



# TRAVELS IN THE NETHERWORLD


*Buddhist Popular Narratives of Death  
and the Afterlife in Tibet*

BRYAN J. CUEVAS



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*For my parents*

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## A Note on Tibetan Words

Tibetan words in their correct written form are not read phonetically. For example, the name *Bla-ma Byams-pa-bde-legs* is actually pronounced *Lama Jampa Délek*. For ease of reading, therefore, I have employed throughout the main body of the text a phonetic system based generally on the Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan devised by David Germano and Nicolas Tournadre of the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library ([thdl.org](http://thdl.org)). Proper Tibetan spellings are given according to the Wylie transcription (Wylie 1959) in the notes, in the bibliography, and in the list of Tibetan spellings of names and terms. Specialists should note that in my transcriptions I capitalize initial letters only, not “foundation letters” (*ming-gzhi*), and I follow standard English rules for the capitalization of titles, proper names, and so on.

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# Travels in the Netherworld

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# I

## To Hell and Back

Though warned by the divine messengers,  
Full many are the negligent,  
And people may sorrow long indeed  
Once gone down to the lower world.  
But when by the divine messengers  
Good people here in this life are warned,  
They do not dwell in ignorance  
But practise well the noble Dhamma.

—*Devadūta-sutta*

Writing in 1928 of his travels in Tibet, Charles Bell makes reference in passing to a brief but noteworthy encounter on the streets of Lhasa: “Now and then in Tibet is to be found a man or woman who claims to have risen from the dead. Such a one is known as *De-lok*, ‘Passed away and returned.’ I met a *de-lok* one day on the Lhasa *ling-kor* behind the Potala.” Bell continues, “She was an old woman from eastern Tibet, and she claimed to have come back to life five or six days after she had died. So she sat by the Sacred Way reading prayers, and pious pilgrims gave her alms. Tibetans always respect a miracle, though they are not unduly surprised by it.”<sup>1</sup>

What sort of “miracle” was this woman whom Charles Bell met behind the Potala? Who were the *délok* in Tibet, those women and men who had passed away and returned to life? What was the nature and circumstances of their experience? What category of



person in Tibetan society was inspired or motivated to have such an experience? Were women, as is often assumed, more predisposed than men to become *délok*? Were there notable distinctions between levels of social status or between the experiences of monks and those of the laity? And what can we learn about popular religion in Tibetan society from the details of their experiences? Throughout this book I will consider these questions and offer a few possible responses. In doing so, I will also highlight how the Tibetan literature on *délok* can be approached as valuable social-historical resources, largely untapped, for gaining better insights into the nature of popular Tibetan Buddhist beliefs and practices about death and the afterlife.<sup>2</sup>

Generally, the *délok* (lit., “those who have returned from the dead”) are simple ordinary people, either women or men, who die, tour the netherworld, and return to report their afterlife experiences. Their accounts emphasize the universal Buddhist principles of impermanence and worldly suffering, the fluctuations of karma, and the feasibility of obtaining a favorable rebirth through virtue and merit. Although there is some scattered textual evidence that attests to the emergence of the *délok* phenomenon in Tibet in the twelfth century, the development of *délok* narratives as a distinct literary genre did not get underway, it seems, until the fifteenth century. In fact, to my knowledge, the earliest recorded reference to a *délok* in Tibetan literature occurs in the fifteenth-century *Religious History of Lhorong* composed between 1446 and 1451 by Tatsak Tséwang Gyel and repeated by Gö Lotsāwa Zhönu Pel (1392–1482) a few decades later in his famous *Blue Annals* (written between 1476 and 1478). In the section on the life of Tashi Pel (1142–1210), first abbot of the Kagyu monastery of Taklung, Tashi Pel is said to have met an old woman at Tankya in central Tibet who had returned from death. This woman, referred to by the term “female revenant” (*shi-log-ma*), offered Taklung Tashi Pel a prophecy predicting his success as a great spiritual teacher.<sup>3</sup> In the *Religious History of Lhorong*, as in Bell’s observation cited above, we catch a glimpse of the social identity and function of the *délok* in Tibet. In both cases, first and foremost, the *délok* is female. Secondly, both women are distinctive in that they not only claim to have died and come back to life—an extraordinary feat in and of itself—but they also subsequently act as soothsayer (in the case of the Lhorong history) or as preacher (in the case of Bell’s woman in Lhasa) reciting prayers to solicit alms. These particular social-religious functions of the *délok* are corroborated by Françoise Pommaret’s pioneering ethnography of two female *délok* in modern-day Bhutan and Nepal. We certainly owe a great debt to Pommaret for being among the first to bring the Tibetan *délok* phenomenon to the attention of the western world and for breaking new ground in research on this subject in her fine study *Les Revenants de l’au-delà dans le monde tibétain*,

originally published in 1989. In interpreting the *délok*'s social roles, Pommaret distinguishes between features described in the literary sources and those observed in contemporary society. Pommaret shows us that the *délok* in the written sources are always favorably characterized as messengers of the dead and as preachers of virtuous action and of the effects of karma. However, in modern social settings, as she highlights, the *délok* are identified also as "shamans" who undergo the death experience at fixed dates and times, as guides for the dead who save them from evil destinies, and as soothsayers who receive visitors asking for spiritual assistance. Furthermore, Pommaret reveals that the *délok* in contemporary society are also viewed as ritual outcasts and are prohibited from assisting with births and funerals. In my view, the logic behind such prohibitions likely stems from the perception of the *délok* as perilous liminal beings, capable of moving freely among the dead. Still, we may ask whether such prohibitions have anything to do with gender distinctions or discrimination? Are such prohibitions and even the *délok* experience itself affected by social divisions or professional religious roles or lack thereof? And what do descriptions of the return-from-death experience in the Tibetan literature reveal about popular perceptions of death and the afterlife? These are a few of the questions raised by Pommaret's landmark study, and in Lawrence Epstein's work before hers, but in my own reading of the literary evidence I found that answers to such questions do not often conform to expectations. For example, the written narratives, unlike the contemporary "living" cases examined by Pommaret, are populated by just as many men as women, and so the phenomenon does not appear to have been dominated by either one or the other, as is usually assumed. The literature, moreover, offers little or no evidence of how these possibly shaman-like individuals were perceived by the society in which they all lived. Fortunately, the texts do tell us quite a bit about the lives of the *délok* themselves and about their unusual personal experiences.

Yet the societal role of the *délok* is not the focal point of these texts. Rather, the narratives are chiefly concerned about personal sins and virtues acquired in this life to be tested in the next. They are, moreover, less interested in the achievement of Buddhist enlightenment professed in monastic textbooks as the only true goal of religious endeavor. Inasmuch as the biographies of these revenants emphasize the universal Buddhist principles of impermanence and the fluctuations of karma, these popular narratives are in accord with the basic teachings of Buddhism. But unlike the scholastic and specialized ritual texts, such as those accompanying the celebrated *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (meant primarily to be employed as professional manuals for the dying and advanced meditation guides for the recently deceased), the *délok* stories are aimed almost

exclusively at a living nonspecialist audience.<sup>4</sup> While parallels can be noted between these texts and those of a more technical nature (and indeed, as we shall see, the basic concepts in the *délok* narratives are almost always rooted in some aspect of formal doctrine), these personal accounts rarely contain all the particulars described in the theoretical works. They are, however, rich in detail about everyday anxieties surrounding death and about common beliefs concerning the world beyond. Though frequently distorting and even contradicting canonical Buddhist doctrine, the popular conceptions found in the *délok* books articulate religious and social values that may have been ultimately more meaningful and compelling to the average Tibetan than those offered in the sophisticated and generally inaccessible literature of the monasteries and mountain hermitages. In an attempt to expand and advance the pioneering research efforts of Epstein and Pommaret, I shall argue throughout this book that the insights gained from a close reading of the *délok* narratives can help illuminate the contours of “popular religion” in Tibetan society, which is a crucial topic still largely neglected in the available scholarship on Tibet and on the Tibetan *délok* in particular. The present study is meant to provide fresh perspectives on Tibetan religious culture more broadly in hope that these insights may help to encourage even more nuanced approaches to the study of Buddhism in Tibetan society.

### Tibetan Popular Religion

It is my general contention that much scholarly work in Tibetan studies has tended to rely on neatly formulated conceptual paradigms and static two-dimensional models of Tibetan religion that fail to communicate the multiplicity of Tibetan religious life. Religion in Tibet, as in all religious cultures, was and continues to be fluid and thoroughly untidy. In my opinion, what first needs to be resisted is the tendency to equate Tibetan religious life unproblematically with either the “tame” activities of the monks (*grwa-pa*) and lamas (*bla-ma*), whom I qualify here as the “professional religious,” or the “wild” activities of the accomplished adepts (*dngos-grub*) and saintly madmen (*smayon-pa*), whom I shall call the “extraordinary religious.”<sup>5</sup> I want to suggest that we begin to take seriously the devotional life of the “ordinary religious” (*so-so-skye-bo*), the village peasants, priests, traders, craftsmen, nomads, and so on. For it is only by widening our focus in this way that we can begin to shed better light on the multi-tiered landscape of premodern Tibetan Buddhist society. Moreover, in revising accepted models for understanding Tibetan Buddhism to include not only the professionally and the extraordinarily religious but also the

ordinary practitioners as well, we may also begin to recognize certain common suppositions shared by all Tibetan religious groups, lay and celibate, learned and illiterate, female and male. I am confident that we can demonstrate a commonality among these groups that, for lack of a better term, we can call “popular.”<sup>6</sup> In this regard, popular would be those common viewpoints and concerns that play as much a vital role in the religious life of village peasants as in the religious life of village monks, lamas, and accomplished yogis.

In Tibetan societies prior to 1950 (the date of Chinese Communist occupation and a convenient transition point between so-called “premodern” and “modern” Tibet),<sup>7</sup> almost all Tibetans no matter what their status viewed themselves as inhabiting a world animated by forces both benign and antagonistic. Recourse to local beliefs, practices, and institutions, particularly in times of stress and anxiety, insured that everyone acted on such a world view in similar ways, though determined individually by the circumstances of history as well as specific local concerns. In general terms, the predominant preoccupation of day-to-day religious activity was to seize, to control, and/or to defend against the pervasive forces of good or evil in order to win success in endeavors large or small. In almost every case, such endeavors were aimed at better health, increased wealth, and future happiness, whether in this or the next life. Again, I use the term “popular” in reference to these common attitudes shared by Tibetans of all classes and occupations; the monks and lamas, accomplished adepts, and male and female laity alike. I want to be clear that I am using the term in this way as a corrective to conventional two-tiered models that polarize Tibetan religious culture usually into a “cleric mode” and a “popular mode” and from there generate countless levels of homologized dichotomies (e.g., great-little, elite-folk, rational-magical, textual-ritual, Buddhist-shamanic, Buddhist-Bön, Gelukpa-Nyingmapa, and so on).<sup>8</sup> In my opinion, these sorts of dichotomous models do little to illuminate the social-religious complexities of Tibetan culture as a whole and obscure the fluid and organic nature of Tibetan Buddhism in particular.

Some scholars, inspired in part by the early work of Melford Spiro, have attempted to resolve the polarity dilemma created by the two-tiered approach by focusing on the different orientations motivating religious practice. These religious orientations are generally divided into three categories: the soteriological (“nibbanic”), the ethical (“kammatic”), and the pragmatic (“apotropic”).<sup>9</sup> Here, the soteriological goal is directed toward the attainment of liberation, enlightenment, Buddhahood, and is defined narrowly as the primary concern of monks and a few extraordinary lay practitioners. The ethical goal is concerned with virtuous action and karmic merit, and is associated also with the activities of the monks. The pragmatic goal, the pursuit of health, wealth,

and future happiness, is characterized broadly as the sole concern of ordinary laypersons. Although on a formal doctrinal and structural level this three-tiered model works well to highlight certain theoretical distinctions in Buddhism and a few of the possible psychological motivations of religious practice, it ultimately fails to resolve the polarity dilemma. The three-tiered orientation model still rests firmly on a logic that assumes a dichotomous relationship between clerical and lay religious practice, whereby monks are the ones doing serious religion in the heroic pursuit of enlightenment and laypeople are just simply wasting precious opportunities.

Such a binary division actually replicates an indigenous Tibetan distinction between the mundane concerns of the everyday world (*'jig-rten-pa*) and the supramundane affairs of the transcendent (*'jig-rten las-'das-pa*), but despite this fact, there are certain sociological distortions created by dichotomizing Tibetan Buddhism and religious practitioners in this way. At the ground level of day-to-day life, we would be hard pressed to recognize the Buddhist activities either of monks or laypeople as anything other than pragmatic, maybe ethical in some specific pedagogical circumstances, and only rarely if ever soteriological. If in the case of Tibetan monks, for example, we clearly discern in their daily religious observances primarily a pragmatic orientation, do we really learn anything about the religious life of monks by forcing them into the soteriological or ethical category? Likewise, we gain little insight into the religious life of Tibetan laypeople if we also insist on assigning their motivations to such rigid categories. I would rather speak to the distinction between monks and laypeople in more historically grounded terms in an attempt to avoid overly generalized dichotomies and speculative psychological profiles altogether. In this way, we may be better able to remain attentive to the complexities of Tibetan social-religious structures without unnecessarily restricting religious attitudes and activities to any one social group.

Traditional Tibetan society consisted broadly of three overarching groups: monks/lamas, aristocrats, and commoners.<sup>10</sup> After the twelfth century, it was the monks and their institutions that dominated society and government, and so it is important that we clarify precisely how monks and monasteries were understood in Tibet. First and foremost, not all monks were celibate. Tibetan society, profoundly embedded as it was within a tantric framework, recognized many types of professional, noncelibate Buddhist clerics. The majority of these religious professionals are referred to by the term *lama*, loosely akin to *guru* in Indian tantric traditions.<sup>11</sup> Ideally, a lama is supposed to be the penultimate master of tantric ritual and meditation, but on the ground he was actually distinguished by a wide variety of overlapping social identities, including, among other things, the celibate monk, the scholar, the unmarried lay yogi, the

married householder, the solitary hermit, and the wandering ascetic.<sup>12</sup> Some lamas were identified also as embodiments of specific tantric deities or, more commonly, as reincarnations (*yang-srid*) of previous lamas whose authority, status, and property he, and occasionally she, had inherited.<sup>13</sup> It is clear, then, that professional “cleric” in Tibet covers a wide range of meanings and cannot be limited solely to the distinction of celibacy. The same must be said of the Tibetan monastery (*dgon-pa*), which is best understood broadly as a type of Buddhist institution that could and frequently did shelter not only celibate monks but also an assortment of lay and noncelibate religious professionals.

As we may begin to suspect, the dividing line between the religious world of clerics and that of the laity in Tibetan society is not an easy one to define. It is clear, however, that it was not a line that separated too sharply the “sacred” from the “secular,” as we might interpret the terms, for those categories really have something of a different connotation in Tibetan society.<sup>14</sup> Religion permeated every aspect of Tibetan social and political life. To speak of a strict dichotomy between monks and laity, then, would certainly distort the complexity of Tibet’s pervasive religious environment; yet there are distinctions that must still be made. Perhaps one natural step would be to distinguish divisions across social categories, between the “learned” (*dpe-cha-ba*) and the “unlettered” (*thos-chung-ba*) religious practitioner, for indeed this is a distinction that we do encounter in Tibetan society.<sup>15</sup> But such a distinction can work only if we avoid turning it into a clear-cut opposition between monks and laypersons, the *literati* versus the *illiterati* as it were, one against or above the other. Indeed, there were as many illiterate monks in Tibet as there were unschooled village peasants, and in turn there were more than a few unlettered villagers who rose to prominence as the best of scholars. I am aware, of course, that two-dimensional models are difficult to avoid and are often in fact useful and perhaps even necessary. My suggestion, then, is not that we do away with binary distinctions altogether (as if we could), but that if we insist on using them to express something about Tibetan Buddhism and society, we do so based on categories that we have some evidence for in history and that the culture itself has recognized or would recognize (e.g., the literate-unlettered distinction). Moreover, it is best that we avoid too inflexible a distinction between terms.

We should stress further the complex interweaving and instability of each of the individual categories, as we find, for example, in the relationships that exist among one typically polarized group, the so-called “elite” among Tibetan Buddhist practitioners: the scholarly monks/lamas—many of whom belonged to the highest strata of Tibetan society through heredity or incarnate birth and held positions of authority in the monasteries—and those semi-literate