

The Influence of the Epic of King Gesar of Ling on Chögyam Trungpa

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CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE was an important figure in a movement of Tibetan Buddhist thought that flowered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Ri-me (*ris med*), or Eclectic school. The leaders of this movement, scholars and masters of meditation, came from different lineages or sects of Tibetan Buddhism. One even represented the native, non-Buddhist religion of Tibet, Bön. They combined the teachings and practices of their different lineages to produce a new synthesis, one that allowed followers of any school to use the best teachings from the other schools. In his eleventh incarnation Trungpa Rinpoche was groomed to be a leading spokesman of this movement and to advance its program in the monastic/academic society of Northeastern Tibet, a region that borders China.

As we will see, the Eclectics were not just a syncretic philosophical movement; some among them seem to have had a sociopolitical vision as well—a vision of how mundane society and mystical religion should be united. We will find this program in no political text, for the study of politics, as we have it from Plato and Aristotle, did not exist in Inner Asia. In that arid and sparsely populated region where nomadic pastoralists predominated, there was no such thing as a polis, a city, as we know it. There

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was no such geographical entity that could have generated a government one would theorize about. Whereas Greece had city-states or empires, Northeastern Tibet had nomadic groups and centers of trade, the Chinese empire to the east, and examples of burgeoning nomadic confederations such as the Mongols along the Silk Route.

The Tibetan oral epic of King Gesar of Ling presents an extensive and detailed description of an idealized nomadic government formed by a Tibetan tribe known as the Mukpo clan, which gradually expands to become an empire-sized nomadic confederation. The Eclectic movement used images from this immense corpus of oral and literary materials to construct its views on the nature and function of government. Trungpa Rinpoche in his Western mission called this “enlightened society”—the theory that there is a certain good way to combine religion, government, and society.

Enlightened Society

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was not only a Buddhist religious teacher but a cultural leader. He devised a set of teachings on how Buddhist culture could apply to the first and future generations of Western Buddhists and outlined a philosophy to describe what he thought Buddhist cultural influence on the secular West should be. These ideas were presented to the public in museum shows, poetry readings, and performance situations at Naropa Institute, the university he created in Boulder, Colorado. To his students he delivered his ideas on the role of Buddhist culture in society in a more systematic form under the rubric of enlightened society.

The idea of enlightened society is that the Buddhist path is not simply a way to escape suffering and the wheel of rebirth and not simply a way of helping others to do this, but also a way of life reflecting the vision and values (if I may use that term) of the buddhas.

Those of us who are not yet enlightened live in samsara, cyclic existence, the realm of illusion. Samsara is one shore—“this shore”—of a river. On the “other shore,” beckoning us to cross the flood, are the enlightened ones themselves, the buddhas of the three times and ten directions—a universe of beings who have transcended samsara, time, and space. Standing on this shore, we confused beings have our own point of view. When we look to our left and right, we see our fellows in samsara and the confused world we have built—a world where, as Marcus Aurelius

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might have said, we assent constantly to false judgments about phenomena and our own mental life.

Across the waters we see the tiny, distant figures of the buddhas calling us to join them. When we climb into boats and row across the river toward the buddhas, the figures of our fellows in samsara become gradually smaller and smaller, while our fellow travelers stay the same size, and the buddhas gradually grow in our vision as we approach their shore. The ship rocks, and we must row constantly. However it is worth the effort, because in the end we will find ourselves in the society of enlightened ones, who “go from bliss to bliss,” whereas the samsaric people “go from suffering to suffering.”

The life we lead in the boat crossing the river of suffering to gain the other shore of enlightenment is what is meant by enlightened society. In developing a visionary sense of how this enlightened society will be, point of view is everything. We cannot truly occupy the point of view of the buddhas, for we are still confused beings. But we no longer see our lives from the point of view of those on “this shore,” the samsaric shore. The virtues we develop and attempt to practice are based on the “other shore” of the buddhas.

There were several components to Trungpa Rinpoche’s vision of the possibility of an enlightened society. The moral code had its grounding in conventional Buddhist ethics. For example, the first principle one absorbed to regulate action in society was the hinayana precept, “First do no harm.” This means that the beginner or intermediate student may not be able to tell what is precisely the right thing to do in a given circumstance, but at least one can make sure one’s behavior harms no one. In his play *Strange Interlude*, Eugene O’Neill wrote, “We must all be thieves where happiness is concerned.” “Do no harm” prevents a principle of selfishness such as this from being put into action, no matter how it seems to coincide with what Western materialists would call, ironically enough, enlightened self-interest.

The central conception of enlightened society is the set of mahayana ethical principles known as the six perfections, or more literally, the virtues of “having gone to the other shore” (*paramita*). These were practiced by knights of enlightenment called bodhisattvas. Trungpa took the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit term *sattva* (Tib. *sems dpa’*) to be “mind warrior,” *pa* being the word for a warrior or knight. He said that

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the central virtue of the bodhisattva path was the courage such a warrior must show.

Trungpa Rinpoche's strict definition of the six paramitas was based on Chandrakirti's *Madhyamakavatara*, which he obviously used for one of his greatest early seminars in America, "The Ten Bhumis." But beginning in the 1980s, he reformulated these ethical principles using a different set of metaphors and systems of signifiers, drawn from the *Kalachakra Tantra* and the *Epic of Gesar of Ling*. The epic was a work that drew upon teachings native to Inner Asia and influences from Chinese thought and literature.

In its modern forms the Tibetan epic shows vast influences from the syncretism of the Yuan dynasty, which combined what we might call Mongol multiculturalism with the philosophical language and bureaucratic infrastructure of the Confucian state. This influence followed quite naturally from the patron-guru relationship that Tibetan high lamas had with the Yuan emperors. It can be seen in the performances and visual representations of the Tibetan oral epic, wherein the warriors wear the armored uniforms and bear the panoply of heroes from Chinese novels, particularly *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*San guo yen yi*) of Luo Guanzhong. The Kangxi emperor explicitly associated this novel with the Gesar epic in the Mongol translation of the epic he published.

The Qing dynasty was also ruled by the descendants of an Inner Asian nomadic confederation, and so the syncretism of the epic continued to have state support in modern times. In the 1950s, when the Communists began to exert their influence on studies of the Tibetan epic, they regarded it as a valid folkloric composition of the Tibetan and Inner Asian minorities of China. In this way, they continued the theme of multiculturalism, which favored the literary, political, and religious syntheses shown in the epic.

Thus, when Trungpa Rinpoche used the language of the Gesar epic to characterize the political and cultural philosophy he taught in his lectures on enlightened society, he was following a venerable tradition of the post-antiquity period in Sino-Tibetan thought. Therefore, he deployed in his political theory the Confucian ideals of natural hierarchy, heavenly mandate, and heaven, earth, and man. Without using the word itself, he presented a Buddhist theory of the Confucian notion of "humanity."

In enlightened society as Trungpa envisioned it, leadership would come from philosopher kings who possessed the mandate of heaven be-

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cause of their wisdom. These kings were able to unite philosophical ideals with practical politics by having the principle of man uniting heaven and earth. The king was the man principle, which joined heaven as ideal with earth as reality. Following that logic, every person in an enlightened society who was trained in political leadership or who provided cultural leadership performed the same function of joining heaven and earth.

The deities that enlightened society would rely on were organized according to heaven, earth, and man as well. They were ordered according to heavenly gods called *lha*, gods of mountains and natural geography called *nyen* who joined heaven and earth, and gods of the waters called *lu* (Skt. *naga*), which were the earth principle. *Lha*, *nyen*, and *lu* matched heaven, earth, and man and numerous Buddhist metaphysical triads. The rituals of enlightened society included the *lhasang*, smoke-offering rituals in which a column of smoke joined the earthly world of the altar with the divine world of the skies. Even technology, the arts, and artisanal products were analyzed according to this principle. Trungpa thus evoked the Confucian classics in his political philosophy and invited into his theory the ritual system, the calendrical astrological theory, and the alchemical science of classical Chinese philosophy.

This fit well with Tibetan medicine, which involved a vast amount of Chinese medicine, native Tibetan religion, and, as we shall see, the cosmology of the Gesar epic, where the most elaborate image of enlightened society was found. It also fit with the calendrical culture of the Kalachakra, which included the Chinese system of elements.

Northeastern Tibet was not a land of cities and political centers, but a vast alpine pastoralist economy on the border of a huge agrarian empire. The Gesar epic in the edition that Trungpa probably knew depicts the region of Golok in Amdo/Qinghai as a place that developed a model for an enlightened society. The epic, in fact, is an idealizing narrative describing the founding of such a society in the course of a series of epic wars.

Many epics, of course, perform a similar function, depicting an ideal society at war or being given birth to by war. Eighteenth-century European literary theory regarded the *Iliad* in this way, Voltaire claiming that Agamemnon, for example, was the image of an ideal king. Virgil's *Aeneid* is still seen this way in contemporary criticism, and all the conscious descendants of these two epics continue the theme of idealizing the political

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identity of a people. Presenting an ideal politic is one of the epic's methods of delivering to its natural audience materials for their sense of self-identity. We learn who we are by reading the epic of our people. The Gesar epic, as we shall see, was used in its home province as a basis for constructing religious and political identity.

The Eclectic school's version of the Gesar epic was thus available to Trungpa as a political model, and he used this school's theorization of the Gesar as a basis for his own missionary dispensation of mystical religion as a public religion, attempting to re-create in the West the cultural program that was being born in Eastern Tibet just as the Chinese invasion began.

The Gesar Epic as a Popular Mystery Text

The version of the Gesar epic that Trungpa used is today read by all Tibetans, but it was closely connected in his youth with a region of pastoral nomads just adjacent to the area of influence of Trungpa's monasteries.

A public text may be universally available and part of a national discourse and yet at the same time have a special and peculiar life in a particular region. This is so for certain biographical texts in Tibetan esoteric Buddhism. Even though the teachings and practices of Tibetan tantra are secret, in a given region there are sometimes a set of texts that exist to make the secret public property, so that an esoteric religion, a religion whose practices and teachings are secret, may nevertheless be in one place the public practice of all the people.

I am thinking here of texts that the great American Tibetanist E. Gene Smith calls *rgyab* texts, literally "back" texts. These are narratives that feature tantric heroes undergoing spiritual training and gaining enlightenment through esoteric techniques. Smith calls them back texts because they serve as general background reading for the study of the secret materials. They are public in themselves and very popular: songs from these texts are on the lips of the common man, and famous passages are known by the public. Nevertheless, in seeming violation of codes of initiatory secrecy, they give a public key to secret teachings.

For example, any literate Tibetan can read *The Life of Milarepa* by Tsang Nyön Heruka and the collection of autobiographical songs that accompany it, *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. These two narrative works show how an ordinary man gained enlightenment through the prac-

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tice of the tantric system of meditation known as *mahamudra* (great symbol). The system of mahamudra exercises is complicated and must be performed stage by stage over a lifetime of asceticism, yogic exercises, subtle rituals, and meditation practices. Every stage is preceded by initiations that are given only to the faithful after they have proved themselves to their guru and taken vows of obedience and loyal commitment. Stage after stage the disciple journeys from one secret to another in this path, secret within secret, mystery secreted behind mysteries.

Actually, however, it seems that every secret teaching of mahamudra is mentioned, described, and illustrated in the course of Milarepa's two-volume biography, a perfectly public document. The songs describe something of how Mila visualizes tantric deities, even though in theory one must receive an abhisheka or initiation in order to have the right to do those visualizations. They describe Milarepa's experience in doing the inward yogic exercises in which one controls the energies (Skt. *prana*; Tib. *rlung*) that run along channels (Skt. *nadi*) in the subtle body. In general a person must do a three-year retreat in order to receive instructions in these yogas; the manuals that describe the exercises are extremely hard to obtain. But the songs of Milarepa are a rgyab text, a back text, to this tradition, and so the songs mention the yogas and describe them a bit. There are even sections where Milarepa describes his experience in the super-secret and controversial tantric sexual yogas. The most profound and advanced formless meditation practices are also described, even though some gurus refuse to give these teachings in public.

The songs of Milarepa are a public background text for the system of practices connected with mahamudra, and there are places in Eastern Tibet where they are so widely sung and generally studied that one could well say that through this background text an esoteric religion has been moved into the sphere of public practice.

In this sense the background texts for the Nyingma lineage's tantrism are the biographies of Padmasambhava, whose verses provide the lyric material for the foundational Nyingma chants. In the same way, the advanced and secret Nyingma and Bönpo teaching known as *dzogchen* (great perfection) has its background text in certain editions of the Gesar epic and for the region of Golok in Amdo/Qinghai, this esoteric system of practices is indeed the public religion.

For those who have studied Tibetan Buddhism, it is strange to think

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that dzogchen should anywhere be common property. The Nyingma philosopher Jamgön Kongtrül the Great listed dzogchen as the last and highest of the nine *yanas* (vehicles). It is even stranger to think that the Golokpas, who are more famous as bandits and fiercely independent rebels than as philosophers, should hold this as their common thought. It is strange to think that the wild, nearly lawless regions around Mount Machen Pomra are a homeland for some of the most profound philosophical ideas ever mentioned in human speech.

And yet some of Tibet's greatest thinkers have come from this region on the Sino-Tibetan marches, including Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje, who was a reincarnation of Jigme Lingpa, and Mipham Gyatso, the great systematizing polymath of the nineteenth century, whose collection of commentarial works forms the heart of the modern Nyingma academic syllabus. In fact, many of the leaders of the Eclectic movement were connected in some way by family, proximity, or dharma lineage with the tribal nomads of Golok. There seems to have been some connection with Golok for Chögyam Trungpa as well. He initiated his students into the cult of one of the presiding mountain deities of the region, Magyal Pomra. He placed one of his principal American retreat centers under Magyal Pomra's protection and spoke of the oral epic of Gesar, which we now know was composed by Golok-speaking bards.

Enlightened Society and Mystery Religion

In Chögyam Trungpa's thought there is a strange mixture of religious secrecy with broad sociopolitical notions of the possibility of what he called an enlightened society. "Enlightenment" in this case refers to the Sanskrit term *bodhi*, the complete mystical realization of a buddha. Every institutionalized religion is at some point seduced into the notion of becoming a national or imperial religion, of becoming one with political leadership. The French policy of *laïcité* and the American doctrine of separation of church and state are testimony to the Western experience of the dangers of such a religious policy.

But our experience in the West of the dominance of a single religion over a society, the pervasive union of a religion with a government and social order, is fundamentally different from the Tibetan one. In the West, mystery religions do not dominate society, but only the public, common,

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and exoteric aspects of a religion. In Tibetan so-called theocracy, the leaders are not ordinary churchmen but mystics who seek to propagate their mysteries among the common people, even though the teachings are held to be secret and initiatory. It is as if Böhme or Eckhardt or John of the Cross or Teresa of Ávila or Thomas Aquinas in the late contemplative period of his life had sought to become Pope and exercise political power for their private mystical paths.

In a sense this notion of mystery religion as public path is close to Plato's *Republic*. The philosopher king and the political leadership of his idealized society were people who ruled by virtue of private mystical realizations. The one who sees the phenomenal world as mere appearance and reality as a transcendent other, rules the country and introduces the citizens to his private mystical world. To use tantric terminology, the leader expands the boundaries of the mandala, the private society of his personal students who share the initiatory mysteries, to the entire nation.

This was the theory of the relationship between religion and society that Trungpa Rinpoche elaborated in the West. Its metaphysics was based on the philosophical syncretism of the Eclectic movement, which evolved an almost Neoplatonic emanational version of Buddhist mysticism. The mythological machinery, the cosmology of his system, was based on the most complex of all Buddhist tantras, the *Kalachakra* (*Wheel of Time*) *Tantra*. But textually it was based on the Tibetan oral epic of King Gesar of Ling, which deployed a non-Buddhist divine machinery based on native Inner Asian shamanistic and animistic religion. The "back text" of Trungpa's socioreligious system was the Gesar epic. This meant that his model for the relationship between religion and society was what he saw in his region of Tibet, the Sino-Tibetan marches of Kham (Eastern Tibet) and Amdo/Qinghai. In particular, he pointed to the Goloks, nomadic pastoralist warriors, who made the mystery religion of dzogchen, the great perfection, their public religion through, among other things, the propagation of the oral epic.

The Regional Belief System of the Gesar Epic

In the imagination of Trungpa Rinpoche, the Goloks were fiercely independent and battle-hardened, living a romantic and adventurous life of banditry and pastoralism. It's probably true; but true or not, they were

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represented in the Gesar epic this way. So the cultural life of the regional nomads became an aura which surrounded Chögyam Trungpa's thinking about the dzogchen teachings.

The Gesar epic in the form he knew syncretically combined elements of Chinese alchemical Taoism, Inner Asian shamanism, and tantric Buddhism with the geopolitics of the Silk Route, with the oral literary materials and epic rhetorical values of pastoralist nomads, with the cosmology of the *Kalachakra Tantra*, and with the special Sino-Tibetan love of the implements of horse-mounted warfare. All of these elements in the thought of Trungpa Rinpoche can be traced back to the influence of the Gesar epic as a background to his most sophisticated thought and most elaborate cultural visions.

The Gesar epic itself is quite a rich and multifaceted literary phenomenon. It is the largest extant oral epic in the world. There are still bards in Tibet and China who can sing from memory many volumes of the Gesar. One female bard claims to be able to sing more than a hundred volumes, and a small army of Sino-Tibetan scholars now devote themselves to recording and studying these modern epic singers.

The epic tells the story of a martial bodhisattva who incarnates in Tibet along with a retinue of Buddhist and native deities to save the Buddhist religion from destruction at the hands of the armies of surrounding Asian kingdoms ruled by anti-Buddhist demon kings. These encircling enemies are the great kingdoms and ethnic groups of the Silk Route. At the beginning of the epic each of these kingdoms is ruled by a monster who was once a man, in fact once a great tantric Buddhist practitioner. They were superior Buddhist yogins in their previous lifetimes, but developed such great power and confidence through their tantric meditations that they became arrogantly opposed to their own gurus and turned against religion itself.

It is a key point in the worldview of Trungpa Rinpoche that negative power comes from a thwarted attempt to realize the positive. The demon kings are *dam sri*, vow violators. They took vows to perform vast positive acts and began on a career of becoming great bodhisattvas who would help many people and perhaps save whole societies. Their virtuous meditation practice and good intentions accumulated for them vast merit and magical powers. But at some point they took a wrong turn and their character changed from positive to negative, from bodhisattva to demon.

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Now, as demons, they still retain the powers their previous virtuous deeds gained them.

Thus, in the anti-Buddhist enemies of Ling we see evil not as a self-existent substance distinct from the good, but as an impulse for good that retains its basic nature but has been twisted into evil. It is a thwarted attempt at transcendence. Since it arose from the universal ground of buddha nature possessed by all beings, it still retains its primordial character of goodness.

This is an example of how the epic fits itself to the dzogchen mystical system. The primordial nature of consciousness is the undetermined, unreified, transcendent All-Good (the Buddha Samantabhadra), beyond phenomenal manifestations of either good or evil. The positive instincts of bodhisattvas come from their inborn sense of the common ground and produce their aspiration to return to it by the most direct method. Evil demons base their negative paths on the same basic instinct, a sense of the common ground of existence. Like the bodhisattvas, they see the return to that ground as a transcendent move, but they mistakenly make their move in the opposite direction, fleeing the ground as if it were bondage rather than freedom.

The epic describes the creation of an enlightened being who, like the demon kings, is powerful with magic, but who, since he is enlightened, has the subtlety to see the positive roots of the kings' negative natures—or, to put it more precisely, to see their positive nature bent by subtle twists into a temporarily evil manifestation.

Chögyam Trungpa's teachings about the nature of this subtle twist became the foundation for his entire presentation of the path in America. He expounded this doctrine in a negative way in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, particularly in the first chapter, "Spiritual Materialism." The title of the book reveals the lineage sources of these ideas, for "cutting through" is Trungpa Rinpoche's translation of *trekchö*, the dzogchen term for teachings on meditation without characteristics. Trungpa Rinpoche's positive presentation of this doctrine appears in many places, but particularly in his Shambhala teachings.

Returning to the epic, we see in the first volume that Gesar is born in the midst of an auspicious magical display of good auspices among the culturally colorful and extremely warlike nomads of the Northeastern Tibetan marches. These people are wild but faithful to the buddhadharma.

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At the crossroads of Chinese and Central Asian civilization along the eastern terminus to the Silk Route, they follow their herds of yaks, sheep, and cattle through vast, treeless meadows lush with mountain wildflowers and the treelike rhododendrons of the Himalayas, living as nomads in the alpine fastnesses of a land Tibetans call Amdo and Kham and the Chinese locate principally in Qinghai and Gansu. These nomads are superb horsemen and doughty warriors. They live in black yak-wool tents surrounded by the the giant killer mastiffs that Tibetans use as guard dogs. Their lamas are hearty and earthy but extremely learned. Their political leaders are wise, full of proverbial wisdom and copious formal speech, and, when it comes to tribal matters, capable of extremely nuanced political views.

The Gesar epic exists in many editions and in many literary forms. First of all, as a purely oral phenomenon, there are bards singing or telling the tale. Some bards are actually storytellers and their versions of the Gesar are pure prose. Others sing the traditional prosimetric epic form, which alternates prose story narration with a sort of folk aria sung by one of the characters. As Mireille Hellfer has shown, each character in the epic has his own particular melody and all of his, her, or its (for the horses sing as well) songs are sung in their distinctive melody.

The poetic form of the songs is very specific and stands in marked contrast to the elegant Sanskritic kinds of poetry favored by the Buddhist clerisy. It is full of nomadic proverbs, sarcasm, humor, and lyrical pastoral evocations. Like classical Buddhist poetry, the songs are often expected to have a subtle meaning that must be figured out by the hearer. This intellectual complexity usually comes from the need to figure out the relationship between the proverbs and the argument of the whole song, which is often no simple matter. Usually the songs are argumentative, not narrative. A speaker urges the other characters to a specific action or criticizes another character's thought or behavior. Although it is too early in our data collection to confidently generalize, it appears that the songs change from performance to performance less than the prose narrative.

Virtually every Tibetan knows the entire plot of the epic from childhood. The stories are absorbed from the general cultural milieu, and it does not really matter whether one has heard a bardic performance or not.

An Outline of the Epic

The story begins with the discovery by Avalokiteshvara or some other high deity that the land of Ling in Tibet is surrounded by the enemies of the four directions or the four demon kings.

There follows a council in heaven very much like the scenes in Homeric epics where Zeus consults with the gods about affairs on earth. At this council it is determined that some divine being must incarnate as a human and lead the armies of Ling against the four kings.

A great bodhisattva is chosen, but he refuses to take on human form unless he is accompanied by a team of other gods who will become his comrades in arms. He secures in advance the collaboration of a number of local Himalayan deities, as well as certain buddhas and famous gurus. For example, the horse-headed tantric buddha known as Hayagriva must promise to incarnate as the hero's future horse. Padmasambhava, the deathless guru guardian of Tibet, must promise to find Gesar a suitable mother and for his family a tribe of fearless warriors faithful to the buddhadharma. Mountain gods must forge magical armor and weapons for the future Gesar and his comrades. A native Tibetan goddess called simply Auntie (Manene) must appear to him constantly as his close adviser. The list of prerequisites the bodhisattva presents tells us much about the culture and religion of Northeastern Tibet and the way of life of the alpine nomads there.

The epic continues from here with descriptions of how the people of Ling and the animistic gods associated with Ling prepare to receive the incarnation. The birth of Gesar is itself an entire volume of the epic and reads in many respects like the accounts of the birth of divine heroes already familiar in the West. In fact, the birth stories of famous Buddhist lamas often follow a similar pattern: prophecies by diviners of the coming birth, the unique status of the mother and her dreams of a special impregnation, miraculous signs at birth, the investment of the tribe of the mother with a special destiny, general rejoicing that a savior has come to the tribe, and contemplations on the mystery of incarnation itself.

After the birth, there is a section of the epic of flexible length that describes the adventures of Gesar as child and youth. It is reminiscent of the Indian Puranas, stories of the child Krishna, a youthful trickster who is a

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god in disguise. There is no doubt that the Gesar epic contains influences from Indian epics, particularly the *Ramayana*.

However, the real source of the stories that make up the youthful Gesar section are probably Turkic narratives about Central Asian nomadic or tribal warriors. For example, young Gesar possesses the mental and magical powers one would expect from a bodhisattva, but he also has the distinctive abilities of a shamanic magician: the ability to use power objects and to deflect magical attacks of other shamans, the ability and propensity to change shape for purposes of deception, mastery of shamanic energy systems that, as we will see, are quite different from the systems of prana, nadi, and bindu central to Indic forms of yoga.

Immediately upon birth, the baby Gesar sets about the task of defeating the particular divine enemies of his tribe. For example, hardly is he out of his womb before he kills with a bow and arrow a demon who represents the power of a local marmot-like creature whose holes and tunnels plague nomadic shepherds. It seems odd that the first act of a Buddhist god would be to go off and kill an animal—in fact, a number of them. But it fits perfectly as the appropriate beginning to the career of a shamanic tribal protector. We will examine this point in more detail in a moment when we look at the influences of the Gesar epic on the thought of Chögyam Trungpa. But let us continue now with our rapid summary of the epic itself.

As a child our hero is not actually called Gesar—a noble name derived from the Byzantine title Caesar, which entered into usage among Mongolians as Kesar and evolved finally into the Tibetan Gesar. He is called Joru, a childish nickname. Joru is actually the image of a nomad juvenile delinquent. His body seems deformed. His clothes are made from uncured skins. He is stunted, dirty, and rough-mannered. He is the opposite of the nomadic ideal of the “young tiger” or “brave son”—the elegant, jauntily dressed, strong, hearty, clean-living young man that nomads present as their ideal, a noble youth who is strong, handsome, courageous, independent, and armed to the teeth.

Instead Joru is stunted, ugly, poorly dressed, unarmed except for the shepherd’s weapon, a slingshot: he is deceptive, disagreeable to his elders, and constantly involved in mean practical jokes. At a certain point Joru actually pretends to be a serial killer, kidnapping Tibetan merchants and making it appear that he has murdered them. He is ostracized from the Mukpo clan into which he is born and must go off with his mother to live

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alone and friendless in the wild, unpeopled land of Ma. There he consorts exclusively with mountain gods and local spirits and grows up secretly, unfettered by politics and social obligations. The only human in his world is his mother. As far as his relatives and friends are concerned, he is an ugly boy who turned monster and was expelled from society.

From an anthropological point of view, he shows the form of an accomplished shaman who spends his youth on an extended shaman's journey through the invisible world of gods—demons, and local and ancestral spirits. From the point of view of a few discriminating Lingites such as the minister Denma, the epic's Ulysses; Chipön, the epic's Nestor; Drugmo, the epic's Helen; and Gyatsha Zhalkhar, the epic's Achilles—he is an enlightened guru whose ability to change form and disguise his true nature is a sign of buddhahood.

From the tribal point of view, Joru is at all times an object of suspicion. His mother claims to be the daughter of the king of the dragons, but she is taken into the tribe as the second wife of a leader of the Mukpo clan—a woman of doubtful origins and doubtful parentage. Joru seems to be a dangerous juvenile pest with the power of black magic, almost a demon. The different reference points are a mark of the Buddhist oral epic. Since Gesar sees the world of mere appearance as based on a dream, insubstantial when compared with transcendent reality, his attitude toward everything, even his relatives and close friends, is seasoned with irony and a sense of the inscrutable and the strange humor of the enlightened gods who, moving from bliss to bliss, see the life concerns of sentient beings as they move from suffering to suffering, as both a matter for compassion and a cosmic joke. There is thus always a play of different points of view.

In the third volume of the epic, the moment finally comes when Joru must transform from a monster boy into a glorious dharma king. The most beautiful maiden in Ling will be the prize in a horse race. The winner of the race will gain her hand in marriage and rulership of Ling. This is a recognizable motif from Turkish epic literature, where a hero must win one of three contests: a wrestling match, a deadly archery contest, or a horse race. Gesar joins the race and when he wins is transformed into an effulgent youthful prince. All the magical beings who agreed to incarnate with him gather around, and the entire tribe of Ling is led into the recesses of Magyal Pomra Mountain, where magical weapons have been left for them by gods and buddhas.

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There is a great celebration, and the rough but honest and faithful tribe of Ling begins its journey to becoming an enlightened society.

The events narrated thus far take up the first three volumes of the epic in its currently most popular edition, a nine-volume work edited under the direction of the great Eclectic philosopher Ju Mipham himself.

In the middle episodes of the Mipham version, Ling is attacked by great empires in the four directions, the famous enemies of the four directions. At one point Gesar's consort, the lovely Drugmo, is kidnapped in a passage reminiscent of both the *Ramayana* and the *Iliad*. Wars are fought successively against each demon king. Each victory expands the political reach of Ling and gains for its tribes some unique cultural treasure or piece of science held by the defeated kingdom. These treasures become part of the patrimony of Ling and lead it step by step toward the greatness and sophistication of an empire. But we must note here that the ever-increasing sovereignty of Gesar and the Lingites is not like that of China's great agrarian empire or the Roman empire. It is the story of the step-by-step creation of a world-conquering nomadic confederation, like the empires created by the Mongols. The difference between an empire and a nomadic confederation is key for understanding the political theory of the Gesar epic.

The ninth and last volume is actually called *Gesar in Hell*, the *Great Perfection*. In it Gesar harrows hell and actually instructs the damned in dzogchen, the highest form of meditation practice in Tibetan Buddhism. They are liberated and leave the wheel of samsara. Gesar dies and transfers his consciousness to the Kingdom of Shambhala, where he exists to this day, waiting for the Buddhist apocalypse. You could say that this last volume occupies the same place in the overall epic as the *Bhagavad Gita* does in the Indian *Mahabharata*, for it is more a philosophical and contemplative manual than a battle saga.

There are many other versions of the Gesar. Sino-Tibetan scholars have collected more than a hundred volumes of published chapters and many times that of recorded performances of chapters in the epic. Like the *Mahabharata*, it is a huge, unwieldy corpus. We do not know what bardic performances Trungpa Rinpoche heard, but it is fairly certain that the written version he saw was one edited by Ju Mipham Gyatso, for Trungpa had his disciples translate and chant the Gesar rituals Mipham wrote to accompany this edition.

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As we will see, Mipham created a sophisticated philosophical structure in his edition of the epic, and this structure provided a program for Trungpa Rinpoche's later dispensations in America and Europe.

The Tracks of the Epic in the Oeuvre of Chögyam Trungpa

As we have learned recently, Trungpa Rinpoche left a prodigious writing behind when he escaped Tibet, the remarkable product of the first nineteen years of his life. Ancient *termas* (found texts) that he discovered and transcribed, rituals he composed, his records of visionary revelations, meditation manuals, and works of poetry were scattered across Eastern Tibet in the area where he wandered as a young meditator and student and taught as a reincarnated lama (*tülku*). These works are being collected now by Karma Senge Rinpoche, a nephew of Trungpa Rinpoche's.

One work from Chögyam Trungpa's early period about which we know a great deal, but which has not been recovered, is a verse epic of several hundred pages probably titled *The Golden Dot: The Epic of Lha, the Annals of the Kingdom of Shambhala*. Trungpa Rinpoche began to reconstruct his original composition after escaping Tibet, and it is this later work to which we refer. The first chapter describes the creation of the world by nine cosmic gods (*srid pa'i lha*) who appear in the form of native Tibetan deities known as *drala* (*dgra bla*), or war gods. These gods represented primal and originary aspects of the phenomenal world. For example, one of these lha stood for all kinds of light. Glancing in many directions, this deity created all the lights that exist in the world, including the sun, the moon, the light of planets and stars, and the inward luminosity of consciousness itself. Another represented space and the sense of direction; by gazing and gesturing in different directions, this primordial god created every sort of space, including physical space, which is given an interesting definition: "the ability to separate two things." One goddess created all forms of water and every body of water in the world. Another was responsible for all mountains and hills.

In Trungpa Rinpoche's epic these deities were directed by a ninth lha called Shiwa Ökar (*zhi ba 'od dkar*), Peaceful White Light, a sort of absolute principle behind creation and the nature of reality. After these nine cosmic deities have created the world, Peaceful White Light goes to the things they have created and invests each one with an animistic spirit, a

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drala. So, for example, each of the bodies of water is given a *lu* (*klu*), or dragon spirit. The mountains are given *nyen* (*gnyan*), or mountain spirits. The highest bodies are given *lha*, or ouranic deities.

The *Epic of Lha*, so we are informed, proceeds in this way at great length. Unfortunately, this work was lost during Trungpa Rinpoche's flight from the Chinese. When he arrived in the West, he rewrote the first two chapters, but no more.

One of the really striking things about the two chapters we have of the *Epic of Lha* is that its previous texts, the literary tradition upon which it is based, are not, as one would expect, the Indic texts of Tibetan Buddhism (the tantras, sutras, and commentaries), but rather the creation myths found in Tibetan royal chronicles and in the *Epic of Gesar of Ling*. These literary works evoke the cosmology of native Tibetan religion, not Buddhism. They record first the creation of the world and then the creation and evolution of the tribes of Tibet: tribes from which the kings of Tibet are descended as well as Gesar of Ling.

In contrast to most Buddhist literature, this native Tibetan style of literature expresses notions of transcendence, not in metaphysical terms, but in terms of ancientness and primordality. Religious ceremonies are likewise typically Inner Asian. Whereas a Buddhist work would describe sacrifices and fire offerings, here one finds instead the characteristic ceremony of the nomadic highland steppes of Inner Asia—the lhasang, or smoke purification. Royal families originate when the *lha* descend to earth or when mountain gods mate with humans. The inner physiology described in this genre evokes the same non-Buddhist cultural paths. Thus, while a Buddhist work would describe the body as containing a central channel and subsidiary channels and say that the channels carry different kinds of “wind” (Skt. *prana*), these Sino-Tibetan works describe officers, guardian deities, and different kinds of souls, in a manner reminiscent of alchemical Taoism.

Auras of defensive energy play about the body and guard the warrior in battle. The energies have colorful names that also remind us of Chinese cosmology: windhorse (*rlung rta*) and field of power (*dbang thang*), life force (*srog*), and life-duration force (*rtse*). These energies, this sort of cosmology, and this approach to tribal annals are all native to the epic and martial literature of the Eastern Terminus of the Silk Route. They are found in Mongolian annals, in Tibetan oral literature, and even in Chi-

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nese classical novels like *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* that I mentioned earlier.

When Trungpa Rinpoche evoked this diffuse cultural tradition in his literary works, he was associating himself with a rising school of Tibetan thought which we call today the Tibetan Renaissance—the Eclectic or Ri-me school. The founders of this school were nineteenth century polymath Buddhist scholars Jamgön Kongtrül the Great, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, and Ju Mipham Gyatso. The Eclectics sought to unify the four principal sects of Tibetan Buddhism, the institutionalized non-Buddhist religion known as Bön, and the shamanistic and animistic teachings of native Tibetan religion into a single system.

This meant that they had to reconcile Inner Asian shamanism with the high scholastic metaphysics and epistemology of Indian Buddhism. The place where this theoretical work is done most explicitly is in the writings of Mipham. His version of the Gesar epic presents the general principles of Buddhist tantra and mahayana quite explicitly. But it is also a manual of shamanistic and magical lore. Unlike the usual bodhisattva, Gesar is a sorcerer and illustrates in his skillful means a particular sort of warrior's magic. His companions wisely comment on these practices and the epic, at least in Mipham's version, becomes a practical manual of Tibetan shamanism.

Earlier I noted E. Gene's Smith's extraordinary comment that dzogchen, although in general an esoteric tradition, is in effect the public religion of Golok. The same could be said of the Gesar style of shamanism. Every warrior in the epic is in some degree a magician. All of them have talking, flying horses. All of them perform lhasangs and use magic in battle to increase their personal defenses. Most of them have patron deities who appear in complex forms mixing aspects of a classical Indic tantric machinery with those of a wild, colorful local animistic deity. As in many Turkic epics, when warriors contend, they use magic on each other as a matter of course, combining arrow, spear, and sword work with energy and deity work.

In this way Mipham made his edition of the Gesar epic a hybrid of Buddhist and local ideas. He made sure that it would be read in this manner by writing a parallel set of Gesar chants that mix religions in the same way. These ritual practices may be found in the Na chapter of his collected works. One of the most famous is the "Long Werma Lhasang," an invocation of Gesar and his entire court as a sort of epic mandala. Here we see a

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careful combination of Buddhism according to the Nyingma sect with local religion. For example, Padmasambhava is invoked along with various buddhas; but then attention moves to Gesar and his court and companions, who are stationed not around Gesar in the four directions, but before him in the manner of the council meetings that occur in the epic when the Mukpo clan gathers. The figures in Gesar's courtly mandala are themselves surrounded by dralas, local deities, and figures of relative power.

Mipham's edition of the epic provides a systematic justification for the syncretic form of the mandala of deities that appears in the lhasang. Gesar is presented as a creation of the enlightened Buddhist tantric guru Padmasambhava collaborating with Amitabha, Avalokiteshvara, and a number of local Tibetan deities. He is literally formed from rays of light that emanate from Amitabha and Avalokiteshvara, dissolve into Padmasambhava, are radiated by him into the bodies of local deities, and transform them into a male and female tantric Buddhist tutelary buddha. These buddhas unite and give birth to an enlightened deity named Joyful to Hear, who agrees to reincarnate as Gesar. Joyful to Hear is partly formed from local deities transformed into buddhas, but he also carries upon his reincarnated body a number of native Tibetan animal-headed dralas who agree to co-incarnate with him. They live inside Gesar's body, secretly investing the power spots on his body—not the chakras that Indian Buddhism believe are located along the spinal column, but the places on the head, shoulders, and torso where the patron deities of native animism are believed to dwell in a fully functional warrior.

A careful reading of the first chapter of Mipham's epic will explain the spiritual technology of the Gesar *sadhanas* in volume Na. But Mipham did not invent this syncretic system. It is present in a world of Nyingma philosophical and chanting texts going back to the very foundations of Tibetan Buddhism. For example, there is a very extensive lhasang called the Mountain Purificatory Offering (*Ri bo bsang mchod*), which contains in the chanted text itself stages in the emanation of the absolute principle into the level of relative deities such as drala.

The "Long Werma Lhasang" is practiced in Golok, in Tibet at large, and among Tibetan refugee communities. In fact, the Dalai Lama's government in exile included it in a set of lhasangs that were distributed to Tibetan emigrés so that they could continue to perform culturally Tibetan rituals in their homes.

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Another very popular Mipham chant in the same tradition has no title, but is actually a chant inscribed on prayer flags. This chant mentions gods who appear in what I would call an emanational order. It begins by calling on deities who represent the absolute, then moves on to enlightened individuals and teachers, and then invokes the Indian god Ganesha, who leads a divine army of dralas. Then it mentions gods who have to do with the manifest world and relative truth: gods of the cosmic lineage who command causality (or coincidence, karmic cause and effect).

In the Na volume of Mipham's collected works one finds numerous very short supplications to Gesar as well. There is even a Gesar Seven-Line Supplication to match the famous one to Padmasambhava.

Trungpa Rinpoche lifted the above chants from Mipham's Gesar cycle (*ge sar skor*) of practices and gave them to his advanced students to chant.

All of the above works by Mipham were translated by the Nālandā Translation Committee with Trungpa Rinpoche and given to his advanced students to chant.

The most interesting practice of all in Mipham's Gesar cycle is the Supplication to the Horse Race. *The Horse Race* is the third volume of the epic in Mipham's edition. For most of *The Horse Race*, Gesar appears not as a godling or divine prince, but as the ugly and ill-favored Joru. He is invited by Drugmo, the lovely princess who is the prize in the race, to come back to Ling so that he can enter a race to win her hand.

This chapter is full of messages about the epic's enlightened view of the conventional reality of the relative world. Some of the messages are ironic, criticizing the hollowness of life on the relative plane. Others are heroic, showing the powers and splendors of a phenomenal world that has devolved from the absolute.

In one chapter, for example, the lovely Drugmo goes to visit Gesar in his terrifying fortress of solitude in the land of Ma. On the journeys to and from Ma, Gesar plays vicious practical jokes on Drugmo and tortures her with Coyote-style tricksterism while simultaneously wooing her in many different disguises. This chapter is called "The Precious Queen," and it is a strange Buddhist examination of femininity. Drugmo's overnice feminine egoism, her preciousness, is ruthlessly attacked by Gesar, who even temporarily disfigures her. And yet at the same time he praises her for being his indispensable complement in the world of manifestation.

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Gesar's criticisms of and attacks on Drugmo seem unfair to the reader. But from the point of view of an enlightened trickster, they are a just critique and appropriate punishment for Drugmo's conventional feminine moral weakness. A Tibetan aristocratic woman must use a certain disingenuousness as she negotiates the conflicting forces that sway her life: her demanding brothers, her scheming father and uncles, the envy of other women, and the likely hostility of her future husband's family: the very numerous societal pressures tribal life brings to bear on beautiful young women. Drugmo is shown trapped in a web of these forces, and Gesar criticizes the hypocrisy that these kinship relations force upon her and the transparent feminine machinations that the conventions of human society impose on her.

The tricks are grotesque, at times quite violent and full of Buddhist irony. At one point Gesar even kills himself in order to test Drugmo's faith. Sobbing, she buries his body, bewailing the fact that her brothers will punish her if she comes home without the hero. She decides to commit suicide and begins to ride her horse into a river. She says melodramatically that this way she can at least be with Gesar in the afterlife. Gesar, however, comes back to life and derides her for improperly burying him. He scorns her conventional compassion, pointing out that she could not be manifesting true charity, for she was willing to let the horse drown with her.

In another chapter of this volume, Drugmo and Gesar's mother go off to catch his magical horse, who is a reincarnation of Hayagriva, the horse-headed tantric buddha. The horse is described muscle by muscle as the ideal creature, and we see the nomad's love, indeed worship of horses as a figure of divine energy.

Finally, in the last chapter of *The Horse Race*, Gesar arrives in Ling, and the race begins. Gesar's hijinks during the race are hilarious, but frightening to his supporters. For example, for much of the race he rides in the opposite direction from the finish line. During the race he constantly stops to engage other racers in metaphysical conversation. Observers complain that Gesar's childish pranks will prevent him from winning the race and realizing his destiny. But the sage chieftain of the Mukpo tribe replies, saying that if you understand the way worldly and enlightened energies work, you will realize that nothing can prevent Gesar from realizing victory, for the destiny generated by one's karma and field of power determine outcomes more than strategizing and hard work.

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Thus, each chapter becomes an analysis of tantric and shamanistic energies: the metaphysical completeness that union with the feminine brings, the magical vitality of the horse principle, the way destiny is inscribed in one's karma and field of power.

In fact, the third volume, *The Horse Race*, is organized in order to have many levels of esoteric meaning. Each of the chapters is named by Mipham after one of the treasures of a Chakravartin, a universal monarch: the precious queen, the precious minister, the precious elephant, and so on. This is a very ancient, Indian list. Trungpa took up the list and used it in his American teachings, giving it esoteric meaning as a tantric iconographical map of relative energies that must be mastered by the adept in order to live ecologically in the world.

Every individual in society must be like a universal monarch to know success in the world: one must have a precious queen (that is, a sexual consort), a precious minister (a friend who is a sound adviser), a precious general (a friend who will help you get things done), a precious elephant (that is, a successful solution to the problems of traveling and moving about), and so forth.

When Mipham had his student, Gyurme, reorganize the *Horse Race* chapter into this structure, he brought out the teachings already inscribed in the oral epic on these subjects and made them evident to the thoughtful reader.

His method was strange and tantric. Before Mipham had his student edit this volume, Mipham wrote "The Horse Race Supplication," a ritual actually worshiping the text itself. The supplication is fairly lengthy and written in symbolic language reminiscent of the cryptic statements of oracles. Mipham gave this chant to the editor, taught him its inner meaning, and then told him to reedit the *Horse Race* chapter to fit the symbol-laden, oracular, inscrutable sections of the chant. This was his method of imposing religious and philosophical order on a naturally occurring oral folk phenomenon. Henceforth, the Gesar rituals would perfectly complement the epic, and as the epic continued to propagate itself naturally in the way that very good stories do, so would Mipham's particular religion of Gesar.

This is a good example of the technique the Eclectic school used to create a systematic interweaving of native shamanism, oral epic, and Buddhist tantra, alchemical Taoism, dzogchen, and the strange, vast *Kalachakra Tantra*. The textual sources for this syncretism are found in

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Mipham's writings on the Gesar epic and in rituals and philosophical presentations from the Eclectics. Trungpa Rinpoche wrote his *Epic of Lha* within this tradition, conscious of the synthesis his gurus had effected. He became in effect the chief spokesman in the West for this syncretic system.

The key point here concerns emanation, a notion that may be more familiar to the reader from Neoplatonism:—the emanation of the relative world with all of its distinctions and individualities out of the undetermined absolute ground of reality, a concatenated chain of cosmic events that Arthur Lovejoy, the American intellectual historian, called the Great Chain of Being.

Buddhism is not always or even usually an emanational system, and it is usually better not to compare it with Platonic idealism. But in the world of tantric philosophy, this approach works. There is, in effect, a sense of the emanation of relative truth from ultimate truth.

Buddhist philosophy begins with the doctrine of the two truths. To put it simply, relative truth (Skt. *samvṛiti satya*) is truth as confused beings see it. Ultimate truth (Skt. *paramārtha satya*) is what the buddhas, who are unconfused and undeceived, see. Relative truth is the world of things and persons. Ultimate truth is emptiness of self-nature, the lack of solidity of every apparently existent thing. Relative truth is appearance, and ultimate truth is reality.

The metaphysics of various Buddhist systems are distinguished mainly by their different positions on the nature of the two truths. The most common position is that relative truth is entirely deceptive, that there is no truth of any sort in it, or even, as in some readings of Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti, that there is no relative truth at all.

The philosophy both implied and explicit in Mipham's version of the Gesar epic relates to a philosophical debate alive among the Eclectics. All Tibetan schools of mahayana Buddhism take Chandrakirti's *Madhyamakavatara* (Introduction to the Middle Way) as a foundational text for their philosophical view. It is an introduction to Madhyamaka, the Middle Way, an approach developed by the great second-century Indian thinker Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna's work is itself an interpretation of the mahayana wisdom scriptures known as the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* (Perfection of Wisdom Sutras). Nagarjuna proposes a set of dialectical exercises by which one can arrive at a direct experience of the perfection of wisdom and a direct insight into the empty nature of reality. No matter how inef-

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fable this mystical insight may be, no matter how impossible one might think it is to describe it, through this dialectic one can arrive at the correct experience of it.

Half of mahayana philosophy is simply a question of proposing different readings or interpretations of Nagarjuna. For example, Chandrakirti's reading, given perhaps a century after Nagarjuna's works were published, holds that relative truth is deceptive to the point of not being a distinct truth at all. So it is impossible to make any true statements, for any statement implies the solidity, the reification of relative or deceptive truth. One can, however, arrive at ultimate truth through a critique of relative truth, in which the spokesman for Madhyamaka never makes an independent statement, but only refutes the position of his opponents. This is called Prasangika Madhyamaka. *Prasanga* is Sanskrit for the argument form *reductio ad absurdum*, Chandrakirti's principal method of critiquing his essentialist opponents.

When Buddhism first arrived in Tibet it was connected with another reading of Nagarjuna, called Svatantrika Madhyamaka, whose chief representative was Bhavaviveka. *Svatantra* means "independent statement." According to this system, it is indeed possible to make some positive statements about the nature of reality, and these positive statements are beyond the reach of the all-destroying dialectic. In the Middle Ages the Svatantrikas had been overshadowed by the Prasangikas, and this raised a problem for the interpretation of tantra.

Tantra expresses itself through complex allegorical pageants known as mandalas. The mandalas are palaces or courts or, if you will, societies full of deities. Each mandala seems to describe an ideal world. Contemplation of a mandala and the deities within it presents to the meditator in a single, unified iconographical form an entire system of mystical philosophy.

Now, since mandalas contain deities who have many qualities, aspects, and attributes, they seem to be creatures of relative truth. It is thus difficult to find a metaphysical basis for such busy and colorful representations in the austere Prasangika system. Difficult, but not impossible. One must be careful not to interpret the deities allegorically. One must be careful not to use them as a basis for making independent statements, which are bound to be false, according to Prasangika Madhyamaka.

The Svatantrika system gave a richer interpretation of tantric symbolic texts, because now with it, it was possible to entrust a nondeceptive

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relative meaning to the tantric symbols. By the nineteenth century, however, Svatantrika Madhyamaka had gone out of fashion. The Eclectics brought it back into fashion, for they were very open-minded and were willing to deploy different philosophies on different occasions. Mipham himself provided new commentaries on the whole range of Indian scriptures, giving a rigorous basis to this sense of multivalency. Some Buddhist practices called for a Prasangika interpretation. Others worked better if you switched metaphysics temporarily and thought like a Svatantrika. In fact, each position in the history of Buddhist philosophy found its place in this graded practice system, which Trungpa Rinpoche passed on to his students from the Eclectics.

Thus he prescribed a variety of approaches to the two truths depending on what ritual and meditational practices were being done. For example, in his rigorous presentation of tantric skillful means at the 1973 three-month retreat for his Western students, he announced that during the section where he taught the visualization of mandalas, he would rely specifically on the view of Svatantrika Madhyamaka. This despite the fact that just a year earlier he had given an extensive lecture program at Rocky Mountain Dharma Center, called “The Ten Bhūmis,” based on Chandrakīrti’s *Madhyamakavatara*.

Later he set the Nālanda Translation Committee, his private translation group, to work producing an English version of two texts by Mipham that sponsored yet a third approach to Madhyamaka, called Zhantong, or Other Emptiness. The two texts in question were polemical treatises entitled *The Lion’s Roar That Proclaims Other Emptiness* (*gzhan stong khas len seng-ge’i nga ro*) and *The Lion’s Roar: The Great Essential Exposition of Sugatagarbha* (*bde gshegs snying po’i stong thun chen mo seng-ge’i nga ro*). He said that contemplating these texts had brought him special moments of great realization.

The foundational text for the Other Emptiness school was a mahayana commentarial text entitled the *Mahayanottaratantra Shastra*. It was written by Asanga. Asanga’s brother Vasubandhu wrote a prose commentary on Asanga’s root verses. The English title in English would be *The Commentary on the Peerless Continuum*. The peerless continuum was the buddha nature, a deathless, undeceived consciousness that is the potentiality for enlightenment existing in the heart of every sentient being and, in fact, in all nature. Ordinarily, buddha nature philosophy is taken to be logically

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opposed to Madhyamaka, for it posits a positive reality, the buddha essence in everyone's heart. However, in Tibet there was a school of thought that reworked this philosophy into a form taken to be noncontradictory to Madhyamaka. The school was called Jonang, and its founder was the great scholar Dolpopa.

The monasteries of the Jonangpas were actually destroyed by the armies of the fifth Dalai Lama, and the school ceased to exist—that is, until the Eclectics quietly took it up and made it an essential part of their system. Like Svatantra, Zhantong (Other Emptiness) could be used to positively explain the nature of the gods who appear in Buddhist mandalas. In fact, it provided a unique ontological basis for Buddhist cosmology—a way of even explaining the existence of the lower gods, the nature gods and local deities featured in the Gesar epic and its related rituals. In Mipham's hands the meaning of the cosmology of the epic and the spiritualist and shamanistic practices in it took on new life. There was now a way of understanding relative truth not simply as a mistake in perception, but as an emanation down from the formless absolute. The emanation would reach down as far as the classical Indic deities of Buddhist tantra and then would reach down even further to embrace local deities and nature spirits who express Tibetan ethnic identity—all would now be considered to have a connection to ultimate meaning.

Trungpa Rinpoche expresses this emanationalism in the *Epic of Lha* where a deity of the absolute commands nine lha who create the pre-eminent features of the relative world: light, space, direction, mountains, bodies of water, and so on—things which in the view of standard Madhyamakan texts would not exist except as illusory appearance. The direct action of the absolute invests this world of mountains and valleys with nature spirits. The next step will be the creation of the tribes of men and the animals, and then finally the events of recorded history. It is as if Aristotle had explained how pans, satyrs, and naiads had come into being as elaborations of the primordial *nous*.

We must note how this view is at odds with traditional Buddhist cosmology. Ordinarily, all gods and spirits would be considered in no way different in substance from human beings and animals—all are illusory beings within the six realms of samsara. Outside the ever-turning wheel of the six realms is the indefinable limitless world beyond world of the buddhas. The gods are not part of that world or particularly connected

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with it. They are not really higher beings, and their form has no cosmic meaning. Brahma is not, except in poetic allegory, the spirit of creation. Shiva is not an essence of destruction. The god known as Yama is not truly lord of death. Local spirits do not express the nature of the places they occupy. None of them are quintessences of anything; they are all simply confused beings with very long lives and bodies invisible to us. For everything in relative truth is deceptive. As Trungpa Rinpoche put it once when describing the cosmology of abhidharma, “All the gods are simply glorified ghosts.”

The emanational view of the gods is at odds with the above view. The animistic deities of Silk Route religion do express essences connected with places and self-existing qualities of the phenomenal world, for the phenomenal world in the precise details of its form elaborately expresses the nature of the absolute, the dharmakaya. The empty and luminous absolute contains qualities, as *The Peerless Continuum* says, “as numerous as grains of sand in the Ganges,” and these qualities elaborate themselves through manifestation down to the smallest detail of the phenomenal world. They express themselves with what Chögyam Trungpa called precision. The absolute expresses itself in manifestation, as he put it, “even down to the shapes and colors inscribed on the backs of beetles.”

It is interesting to note that when he expounded this philosophy in mythological form in his epic, Trungpa Rinpoche chose as his exemplary deities not the Indic gods of the Buddhist or Hindu pantheon, but the dralas, the war gods of native Tibetan religion. This is the strategy of Mipham’s Gesar epic—an approach found in the writings of the other Eclectics, particularly Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, who wrote his own cycle of Gesar rituals.

The oral literature of Eastern Tibet and Amdo, the Tibetan provinces on the northwestern border of China, shows the characteristics of this view. For example, there is the autobiography of Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje, a Golok master who was a reincarnation of Jigme Lingpa, one of the greatest thinkers of the Nyingma lineage. The birth of his famous previous incarnation is described in the first chapter. It is actually written in the Golok language.

Do Khyentse’s autobiography is typical of the miracle stories of the birth of famous lamas, except for the curious fact that the mother and child are surrounded not so much by Buddhist deities as by figures from the

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Gesar epic. While the miraculous child is being born, war gods perform weapons rituals, and invisible bards sing the epic as they dance on smoke-offering shrines. Invisible mounted warriors ride in circles around the mother's tent. Mountain gods give their blessings along with the Indic deities of dzogchen.

Gesar and the Shambhala Teachings

Trungpa Rinpoche's first teachings in the West, given in Britain, did not focus on the native Tibetan symbol system. They were mainly concerned with the highest, most abstract practices of the Nyingma lineage. When he came to America, he changed the curriculum, focusing on the Kagyü teachings and the life stories of the Kagyü lineage holders: Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, Milarepa, and Gampopa.

In 1978 Trungpa returned to the teachings and cosmology of the Gesar epic, which became the basis for a series of weekend public programs that he called Shambhala Training. Trungpa translated about twenty-five percent of Mipham's Gesar chants and introduced the practice of lhasang, or smoke purifications, to his Western students. Over the next few years he discovered and wrote down a series of revelational texts that featured as the principal deities Shiwa Ökar and his circle of drala, Gesar of Ling and the principal figures from his epic, and the kings of the mythical kingdom of Shambhala.

The first text in this series was titled *The Golden Sun of the Great East*. It read like a Buddhist tantra, presenting a mandala of deities who performed ritual practices and contemplations and who were themselves the objects visualized in contemplative exercises. The central deities of *The Golden Sun* were drawn from the introduction to the most complex of all Buddhist esoteric texts, the *Kalachakra Tantra*: they were the enlightened kings of Shambhala called *rigdens*, or holders of noble family.

The retinue of these kings in *The Golden Sun*, however, was drawn not from among the hundreds of deities of the mandala of Kalachakra, but rather from the heroes and war gods of the Gesar epic. In later texts in his Shambhala cycle of revelations, some deities from the *Epic of Lha* were added. Over the following years, more scriptures appeared from the fertile mind of Trungpa Rinpoche, all featuring the same characters.

The collection of Shambhala texts evidently constituted a single

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tantric cycle. Trungpa Rinpoche's oral commentary on these texts showed that although the new canon was relatively short, it was extremely pithy, containing an elaborate system of teachings and practices.

The Shambhala texts read strangely. Unlike translations from Indian tantras, they were written in a unique poetic idiom that combined the sound of bardic song with the brassy, bragging heroic tone of nativist warrior rituals. All in all, their voice is that of cocky Asian nomads—proud of their independence and resourcefulness, bold in every action, given to banditry and sudden violence, in love with their own eloquence and braggadocio. Trungpa Rinpoche's Shambhala lectures matched this sassy martial tone with a familiar contemplative principle—that the mystic practitioner was like a warrior in battle and the mystical religious path was the way of the warrior.

This message was not welcomed by his American disciples in the 1970s, when the pacifist movements of the Vietnam War era still held sway over the minds of American youth—especially those who had decided to follow Asian religion. This despite the fact that mahayana Buddhist rhetoric is totally penetrated by martial imagery. The word *bodhisattva*, for example, means in Tibetan “warrior of enlightenment.” The gods of tantric mandalas are called *dakas* and *dakinis*, male and female warriors. But centuries of usage had worn away the military sense of these Indic terms. The word *warrior* had a fresh sound in the Shambhala teachings, because it evoked Central Asian nomadic mounted guerrillas, not the elegant, settled aristocratic knights of the Indian epics, who like their Greek counterparts fought from chariots and charged their enemies in formation.

The Shambhala texts represented the spiritual path as a field of battle where nomadic warriors on horseback fought against the demon enemies of the four directions, who now represented four sorts of moral hypocrisy. The pitfalls on the spiritual path became the kind of threats Gesar's troops met in their epic contests: the poison of arrogance, the trap of doubt, the ambush of hope, the arrow of uncertainty. Each of these obstacles was elaborated into lists of moral failings, spiritual missteps, and movements tangential to the direction of the path. The lists were drawn from Buddhist scholastic manuals, but here they were clothed in the garments of epic discourse.

For example, whereas a Buddhist text would say that a practitioner should be “homeless” (Pali *anagarika*) in the heart, the Shambhalian text

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recommended that he or she follow the dictates of “tent culture.” The nomadic pastoralist life of Northeastern Tibetans became a metaphor for the mental conduct of modernist Western disciples.

In the early days of Tibetan tantric lineages, the disciples lived with their gurus and there was a tradition that structured the family of the guru as if it were the mandala of a tantric tutelary deity (Tib. *yidam*). So, for example, the plantation of Marpa the Translator, the founder of the Kagyü lineage, was allegorized as the mandala of the wrathful buddha Hevajra. Marpa was considered to be Hevajra himself. His wife was the consort of Hevajra, Nairatmya. The son and principal disciples of Marpa were the retinue deities of the four gates, and so on. To study with Marpa meant that you joined his family and took up a position as one of the Hevajra deities. This practice has fallen out of fashion within the Kagyüpas, who today are mainly monastics. But it is continued in the Nyingma lineage.

Trungpa Rinpoche continued the tradition with his own disciples, except that instead of using a Buddhist mandala he used the hybrid Gesar/Kalachakra mandala of the Shambhala teachings. He called his home Kalapa Court, naming it after the capital of the Kingdom of Shambhala. He abandoned the customs of humility and the appearance of poverty cultivated by Buddhist lamas and took up the formal observances and honorifics of royalty. He allowed himself to be allegorized to the Rigden King of Shambhala, the central deity of the Shambhala mandala, and had his close disciples address him as Sakyong, or King. His wife was the queen. The mandala of the Shambhala cycle of revelations, just like the epic and the Gesar chants of Mipham, included ministers, generals, queens, ladies in waiting, and host of armored warriors.

The disciples at the court were allegorized to these roles despite the fact that it brought them infinite confusion, because they were not yet in contact with the Asian oral epics which were the true previous texts of this discourse world.

One of the central signifiers of Buddhist religion is the notion of a noble family (Skt. *kula*). The Buddha originally deployed this metaphor as an attack on the Indian caste system. Since all sentient beings possessed the buddha nature, all of them, no matter what their birth, were equally capable of gaining buddhahood. By taking Buddhist vows, one became a son or daughter of noble family. One transcended all castes, to become the caste of the Buddha.

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In the context of the Gesar epic, however, the word *family* took on a different meaning; it was, in fact, replaced by *tribe* or *clan* (Tib. *ldong*). Gesar himself was a member of the Mukpo clan, one of the primordial tribes of Tibet. Trungpa Rinpoche was a member of the Mukpo clan and therefore mystically descended from Gesar. Receiving the Shambhala teachings and being given permission to read the Shambhala scriptures made his students in effect adopted members of the Mukpo clan.

This, actually, was in perfect keeping with nomadic tradition, for in the political world of nomadic confederations, *tribe* was an extremely elastic term. Political relations were expressed by kinship terms, so that people who entered into close alliances or relationships of loyalty often considered themselves cousin-brothers, sister-cousins, or uncle-fathers. So, for example, in the Gesar epic the emperor of China was addressed by Eastern tribes as “Uncle.” People who bound in marriage alliance or any other sort of bond of loyalty were addressed as kin when they were not. Adoptive kinship was extended relatively easily.

This loose notion of tribal bonding changed the organic relationship between disciples and the deities of the mandala. In Buddhist tantra, a disciple received the right to visualize a certain metaphysical principle as a certain deity through an empowerment ceremony called an *abhisheka* or anointment. The energy of empowerment was passed down a lineage from guru to disciple in much the manner of Christian apostolic succession or the Islamic notion of descent of *barakah*. But the Shambhala deities, whose iconography was based on native Tibetan religion, were received not from Buddhist lineages, but from the Mukpo family, since the deities were, in effect, the lares and penates of the guru’s blood family.

Thus, in Chögyam Trungpa’s new dispensation of Shambhala teachings, the tribal metaphor of a Central of Inner Asian nomadic pastoralist world was scrupulously maintained. Bodhisattvas in training became shamanic warriors in the style of the oral epics. The guru’s family mandala became the court of Shambhala kings. The abstract metaphysical deities of Indian tantric mythology became the earthy nature deities of Inner Asia. The wandering life of a monk as an allegory for a lifetime’s spiritual journey became the everywhere-wandering tent culture of a pastoralist. And, significantly, disciples were considered as adoptive members of the Mukpo clan.

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Finally, and most significantly, the pattern of energies within the body moved from the Indian system of yogic signifiers to the shamanic symbols of the Sino-Tibetan marches, wherein Taoist deities mixed with native Tibetan deities. That is to say, whereas ordinary tantric practitioners would talk of the movement of prana or wind through the nadis or channels of the body, Shambhala practitioners would talk about the auras of energy that shone in splendor from the warrior's body.

In the Gesar epic, the bodies of warriors are invested with invisible war gods who perch on their head and shoulders and within their torso as invisible defenders. In order to defeat an epic warrior in battle, one must first frighten away these native deities, who protect the person wearing them against assassination.

In the same way, confidence replaces faith in Shambhala discourse. Fear, the opposite of confidence, replaces lack of faith as the primary problem to be solved. Thus, in Trungpa Rinpoche's Shambhala path, defeat of fear was regarded as the greatest spiritual accomplishment. A disciple who is free from fear cultivates an elegant, impeccable exterior, like a cavalry soldier jauntily accoutred for battle. This fear signifies religious faith in one's own buddha nature, which has been allegorized as the noble fury of a horseman in battle. When an epic hero has extinguished doubt and conquered his or her fears, the war gods descend on the body and fill it with light. The divine energy of battle bravery, known as windhorse, rises in the body, and a divine field of power envelops the warrior's form. The spiritual technology of this battle charisma is fully developed in Mipham's version of the Gesar epic. Trungpa Rinpoche's commentary gave this shamanic presentation a metaphysical and contemplative explanation and turned the epic's depiction of the exemplary behavior of warriors into practices for the spiritual path of students.

The system was already present in the encyclopedic writings of the Eclectics. There in the volumes of rituals, manuals, empowerments, and philosophical commentaries of Jamgön Kongtrül, Mipham, and Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo a system of spiritual culture and mystical metaphysics was worked out in detail. The system related the native shamanic religion with high Indian scholastic philosophy and the Indian tantric iconographical language with Sino-Tibetan spirituality. Although they did not invent the syncretic philosophy at work here, it was the Eclectics who crystalized it into a single system explicated in a single textual corpus.