

Rolf Scheuermann

«ONE WILL QUICKLY DIE!»  
PREDICTIONS OF DEATH IN THREE  
TIBETAN BUDDHIST DIVINATION MANUALS

Since there is no certainty with respect to time, one does not know the time of death: whether an old man or an infant that was born yesterday, one does not know who will die first<sup>1</sup>.

Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po (1110-1170)<sup>2</sup>

*Introduction*

It is common knowledge that death is the inevitable end of life and that a human's life-span is also uncertain. Questions such as «When will I die?», «When will my beloved ones die?» or «What can one do to prolong life?» have been relevant for people across all time periods and cultures. Death is an ever-present source of existential fear. Hence, it is understandable that individuals seek out specialists to inquire about the time and circumstance of death. Even if one were to receive a precise answer to such a question, however, detailed death predictions would certainly create even more unease among the majority of those making the enquiries.

Looking at traditional forms of prognostication, such as Tibetan divinatory practices, many scholars will object that these are based on superstitious beliefs and are an irrational type of knowledge;

1. R. Scheuermann (tr.), «Illustration of Fourfold Mental Reorientation, Stages of the Path for the Three Types of Beings (*Skyes bu gsum gyi lam rim blo bzlog bzhi*)», in *When Sūtra Meets Tantra – Sgam po pa's Four Dharma Doctrine as an Example of his Synthesis of the Bka' gdams- and Mahāmudrā-System*, Wien 2016, 273. For the Tibetan, see *ibid.*, 260: *dus la nges pa med pas nam 'chi cha med de rgad po zhig dang byis pa mdang skyes shig sngon du gang 'chi cha med*.

2. Influential Tibetan Buddhist master and founding father of the Phag gru bKa' brgyud tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

hence the term «rejected knowledge»<sup>3</sup> may be applicable. Yet, in Tibet, where the European Enlightenment did not play a role prior to the Chinese invasion of 1950, divinatory practices were (and still are) an accepted and specialized form of knowledge.

Tibetans generally distinguish between the life-span (*tshe*), the life-force (*srog*), and the vitality (*bla*). Vitality is a factor that supports the life-force, and if either the vitality and/or the life-force decline, or the life-span is exhausted, life is said to come to an end<sup>4</sup>. According to the law of karma, cause and effect, the life-span is determined by the imprints of karmic actions and it is therefore considered possible to strengthen the life-force, i.e., prolong one's life, by accumulating meritorious acts (*bsod nams*). In this regard, divination is used to determine the condition of one's life-force, vitality, and life-span as well as the methods for improving the situation at hand.

In order to do so, one consults an astrologer (*rtsi pa*) or diviner (*mo pa*), who can either be a Buddhist monk or a specialized layman and woman. They use a wide variety of prognostic methods that are employed for all kinds of purposes, such as everyday decision-making, medicine, and religious matters. One of the early nineteenth-century researchers who first described Tibetan Buddhist divination techniques was Emil Schlagintweit. He dedicated a chapter of his influential *Buddhism in Tibet* to this subject and the following quotation from the introduction to the chapter provides a good example of the ethnocentrism with which many Western scholars of the time approached the issue:

The Tibetans, like all primitive nations, attribute to the position of the sun in reference to the constellations, to the planets, to the direct active interference of gods and spirits, and such like, a very considerable influence upon the welfare of man in this and in future existences<sup>5</sup>.

This judgment is particularly problematic if one considers that the use of different divinatory methods has never reached an end but

3. W. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, New York 2012.

4. Interestingly, the concept of vitality is not addressed explicitly in either of the three texts examined in this paper. Still, when they suggest that there either is or is no interference by spirits, this, of course, has to do with vitality as it is believed that spirits are able to steal or harm a person's vitality.

5. E. Schlagintweit, *Buddhism in Tibet*, Leipzig 2007, 290.

remains a widespread phenomenon even in our Western post-enlightenment era. Now and then, here and there, there are contingencies that need to be dealt with, which make people turn to prognostic methods. While a Tibetan merchant may enquire from a diviner or an astrologer about the outcome of a future business transaction, a European stock manager may adhere to astrological stock market predictions<sup>6</sup>.

In the Tibetan context, we find practices that examine and interpret signs conveyed via dreams, the flickering of butter lamps, coincidences, astrological constellations, and natural phenomena or animals (e.g. bird divination). Quite common are also techniques that involve coins, dice, rosaries, mirrors, scapulimancy, ropes, and the drawing of lots. The latter method has, for example, been used to determine the reincarnation of important masters, by writing the names of prospective candidates on dough balls that are then drawn out from a vase. Moreover, identifying a reincarnation of an important personality can also be seen as a way of expanding the legacy of a person beyond physical death. Oracles and spirit-mediumship are widespread phenomena in the Himalayas. An important example in Tibet is the famous Nechung state oracle, which acts as an advisor to the Dalai Lama. The medium falls into a trance and utters statements said to occur in a state of possession by the spirit, which are then interpreted by the Dalai Lama. A further form of future-telling common in Tibet is that of prophecies, which are performed by Lamas who are deemed to possess the power to foresee the future based on their training in meditation. These visions are often written down in the form of poems or songs<sup>7</sup>.

### *Three Practices*

Among the many divination practices in Tibet, this contribution focusses on three specific techniques on the basis of their associated

6. Gimpl and Dakin already compared traditional techniques of decision-making with more recent ones used by economists. M. L. Gimpl and S. R. Dakin, «Management and Magic», *California Management Review*, 27.1 (Fall 1984), 125-36.

7. For an overview of the different practices, see R. Nebesky-Wojkowitz, «Oracles and Demons of Tibet», The Hague, 1956, 409-66. Cf. D. Tseten, «Tibetan Art of Divination», in *Tibetan Bulletin*, (March/April 1995).

divination manuals, and examines in particular the question of how they address the subject of death prediction<sup>8</sup>. While these three practices show considerable variation, they cannot do justice to the diversity of divinatory techniques common in Tibet. A thorough treatment of the subject would, of course, require that one examines and compares a plethora of different practices.

The three divination manuals are the following:

1. Rosary Divination prophesied by Jetsun Tāra to Lord Atiśa or rje btsun sgröl mas jo bo rje dpal ldan a ti sha la lung bstan pa'i 'phreng mo<sup>9</sup>
2. How to Examine Good or Bad [Omina] by Means of the Elephant Ritual Associated with the Protectress of the Doctrine (A phyi Chos kyi sgröl ma) or bsTan srung chos kyi sgröl ma'i glang po'i cho gas bzang ngan brtag pa<sup>10</sup>
3. The Words of the Delightful Mañjuśrī, or How to Examine What Should be Adopted or Rejected Through Relying on the King of Awareness Mantras or Rig sngags kyi rgyal po a ra pa tsa la brten nas blang dor brtag pa 'jam dpal dgyes pa'i zhal lung<sup>11</sup>

The three practices described in these manuals share several features: they are linked to a Buddhist deity; they include lists with possible results of divinations that can serve as a reference for the diviner; and they are still in use today. In all three of these texts, moreover, the lists of individual results of the divination are further subdivided into different subjects of enquiry. The most elaborate classification is found in the latest of the three manuals, the nineteenth-century *Words of the Delightful Mañjuśrī, or How to Examine What Should be Adopted or Rejected Through Relying on the King of Awareness Mantras*. It contains the following elevenfold subdivision that is used throughout the work:

- (1) Body and life-force (*gzhi srog*); (2) Ideas and aims (*blo don*); (3) Friends and wealth (*grogs nor*); (4) Enemies (*dgra*); (5) Visitors (*mgron po*); (6)

8. This textual study thus complements Barbara Gerke's excellent work on the life-span in astrological and divinatory contexts. B. Gerke, *Long Lives and Untimely Deaths*, Leiden 2012, part four.

9. Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), <https://www.tbrc.org/>, W23716, 63-73.

10. BDRC, W00JW501203, CI, 166-79. Cf. BDRC, W30287, II, 135-60.

11. BDRC, W23468, V, 349-94. Cf. BDRC, W2DB16631, XXIX, 649-87, and BDRC, W5062, IV, 326-75.

Sickness (*nad*); (7) Evil spirits (*gdon*); (8) Buddhist religion (*chos*); (9) Lost things (*bor ba*); (10) What will happen or the outcome (*'ong ngam grub pa*); and (11) All remaining questions (*dri ba lhag ma*).

These categories organize the responses and allow the diviner easily to navigate through the text. In the other two manuals, responses to these issues are also given, but these are less organized and do not always cover each category for every result. This study focusses particularly on responses that concern the subject of «body and life-force», but also draws in part on the categories of «sickness» and «evil spirits».

1. *Rosary Divination prophesied by Jetsun Tāra to Lord Atiśa*

If one takes the manual's title literally, the rosary divination (*'phreng mo*) described in this manual is attributed to the famous Indian master, Atiśa Dīpaṃkāra Śrījñāna (982-1054), who visited Tibet in the eleventh century and is believed to have received this practice through a revelation by the Buddhist female deity Tāra<sup>12</sup>. The work is part of an anthology published in 1997 that contains twenty-two divination texts<sup>13</sup>. Rosary divination in general is a widespread practice in Tibet that – as its name suggests – uses an object that every Tibetan Buddhist always carries: the Buddhist rosary (*'phreng ba*) with 108 beads. The text begins with a short visualization of each of one's hands as they hold the rosary: «One visualizes a moon disc (that arises) from the (syllable) *a* in one's right hand and a sun disc (that arises) from the (syllable) *ram* in one's left hand»<sup>14</sup>. This is then followed by a salutation that addresses the three jewels<sup>15</sup>, the lineage of the *gurus* or teachers, the Buddhas and

12. For a study of Atiśa's life and activity in Tibet, see A. Chattopadhyaya, *Atiśa and Tibet. Life and Works of Dīpaṃkāra Śrījñāna in Relation to the History and Religion of Tibet. With Tibetan Sources*, Calcutta 1981 (first ed. 1970).

13. Konchok Lhadrepa, *Mo dpe sna tshogs*, Delhi 1997. BDRC, W23716.

14. BDRC, W23716, 68<sub>1-2</sub>: *rang gi lag pa g.yas pa a las zla ba'i dkyil 'khor g.yon ram las nyi ma'i dkyil 'khor du sgom*].

15. The three jewels or *triratna* in which Buddhists take refuge: the *buddha* or the awakened one, the *dharma* or his doctrine, and the *saṅgha* or the assembly of disciples.

Bodhisattvas, Atiśa, the Three Lords<sup>16</sup>, and finally the goddess Tāra. An invocation addressed to a deity or deities, along with the recitation of associated mantra(s), is relatively common at the beginning of divinatory practices in Tibet. Although this is not mentioned explicitly in the text, it may be assumed from the presence of this salutation that the rosary is blessed before the divination in the course of the invocation.

The main text then consists of two sets of reference lists for the diviner, which provide a detailed account of the individual divination results. Which reference list is to be used depends on how the divination is conducted, as explained below. The text is concluded by the following brief colophon that explains the extraordinary origin of the practice:

[This] concludes the rosary divination. This rosary divination was revealed by (the deity) Tāra to the Glorious Lord Atiśa when he visited Tibet<sup>17</sup>.

The attribution of authorship to the Indian Buddhist master Atiśa, which is also reflected in the title of the manual, is highly questionable. Since Tibetan Buddhists consider doctrines stemming from India to be particularly authentic, it is common for the authorship to be liberally attributed to Indian Buddhist masters. In the present case, no further evidence is available to suggest that this practice may indeed be traced back to the famous Atiśa, and it might therefore be no more than a generic attribution. Furthermore, a text quite similar to the present one has been attributed to another prominent Indian luminary of the twelfth century, Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas<sup>18</sup>. Rosary divination is also common in the Bon tradition and has been mentioned in the Old Tibetan Dunhuang Chronicles<sup>19</sup>. Hence, this practice is probably best understood as a folk-practice of unclear origin.

16. Three important Buddhist deities that represent the qualities of the Buddha: Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi.

17. BDRCC, W23716, 73: *'phreng mo rdzogs so | 'phreng mo 'di jo bo rje dpal ldan a ti sha bod la byon pa'i dus su sgrol mas lung bstan pa yin no |*.

18. For Dan Martin's transliteration and partial translation of this work, the *Pha dam pa sangs rgyas kyi 'phrungs mo*, which is based on a manuscript in the Johan van Manen Collection at the Leiden University Library, see D. Martin, *Padampa's Rosary Divination*, <http://tibeto-logic.blogspot.co.il/2013/05/padam-pas-rosary-divination.html>.

19. C. N. Norbu and D. Rossi (tr.), *Light of Kailash*, Arcidosso 2009, I, 203-4.

The actual divination is performed by holding the rosary in front of oneself in both hands, thereby dividing it into two parts, and then subtracting the beads from each side three at a time<sup>20</sup>. This is continued until only one, two or three beads remain<sup>21</sup>.

Here, the more detailed interpretation is conducted in two different ways, by interpreting either a single or three consecutive results. The two different reference lists that make up the remainder of the text therefore consist of the individual combinations and their interpretations for each of these two approaches.

The following three excerpts present the passages related to death predictions, contained in the reference list that offers interpretations for two consecutive results<sup>22</sup>:

[1-3]: If one is followed by three, [...] as for the fortune with regard to the life-force: one's body undergoes a transformation and one's mind<sup>23</sup> will move on (*ming spo*). Engage in the practice of liberating lives! Light butter lamps for a day! For whatsoever [this divination] has been cast, it is bad<sup>24</sup>.

[3-2]: If one remains ill for a long time, there is a risk that one will die. Particularly for women suffering from diseases caused by insects or microorganisms (*bu srin nad*), it is bad. Someone who chases a (karmic) debt is around you, i.e., a so-called spirit. One should recite the *Uṣṇīṣavijaya* [*-dhāraṇi*]<sup>25</sup>, pray to the personal deities, recite the \**Āryasuvarṇasatanāma*-

20. This is indicated in the following line preceding the reference lists: BDRc, W23716, 64<sub>2</sub>: 'phreng ba gnyis su bcad de gsum du'dren no |.

21. Other rituals that involve rosary divination often classify the three possible results as follows: one bead is called a falcon (mostly good), two beads are called a raven (mostly bad), and three beads are called a snow lion (mildly positive/neutral). However, this type of classification is not employed in the present method. See Tseten, «Tibetan Art of Divination».

22. This section spans approximately five folios: BDRc, W23716, 64<sub>2</sub>-69<sub>1</sub>.

23. Literally, the Tibetan term *ming* (Skt. *nāma*) means name, but in the technical term *ming gzugs* (Skt. *nāma-rūpa*), or name and form, which describes all mental and physical aspects that make up the individual, it refers to the mental aspects.

24. BDRc, W23716, 65<sub>1-4</sub>: *gcig phyir gsum byung na | ... srog phywa la lus bsgyur ming spo | sems can tshe thar thong | mar me nyin spar gyis | ci la btab kyang ngan par 'dug* |. Saving lives and offering butter lamps are common practices that are performed to accumulate good *karma*, often with the intention of improving an individual's *karma* and preventing negative karmic imprints from ripening.

25. This refers to the mystic formula of the *Uṣṇīṣavijaya-dhāraṇi*. BDRc, W22348, I, 251-56.

*Mahāyānasūtra-huṃe*<sup>26</sup>, and pray to the *Dgra lha-s*<sup>27</sup> in case of enemies<sup>28</sup>.

[3-3]: If one has a disease, it is deep-rooted, but one will not die [from it]<sup>29</sup>.

The first of the three short predictions seems to imply that the body of the person disintegrates and, in accordance with the Buddhist principle of reincarnation, that the person's mind will move on towards a future existence. This notion resembles the third line of the fourth stanza that deals with death and impermanence in rGyal sras Thogs med bzang po's (1295-1369) famous *Thirty-Seven Practices of the Bodhisattvas* (*Rgyal sras lag len so bdun ma*): «(At the time of death), consciousness, the guest, has to depart from the guest house of the body»<sup>30</sup>. The text further suggests that practices commonly used to improve one's karma should be applied. In particular, animal release practices such as liberating lives (*tshe thar*) that is mentioned here, are commonly believed to prolong an individual's life-span, which indicates that there is still hope for the person that is the subject of the inquiry. In the case of liberating lives mentioned here, one's own animals, particularly the livestock raised to be eaten, should be set free. According to the Buddhist law of karma, i.e., the law of cause and effect that accompanies each and every action, it is believed that the result of a deed always corresponds to the nature of the deed committed. Hence, prolonging the life of a being will therefore produce a positive effect on one's own life-span, in this or

26. Tib.: 'Phags pa gser 'od dam pa mdo sde'i dbang po'i rgyal po las g.yang skyabs. This apocryphal text is considered an abstract of the Suvarṇabhāṣot-tama-Sūtra, but may have originated in Tibet. See D. Berounsky, «Tibetan myths on «good fortune» (phya) and «well-being» (g.yang)», in *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia* '14. *Ethnolinguistics, Sociolinguistics, Religion and Culture*, 7, no. 73-75.

27. *dGra lha* (also *dGra bla* and *sGra bla*) are a type of non-human deity that are often – but not exclusively – called upon to defeat one's enemies. For details, see T. Gibson, «Dgra-lha: a Re-Examination», *The Journal of the Tibet Society*, 5, 67-72.

28. BDRC, W23716, 68<sub>1-4</sub>: *gsum phyir gnyis byung na* | [...] *yun ring nad pa yin na 'chi nye che* | *khyad par bu srin nad pa'i mo la ngan no* | *bu lon snyeg mkhan gyi phyi nas 'dre zer ba 'dug* | *gtsug tor don* | *lha gsol* | *g.yang skyabs 'don* | *dgra ngo 'dug pas dgra lha gsol* ||

29. BDRC, W23716, 67<sub>5-6</sub>: *gsum phyir gsum byung na* | [...] *nad pa yod na nad gzhi che yang mi 'chi* |

30. BDRC, W1CZ895, 38v<sub>2-3</sub>: *yun ring 'grogs pa'i mdza' bshes so sor 'bral* | *'bad pas bsgrubs pa'i nor rdzas shul du lus* | *lus kyi 'gron khang rnam shes 'gron pos 'bor* | *tshe 'di'i blos btang rgyal sras lag len yin* ||.



a future lifetime. In this respect, the first of the three predictions indicates a more severe case than the second one, where a certain risk of dying appears to be present only if the disease becomes chronic, and different remedies are prescribed in the text, such as reciting specific scriptures and prayers. Finally, the third verdict is not completely negative as it predicts that the current situation, however severe it may appear, will not lead to a fatal outcome. All in all, only one of the nine possible results, a one followed by a three, produces a highly negative outlook, and one further result, a three followed by a two, leaves at least room for the possibility of death.

As mentioned earlier, a further way to perform this divination is by examining three consecutive results, i.e., a set of two rounds that is performed three times, making a total of six individual examinations. In this section, individual entries in the reference list are not organized around numbers as in the previous section, but the results are referred to simply as good (here marked as +) or bad (marked as -). Accordingly, the first entry on the list is introduced by saying, «As to three good results [that are to be obtained] by casting the divination three times»<sup>31</sup>. In this context, it should be noted that a result that is classified as good with respect to an inquiry into a certain subject may be considered bad in the context of an inquiry into another subject.

The following three excerpts present the passages related to death predictions contained in the reference list that offers interpretations of three consecutive results<sup>32</sup>:

[+,+,+]: If [this divination] is cast for a sick person: one should recite 20,000 times the *Uṣṇīṣavijaya[-dhāraṇi]*<sup>33</sup> and/or the Amitāyus[-*mantra*]<sup>34</sup> in order to expand the aspect of time, practice the ransoming of the life-force<sup>35</sup> with respect to those whose death is certain, or offer a number of

31. BDRC, W23716, 69<sub>2</sub>: *mo lan gsum btab pa'i gsum bzang na* |.

32. This section spans approximately four and a half folios: BDRC, W23716, 69<sub>2</sub>-73<sub>3</sub>.

33. See fn. 25.

34. The Buddhist deity Amitāyus and the different mantras associated with it are the focus of many rituals that are applied to increase an individual's life-span.

35. The practice of ransoming the life-force (*srog bslu*) is another animal release practice similar to liberating lives (*tshe thar*), mentioned earlier. It focuses on animals raised for slaughter that belong to someone else rather than on one's own livestock, as in the case of the practice of liberating lives.

clay figurines (*tsha tsha*)<sup>36</sup>. Since the fortune with regard to the life-force of a sick person is bad, one must be careful. One should perform many water and votive cake-offerings<sup>37</sup>. One needs to subdue the *the'u rang* spirits<sup>38</sup> that inflict harm and tie up [their] mouth<sup>39</sup>. As for all other matters, there is no problem and it is good<sup>40</sup>.

[+,+,-]: As for the fortune with regard to the life-force: since there are defilements and impurities, there will be danger. Sickness occurs, but since the cause of the illness is not grave, there is no harm to the life-force. Offer 400 Uṣṇīṣavijaya votive cakes<sup>41</sup>.

[-,-,-]: [As for the] fortune with regard to the life-force: one will quickly die<sup>42</sup>!

The first result presented, three good results [+,+,+], is a typical example showing that the same result can be considered as good or bad depending on the context. While the outlook is good for basically all matters, it is seen as a bad result if the inquiry was made with regard to the life-force of a sick person. Still, as with the second one, two good results followed by a bad one, the case is not hopeless and different remedies are prescribed. This is quite different in the case of the third result listed above, i.e., three consecutive bad results, which uses drastic language, i.e., «one will quickly die». Still, in total, there are only three bad results with regard to this inquiry, which are clearly outnumbered by the good predictions.

36. Tibetan clay figurines (*tsha tsha*) are ritually produced for different purposes such as offerings, ensuring protection and funeral gifts. They often depict Buddhist deities, and a popular type contains the three deities of long-life: Amitāyus, Uṣṇīṣavijaya and Sitaṭāra. See D. Berounsky and L. Sklenka, «Tibetan Tsha-Tsha», *Annals of the Náprstek Muzeum*, 26 (2005), 59–72.

37. Water and votive cake-offering (*chab gtor*) are apotropaic rituals that involve the offering of water and small dough balls.

38. A potentially harmful type of spirit that belongs to the class of elemental spirits (*'byung po*). They are often venerated in order to gain wealth and fortune, but are easily offended.

39. It is unclear how the mouth of the spirit could be tied up (*kha 'ching*), but this may refer to a representation of the spirit that is used in a ritual or to a ritual that is performed to bind the spirit.

40. BDR, W23716, 69<sub>5</sub>-70<sub>1</sub>: *nad pa la btab na dus phyogs kyi rgyas pa | nyi khri gtsug tor tshé dpag med 'don | 'chi nges pa'i srog bslu | tsha tsha* [Text: *tshwa tshwa*] *lo grangs thong | nad pa'i srog phywa ngan pas zab dgos | chab gtor mang du thong | the'u rang skyal 'debs kyi* [Text: *kyi*] *mnan pa dang kha 'ching dgos | gzhan ma ci yang mi nyes bzang ngo* |.

41. BDR, W23716, 70<sub>5</sub>-6: *srog phywa la grib dang mi gtsang bas nyen blang | na tsha yong ste nad gzhi cher med pas srog la mi skyon | brgya bzhi gtsug tor gtor ma gton* |.

42. BDR, W23716, 73<sub>1</sub>: *srog phywa myur du 'chi* |.

2. *How to Examine Good or Bad [Omina] by Means of the Elephant Ritual Associated with the Protectress of the Doctrine (A phyi Chos kyi sgrol ma)*

The second manual under examination is attributed to 'Bri gung Rig 'dzin chos kyi grags pa (1595-1659), the first Chung tshang Rin po che of the 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud tradition who was active at 'Bri gung mthil monastery, Central Tibet. It lays out a particular type of raven augury, and the existence of an English translation suggests that is still in use today<sup>43</sup>. Bird divination is already attested in ancient authoritative Tibetan documents from Dunhuang<sup>44</sup> but, strikingly, the focus of this practice here is neither the observation of the raven's flight nor its cries, as in other common forms of raven augury in Tibet, but how the raven approaches an elephant-shaped effigy<sup>45</sup>. The practice involves an elaborate ritual that centers on the female deity, A phyi Chos kyi sgrol ma. The term A phyi literally means «grandmother», which refers to the origination myth connecting her with a historical person, the grandmother of Jig rten gsum mgon (1143-1217), founder of the 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud tradition. Accordingly, A phyi, who is considered to be a wrathful type of deity who protects the Buddhist doctrine, a so-called *dharmapāla*, has been prominent in the 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud-tradition until today. While the manual was presumably written in the seventeenth century, its colophon<sup>46</sup> informs us that it builds upon several older

43. Online: [http://drigung.com/elephant\\_liturgy.html](http://drigung.com/elephant_liturgy.html) (last access May 9, 2017).

44. For bird divination in ancient Dunhuang documents, see A. Nishida, «Bird Divination in Old Tibetan Texts», in *Current Issues and Progress in Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Third International Seminar of Young Tibetologists*, Kobe 2012, Kobe 2013, 317-41.

45. On the spread and different forms of raven augury, see E. Mortensen, «Raven Augury from Tibet to Alaska. Dialects, Divine Agency, and the Bird's-Eye View», in *A Communion of Subjects. Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*, New York 2006. Cf. also B. Laufer, «Bird Divination among the Tibetans», *T'oung Pao*, 15 (1914), 1-110.

46. See the colophon of this work: BDRC, W00JW501203, vol. 101, 1785-179.; *zhes glang po'i cho ga bzang ngan brtag pa'i thabs 'di'ang skyob pas mdzad pa dang | dpe ka dbang rgyal dang | nyer bryad pas mdzad pa rnams cung zad go dka' zhing 'thor ba zhig 'dug par brten |*.

commentaries written by sKyob pa (’Jig rten gsum mgon), dPe ka dbang rgyal<sup>47</sup>, and Nyer brgyad pa<sup>48</sup>.

Elements of the complex tantric rituals that accompany the divination include extensive offerings, the construction of elaborate votive cakes, and the assembly of ritual objects. We will confine our focus here to those aspects relevant to our examination. At the core of this practice is the production of an effigy made of dough, representing a white or blue elephant with an upward-curling tail. It bears a saddle on which a jewel, probably a wish-fulfilling jewel (*cintāmaṇi*), is placed. After extensive invocations and prayers, which constitute the largest part of the manual, this effigy is then placed outdoors in a clean place to be eaten by the ravens along with further votive cakes.

One then examines and interprets the part of the effigy that is eaten first by the raven, a subject that is dealt with briefly at the end of the text<sup>49</sup>. In this reference list, which indicates the good and bad omina, 16 different locations are addressed, of which the last two are of particular interest here:

If the tail is eaten, it is extremely bad, and apotropaic rituals can hardly avert it, [but] otherwise [it will be] worse. If the buttocks are eaten, it is extremely adverse. That does not sustain the life-force. [...] Even apotropaic rituals cannot avert it<sup>50</sup>.

Immediately following this passage, a short section sums up the previous explanation by providing an overview of omina in accordance with individual subjects of inquiry. Under the header, «Fortune with regard to the life-force», we are informed again that: «[Eating] the buttocks and the tail is an extremely bad [omen]».

At the very end of the section on omina, a few general observations are offered regarding this ritual. For example, if the crows start

47. This might refer to Jig rten gsum mgon’s grandfather, sNgags chang dPe ka dbang rgyal (12<sup>th</sup> cent.). See E. Sperling, «Some Notes on the Early ’Brig-gung-pa *Sgom-pa*», *Silver on Lapis. Tibetan Literary Culture and History*, 33-53 (Indiana 1987), fn. 14.

48. This might refer to Nyer brgyad pa rDo rje rgyal po (1284-1350). *Ibid.*, fn. 21.

49. BDRC, W00JW501203, CI, 176<sub>6</sub>-78<sub>3</sub>.

50. BDRC, W00JW501203, CI, 177<sub>4</sub>: *mjug ma zos na shing tu ngan te zlog pas log thub tsam ’ong* [W30287: *tsam ’ong*: W00JW501203 *cing*] *gzhan ngan* | *rkub zos na shing tu log* | *de srog mi ’tsho* | [...] *zlog pas kyang mi log pa yin no* |..

with the votive cakes before pecking at the elephant effigy, the ritual must be repeated<sup>51</sup>, while if the ravens become scared and fly away, rituals of confession and restoration with respect to the religious commitments of the ritualists are required, so one should pay attention to maintaining pure ethical conduct<sup>52</sup>.

One of the general observations is again of particular interest regarding the subject under examination:

If the ravens do not come to eat from the support (i.e., the elephant effigy), it is also an omen indicating harm/death and the like for the practitioner (*yogin, mal 'byor pa*)<sup>53</sup>. It is extremely bad<sup>54</sup>.

### 3. *The Words of the Delightful Mañjuśrī, or How to Examine What Should be Adopted or Rejected Through Relying on the King of Awareness Mantras*

The last of the three divinatory practices is the most recent of the three. It is widely used today in Tibetan communities, but also in the West due to the existence of an English translation<sup>55</sup>. As its title suggests, it relies on the male tutelary deity Mañjuśrī, but the title also contains an interesting wordplay. «Delightful Mañjuśrī» or 'Jam dpal dgyes pa in Tibetan is not only the name of the deity but also an epithet of the author, the famous 'Jam mgon Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846-1912), who played an important role during the so-called non-sectarian or Ris med-movement in Eastern Tibet during the nineteenth century.

The practice is performed using a simple six-sided die on which the six syllables of Mañjuśrī's mantra [om] *a ra pa tsa na dhīḥ* (Skt. om

51. BDRC, W00JW501203, CI, 178<sub>3-4</sub>: *glang po mi za ba'i* [Text: *ba*] *sngon la gtor ma za na | da dung bskyar nas gtong* [W30287 *btang*] |.

52. BDRC, W00JW501203, CI, 178<sub>3</sub>: *zhed* [W30287 *zhed*: W00JW501203 *zhad*] *nas bros na bskang bshags bya gtsang sbra la 'bad* |.

53. According to Khenpo Konchok Tamphel, University of Vienna, the term *mal 'byor pa* or «practitioner» refers here to the client for whom the divination is undertaken. Another possible interpretation would be to relate the term to one of the practitioners who participate in the ritual.

54. While one of the two available editions reads «harm» ('*tshé ba*) here, the other reads «death» ('*chi ba*). BDRC, W00JW501203, vol. 101, 178<sub>3</sub>: *bya rog rten* [W30287 *bstan*] *zar mi 'ong mal 'byor par* ['*tshé* W30287: '*chi*] *ba sogṣ shing tu ngan* |.

55. J. Goldberg and L. Dakpa (tr.), *Mo. Tibetan Divination System*. Ithaca, 1990.

*arapacana dhīḥ*) are written instead of numbers, i.e., *dhīḥ* replaces one, *ra* two, *pa* three, *na* four, *tsa* five, and *a* six. Following a short invocation to Mañjuśrī and the repeated recitation of the six-syllable mantra, as well as the recitation of the *dhāraṇi* of *praṭītyasamūtpāda* or dependent arising<sup>56</sup> three or seven times, the question is asked and the die is tossed twice<sup>57</sup>. The sequence of the two syllables is then compared with the reference list in the divination manual. The entry for each of the results in the reference list is arranged in accordance with the 11 subjects of inquiry mentioned above. In this divinatory system also, the majority of the results are favorable.

The following overview highlights the explanations that address negative predictions with respect to the life-force found in this text:

- *ra-pa* (2-3): As for the body and the life-force, there are death and great obstacles. Undust [texts that contain] Buddhist teachings and engage in the (apotropaic) *Khro bo rol pa'i gtor zlog*-ritual<sup>58</sup>.
- *pa-ra* (3-2): As for the body and the life-force, even though there is no immediate problem, since it is hard to say in the long run, one should engage in meritorious deeds<sup>59</sup>.
- *pa-tsa* (3-5): As for the body and the life-force, there are obstacles and great turbulences<sup>60</sup>.
- *tsa-pa* (5-3): As for the body and the life-force, even though it is unfavorable in all respects, and there is great separation, scattering and destruction, [the situation] will be responsive to healing rites<sup>61</sup>.
- *na-ra* (4-2): As for the body and the life-force, there is instability and great obstacles<sup>62</sup>.

56. For details on the *dhāraṇi* of dependent arising, see C. Kemp and R. Scheuermann (trs.), *The Sūtra on Dependent Arising*, 2016, <http://read.84000.co/#UT22084-062-012/title>.

57. Cf. BDR, W23468, 350<sub>2-3</sub>.

58. BDR, W23468, 361<sub>2</sub>: *gzhi dang srog phywa* [Text: *cha*] *la shi ngo dang bar chad che* | *bka' chos rdul sprugs dang khro bo rol pa'i gtor zlog bya* |. An apotropaic ritual involving the scattering of votive cakes, called *Khro bo rol pa'i gtor zlog*, is prominent in the bKa' brgyad tradition of the Rnying ma school. Cf. BDR, W23695, II, 339-49.

59. BDR, W23468, 368<sub>2</sub>: *gzhi srog la 'phral du mi skyon kyang phug cung zad 'dzer bas tshogs bsags* |.

60. BDR, W23468, 370<sub>2</sub>: *gzhi srog la gegs chags tshub cha che* |.

61. BDR, W23468, 377<sub>2</sub>: *gzhi srog gang la'ang mi mthun bye bral 'thor zhiḡ che yang rim 'gros lan* | |.

62. BDR, W23468, 383<sub>2</sub>: *gzhi dang srog phywar mi brtan gegs chags che* |.

It seems that only five of the 36 possible results can be classified as negative, but there is actually a sixth one, the combination *tsa-na* (5-4)<sup>63</sup>. In general, this is a bad result regarding all matters, but unfortunately the description for the aspect of the body and life-force is missing from all of the editions that I have consulted<sup>64</sup>. Yet, in the English translation of the work, one finds the following description: «The outlook is unfavorable»<sup>65</sup>. While it is, of course, possible that the translators had access to a complete edition, the wording tallies perfectly with the explanation and the English translation given for this result in the general section: «All remaining matters. They are not favorable»<sup>66</sup>. Hence, while the phrase may have been added to the English translation for the sake of completeness, they are certainly right that the combination *tsa-na* indicates a negative result of the divination.

In all of these cases, the result is not as bad as it first appears, as it leaves room for the application of remedies, either explicitly or implicitly. While the prediction associated with the combinations *pa-tsa* and *na-ra*, for example, do not explicitly prescribe a remedy, the formulation is relatively vague and the term «obstacle» (*gegs*) immediately suggests that the application of specific rituals, i.e., «the removal of obstacles» (*gegs sel*), may prove beneficial.

The great majority of predictions are favorable, particularly all combinations that include the syllables *a* (6), which symbolizes the Buddhist principle of emptiness, and *dhīḥ* (1), a syllable associated with the deity Mañjuśrī. Despite the fact that the majority of the results are indeed good, they sometimes appear to imply a condition, such as emphasizing the need for rituals or religious practice. The combination *a-dhīḥ* [6-1], for example, leads to this result: «As for the aspect of the body and life-force, if one performs long-life rituals that rely on female deities, one's life-force will be firm and stable»<sup>67</sup>.

63. All other results are either clearly optimistic (no remedy required) or generally optimistic, but suggest also precautionary rituals.

64. BDRc, W23468, BDRc, W2DB16631, and BDRc, W5062.

65. Goldberg and Dakpa, *Mo. Tibetan Divination System*, 96.

66. Goldberg and Dakpa, *Mo. Tibetan Divination System*, 97. BDRc, W23468, 380<sub>6</sub>: *lhag ma'i dri ba thams cad la mi dge ste* |.

67. BDRc, W23468, 357<sub>1-2</sub>: *gzhi dang srog gi cha la lha mo la brten pa'i tshes grub byas na tshes srog gzhi brtan* |.

### *Conclusion*

Based on the various predictions related to the life-force and death in the manuals under examination, the great majority of predictions are positive, and those that are not are rather mildly phrased and are usually accompanied by a prescription for remedies to avert a feared future circumstance.

It is important to note that the formulations tend to be highly ambiguous, as already observed by Barbara Gerke in the context of other Tibetan divinatory techniques, where she concludes that answers «typically follow a pattern of ambiguity»<sup>68</sup>. In the examples introduced here, only a few formulations are relatively explicit, among which the statement «One will quickly die!» certainly stands out but, even here, there is still a degree of uncertainty. While the word «quickly» implies that death will occur soon, the exact moment in time is not defined.

Quite generally, for Tibetan Buddhists, the future is not a given. It is neither written in a book nor is there an irreversible fate awaiting human beings, not even the wicked. Here, the Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising may become visible, the idea that things come about due to causes and conditions. Predictions are considered to point out a very likely future that, in most cases, may still be subject to change if causes and conditions are influenced in the right way. As long as an event has not occurred, or the causes and conditions for it to appear have not been assembled so that its appearance becomes irrevocable, there is still room for negotiation in the form of medicine, rituals, accumulating merit, long-life empowerment and so on. Still, the life-span cannot be extended limitlessly and there is the idea of a maximum life-span, which is considered to be a result of previous karma or meritorious actions and can only be extended in particular cases, as pointed out by Gerke:

Among Tibetans, the full completion of the life-span is expressed in the idea of the «maximum life-span» called *tshe lo* or *tshe mthar phyin pa* (lit. «fully completed life-span»). *Tshe* in general is not seen as fixed, since merit can always be collected and negative karma be purified. It appears to be

68. Gerke, *Long Lives and Untimely Deaths*, 221.



easier for the family and relatives to accept the inevitable death when the «maximum life-span» has been achieved, and a divination states that «nothing can be done» to extend life. The *tshe lo* is usually not extendable, except in the case of yogic or tantric masters, who are said to control their *tshe lo* by controlling their breath<sup>69</sup>.

An important aspect in the passage quoted above is the consoling effect that a divination may have on the family of a dying person, releasing them from the responsibility to do everything possible to prevent their loved one from dying before the time has come. In this sense, a prediction like «One will quickly die!» in the *Rosary Divination Prophesied by Jetsun Tāra to Lord Atiśa*, which differs clearly from the remaining ones discussed here in regard to its tone, can make perfect sense. It may also give the family time to prepare for elaborate rituals and funeral expenses that go along with the death of someone.

As mentioned before, the diviner can influence the outcome of this divination by deciding to stop after a single negative result that would leave more room for negotiation and the prescription of remedies, or to continue with two further confirmative rounds which, in the worst case, establish the extremely negative result. Hence, the diviner can make use of this leeway to engage in counseling.

Different death predictions are closely linked to rituals and remedies, which are seen as effective aids for prolonging one's life, depending on the problem that has been diagnosed. In most cases, even a very negative prediction does not rule out the possibility that something can still be done, thereby urging one to seek out a doctor or ritual specialist. Since many of the methods mentioned call for the necessity to involve a ritual specialist, often in the person of the diviner him- or herself, an economic dimension cannot be denied. Furthermore, where there is no reference to a remedy in the manual, the diviner often has the leeway in the decision-making to suggest one at his/her own discretion depending upon the context and his/her own experience. This corresponds to what Gerke called «situational agency»<sup>70</sup>. Still, if the diviner should advise the client on the basis of the divination that nothing can be done, it could also be

69. Gerke, *Long Lives and Untimely Deaths*, 201-3.

70. Gerke, *Long Lives and Untimely Deaths*, 287.

an active choice that aims to console the family of the client or serve as a reminder to devout Buddhists to start to prepare for the unavoidable, and what is merely seen as part of what the Buddha called «the truth of suffering» – death.

ABSTRACT

Rolf Scheuermann, «*One Will Quickly Die!*» – *Predictions of Death in Three Tibetan Buddhist Divination Manuals*

In the Tibetan cultural environment, various techniques aimed at coping with the uncertainty of the future play an important role in the everyday lives of individuals. They range from the observation of omina, geomancy and astrology to oracles and prophecies. Yet another category, *mo*-divination, comprises different techniques that involve coins, dice, rosaries, mirrors, ropes, scapulimancy, and the drawing of lots using doughballs. By briefly introducing three diverse Tibetan Buddhist divinatory practices, this article analyzes the predictions related to death contained in the associated manuals, supported by translated excerpts of relevant passages.

Rolf Scheuermann  
IKGF Erlangen  
rolf.scheuermann@fau.de

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