

## Soteriology of the Senses in Tibetan Buddhism\*

Holly Gayley

Harvard University, The Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies,  
1 Bow Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA  
[gayley@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:gayley@fas.harvard.edu)

---

### Abstract

In Tibet, certain categories of Buddhist sacra are ascribed the power to liberate through sensory contact. No less than “buddhahood without meditation” is promised, offering an expedient means to salvation that seemingly obviates the need for a rigorous regime of ethical, contemplative, and intellectual training. This article investigates two such categories of sacra, substances that “liberate through tasting” and images that “liberate through seeing” as found in a mode of revelation particular to Tibet and culturally related areas, in which scriptures and sacred objects are reportedly embedded in the landscape as *terma* or “treasures” (*gter ma*). The author argues that charisma invested in these substances and images — through an amalgamation of relics and special means of consecration — provides the grounds for the soteriological benefits claimed as a result of sensory contact with them. The question is whether these benefits suggest a notion of grace in Tibetan Buddhism, and if so how it might contravene without contradicting the law of karma. Exploring this question sheds light on the role of the senses and the nature of Buddhist soteriology as it developed in Tibet.

### Keywords

charisma, senses, Tibetan Buddhism, *terma*, relics, grace

Among the wide range of benefits promised by sensory contact with Buddhist sacra in Tibet, the grandest claim of all is to liberate merely by seeing, hearing, tasting, wearing, or otherwise encountering certain

---

\* I would like to express my appreciation to Janet Gyatso, Kimberley Patton, Susanne Mrozik, and Meghan Howard for their comments on early versions of this article.

types of texts, objects, and structures. Note the following benefits to be derived from ingesting a special type of ritually consecrated pill:

Beings of the six realms, whether old or young, male or female, virtuous or evil, regardless of [their] good or bad tendencies, [attain] buddhahood by eating this. It works even when reaching one's last breath! By eating this very pill, because one need not read texts, the blind, though ingestion, [can attain] buddhahood. Likewise for the deaf, since one need not rely on hearing. Even if the body is crippled, this pill frees one from the dangerous pathway [leading] to the three lower realms. For any sentient being whatsoever, despite committing [one of] the inexpiable sins or accumulating evil deeds, suffering is pacified and bliss is attained.... What's more, by this pill, the mere size of deer droppings, one is born into the pure land of Avalokiteśvara, the supreme place to practice.<sup>1</sup>

This passage is striking in its suggestion that the simple act of eating a pill can save beings from the karmic consequences of their own negative deeds. Any and all are included, even the greatest sinner and those whose faculties might hinder their access to receiving Buddhist teachings. This pill promises no less than to “liberate through tasting” (*myong grol*), and its soteriological benefits range from blocking rebirth in the lower realms — as an animal, hungry ghost or denizen of hell — to buddhahood itself. Moreover, the culminating benefit listed is rebirth in the pure land of Avalokiteśvara, from which point salvation is by and large secured.<sup>2</sup> How should we understand such claims within the overall framework of Buddhist soteriology? What do these claims suggest about the role of senses in Tibetan Buddhism?

The promise of expedient means to salvation through the senses is nothing new in Buddhism by the time it reached Tibet (seventh to ninth centuries). Outside of esoteric spheres, this took shape in devotional activities — such as hearing, reciting, copying, preserving, or venerating a scripture — accompanied in various Mahāyāna *sūtras*,

<sup>1</sup> Padma gling pa 1975, vol. 7:506.6–507.6, echoing a shorter statement in vol. 2:680.6–681.3. Elsewhere in his corpus of revelations, these pills are specified to be the size of droppings (*ril ma*) belonging to a small rodent (*bra ba*) common in Tibetan grasslands and mountainous areas, most likely a pika. See vol. 2:677.4 and 681.2.

<sup>2</sup> Kapstein 2004 calls this a “pure land orientation” in Tibetan Buddhism.

such as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* and *Kāraṇḍavyūha*, by a generic list of benefits including rebirth in Amitābha's pure land of Sukhāvātī.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* promises, for example, that “by merely seeing” (*darśanamātreṇa*) one who bestows the six syllable formula of Avalokiteśvara, *Om Maṇipadme Hūm*, men, women, children and even animals will become “last-existence” bodhisattavas (Sanskrit: *caramabhavikā*), freed from the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death (Studholme 2002:141). By the thirteenth century, this logic had been extended by Guru Chöwang, who vigorously promoted the cult of Avalokiteśvara and the benefits from encountering this bodhisattva's mantra, perhaps the most widely recited by Tibetans still today. In his *Maṇi Kabum Chenmo*, the mantra (in its seven syllable form) is promoted as an expedient means toward salvation by seeing, hearing, recollecting, touching, writing, holding, practicing, reciting, and/or explaining it. According to Guru Chöwang, not only should the mantra be erected at crossroads for all to see and proclaimed so that animals can hear it, but even contact with the mantra by drinking the water that washed over it (for example, when carved in stone) leads to rebirth in Sukhāvātī (Phillips 2004:188–90).<sup>4</sup>

While the senses are touted as a means to salvation in Mahāyāna literature alongside other devotional activities, the promise of liberation through sensory contact crystallized into particular categories of sacred texts and objects in Tibet and culturally related areas.<sup>5</sup> A well-known example is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, whose Tibetan title

<sup>3</sup> I use “devotional activities” to mean those acts of veneration geared toward earning merit, following Schopen's characterization of “a context the defining poles of which are *pūjā* (worship, cult) and *puṇya* (merit)” (1977:189). Schopen argues that rebirth in the pure land of Sukhāvātī is “one of a list of stock blessings” (180) to be derived from this type of activity (180). See Gomez on hearing the name of the buddha Amitābha as a salvific act in the *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* (1996:26 and 71–75).

<sup>4</sup> The section on the benefits of touching Avalokiteśvara's mantra, from which this final example is drawn, can be found in Chos kyi dbang phyug 1976:505.2–506.4.

<sup>5</sup> Areas where Tibetan Buddhism has historically been practiced extend across the Tibetan plateau and into Himalayan areas such as Bhutan, Sikkim, Ladakh, and high alpine regions of Nepal, including Mustang, Dolpo, and Solu-Khumbu. For the duration of this article, I will simply use “Tibet” in order to avoid the cumbersome addition of qualifiers, and by this I refer to the so-called “three districts of Tibet” (*bod chol ka gsum*): central Tibet as well as Kham and Amdo to the east.

translates as *Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State* (*Bar do thos grol*); it provides guidance through the intermediate state between death and rebirth, often read aloud at the bedside of a corpse.<sup>6</sup> A more common category, “liberation through wearing” (*btags grol*), refers to amulets containing verbal formulas — such as mantras or *dhāraṇī* — wrapped in cloth and worn around the neck.<sup>7</sup> The category of “liberation through tasting” (*myong grol*), by contrast, is applied to a range of sacred substances (*dam rdzas*),<sup>8</sup> usually in the form of ritually-produced pills that are distributed by lamas on ritual occasions and in private audiences, also sometimes available for sale at monasteries.<sup>9</sup> With per-

<sup>6</sup> The *Bar do thos grol* is a revelation by Karma Lingpa, part of his widely-disseminated cycle of peaceful and wrathful deities, *Zab chos zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol*. A number of translations are available, including those by W.Y. Evanz-Wentz, Francesca Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa, Robert Thurman, and most recently Gyurme Dorje. For a historical study of the *Bar do thos grol* and its transmission, see Cuevas 2003, and for its reception among Western audiences, see Lopez 1998.

<sup>7</sup> These are also said to be worn in topknot of yogins and placed on the chest of a corpse when cremated (Cuevas 2003). Of course, *dhāraṇīs* are an important site for claims to expedient means of salvation, not only through their recitation and recollection, but also through seeing and hearing. See Scherrer-Schaub 1994 for an example of *dhāraṇī* among Dunhuang manuscripts that claim to be “means of rescue” (*skjob pa'i thabs*) from being reborn in hell through being seen and heard.

<sup>8</sup> The *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (Krang dbyi sun 1993) gives the etymology for *dam rdzas* as *dam tshig gi rdzas*, referring to “samaya substances,” and defines it as “material objects that have been blessed through mantra” (*sngags kyis byin gyis brlabs pa'i dngos po*). I have chosen to translate the term more generically as “sacred substance” to reflect this consecrated status. In a similar vein, Martin 1994 translates the term as “consecrated substances.”

<sup>9</sup> There are a wide variety of categories of ritually-produced pills, which at a certain point get collapsed, such that today at Mindroling Monastery outside of Lhasa you can purchase pills considered to be “sacred substances that liberate through tasting” (*dam rdzas myong grol*) as well as an “elixir” (*bdud rtsi*) and “religious medicine” (*chos sman*), bearing the label: *Dam rdzas myong grol bdud rtsi chos sman*. Less typically, I have encountered the term “liberation through tasting” applied to a vase containing “water of accomplishment” (*sgrub chu*) housed at Shalu monastery near Shigatse and taken from a site where the Indian master Atiśa is said to have meditated. The term *sgrub chu* refers to water springing from a cave or other site where a tantric master has meditated, understood to contain the blessings of his or her accomplishment. Its ingestion constitutes part of a broader tendency among Tibetans to gather materials from pilgrimage sites as “portable sources of a site’s power to be directly consumed, or carried off for later use and further distribution” (Huber 1999:15).

haps the widest range of application, “liberation through seeing” (*mtshong grol*) made an early appearance in the fourteenth century as “natural liberation through naked insight” (*gcer mtshong rang grol*), whereby “seeing” refers to insight into the nature of reality.<sup>10</sup> However, the term is more frequently found in the context of pilgrimage to denote specific types of images and the structures that house them, as well as *stūpas* containing the relics of accomplished masters.<sup>11</sup> I have also seen “liberation through seeing” applied to a laminated image of Avalokiteśvara, photographs of Buddhist lineage holders, and even a VCD depicting the religious activities of a Nyingma lama.<sup>12</sup>

This phenomenon developed into groupings of “four liberations” (*grol ba bzhi*) or alternatively “six liberations” (*grol ba drug*), though there is little consensus regarding the constituent categories. Two commonplace sets of four are sometimes collapsed into six, namely liberation through seeing, hearing, tasting, wearing, recollecting and touching.<sup>13</sup> Reference to smell (*dri*) or the more generic category of

<sup>10</sup> This term occurs in the context of the introduction to awareness (*rig pa ngo sprod*). There are two translations of Karme Lingpa’s *Rig pa ngo sprod gcer mtshong rang grol*, in Reynolds 2000 and Gyurme Dorje 2006.

<sup>11</sup> The use of this term in reference to structures housing sacra or relics such as *stūpas*, temples, and assembly halls can be found in the names of the structures themselves and in titles for the catalogues that list their contents. In recent years, the Tibetan diaspora has led to the construction and consecration of “great *stūpas* that naturally liberate upon seeing” (*mchod rten chen mo mtshong bar rang grol*) as far apart as Dehradun, India and the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

<sup>12</sup> I have seen a laminated image of Avalokiteśvara for sale in Lhasa, labeled as *mtshong grol* and listing a host of benefits on its back side, including rebirth in Sukhāvati. Moreover, formal portraits of the two main lineage holders of the Drikung Kagyu, currently on display at Songtsen Library in Dehradun, are termed “precious photographs that liberate through seeing” (*sku par mtshong grol rin po che*). Finally, a VCD of the tertön Tulku Jigme Phuntsok (husband of Khandro Tāre Lhamo, 1938–2002) bears the title: “A Compilation of Deeds that Naturally Liberates Those Who Witness It” (*Mdzad bsdus mtshong tshad rang grol*).

<sup>13</sup> Textual sources tend to deal exclusively with one or another of these and may mention different groupings of other senses in passing. While the rubric of the “six liberations” is in common parlance among contemporary lamas, I have so far only found groupings of four in textual sources. Moreover, there is significant variation regarding the constituency of these four, though two common sets are: “liberation through seeing, hearing, recollecting, and touching” (*mtshong thos dran reg grol*) and

feeling (*tshor*) are less frequently found. Of these, this article will treat substances that promise to “liberate through tasting” and images that promise to “liberate through seeing” as found in a mode of revelation particular to Tibet and culturally related areas in which traces of the past are said to be discovered in the landscape as *terma* or “treasures” (*gter ma*).<sup>14</sup> Purported to be hidden away for future generations by the eighth-century tantric master Padmasambhava (and other comparable figures),<sup>15</sup> these treasures can be texts, relics, images, ritual implements, medicinal pills and more.<sup>16</sup>

---

“liberation through seeing, hearing, tasting, and wearing” (*mthong thos myong btags grol*). There is also a distinct esoteric grouping of liberations particular to Dzogchen or the “great perfection” (*rdzogs chen*); however, it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into these. One important distinction to make is that the esoteric version constitutes part of a meditative system in which their liberating effect is understood to be immediate, whereas the categories treated in this article have more to do with devotional activities whereby the soteriological promise to a large extent relates to future lifetimes. One site where this distinction collapses is death rituals in which meditative insight and a favorable rebirth may be equally pressing and immediate concerns. In contrast to the groupings above, Tulku Thondup lists a set of five liberations: diagrams (*'khor lo*) that liberate through seeing, mantras (*gzungs sngags*) that liberate through hearing, ambrosia or elixir (*bdud rtsi*) that liberates through tasting, a consort (*phyag rgya*) who liberates through touching, and transference (*'pho ba*) that liberates through thinking (1997:242, n. 152).

<sup>14</sup> For seminal studies on the treasure tradition, see Tulku Thondup 1997 and Janet Gyatso 1986 and 1993. Within Tibetan Buddhism, treasure revelation is primarily associated with the Nyingma school, though treasures have been revealed on a more sporadic basis by prominent members of all schools (Smith 2001:239–40). Moreover, the Bön religion in Tibet has its own substantial tradition of treasure revelation; see Martin 2001 and Karmay 1972. While treasure literature has received considerable scholarly attention, the material dimension of this mode of revelation has yet to be adequately explored. See my “Ontology of the Past and its Materialization in Tibetan Treasures” (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> Gyatso 1993:98, n. 2 and Doctor 2005:198, n. 14 list the names of other such masters. On the role of Padmasambhava — both historical and mythic — in the propagation of Buddhism in Tibet, see Kapstein 2000:155–160.

<sup>16</sup> Treasures purportedly revealed from the landscape are called “earth treasures” (*sa gter*) and typically consist of a treasure casket (*gter sgrom*), containing texts preserved in seminal form on yellow scrolls (*shog ser*) as well as relics and other sacra. Each treasure is said to have been entrusted by Padmasambhava to one of his disciples for discovery in a future lifetime. For an overview of typologies of treasures, see Doctor 2005.

In this article, I examine how charisma is invested in such objects, what benefits are claimed for sensory contact with them, and the implications of this for our understanding of Buddhist soteriology. Here I am using charisma following Stanley Tambiah in his study of Buddhist saints and the “transfer of charisma to objects” such as amulets and images. Tambiah makes the point that “objects are not merely regarded as reminders and fields of merit, but also as repositories of ‘power’” (Tambiah 1984:6, 203). While images serve as a reminder of the Buddha and the basis for making offerings in order to earn merit, Tambiah’s point is that they are also understood to be efficacious in some regard, due to a power invested in them through their origins and/or sanctification. In the context of Thai image veneration, this power is said to be the “fiery energy” of *tejas*,<sup>17</sup> which emanates from the Buddha’s virtues and realization. By contrast, in Tibetan contexts, Buddhist sacra are understood to be receptacles (*rten*) for *chinlab* or “blessings” (Sanskrit: *adhiṣṭhāna*; Tibetan: *byin rlabs*),<sup>18</sup> invested in an object by virtue of physical contiguity with Buddhist saints or through its consecration. *Chinlab* carries associations of royal power as “splendor” or “majesty” and denotes an ability to influence or transform the attitude and perceptions of others.<sup>19</sup> Though the function of blessings has a

<sup>17</sup> Tambiah follows Griswold by describing this power as a “fiery energy” (*tejas*) in the Thai context. See Tambiah 1984:203–4 and Griswold 1990. I would like to thank Donald Swearer for an illuminating exchange regarding the Thai application of the terms, *tejas* and *adhiṣṭhāna* (Pali: *teja* and *adhiṣṭhāna*).

<sup>18</sup> According to Martin, there are three main classifications of *rten*: “body receptacles” (*sku rten*) referring to images of buddhas, bodhisattvas, tantric deities and saints, “speech receptacles” (*gsung rten*) referring to sacred texts, and “thought receptacles” (*thugs rten*) referring primarily to stūpas containing relics of accomplished masters (1994:275). These are also considered to be receptacles for blessings (*byin rten* or *byin rlabs kyi rten*).

<sup>19</sup> Stein offers evidence for the royal associations of *byin* but suggests an ambiguity about whether archaic terms retained their previous meaning when subsumed into new Buddhist binomes — in this case *byin rlabs* which he defines as benediction (Stein 1983:197–200). Elsewhere he correlates *byin rlabs*, *gzi byin* and *gzi brjid* in non-Buddhist sources as equivalents meaning “majesty, prestige, charisma” (164). The *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (Krang dbyi sun 1993) defines *byin* as “a potency or power that is able to transform the attitude and perceptions of others” (*gzhan gyi bsam pa dang snang ba sogs bgyur thub pa’i nus pa’am mthu*), *rlabs* as “a degree of potency and force” (*nus*

wider application in tantric ritual and warrants further study, for our purposes, we could characterize it as a potency or power localized in a sacred object that is understood to transform its immediate environment and those who come into direct contact with it. As I hope to demonstrate, blessings are understood to have an apotropaic effect, conferring worldly benefits (such as protection from illness, obstacles and malignant spirits), as well as a soteriological effect, geared toward salvation in subsequent rebirths or alternatively release from cyclic existence, or *saṃsāra*, altogether. Thus, in the Tibetan case, the power attributed to Buddhist sacra goes beyond the “this-worldly” efficacy discussed by Tambiah and into the domain of soteriology.

I introduce the term, *soteriology of the senses*, to denote a notion articulated in treasure literature that certain objects are so highly charged with blessings that sensory contact with them promises salvation in one of three forms: its proximate form of a favorable rebirth; its ultimate form of buddhahood; or a synthesis of the two, namely rebirth in a Buddhist pure land.<sup>20</sup> The latter constitutes a favorable rebirth and is

---

*pa dang mthu stobs kyi tshad*) though it can also simply mean “wave,” and *byin rlabs* as “a potency or power that resides in those religious objects [pertaining to] the noble path” (*phags pa'i lam chos kyi don gang yin pa la gnas pa'i nus pa'am mthu*). Dungkar Rinpoche concurs on *byin* as power (*nus pa*) within the term *byin rlabs* but suggests that the influence of *byin rlabs* can be positive or negative (Dung dkar 2002:1487). Martin suggests an etymology for *byin rlabs* as “received by (way of) giving” (1994:274) choosing to take *byin* as the past tense of the verb *sbyin pa* (to give). However, this etymology misses the association of *byin rlabs* with power — one of the meanings of *adhiṣṭhāna* in Sanskrit as well — and fails to capture the agency and directionality of *byin rlabs*, which is not a receptive capacity but an active force that operates on its environment and those who encounter it.

<sup>20</sup> Here I follow the definition of Buddhist soteriology as developed in Spiro 1982. Spiro has two categories: proximate salvation, related to karma and improving one's prospects of a favorable rebirth (his kammatic orientation), and radical (what I am calling ultimate) salvation, pertaining to transcendence of worldly suffering in *saṃsāra* altogether (his nibbanic orientation). Note that a favorable rebirth here refers to rebirth *within* the cycle of *saṃsāra* in one of the higher realms as a god, demigod, or human and thereby avoiding rebirth as an animal, hungry ghost, or denizen of hell. To this must be added a third category, a pure land orientation, not relevant to Theravāda context in which Spiro developed his schema, but which figures prominently in East Asia. Though only so far examined in Kapstein 2004, this pure land orientation also exists in Tibetan Buddhism, albeit not as a separate school.

also understood to offer the ideal conditions in which to complete the path to enlightenment. If the ingestion of sacred substances, for example, offers not only the medicinal effects of a temporal panacea but also the soteriological promise of rebirth in a pure land and even buddhahood, then to what extent does this imply the possibility of salvation through grace in Tibetan Buddhism? Grace faces the same problem that the transfer of merit does, described by Melford Spiro long ago as a “vexatious problem for the metaphysics of karma” since “according to karmic law, retribution for one’s acts devolves exclusively on the actor” (Spiro 1982:124).<sup>21</sup> As we will see in the following, sensory contact with certain categories of sacra are credited with the power to tip the karmic scale, thereby sparing individuals the results of their own vices and enabling even the worst of sinners to gain a favorable rebirth. As such, the four (or six) liberations raise important questions about the role of the senses and about the very nature of salvation in Buddhism as it developed in Tibet.

Because of the diverse range of apotropaic and soteriological claims made regarding sensory contact with certain texts, images, substances, mantras and structures in Tibetan Buddhism, one has to be quite careful about generalizations at this early stage of research.<sup>22</sup> A narrowly-focused

---

<sup>21</sup> With reference to versions of the *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*, Gomez poses this as a tension between the “ideals of self-cultivation” and “trust in the Buddha’s grace” (1996:28). Harrison draws a similar contrast between “a tradition of self-emancipation through insight” (which he associates with Chan masters) and “a tradition of salvation by faith in the grace and power of certain personifications of the Buddha-principle” (associated with Pure Land schools of Buddhism in East Asia). However, he argues that during the formative centuries of the Mahāyāna there is “little sense of mutual opposition of ‘faith’ and ‘works’ which is evident, for instance, both in Christian writings at the time of the birth of Protestantism and the polemics of later Japanese Pure Land masters” (Harrison 1978:35).

<sup>22</sup> To date, there is only one article treating this phenomenon, Tokarska-Bakir 2000, which presents a broad overview of different types of sacra that promise liberation through sensory contact, discussed in comparison with European conceptions about the role of the senses in religious experience. Unfortunately, Tokarska-Bakir fails to consult primary sources, except those few that are available in translation. Because of this, for example, she mistakenly takes “liberation through wearing” (*btags grol*) a category dating back at least to the fourteenth century where it appears in several treasure collections (*Snying thig ya bzhi*, *Bla ma dgongs ’dus*, and *Kar gling zhi khro*) to be a subclass of “liberation through touching,” which is rarely discernable as a separate

study will allow us to identify a coherent soteriology and lay the foundation for further research, and so I will restrict myself here to a comparison of two specific types of treasure objects. The first is a substance said to “liberate through tasting,” called *kyedun*, a pill purportedly made from the flesh of one born “seven times” (*skye bdun*) a brahmin but which became transformed in treasure lore into the flesh of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion whose special domain is said to be Tibet. And the second is a type of image promising to “liberate through seeing,” called a *kutsab* or “representative” (*sku tshab*) of the eight-century tantric master Padmasambhava, who is credited in treasure lore with a seminal role in propagating Buddhism in Tibet. Both these types of treasure objects constitute a narrow and somewhat rarified subset of a broader category, for *kyedun*, liberation through tasting and, for *kutsab*, liberation through seeing. However, the phenomena they represent — namely liberation through seeing, hearing, tasting, wearing, etc. — is widespread and today can be commonly encountered in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. By examining categories that make the grandest claims for the role of the senses, we can learn more generally about the rationale behind the range of benefits attributed to sensory contact with Buddhist sacra.

---

category in the collections that I have so far consulted. She makes this mistake in part because of her insistence on the term, “liberation through the senses,” for which she neither gives a Tibetan equivalent nor defines as her own. Thus she struggles in vain to find a “sense” with which to correlate liberation through wearing, incorrectly asserting it to be a subset of touch and even more strangely of smell. The article also contains minor errors that ethnographic research could have addressed, such as the assertion that liberation through wearing is “almost exclusively meant for the dead” (77–78) though it is commonplace for Tibetans to wear this and other classes of amulets around the neck. She concludes by describing “liberation through the senses” as means for the “radical disappearance of the subject” in which “all the traces of subjective-objective distance are gone” (111–12), an assessment that may accord with philosophical understandings of liberation in Tibetan Buddhism but is not evident in relation to the devotional practices in which liberation through seeing, hearing, tasting, wearing, etc. are commonly found. For the categories under consideration here, her conclusions do not mesh with the types of liberation promised, the rationale behind benefits claimed for sensory contact with Buddhist sacra, or the logic of devotional activities in which this contact routinely occurs.

My sources for this study are a cluster of texts from the collected works (*gsung 'bum*) and treasure collection (*gter chos*) of tertöns or “treasure revealers” (*gter ston*) and their disciples within the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>23</sup> These texts span various genres,<sup>24</sup> including catalogues (*dkar chag*), histories (*lo rgyus*), and medicine-making rituals (*smān sgrub*) that recount the origins of sacra and contain statements that describe the benefits (*phan yon*) of sensory contact with them. Such benefit statements can be found in a wide range of literary sources and also circulate on the ground in a variety of ways: recounted during rituals, posted at pilgrimage sites, and even printed for distribution on the back of amulets, postcards and laminated images. These constitute a valuable and overlooked source for understanding the rationale for modes of Buddhist practice, since they articulate an applied understanding what is to be gained by performing a particular ritual, encountering a sacred object, or visiting a pilgrimage site.

Strikingly, texts that discuss the origins and benefits of *kyedun* and *kutsab* have little to say about the aesthetics of taste and sight. Though *kyedun* promises to “liberate through tasting,” there is no mention of its flavor, and the act of tasting seems less important than ingestion as a means to internalize blessings. Similarly, the beauty of a *kutsab* is not the focus of discussion, nor is its form (luster, proportion, artistry) what gives these images their power to “liberate through seeing.” What we find instead is an emphasis on the amalgamation of relics contained in such objects and their special means of consecration, which together form the basis for the range of benefits promised by sensory contact with them. In the first half of what follows, I chart the multiple ways that charisma is invested in *kyedun* and *kutsab*, serving as the basis for claims to their high degree of potency and corresponding efficacy. And in the second half, I consider whether their promise to liberate through sensory contact should be considered a free and unearned gift of grace.

---

<sup>23</sup> See Gayley 2003 for a discussion of the tertön as a category of Buddhist saint.

<sup>24</sup> See Martin 1996 on the genre *dkar chag* and Vostrikov 1970 and van der Kuijp 1996 for a survey and analysis of different genres of historical writing in Tibetan literature. In its usage within the treasure tradition, *lo rgyus* commonly provides the lore surrounding the origins of a treasure, whether a ritual cycle or sacred object.

### ***Kyedun* as Bodhisattva Flesh**

Substances said to liberate through tasting are hailed as “most excellent in the power of their wondrous blessings” (Gter bdag gling pa 1998, vol. 11:130b.5).<sup>25</sup> Ingesting them is touted as a “short cut, the path to buddhahood without meditation” (*ma bsgoms sangs rgyas lam gyi nye lam*, *ibid.* vol. 11:131a.4). A significant locus for the claim to liberate through tasting is a type of ritually-made pill, called *kyedun*, or literally “seven births” (*skye bdun*), because they are purported to be made out of the flesh of one born seven times as a brahmin. In a thirteenth-century history of treasure revelation by Guru Chöwang, *kyedun* is listed as an arcane ritual substance.<sup>26</sup> However, by the fifteenth century, in the treasure corpus of the Bhutanese tertön Pema Lingpa,<sup>27</sup> the flesh of one born seven times a brahmin has been transformed into the flesh of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara said to emanate as two (or sometimes three) brahmins. This signals a shift from an alchemical register, whereby eating the flesh of a brahmin is associated with the power of flight in Indian tantras, such as *Hevajratantra*, to a charismatic register whereby the emanated flesh of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara is regarded to be a repository of merit and blessings.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> The Tibetan reads: *ngo mtshar byin rlabs nus pa khyad par 'phags*.

<sup>26</sup> See Chos kyi dbang phyug 1975:81, also studied in Gyatso 1994. Elsewhere definitions of *kyedun* as the flesh of a boy born seven times to a royal family or seven times as a bodhisattva are attributed to Guru Chöwang. See *Bdud rtsi sman sgrub kyi las tshogs* in Byams mgon kong sprul 1976, vol. 48:205–27, derived from his cycle, *Bka' brgyad gsang ba yongs rdzogs*.

<sup>27</sup> There are several texts in Padma gling pa 1975 which I draw on for this study. These include: “Sādhana of *Kyedun* Flesh” (*Skype bdun sha'i sgrub pa*, vol. 2:675–79); “Meaningful to Behold: History of the Sacred Substance, *Kyedun* Pills” (*Dam rdzas skype bdun ril bu'i lo rgyus mthong ba don ldan*, vol. 7:489–92); “The Benefits of *Kyedun* Flesh” (*Skype bdun sha'i phan yon*, vol. 2:679–81); “The Procedure for Preparing *Kyedun*” (*Skype bdun sbyar thabs kyi phyag bzhes*, vol. 7:493–99); and “Meaningful to Behold: A History of *Kyedun*” (*Skype bdun lo rgyus mthong ba don ldan*, vol. 7:501–8). The first two, considered to be treasure revelations, are narrated in the first person voice of Padmasambhava. The third is considered to be an ordinary composition by Pema Lingpa, and the latter two are compositions by his disciples, Nangso Döndrup and Ngödrup respectively.

<sup>28</sup> This point is made explicitly in the writings of Nyingma apologist Sodokpa Lodrö Gyaltzen, who distinguishes *kyedun* as described in tantras such as *Hevajratantra*

In an interesting twist on the term, *kyedun*, these pills no longer claim to contain the flesh of one born seven times a brahmin; rather, they promise the individual who ingests them the possibility of liberation within seven lifetimes. Regarding its soteriological promise, one treasure text in Pema Lingpa's corpus, framed as a dialogue between Padmasambhava and his Tibetan consort and disciple Yeshe Tsogyal, contains a wonderful play on words. Note the use of *kyedun* or "seven lifetimes" in the following statement in the first-person voice of Padmasambhava:

If ingested, after taking birth in a body endowed with qualities for seven lifetimes, one will attain the state of a *vidyādhara* and ultimately meet with me, Padmasambhava, in person. . . . Those unable [to practice] the dharma, exert yourselves in this sacred substance. (Padma gling pa 1975, vol. 7:491.1–2)<sup>29</sup>

The notion of seven lifetimes is preserved but the valences of *kyedun* have changed. It no longer refers to the substances that are ingested but rather to the soteriological promise of their ingestion. Indeed, in this passage, *kyedun* offers the prospect of seven lifetimes in a "body endowed with qualities" after which time realization is achieved. This almost certainly refers to a human body that is free and well-favored (*dal'byor milus*), possessing the conditions necessary to pursue spiritual practice.

The soteriological promise of these pills derives to a large extent from their alleged ingredients, first and foremost, the flesh of the

---

from *kyedun* revealed as treasures (*gter gyi skye bdun*), said to contain brahmin flesh emanated by Avalokiteśvara as well as relics from eighth-century tantric masters, both Indian and Tibetan. See Sog bzlog pa 1975, vol. 2:448.1–2 and 450.1.

<sup>29</sup> A catalogue in Chokgyur Lingpa's corpus also employs the trope of seven lifetimes in stating the promise of *kyedun*. In the first person voice of Padmasambhava, it states that *kyedun* pills are made "in order to effortlessly liberate the faithful in the future — all who see, hear, recollect or touch [them] — after seven lifetimes" (*ma'ongs dad ldan mthong thos dran reg kun/ skye ba bdun nas 'bad med grol ba'i phyir*, Mchog gyur gling pa 1982–86, vol. 29:379:3). As an anomaly vis-à-vis other texts examined here, in this case, the base material is emanated by Padmasambhava through the powers of his meditation. As another variation on the valence of "seven births," Sodokpa lists seven brahmins emanated by Avalokitesvara whose flesh serves as the basis for *kyedun* within the treasure tradition (Sog bzlog pa 1975, vol. 2:448.2–3).

bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, or more specifically, brahmin flesh that has become “reencoded” as the flesh of Avalokiteśvara who is said to emanate as brahmins in order to establish beings in a state of buddhahood.<sup>30</sup> As the story goes, Avalokiteśvara’s flesh is found by the Indian princess Mandāravā and offered to Padmasambhava (referred to below as Uḍḍiyāṇa Padmākara), who then brings it to Tibet and fashions pills. The following account is given by Pema Lingpa:

The Great Compassionate One, the noble Avalokiteśvara, in order to establish all beings in saṃsāra as buddhas, sent forth an emanation to tame anyone in whatever way necessary and thus performed the benefit of beings. In the region of Zahor in India, [he generated] physical emanations as the brahmins Vimalahṛdaya and Puṇḍarika. Furthermore, in the region of the King Vihāradhara, [the flesh? of these brahmins] was found by Mandāravā, an emanation of Sarasvatī, who took [it] to her delighted father. Blazing with inner experience and realization, the maiden offered [it] to her father as a means of beseeching. At the time of performing prayers, she took Uḍḍiyāṇa Padmākara as her guru and offered [it] to him. Uḍḍiyāṇa Padmākara conveyed [it] to Tibet and made pills from brahmin flesh, red and white *bodhicitta*, elixir and the flesh of *vidyādhara*s and *mahāsiddha*s. He hid these pills as treasures for the benefit of beings in the Snowy Land [Tibet], to be revealed by a succession of appointed tertöns. (Padma gling pa 1975, vol. 2:680.1–6)

In this reworking of the *kyedun* myth,<sup>31</sup> Avalokiteśvara’s flesh becomes available through the intervention of Padmasambhava, who transports it to Tibet and conceals it for the future.<sup>32</sup> The mediation of Padmasambhava distances *kyedun* pills from the antinomian dimensions of procuring brahmin flesh, though it is ambiguous in the above account

<sup>30</sup> I borrow the concept of “reencoding” from David Gray 2005, who uses it to refer to semantic shifts in the adaptation between tantric systems, particularly the domestication of transgressive practices.

<sup>31</sup> Sodokpa contrasts the lore of *kyedun* in the treasure tradition (as above) with a different version of the story whereby *kyedun* is associated with the power of flight. See his “Catalogue that Establishes how Pills that Liberate through Tasting are Based on the Flesh of One Born Seven Times a Brahmin” (*Bram ze skye ba bdun pa’i sha la brten pa’i myong grol ril bu ji lta bar bskerun pa’i dkar chag*) in Sog bzlog pa 1975, vol. 2:443–58.

<sup>32</sup> The cults of Avalokiteśvara and Padmasambhava overlap in important ways in the treasure tradition, in which the two form a trinity with the buddha Amitābha as his *saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya* manifestations, respectively.

whether Mandāravā offers him living brahmins or their flesh. This ambiguity is cleared up in an account offered by a disciple of Pema Lingpa in which Mandāravā stumbles upon the flesh of an eight year old boy (understood to be a brahmin) when she goes to the marketplace, abandoned the morning after a torrential rainstorm, and finds no other meat available (Padma gling pa 1975, vol. 7:504.1–2).

Significantly, the above account was given during a ritual consecrating a batch of *kyedun*, suggesting that *kyedun* revealed as treasures have been used to supply the relics for batches of pills made publicly in a ritual context. When ritually produced, the base material for these pills contain assorted ingredients, including ground mutton, grains, sweets, milk, spring water as well as other medicinal and precious substances.<sup>33</sup> To this is then added a catalyst (*phabs*), a “mother” (*a ma*) pill if available and otherwise a previously consecrated *kyedun* pill (Padma gling pa 1975, vol. 7:495:4). This goes along with Dan Martin’s suggestion that substances were “consecrated by minute, and probably extremely minute traces of relics added to the ‘brew’ through the centuries of consecration rites” such that relics function as “a genuine starter (*phab-rgyun* as in ‘yeast starter’ for making beer or yoghurt)” (Martin 1994:301).<sup>34</sup> Since any fraction of a relic contains the potency of the whole, minute traces can be used to consecrate new batches of pills, distributing the sanctity of one into many. In another example of this principle, *kyedun* are understood to sometimes magically multiply (Gter bdag gling pa 1998, vol. 11:131.5; Mchog gyur gling pa 1982–86, vol. 29:380.1–2).

<sup>33</sup> According to “The Procedure for Preparing Kyedun” (*Skye bdun sbyar thabs kyi phiyag bzhes*), the first stage of making *kyedun* involves the procurement of a female sheep’s vital organs to be placed in a stone vessel and ground into a fine powder or paste. Next, in a metal or clay pot, this is to be mixed with the following ingredients: water gathered from a spring, snow (mountain), lake and marketplace; milk collected from cow, *’bri* (female counterpart to a yak), *’dzo mo* (i.e. *mdzo*, a cross between a yak and cow) and sheep; flour of various grains such as barley, wheat, rice and sesame; various precious metals such as gold, silver, and copper; the powder of various medicinal ingredients; and in spring, the extract of flowers and in winter, the power of dried flowers. See Padma gling pa 1975, vol. 7:494.3–495.4.

<sup>34</sup> Sodokpa mentions a catalyst containing the blessings of lineage forefathers (*gong ma’i byin brlabs phabs rgyun*) but it is not clear if he is referring to the relics contained in *kyedun* pills or the pills themselves (Sog bzlog pa 1975, vol. 2:458.1).

Compounding their sanctity, *kyedun* pills are also reported to contain an amalgamation of relics of accomplished masters, ranked as *vidyādharas* (knowledge holders) and *mahāsiddhas* (accomplished ones). In one history in Pema Lingpa's corpus, we find the names of specific eighth-century saints from India and Tibet whose relics are enumerated as the source for "kyedun endowed with blessings" (*byin rlabs can gyi skye bdun*, Padma gling pa 1975, vol. 7:489.5–490.4). These figures, such as Garab Dorje (\*Prahevajra), Mañjuśrīmitra, Sangye Yeshe, Namkai Nyingpo, Yeshe Tsogyal, and Vairocana, play in an important role in the Nyingma understanding of its historical roots. And due to the amalgamation of their relics, *kyedun* pills offer a means to receive blessings from seminal lineage figures and to establish a connection to the lineage as a whole. The tendency to amalgamate relics in *kyedun* can also be found in lists of base materials used to produce these pills, which can include substances revealed by successive tertöns and the relics of tertöns themselves (ibid. vol. 7:504:5–505:5).<sup>35</sup> Still today, sacred substances claiming to "liberate through tasting" attribute the blessings contained therein to the addition of a catalyst associated with saints of yore as their relics, as treasures revealed by them, or as pills consecrated by them. For example, one of the various types of pills available for sale at Mindroling Monastery outside of Lhasa bears the label: "sacred substances that liberate through tasting, containing a catalyst that combines the blessed substances of various accomplished saints of India and Tibet."<sup>36</sup>

*Kyedun* are further sanctified through the consecration process in which the pills are transmuted into the body of Avalokiteśvara. The ritual preceptor performs a self-visualization as Avalokiteśvara in the

<sup>35</sup> There is also a sectarian inclusiveness to the substances listed, including relic pills from Sakya and Kagyu masters.

<sup>36</sup> This comes from the label on a package of pills that were produced at Mindroling during a ritual associated with the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*. The label in full reads: 'Og min o rgyan smin grol gling du sgrub chen bka' brgyad bde 'dus gyi sgo nas bsgrubs pa'i 'phags bod skyes chen du ma'i byin rdzas phab ldan rten 'dus dam rdzas myong grol bzbugs. Mindroling Monastery, founded in 1670 by Terdak Lingpa, lies a few kilometers off the road between Lhasa and Tsetang in Lhoka Prefecture.

form of the Great Compassionate One (*Thugs rje chen po*) and light emanating from a seed syllable at his heart center strikes a vase of freshly made pills in order to transform them. What follows is the visualization section of a *sādhana* or “means of accomplishment” for consecrating “flesh pills” (*sha ril*):

For the consecration, place [the pills] into a vase, seal [it] with ritual implements of the five buddha families along with ordinary rope, and place [it] at the center of a maṇḍala of the three roots. For the main section of the visualization, one instantly [arises in] in the form of the Great Compassionate One, red in color, with one face and two arms. In his right hand, he holds a lotus garland at the heart, and in his left, he holds a vase for ablutions. Jewel ornaments adorn his perfect body, and his head is ornamented by a perfect buddha. United with a secret wisdom consort, he is seated in cross-legged posture on a throne of a sun, moon, and lotus. On a moon disk at his heart center, a red HUM radiates light that strikes the vase of flesh pills and transforms [them] all into the Great Compassionate One. One should perform the emanation and gathering again and again. (Padma gling pa 1975, vol. 2:677.4–678.4)

In this ritual, which prescribes a mantra recitation over the course of seven days, Avalokiteśvara’s presence is explicitly evoked in order to consecrate the pills. Indeed, he presides over the consecration process in the form of the Great Compassionate One as the central deity of the self-visualization. Moreover, there are two important ways that *kyedun* are identified with his body. Not only are these pills said to contain flesh emanated by Avalokiteśvara, brought to Tibet by Padmsambhava and mixed with the relics of eighth-century masters, but the pills once fully formed are ritually transformed into an embodiment of Avalokiteśvara.

Given the purported ingredients of *kyedun* pills and their method of consecration, it should come as no surprise that one of the chief benefits promised by ingesting these pills is rebirth in the Avalokiteśvara’s pure realm, from which point forward salvation is by and large secured. This realm guarantees birth as one who has reached the end of saṃsāra (*‘khor ba mtha’ can skye*), and places one at the threshold of the path of awakening (*byang chub lam sna zin*). Regarding this articulation of pure land orientation, buddhahood itself is not bestowed but it is nonetheless guaranteed by rebirth into Avalokiteśvara’s pure land.

The soteriological promise of *kyedun* varies from text to text, even as the purported ingredients remain fairly consistent: pills of brahmin flesh emanated by Avalokiteśvara, mixed with relics, medicinal substances and other ingredients. In catalogues among the treasures of the influential seventeenth-century tertön,<sup>37</sup> Terdak Lingpa, for example, though Avalokiteśvara is cast as the source of *kyedun* flesh through his emanations as brahmins, there is no mention of rebirth in his pure land. Instead, freedom from the lower realms and the irreversibility of an individual's progress toward full liberation are stressed. In the first person voice of Padmasambhava, these texts explain that sacred substances are hidden as treasures for degenerate times (*snyigs ma'i dus*) in the future when few people practice the dharma and most engage in negative emotions, because of which they experience the suffering of the lower realms. The implication is that such dire circumstances require special means for salvation. *Kyedun* pills promise to provide “the finest allotment of merit” (*bsod nams skal ba mchog*) and “dredge the depths of saṃsāra” (*'khor ba dong sprugs*, Gter bdag gling pa 1998, vol. 12:95a.3–4). In other words, *kyedun* pills are intended to spare beings the sufferings of the lower realms and grant them an extra measure of merit, thereby enhancing their prospects for a favorable rebirth and expediting their progress toward buddhahood.

Though not articulating a pure land orientation per se, such statements nonetheless suggest quite clearly a notion of grace to the extent that individuals can be spared the karmic consequences of their own actions and granted merit accumulated by saints and bodhisattvas. Even the greatest of sinners — who has committed one of the five inexpressible sins — can expect to attain the blissful result (*bde 'bras*) in a future life as a god or human (Gter bdag gling pa 1998, vol. 11:131a.1–2).<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> There are two catalogues dedicated to substances that liberate through tasting in the corpus of Terdak Lingpa (Gter bdag gling pa 1998): “A Catalogue of Great Bliss Pills that Liberate through Tasting” (*Myong grol bde chen ril bu'i dkar chag*, vol. 11:129a–131b) and “Dredging the Depths of Saṃsāra: A Catalogue of Sacred Substances that Liberate through Tasting” (*Dam rdzas myang grol gyi dkar chag 'khor ba dong sprugs*, vol. 12:94a–95b).

<sup>38</sup> The five inexpressible sins (*mtshams med lnga*) are a set of deeds considered so heinous that their retribution is immediate upon death; those who commit any one of them are understood to go immediately to hell without recourse or intervening period

While accounts differ in the specific soteriological effect promised, they agree on the rationale behind the efficacy of *kyedun*, based on the realization and merit of bodhisattvas and accomplished masters, made available to others in the form of blessings imbuing their flesh and relics.

### Representatives of Padmasambhava

Turning now to our second category of treasure object, there is a special type of image considered to be a *kutsab* or “representative” (*sku tshab*) of Padmasambhava and credited with the power to “liberate through seeing” (*mthong grol*).<sup>39</sup> A number of tertöns have discovered this type of image, said to be crafted and consecrated by Padmasambhava himself. Today, *kutsabs* revealed by Dorje Lingpa, Shikpo Lingpa and Terdak Lingpa are on display at Mindroling Monastery.<sup>40</sup> The term *kutsab* suggests that these images serve as a stand-in for Padmasambhava himself in contrast to more common terms for images, such as “likeness” (*sku 'dra*), which underscores the iconic aspect of images, and “support” (*sku rten*), which refers to their function as a locus for the presence of a buddha, bodhisattva, or tantric deity installed during the consecration process. Strikingly, as representatives, *kutsabs* are deemed to be equivalent to meeting Padmasambhava himself, considered by Tibetans to be a second buddha. One history proclaims: “For all who see, hear,

---

in the intermediate state or *bardo*. These five consist of matricide, patricide, killing an arhat, causing a schism in the saṅgha, or drawing blood from a tathāgata.

<sup>39</sup> *Kutsab* as a category does not refer exclusively to images of Padmasambhava revealed as treasures; for example, the revered Jowo image housed in the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa is considered to be a *kutsab* of Śākyamuni Buddha (Cameron Warner, personal communication).

<sup>40</sup> For my study of *kutsab* in this section, I rely primarily on two catalogues of images that liberate through seeing from Gter bdag gling pa 1998: “A Catalogue of Two Images that Liberate through Seeing” (*Mthong grol sku rten gnyis kyi dkar chag*, vol. 11:124a–128b) and “The Wondrous Mirror: A Catalogue of Two Kutsab of the Guru” (*Gu ru'i sku tshab rnam gnyis kyi dkar chag ngo mtshar me long*, vol. 12:91a–93a). Images of *kutsab* discovered by a number of tertöns and other treasure objects can be found in Tulku Thondup 1997. See Shes bya and Dam chos bstan 'dzin 200? for photographs and descriptions of sacra at Mindroling Monastery including several *kutsab*.



### Images on Display at Mindroling Monastery

A *kutsab* revealed by Shikpo Lingpa stands behind the central image (front) of the tertön Terdak Lingpa. It is flanked on either side by two *kutsabs* encased in amulet boxes, discovered by Terdak Lingpa (right) and Dorje Lingpa (left) respectively. (Photo: Holly Gayley.)

recollect or touch this supreme *kutsab*, it is no different from meeting Guru Padma” (Mchog gyur gling pa 1982–86, vol. 29:386.5–387.1).

This equivalence is emphasized in accounts of the origins of *kutsab*. Catalogues revealed by the seventeenth-century tertön Terdak Lingpa, for example, begin with Padmasambhava’s disciples bemoaning his immanent departure from Tibet and requesting that he leave a token of himself behind to serve as his successor (*zhal skyin*) — a representative (not representation) of Padmasambhava to receive supplications and offerings on his behalf. Padmasambhava’s disciples cry out: “When you depart, what will serve as the basis for supplications by the faithful among Tibetans? What field will they use for accumulating merit? For the benefit of us and Tibetan followers in the future, we request you to bless a receptacle for supplicating” (Gter bdag gling pa 1998,

vol. 12:91b.5–6). Here as elsewhere a *kutsab* is envisioned as a field of merit for offerings and vehicle for supplications to Padmasambhava, intended to serve as “a representative for the benefit of the faithful, who in the future will not meet the guru” (*ma ’ongs gu ru ma mjal dad ldan gyi don du sku tshab*, Mchog gyur gling pa 1982–86, vol. 29:387:1). However, a *kutsab* is not just a passive “object” of veneration; rather it is envisioned as a means by which Tibetans can come into contact with Padmasambhava and a vehicle through which his benevolent activity continues. Elsewhere a *kutsab* is proclaimed to be “the future regent (*rgyal tshab*) of the guru and tamer of beings, which remains as a support for [his] limitless activity, benefiting others by creating meaningful connections with karmically-endowed individuals” (ibid. vol. 29:386:2–3). Such statements emphasize Padmasambhava’s beneficent foresight on behalf of future generations as well as his enduring presence and power localized in this type of image.

For *kutsabs*, a number of factors contribute to their potency and soteriological effect: the materials used to fashion them, relics inserted into the cavity of these images, and their special means of consecration. Taken together, these factors “cumulatively contribute” to the exceptional sanctity of these images.<sup>41</sup> As with *kyedun*, blessings are invested incrementally in *kutsab* in order to achieve the highest degree of potency and corresponding efficacy. We could consider this a tendency not only to localize or materialize charisma in objects but also to concentrate it through multiple modes of sanctification. Indeed, descriptions of the origins and benefits of both *kyedun* and *kutsab* imply that the efficacy attributed to sacra mirrors the *degree of sanctity* invested in it. Thus origin accounts of *kutsab* are meant to convince the reader (or listener) of the exceptional potency of its blessings, which in turn serves as the basis for the apotropaic and soteriological benefits promised by sensory contact with it, particularly its claim to liberate through seeing.

As with *kyedun*, the contents of *kutsab* feature the same tendency toward an amalgamation of relics. According to a catalogue in Terdak Lingpa’s corpus, *kutsabs* were fashioned by Padmasambhava from materials gathered by the *dākinīs* from celestial domains and sacred places in

---

<sup>41</sup> I borrow this term from Tambiah 1984:254.

India. This is akin to what Martin calls “relics of geography” or substances sanctified by their association with sacred sites that function as relics when inserted into images and structures (Martin 1994:278). The materials include jewels from the *devas* and *nāgas*, Jambu (river) gold and sands of Lake Mānasarovar, soil from the eight charnel grounds and twenty-four *pīṭhas* in India in addition to fragrances from a tree of paradise, medicinal essences, and various elixirs and extracts (Gter bdag gling pa 1998, vol. 11:126a.6–126b.1).<sup>42</sup> Then, into the cavity of these images, Padmasambhava is said to have inserted relics (corporeal and relics of association) from Indian masters considered to be seminal figures for the Nyingma lineage — Garab Dorje, Mañjuśrīmitra, Śrī Siṃha, Vimalamitra among others — such as locks of their hair, clothing fragments, bone relics, practice substances, and his own blood, hair and semen (ibid. vol. 11:126b.2–4). Thus, even before its consecration, the base materials and relics inserted into a *kutsab* have already charged the image with a high degree of potency.

The consecration process further augments the potent blessings instilled in a *kutsab* by relics and other materials. In the following passage, note the way that such an image is said to be blessed, first by celestial figures and then by Padmasambhava himself:

While performing the consecration,  
 Countless *vidyādhara*s, *ḍākinī*s and *ḍāka*s  
 Gathered like clouds in the sky and blessed [the image].  
 The actual body of the Guru [then] into a drop of light  
 And dissolved for a moment into the heart of that very *kutsab*.  
 Separating [from it] once again, he blessed [the image].  
 (Gter bdag gling pa 1998, vol. 11:126b.4–6)

Strikingly, this passage portrays Padmasambhava’s body dissolving into the heart center of the *kutsab* and then reemerging to bless it. Thus, just as *kyedun* pills are identified with the body of Avalokiteśvara, here we can see the various ways that *kutsab* are identified with the body of Padmasambhava. A *kutsab* is molded by his hands (thereby a relic of contact); filled with corporeal relics that include his own; infused with

<sup>42</sup> Tulku Thondup 1997 provides a translation of this passage in connection with Figure 5 (a photograph of the *kutsab* in question).

his presence by his dissolution into the image; and thereafter blessed by him.

This tendency to amalgamate and concentrate sanctity in images can be found elsewhere in the Buddhist world, though it has a special function in reference to treasure objects. Tambiah emphasizes how multiple factors contribute to the sanctity of Buddha images in a Theravāda context, including the power of the Buddha's realization, the powers attributed to those who make and sacralize images, the efficacy of consecration rituals, and the potency of substance out of which the image is made (Tambiah 1984:203). In the case of *kutsab*, we have just seen the importance given to its base materials and the ritual officiant presiding over the consecration, none other than Padmasambhava himself. Beyond these factors, in Tibetan Buddhist contexts, the deposition of relics is an indispensable part of the sanctification process for images,<sup>43</sup> and catalogues of *kutsab* demonstrate the importance of this by listing the names of specific masters whose relics have been inserted into an image. For treasure objects, we could add yet another factor that contributes to the high degree of potency ascribed to them: their concealment from the vagaries of time. Treasure objects are believed to contain particularly potent blessings, because of their association with seminal eighth-century lineage figures and concealment from the degenerative tendency ascribed to historical time in a Buddhist framework.<sup>44</sup> In describing treasures, both texts and objects, Guru Chöwang calls attention to their enduring benefit as “objects and doctrines that do not deteriorate whatsoever” (*rdzas chos gang yang chud mi za ba*) and Jigme Lingpa heralds the prophylactic effect of concealment: “to prevent the doctrine from disappearing, the teaching from being adulterated, and the power of blessing from disappearing.”<sup>45</sup> Through their concealment as treasures,

---

<sup>43</sup> In her study on consecration (*rab gnas*) in Tibetan Buddhism, Yael Bentor emphasizes the primacy of the deposition of relics (1996 and 1997). Although the consecration of Buddhist images shares many features with Theravāda contexts studied by Tambiah, Swearer, and Gombrich, another important distinction to be made, as Bentor points out, is the use of a tantric *sādhana* format for the consecration process.

<sup>44</sup> On Buddhist notions of times, see Nattier 1991.

<sup>45</sup> See Guru Chos kyi dbang phyug 1979, vol. 2:99.2, and Tulku Thondup 1997:150.

the blessings invested in *kutsab* by Padmasambhava himself are understood to retain their original potency.

The principle of concentrating the maximum degree of sanctity into a single object can be seen most clearly in an origin account in a catalogue revealed by the nineteenth-century tertön Chokgyur Lingpa (Mchog gyur gling pa 1982–86, vol. 29:377–400).<sup>46</sup> According to this account, Padmasambhava sent out magical emanations to innumerable realms in the ten directions in a flash of light and then gathered back the blessings of all of them into a drop of elixir, using his *vajra* gaze (*rdo rje'i lta stang*) and mental powers (*dgongs pa'i byin*). He then mixed this drop of elixir with a variety of substances from sacred places and charnel grounds, formed this into clay, and invested it with the wisdom and blessing of bodhisattvas in the form of blazing light (ibid. vol. 29:385:4–386:2). In this account, the distillation of Padmasambhava's blessings as a single drop of elixir (Sanskrit: *amṛta*; Tibetan: *bdud rtsi*) is used to sanctify the substances out of which the *kutsab* is made. Moreover, Padmasambhava himself is cast as the “lord who distills the body, speech, mind, quality and action of all the buddhas of the three times” (ibid. vol. 29:385:1).<sup>47</sup> As such, this *kutsab* is portrayed as highly concentrated, distilling the power and blessings of Padmasambhava, who is himself the distillation of all buddhas.

It is this concentration of sanctity and the saturation of the *kutsab* with the presence of Padmasambhava that allows catalogues to claim that encountering this type of image is equivalent to meeting Padmasambhava in actuality (*dnagos su mjal*). This saturation also serves as the basis for its promise to provide “comparable blessings” (*byin rlabs mts-hungs pa*) and the rationale for the list of benefits to be derived from beholding such an image, framed in the first person voice of Padmasambhava as follows:

At this time, [you] meet myself, Padmasambhava;  
In the future, [people] will go to see my *kutsab*.

<sup>46</sup> This text is titled “The Play of Activity: A History of Sacred Substances that Liberate through Tasting and Two Kutsab that Liberate through Seeing” (*Dam rdzas myong grol phrin las rol ba dangl mthong grol sku tshab rnam gnyis kyi lo rygus*).

<sup>47</sup> The Tibetan for this reads: *Dus gsum sangs rgyas kun gyi sku gsung thugs! yon tan phrin las gcig tu 'dus pa'i bdag*.

Whether their merit and fortune are good or bad,  
 If individuals make offerings and supplications with faith to these two images  
 of me,  
 Sickness, demons, sins, obscurations, obstacles, and adversity will be pacified;  
 Their life will be glorious with increasing wealth and great enjoyment;  
 Harm from hordes of malignant spirits and enemies will be reversed.  
 They will complete the two accumulations and attain unsurpassed awakening.  
 (Gter dbag gling pa 1998, vol. 11:127b.5-128a.1)

In this passage, seeing a *kutsab* is attributed a range of benefits, including the ultimate goal of buddhahood itself. In terms of its apotropaic promise, *kutsabs* are said to pacify sickness, negativity, and obstructing conditions; increase wealth and enjoyment; and reverse harm from malignant spirits and enemies. In addition, there is also a clear soteriological promise: the purification of past evils (*sdig pa*) and obscurations (*sgrib pa*) as well as the two accumulations of merit and wisdom, resulting in “unsurpassed awakening” (*bla med byang chub*).

Significantly, *kutsabs* also promise to transform the place where they are housed, said to be infused with the blessings of Padmasambhava (Mchog gyur gling pa 1982-86, vol. 29:384:2). In a catalogue among Terdak Lingpa’s treasures, it states that *kutsabs* create auspiciousness (*bkra shis*) and good fortune (*skal bzang*) for their surroundings. Beyond that, they are said to be hidden by Padmasambhava as treasures in order to reverse plague, famine, conflict, poverty, broken vows, and other downfalls for the Tibetan people during degenerate times (Gter dbag gling pa 1998, vol. 11:127a.5–6.). Since blessings are understood to emanate out from a source, permeating the surroundings of an image and transforming individuals who encounter it, an apt metaphor for the effect of images and other objects containing relics may be radiation.<sup>48</sup> This metaphor also conveys the spatial and temporal dimensions

---

<sup>48</sup> I prefer the metaphor of radiation to contagion, suggested by John Strong in relation to relics (1987:275). Strong uses contagion to describe how a relic is understood to be imbued with the salvific powers of the saint, highlighting how any single part of a saint’s body is understood to contain the potency of the whole. However, unlike Frazer’s notion of “contagious magic,” whereby magic performed on a single body part (such as hairs, nails, etc.) allows one to affect the individual in question, in the case of relics (and objects containing relics), the charisma of the saint is understood to affect others. As a metaphor, radiation captures this transformative power of

of blessings, which are understood to be highly concentrated in a specific locus and to dissipate across time and space. Indeed, the emphasis on sensory contact with sacra implies at the very least that one must come into close proximity with them in order to garner their blessings.

Regarding their efficacy, we have so far seen the importance of the high degree of sanctity invested in *kyedun* and *kutsab* through their ingredients and special means of consecration. What remains to discern is whether such blessings automatically transform the individuals who encounter such objects or whether this transformation depends on other factors as well. On the one hand, benefits to the individual are articulated within a set of devotional activities with its concomitant logic of accumulating merit. On the other hand, benefits to the surrounding area seem to occur automatically, simply by the fact of a *kutsab* being housed in a particular locale. At stake here is the extent to which apotropaic and soteriological benefits are attributed to *mere* sensory contact with an image and the extent to which they require the appropriate ritual actions. This issue centers upon whether the benefits promised by sensory contact with *kyedun* and *kutsab* are earned through works or received as a gift of grace. As such, this returns us to the question posed at the outset of this article regarding the possibility of salvation through grace in Tibetan Buddhism.

### A Question of Grace?

Let us now consider whether what we find here can indeed be considered a notion of grace, and if so, how it might contravene without contradicting the law of karma. So far we have seen that a range of soteriological and apotropaic benefits are claimed for sensory contact with treasure objects considered to be highly charged with blessings and infused with the presence of Avalokiteśvara and Padmasambhava in multiple ways. The precise nature of soteriological promise varies and includes ensuring a favorable rebirth, thereby sparing beings the sufferings of the lower realms; enabling rebirth in a pure land which

---

charisma in addition to the way that, at least in Tibetan Buddhist contexts, blessings are understood to permeate the environment where sacra are housed.

offers the ideal conditions to complete the path to buddhahood; and hastening the ultimate goal of buddhahood. Several questions remain: Does the soteriological promise of sensory contact with objects claiming special sanctity, such as *kyedun* and *kutsab*, depend solely on the potency of blessings invested in them through their identification respectively with Avalokiteśvara and Padmasambhava? What role, if any, do the actions and disposition of the individual encountering these objects play in reaping these benefits? To the extent that blessings are understood as a transformative power that can affect an individual's soteriological prospects, how does this square with the law of karma and the overarching emphasis of self-cultivation in Buddhism?

If we revisit the quote that opened this article, we see quite clearly the capacity to contravene the law of karma that is credited to *kyedun* pills. Ingestion of this bodhisattva's emanated flesh is portrayed as capable of securing rebirth into Avalokiteśvara's pure realm despite any and all misdeeds. In the larger passage from which the quote is drawn, *kyedun* is also credited with pacifying suffering, repairing violations to tantric vows, and purifying evil deeds and obscurations as well as a host of apotropaic benefits, such as reversing demons and untimely death, acquiring good health and a radiant physique, and enjoying abundant rainfall and healthy livestock (Padma gling pa 1975, vol. 7:506.1–508.1). However, while *kyedun* is credited with the power to purify past evils and thereby tip the karmic scales, the same is not true where buddhahood itself is concern. *Kyedun* are said to place individuals firmly on the path of deliverance (*thar pa'i lam*) — here in the sense of the ultimate aim of release from *saṃsāra* — but cannot single-handedly confer it (ibid. vol. 2:679.1).

Significantly, in these accounts, buddhahood itself is never guaranteed, only the opportunity to achieve it. The notion of liberation in seven lifetimes, articulated in some texts about *kyedun*, preserves the integrity of a gradual Buddhist path while nonetheless maintaining the promise of grace. These pills hold out the prospect of buddhahood by promising the ideal conditions for practice either in a pure land or in seven (presumably human) lifetimes. Thus, it does not directly contradict the emphasis in Tibetan Buddhism on a rigorous regime of ethical, contemplative, and intellectual training. But it does nonetheless offer a substitute to earning the necessary merit for a rebirth in which the ideal

conditions for practice are present. Unfortunately, these texts do not make clear how the accumulated merit and spiritual realization of accomplished masters are converted into blessings, nor how those blessings are transferred to the individual via the senses. Whatever the mechanisms may implicitly be, it is clear that they provide a karmic boost sufficient to ensure the proximate salvation of a favorable rebirth and to provide the conditions for the pursuing the ultimate goal of buddhahood in a future lifetime. In light of this, it might be more apt to say that *kyedun* pills are intended to jump start the process of self-cultivation, while at the same time protecting those who ingest them from the suffering of the lower realms.

To the degree that they operate on the karmic balance of an individual's accumulated deeds, the benefits of *kyedun* are reminiscent of cases in Mahāyāna literature, studied by Susanne Mrozić in which she notes the “ethically transformative effects” of seeing, hearing, touching and even tasting the body of a bodhisattva (Mrozić 2004). In one example she analyzes from the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, an animal which eats the flesh of a recently deceased bodhisattva is reborn in a divine abode. However, unlike bodhisattva flesh in the literature surveyed by Mrozić in which the purity of the bodhisattva's vow gives it efficacy, in *kyedun* a favorable rebirth is obtained through the potency of merit and blessings contained in Avalokiteśvara's flesh, mixed with a variety of relics.

In the context of *kyedun* and *kutsab*, there are other mitigating factors that qualify grace. Often the faith and pious activities of individuals are portrayed as enhancing their ability to receive blessings via the senses. While some benefit comes to even the greatest sinners, more typically the main benefit of sensory contact is reserved for the faithful (*dad ldan*). This was reiterated to me in an interview with a cleric-scholar of Mindrolling Monastery, who emphasized that individuals receive blessings in proportion to their degree of faith. Khenpo Shipsha stated, “Whether blessings come depends on whether or not one has faith. Those with great faith receive great blessings; those with middling faith receive middling blessings; and those with little faith receive little blessings.” As another qualify factor, he stressed that the efficacy of prayers (*smon lam*) made before an image is determined not only by the potency of the image but also the moral charac-

ter of the individual in accord with the karmic law of cause and effect (*las rgyu 'bras*).<sup>49</sup>

According to some texts, the disposition of different categories of individuals determines the extent of benefit they receive from encountering *kyedun* or *kutsab*. For example, in Terdak Lingpa's treasures, the term "buddhahood without meditation" (*ma bsgoms sangs rgyas*) is qualified in several ways. Some are excluded from its benefits outright, such as heretics (*log pa lta can*) and skeptics (*the tshom yid can*) who are deemed unsuitable vessels (Gter bdag gling pa 1998, vol. 11:131a.3). For those just beginning the Buddhist path, a favorable rebirth is given as the result of direct contact with sacred substances (here notably through the sense of smell) as follows: "A fortunate one at the initial stages of the path, just by smelling such substances in the breeze, will purify evil deeds and obscurations and thereby obtain [a rebirth in] the higher realms" (ibid. vol. 11:131a.2–3).<sup>50</sup> Even for the advanced, despite the rhetoric of "buddhahood without meditation," it seems that there is still work ahead. The faithful who taste sacred substances in the context of a tantric initiation are purported to purify their karma and obscurations, attain the state of a non-returner (*phyir mi ldog pa*), and quickly attain buddhahood (ibid. vol. 11:130b.6–131a.1). Though given a significant boost, they must still pursue the task of achieving ultimate salvation.

In a history within the treasure corpus of the nineteenth-century tertön, Chokgyur Lingpa, we also see that the benefits derived from

---

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Khenpo Shipsha in Lhasa on February 26, 2006. In terms of the moral character of the individual, Khenpo Shipsha mentioned a number of aspects, including the accumulation of merit (*bsod nams bsags pa*), avoidance of evil deeds (*sdig pa spong ba*), performance of virtue (*dge ba sgrub pa*), and a positive attitude (*bsam pa bzang po*). If one does not have a positive attitude and has accumulated many evil deeds, he stated flatly "the blessings of an image will not come to you" (*sku 'dra yi byin rlabs khyed rang la yong gi ma red*). See below for how this statement might be reconciled with grand claims of benefiting even those who have committed one of the five inexpressible sins.

<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, the sense of smell suggests a lack of intentionality to this moment of contact with *kyedun* by the uninitiated novice.

encountering a *kutsab* are commensurate with the types of offerings made. An excerpt from a long list of benefits in this text must suffice to illustrate this point:

Whoever offers incense to this *kutsab* will have pure conduct and benefit others immeasurably. Whoever offers butter lamps to this *kutsab* obtains clear sense faculties and the eye of wisdom. Whoever offers perfume to this *kutsab* purifies obscurations and clears away illness and demons. Whoever offers food to this *kutsab* enhances *samādhi* and augments their food supply and wealth. Whoever offers music to this *kutsab* will perfect the enlightened mind and achieve renown. . . . In sum, whoever venerates this *kutsab* with one-pointed faith and devotion will not become destitute; they will be reborn in a noble family and quickly attain enlightenment. In this way, their merit is equivalent to meeting and paying homage to Padmasambhava in person and it ripens commensurately. There is not the slightest bit of difference in blessings and siddhis [received]. (Mchog gyur gling pa 1982-86, vol. 29:388.4–389.4)

In this example, we see the notion of grace fully integrated with the workings of karma and the ritual process of merit-making. The ordinary acts of image veneration — involving a series of sense offerings — are correlated with a range of benefits, including purifying sin, increasing wealth, and gaining wisdom. Here *kutsabs* are envisioned as particularly efficacious objects of worship, such that the merit gained through ritual acts of veneration is equivalent to that of paying homage to Padmasambhava in person. Moreover, the potency of the image, coupled with the disposition of faith, is asserted as a means to quickly attain enlightenment.

Considering these texts about *kyedun* and *kutsab* as a group, what we find could be characterized as a type of qualified grace. To the extent that individuals gain merit through ritual acts of veneration, the result must be considered to be earned. However, this only accounts for an image as a field of merit and not as a repository of power. To the extent that blessings are credited with influence and efficacy, the resulting soteriological benefit could be characterized as grace, since it is free and unearned.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the disposition and capacity of the individual

---

<sup>51</sup> This is a refinement on a point made by Martin in relation to relics in Tibet as follows: “In the experience of the believer, however, the relics are no more merely passive and unresponsive objects of worship than the living revealers or saints themselves

also play a key role in determining their receptivity to blessings available through sensory contact with sacra. Thus, the workings of grace emerges based on three factors: (1) the potency of blessings that radiates out from a sacred object, (2) the occasion of direct contact with it through the senses, and (3) the receptivity of the individual based on their degree of faith, moral character and spiritual capacity. However, even this must be further qualified.

When considering the soteriological promise of sensory contact with Buddhist sacra, we must also pay close attention to the logic governing the ritual context in which it occurs. *Kyedun* and *kutsab* can be encountered in a variety of settings, including pilgrimage (*gnas skor*), temple visits (*mchod mjal*), public initiations (*khrom dbang*), or an audience with a lama (*mjal kha*).<sup>52</sup> This suggests that the receipt of blessings occurs within a set of ritual actions already oriented toward the purification of past evils (Tibetan: *sdig pa*, Sanskrit: *pāpa*) and the accumulation of merit (Tibetan: *bsod nams*, Sanskrit: *punya*). In other words, the blessings contained in them are understood to support and expedite the process of self-cultivation rather than supplant it.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, the pattern in texts dedicated to one of the four (or six) liberations is to make a grand claim to be a means to “buddhahood without meditation” and then qualify that claim in specific ways. For example, in *Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State* (*Bar do thos grol*) in the corpus of Karma Lingpa, while it is called “the

---

could possibly be. Something palpable is given in return for their veneration, something we might call grace or blessings” (1994:273–74). The distinction I would like to make is that merit is earned in return for acts of veneration; however blessings — while received in the context of devotional activities — are not necessarily “given in return.” Instead, the texts examined in this article suggest that blessings permeate the environment where sacra are present and that the disposition of the individual determines his or her receptivity to them.

<sup>52</sup> Another important site for several categories within the four (or six) liberations is in connection with death rites. I have already mentioned the use of the *Bar do thos grol* and *btags grol* in this regard. In addition, sacred substances promising to liberate through tasting may be put into the mouth of the dying person.

<sup>53</sup> With regard to a pure land orientation, Kapstein has emphasized, “Tibetan religious intelligentsia, even while energetically promulgating faith in Amitābha and the aspiration for rebirth in his realm, could not countenance a conception of salvation by grace alone” (2004:30). His point is that moral effort is also required.

profound instruction which liberates by being seen, liberates by being heard and liberates by being read aloud” without the need for meditation, nonetheless the text recommends itself for daily recitation, memorization, reflection on the meaning, and thorough comprehension (Gyurme Dorje 2006:303).<sup>54</sup> Moreover, when used in death rites, the degree to which individuals going through the death process and intermediate state have been familiar with meditation practice, the various deities described, and virtuous conduct during their lifetime are all said to determine the efficacy of the text to guide them to liberation.<sup>55</sup> In the same corpus of revelations, a text on “liberation through wearing” begins by making grand claims regarding the soteriological benefits of wearing a mantra circle (specifically, a circular design containing the mantras of the hundred peaceful and wrathful deities) as follows:

As it confers liberation by wearing, there is no need for spiritual practice.  
 As it confers liberation through contact, there is no need for training.  
 As it confers liberation through feeling, there is no need for reflection.  
 This [mantra circle] confers natural liberation whenever it is encountered.  
 (Gyurme Dorje 2006:347–48)<sup>56</sup>

Strikingly, this passage suggests that sensory contact with a set of mantras seemingly obviates the need for rigorous self-cultivation in order to attain liberation. However, after listing the various mantras and their benefits, the text concludes by exhorting the reader to practice virtue, avoid negative actions, read the mantras aloud, contemplate them and thoroughly comprehend them. Thus, despite its promise to liberate merely by wearing, nonetheless a course of ethical conduct, ritual practice and textual study is prescribed. What should be made of this seeming paradox?

---

<sup>54</sup> According to the *Bar do thos grol*, seeing and hearing continues after death and into the intermediate state during which time the deceased occupies a mental body.

<sup>55</sup> This is made explicit throughout Gyurme Dorje 2006:219–303; see especially pp. 270–71 and 300–1. Note that the *Bar do thos grol* advocates instantaneous release from cyclic existence (if one recognizes the various appearances that occur in the *bardo* as the natural radiance of one’s own mind) but also offers guidance for ensuring a favorable rebirth.

<sup>56</sup> This text is titled “Liberation by Wearing: The Concise Meaning of Natural Liberation of the Psycho-physical Aggregates” (*Btags grol phung po rang grol gyi don bsdu*).

The question really boils down to whether claims to liberate through seeing, hearing, tasting, wearing, etc. are intended to be taken literally or whether they are acclamatory in nature, heralding the special sanctity of a particular text, object, substance, mantra, or structure. Consider, for example, the stock claim to rescue from the lower realms even someone who has committed one of the five inexpressible sins. Are we to imagine that the audiences of these texts (and comparable statements posted at pilgrimage sites) have been overly concerned with the karmic consequences of matricide, patricide, killing an arhat, causing a schism in the saṅgha, or drawing blood from a tathāgata? It would be more plausible to view such statements as a claim to the extraordinary powers and efficacy of the object in question. Additionally, this claim could be viewed as a statement of inclusiveness: offering the prospect of salvation to any and all, no matter what their opportunities for more rigorous spiritual training or their ethical profile of past deeds.<sup>57</sup>

I would suggest that the promise of a short cut (*nye lam*) and an effortless (*'bad med*) means to attain liberation through sensory contact functions as a claim to superlative status among sacra, akin to an advertisement offering the best possible package of benefits.<sup>58</sup> Given the accompanying rhetoric of the degenerate age (as above, a time when negativity is rampant, suffering is great, and dharma practice is rare), it seems likely that the grand claims of soteriological efficacy are a means to appeal to those for whom more rigorous spiritual training is not possible. As an extension of the logic of devotional activities, claims to liberate through seeing, hearing, tasting, wearing, etc. take the range of benefits possible for encountering Buddhist sacra to its farthest extreme — promising no less than buddhahood itself (though as it turns out only indirectly). To borrow a concept developed by Steven Collins (1998), this is akin to the “spectrum of felicities” offered in Buddhism in which nirvāṇa represents a distant endpoint to the more mundane levels of release from suffering. As is the case with Theravāda, in the Tibetan context, only a small proportion of religious specialists and

---

<sup>57</sup> Of course a shift in attitude (such as feelings of repentance) would be required to meet Khenpo Shipsha's criterion for receiving blessings. See note 49 above.

<sup>58</sup> This is comparable to claims in Mahāyāna *sūtras* which offer the promise of expedient means to salvation. See Studholme 2002.

adepts actually aspire to the ultimate goal of buddhahood, while most people (monastics and laity alike) seek more proximate forms of salvation. In the case of *kyedun* and *kutsab*, we can say that although the rhetoric of “buddhahood without meditation” is employed, what is really being offered is the promise of a favorable rebirth in one of the higher realms or alternatively in a pure land. Thus, in the cases examined here, this soteriology of the senses is situated in the set of devotional practices existing outside the rarified domain of scholarship and esoteric meditation — what Gomez (1996:12) calls “the other sides of Buddhism” and which Kapstein (2004:19) nicely summarizes for the Tibetan context as merit-making, contrition of sins, purposeful rituals, devotion, and prayer.<sup>59</sup> Of course, only future studies made on a case by case basis will allow us to ascertain to what extent the conclusions drawn here apply to other categories of sacra.

### Interchangeability of the Senses

Let us conclude by returning to the role of the senses. In the texts surveyed here, the importance of direct contact with sacra is highlighted, rather than the sensory faculty through which such contact is made. Indeed, one need not taste *kyedun* nor see a *kutsab* in order to benefit from the potent blessing contained therein. For example, Chokgyur Lingpa recommends that fragments of a *kutsab* can be used to consecrate other images. This suggests that due to their special sanctity, *kutsabs* can function as relics to be inserted into other images, just as *kyedun* can supply the relics for producing new batches of pills. Moreover, *kyedun* pills can also function as relics when inserted into images or *stūpas*.<sup>60</sup> The same is true for mantras, *dhāraṇī*, and texts that prom-

<sup>59</sup> There are important ways that devotional activities (as well as death rites) intersect with esoteric meditative practices — the *Bar do thos grol* being a case in point. Similarly, a public initiation (*khrom dbang*), attended by crowds of thousands as a blessing, blurs any cut and dry distinction between devotional activity and a tantric regime involving preliminary practices (*sngon 'gro*) and the subsequent performance of the *sādhana* of a particular deity.

<sup>60</sup> For example, *kyedun* and other sacred substances (*dam rdzas*) were inserted into the central image of Padmasabhava in order to consecrate Pema Lingpa's temple, Tamzhing, built in the Chökhör Valley in what is present-day Bhutan. Among the items

ise to “liberate through wearing” (*btags grol*), which may be placed in a *stūpa* or alternatively inside the large cylinder of a “circumambulatory temple” (*skor khang*) which is spun by pilgrims while reciting prayers. In these cases, sensory contact is made with the structure containing texts, substances and images infused with blessings rather than with the objects themselves. Moreover, while *kutsabs* are said to liberate through seeing, we do not find a well-defined notion of “seeing” evident in relation to them, comparable to *darśan* in the Hindu context of image veneration.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the Tibetan term used for visiting a place of worship (*mchod mjal*) combines the terms for “offering” (*mchod*) and “meeting” (*mjal*) in its honorific form, rather than making a reference to seeing or any other sense. Moreover, for Tibetans, one of the quintessential gestures when visiting a Buddhist temple is to touch one’s head at the base of images and/or to rub a rosary (or other object) on a part of the central image in order to garner its blessings. This suggests that what is most fundamental is contact itself, which may be made through any one of the senses.

One could argue, in fact, that the senses are deemed to be interchangeable. In texts dedicated to one or another of the four (or six) liberations, one frequently finds inclusive statements whereby encountering the same object through more than one of the senses is credited with a comparable soteriological effect. For example, in Karma Lingpa’s corpus, in describing liberation through wearing a mantra circle, it is said that one can wear the mantra circle, hear the mantras pronounced, see (or read) the mantras, or touch the mantra circle as well as recollect and recite the mantras contained therein (Gyurme

---

listed by Pema Lingpa are a statue of Vajrasattva extracted from Naring Drak; the yellow scrolls (*shog ser*) for texts from the *Dgongs pa kun ’dus* and *Bla ma nor bu rgya mtsho*; pieces of Padmasambhava’s monastic robes; effluvia from Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyal, including their red and white *bodhicitta* (code for sexual fluids); relic pearls (*ring bsrel*) from Mañjuśrīmitra; soil from the eight charnel grounds of India; a tress of hair belonging to Princess Pemasel; religious medicine (*chos sman*), *amṛta*, and *kyedun*; an image of the Buddha; various jewels, grains, and other sacred substances (Padma gling pa 1975, vol. 14:288–89). On the inclusion of *kyedun* in *stūpas*, see Martin 1994 and Bogin (unpublished paper).

<sup>61</sup> On the centrality of “seeing and being seen” to image veneration in Hindu contexts, see Eck 1996.

Dorje 2006:348–79). Any of these modes of encounter is equally efficacious, and no hierarchy of the senses is given. The same is also true for the six mini-tantras that liberate through wearing in the *Nyingthik Yabzhi*, which also contain references to liberation through seeing, hearing, and touching.<sup>62</sup> Regarding *kutsab*, moreover, whether one sees, hears, recollects or touches such an image, it is said to be equivalent to meeting Padmasambhava in person.<sup>63</sup> This type of inclusiveness seems less true for liberation through tasting, where the other senses are downplayed (as in the opening quote of this article) and where smell clearly plays a secondary role if mentioned at all.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, inclusive statements can be found.<sup>65</sup>

Through this preliminary exploration of a soteriology of the senses in Tibetan Buddhism, it seems reasonable to surmise that the role of specific sense faculties may be less important than the act of sensory contact with saints and objects containing their relics. Indeed, direct contact with accomplished masters is surely one of the cornerstones of popular religiosity in Tibetan Buddhism. In sparsely populated areas in Tibet and neighboring regions such as Bhutan, thousands have often gathered for a public initiation and thronged the presiding lama to receive a blessing by having the top of the head touched by his or her

---

<sup>62</sup> The six short tantras dedicated to “liberation through wearing” (*btags grol*) are contained in the *Nyingthik Yabzhi*, a collection of esoteric instructions associated with Dzogchen or the “great perfection” (*rdzogs chen*). Though these tantras are meant to be worn, they also promise liberation through seeing, hearing, and touching the tantra in question. See *Btags grol gyi rgyud drug* in Klong chen pa 1975, vol. 10:16–25, for example 20.1.

<sup>63</sup> See Mchog gyur gling pa 1982–86, vol. 29:386.5–387.1, quoted above, p. 477–78. Though the text does not specify how one is supposed to hear an image, this does not fall outside the domain of what is possible for Buddhist images in Tibet. Indeed, there are images classified as “one [from whom] speech has arisen” (*gsung byon ma*). For example, Mindroling Monastery has a mural of Padmasambhava that is classed as such, referred to as: *Gu ru snang srid zil gnon gsung byon ma byin can*. See Shes bya and Dam chos bstan ’dzin 200?.

<sup>64</sup> For example, though tasting is considered most efficacious, Sodokpa nonetheless suggests that even by touching, seeing, smelling, or otherwise sensing (*tshor ba kyedun*, the gates to an unfortunate migration are closed (*ngan ’gro’i sgo gcod*) and one will be born as a practitioner of secret tantra (*gsang sngags spyod par skye*). Sog bzlog pa 1975, vol. 2:455.5.

<sup>65</sup> See note 29 above.

hand, called a “hand empowerment” (*phyag dbang*). It is also common for a lama to use a sacred object (such as an image or ritual implement) to bless participants in a ritual by placing it on the crown of the head. This type of sensory contact is a means to forge a connection (*'brel ba*) with accomplished masters,<sup>66</sup> who may be called upon to intervene in various crises including the intermediate state (*bar do*) between this life and the next. Through future studies on the four (or six) liberations and related phenomena, there is much to be learned about the function of charisma in Tibet and the role of the senses in Buddhist soteriology more generally.

## References

- Bentor, Yael  
 1996 “Literature on Consecration (*Rab gnas*).” In Cabezón and Jackson 1996: 290–311.  
 1997 *Consecration of Images and Stupas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism*. Leiden: Brill.
- Bogin, Benjamin  
 2005 “Making Brahmin’s Flesh in Tibet: The *Kyédon* Ritual and the Relic Cult.” Unpublished paper presented at *Buddhist Relics Redux* Workshop on November 5, 2005 at University of California, Berkeley.
- Byams mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas  
 1976 *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*. Paro: Ngodrup & Sherap Drimay.
- Cabezón, José, and Roger Jackson  
 1996 (eds.) *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.
- Chos kyi dbang phyug, Guru  
 1976 *Mañi Bka’ ’bum chen mo Version “A” of the Life of the famed gter-ston Gu-ru Chos-kyi-dbañ-phyug recounted in terms of his instructions of the Avalokiteśvara practice*. Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunang Topgey.

<sup>66</sup> For example, when Pema Lingpa conferred a blessing with his hand (*phyag dbang*) to a crowd of two thousand in the region of Lodrak in southern Tibet, his hagiography suggests that a “meaningful connection” (*'brel tshad don dang ldan pa*) was made through seeing, hearing and touching with the hands (Padma gling pa, vol. 14:412.6). Elsewhere, his hagiography lists three means by which a connection (*'brel ba*) is forged with an accomplished master: through a tantric initiation (*dbang*), reading authorization (*lung*) and sacred substances (vol. 14:386.4–5). Notably, his hagiography chronicles a number of large-scale events which entailed the dissemination of various types of religious medicine (*chos sman*), particularly *kyedun*.

- 1979 *Gter 'byung chen mo*. In *The Autobiography and Instructions of Gu-ru Chos-kyi-dban-phyug*, vol. 2:75–193. Paro: Ugyen Tempai Gyaltzen.
- Collins, Steven  
1998 *Nirvāṇa and Other Buddhist Felicities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cuevas, Brian  
2003 *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Doctor, Andreas  
2005 *Tibetan Treasure Literature: Revelation, Tradition, and Accomplishment in Visionary Buddhism*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.
- Dudjom Rinpoche ('Jigs bral ye shes rdo rje)  
1991 *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*. Translated by Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las  
2002 *Mkhas dbang dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las mchog gis mdzad pa'i bod rig pa'i tshig mdzod chen mo shes bya rab gsal*. Beijing: Bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang.
- Eck, Diana  
1996 *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gayley, Holly  
2003 Introduction to *The Life and Revelations of Pema Lingpa*. Translated by Sarah Harding. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.  
(forthcoming) "Ontology of the Past and Its Materialization in Tibetan Treasures." In Olav Hammer and Jim Lewis (eds.), *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gómez, Luis  
1996 *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Gray, David  
2005 "Eating the Heart of the Brahmin: Representations of Alterity and the Formation of Identity in Tantric Buddhist Discourse." *History of Religions* 45(1):45–69.
- Griswold, Alexander  
1990 *What Is a Buddha Image?* Bangkok: Promotion and Public Relations Sub-Division, Fine Arts Dept.
- Gter bdag gling pa 'Gyur med rdo rje  
1998 *Smin gling gter chen 'gyur med rdo rje'i gsung 'bum*. Dehra Dun: D.G. Khochhen Tulku.
- Gyatso, Janet  
1986 "Signs, Memory and History: A Tantric Buddhist Theory of Scriptural Transmission." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9(2):7–35.

- 1993 “The Logic of Legitimation in the Tibetan Treasure Tradition.” *History of Religions* 33(1):97–134.
- 1994 “Guru Chos-dbang’s Gter ’byung chen mo: An Early Survey of the Treasure Tradition and Its Strategies in Discussing Bon Treasure.” In Per Kvaerne (ed.), *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Fagernes 1992*, Oslo: Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, vol. 1:275–287.
- Gyurme Dorje  
2006 (trans.) *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate State*. New York: Viking.
- Harrison, Paul  
1978 “Buddhānsmṛti in the Pratyutpanna-Buddha-Saṃmukhāvasthita-Samādhi-sūtra.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 6:35–57.
- Huber, Toni  
1999 *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kapstein, Matthew  
1992 “Remarks on the Mañi Bka’ ’bum and the Cult of Avalokiteśvara in Tibet.” In Ronald Davidson and Steven Goodman (eds.), *Tibetan Buddhism: Reason and Revelation*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 79–93.  
1997 “The Royal Way of Supreme Compassion.” In Donald Lopez (ed.), *Tibetan Religions in Practice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 69–76.  
2000 *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
2004 “Pure Land Buddhism in Tibet? From Sukhāvati to the Field of Great Bliss.” In Richard Payne and Kenneth Tanaka (eds.), *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 16–51.
- Karmay, Samten  
1972 *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Klong chen pa Dri med ’od zer  
1975 *Sñiñ thig ya bzī: A Collection of Important Initiations and Instructions of Rdzogs-chen Practice*. Delhi: Sherab Gyaltzen Lama.
- Krang dbyi sun  
1993 *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*. Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Lopez, Donald  
1998 *Prisoners of Shangri-la*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Martin, Dan  
1994 “Pearls from Bones: Relics, Chortens, Tertons and the Signs of Sainly Death in Tibet.” *Numen* 41(3):273–324.  
1996 “Table of Contents (dKar chag).” In Cabezón and Jackson 1996:500–514.  
2001 *Unearthing Bon Treasures: Life and Contested Legacy of a Tibetan Scripture Revealer*. Leiden: Brill.

- Mchog gyur gling pa  
1982-86 *Treasury of Revelations and Teachings of Gter-chen mchog-gyur-bde-chen-gling-pa*. Paro: Lama Pema Tashi.
- Mrozik, Susanne  
2004 “Cooking Living Beings: The Transformative Effects of Encounters with Bodhisattva Bodies.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32(1):175–194.
- Nattier, Jan  
1991 *Once upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Padma gling pa, Rig 'dzin  
1975 *Rig 'dzin padma gling pa yi zab gter chos mdzod rin po che*. Thimpu: Kun-sang Tobgay.
- Phillips, Bradford  
2004 “Consummation and Compassion in Medieval Tibet: The Maṇi Bka' 'bum chen mo of Guru Chos-kyi dbang-phyug.” Ph.D. diss. University of Virginia.
- Reynolds, John  
2000 (trans.) *Self-Liberation through Seeing with Naked Awareness*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.
- Scherrer-Schaub, Cristina  
1994 “Some Dhāraṇī Written on Paper Functioning as Dharmakāya Relics: A Tentative Approach to PT 350.” In Per Kvaerne (ed.), *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Fagernes 1992*, Oslo: Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, vol. 2:711–727.
- Schopen, Gregory  
1977 “Sukhāvātī as a Generalized Religious Goal in Sanskrit Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature.” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 19:177–210.
- Shes bya, Mkhan po, and Dam chos bstan 'dzin  
200? (eds.) *'Og min o rgyan smin grol gling dgon gyi ngo sprod rags bsdus*. (Brochure for sale at Mindroling Monastery in Lhoka Prefecture, Tibetan Autonomous Region, PRC). No publication information available.
- Smith, Gene  
2001 *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan  
1975 *Collected Writings of Sog-bzlog-pa Blo-gros-rgyal-mtshan*. New Delhi: Sanje Dorji.
- Spiro, Melford  
1982 *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stein, R.A.  
1983 “Tibetica Antiqua I.” *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient* 72:149–223.

Strong, John

1987 “Relics.” In Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. New York: Collier Macmillan, vol. 11:275–282.

2004 *Relics of the Buddha*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Studholme, Alexander

2002 *The Origins of Om Manīpadme Hūṃ: A Study of Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Swearer, Donald

2004 *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Consecration in Thailand*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tambiah, Stanley

1984 *Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tokarska-Bakir, Joanna

2000 “Naive Sensualism, Docta Ignorantia: Tibetan Liberation through the Senses.” *Numen* 47(1):69–112.

Tulku Thondup

1997 *Hidden Teachings of Tibet*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

van der Kuijp, Leonard

1996 “Tibetan Historiography.” In Cabezón and Jackson 1996:39–56.

Vostrikov, A.I.

1970 *Tibetan Historical Literature*. Translated by Harish Chandra Gupta. Calcutta: Indian Studies: Past & Present.