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Saving the Dead: Tibetan Funerary
Rituals in the Tradition of the
Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra

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Buddhists have long viewed death as a source of anxiety and rupture while, at the same time, consider the dying process a potent and unique opportunity for transformation. Many Buddhist traditions maintain that with some combination of the right training, guidance, and conditions, the dying can avert undesirable rebirths, secure a more favorable future—ideally in a Buddha’s paradisaal realm, or achieve liberation from *saṃsāric* existence altogether. Indeed, the tradition’s repertoire of funerary practices encompasses a range of approaches to guide individuals of all ranks as they navigate the uncertainties of the afterlife.

To this end, Tibetan Buddhists have for centuries enlisted resources from the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra* (hereafter the SDP), or *Purification of All Negative Rebirths*, an Indian yoga *tantra* first translated into Tibetan in the late-eighth century, as well as the many commentaries and funerary manuals it inspired. While popularized works like the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or *Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, have attracted the lion’s share of scholarly (and mainstream) attention,¹ the history and impact of the SDP tradition in Tibet and beyond remains relatively unexplored.²

¹ See Donald Lopez, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2011); Bryan Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

² Rory Lindsay highlights a few notable exceptions: Kris L. Anderson, “Raising the Dead and Saving Them: Transformations in Funerary Manuals of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra*” (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2022); Tadeusz Skorupski, *The Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra: Elimination of All Evil Destinies* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1983); Leonard van der Kuijp, “Notes Apropos the Transmission of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra* in Tibet,” *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 16/17 (1992): 109–25.

With *Saving the Dead: Tibetan Funerary Rituals in the Tradition of the Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra*, Rory Lindsay sheds important new light on the SDP, tracing the *tantra*'s historical development in Tibet, its ritual logics, and the influence it exerted over the centuries following its initial reception. Through textual-historical analysis, Lindsay investigates the considerable influence the SDP had on Sakya hierarch Drakpa Gyaltsen (Grags pa rgyal mtshan, 1147–1216) and the polemical nerve he struck among prominent Sakya scholars, as seen in the debates orbiting around his writings well into the seventeenth century.

In addition to advancing the study of Tibetan mortuary practices and postmortem concepts, Lindsay's first monograph, a refined version of his 2018 doctoral dissertation, has much to offer in terms of theoretical contributions. Influenced by anthropologists and critical theorists like Alfred Gell and Bruno Latour, Lindsay explores the intersecting forms of agency—human, nonhuman, and material—that are operative in the SDP and SDP-inspired works.

Readers will benefit from the book's wide range of sources, lucid chapters, and thoughtful organization. Beginning with a captivating and orienting introduction, the study proceeds chronologically and methodically through four main chapters, each revolving around a set of stimulating conceptual questions. Exploring questions of authority and authenticity, the first chapter establishes the SDP's early history in Imperial Tibet—including its role in the royal funerals of Tibetan kings—as well as its translation history and the controversial nature of its transmission. Here we learn how this *tantra* constitutes part of the earliest strata of Buddhist funerary practices in Tibet at the state level.

The second chapter explores conceptions of agency at work in Drakpa Gyaltsen's *Light Rays for the Benefit of Others: The Rituals of Sarvavid*, questioning who—or what—possesses the power to liberate the dead. We discover that salvific agency is not centralized, but diffused among a broad

range of actors, including ritual experts, deities with which they merge, material objects, and the ritual environment itself. The following chapter on “death ritual polemics” demonstrates how understandings of ritual agency were far from unanimous, but strongly disputed, seen especially in the heated exchanges between Bodong Panchen (Bo dong Paṅ chen Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1375/6–1451) and Gorampa (Go rams pa Bsod nams seng ge 1429–1489) as they debated Drakpa Gyaltsen’s *Light Rays*.

In addition to providing an overview of *bardo* theory in India and Tibet, the final chapter revisits two contrasting “necroliberative paradigms” wherein the dead are framed either as passive recipients of liberating last rites or as agents capable of securing their own freedom, so long as they have the proper guidance and training. These divergent models of “postmortem agency,” Lindsay argues, reflect a distinction between yoga *tantra* and highest yoga *tantra*, which is embodied in texts such as the SDP and *Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* (*Bardo Thodol*), respectively. After exploring shifting perceptions of the soteriological capacities of the living and the dead, Lindsay then turns to the bridge-building work of Amnye Zhab (A mes zhabs Ngag dbang kun dga’ bsod nams, 1597–1659), one of the few Sakya polymaths who embraced ritual innovation in his attempts to integrate *bardo* theory into the SDP’s ritual system.

Throughout the book, the author weaves together different textual sources, spanning genres like *tantra*, commentary, narrative, and liturgy, as well as accounts from early European travelers to Tibet and other biographical vignettes that bring depth and color to the lives and legacies of the book’s protagonists, which, in this case, includes the SDP itself. Many of these protagonists are further brought to life in fourteen black-and-white illustrations that the author commissioned from Vietnamese artist Doan Trang. Most striking of all is the intricate line drawing of the Sarvarvid *maṇḍala*, which has the effect of inducting readers into the elaborate ritual world the text creates.

Lindsay's study of Tibetan necroliberative rites encourages us to consider the exhortative power of ritual texts themselves and the unique ways that tantric technologies—with their use of *maṇḍala*, *mudrā*, *mantra*, and visualization—enable an intermingling of identities between human and more-than-human beings like buddhas and bodhisattvas. What *Saving the Dead* reveals is the extent to which this “mesh of textual, human, divine, and material agencies” (136) interanimates ritual environments, contributes to ritual success, and does the work of liberating the dead.

Building on the theory of agency advanced by Gell in his now-cult classic, *Art and Agency* (1998), Lindsay seeks to push conceptions of agency beyond the human. Lindsay recognizes the limitations of Gell's framework, observing that it is less concerned with how material things (keyed as insentient “secondary agents”) operate as agents in their own right than with the conditions under which “primary agents” (that is, conscious human beings) come to perceive objects as agent-like. Aware of the anthropocentric bias embedded in this formulation, Lindsay turns to Bruno Latour's (2005) Actor-Network Theory in search of a more expansive model of agency. Ultimately, however, he retains intentionality as *the* decisive criterion for distinguishing between primary and secondary agents, arguing that this distinction most closely aligns with the language and conceptual commitments operative in SDP-oriented works (10–11).

Within the resulting, Gell-inflected hierarchical model of agency that Lindsay adopts, material objects are inevitably defined by their subordinate status as “secondary [agents] that extend human and divine agencies” (24). From my perspective, this hierarchy is problematic insofar as it overlooks the dynamic variability and circularity of agent–patient relations, particularly in tantric ritual contexts where agents often shift positions. This critique, however, does not diminish the sophistication of Lindsay's observations or the elegance of his translations, nor does it detract from the value of his textual-critical work tracking shifting registers of agency across this network of neglected Indian and Tibetan sources.

Another distinction that may call for further consideration is the line drawn between the SDP and the *Bardo Thodol* based on their divergent visions of postmortem agency, which is mapped more globally onto yoga *tantra* and highest yoga *tantra* categories. In Chapter Four, Lindsay explores these two different “necroliberative models,” emphasizing that in works like the *Bardo Thodol* the dead are framed as primary agents capable of securing their own freedom, whereas the dead of the SDP are largely passive wanderers in need of rescue (233–236). This view may be prevalent among New School (Gsar ma) traditions, but the picture is not so clear cut according to Old School (Rnying ma) perspectives on the *bardo* teachings. *Sarvadurgati* rituals are specifically intended for individuals with no training, which helps explain why its “other-power” ethos is so pronounced. However, the *Bardo Thodol*—and *bardo* teachings more generally—are not only limited to advanced practitioners capable of self-liberation, but are also viable for individuals with little or no yogic training, even animals. As Old School views make clear, the *bardo* teachings encompass a range of possibilities that vary depending on the practitioner’s level of training, operating along a sliding scale between self-power and other-power techniques.³

In terms of Lindsay’s own methods, his monograph employs a rigorous blend of philology and social, institutional, and intellectual history. Only in passing, however, does the author mention insights he gained from on-the-ground participant observation, be they from Boston, where he first witnessed a Tibetan Buddhist funeral performed according to SDP protocols, or from his year in Kathmandu, Nepal, where Lindsay was in dialogue with Tibetan monk-scholars about the *tantra* and its

³ The “liberation through wearing” section that concludes the *Bardo Thodol* illustrates the point that these instructions can confer liberation simply by their being worn as a *mantra* amulet on the body at the time of death, regardless of an individual’s spiritual training or acumen. For more, see Dorje Gyurme, trans., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Penguin, 2005), 343–349.

commentaries. Insisting that any serious reflection on contemporary practices is better “left to anthropologists” and beyond his scope, as Lindsay does in the book’s final pages, only exacerbates an old divide between textual study and ethnographic work. The supposed incompatibility and estrangement between these two methodological camps is long overdue for a reappraisal. I believe that incorporating reflections grounded in close engagement with contemporary communities would only enrich an already robust textual study.

None of these unexplored opportunities detract from the book’s valuable contribution to the concentric worlds of Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, offering rich new insights as it does on an overlooked current of Tibetan funerary practices and death rituals. Caring for the dead in ritually efficacious ways, as Lindsay demonstrates, was both a major concern for Tibetan scholastic elites and a generative, albeit contested, site that brought tensions to the fore. Matters of death and the afterlife have been central foci for Tibetan scholars, prompting them to grapple with issues of authenticity and ritual efficacy, as well as critical questions around how to balance fidelity to tradition with the need for ritual innovation.

Saving the Dead brings into sharper relief one of Buddhism’s most influential and enduring yoga *tantras* as well as the vast network of lives, works, and materials with which it intersects. As such, Lindsay’s monograph marks a significant step forward in SDP studies and also opens many doors for future research. It promises to be a useful resource for scholars, researchers, and graduate students interested in tantric Buddhist ritual, funerary practices, *bardo* theory, Sakya literature, textual transmission and authority, polemics, agency, and the role of humans in a more-than-human world. The generous spirit of Lindsay’s scholarship is also reflected in the fact that the book is open access and freely available. For those seeking to enrich their perspectives on the diversity of Buddhist approaches to death, dying, and the afterlife, *Saving the Dead* is not to be missed.

Notes on the Contributor

Julia Hirsch is a PhD candidate in Buddhist Studies at Stanford University, where her research focuses on Buddhist material religion, including Buddhist perspectives on the body, ritual, relics, death, and dying. Her work has been featured by *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*.

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