

## **Keeping the Faith Alive: The Tertön as Mythological Innovator in the Tibetan Treasure Tradition**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper presents a phenomenological study of how the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism preserves its religious beliefs amidst significant external and internal cultural shifts through an agency of mythopoesis intrinsic to its theological doctrine. The Nyingma School is singular in the world of Buddhism for its recognition of tertöns, or “Treasure revealers,” who are men and women believed to possess mystical powers that enable them to discover and decipher sacred texts and religious relics hidden throughout the Tibetan landscape by Buddhist luminaries and masters of the past. These teachings and objects, known as Terma or Treasures, are then shared with the community, monastic and secular alike, to advance their quest for enlightenment and liberation in a world they perceive to be in perpetual decline. This study will demonstrate how the mythopoeic function of the tertön has been efficacious in preserving the Nyingma community’s faith in the Buddhist mythos as that mythos is communally perceived from their idiosyncratic worldview. From the specific example of the Nyingma’s Terma tradition, a general conclusion can be drawn that an internal means of mythopoesis is instrumental to the perpetuation of religious and spiritual belief systems whose worldviews become increasingly vulnerable to the momentous changes with which globalization has impacted the modern world.*

A religious tradition’s inability or refusal to adapt to tectonic shifts in political, social, spiritual, scientific, and environmental circumstances often eventuates in its gradual decline into obsolescence. Without an internal means of reinventing or transforming the belief system, the mythological architecture that had formerly housed, grounded, and oriented the existential experience of a particular culture or people will tend to depress towards collapse under the forces of acculturation or harden into the airtight fastness within which fundamentalists and nativists hunker down to shelter from the winds of change. The impacts of globalization and the advancements in science and technology in the twenty-first century have made religious belief systems more vulnerable to disintegration than ever. A belief system, whether spiritual or secular, and the worldview to which it gives shape, is arguably foundational to creating a sense of meaning and purpose in the lives of members of any community. A worldview, thus, enables a person to

experience the world *mythically*, to find oneself within a mythos. It is a way of seeing, sensing, arranging, and interpreting experience. Religious traditions, by and large, have been the principal shapers of worldviews for much of human history—but will they continue to maintain this role in an increasingly multicultural, rationalistic, and environmentally-unstable modern world?

This is a popular concern in various fields of study in the humanities, as well as for the stakeholders of religious and spiritual belief systems who may see their worldviews being threatened. This topical imperative, then, merits investigating current examples of religious communities that have been effective in adapting the mythos inherent to their worldview to the physical and cultural changes with which they have been beset by the march of time. Before moving on to the specific example with which the remainder of this study will concern itself, I would like to posit a general answer to the problem discussed thus far: a religious tradition must avail itself of an internal agency for mythopoesis to address the existential and spiritual crucibles that cosmic and temporal forces invariably thrust upon its devotees. The term *mythopoesis* and its adjectival form *mythopoeic* have been used differently by various scholars in the history of the study of myth, so some explanatory remarks as to its use in this essay are necessary. Though Doty primarily limits this term to literary applications, I follow his general definition of *mythopoesis* to mean any act of re-visioning or reinventing earlier mythical concepts and expressions; a “creative making,” as he translates it.<sup>1</sup> Mythopoesis, then, is the moving of an older mythos into a new configuration, most often one that is anticipatory of or responsive to intuitable sea changes occurring beneath the surface of contemporary culture. It functions as the adaptive quality by which the worldview of a particular community—comprised of a people with a shared sense of history and destiny, of values and hopes—can attune itself to the needs of the historical moment for its own preservation.

One religious tradition that has cultivated a mythopoeic mechanism capable of perpetuating the efficacy of its spiritual beliefs and ritual praxis is the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism. In this ancient Vajrayana sect, tertöns (*gter ston*), or “Treasure revealers,” are believed to possess mystical powers that enable those who find them to discover sacred texts and religious relics hidden throughout the Tibetan landscape by Buddhist luminaries and masters of the past and decipher their arcana. These teachings and objects, known as *Terma* (*gter ma*) or Treasures, are then shared with the community, clerical and lay alike, to advance their quest for enlightenment and liberation. Though the authenticity of some Treasures is sometimes disputed by Nyingma authorities and other Buddhist sects in Tibet, the teachings encoded in these texts have quite consistently invigorated the Nyingma tradition throughout the last millennium and are given an especial eminence in the Nyingma School that is not accorded to them by other Buddhist schools. It is the tertön’s singular capacity to introduce innovative teachings and ritual artifacts into the Nyingma tradition that has contributed largely to maintaining its spiritual efficaciousness, soteriological promise, and cultural relevance to adherents of its brand of Buddhism. This study is

not intended to evaluate the credibility or veracity of the mythical elements of the *Terma* tradition, namely the much-contested authenticity of the Treasures. Rather, it will use a phenomenological approach to examine how the Treasures and tertöns perform a mythopoeic role in the Nyingma School of Tibet that has effectively galvanized the religion over the centuries and into the present.

### **1. The Logic of Treasure Concealment: Terma Tradition as “Expedient Means”**

Vajrayana Buddhism was introduced into Tibet in the eighth century C.E., where its practitioners won the favor and faith of the ruling Yarlung dynasty that reigned from the seventh to ninth centuries. Among the enlightened sages that traveled to Tibet during this time period was the legendary tantric master Padmasambhava, often referred to as Guru Rinpoche, the Precious Teacher, who is recognized by the Nyingma School as its founder and regarded as the second Buddha. Thondup says of Padmasambhava with an insider’s conviction that “he *was* a manifestation of the enlightened ones in the form of a great esoteric practitioner and master” (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> Despite a dearth of historical data to verify the historicity of Guru Rinpoche’s influence on Tibetan Buddhism, Nyingma legend has it that Padmasambhava was summoned from India to Tibet by the king Trisong Detsen (ca. 740–798) to pacify and subdue the demons and malevolent forces that were thwarting the construction of the Samye temple that the Buddhist king had commissioned Santaraksita, the abbot of Nalanda, to build.<sup>3</sup> During his stay in Tibet, Padmasambhava performed myriad miracles and helped transform the realm into one of the richest lands of tantric Buddhism. Among the Guru’s most important contributions was his concealment of important tantric teachings, the Treasures, in the mind-streams of various disciples, which were to be rediscovered in the future by the *tulkus*, or reincarnations, of those very students and shared with the Tibetan people to deepen their spiritual understanding and offer salvific recourse in a degenerate age languishing in a perpetual state of cosmic decline.<sup>4</sup>

Being an offshoot of the Mahayana school of Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhists believe in cultivating the enlightened attitude of *bodhichitta*: the dualistic aspiration to achieve buddhahood for oneself and also to devote one’s life to assisting others in attaining buddhahood.<sup>5</sup> It is in this spirit of altruism that Padmasambhava chose to hide his sacred teachings, for they were never meant to serve the followers of Buddhism during the reign of the Yarlung dynasty; they were intended to serve the people of various epochs in the future when Buddhism would face obstacles and threats entirely unique to the temporal circumstances of those respective time periods. In addition, most of the Treasures are tantric teachings, and so are esoteric by nature. As opposed to the strict austerities characteristic of Theravada praxis or the eons-long devotion to meditation and meritorious actions taught in the Mahayana sutras, tantric Buddhism promises, though most certainly does not guarantee, liberation for an accomplished acolyte of a tantric master in a single lifetime, should the acolyte possess immaculate yogic training and his or her karmic circumstances

be favorable to buddhahood. The core tenet of the Vajrayana corpus is that an enlightened person can perceive absolute truth (nirvana) through engaging—as opposed to withdrawing from—his or her existential experience in the world of relative truth (samsara) by expedient means. This process is made possible by the empowerment transmitted by a tantric master, a guru, who instructs the acolyte how to transmute samsaric reality into that of bliss and emptiness by effectively harnessing the channels, energies, and essence of the vajra-body<sup>6</sup>, or the utterly enlightened Buddha innate within all sentient beings.<sup>7</sup> So profound are the secrets contained within the tantras that they run the risk of being misunderstood and therefore abused or mishandled by a wrongheaded or morally weak practitioner.<sup>8</sup> In a scene from the *Terma* text *Lady of the Lotus-Born*, Padmasambhava explains to King Dretsen that tantric insight is so powerful that it must be “hid / From narrow minds upon the lower paths.”<sup>9</sup> These Treasures that the tertön uncovers, then, are no inconsequential artifacts of a bygone era; they are profoundly powerful tools to a person in seek of liberation, and so must be withheld from the world until a predetermined moment in time when the designated *tulku* is intended to rediscover them.

It is around Padmasambhava’s concealment of the Treasures that the Nyingma mythology has developed; and in doing so, it has effectively institutionalized its version of Buddhism with an agency of mythopoeia. To begin with, the Nyingma School presupposes, with a sound prescience uncharacteristic of many other religious systems, that its idiosyncratic Buddhist tradition will at some point inevitably encounter cosmic, societal, or spiritual complications that will imperil its religious efficaciousness and threaten its longevity. With this dire forecast ever looming on the horizon, Nyingma authorities at some point near the beginning of the second millennium adopted the *Terma* mysteries and granted them a scriptural primacy not seen anywhere else in the world of Tibetan Buddhism. Only in the Nyingma School are the Treasure texts accorded the same status as the teachings of the Buddha.<sup>10</sup> In elevating the *Terma* teachings to the same level of veneration as the classical texts of the *Sutra* or *Vinaya Pitakas*, the Nyingma have consequently—and, in all likelihood, quite consciously—exalted the tertön to the preeminent role of mythic hero, for it is only by the tertön’s act of revealing a Treasure that the Nyingma tradition can be revitalized and safeguarded as the degenerate age unspools by uncovering tantric texts and other religious objects intended to serve the people of that particular moment in history. The following survey will examine the intricate process of Treasure transmission, concealment, and rediscovery to illustrate the means by which this unique mythological phenomenon affords the Nyingma School the mythopoeic innovation needed to sustain its spiritual potency.

## **2. Dispatches from the Realm of Immortal Light: Treasure Genesis and Transmission**

According to the Nyingma School, the *Terma* teachings originate in the same fashion that all Buddhist teachings do: from Buddha. The Treasure transmission paradigm has three stages: (1)

Mind Transmission, when the primordial Buddha (*dharmakaya*) transmits a tantra from its state of eternal emptiness by spontaneously joining minds with a Buddha (*sambhogokaya*) dwelling in an ahistorical buddha-field; (2) Indication Transmission, when the *sambhogokaya* Buddha transmits the tantra to the manifestation of a Buddha (*nirmanakaya*) that will enter samsara and manifest in various ways in order to free beings from suffering; and (3) Aural Transmission, when the *nirmakaya* Buddha, usually Padmasambhava in the *Terma* corpus, disseminates the tantra teachings to a group of ordinary human beings in a historical temporality, usually that of eighth-century Tibet.<sup>11</sup> The final stage of Aural Transmission is comprised of three phases of its own: (1) a disciple is appointed by Padmasambhava to rediscover a Treasure at a predetermined point in the future; (2) the Treasure is then embedded in the mind-stream of the disciple, which will follow the disciple through his or her various reincarnations; and (3) the teaching is normally written as a text in a symbolic script and hidden in one of the five elements, where *dakinis* are entrusted with its protection.<sup>12</sup> Once the Treasures are concealed, they can only be rediscovered by the appropriate tertön, the *tulku* of the disciple who first heard the teaching from the mouth of Padmasambhava.

To be certain, in the context of the Tibetan Treasure tradition, the revelation of a *Terma* text would not be a categorically “new” teaching, since the text had already been written down and concealed long ago. This would mean that the tertön is not at all the author of the tantras or creator of the relics that he or she discovers. The Treasures themselves were not even authored by Padmasambhava, though they entered into eighth-century Tibet through him. The Treasures, of course, originate spontaneously from Samantabhadra, the *dharmakaya* Buddha. The matter of authorship has important implications to the dynamic of mythopoeia in the Nyingma tradition. Technically speaking, mythopoeia could not be possible within the Nyingma worldview, since the tantric teachings of the *Terma* texts originate in the timeless, ahistorical *dharmakaya* realm. This is to say that there is no active mythmaking in progress—the myths (i.e., the teachings) have always existed. The tertön, thus, is not engaged in mythopoeic innovation, but merely retrieving fragments of a mythological corpus that has not been fully realized in the empirical, historical realm.

That said, when a Treasure revelation occurs, the Nyingma canon and its very self-conception as a religion nonetheless undergoes an innovative process, albeit with varying degrees of change. Though the Treasures may not be new to historical Tibet, for they were concealed long ago, they are indeed scriptural novelties to the contemporary Nyingma community. It is in fact the Nyingma School’s capacity to produce a consistent outflow of these Treasures over the years that has attracted widespread criticism from other Buddhist sects. The Treasures do indeed add to or reinterpret the classical Buddhist canon. To the greater Buddhist community, *Terma* texts tamper with the sacrosanct Dharma taught by the historical Buddha; but to the Nyingma, they enrich and elucidate the Buddha’s teachings. With regard to the latter, a brief study of the evolution of the

*Terma* tradition will illustrate how the Treasures have consistently bolstered and complemented Vajrayana doctrine over the centuries by virtue of their mythopoeic utility.

### 3. When Shafts of Light Burst into Samsara: Treasure Discovery and Classification

Treasure revelation formally debuts in Tibetan history, at least with a nascent system of *Terma* typology, in the writings of Nyangral Nyima Özer in the second half of the twelfth century, though the Nyingma tradition traces the first Treasure discoveries to the earliest centuries of the second millennium.<sup>13</sup> By this time, the former glory of the Yarlung dynasty, which collapsed under civil war during the ninth century, had become the epitome of Tibetan power and innovativeness to adherents of the Nyingma tradition, who by the eleventh century, in a temporary state of decline, had highly mythologized the Yarlung reign in their histories and hagiographies as a golden age for Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> But contemporaneous with the Treasure revelations of the first tertöns, skeptics from the newer Buddhist schools arriving in Tibet at the time authored polemics denouncing the Treasures as forgeries, interpolations, or heretical neologies. Thus, an animated religious debate was sparked, with the phenomenon of Treasure literature fueling the fire of discourse. As Nyingma apologists engaged their detractors and critics in a sustained disputation regarding the authenticity of the Treasures, a comprehensive system of taxonomy and hermeneutics evolved that enhanced the Nyingma authorities' evaluative methods of the Treasures whenever a revelation occurred, which consequently bolstered the credibility of the Treasures in the view of the Nyingma community. In other words, the *Terma* tradition was maturing from a mythical phenomenon into an elaborate religious institution.

An important hermeneutic developed out of the taxonomical studies conducted by luminaries of the Nyingma School: namely, what constitutes a Treasure. Multiple scribes and exegetics have written copiously on this subject, but one author's particular denotation of *Terma* offers a telling representation of the general attitude toward Treasures within the Nyingma community. The fifteenth-century apologist Ratna Lingpa defines a Treasure in the following words: "It is a Treasure because it is concealed. It is a Treasure because it is hidden. It is a Treasure because it is inexhaustible. It is a Treasure because it fulfills needs and wishes."<sup>15</sup> This broad definition, which clearly ignores the extraordinary, supernatural phenomena surrounding *Terma* discoveries, situates the revelatory nature of Treasures to tertöns within the mainstream of Mahayana Buddhism, whose canonical Pali texts abound in records of sutric masters apprehending profound teachings from epiphanic visionary insights, including none other than Sakyamuni himself. In addition, Lingpa's concluding qualification of a Treasure is teleological: it is purely something that "fulfills needs and wishes." Such a definition implies that historical authenticity, though certainly a matter of importance, is subordinate to the soteriological efficacy propounded by the revealed tantric text in any final assessment of a Treasure's spiritual value. In other words, the important question for

Nyingma authorities regarding Treasure authenticity is whether or not it will serve the people of that immediate time and place. Thus, the primary grounds upon which the Nyingma tradition substantiates the historical and canonical validity of its Treasures is to accentuate the inherently Buddha-esque means by which these teachings come to be revealed (i.e., enlightened actions), rather than establishing an empirically traceable connection to Buddhism's epicenter in India. Andreas Doctor articulates this point exquisitely: "The Treasure teachings repeatedly emphasize their roots in the transcendent, and the buddha of the origin account is not always a buddha figure connected geographically to India but rather to the principle of enlightenment itself."<sup>16</sup> The twentieth-century Tibetan exegetic Dudjom Yeshe Dorje (1904–1987) offers a fitting encapsulation of the general hermeneutic at the heart of Nyingma Treasure ideology, where a Treasure's lineage to the transcendent, ahistorical *dharmakaya* Buddha is privileged over an established link to the historical Sakyamuni Buddha:

None the less, some jealous persons created discord by, for example, declaring that certain of the ancient tantra had been composed in Tibet because they did not exist in India. However the non-existence of those tantras in India did not prove them to be inauthentic. Even the tantras which did exist in India did not originate there: they were brought forth by great accomplished masters from the domains of the gods, nagas, yakas, dakinis and so on...and later they were introduced to India.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, a Treasure, like any sutra or tantra, is understood by the Nyingma to be a mere reflection of the timeless reality (*dharmakaya*) that underlies and pervades the ever-turning wheel of samsara. It is the mythopoeic task of the tertön, then, to continue the Buddha's mission of unveiling the Dharma to new generations of beings in need of liberation through the revelation of Treasures.

The discovery, interpretation, and comprehension of a *Terma* text are feats, as Gyatso notes, accomplished through a system of semiotics, where signs and symbols are used to provoke some new understanding. The only understanding that Buddhism seeks to unveil is that of the Dharma, the revelation of the absolute truth underlying all existence. Treasure texts, as tantric scripture, are specific paths to arriving at this point of wisdom. One of the distinguishing characteristics of tantric Buddhism is that it uses a multitude of semiotic resources to foster an experience of enlightenment for a practitioner, such as the elaborate iconography adorning Tibetan temples, the intricate sand drawings of mandalas, and the *yidams* that are the focus of concentration in Deity Yoga.<sup>18</sup> Samsara, the material world of birth and death, is itself a system of sensorial semiotics that a siddha learns to harness in order to transcend the limitations of his or her mortal existence to experience the timeless union of bliss and light, where non-dualistic wisdom shatters all classifications and distinctions. So it should not come as a surprise, then, that the tertön's undertaking of Treasure revelation entails navigating through a network of mythical semiotics.

The process of *Terma* discovery is riddled with variances, though certain patterns do resonate throughout the historical accounts of Treasure revelations. Appendix 1 provides a detailed catalog of the semiotic aspects of Treasure concealment and revelation, and is helpful in parsing out the intricacies and nuances involved in any tertön's discovery and subsequent deciphering of *Terma* texts. The following discussion of this process, however, will focus on the most conventional steps recorded in the chronicles concerning the unveiling of Earth Treasures, material texts and objects found in a physical locality and not exclusively transmitted in and revealed in the mental realm.<sup>19</sup>

When the predetermined moment for a particular Treasure revelation arrives, a tertön is directed to the hidden location of the Treasure. These prophetic directives are made known to the tertön through any one of a common trinity of special mystical signs: during a meditative experience (*nyams*), in a dream (*rmi-lam*), or in the waking state (*dgnos*).<sup>20</sup> Oftentimes, a prophetic guide appears to the tertön as a *dakini* or even an incarnation of Padmasambhava. Before the tertön uncovers the Treasure, he or she will most likely need to pacify the *dakinis*, *nagas*, *yaksas*, *raksasas*, or other spirits charged by Padmasambhava long ago with the guardianship of the Treasure. This task is normally completed by performing a feast offering and reciting *sadhanas*, the latter of which is intended to purify the tertön before he or she can access the Treasure. With preparations completed, the Treasure is then revealed to the tertön. Most often, the Treasure is a tantric text inscribed upon what is commonly referred to as a “yellow scroll,” though the paper can be of various colors.<sup>21</sup> The scrolls are often found in caskets made of jewels, wood, clay, metals, or stone, though they may be stored in other vessels as well.<sup>22</sup> The writing on the scroll is either encrypted in the symbolic script of the *dakinis* or an indecipherable variation of Tibetan, Sanskrit, or other Indian language, either of which is translatable only to the tertön,<sup>23</sup> though there are also accounts of tertöns requiring the sagacity of a great tantric master to assist in the decoding of the script. Should the Treasures be deemed authentic by the presiding Nyingma authorities, then the Treasure will be transcribed and codified into the form of a cycle, the corpus of texts that constitute the literary presentation of a Treasure discovery to the general Nyingma community. A typical Treasure cycle includes a collation of the following texts: the tantric scripture itself (i.e., a transcription of the yellow scroll), known as the “root text”; commentaries on the tantric text; *sadhanas*, usually those recited prior to and after the Treasure's discovery; explanations of relevant ritual and liturgical concerns; and a colophon that details the Treasure's origin, its rediscovery, and biographical information about its respective tertön.<sup>24</sup>

The visionary aspect of Treasure revelations is of paramount interest to the present study of the mythopoeic utility of *Terma*. As has been discussed already, mystical insights are common occurrences in the world of Buddhism and accepted as plausible forms of enlightenment, so the sudden appearance of a *dakini* to a tertön during meditation or a dream is by no means unusual. Where this visionary interaction becomes crucial, however, is in the purpose for that incursion: to remind or awaken a long dormant memory in the mind-stream of the tertön, embedded there



centuries earlier by Padmasambhava. The memory, of course, is the location of the Treasure and the tantric teaching encoded in it. This mystical encounter with a being from a buddha-field serves as testament, at least to the Nyingma, that the “expedient means” of Padmasambhava and other Buddhas are active in the current historical period. Gyatso calls this supernatural agency a dynamics of incursion, “an incursion of the primordial and authoritative past into the present moment of the degenerate age”.<sup>25</sup> The “new” texts produced in the final Treasure cycles, then, not only offer innovative tantric teachings tailored to meet the needs of a particular people in a specific time and place, but they serve as tangible signals of the Buddha’s proactive presence in an age tipping further and further into decline and destabilization.

#### 4. Liberation Without Meditation: The Mythopoeic Utility of Non-Textual Earth Treasures

But the *Terma* texts are not the only Earth Treasures that foster faith and hope in adherents of Nyingma Buddhism. Some of the artifacts tertöns discover along with the yellow scrolls—sub-classified as Material Treasures and Wealth Treasures by Kongtrul—are recognized in the Nyingma tradition as having curative, apotropaic, or soteriological benefits, and provide another example of mythopoeia in this particular Vajrayana sect. Two of the items revealed on different occasions by the famous nineteenth-century tertön Chokgyur Lingpa are illustrative of the non-textual objects that often appear in caches of Earth Treasures: a statue said “to liberate by sight” and sacred pills made from “all buddhas.”<sup>26</sup> The statue (*kutsab*) and the pills (*kyedun*) are rather unique relics in the context of Buddhist theology. Terdak Lingpa’s corpus of *Terma* texts classifies such sacred objects as “buddhahood without meditation” (*ma bsgoms sangs rgyas*), for they are said to liberate a devotee purely through sensorial contact with the artifact.<sup>27</sup>

In the case of the *kutsab*, which translates to “representative,” these statues carved in the image of important buddhas, quite often Padmasambhava, are not understood to be icons or likenesses of a deified bodhisattva or siddha but their actual equivalents. In other words, to see or touch a *kutsab* is to see or touch Padmasambhava himself, who is said in many Treasure histories to have crafted and consecrated these statues so he could be actively “present” for the future generations of the degenerate age.<sup>28</sup> According to catalogues in Terdak Lingpa’s corpus, *kutsabs* were fashioned by Guru Rinpoche with materials gathered from celestial domains and sacred places by *dakinis*; sometimes he may have inserted the personal possessions or organic matter of a seminal figure from the Nyingma lineage or even himself into the statues, such as locks of hair, clothing fragments, bone relics, practice substances, blood, or semen.<sup>29</sup> To merely see or touch a *kutsab* transmits the blessings of a karmically-endowed siddha, like Padmasambhava, to the recipient by virtue of the sacred and sanctified composition of the statue.

Whereas the *kutsab* offers “liberation through seeing,” the *kyedun* offers “liberation through tasting.” These pills are reportedly made from the flesh of one born seven times (*skye bdun* means

“seven births”) as a brahmin, which, according to the fifteenth-century Bhutanese tertön Pema Lingpa, automatically transforms into the flesh of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.<sup>30</sup> According to Nyingma mythology, Padmasambhava hid this sacred flesh in stores of pills as Treasures, recovered later by tertöns when such sacra would be beneficial. Though the effects produced by swallowing *kyedun* have been reinterpreted over time by various tertöns and Nyingma authorities, today it is understood that ingesting one of these pills does not automatically trigger liberation, though it is certainly a possible outcome in the Buddhist worldview, but “offers the prospect of seven lifetimes of a ‘body endowed with qualities’ after which time [enlightenment] is achieved.”<sup>31</sup>

What is to be made of these relics that offer seemingly antinomian liberation within a religious system that postulates buddhahood is only attainable through meditation, a robust cultivation of *bodhichitta*, and favorable karmic circumstances that can take innumerable cycles of death and rebirth to garner? In other words, why would Padmasambhava include “shortcuts” to enlightenment among his Treasures? Gayley posits that relics like the *kyedun* and *katsub* are examples of Padmasambhava’s use of “expedient means” to help unenlightened beings onto the path of liberation who are born into a degenerate age, when “negativity is rampant, suffering is great, and dharma practice is rare.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, sensorial contact with these artifacts offers the *possibility* of liberation or a reorientation of one’s karmic disposition towards the path of liberation, but it does not *guarantee* liberation. Gayley postulates that grace-bestowal via sensorial contact with religious relics in the Nyingma tradition is determined by 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 (i.e., importance of ritual context, such as pilgrimage, temple visit, public initiation, audience with a lama), and
3. the receptivity of the individual based on their degree of faith, moral character and spiritual capacity.<sup>33</sup>

Gayley’s final factor is crucial. Buddhahood is only attainable to a mind properly oriented to the experience of awakening, a mental configuration made possible by living like a Buddha.

In reality, there are no shortcuts to liberation in Buddhist doctrine, the Nyingma School included, although many Nyingma *Terma* texts profess their capacity to liberate by one of the six senses, which Chögyam Trungpa lists as hearing, wearing, seeing, remembering, tasting, and touching.<sup>34</sup> If a person achieves liberation through a sensorial medium, as opposed to meditation, it is because that individual was mentally and morally prepared to do so. An example of this fundamental Buddhist principle is made evident throughout the famous Treasure text of Padmasambhava, revealed by the tertön Karma Lingpa, known to the West as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This funerary text is read at the bedside of a person who has recently passed away to guide him or her

through the intermediate state (*bardo*) between death and rebirth. Though this text, which is translated as *The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo* (transliterated as *Bardo Thötröl*), declares that it liberates a dying human from the cycle of samsara merely by being heard, the vast majority of it is devoted to accommodating the expiring person's failure to attain liberation while in the *bardo*. And though the *Book of the Dead* is intended to be recited to a moribund person, Lingpa states, "One should read [the *Bardo Thötröl*] continually and learn the word-meanings and terms by heart"<sup>35</sup> throughout one's life in preparation for the experience of death, which suggests, rather ironically, that the text does not in fact certainly liberate through any of the senses enumerated by Trungpa as it claims to while one is still technically alive. Once again, the dying person must be mentally and karmically oriented to attain liberation. Early in the *Book of the Dead*, Karma Lingpa recommends to the orator entrusted with reciting the text to repeat the instructions on how to recognize the Immortal Light personified in the union of Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri three to seven times so "it will remind [the dying person] of what he has previously been shown by his guru."<sup>36</sup> This demonstrates that though the objective of the *Bardo Thötröl* is to liberate the dying person, there is a presupposition that the deceased individual was previously engaged in tantric training under a master and pursuant of siddhahood, thus making him or her predisposed to a favorable passage through the *bardo*.

The above examples of "buddhahood without meditation" demonstrate that Earth Treasures reputed to generate miraculous karmic outcomes, such as health, wealth, or liberation, through sensorial contact can only confer such blessings if the votary's moral character and yogic practices are sufficiently in accord with the principles of Dharma. Much like a system of checks and balances, this class of Treasures at the least bestows upon the beneficiary—if it bestows anything at all—the confidence that a life devoted to attaining wisdom and acting with compassion will yield positive karmic consequences, and chart a clearer and quicker course to buddhahood. Such Treasures, if deemed soteriologically efficacious by those they are intended to serve, have the potential to sustain the Nyingma mythological tradition throughout the ages with each new revelation.

## **5. The Golden Anchor in the Samsaric Sea: A Coda**

Though the Treasure tradition does not preclude the possibility of an individual achieving enlightenment by sheer insight alone, it does imbue *Terma* texts, as Gyatso notes,<sup>37</sup> with a spiritual gravitas and authenticity not accorded to personal revelation by virtue of their capacity to "[link] the present 'dark age' to the celebrated past when Buddhism was introduced [to Tibet] and the [Yarlung] empire was at its zenith."<sup>38</sup> In other words, the *Terma* texts are accorded scriptural primacy in the Nyingma School for their historical connection to the golden age when Padmasambhava and his disciples brought tantric Buddhism to imperial Tibet. With every new Treasure revelation, this glorious past is united with the dark present, and not only instills in that

dark present a much needed sense of meaningfulness and hope, but offers a customized and nuanced brand of Buddhism attuned to the needs of the people in a particular historical time period.

If a religious tradition lapses into the doldrums of imaginative stagnation, becomes frozen in doctrinal calcification, or fixates on an irretrievable paradisaical past, it dispenses with the visionary foresight and hermeneutical versatility needed to adapt to and accommodate the vagaries and vicissitudes that the future inevitably keeps in store. To weather those periods punctuated by cosmic injustices and spiritual ruts, when the collective ethos has sunk to its nadir, a religious or spiritual belief system must rely on mythopoeic innovation and reinvention to invigorate the life-furthering, soul-orienting potency it was always intended to effect in its followers. With regard to the *Terma* tradition in Tibet, it is indeed possible that as long as tertöns can produce Treasures of persuasive soteriological value for the Nyingma community that its brand of Buddhism will continue to prosper in its corner of the world, animating the faith and hope of the people whom it is meant to guide towards enlightenment and liberation.

### Appendix 1. Aspects of Semiotic Feats in the Concealment and Revelation of Treasure Texts<sup>39</sup>

Aspect	Description	Tibetan Rendering
1. Encryption of Treasure	Treasure is encrypted (usually) in a <i>dakini</i> alphabet following the Tantric Empowerment Ceremony.	“type of letters” ( <i>yig rigs</i> )
2. Presentation of Treasure	At the appropriate time in the future, the tertön comes into physical or psychological contact with the hidden text through one of three media.	“introduce to” ( <i>ngo sprod</i> )
A. Key	Treasure code is deciphered through a key.	“key” ( <i>lde mig can</i> )
B. External presentation	Empirical object, person, or event unveils Treasure to tertön.	“certainty through circumstances” ( <i>rkyen las nges</i> )
C. Internal presentation	Treasure is hierophanically unveiled by a sudden psycho-spiritual event within the tertön.	“without regard for [an alphabet or external circumstances]” ( <i>gnyis la mi ltos</i> )
3. Revelation of Treasure’s meaning	The variety of ways the Treasure’s encrypted meaning becomes understood to the tertön.	“set out” ( <i>god tshul</i> )
A. Symbol mnemonic	Tertön unlocks the Treasure’s meaning quickly after identifying a character or symbol in the text itself (i.e., pictorial cue).	“just an appearance” ( <i>snang tsam</i> )
B. Evocation	Two modes by which the tertön unlocks Treasure’s meaning after being reminded of its contents from particular cues.	“just a support” ( <i>rten tsam</i> )
i. Textual mnemonic	Tertön unlocks the Treasure’s meaning after reading the title, introduction, or some other sections of the text (i.e., literal or phonetic cue).	“evocation by a section of text” ( <i>dngos skul byed</i> )

ii. Memory mnemonic	Two ways that a tertön unlocks the Treasure’s meaning by recalling signaling memories from a past life.	“evocation through a recollection” ( <i>rjes dran skul byed</i> )
ii. a. Direct recollection	A section of encoded text prompts the reader to recall peripheral events of the time and place when Treasure was initially revealed to him/her, normally from a Tantric Empowerment Ceremony with Padmasambhava.	
ii. b. Indirect recollection	An internal or external event jolts a past-life memory to consciousness prompting an epiphanic unveiling of the Treasure’s meaning (e.g., hearing the word “diamond” reminds the discoverer of a Treasure concerning Vajrasattva, “The Diamond Being”).	
C. Divine revelation	Treasure simply “descends” ( <i>beb</i> ) unsolicited to the tertön and makes its meaning known.	“freely put forth” ( <i>thar chags</i> )

## Endnotes

1. Doty 2000, 464.
2. Thondup 1994, 50.
3. Thondup 1994, 53. These menacing spirits and malignant agents are most likely mythologized avatars representing the ministers and pantheon of the Bön religion. Chapter seven of the Padmakara Translation Group's version of the *Terma* text *Lady of the Lotus-Born*, discovered by the tertön Taksham Samten Lingpa, recounts this historical clash in a highly dramatic and fantastical debate between Buddhist adepts and Bön wizards competing for the king's sponsorship and consequently the religious sovereignty of Tibet.
4. Gyatso 1986, 11.
5. Watson 1997, 6.
6. Thondup 1994, 17.
7. Mahaffey 2013, 6.
8. Changchub and Nyingpo 2002, xxiv.
9. Changchub and Nyingpo 2002, 21.
10. Gyatso 1986, 7.
11. Thondup 1994, 46.
12. Thondup 1994, 69.
13. There is discrepancy in the scholarship on chronology here. Gyatso locates the first revelations in the tenth century (1986, 7), while Doctor places them in the eleventh century (2005, 31).
14. Gyatso 1993, 113.
15. Quoted in Doctor 2005, 35.
16. Doctor 2005, 41.
17. Quoted in Doctor 2005, 42.
18. Mahaffey 2013, 3.

19. In his anthology of Treasure revelations entitled *Store of Precious Treasures*, the nineteenth-century hagiographer Jamgön Kongtrul developed the most recent and thorough taxonomy of Treasures, which falls into various sub-classifications under two main categories: Earth Treasures, which are discussed above, and Mind Treasures, which are revealed purely from the mind-stream of the tertön where Padmasambhava originally concealed them, negating the need of a material text or object; see Doctor 2005, 26.
20. Gyatso 1993, 109.
21. Earth Treasures, it should be noted, are often a trove of materials found along with the yellow scrolls. For example, in his *New Treasures* chronicle of the great tertön Chokgyar Dechen Shigpo Lingpa (1829–1870), Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo records the following inventory of a Treasure uncovered by Lingpa in the vicinity of Sengchen Namdrak on June 12, 1857: the cycle of *Six Scrolls of the Sacred Teaching*, a secret manuscript, a crown belonging to Padmasambhava, a seal belonging to prince Murub Tsenpo, robes belonging to the Buddha, and spiritual medicine prepared by Garab Dorje; see Doctor 2005, 90.
22. See Thondup 1994, 70. For instance, Khyentse records that at Bumdzong Lake the tertön Chokgyar Lingpa was given a yellow scroll of the *Embodiment of the Realization of the Dharma Protectors* by a *naga*, who brought the Treasure to the surface of the lake in a stone container held between its teeth; see Doctor 2005, 91.
23. Thondup 1994, 69.
24. Gyatso 1986, 8.
25. Gyatso 1993, 132.
26. Doctor 2005, 91.
27. Gayley 2007, 487.
28. Gayley 2007, 477.
29. Gayley 2007, 479.
30. Gayley 2007, 470.
31. Gayley 2007, 471.
32. Gayley 2007, 491.
33. Gayley 2007, 489.



34. Fremantle and Trungpa 2003, *xi*.
35. Fremantle and Trungpa 2003, 93.
36. Fremantle and Trungpa 2003, 37.
37. Gyatso 1986, 11.
38. Doctor 2005, 19.
39. All Tibetan terms and their translations are taken from Gyatso 1986, 18–21.

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