inside a box made of the seven precious substances, and conceals it at the great charnel ground of Pleasure Grove, entrusting it there to the *ḍākinī*s.

Instead of ending there, Karma chags med continues with the next chapter of the *Padma bka' thang* narrative to relate how Mandāravā and

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[102] Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 456.6–458.2.
[103] Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 458.2–459.4.

her entourage of 500 servants then became *bhikṣuṇī*s, and while living in a temple, Padmasambhava arrives in Za hor and teaches them the Dharma. With no segue, Karma chags med continues to narrate that the king punishes Padmasambhava and Mandāravā by burning them alive. But when they are seen sitting on the pyre atop a lotus, unharmed by the fire, the king is stirred by faith and offers Padmasambhava not only his whole kingdom, but also Mandāravā to serve as his consort, along with the Treasure of the seven-born flesh. Padmasambhava then conceals the flesh in a storied pavilion.

When we recall the details of the *Padma bka' thang* rendition of this narrative, Karma chags med's telling is clearly a further elaboration. First, unlike the *Padma bKa' thang* version, Karma chags med's telling frames the Za hor story in terms of Avalokiteśvara's manifestation of the brahmin child Dri med snying po, who declares to the public his intention to offer his body and makes a display of dying. Another innovation in relation to the *Padma bKa' thang* rendition is that from eating the flesh the king is purified of the obscuration of ignorance and attains the great illumination of wisdom, in addition to the bodily warmth of bliss and flight described in the *Padma bKa' thang*. Missing from the *Padma bKa' thang* narrative too is how the flesh serves as a narrative thread linking the king of Za hor flesh story with the story of Padmasambhava's relationship with Mandāravā.

Karma chags med then shifts away from Avalokiteśvara's "emanation of awakened body" in Za hor to relate how Avalokiteśvara's "emanation of awakened speech" similarly manifested in Kashmir as a brahmin called Shel phreng can, and how Avalokiteśvara's "emanation of awakened mind" manifested in front of the Svayambhū Khasarpaṇi temple in India as a brahmin called Dung rna can.[104] By Karma chags med's account, Padmasambhava takes possession of these corpses too, conceals them, and allows them to remain hidden until Khri srong lde'u btsan invites Padmasambhava to Tibet. Thereupon, Padmasambhava recovers the three Treasures of the seven-born and multiples the flesh into innumerable pills. Having concealed several pills throughout Nepal and Eastern and Western India, Padmasambhava then brings most of it to Tibet, where he conceals it in numerous Treasure sites.

Karma chags med goes on to relate how later still, the "*samaya* substances" of the *bodhicitta* fluids of Padmasambhava and Ye shes mtsho rgyal are added to the pills and consecrated again.[105] This time the pills are rolled by the hands of Ye shes mtsho rgyal herself, whose thumb prints leave traces of the syllables *a* and *ma* on each pill, thus

[104] Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 459.4–460.6.
[105] Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 461.2–.4.

earning them the name "*a ma* pills." Before concealing them for future generations, the couple make an aspiration that, like a wish-fulfilling jewel, the pills never run out. Accordingly, Karma chags med concludes, the pills are still not running out, but rather multiplying.

Karma chags med then transitions into an account of Ratna gling pa's 15th century recovery of the flesh pills and his subsequent efforts to propagate them through multiplying, consecrating, and distributing them in the context of collective great accomplishment rites.[106] He concludes this account by reporting that Ratna gling pa staged over 300 great accomplishments focused on the flesh over his lifetime; Karma chags med then traces the lineage up to his own time.

When considering Karma chags med's history in light of the peregrinations of the Kalmāṣapāda narrative considered thus far, a number of observations come to the fore. First and foremost, the tendency toward apotheosizing the flesh as Avalokiteśvara and rooting it in an authoritative Indian Buddhist discourse finds its fullest expression in Karma chags med's retelling. By his account, the *Padma bka' thang* episode is only one among many vignettes in the ever-unfolding cosmic drama of Avalokiteśvara's struggles to benefit beings. Not only are the seven-timer brahmins produced by the great bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara; this act is prompted by "all the buddhas" and ultimately goes back to the *dharmakāya* buddha Amitābha's creative act of emanating multiple Avalokiteśvara forms to guide beings. Moreover, according to Karma chags med's version, the events in Za hor that are told in the *Padma bka' thang* rendition are only one of three related series of events. Avalokiteśvara also manifested as seven-timer brahmins in Kashmir and India, thus drawing two additional regions into the story and thereby mapping out a spiritual geography of South Asian seven-timer origins. Karma chags med's rendition also bridges these South Asian origins with Tibet, narrating Padma-sambhava's collection of the brahmin flesh in South Asia, his distribution of some throughout Nepal and Eastern and Western India, and his carrying of the rest to distribute throughout the Tibetan landscape. In this, Karma chags med's telling represents the culmination of the apotheosis of the flesh, its assimilation in Tibet, and its grounding in the South Asian origins of the Buddhist tradition.

6. Concluding Reflections

This exercise of tracing a narrative from the Tibetan translation of the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish* through Zhe sdang rdo rje's *Hevajratantra* commentary, the *Zhi byed* tradition, the *Padma bka' thang*,

[106] Karma chags med 2010, vol. 14, 461.4–464.5.

and the successive renditions told in the 16th and 17th century, culminating with Karma chags med's, suffices to conclude that these are all iterations of the story of Kalmāṣapāda, cast in the idiom of late-Indian Buddhist Tantra, in which the practice of human flesh consumption had become something to adopt rather than to abandon.

New framings of the core narrative within other narratives and explanations, along with the introduction of new characters, story elements, and the new associations that these formed, enabled the Kalmāṣapāda story to acquire roles in tantric practice in Tibet that were unprecedented in India and Tibet. These narrative transformations were an integral part of the assimilation of what was arguably one of the most challenging features of tantric theory and practice—the injunction to consume human flesh as part of tantric sacraments.

The transformations of the narrative reflect changing conceptions about this practice among Buddhists in India and Tibet. These changing conceptions can be summarized generally in terms of shifts between a rhetoric of transgression and a rhetoric of purity. In the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish,* the tale was about a king who ends up cursed to eat human flesh as a backstory to one of the most notorious sinner-turned-saint narratives in the history of South Asian literature: the story of Aṅgulimāla. As the story entered tantric Buddhist milieus it was transformed; the consumption of human-flesh had transitioned rhetorically from being a curse to a tantric precept. In Tibet, as the story found its way into the *Zhi byed* and Treasure traditions, it registers yet another shift of values. The flesh, which in standard *mahāyoga* and *yoginī tantra* discourse is associated primarily with the transgression of dualistic concepts of pollution and purity, and the conferral of boons such as flight, longevity, and power, was gradually transformed into a relic, to be consumed primarily for the spiritual benefits brought from encountering a pure being. Marking this transition was the gradual interweaving into the narrative core of Mahāyāna values and tropes through the augmentation of the narrative in new renditions and explanations.

This combination of features—transgressive power substance, and/or pure relic—was beginning to surface already in late Indian Buddhist tantric commentarial literature. The complex and ambiguous relationships between power, pollution, transgression, purity, and liberation in Indian literary discourses are brought into pronounced tension in the tantric injunction to consume the flesh of a pure being, one born seven consecutive lifetimes as a brahmin. The tantric transformations of the myth in Tibet give witness to the disparate foregrounding and accentuation of certain elements at the expense of others rather than entire reworkings. Elements of the Kalmāṣapāda

story—kingship, courtly sexuality, meat eating, human-flesh consumption, violence, the interplay between purity and pollution, and magical flight—were foregrounded and revaluated as they were brought into a resolutely tantric textual environment.

With this revaluation, we can witness key shifts between pollution and purity. In the *sūtra* telling, since human-flesh consumption is resolutely bad, flight comes not from eating the flesh but from recollecting and instrumentalizing past virtue to escape from the repercussions of having so wrongly indulged in this forbidden meat. In the renditions of Zhe sdang rdo rje and the *Zhi byed* tradition, however, we find a curious interweaving of values, combining pollution and purity, where the flesh is said to come from an exalted and pure bodhisattva, but its consumption is nonetheless associated with the transgressive practice of consuming the five ambrosias—the *samaya* of eating—rooted in the *mahāyoga* and *yoginī tantra*s, along with the conferral of flight, dominion over the spirit world, and other such boons. When the flesh reaches the 14th century retelling of U rgyan gling pa's *Padma bka' thang*, it still retains the undertones of earlier transgressive associations, but its new framing, along with changes to the narrative details, marks a trajectory toward greater purity and away from pollution. We witnessed this shift in the successive reactions to the polemic against the *Padma bKa' thang* narrative, each of which introduced layers of Mahāyāna doctrinal values and literary tropes to purify the flesh as not just belonging to any fledgling bodhisattva, but to the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara himself. Karma chags med's reframing of the core features of the story continues this process of transformation by contextualizing the flesh and their owners in terms of the ever-unfolding spiritual biography of Avalokiteśvara as the patron bodhisattva of Tibet and Tibetans. The ritualized production, distribution, and consumption of Avalokiteśvara seven-born flesh-pills continues to this day. Tracing core elements of Kalmāṣapāda's story of human-flesh consumption has thus offered us a view onto the history of how Tibetans adapted Indian Buddhist narratives in their process of assimilating tantric Buddhist discourses and practices to form vibrant and distinctively Tibetan traditions of their own.

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