

Stairway from Heaven: Account of the Intermediate State (*bar do'i rnam thar*) of the Fourth Karma pa, Rol pa'i rdo rje (1340–1383)

Dominik Dell
(Jagiellonian University, Kraków, and
International Institute for Tibetan and Asian Studies,
Vélez-Málaga)

1. Introduction

While reading life stories (*rnam thar*) of Tibetan Buddhist masters, one comes across different levels of content, which can classically be divided into outer, inner, and secret life stories.¹ Secret life stories (*gsang ba'i rnam thar*) contain mystic events experienced by the protagonist, such as miraculous dreams, visions, and supernatural phenomena—all of them representing realization of the nature of mind. Through earlier research, I became particularly interested in accounts of experiences during the intermediate state between death and rebirth (Tib. *bar do*), which can be classified as a sub-category of the secret life story.² Those accounts are sometimes called *bar do'i rnam thar*.³ This paper is dedicated to an account of this kind of the Fourth Karma pa, Rol pa'i rdo rje (1340–1383).⁴ It appears in two different sources. The first one is a historiographical work of the genre “Religious History” (Tib. *chos 'byung*) called “Feast of the Wise” (Tib. *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*), composed by the historian dPa' bo gtsug lag 'phreng ba (1504–1564/1566), which will be henceforth referred to as CKG.⁵ The second source is also a historiographical work, but of the genre “Golden Garland” (Tib. *gser 'phreng*), often referred to as the “Golden Garland of the Kaṃ tshang bka' brgyud” (Tib. *Kaṃ tshang bka' brgyud gser 'phreng*) or by its ornamental title “Moonstone Water-

¹ This classification is ascribed to sDe srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705) (Vostrikov 1994, 186–87).

² On the meaning of *bar do*, see Cuevas 2003, 39–68.

³ Sometimes they are also called *rnam thar bar do ma*, especially with respect to the Third Karmapa. See for example Manson 2009, 44, and Berounský 2010, 7.

⁴ The existence of this account with reference to two sources was already mentioned in Dell 2020, 44.

⁵ For an overview of the *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*, see Dell 2021. For the life of its author, see Bjerregaard and Dell 2022.

Crystal Mālā" (Tib. *Nor bu zla ba chu shel gyi phreng ba*, often shortened to *Zla ba chu shel*), which will be henceforth referred to as KSP. It was written by the polymath Si tu Chos kyi 'byung gnas (1699/1700–1774), also known as Si tu Paṅ chen, and his student 'Be lo Tshe dbang kun khyab (b. 18th cent.).⁶

The KSP has become the standard work for scholars in the Karma bKa' brgud tradition who deal with the lives of their lineage's masters. Its language is considered easier to understand and its organization is more chronological than the earlier CKG, which is another standard historical Karma bKa' brgud work.⁷ In the case at hand, in both sources, the *bar do'i rnam thar* seems to follow the same story line and content, but the text is generally more extended in the KSP.

For context, a short summary of the known accounts of this type from the different Karma pas shall be provided in this introduction. A more extensive overview of different existing representatives of *bar do'i rnam thars*, as well as research on and translations of them, has been presented elsewhere.⁸ In section 2, annotated translations of both texts are to be presented, followed by an analysis of their content in section 3, and a conclusion in section 4. An appendix contains the Tibetan text of both passages.

Most representatives of *bar do'i rnam thars* that have been identified as such are about the Karma pas', who are the hierarchs of the Karma bKa' brgyud tradition and who formed the first incarnation lineage in Tibet. Usually, *bar do'i rnam thars* are not separate texts, but inserted into *rnam thars*, sometimes without calling them by that name. This gives reason to conjecture that there are probably a lot more representatives yet to be identified.

Most of the research papers touching on *bar do'i rnam thar* circle around the Third Karma pa, Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339).⁹ In his introduction into the life of Karma Pakshi (1204/6–1283),¹⁰ Manson mentions the existence of a *bar do'i rnam thar* with respect to the transference of Karma Pakshi's consciousness to his third incarnation.¹¹ Manson traces back the existence of a missing original *bar do'i rnam*

⁶ For an overview of the *Kam tshang bka' brgyud gser 'phreng* and references about the lives of its authors, see Dell 2023.

⁷ Rheingans 2017, 69.

⁸ Dell 2020, 43–47.

⁹ BDRC, P66. (BDRC stands for Buddhist Digital Resource Center (<https://www.bdrc.io/>). In the following text, footnotes, and bibliography, I will very often use the abbreviation BDRC followed by an alphanumeric code by which the person, location or work can be found in the BDRC database.) For more information on the Third Karma pa's life, see Seegers 2009 and forthcoming 2024, and Gamble 2018 and 2020.

¹⁰ Second Karma pa, Karma Pakshi (BDRC, P1487).

¹¹ Manson 2009, 44–43.

thar text from an account and references in the Red Annals¹² and from the reappearance of the account in the later Blue Annals.¹³ It is also mentioned in passing in Rang byung rdo rje's *rnam thar* in verse, but not discussed there.¹⁴ Accordingly, in the Collected Works of the Third Karma pa, this text is also indicated as missing.¹⁵ Berounský dedicated a paper to this missing text.¹⁶ Gamble translated the *bar do'i rnam thar* of the Third Karma pa, which she found inserted into one of his life stories.¹⁷ This text is the longest of its kind I know of, and most likely the earliest one, since the Karma pas were the first ones to establish the system of successive incarnations in Tibet. According to Gamble, the Second Karma pa, Karma Pakshi, called himself an "emanation" (Tib. *rnam par 'phrul*) of the First Karma pa, while claiming to have various other emanations at the same time.¹⁸ The Third Karma pa was the first to shift focus from simultaneous emanations of a celestial being to concatenate lives and the idea of reincarnation.¹⁹ His *bar do'i rnam thar* plays a crucial role in establishing this narrative by filling the gap between these successive incarnations. In Berounský's words: "the sole existence of a text containing the detailed description of the events of the 'intermediate state' during reincarnation shows that in this case an effort was made to provide a variety of proofs confirming the genuineness of the 'repeated existence' of Karmapa."²⁰

The life story of the Fourth Karma pa, Rol pa'i rdo rje (1340–1383)²¹ begins, both in the CKG and the KSP, with an account of his intermediate state.²² The CKG passage is rather short, while the KSP passage is more extended, but still less than one folio. Translations of both passages are found in section 2 of this paper. The function of the Fourth Karma pa's account might be similar to that of his direct predecessor's—consolidation of the still freshly established narrative of successive incarnations.

The *bar do'i rnam thar* of the Seventh Karma pa, Chos grags rgya mtsho (1454–1506) in the CKG extends to about one folio, while in the

¹² Tshal pa kun dga rdo rje (1309–1364) 1981, 96. For a translation of the relevant paragraph, see Berounský 2011, 24–26.

¹³ Roerich 1988, 487–88. For the Tibetan original, see 'Gos lo gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481) 1984.

¹⁴ Rang byung rdo rje 2006c.

¹⁵ The missing text is called *Bar do'i rnam thar bstan pa*, see Rang byung rdo rje 2006a, *dkar chag*.

¹⁶ Berounský 2010.

¹⁷ For the original, see Rang byung rdo rje 2006b, 358–66. For the translation, see Gamble 2020, 121–27.

¹⁸ For Karma Pakshi's view on his preincarnations, see also Manson 2022, 111–26.

¹⁹ Gamble 2018, 78–80.

²⁰ Berounský 2010, 8

²¹ BDRC, P1456.

²² For the CKG, see PX1, vol. 2, 98; for the KSP, see SX1, vol. 11, fols. 161r–161v.

KSP it is condensed to three short sentences, which correspond to the end of the CKG version.²³ Hence, in its longer version it is about the length of the account of the Fourth Karma pa. The account of the Seventh Karma pa was translated and analyzed in an earlier paper.²⁴

The *bar do'i rnam thar* of the Eighth Karma pa, Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–1554),²⁵ is not discussed much in research papers, but translations exist from different sources. It covers approximately two folios in the KSP, and Verhufen provided a German translation of it.²⁶

Rheingans translated a rather short version not exceeding a few lines from one of the Third Karma pa's *rnam thars* in his Collected Works.²⁷ Rheingans mentions another seemingly untranslated text, a spiritual autobiography (Tib. *rang rnam*) that supposedly contains an account of the Karma pa's sojourn in the pure land of Maitreya.²⁸

In the future, further *bar do'i rnam thars* of the Karma pas might surface, but at present, these are the only ones known to me.

2. Translation

In this section, annotated translations of the Fourth Karma pa's account of the intermediate state from the CKG and the KSP are presented.

2.1 Translation from the CKG

The noble Rol pa'i rdo rje

First,²⁹ [his] physical form condensed in Shang to palace³⁰ and [he] looked at the world from the top of a moon disc.

Suddenly, in Tuṣita [Heaven], when the divine sages exchanged gifts [with the Karma pa], Bhagavan Maitreya encouraged [him to take

²³ For the CKG, see PX1, vol. 2, 184–86; for the KSP, see SX1, vol. 11, fols. 266r–266v.

²⁴ Dell 2020.

²⁵ BDRC, P385. For a comprehensive overview of the life and works of the Eighth Karmapa, see Rheingans 2017.

²⁶ Verhufen 1992, 75–77. For the Tibetan original, see SX1, vol. 12, fols. 3r–3v.

²⁷ Rheingans 2010, 280. For the Tibetan original, see A khu A khra dGe slong Byang chub bzang po 2004, 82 (fol. 25b).

²⁸ Rheingans 2017, 63. For the Tibetan original, see Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karma pa VIII (1507–1554) 2004.

²⁹ Tib. *sngon*, lit. “earlier” or “previously.”

³⁰ Tib. *pho brang shang to*. Here, *shang to* seems to be the name of the palace, however, I could not find any reference to it as a name. Likewise, *shang to* is not lexicalized as a word. In the KSP text, the name is given as *shong to*, however, the same result applies. Nevertheless, the scene is likely an allusion to the life story of the Buddha who resides in a palace in Tuṣita Heaven before descending to the earth, as becomes even clearer from the next sentence.

birth and benefit beings].³¹

Thereupon, [the Karma pa] demonstrated appearances which proceeded from a crystal stairway into the golden base [of our world],³² and [thus] purified [his] mother's womb through miracles which proceeded from the entirety of buddha-fields such as Sukhāvati also into this field.

In A la rong,³³ in the rNgod [area],³⁴ not far from the Eighteen Great Valleys, in the south [of] the country of Sum pa,³⁵ [he] was born to [his] father bSod nam don grub from the Ku cor family line and [his] mother brTson 'grus rgyan, on the eighth day of the third month [of] the [iron-]dragon year (1340).

2.2 Translation from the KSP

[The story of] Rol pa'i rdo rje³⁶

Regarding the glorious holder of the black crown, the Fourth Karma pa Rol pa'i rdo rje, in the sealed instructions [in] the life story of Karma Pakshi, [the latter] said:

"In more than one hundred years from now,
having come [as] an emanation of the mind of the Great Brahmin, [Saraha, and as] an emanation of the essence of Dus gsum mkhyen pa [in the past],
although [I] will uphold the teachings [in that future time], [we] will have entered a period of decline [of their] knowledge.

Therefore, at that time, my activity will hardly occur, [it] will occur only a little."³⁷

In accordance with [this], first, [his] physical form condensed in Shong to palace³⁸ and [he] looked at the world from the top of a moon

³¹ The text only says that Maitreya encouraged (Tib. *bskul*). However, in the corresponding passage in the KSP, we learn a bit more. There, he asks the Karma pa explicitly to benefit beings. I used this information to fill in the missing part here, since otherwise it is too contracted to make sense of it.

³² Here it is not obvious if it is Maitreya or the Karma pa who demonstrates these appearances. However, in the KSP, the passage is a bit longer, which makes it a bit clearer who does what.

³³ BDRC, G4881 (*a la rong*): a canyon located in rNgod.

³⁴ BDRC, G4880 (*rngod*): a valley located in Kong po.

³⁵ BDRC, G3CN404 (*sum pa*): a country located in greater Tibet.

³⁶ Literally "Rol pa'i rdo rje exclusively."

³⁷ All the verbs, which I translate with the future tense ("will"), are in the present tense in Tibetan. However, given the context, which clearly suggests a prediction to be made here, they must have future meaning. The fact that, first, the past incarnations are mentioned, makes it even more tricky to sort it out.

³⁸ Tib. *pho brang shong to*. Here, *shong to* seems to be the name of the palace, however, I could not find any reference to it as a name. Likewise, *shong to* is not lexicalized

disc.

Suddenly, in Tuṣita [Heaven], when the divine sages exchanged gifts [with the Karma pa], Bhagavan Maitreya prophesied: "You are not weary of the world. Continue to be a guide of sentient beings!"

Thereupon, [the Karma pa], immediately, thought: "[I] need to benefit sentient beings in the world."

When this aspiration occurred, in the presence of a multitude of [forms of the] precious Bhagavan Maitreya dwelling on thrones,

[the Karmapa] generated immeasurable manifestations [of himself] who were pleased by manifold assemblies of *ḍākinīs* and *ḍākas*³⁹ such as Śrī Hayagrīva⁴⁰ [surrounding them], and [he] said: "May the benefit of sentient beings arise spontaneously!"

Then [the numerous Karma pas] offered *amṛta*⁴¹ [to the numerous Maitreyas] and appearances dispersing the highest abode⁴² emerged.

Emanating various rainbows on a stairway attached to a crystal house, [the Karma pa] demonstrated appearances which proceeded into the foundation [of the house] which was like the golden base [of our world].⁴³

Thus [he] purified [his] mother's womb through miracles which proceeded from the entirety of buddha-fields such as Sukhāvati also into this field.

In A la rong⁴⁴, in the rNgod [area]⁴⁵, not far from the Eighteen Great

as a word. Nevertheless, the scene is likely an allusion to the life story of the Buddha who resides in a palace in Tuṣita Heaven before descending to the earth as becomes even clearer from the next sentence.

³⁹ *Ḍākinīs* (Tib. *mkha' 'gro*) and *ḍākas* (Tib. *dpa' bo*) have been classified in multiple ways, but often they are seen as a kind of dharma protector, which fits with the given context and the mention of Śrī Hayagrīva as an example (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 208–209).

⁴⁰ Śrī Hayagrīva (Tib. *dpal rta mgrin*) is a tantric wrathful deity (ibid., 347).

⁴¹ Tib. *bdud rtsi*, Skt. *amṛta*. The concept of *amṛta* originates in the Vedic legend of the churning of the ocean, which was later adopted by Buddhism. It is the "nectar of immortality" (Beer, 1999, 109–10). It also became an attribute of the longevity Buddha Amitayus ("Limitless Life," Tib. *tshe dpag med*) in the form of the contents of his long-life vase (ibid., 221).

⁴² Tib. *rab gnas* often comes to mean "consecration," but here I took it more literally as "highest abode" (extended form: *rab tu gnas pa*), which I think refers to this very realm of Tuṣita in which the scene takes place and which starts to dissolve. This understanding is also supported by what follows.

⁴³ Tib. *gser gyi sa gzhi*. According to Abhidharma descriptions of how our world-system was formed, one of the very first events is that through churning an ocean a golden disc or golden base formed. Later on, Mount Meru, all the continents and everything else formed on top of this golden disc (Jamgön Kongrul Lodrö Tayé 2003, 109–10).

⁴⁴ BDRC, G4881 (*a la rong*): a canyon located in rNgod.

⁴⁵ BDRC, G4880 (*rngod*): a valley located in Kong po.

Valleys, in the south [of] the country of Sum pa,⁴⁶ [he] joined the great family line called A la spang dkar. In particular, as it appears to others, [he] was born in the form of a lower, ordinary being [to his] father lHa sdong bSod nams don 'grub from the family line of Ku cor and [his] mother mDza' za brTson 'grus rgyan, at sunrise of the eighth day of the third month [of] the male iron-dragon year (1340).

3. *Analysis*

3.1 *Outline*

In order to embark on an analysis of the account of the Fourth Karma pa's intermediate state, first, an outline of the story, which includes both versions, is provided:

- Reference to prophecy from Karma Pakshi's life story (KSP only)
- Manifestation in Shang to / Shong to palace and looking at the world from a moon disc (CKG and KSP)
- Meeting with Maitreya and divine sages in Tuṣita and encouragement to take rebirth to benefit beings (CKG and KSP)
- Karma pa's demonstration of appearances and purification of the mother's womb (short in CKG and much more extensive in KSP)
- Place and date of birth, and name of his parents (CKG and KSP)

3.2 *Karma Pakshi's Prophecy*

The first paragraph, the reference to the prophecy from Karma Pakshi's life story, is only found in the KSP. There, Karma Pakshi (1204/6–1283) claims that he had been Saraha (8th cent. CE)⁴⁷ and the First Karma pa, and that he would come again in about a hundred years. The lifetimes of the Second and the Fourth Karma pa are about a hundred years apart and it is obvious from context that the Fourth Karma pa is meant to fulfil this prophecy. Manson's work about Karma Pakshi shows that his connection to those historical figures is mentioned in many places in his life stories.⁴⁸ The prophecy also mentions the

⁴⁶ BDRC, G3CN404 (*sum pa*): a country located in greater Tibet.

⁴⁷ For the Tibetan traditions of Saraha, see Schaeffer 2005.

⁴⁸ E.g., Manson 2022, 23, 93 and 124. Nevertheless, I was not able to find this

decline of the knowledge of the teachings in this degenerate time. This is then used as a transition to the actual *bar do'i rnam thar*, since it constitutes a motivation for such a great master to take birth again and help sentient beings. In that sense, it is also used to create an arc of suspense.

3.3 *Manifestation in Celestial Realm*

Both accounts mention that he condensed himself in Shang to (CKG) or Shong to (KSP) palace and looked at the world from the top of a moon disc. This is certainly a way of saying that the Third Karma pa passed away and then found himself in a pure or celestial realm. I was not able to identify the name of this palace from any literature, however, the mention of a palace in a heavenly realm reminds of the palace in Tuṣita, where the tenth level bodhisattvas reside before they become buddhas, and it also fits with the subsequent scene where it is made explicit that it plays out in Tuṣita.⁴⁹ As for the symbolic meaning of the moon disc, Beer explains:

“The sun disc [symbolizes] ultimate *bodhichitta*; and the moon disc, relative or conventional *bodhichitta*. The Sanskrit term *bodhichitta* (Tib. *byang chub kyi sems*) means ‘the mind of enlightenment’, which is the foundation of the Mahayana path. Conventional *bodhichitta* refers to the altruistic resolve to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, and ultimate *bodhichitta* refers to the enlightened wisdom which directly realizes emptiness through the perfection of this altruistic aspiration.”⁵⁰

The moon disc standing for conventional *bodhichitta* fits very well with the given context. The Karma pa looks at the world, where he sees the beings that are in need of his help as a spiritual teacher and thus resolves to take rebirth for their benefit.

3.4 *Meeting with Maitreya and Divine Sages in Tuṣita*

In the next scene, the Karma pa finds himself in Tuṣita Heaven meeting the future buddha, Maitreya. This is an allusion to the life story of the Buddha. Buddha Śākyamuni, before descending to the world in his last rebirth, resided in Tuṣita and was its regent. He handed over regency to the designated future buddha Maitreya, the fifth buddha of our

prophecy there.

⁴⁹ The palace is, for instance, described in the Lalitavistara sūtra, see Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2013, paragraph 2.13.

⁵⁰ Beer 1999, 38.

eon.⁵¹ Likewise, when the time has come, Buddha Maitreya will hand over regency of Tuṣita to the sixth buddha, Siṃha, who is said to be the Karma pa.⁵² Hence, Buddha Śākyamuni, the future buddha, Maitreya, and the Karma pa eventually are considered to play in the same league. In the scene at hand, the Karma pa and the divine sages exchange gifts. It is not quite clear if the Karma pa gives or receives gifts or if it is bi-directional. It could be an allusion to Buddha Śākyamuni, who received offerings from countless gods and bodhisattvas before he left Tuṣita to take birth, as described in the Lalitavistara sūtra.⁵³ On the other hand, in the case of the Eighth Karma pa, it was him who made offerings to a great number of buddhas in the *bar do* state.⁵⁴ Similarly, in the next scene (at least according to the KSP), the Fourth Karma pa will offer *amṛta* to a multitude of forms of Maitreya.

Maitreya encourages or urges the Karma pa to take rebirth (CKG) or prophecies that he will take rebirth again to benefit beings (KSP). This is a common theme in all *bar do'i rnam thars*. The Third Karma pa is asked to take rebirth by the twenty-five earth guardians over and over until he finally agrees.⁵⁵ The Seventh Karma pa meets several buddhas in the *bar do* state one by one, and most of them, with slightly different wording, ask him to bring benefit to sentient beings—among them Vajradhāra, Maitreya, Akśobhya, Ratnasambhava, and Amitābha.⁵⁶ Likewise, the Eighth Karma pa is asked by Maitreya to teach beings to save them from the lower realms.⁵⁷

3.5 The Karma pa's Demonstration of Appearances in Tuṣita and Purification of the Mother's Womb

This scene is described very briefly in the CKG, where it is just mentioned that “[the Karma pa] demonstrated appearances which proceeded from a crystal stairway into the golden base [of our world] and [thus] purified [his] mother's womb through miracles which proceeded from the entirety of buddha-fields such as Sukhāvati also into this field.” Whereas, in the KSP, it is described at some length. The two versions do not contradict each other; the CKG version is just very condensed. Therefore, I will offer some interpretations based on the KSP version. To summarize: Out of the aspiration to benefit beings, the

⁵¹ For this scene, see, e.g., Translation Committee 2013, paragraph 5.2.

⁵² Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé 2010, 349: “The future sixth buddha, Lion's Roar, in the guise of a bodhisattva, appears as the Karmapas.”

⁵³ Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2013, paragraph 5.75.

⁵⁴ Verhufen 1992, 75.

⁵⁵ Gamble 2020, 121–27.

⁵⁶ Dell 2020, 49–50.

⁵⁷ Verhufen 1992, 75.

Karma pa finds himself in front of multiple forms of Maitreya dwelling on thrones. He, in turn, generates multiple manifestations of himself surrounded by *ḍākinīs* and *ḍākas* and utters the wish that benefit for sentient beings may arise spontaneously. The multiple forms of both future buddhas might symbolize their power and all-pervading quality. The fact that they both are able to manifest those multiple forms might show that they are on an equal level.

Next, the Karma pas offers *amṛta*—the nectar of immortality—to the Maitreyas, which is certainly a sign of reverence to his predecessor in the line of buddhas. When meeting with Maitreya, the regent of Tuṣita, every bodhisattva would present a gift. Nevertheless, this deed also leads to the dispersal of Tuṣita from the point of view of the Karma pa and eventually to his embodiment in his future mother's womb. Symbolically, one could say, giving away the nectar of immortality, he consents to take birth again and thus becomes mortal.

The dispersal of Tuṣita leads seamlessly into the next scene, where the Karma pa stands on a stairway attached to a crystal house and emanates rainbows and appearances. They proceed into the foundation of the house, which is likened to the golden base of our world, and thus he purifies his future mother's womb through miracles, which proceeded through the entirety of buddha-fields to her. Obviously, the scene describes the Karma pa's descent from Tuṣita to the world, i.e., his conception. It is somewhat different from the Buddha's conception, who was conceived while his mother was dreaming of a six-tusked elephant.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, there are elements that remind us of the Buddha's life story. For instance, a stairway reaching from the celestial realms to the earth occurs in the Buddha's descent at Sāṃkāśya from Trāyastriṃśa Heaven ("Heaven of the Thirty-three"), where he had gone to teach Abhidharma to his deceased mother—a story so popular that it gave rise both to the establishment of this place as one of the four secondary pilgrimage sites related to the Buddha's life, and to a Buddhist holiday or festival (Tib. *lha babs dus chen*). Young points out that the Buddha's descent on a staircase is also a widespread image in iconographic representations while textual references to it are rather rare.⁵⁹

Another aspect that reminds us of the life story of the Buddha is the crystal house. It is not quite clear if this house is located in the celestial realm or elsewhere. However, in the Lalitavistara sūtra, we learn that the Buddha as a fetus resided in a jeweled structure or temple inside his mother's womb, which is described in great length as having the

⁵⁸ Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2013, paragraphs 6.3–6.4

⁵⁹ Young 2004, 41. According to her, it is, e.g., mentioned in the Buddhacarita.

most exquisite qualities.⁶⁰ The crystal house could be an allusion to this jeweled structure, implying that the Karma pa dwelled in a similar structure while in the womb. It is mentioned that the foundation of the crystal house is like the golden base of our world, i.e., the base on top of which the structure of our world, such as Mount Meru and the continents, formed, according to legend. This might indicate that the crystal house is not placed in the celestial realms but further down in a place such as Jambudvīpa (and more specifically his mother's womb) which is more closely connected to this golden base. It could also signify that this crystal house is a miniature world in itself.

In the *bar do'i rnam thar* of the Third Karma pa a crystal palace is also mentioned in the context of conception:

“As they explained this process of conception, [the *dākinīs*] created a nine-colored rainbow that became intensely saturated and bright. I watched as they ascended the rainbow, then I traveled alone down to a crystal palace with a sky-door, four bright white sides, and a dark base. Rainbows danced around me on all sides. As soon as I entered the house, waves of passionate blood were aroused, and I watched them [the *dākinīs*] flee.”⁶¹

Here, the womb is also represented by a crystal palace. Another similarity to the Fourth Karma pa's conception scene is the involvement of rainbows in this process. The difference is that in the case of the Fourth Karma pa, he himself emanates the rainbows and other appearances and they are not only related to the conception but also to the purification of the mother's womb, which is at least not explicitly mentioned in the case of the Third Karma pa. In the case of the Buddha, we find the aspect of purification briefly mentioned in the Lalitavistara sūtra: “When the Victors' Son, the Great Being, settled in his mother's womb, [...] Golden light shone forth and all the lower realms were purified.”⁶²

The subsequent paragraph contains the physical circumstances of the Fourth Karma pa's birth such as place, date, and name of parents. It was only included in the translation to round off the passage about the *bar do'i rnam thar*. There is no need to provide any interpretations in this context.

4. Conclusion

The core of the article is the annotated translation from the CKG and KSP of the account of the intermediate state of the Karma pa's

⁶⁰ Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2013, paragraphs 6.40–6.48

⁶¹ Gamble 2020, 126.

⁶² Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2013, paragraph 6.62.

transition from his third to his fourth incarnation, together with the analysis thereof. The analysis part tried to decipher and explain the description of the events in the *bar do* and to put them into context. To this end, parallels or allusions to the life story of the Buddha, as well as to other known *bar do'i rnam thars*, were pointed out, and more generally the background of Vajrayāna and its symbolism was considered. The fact that the description in the later KSP is more extensive than in the earlier CKG suggests that the KSP has not (or not only) drawn from the CKG, but that there must be an earlier source known to both authors. There is a *rnam thar* of the Fourth Karma pa consisting of sixty-one folios authored by his contemporary and student, the Second Zhwa dmar pa, mKha' spyod dbang po (1350–1405).⁶³ There are grounds to conjecture that both later sources drew from this text, but to confirm this remains a task for future research and goes beyond the scope of this paper.

The analysis part of this article involved some comparison between different *bar do* accounts, but a systematic comparison between all known representatives of this sub-genre with respect to content, form, length, intention, circumstances, function, and so on is still a desideratum. It is something I would like to work on in the future, but I feel it might be worth first exploring the life stories of the Karma pas a bit more to identify and take into account even more examples of *bar do'i rnam thars*.

5. Appendix: Edition

5.1 Edition of the Passage from the CKG

An extensive overview of the extant textual witnesses of the CKG was provided by Dell and I will use the same sigla in the paper at hand.⁶⁴ All witnesses are derived from just one set of printing blocks—the IHo brag printing blocks. There are several textual witnesses of the *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*, of which the most interesting and original one is a reproduction of prints from the IHo brag blocks from Rumtek Monastery in two volumes from 1980 (PX1). This reproduction is also available via BDRC, and I took this as the starting point for the edition provided here. There are several other prints or reproductions of prints from those printing blocks available. However, all being produced from the same printing blocks, I do not expect any added value in considering them, and therefore, neglected them for the edition. All other textual

⁶³ For the person, see BDRC, P1413; for the Tibetan text, see mKha' spyod dbang po 2013.

⁶⁴ Dell 2021, 126–41.

witnesses are derived from these printing blocks' text more recently.

Apart from the mentioned block print reproduction, I only used one of the contemporary editions, i.e., rDor je rgyal po's modern edition in book format, which was published by Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, first in 1986 in two volumes (PB2). It is also available via BDRC. The added value of rDo rje rgyal po's edition is that in many places, it corrects spelling mistakes or non-standard spellings from the original block print. If there are differences, they are indicated in the apparatus. Generally, there are no significant differences in the section I studied.

[PX1, vol. 2, p. 98, l. 4; PB2, vol. 2, p. 950, l.1] *de la rje rol pa'i rdo rje ni/ sngon pho brang shang tor sku'i bkod pa bsdus shing*⁶⁵ *zla ba'i dkyil 'khor gyi steng nas 'dzam gling la gzigs te*

*skad cig gis dga' ldan du lha'i drang srong legs skyes su gyur pa la bcom ldan 'das byams pas bskul te*⁶⁶ *shel gyi skas las gser gyi sa gzhir gshegs pa'i snang ba bstan la/*

bde ba can la sogs pa sangs rgyas kyi zhing mtha' dag nas kyang zhing 'dir gshegs pa'i cho 'phrul gyis yum gyi lhuums sbyangs te

sum pa'i yul lho lung chen bco brgyad dang mi ring ba rngod a la rong du ku cor gyi gdung las yab bsod nams don grub dang yum brtson 'grus rgyan las 'brug lo zla ba gsum pa'i tshes brgyad la sku bltams te

5.2 Edition of the Passage from the KSP

An overview of the different textual witnesses of the KSP was provided by Dell and I will use the same sigla in the paper at hand.⁶⁷ There is only one set of printing blocks. Consequently, one of their reprints is used below (SX1), which forms volumes 11 and 12 of the collected works of Si tu Chos kyi 'byung gnas. In addition, one of the modern editions is used for the reader's convenience (SB3). In the paragraph at hand, there were no differences in spelling and nothing where I felt the need for an emendation. In the edition below, the page numbers of both texts are indicated in brackets, if a new page starts.

[SX1, vol. 11, f. 161r, l. 5; SB3, p. 380] *rol pa'i rdo rje kho na'o//*

//de la dpal mthon mthing gi cod pan 'dzin pa karma pa bzhi pa rol pa'i rdo rje ni/ karma pakshi'i rnam thar bka' rgya ma las//da ste lo brgya lhag tsam na bram ze chen po'i thugs kyi sprul pa/ dus gsum mkhyen pa'i ngo bo rnam par 'phrul pa zhis byon nas/ bstan pa skyong yang shes dus tshod mar 'grib du song ba'i phyir/ deng sang nga'i phrin las tsam mi 'byung cung zad

⁶⁵ shing PB2] cing PX1

⁶⁶ te PB2] ste PX1

⁶⁷ Dell 2023, 21–29.

tsam 'byung/zhes gsungs pa dang mthun par sngon pho brang shong tor sku'i bkod pa bsdus zhing zla ba'i dkyil 'khor gyi steng nas 'dzam gling la gzigs tel skad cig gis dga' ldan du lha'i drang srong legs skyes su gyur pa la/ bcom ldan [SX1, 161v] 'das byams pas khyod 'dzam bu'i gling du skyo bar ma byed par/ da dung sems can gyi 'dren pa la song zhig

/ces lung bstan pa dang de ma thag tu 'dzam bu'i gling du sems can gyi don bya dgos par 'dug snyam pa'i 'dun pa byung ba'i dus su/ bcom ldan byams pa rin po che sna tshogs kyi khri la bzhugs pa'i drung du/ dpal rta mgrin la sogs dpa' bo dang/ mkha' 'gro'i tshogs du mas dgyes pa'i rnam 'gyur dpag tu med pa mdzad cing/ sems can gyi don lhun grub tu byung bar gyur cig/ces gsungs nas bdud rtsi [SB3, 381] drangs shing rab gnas 'thor ba'i snang ba byung ba dang/

shel gyi khang pa them skas dang bcas pa yod pa la 'ja' tshon sna tshogs 'phro ba/ logs gser gyi sa gzhi lta bu yod pa'i nang du gshegs pa'i snang ba bstan pa dang/

bde ba can la sogs pa sangs rgyas kyi zhing mtha' dag nas kyang zhing 'dir gshegs pa'i cho 'phrul gyis yum gyi lhums sbyangs tel/

sum pa'i yul lho lung chen bco brgyad dang mi ring ba rngod a la rong du/ a la spang dkar zhes bya ba rus chen sdong/

bye brag ku cor gyi rigs las/ yab lha sdong bsod nams don 'grub dang/ yum mdza' za brtson 'grus rgyan zhes bya ba gzhan snang du skye bo phal pa dman pa'i tshul bzung ba la/ lcags pho 'brug gi lo zla ba gsum pa'i tshes brgyad kyi nyi shar la sku bltams tel/

Bibliography

Tibetan Literature

Editions of the CKG

gTsong lag phreng ba, dPa' bo II (1504–1566).

PB2: *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*. Two volumes. Edited by rDo rje rgyal po. Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1986. BDRC: W7499.

PX1: *Chos 'byun mkhas pa'i dga' ston*. *A detailed history of the development of Buddhism in India and Tibet*. Two volumes. Reproduced from prints from Lho brag blocks from Rumtek Monastery. Delhi: Delhi Karmapa Chhodhey Gyalwae Sungrab Partun Khang, 1980. BDRC: W28792.

Editions of the KSP

Chos kyi 'byung gnas, Si tu VIII (1699/1700–1774), and Tshe dbang kun khyab, 'Be lo (1718–1790).

SB3: 1998. *Karma kam tshang gi brgyud pa rin po che'i rnam thar*. Edited by Reb gong rDo rje mkhar (b. 1958). Kun ming: Yun nan mi rigs dpe skrun khang. BDRC: W24686.

SX1: 1990. “Kaṃ tshang brgyud pa rin po che’i rnam thar rab ’byams nor bu zla ba chu shel gyi phreng ba’i **kha skong**” and “Sgrub brgyud karma kaṃ tshang brgyud pa rin po che’i rnam par thar pa rab ’byams nor bu zla ba chu shel gyi phreng ba.” In *Ta’i si tu pa kun mkhyen chos kyi ’byung gnas bstan pa’i nyin byed kyi bka’ ’bum—Collected Works of the Great Tai’i Si tu pa Kun mkhyen Chos kyi byun gnas Bstan pa’i nyin byed*, vols. 11 (*da*) and 12 (*na*) (of fourteen volumes). Block print reproduction. Sansal, India: Sungrab Nyamso Khang. BDRC: W26630.

Other Tibetan Sources

(Latin alphabetical order according to the root letter)

- A khu A khra dGe slong Byang chub bzang po (b. 16th cent.). 2004. “rGyal ba kun gyi dbang po dpal ldan karma pa mi bskyod rdo rje’i zhabs kyi dgung lo bdun phan gyi rnam par thar pa nor bu’i phreng ba.” In *dPal rgyal ba karma pa sku ’phreng brgyad pa mi bskyod rdo rje’i gsung ’bum*, mainly authored by Mi bskyod rdo rje. Vol. 1, 33–106, 37 fols. lHa sa: s.n. BDRC, W8039.
- mKha’ spyod dbang po, Zhwa dmar pa II (1350–1405). 2013. “Bla ma’i rnam par thar pa yon tan mi zad pa gsal ba’i me long.” In *dPal rgyal dbang karma pa sku phreng rim byon gyi gsung ’bum phyogs bsgrigs*, 108 volumes, modern type-set book, vol. 24, 1–121. Lhasa: dPal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib ’jug khang. BDRC: W3PD1288.
- ’Gos lo gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481). 1984. *Deb ther sngon po*. Khreng tu’u: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang. BDRC: W1KG5762.
- Rang byung rdo rje, Karma pa III (1284–1339). 2006a. *Karma pa rang byung rdo rje’i gsung ’bum*. Zi ling: mTshur phu mkhan po lo yag bkra shis. BDRC, W30541.
- . 2006b. “dPal chen rang byung rdo rje’i rnam thar.” In *Karma pa rang byung rdo rje’i gsung ’bum*, vol. nga, 353–373. Zi ling: mTshur phu mkhan po lo yag bkra shis. BDRC, W30541.
- . 2006c. *Thams cad mkhyen pa rin po che rang byung rdo rje’i rnam par thar pa tshigs su bcad pa*. In *Karma pa rang byung rdo rje’i gsung ’bum*, vol. nga, 374–415. Zi ling: mTshur phu mkhan po lo yag bkra shis. BDRC, W30541.
- Tshal pa kun dga’ rdo rje (1309–1364). 1981. *Deb ther dmar po rnams kyi dang po hu lan deb ther*. Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1981. BDRC: W1KG5760.

Western Literature

- Beer, Robert. 1999. *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. Boston: Shambala.
- Berounský, Daniel. 2010. "Entering Dead Bodies and the Miraculous Power of the Tibetan Kings: The Landmark of Karma Pakshi's Reincarnation in Tibet. Part I.", *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia* '10, *Linguistics, Ethnolinguistics, Religion and Culture*, 3(2): 7–33.
- . 2011. "Entering Dead Bodies and the Miraculous Power of the Tibetan Kings: The Landmark of Karma Pakshi's Reincarnation in Tibet. Part II." *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia* '11, *Linguistics, Ethnolinguistics, Religion and Culture*, 4(2): 7–29.
- Bjerregaard, Maria, and Dominik Dell. 2022. "The Second dPa' bo, gTsong lag phreng ba (1504–1566): Life and Works of the Great Sixteenth-Century Historian." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 63 (April 2022): 131–75. http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_63_05.pdf.
- Cuevas, Bryan. 2003. *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buswell, Robert E. and Donald S. Lopez. 2014. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dell, Dominik. 2020. "Tibetan Buddhist Masters between Two Lives: A Closer Look at the Genre of Bar do'i rnam thar Using the Example of the Seventh Karma pa, Chos grags rgya mtsho (1454–1506)." *Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture*, n.s., 11 (1/2020): 41–63. <https://doi.org/10.4467/24506249PJ.20.002.12988>.
- . 2021. "'Feast of the Wise': Author, Structure and Textual Witnesses of the 16th Century Religio-Historical Work Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston by the Second dPa' bo, gTsong lag phreng ba (1504–1566)." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 61 (October 2021): 110–65. http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_61_03.pdf.
- . 2023. "'Moonstone Water-Crystal Mālā': Structure and Textual Witnesses of the Golden Garland of the Karma bKa brgyud by the Eighth Si tu, Chos kyi 'byung gnas (1699/1700–1774), and 'Be lo Tshe dbang kun khyab (1718–1790)." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 66 (April 2023): 5–67. http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_66_01.pdf.
- Dharmachakra Translation Committee. 2013. *The Play in Full, Lalitavistara*. 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha Version v

- 4.48.18 (2023). Accessed October 03, 2023. <https://read.84000.co/translation/toh95.html>.
- Gamble, Ruth Ellen. 2018. *Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism. The Third Karmapa and the Invention of a Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2020. *The Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje: Master of Mahāmudrā*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications.
- Huber, Toni. 2004. “The Chase and the Dharma: The Legal Protection of Wild Animals in Premodern Tibet.” In *Wildlife in Asia: Cultural Perspectives*, edited by John Knight, 36–55. London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé. 2003. *The Treasury of Knowledge. Book One: Myriad Worlds*. Translated by the Kalu Rinpoché Translation Group. Ithaca and New York: Snow Lion Publications.
- . 2010. *The Treasury of Knowledge. Books Two, Three and Four: Buddhism’s Journey to Tibet*. Translated and introduced by Ngawang Zangpo. Ithaca and New York: Snow Lion Publications.
- Manson, Charles. 2009. “Introduction to the Life of Karma Pakshi.” *Bulletin of Tibetology*, 45: 25–51.
- . 2022. *The Second Karmapa Karma Pakshi. Tibetan Mahāsiddha. Lives of the Masters*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications.
- Rheingans, Jim. 2010. “Narratives of Reincarnation, Politics of Power, and the Emergence of a Scholar: The Very Early Years of Mikyo Dorje.” In *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined—Biography in the Buddhist Tradition*, edited by Linda Covill, Ulrike Roesler, and Sarah Shaw, 241–98. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- . 2017. *The Eighth Karmapa’s Life and his Interpretation of the Great Seal. A Religious Life and Instructional Texts in Historical and Doctrinal Contexts*. Hamburg Buddhist Studies 7, series edited by Steffen Döll and Michael Zimmermann. Bochum, Freiburg: project verlag.
- Schaeffer, Kurtis R. 2005. *Dreaming the Great Brahmin. Tibetan Traditions of the Buddhist Poet-Saint Saraha*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Seegers, Manfred. 2009. “The Lord of Teachings. Life and works of the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339).” Master’s thesis. University of Kent at Canterbury.
- . Forthcoming 2024. *Der 3. Karmapa—Meister der buddhistischen*

Lehren. Leben und Werk des Rangjung Dorje (Rang byung rdo rje, 1284-1339). Hamburg: Zeitlose Werte Verlagsgesellschaft.

Verhufen, Gregor. 1992. "Die Biographien des achten Karma-pa Mi-bskyod rdo-rje und seines Lehrers Sangs-rgyas mNyan-pa Rin-po-che. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Karma-bKa'-brgyud-pa-Schulrichtung des tibetischen Buddhismus." Master's thesis. University of Bonn.

Vostrikov, Andrew Ivanovich. 1994. *Tibetan Historical Literature.* Abington, Oxon, UK: Routledge.

Young, Serinity. 2004. *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts: Sexualities in Buddhist Narrative, Iconography, and Ritual.* New York and London: Routledge.

