

From Transference to Transformation: Levels of Understanding in Tibetan *Ars Moriendi*

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TIBETAN BUDDHISM generally places great importance on the Buddha Amitābha and the religious practices leading to rebirth in the pure land of Sukhāvatī. We thus find plenty of texts dealing with the practice and theory of the Pure Land among the writings of Tibetan Buddhist masters, but even more than the traditional literary sources, it is the oral narrations circulating in this cultural sphere that document the centrality of Pure Land faith for common lay followers. The following story, for example, emphasizes faith in the Buddha Amitābha on a light, humorous note:

Once upon a time there was a carpenter who had no interest in the Dharma whatsoever. The only thing he cared about was his business and how he could gain the most profit out of it. As he was getting older, his daughter, a well-travelled grown-up lady, took some concern with her father's future destiny. Since she knew there was no way she could convince him of the importance of studying and practicing the Dharma, she came up with another plan. One day, when she came back from one of her travels, she told her father: "I have just come from a very fine and flourishing land in the west. It is called Dewachen,¹ and many people keep on moving there. They are in need of new houses and pay well for

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¹ "Dewachen" (orthography "bDe ba can") is the Tibetan term for Sanskrit Sukhāvatī.

good carpenters. I told them about you and, soon, they will send someone called Öpame,² who will come and bring you there.” From that day on, the aged carpenter had no other enthusiasm than going to Dewachen one day, always hoping for the arrival of Öpame, even dreaming of him at night.

The happy end of this traditional Tibetan narrative is, of course, highly predictable, just as its moral is easily discerned: the pure land Sukhāvatī is more than easy to reach for those longing to go there, even if they do not know anything in particular about it, or, for that matter, about the Buddhist Dharma as a whole. Clearly, the story presupposes that even this highly productive carpenter will not be disappointed upon reaching there. While his financial expectations will probably remain unfulfilled, the advantages of the Pure Land are clearly expected to outweigh profitable carpentry.

Still, the story itself does not tell very much without its context. During recent decades, I was frequently asked by Buddhist centers to interpret for visiting lamas, which gave me the honour, for example, of interpreting instructions on the Phowa³ ritual for transferring one’s consciousness to Sukhāvatī on several occasions, most prominently for Ayang Rinpoche,⁴ a widely reputed specialist in this rite, or to translate prayers describing the process of death and the intermediate state (*bardo*),⁵ for recitation in *bardo* meditation retreats. The above story, though, is a favorite of Sönam Rinpoche,⁶ a lay yogin from eastern Tibet who was put in charge of a Buddhist center in the European countryside in the 1970s.⁷ His forty years of humble and secluded living on a former farm in northern Europe have hardly changed his way of life, and whenever he agrees to an invitation from another Buddhist center, he intentionally proposes a tightly limited portfolio of no more than three subjects he wants to talk about, most preferably the pure land of Dewachen (Sukhāvatī).⁸ The primary goal of these

² “Öpame” (orthography “Od dpag med”) is the Tibetan term for Sanskrit Amitābha.

³ The Tibetan name of the rite, “Phowa” (orthography ’Pho ba, Skt. Saṅkramāṇa), is in fact a verbal noun, based on *pho ba*, an *intransitive* verb of movement, designating “shifting” from one place to another. Therefore, in this article, the English verbal noun “transference” here has to be understood mostly in the *intransitive* meaning of transferring, figuratively or literally, from one place to another.

⁴ A dbyangs Rin po che. See also Brauen-Dolma 1985, p. 247, n. 5.

⁵ “Bardo” (orthography “bar do”) is the Tibetan term for Sanskrit *antarābhava*.

⁶ Name changed by the author.

⁷ In this context, “lay yogin” refers to a non-celestial lama.

⁸ Sönam Rinpoche bases his teachings on the long Sukhāvatī prayer by Karma Chagme (Karma Chags-med, c. 1613–1678).

presentations is an introduction to the Pure Land, and if time permits, this is taught in combination with Phowa, the transference of consciousness to that very domain. Practice aiming at rebirth in Dewachen, Sönam Rinpoche claims, is that form of Buddhist practice which suits the lifestyle of western laypeople best. In our busy times, he holds, there is hardly any hope of achieving any stable realization in meditation that would last beyond death. Aiming for Sukhāvatī thus prevents both the uncertainty of the intermediate state as well as an eventual rebirth in a land without the Dharma.

During his teachings on the Pure Land, there inevitably comes a phase in which he describes how, in Dewachen, every wish that comes to one's mind is fulfilled, instantly, just the way one wants it: if one wants to sleep, a bed manifests itself, and if one wants to listen to music, one's favored tune simply starts playing as if a radio has been switched on. This is the phase when members of the audience usually start giggling in disbelief, the Pure Land becoming all too similar to the description of Cockaigne, that hedonistic paradise where grilled pigeons fly through the air just in order to land in the mouth of whoever wants to eat them.

Even though food in the Pure Land is apparently vegetarian, and the proverbial grilled pigeons do not play a role, it still seems that western audiences expect a Buddhist pure realm to cater much less for one's trivial needs, and the same might apply to young urban audiences in Asia. Highly educated, especially when compared to pre-modern illiterate audiences, modern listeners seem to be more inspired by abstract, philosophically or psychologically profound explanations.⁹ This applies even when such explanations happen to miss the point, as in the case of C. G. Jung's best-selling interpretations of the Pure Land along the lines of his analytical psychology. After several decades of undisputed popularity, those Jungian analyses were convincingly "counter-analyzed," so to say, by Luis O. Gómez in 1995.¹⁰

The aim of this article is to show that a *specific* symbolic understanding of the Pure Land in general and the Phowa rite in particular is not only in line with traditional Tibetan Buddhist thought, but that tradition even advises a Buddhist teacher to provide this interpretation to audiences capable of grasping it. Importantly, in this peculiar paradigm, the symbolic interpretation does not negate the literal one: Both readings form co-existing (or, co-non-existing) levels of truth. This ontological twist is, I think, fully

⁹ See, for example, Bishop 1993, p. 87: "Pure Land beliefs do not easily fit the dominant scientific image that the West seems to want from Buddhism." See also Gouin 2010, p. 45.

¹⁰ See Gómez 1995, pp. 217–24.

communicable to the majority of modern listeners and a necessary prerequisite for precluding a *mere* symbolic interpretation.¹¹

Returning to Sönam Rinpoche's teaching session, he, when faced with such bemusement about the scented water and the singing birds in the Pure Land, initially opts to steer clear of nihilism and regularly affirms his view that this is exactly the way it is; it may sound unbelievable, but it is really so. He is simply describing the Pure Land, nothing more, nothing less. Such is the drift of the teachings during which Sönam Rinpoche usually tells the above story of the carpenter and his daughter. And since the Pure Land adapts greatly to one's wishes, it cannot be positively ruled out that the carpenter ultimately even got to build houses for a good salary, although the narrative itself ends with his ascent and remains silent about his life thereafter.¹² The Tibetan oral tradition transmits several such stories in which the protagonist attaining rebirth in the Pure Land can often be assumed to be illiterate or barely literate. Let me mention just another one, recorded by Lama Surya Das:

A famed Tibetan Buddhist master had a mother who showed no ambition to practice refined meditation techniques, or to understand the profound meaning of the scriptures. Instead, she went the way of the ordinary people with simple devotion towards the Dharma. The only prayer she recited was the wish to be reborn in the Pure Land, and she did so every morning and every evening.¹³ As she approached the end of her life, she began seeing a monk appear near her. When she asked her son about this, he gave no reply. She kept on saying: "This monk shining in red must be a deity. He keeps getting clearer every day." When her son finally explained to her who it was, she asked in amazement: "He even comes to people like me?"¹⁴

¹¹ This article focuses on the Tibetan tradition and does not seek to explore similar approaches in East Asian Buddhism. I would like to refer the reader to Donner and Stevenson 1993, pp. 89–96, for an excellent introduction to the doctrinal developments within the Tiantai 天台 tradition and to Wu 2008, p. 66, for the debates in seventeenth-century China.

¹² The story of the carpenter is recorded, with some variation in detail, in Surya Das 1992, pp. 239–40 and Kalu Rinpoche 1995, pp. 106–7.

¹³ This possibly refers to the above-mentioned prayer by Karma Chagme, one of the most popular Tibetan Sukhāvatī liturgies. On Karma Chagme's teaching cycle which contains this Sukhāvatī prayer, Kapstein (2004, p. 41) remarks: "My own, somewhat informal, observations over the years suggest that liturgies such as the *Means for the Attainment of the Field of Bliss* . . . enjoyed a great grassroots popularity." My own equally informal findings fully support this. I have met illiterate laypeople in eastern Tibet (2000) who recite Karma Chagme's prayer by heart every day, having learned the recitation not in the monastery but from their parents. See also Gouin 2010, p. 21.

¹⁴ My paraphrase is based on Surya Das 1992, pp. 205–6.

The gist of the story is, again, easily discernible, and once the protagonist has dramatically crossed the threshold from uncertainty to confidence, the final ascent is clearly in sight. The same elements can be found in a wealth of stories praising the virtues of simple belief and the accessibility of Sukhāvatī.¹⁵ The subjects are clearly simple people who do not expect to be visited by such an exalted religious authority as the Buddha Amitābha himself, and this probably explains why oral tradition is so important for understanding the relevance of Pure Land belief in Tibet.¹⁶ Such stories were often transmitted among the laity, or told by a lama, for example, when visiting families' homes for the customary prolonged funeral rites—a duty, often loathed, that scholars were less burdened with.¹⁷ In a similar manner, Sönam Rinpoche's teachings are addressed to an audience that mostly lacks systematic training in Buddhist doctrine or practice, and still he never fails to mention the various levels of Phowa practice, a more abstract doctrine for which written sources exist in abundance.

Levels of Transference in the Words of My Perfect Teacher

In Patrul Rinpoche's¹⁸ famed treatise *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* (Words of My Perfect Teacher),¹⁹ he shows himself to be highly critical of some

¹⁵ Surya Das does not record his stories as an academic ethnographer, and I cannot vouch for the accuracy of his rendering. In his account, the old lady, upon this revelation, experiences a certain spiritual epiphany and cries out: "Now I feel that Amitābha is no longer outside of me," upon which her son replies: "He has never been outside of you." Such an element is usually missing in the narratives promoting naïve faith and I have to remain reserved as to its authenticity. From a doctrinal point of view, though, the son's statement is definitely accurate.

¹⁶ For theoretical considerations on transference to Dewachen in the writings of Ju Mipham ('Ju Mi-pham, 1846–1912), see Kajihama 1992, esp. pp. 155–57.

¹⁷ These observations were made during numerous journeys and terms of residence in Tibet, Nepal and India between 1992 and 2010. They fully support the descriptions by Cuevas (2003, p. 70), Beyer (1973, pp. 19–20), and Lhundrup Sopa (1983, p. 4). In a way, the Sukhāvatī anagoges can be considered the favorable counterparts to the rather sinister travels to the lower realms as described in Brian Cuevas' *Travels to the Netherworld* (2008). Cuevas (2008, pp. 130–31) relates that these travelogues are often the speciality of itinerant storytellers. Although my experience with those narratives is scant, I assume that such spirited underworld narrations would be rather tactless on the occasion of funerals, where word of Sukhāvatī can provide a more auspicious phrasing. Provisionally, it seems that the dangers of the netherworld were only mentioned within the narrow ritual framework of the *Bardo-thödrol* or *Chö* rituals, although this question surely rewards further inquiry (see also Cuevas 2008, p. 37; Gouin 2010, pp. 21, 32, 43; and Mumford 1989, pp. 219–24).

¹⁸ rDza dPal sprul O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po (1808–1887).

¹⁹ Page numbers for the Tibetan text refer to the, often reprinted, 1989 paperback edition *sNying thig sngon 'gro'i khrid yig kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* (see "Zhal-lung-Tib" in

lamas who travel extensively in order to perform the rituals for transferring the consciousness of a deceased person to Sukhāvatī. In his view, those lamas, especially reincarnated *tulkus*, often lack the necessary experience in tantric meditation practice, let alone the appropriate detachment in financial matters:

I wonder whether they should not better train a little in *bodhicitta* and secluded practice rather than going around looking for offerings as soon as they can ride a horse.²⁰

It is not by mere accident that Patrul places these remarks in the context of his explanation of Phowa ritual practice, for the hopes and fears of ordinary people have been misused more than once. After these warnings about its possible abuse, Patrul elucidates five levels of Phowa practice:

- (1) highest Phowa, that of the *dharma-kāya*
- (2) middling Phowa, that of the *sambhogakāya*
- (3) lowest Phowa, that of the *nirmāṇakāya*
- (4) common Phowa, that through the three kinds of conception
- (5) Phowa of caring for a deceased person²¹

Patrul presents these five in descending order, possibly in order to preclude the misconception that Phowa simply means guiding the dying to the Pure

the list of abbreviations). The *Words of My Perfect Teacher* has been described by Matthew Kapstein (2004, p. 50, n. 67) as “far and away the most popular account, throughout the past century, of the fundamental practices of the Rnying-ma-pa tantric path,” and, I dare say, it is to the present day probably the most popular introduction to the Buddhist worldview in south-eastern Tibet, widely studied and practiced even beyond the Nyingma tradition in a narrow sense. The title of the work has a dual meaning and can also be translated as *The Instructions of My Lama [Equal to] Samantabhadra*. See Bayer 2012, p. 84, n. 8.

²⁰ Modified translation, based on *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group (2007, see Zhal-lung-Padma in the list of abbreviations), p. 354, and Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 573: “chibs gong thub tsam nas dkor la mi ‘byon par thugs bskyed dang mtshams sgrub re la cung zad slob dgos sam snyam mo.” Patrul’s criticism is here probably primarily directed at the monastic bursars who send the young reincarnations on such bread-winning tours rather than at the *sprul skus* themselves, who as children often do not have much of a say in these decisions.

²¹ Zhal-lung-Tib, pp. 567–69. For the sake of simplicity, I translate the shorter names of the five categories as provided by the editors of Zhal-lung-Tib (with the exception of no. 4). The original outline (Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 567) presents more explicative names and reads: “spyir ‘pho ba la dbye na Inga ste / rab chos sku lta ba rgyas ‘debs kyi ‘pho ba / ‘bring longs sku bskyed rdzogs zung ‘jug gi ‘pho ba / tha ma sprul sku tshad med thugs rje i ‘pho ba / tha mal pa ‘du shes gsum ldan gyi ‘pho ba / gshin po rjes ‘dzin thugs rje lcags kyu i ‘pho ba dang Inga yod.”

Land. For the sake of argument, I would like to reverse this order, ascending through the five classes and discussing the common funerary ritual first, the Phowa of caring for a deceased person (5).

As said above, performing Phowa for somebody else is a sensitive issue. Here, Patrul quotes Milarepa to the effect that “to perform transference for the dead, one should have definitely attained the Path of Seeing.”²² Nonetheless, Patrul concedes that even those who “just carry the titles of lamas or reincarnations” and who regularly carry out those rites can benefit the dead through the Phowa rite if they perform it motivated by *bodhicitta*, benevolence, and compassion: It is the very power of the right *motivation* which makes the ritual effective.²³ Notably, Patrul allows for a complete discrepancy between the ritual performer’s visualization and the “actual” movements of drops and winds in the channels, due to the officiating lama’s lack of ability to have an actual vision thereof. Still the ritual can be greatly beneficial if the officiant’s powers of *bodhicitta*, benevolence and compassion, again pure and simple, compensate for his lack of visionary powers and ritual precision.²⁴

(4) As for the next level, the “ordinary” way of transferring into the pure land of Sukhāvatī, it is probably that version of the Phowa rite which has

²² Zhal-lung-Padma, p. 355; Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 569: “*gshin po la 'pho ba 'debs pa la / mthong lam thob ba zhig nges par dgos.*” Note that in the expression ‘*pho ba 'debs pa*, *'pho ba* (“transference”) seems to be a verbal noun based on the intransitive *'pho ba*. Tib. *'pho ba 'debs pa* therefore roughly denotes “causing someone to transfer” (lit. “inflicting transference”; see also Zhang 1985, s.v. *gshin po'i rnam shes dag zhing du spor ba*).

²³ See Zhal-lung-Padma, p. 353; Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 571: “*da lta bla ma'am sprul sku la sog pa'i ming tsam btags pa phal mo ches shin po la 'pho ba 'debs pa ni / byams snying rje byang chub sems kyis kun nas bslangs . . . na ni / byang chub sems kyi kun slong las gshin po la yang phan thogs shes che zhing.*” Mumford (1989, p. 198) proposes that the transference ritual “is a symbolic effort: the rest of the funeral would proceed on the assumption that the ‘*pho-ba* had been unsuccessful” (followed by Cuevas 2003, p. 70). I do not consider this interpretation very exhaustive. Rather, the ritual continues after the Phowa in order to provide guidance in the possible case that it has not been successful. In fact, the recitations of the following forty-nine days provide an opportunity to quit the intermediate state on every single day, and still they are continued for the whole duration of seven weeks. There are certainly several reasons for this, and along with piety and financial calculation, some humility on the part of the officiant may be one of them.

²⁴ In the history of the Dzogchen (rDzogs-chen) tradition, the process of dying and the practice of the officiant have been described with varying degrees of formalism. David Germano describes a number of visualizations and rituals in “Dying, Death, and Other Opportunities” (1997, pp. 473–76). In his 2005 article “The Funerary Transformation of the Great Perfection (*Rdzogs chen*)”, he traces the development of scholarly discourse on rituals for the dying.

received the most attention in the recent global reception of Tibetan Buddhism. Here, the practitioner exercises in order to travel to the Pure Land on his or her own, and this kind of Phowa seems to be particularly appealing to the highly individualized subject in a modern post-industrial society, expected to make his or her way through whatever comes.²⁵ Guidance by authorities or reliance on one's grandchildren in times of weakness is not the order of the day,²⁶ nor is it a time to plunge into the depths of the unconscious in order to explore each and every dark corner.²⁷ The "ordinary" kind of Phowa is a subjective, proactive way of controlling the unavoidable, a completely autonomous *ars moriendi*.²⁸ It basically consists of ejecting one's own consciousness, visualized in the form of the syllable *hrīḥ* (ḥ),²⁹ out of one's body into the pure land of Sukhāvatī, visualized above one's head. The syllable *hrīḥ* leaves the body through the central channel (Skt. *nādī*), visualized as a straight tube running vertically through one's body, from the top of the head down to a level shortly below the navel.

²⁵ It is therefore not every instance true that, as Bishop (1993, p. 87) claims, "Pure Land Buddhism . . . relies almost totally upon faith." Although the Phowa technique presupposes faith in the efficacy of the method and the power of the Buddhas, a proactive mastery of inner channels and energies plays just as big a role as it does, for example, in any of the Six Yogas of Nāropā, or any *sādhana* of Tibetan Buddhism.

²⁶ I allude here to the Phowa performed by a religious authority (5) and ancestral worship.

²⁷ On the fundamental discrepancy between Jung's psychoanalytical interpretation of Sukhāvatī and the probable original intention of the *Guan wuliang shou jing* 觀無量壽經 (Vision of Amitāyus Sutra; T no. 365), see Gómez 1995, pp. 217–24.

²⁸ Cf. Brauen-Dolma (1985, p. 247), who describes the revival of collective Phowa practice in the Tibetan exile community in the 1980s and infers from it the aspect of a "crisis cult." Although it would be tempting to assume that the collective practice of Phowa could be performed in expectation or the aftermath of a crisis, the data provided by Brauen-Dolma do not seem to suffice to support this. While I cannot provide more detailed statistics, my subjective impression is, almost thirty years after his research, that the current popularity of Phowa events is in no way connected to a possible perception of the exile situation as an acute or imminent crisis. As a whole, of course, the practice of the Pure Land is often linked to the doctrine of the degenerate age, in which people lack the time and ability to practice more complex paths (see also Wu 2008, p. 66). This, I assume, does not represent an acute doomsday ideology but rather a doctrinal superstructure for convenient and accessible lay practices that have been popular throughout the ages.

²⁹ More precisely, the Tibetan term *yi ge* (Skt. *akṣara*) refers to a written syllabic cluster which indicates one vowel (or diphthong) and optionally semivowels as well as opening or closing consonants. Unlike *devanāgarī*, Tibetan print type and Indian scripts such as *siddhamātrikā* line up such *akṣaras*, side by side, without a connecting line.

Patrul designates this method as the “common transference with the three kinds of conception.”³⁰ Notably, the adjective “common,” or “ordinary” (*tha mal pa*) is, in classical Tibetan, used for a “commoner” or an ordinary person (*mi tha mal pa*), too.³¹ This kind of Phowa is obviously both “common” in the sense of “widespread,” and also practiced by common persons who have little or no experience in other meditation practices.³² As for the multifaceted Tibetan term *'du shes* (“conception”), it renders, for example, Sanskrit *samjñā* in the context of the five *skandhas*, and an exact English equivalent is almost impossible to find.³³ When *'du shes* is used in the description of this fourth level of Phowa practice, it means simply “conceiving of” A as B, as, for example, in the famous instruction to conceive of the Buddhist disciple as a sick person, the Buddha as a physician and the Dharma as medicine.³⁴

The three conceptions on the fourth level of Phowa practice are: (a) conceiving of the central channel as the path, (b) conceiving of the drop of mind in consciousness [on which the syllable *hrīḥ* is rested] as the traveller, (c) conceiving of the place *Sukhāvatī*, the Pure Land, as the goal of the journey.³⁵ Even though it is clear that the central channel, the drop and the Pure Land are to be taken literally at a certain level, the elements of the visualization abound in symbolism.³⁶ The central channel is, for example, “blue like an azurite cover, symbolizing the unchanging *dharmakāya*,”³⁷ the syllable *hrīḥ* is “the essence of one’s mind and consciousness,”³⁸ and above one’s head one visualizes not exactly the Pure Land but one’s root guru, who in essence unifies all Buddhas of the three times, though

³⁰ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 567: “*tha mal pa 'du shes gsum ldan gyi 'pho ba.*”

³¹ See also Bayer 2010, pp. 371–72.

³² See also my remarks on “ordinary consciousness” (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), below.

³³ For a preliminary discussion, see Bayer 2010, pp. 314–20.

³⁴ See Zhal-lung-Padma, p. 16; Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 19: “*bdag nyid la nad pa'i 'du shes bskyed par bya . . .*”

³⁵ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 569: “*rtsa dbu ma la lam gyi 'du shes / sems rnam shes kyi thig le la mgron po'i 'du shes / gnas bde ba can dag pa'i zhing la 'gro sa'i 'du shes.*”

³⁶ For example, the practitioner is instructed to visualize himself in the form of Vajrayoginī, “with her left hand resting at her hip, [holding] the curved knife that cuts the three poisons at the root.” See Zhal-lung-Padma, p. 360. Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 582: “*g.yon dug gsum rtsad nas gcod pa'i gri gug dkur brten pa.*”

³⁷ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 582: “*chos sku 'gyur ba med pa mtshon pas mthing gi shun pa ltar sngo ba.*” See Zhal-lung-Padma, p. 360.

³⁸ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 582: “*rang gi sems rnam shes kyi ngo bo hrīḥ yig.*” See Zhal-lung-Padma, p. 360.

appearing in the form of the Protector of Limitless Light, Amitābha, red in color, with the major and minor marks of a Buddha.³⁹ After a number of prayers to Amitābha,⁴⁰ the final recitation reads: “Emaho! In this self-manifesting place, the true Akaniṣṭha, . . . may I attain the fortress of the *dharma-kāya*.⁴¹ At this point of ritual climax, higher destinations such as Akaniṣṭha and Sukhāvatī appear to be interchangeable, and a strong emphasis is placed on the *dharma-kāya*, the fortress that can be found *within* Akaniṣṭha and Sukhāvatī, of course through practice *in* these pure lands, but even more so as their *inherent* nature.⁴²

Having repeated “May I attain the fortress of the *dharma-kāya!*” several times, the practitioner ultimately ejects his subjectivity through the top of his head, notably not simply into the Pure Land of Sukhāvatī, but directly into the heart *cakra* of Buddha Amitābha, epitomizing all Buddhas of the three times. After a short sojourn in this realm of bliss, the practitioner falls back down, so to say, into his own heart *cakra* and recommences the process of ascending through the central channel.⁴³ The exercise is repeated several times and in the end, the liturgy advises the practitioner to rest in equipoise, in a state without mental proliferation,⁴⁴ before the Buddha Amitābha and his entourage dissolve into light and ultimately into the practitioner himself.⁴⁵ The practitioner then re-emerges in the form of Amitāyus, engaging in recitation of a long-life mantra in order to “pacify hindrances to one’s life[-span] through the truth of origination in depen-

³⁹ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 583: “ngo bo dus gsum sangs rgyas thams cad ‘dus pa’i bdag nyid . . . rtsa ba’i bla ma yin la / rnam pa . . . mgon po ‘od dpag tu med pa sku mdog dmar po.” See Zhal-lung-Padma, p. 361.

⁴⁰ The ritual liturgy (Tib. *grub thabs*) of the preliminary practices Patrul comments upon, the Longchen Nyingthig (*Klong chen snying thig*) tradition, is rather brief. It does not contain Karma Chagme’s prayer, the reception of which by Patrul is, nonetheless, well attested. See Fujinaka 2006, p. 52 and Kajihama 1997, p. 271.

⁴¹ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 585: “e ma ho / gnas rang snang don gyi ‘og min na / . . . chos sku ‘i rgyal sa zin par shog.”

⁴² See also Kapstein (2004, p. 29), who notes about a nineteenth-century Sukhāvatī prayer from the Dzogchen (rDzogs chen) tradition that: “Sukhāvatī is here identified with Akaniṣṭha (‘og min), which is by itself no longer the name of a particular paradise, but rather a metonymic expression for the primordial ground in which the Buddha’s gnosis is disclosed.”

⁴³ See also Brauen-Dolma (1985, p. 247), who describes some of the somatic effects that can occur in this state of absorption, such as intense breathing, sobbing, and so on.

⁴⁴ Zhal-lung-Tib, pp. 589–90: “gnas lugs spros pa dang bral ba’i ngang du mnyam par bzhag.” “Resting in equipoise” here is a translation of the expression *mnyam par bzhag* (or, “resting in balance”). On “sinking” and similar expressions, see Gómez 1995, p. 219.

⁴⁵ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 590: “‘od dpag med ‘od du zhu nas rang la thim.”

dence”⁴⁶ and surely in order to reaffirm that he or she does not wish to go to the Pure Land before the time has come.

The practice is thus rich in allusions that a quasi-physical going to the pure land of Sukhāvatī is only a lesser, or preliminary goal when compared to oneness with the *dharmakāya*, a more direct understanding of the nature of mind, or however one may call a realization of the ultimate. This oneness with original Buddhahood probably finds its strongest symbolic expression in the fact that one visualizes one’s own consciousness in the form of the syllable *hrīḥ*, the “seed” syllable (*bīja*) of Buddha Amitābha, *initially*, even *before* the process of transference begins,⁴⁷ let alone the understanding of the *path* to Sukhāvatī, the central channel, as the unchanging *dharmakāya*, which is in fact the ultimate *goal* of the journey.

While (4) and (5), the two kinds of Phowa that have been discussed so far, are meant for those who have little or no experience in meditation practice, the following three kinds presuppose stable attainments of various degrees. Here, the transference of the *nirmāṇakāya* (3) is interpreted by Patrul as a means for shifting into a pure place of rebirth.⁴⁸ The explanation appears somewhat blurred, and since it is unessential to my argument,⁴⁹ I would like to go on to the middling transference of the *sambhogakāya* (2): As far as I understand, it consists in assuming the form of one’s meditative deity in the intermediate state after death, practicing the generation stage and the

⁴⁶ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 590: “*rten 'brel gyi bden pas tshe gegs kyang zhi ba.*”

⁴⁷ The syllable *hrīḥ* of course carries a variety of connotations apart from being the *bīja* of Buddha Amitābha. See Mikkyō Jiten Hensankai 1931–33, p. 38.

⁴⁸ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 569: “*zhing dag pa'i skye gnas su 'pho ba yin.*”

⁴⁹ The editors of Zhal-lung-Tib had some difficulty distinguishing this *nirmāṇakāya* Phowa (3) from the ordinary Phowa (4) and wrongly treat the two as a single item in this passage (p. 569), surely because the ordinary Phowa is explained in detail further below (pp. 573–91). As for the *nirmāṇakāya* Phowa, the Tibetan phrasing is somewhat cryptic, and the translators of Zhal-lung-Padma render it as “driven by great compassion and applying the practice of assuming rebirth as a *nirmāṇakāya* emanation, they then transfer their consciousness to a place of rebirth in one of the pure lands” (p. 352). The interpretation of Evans-Wentz (2000, p. 247: “consisteth of taking Divine Rebirth”) seems equally conjectural. Most probably, something went wrong in the transmission of this doctrine and it originally referred to the ability to go from one body in the world to the next on one’s own volition, through the propelling force of great compassion (*snying rje chen po'i 'phen pa*). In fact, the Tibetan word *trūlku* (*sprul sku*), the equivalent for Sankrit *nirmāṇakāya*, is most commonly used for a bodhisattva taking rebirth in human form out of compassion, which would fit this conception of *nirmāṇakāya* Phowa quite well. It should further be noted in this context that a *nirmāṇakāya* manifestation does not always mean rebirth as a human being, but equally a beneficial manifestation in the form of an animal, plant, or material object. See ’Jigs bral ye shes rdo rje 1992, p. 21.

completion stage in union.⁵⁰ Notably, the soteriological goal to be achieved here is not the *sambhogakāya* itself but the wisdom body (*jñānakāya*), which is, according to the text, “union,” arising together with the perplexing appearances of the intermediate state (*bardo*).⁵¹ I have admittedly kept my English paraphrase of this expression just as cryptic as its Tibetan original, but nonetheless I am confident that the mention of “wisdom arising together with erroneous appearances” can accurately be interpreted as a kind of simultaneously-arising wisdom (Skt. *sahajajñāna*), which means that whenever a sense object appears, an understanding of its absolute nature (i.e., emptiness or *mahāsukha*) appears simultaneously in the consciousness of the yogin or yoginī.⁵²

Finally, the highest form of Phowa, that of the *dharma-kāya* (1), consists in “transferring into the expanse of the *dharma-kāya*” at the time of death.⁵³ Although we here find the *dharma-kāya* placed in such an eminent position, seemingly as the highest goal of all Phowa practice, it is quite remarkable that Patrul nowhere throughout his whole book gives a straightforward definition of what this term factually refers to, let alone a detailed definition. I assume that this state of affairs is intentional, and that, therefore, any lucid definition satisfying the scholarly need for precision would be somewhat

⁵⁰ These two stages are described, for example, in Cuevas 2003, pp. 44–45.

⁵¹ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 568: “*bar do 'khrul ba'i snang ba 'char ba dang mnyam du zung 'jug ye shes kyi skur 'pho ba de yin*.”

⁵² On *sahaja*, *mahāsukha* and the fourth Buddha body, see Snellgrove 1987, pp. 130, 245, 250; and Guan Xing 2005, p. 90; on *sahaja* esp. Kværne 1975, Davidson 2002, and Wedemeyer 2007, p. 93. Kapstein (2004, p. 49, n. 63) notes that in a Sukhāvatī prayer from the Drigung ('Bri gung) Kagyü tradition, the Tibetan word used for the Sankrit Sukhāvatī is not bDe ba can (or bDe can, in short), but *bde chen* (“great joy”) which normally renders the Sanskrit *mahāsukha*. This usage is also apparent in the text under consideration here: Sukhāvatī is referred to as bDe chen (Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 385). As Kapstein further notes, Tib. *bde chen* is semantically close to the Chinese *jile* 極樂, while the historical interrelation of these two terms remains unclear. At any rate, the shift from *can* (“endowed with,” Skt. *-vat*) to *chen* (“great,” which normally renders Skt. *mahā*) was probably facilitated by the fact that both syllables sound alike in dialects such as contemporary Lha-sa Tibetan, the vowel “a” shifting to *umlaut* before a final *-n*. The interpretation as “utmost bliss” or “great bliss” is indeed suggested by an etymology presented in the beginning of the smaller *Sukhāvatī-vyūha*, stating “there is nothing but immeasurable pure [Tib. ‘incessant causes of’] joy. For that reason, it is called the Sukhāvatī world” (*wei you wuliang qingjing xile shi gu ming wei jile shijie* 唯有無量清淨喜樂 是故名為極樂世界), T no. 367, 12: 348c16. The Tibetan reads: “*bde ba'i rgyu chad med par yod de / de'i phyir 'jig rten gyi khams bde ba can zhes bya'o //*” (P no. 783, folio chu: 220b1–2).

⁵³ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 568: “*'chi kha'i tshe . . . chos sku'i 'pho ba de yin*.”

misleading. Probably, “*dharmaṅkāya*” is meant to be used the way it is, as some absolute, partly unknown state of being, not fully accessible to the rational mind.

While the designation of this highest kind of Phowa, “transference of the *dharmaṅkāya*, sealed by the view,”⁵⁴ indicates that a philosophical or otherwise subjective worldview plays a role, Patrul Rinpoche explains this form of Phowa quite differently a little later in the text: a section describing the consecutive phases in the process of dying mentions an inevitable stage when “the clear light of the ‘time of the basis’ shines forth. If one recognizes this as one’s own nature and rests in equipoise, this is ‘the highest Phowa towards the *dharmaṅkāya*’ and one attains Buddhahood without [going through] the *bardo*.⁵⁵ Here, light and clarity, as well as the recognition of one’s own nature are emphasized, again in partly ambiguous language, but clearly different from the above, more philosophical, approach. Patrul Rinpoche keeps his explanations on “clarity” and “recognition” rather brief, probably because a rational explanation of this state was, again, not considered essential and because the *Words of My Perfect Teacher* is meant as a condensed manual on the *preparatory* meditation practices. Extensive explanations, Patrul says, belong to the main practices.⁵⁶

Phowa of the Dharmakāya in Karma Lingpa’s Writings

More details can be gained from a work by Karma Lingpa,⁵⁷ a fourteenth-century “treasure finder” (Tib. *gter ston*) who revealed, so to say, the famed collection of the *Great [Book of] Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 567: “chos sku lta ba rgyas ’debs kyi ’pho ba.”

⁵⁵ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 580: “gzhi dus kyi ’od gsal ’char ba de rang ngo shes nas mnyam par bzhag na rab chos skur ’pho ba zhes bya ba yin te bar do med par sangs rgya ba yin.” Similar instructions for the dying have been translated in Germano 1997, p. 486.

⁵⁶ Zhal-lung-Tib, p. 580: “de nas rim gyis chos nyid dang srid pa’i bar do sogs ’char ba yin / de dag dngos gzhi ’i khrid kyi cha lag yin pas ’dir mi spro’o //.”

⁵⁷ Karma Gling-pa (1326–1386).

⁵⁸ *Bar do thos grol chen mo*. Translated by Gyurme Dorje in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (2005). Various *bardo* and funerary texts have been translated, for example, in Mumford 1989, pp. 257–60 and Bayer 2008a, 2008b, 2008c. On the variety of *bardo* texts recited on funeral occasions, Cuevas (2003, p. 211) reports: “when I would ask . . . about the textual tradition of the *Liberation upon Hearing* . . . I often met with blank expressions” (see also Gouin 2003, p. 22). This can partly be explained by the variety of *bardo* texts, but probably also by the fact that the Gelugpa tradition does not accept the “hidden treasures” on the *bardo* as authentic (see also Cuevas 2003, p. 277, n. 31). Although the Gelugpa perspective has been outlined in Lati Rinbochay and Hopkins 1979, the differences to the popular “Book of the

Within this “treasure,” the treatise on “Self Liberation through Recollection”⁵⁹ describes basically the same levels of Phowa practice as those Patrul sets out five centuries later. At the stage of Phowa of the *dharma-kāya*, yogins and yoginīs are advised to perform the core of the practice as follows:

Then, in an unartificial state of mind,
Free from ideas (*rtoq pa*) of transference and that which transfers,
Let your awareness (*rig pa*) rest,
Unfabricated and lucid, undistracted and acute, clear and empty. . . .
If one passes away in that state, the clear light of the ground
And the clear light of the path one is travelling now,
Will meet like a stream meeting the main river,
The clear light of the son meeting that of the mother. . . .
It is the highest of all kinds of Phowa.⁶⁰

This kind of Phowa thus neither relies on any formal visualization nor on the concept of shifting from one place to another, let alone of a subject shifting. This advanced way of practicing is strictly reserved to experienced meditators who “have comprehension of the clear light,” an understanding of emptiness and so on.⁶¹ Looking for further details as to whether this clear light is, to the one (unitarian) extreme, the complete absence of ordinary sense objects, or, to the other (actualist) extreme, simply the sense objects as they are reflected in ordinary perception, one finds statements that can be interpreted as pointing to anywhere on the scale between these two edges.⁶² It therefore seems that here, too, any scholarly attempt to nail down one

Dead” have not drawn much public attention, and the Dalai Lama’s introduction to Gyurme Dorje’s translation follows a conciliatory line: “the *Bar-do Thos-grol Chen-mo*, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a treasure-text which focuses on this important subject, has become one of the best-known works of Tibetan literature in the West” (Gyurme Dorje 2005, p. xxviii).

⁵⁹ ‘Pho ba dran pa rang grol. “Self liberation” here is rather meant in the sense of “liberated by itself,” (i.e., “independently”), even with the connotation of “intrinsically.” An often-used example is that of a coiled snake which cannot be untied by others but only by itself, in fact quite effortlessly. See Zhang 1985, s.v. *rang grol* and Reynolds 1996, p. 114.

⁶⁰ Karma Gling-pa 1975–76a, p. 391. See also Gyurme Dorje 2005, pp. 208–9. The imagery of “the clear light of the path” resembles the above description of the central channel, the path, “blue like an azurite cover, symbolizing the unchanging *dharma-kāya*.” On metaphors of the path, see also Bayer 2010, pp. 431–33.

⁶¹ Karma Gling-pa 1975–76a, p. 390. See also Gyurme Dorje 2005, p. 208.

⁶² See also Mathes 2008, p. 407: “Mahāmudrā descriptions of the ultimate consist of sheer endlessly creative play between cataphatic and apophatic terms.” My expression “two edges” alludes to the Tibetan expression *mtha’gnyis*, which more literally means “two ends” or “two extremes.”

specific meaning will be misleading: ambiguity is obviously an integral part of the *dharmaśākya*'s portrait.

The dying person practicing the Phowa of the *dharmaśākya* is asked to recall the teachings previously received, and this surely means teachings on the nature of mind, such as we find, for example, in one instruction on clear light and the ultimate nature of mind in another work from Karma Lingpa's treasure, called "Direct Introduction to Awareness (*rig pa*): Liberation through Naked Seeing".⁶³

Those who uphold their own doctrinal tenet (Skt. *siddhānta*) are
thereby fettered and do not see the clear light;
The śrāvakas and *pratyekabuddhas* are obscured by clinging to
[the duality of] subject and object;

The Mādhyamikas are obscured by their clinging to the extremes
of the two truths;

The practitioners of Kriyātantra and Yogatantra are obscured by
their clinging to the extremes of service and realization;

The practitioners of Mahāyoga and Anuyoga are obscured by their
clinging to space and awareness;⁶⁴

Those [practitioners] go astray because they split into two what is
non-dual;

What is non-dual has not become one and therefore they do not
attain Buddhahood.

While *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are not separate,

They wander about in *samsāra* by means of the vehicle of aban-
doning and taking up, of discarding and adopting.

With regard to one's own awareness,⁶⁵ the spontaneously effort-
less⁶⁶ three bodies,

The [meaning] intended by the Buddha is beyond the intellect,⁶⁷
and still [they say,] "it is this, it is not this."

⁶³ *Rig pa mn̄go sum du ngo sprod pa gcer m̄thong rang grol.*

⁶⁴ Tib. *dbiyings rig* (*rig* here *metri causa* for *rig pa*). The remaining vehicle, that which is not criticized as dualistic in these verses, is thus the "Atiyoga," or Dzogchen (Tib. *rdzogs chen*). See Snellgrove 1987, pp. 407, 462.

⁶⁵ With "one's own awareness," I have intentionally chosen a simplistic rendering for the Tibetan "*rang rig*." Often rendered, equally accurately, as "self-awareness" (Skt. *svasaṃvedana*), it is a central technical term with far-reaching implications. See, for example, Snellgrove 1987, p. 200 ("self-experiencing"); Meinert 2004, pp. 91, 100, 242–64; and Kapstein 2000, p. 117.

⁶⁶ On "effortlessness" (Skt. *anābhoga*), see Bayer 2010, pp. 431–33.

⁶⁷ The phrase *sangs rgyas dgongs pa* is again highly idiomatic and could equally be translated as "the intention of the Buddha[s]" or even "the mind of the Buddha[s]."

This is a method to walk far away from it.⁶⁸
 Therefore one should cast aside all constructed teachings and
 [ostentatious] freedom from activities.⁶⁹

Conclusion

The traditional teachings on the Pure Land as a place of safety, luxury, and simple delights are surely to be taken in a literal sense, showing the firm belief in a quasi-material destination of the journey yonder. At the same time, the Tibetan Phowa tradition abounds in symbols and instructions which indicate a higher goal, beyond the pleasant and entertaining manifestations of Sukhāvatī. While to my knowledge no passage recommends a *merely* provisional and metaphoric interpretation, it is already the symbolism of the “common” Phowa practice which suggests a more abstract soteriological goal than just going to the Pure Land, even provisionally, when the practitioner ejects his consciousness to the *heart* of Buddha Amitābha. Furthermore, the postulated hierarchy of Phowa practices gives the impression that the lower practices were concessions to more worldly paradigms, rather than a wholehearted propagation of an alternative mythical reality. While both literal and metaphoric interpretations are thus legitimate, these need not be contradictory but may well exist side-by-side without cognitive dissonance. This can be

⁶⁸ The preceding two lines are missing in Gyurme Dorje’s translation, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (2005, p. 40).

⁶⁹ Cf. Gyurme Dorje 2005, p. 40. Karma Gling-pa 1975–76b, p. 472: “gzhan yang rang rang gzhung dang grub pa'i mtha' // 'dod pas bcings pas 'od gsal ma mthong bsgribs // nyan thos rang rgyal gzung 'dzin zhen pas bsgribs // dbu ma bden gnyis mtha'la zhen pas bsgribs // kri yog bsnyen bsgrub mtha'la zhen pas brgribs // ma hā a nu dbyings rig zhen pas bsgribs // gnyis med don la gnyis su phyi [read: phye] bas gol // gnyis med gcig tu ma gyur sangs mi rgya // thams cad rang sems 'khor 'das dbyer med las // spang blang 'dor len theg pas 'khor bar 'khyams // rang rig sku gsum rtsol med lhun grub la // sangs rgyas dgongs pa blo las 'das pa la // 'di yin 'di min thag ring gzhan du bgrod thabs . . . de phyir byas chos bya bral kun skyur la //.” The last phrase is remarkable, since “freedom from activity” (Tib. *bya bral*) is usually judged positively, the unconventional behaviour designating a realized yogin. I provisionally agree with Gyurme Dorje’s interpretation (“one should abandon . . . all [unnatural] states free from activity”) in so far as *bya bral* is judged negatively here. Seemingly, unconventional behaviour was neither seen as a reliable indicator nor as a necessary concomitant of spiritual realization. Still, the sentence is extremely dense and the syntactical issues have yet to be settled decisively. The words *byas* (in *byas chos*) and *bya bral* are possibly intended as antonyms, denoting activity as well as non-activity. Doctrinally, at any rate, giving up all constrained practice and doctrine is clearly the gist of this phrase.

seen, for example, in Karma Lingpa's phrasing "one's own awareness, the spontaneously effortless three bodies." At the core, the three Buddha bodies seem to be united in one's ordinary awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), the originally awakened mind.

To sum up, nowhere do the texts suggest the *Sukhāvatī* is *nothing but* a symbol for mind in its natural state. On the other hand I would like to propose that it is completely in accordance with traditional doctrine to consider *Sukhāvatī*, the body of the Buddha Amitābha, and so on as symbols, ultimately pointing to suchness (*tathatā*), just as it is here and now, the supreme soteriological goal in the Phowa tradition held by Patrul Rinpoche.

ABBREVIATIONS

P	<i>Eiin Pekin ban saizō daizōkyō</i> 影印北京版西藏大藏經. 164 vols. Ed. Saizō Daizōkyō Kenkyūkai 西藏大藏經研究会. Tokyo and Kyoto: Saizō Daizōkyō Kenkyūkai. 1955–61.
T	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō</i> 大正新脩大藏經. 85 vols. Ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai. 1924–34.
TBRC	Catalogue number in the online catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (http://www.tbrc.org/#!catalog).
Zhal-lung-Padma	O-rgyan-'jigs-med-chos-kyi-dbang-po. <i>Words of My Perfect Teacher</i> . Rev. ed. New Delhi: Vistar Publications. 2007.
Zhal-lung-Tib	rDza dPal sprul. <i>sNying thig sngon 'gro'i khrid yig kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung</i> . Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang. 1989.

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