"From: Hell, with Love" The Role of the Délog Tradition in Tibetan Buddhism

Sommer Disante
University of Redlands

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"From: Hell, with Love"

The Role of the Délog Tradition in Tibetan Buddhism


DiSante, Sommer
Academic Director: Onians, Isabelle
University of Redlands
Religious Studies
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ABSTRACT

"Thus that which is the most awful of evils, death, is nothing to us, since when we exist there is no death, and when there is death, we do not exist."

-Epicurus, Greek philosopher

There was a time in my life when I would have agreed with the above observation of the elusive and separate nature of death. Of course death is of little consequence; why worry about that which one cannot predict, control, or understand? Over the years, however, it has become clear to me that the very nature of mankind, as it is observable throughout human history, serves to stand in stark contrast to Epicurus’ opinion of death. We exist now, that is undeniable. And death is everywhere, though we may not be able to control or even understand it. Societies have built religious philosophies that attempt to provide some answers about what awaits in the afterlife, poets have tried to capture it in their prose, artists on their canvases.

Today, death stares back at us from our televisions and movie screens, and yet we in the 21st century have come to avert our eyes when faced with the prospect of our own death, or that of loved ones. Ours is an environment in which “the reality of death must be hidden from our immediate environment. Imaginary death is somehow enticing and entertaining, yet real death is made to seem disgusting and fearful.” (Mullen 1987:2) We have built a culture that fears and ignores death. Society glorifies the young and sexy, and is made uncomfortable by aging and death. The only outcome of ignoring death is that when it comes, which it certainly will, we are unprepared. The 12th century master Drakpa Gyaltsen said “human beings spend all their lives preparing, preparing, preparing....Only to meet the next life unprepared.” (Sogyal Rinpoche 1993:23)
general, humans tend to concern themselves with world matters like wealth and appearance. This is useless in death; we won’t be able to take any of it with us.

From the wealth of literature, spawned by uncertainty about death and the afterlife, has come a trans-tradition theme of travels to the respective netherworld. The Tibetan tradition of Tantric Buddhism contains a number of biographies of men and women known as délogs (‘das-log) who die, tour the Buddhist hell realms, meet with the Lord of Death, and return as messengers of the afterlife to their body in the human realms. The following essay is devoted to analysis and cross-comparison of several important délog stories, to better understand their place within the broader Buddhist themes of afterlife and karmic justice in religion and society. I hope to show how the personal experiences of a délog show that “death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected.” (Nyima Rinpoche 1993:11)

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the role that délogs play in the life of Tibetans and their understanding of death and karma, I interviewed Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in and around Dharamsala, India. My interviews were with monks, teachers, and lay practitioners alike, in order to gain a broader social perspective. I am also indebted to the wonderful literature I was able to read, particularly that which contained English translations of délog biographies. For simplicity, all U-chen Tibetan spellings of names and terms are listed in the glossary.
INTRODUCTION

A fundamental component of any religion, ancient or current, is to attempt to answer the unanswerable question that has stumped humanity for millennia: where do we go when we die? All the major religions have put their own twist on what the afterlife is, as has every belief system from ancient Egypt to Scientology. Sometimes the similarities between versions are strikingly similar, sometimes drastically different. The common thread, across thousands of years and miles, is that we still don’t have certainty based on personal experience. We can imagine the hells, but we can’t see them until we die (Karma 2009).

An enormous genre of literature has sprung from contemplation about the existence of a life after death, in which a person embarks on a spiritual journey, visiting the realms of the afterlife. These stories are abundant in Western religion and literature. For example, the Appendix to Plato’s Republic describes Er, a soldier in the war between the Greeks and Persians, who briefly dies and, in the underworld, witnesses the deceased taking rebirth.

In the East, Buddhism has its own expansive traditions of spiritual journeys into the hell realms. For example Maudgalyayana, one of Sakyamuni Buddha’s main disciples, traveled to the Avici hell¹ to try to save his mother, and also relays messages to the disciples of gurus he met in hell during his journey. Stories of other travels also exist in Buddhist texts. In Tantric Buddhism of Tibet, these travelers can be divided into several distinct, yet related, genres. They are saints and mystics, oracles and shamans,

¹ The Avici Hell is reserved for inmates who are so sinful in life that they fall there without passing before Dharmaraja’s court (Epstein 29)
and délogs, to which this paper is devoted. Saints and mystics leave intentionally to take on other-worldly goals, while shamans and oracles, with a low degree of mental control, aim to solve problems of this world such as illness. Délogs fall somewhere in the middle of these two divisions; their quest starts involuntarily, but ends as a full Buddhist commitment (Epstein 1983:62). In their biographies, the délogs are said to die, tour one or more of the Buddhist hell realms, and then come back to their life in the human world, to be a messenger of all they’ve seen.

A thorough understanding of délog literature, the majority of which came from the 16th – 18th centuries, reveals a wealth of information about the historical context in which they take place, the social role or religion, and basic Buddhist beliefs with regards to the interplay of karma in everyday life and the importance of human existence. This paper analyzes and compares the biographies of seven important délogs. They are four women; Lingza Chokyi (Gling-bza’ Chos-skyid), Karma Wangzin (Kar-ma dBang-dzin), Dawa Drolma (Zla-ba sGrol-ma), Nangsa Wobum (sNang-sa ‘Od-'bum), and three men; Lama Jampa Délek (bLa-ma Byams-pa bDe-legs), Dorjé Dhudil Rinpoche (rDo-rje bDud-'dul Rin-po-che), and Jangchup Sengé (Byang-chub Seng-ge). The majority of délog biographies originate in the south and eastern regions of Tibet. Nangsa Wobum is from Gyantse, a region south of Lhasa, Tibet’s capital. Jangchup Sengé, Jampa Délek, and Karma Wangzin are all from different areas of Kham, in eastern Tibet. Though there are stories from Nepal and Bhutan as well, this paper will only focus on those of Tibetan origin. The stages of their stories as I identify them are dying, remaining on earth

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2 Names in U-Chen alphabet are listed in the glossary.
3 Jangchup Sengé is from Nyarong Valley, Jampa Délek is from present day Ngamring, Karma Wangzin is from Lhodrak. (Cuevas 2008)
immediately after death, visiting the hell realms, meeting Yama (Ya-ma)\(^4\), the Lord of Death, and coming back to life. Each stage of a délog’s life is unique, yet common themes are prevalent. From the differences and similarities can meaning be drawn about Tibetan life in the 16\(^{th}\)-19\(^{th}\) centuries, and the true purpose of délog stories within Buddhism, which are aimed at a living lay audience. (Epstein 32). The eighteen Buddhist hell realms\(^5\) are well described and documented in Tibetan texts such as *Liberation Upon Hearing in the Bardo*\(^6\), yet outside of monastic institutions these texts were written for a religious elite, and remained widely inaccessible to lay practitioners. The stories of délogs, on the other hand, were transmitted to the public originally through people such as mani-pa\(^7\), and were more available to the non-monastic practitioner. The biography of Nangsa, a female délog, was even made into a Tibetan opera, or lha-mo, which is still performed today (Dhondrup 2009).

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\(^4\) Yama, Shinjé Choky Gelpo (dShin-rJe Chos-kyi Gel-po), Sanskrit: Dharmaraja, “King of the Dharma,” in India as early as the Rg Veda, Yama was recognized as the first being to travel to the afterlife. Now has come to occupy a seat of judgment in Hinduism, Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism. (Cuevas 2008:44)

\(^5\) There are eighteen Buddhist hell realms; eight hot hells, eight cold hells, the neighboring hells, and the temporary hells.

\(^6\) Mistranslated as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*

\(^7\) Modern mani-pa are devotees of Avalokitesvara, either monastic or lay persons, who travel around with tools such as images of the “Wheel of Life,” describe the suffering of the different realms of existence. (Epstein 29)
A PAINFUL DEATH

"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience."

-Dr. Wayne D. Dyer

The délog biographies are those of a pseudo-death occurrence in which the délog dies for only a brief time, which allows him or her to witness the afterlife temporarily, and then return to the human realm to share what awaits after death. In this way, the délog biographies can be preparatory in nature. Although everyone experiences cycles of bardos through the samsaric cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, these past lives are unable to be remembered. Therefore, accounts of the afterlife, which are taken to be experiential rather than speculative, provide support and understanding for practitioners about what awaits. In each of the délog biographies this paper addresses, the experience of dying is depicted. These portrayals help to understand common fears and perceptions of the experience of death. I will begin by briefly detailing the deaths of each délog, then analyze them together in terms of Buddhist beliefs and fears surrounding death.

Lingza Chokyi

A housewife, mother of three, and animal herder in a typical eastern Tibetan nomadic community (Cuevas 21), Lingza Chokyi epitomizes the average domestic laywoman, likely more occupied with daily concerns of managing a household than pursuing the religious path of the dharma. Her biography begins with a serious illness. Lingza battles her illness for sixteen days, taking medicine, trying curing rituals, and consulting astrologers. Before her death, she is perplexed by what she considers her sinful life, having never had the opportunity to practice the dharma. She laments:
“When I was small I thought I would become a nun, but my parents and brothers did not let me. In my youth, I did not get a single initiation, authorization or introduction to the dharma. I had made no great progress in meditation.” (Epstein 1983: 40)

Lingza is consumed with guilt and fear about what awaits her as a result of her failure to follow a religious path. Anticipating death, she instructs her husband in matters both religious and domestic, with specific requests about her funeral and the fate of her children. Her husband balks, which greatly troubles Lingza. It is in this state that “my head and body went awhirl” (Epstein 1983:40) Not only was Lingza prevented by marriage from a religious life, at the moment of her death her husband refuses her requests. She dies in this agitated state of mind, her despair and anxiety indicated as the direct cause of her death (Cuevas 2008:22). Lingza recalls:

“The entire earth and ground were filled with fire, and I felt the pain of my body burning within the blaze of a great thunderous roar. After there appeared red, white, and yellow paths...Lights of five colors shined above my head, and emanating from this radiant halo were many rays of light... Then there came the resounding roar of a thousand thunderclaps, calling out, ‘Ha! Ha! Hum! Hum! Kill! Kill! Strike! Strike!’ I was filled with inconceivable terror.” ( Cuevas 2008:26)

Lingza’s account mirrors that of other délog deaths being terrifying, confusing, and painful. The light that she describes seeing is consistent with the “ground luminosity”8 that appears briefly at the moment of death. An experienced practitioner

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8 The luminosity that occurs at the moment of death, after the dissolution stages are complete. It is known as the luminosity of the meeting of mother and child. It is said that one who has been trained in the luminosity of the path during life will be able to recognize the ground luminosity at death. (Nyiima Rinpoche 2003:103)
may be able to identify this fleeting luminosity and rest in it, thereby gaining liberation. Most people do not recognize this luminosity and move on to the Bardo of Dharmata. These and other similarities will be detailed at the end of this section. For now I will move on to Karma Wangzin. Also in the domestic role of housewife, Karma’s biography is reminiscent of Lingza’s.

*Karma Wangzin*

Karma, the daughter of a lama, occupied a higher social role than Lingza. Though she also yearns to devote her life to religion, Karma is sent at a young age to be married to a man picked based on social status by her parents. Once married, Karma sought out Buddhist lamas and yogis, hoping to be able to pursue a religious life despite her domestic responsibilities.

Karma’s illness and subsequent death seems to, like Lingza’s, have been brought on by emotional distress. She is frustrated that her marriage prevents her from a religious life. She appears to have more knowledge of the technical stages of dying described in Buddhist texts, possibly because of her interaction with lamas and yogis, which Lingza did not have.

“The process of the dissolution of the four elements began. As a sign of flesh and earth dissolving my body collapsed and I fainted. With the dissolution of blood and water I became extremely thirsty and my mouth and nose dried up; I no longer had the capacity to drink.” (Cuevas 2008:73)

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9 The Bardo of Dharmata comes after the Painful Bardo of Dying, and is where the hell realms exist.
Karma goes on to describe the impacts on her body as each element breaks down. Her description of fainting describes the dissolution of the Pervading Wind\(^\text{10}\), which gives muscles their power. When it leaves the body, one becomes like a corpse, unable to move (Nyima Rinpoche 2003:90) Her inability to drink is probably the result of the dissolution of the Upward-moving Wind, which causes one to be unable to eat, drink, or breath easily. Remembering all her sins, Karma cries with regret. She is plagued with attachment to her family, unable to get them out of her thoughts. Attachment to worldly things is highly warned against in Buddhism, as strong feelings of attachment to this life will affect one’s next rebirth. Karma then faints, seeing the clear light of death (Cuevas 2008:73), and dies.

_Nangsä Wobum_

The story of Nangsä Wobum is perhaps the most well-known biography of its kind, because it has been made into an opera and is much more likely to have been transmitted to a lay audience. As was relayed by the director of Tibetan opera at TIPA\(^\text{11}\), for lay people it is more likely through performance that stories like these become known (Dhondrup 2009).

Nangsä’s domestic life was fraught with anxiety and abuse. The prelude to her opera describes a young Nangsä, stunningly beautiful, generous, and compassionate, with the wish to devote herself to the dharma, not worldly matters. The plot itself begins with Nangsä being kidnapped for marriage by the son of a local chieftain. Her parents encourage the marriage, deeming it to be of beneficial status. Her husband and sister-in-

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\(^{10}\) Tibetan Buddhism says that the body possesses five _pranas_ or winds. These are the Life Wind, Downward-moving Wind, Upward-moving Wind, Pervading Wind and Supporting Wind. At death these _pranas_ begin to disintegrate, accompanied by inner and outer effects. (Rinpoche 2003:89)

\(^{11}\) Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts in McLeod-Ganj, Dharamsala, India.
law are viscously cruel to Nangsa. One day, her husband beats her so violently that she dies. In the summary of the opera, the personal experience of her death is not described. Rather, the story jumps directly to her meeting with the Lord of the Dead, which will be discussed later.

Like Karma and Lingza, Nangsa is a wife who finds herself in an undesirable domestic situation, which prevents her from pursuing religion. While her two counterparts’ deaths were caused by domestic stress, Nangsa’s was more violent in nature, though domestic nonetheless. The final female délog considered in this work, Dawa Drolma, shares similar motifs with that of other délogs, yet is also a clear departure from their established norm.

*Dawa Drolma*

Délog Dawa Drolma is also better known in modern times; she is the mother of His Eminence Chagdud Tulku, author of Lord of the Dance, and her biography has been widely published and distributed.

There is some disagreement as to whether a délog chooses to die and tour the hell realms, or does so unknowingly, as a result karma. Usually a person who dies does not know if they will come back (Rabjam 2009). Based first and secondary sources, as well as interviews conducted for this paper, the consensus is that whether one is a délog is a concern of karma, not the person (Karma 2009). The délogs are not aware that they are to return
to their human form until after their council with Yama. However, Dawa is aware that she will become a délog. When she was a young woman, Tara appeared to her and told her that she would soon fall ill and die. However, if she followed certain instructions explicitly, she would be able to revivify her dead body and benefit others by teaching about her experience (Chagdud 1992:2). Anticipating her journey like the other délogs did not, Dawa leaves very specific instructions for caring for her body. In accordance with her wishes, the corpse is washed in consecrated saffron water, dressed in new clothes, and laid in a room without food or water, to be completely undisturbed (Tulku 1992:5).

While Lingza, Karma and Nangsa experience horrible confusion and pain at their deaths, Dawa is tranquil: “... I had not merely fallen into an endless playing out of my confusion. Rather, I was fully aware of the fundamental condition of my mind in all its ordinariness” (Drolma 2001:8).

Tara, with whom Dawa has a deep karmic connection, appears before her to guide her into the afterlife.

**Jampa Délek**

Though some sources imply that délogs are predominately women, in actuality gender is not a real factor in becoming a délog (Chosang 2009). Though it may happen that the biographies of female délogs are better known, there balance of male and female tales is basically even. I will now turn away from the domestic female genre of délogs and turn towards the death experiences of monastic men, the first of which is Jampa Délek, a lama and monk who held high standing in the religious institution (Cuevas 2008:55). Jampa is able to follow the religious path denied to the women above, yet his
life is filled with concern. His biography begins with a description of the dark times which Buddhism in Tibet has fallen into. So concerned about the fate of Buddhism, Jampa falls incurably ill with what is described as a disorder of the bile. Worn down by illness and distressed by the threat of invading armies, Jampa Délek finally dies (Cuevas 2008:57). His concerns are religious and political whereas domestic concerns plague Karma, Lingza and Nangsa; however they all share in common that their deaths were brought on by stress of the environments around them that they seek to control.

Recounting his death, Jampa tells us:

“I turned my body like before and performed the visualization of transference (‘pho-ba). My body and mind separated. At that time I had the sensation of being suppressed by a rocky mountain. I heard all of the sounds of the earth, the stones, the mountain, and I was scared and felt pain. After that, the entire ground fell into a great ocean...” (Cuevas 2008:58)

Jampa experiences pain and fear, but what is drastically unlike the other délogs’ accounts is his attempt to meditate and perform phowa (‘pho-ba), which he had most likely been trained to do. He goes on:

“There were about thirty of them [human forms] wielding various weapons, and I saw that they had a variety of human-like heads, saying ‘Kill! Strike!’ and so on. Just seeing them terrified me. ... My fear and anxiety were immeasurable.” (Cuevas 2008:59).

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12 According to Tibetan medical tradition, illness arises due to imbalance of the three components; wind, phlegm and bile. (Rinpoche 2003:83)

13 Phowa is a practice aimed at guiding the soul when it dies, in order to facilitate a good rebirth. Either it can be done by the dying, if they are well-practiced, or it can be read to the dead by a lama or dharma friend. It is described in detail in Liberation Upon Hearing in the Bardo.
Jampa Délek also experiences the hordes of beings, presumably yamas, minions of the Lord of the Dead, shouting and brandishing weapons, which terrify him. Fear, it is clear, is the most powerful emotion that is felt at the time of death. Most likely it arises because of strong attachments to material objects, even including one's own body, which the dying is not ready to relinquish. The powerful imagery described in all délog biographies portrays a hostile scene waiting when we die. The most advanced practitioners will be able to see into the nature and essence of their pain and fear, and will realize that it is important not to get carried away and put too much importance on these sensations (Nyima Rinpoche 1993:105). Because practitioners of this level of realization will also not need to experience all the bardos sequentially, as the délogs do, it is safe to say that none of the subjects of this paper are advanced practitioners. Their fear and pain are testament to the sensations that most people will feel during their death. In this way their stories are a model for ordinary practitioners.

Jangchup Sengé

The death of Jangchup Sengé, a monk educated in Buddhist and Bonpo traditions, is caused by his lack of faith in a dream he has about Avalokitesvara.14 Like Jampa Délek and Karma Wangzin, Jangchup gives a formal description of his death in terms of the dissolution of the elements, indicating a substantial knowledge of Buddhist doctrine on the matter. Further indication of this is his thoughts during death that he should practice phowa. Again, death is accompanied by fear, pain, and terrifying images:

"I had visions that every inch of my body was being struck with sharp spears and knives and countless weapons. Then suddenly I had the impression that

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14 The Bodhisattva of Compassion, to which a wide following in Tibetan Buddhism is accorded.
buildings atop Mount Meru\textsuperscript{15} were crumbling down, and in a flash I had a vision of being overtaking by a great river....I had the sense that I was engulfed in light. At that moment I heard the words ‘Kill! Kill! Strike! Strike!’ resounding like a thousand thunderclaps simultaneously” (Cuevas 2008:109).

\textit{Dorjé Dhundil Rinpoche}

A Buddhist Tantric siddha in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century (Yangsham 2009), Dorjé Dhundil Rinpoche’s biography has recently been published in Tibetan language, a cursory translation of which lends itself to a broader understanding of the délog tradition.

The Rinpoche, following délog standards, became very sick and was helped by neither medicine nor religious rituals. He enters \textit{tug-dam} (tuks-dam)\textsuperscript{16} and is resurrected a few days later. According to his biography, recorded by a disciple:

“[He] fell into a state where his flesh was absorbed by the earth, his limbs collapsed, and his blood dissolved into water. His bodily strength left him, his spit and nasal liquid ran freely, and his tongue dried out...” (Yangsham 2009)

This description goes on, detailing the dissolution of the elements and winds, as has been described by the previous délogs, and is consistent with Buddhist medical texts. Upon his actual death, the text says:

“All of a sudden, he found himself in the bardo...Here, the dead were horrified by shouts of ‘Kill!’ and ‘Hit!’ and they suffered from hunger, thirst, and heat”(Yangsham 2009). Again, the délog experiences a fearsome place echoing with the cries of Yama’s minions.

\textsuperscript{15} Mount Meru is a sacred mountain in Buddhism, believed to be the mythological center of the universe.

\textsuperscript{16} A state in which the body does not decompose for a time after death.
Whether or not délogs existed historically, let alone successfully toured the hell realms, is not relevant. This paper does not seek to validate or discredit religious beliefs, as that is both impossible and ignorant of their intention. The true purpose is missionary and revivalist in nature. In their stories, there are no revolutionary Buddhist concepts introduced. Rather, their accounts draw from Buddhist texts. These scriptures were widely unavailable to a lay community who could not devote time to their study, provided they were even literate. Délogs thus appeal to the masses, by providing them with valuable information and instruction about what to do in this life, and what to expect in the afterlife. The deaths of the délogs above support important elements of the Buddhist tradition.

A specific emphasis on the importance of dharma practice is obvious in the biographies. Lingza Chokyi, Karma Wangzin, and Nangsa Wobum all feel immense guilt and unhappiness, because they were denied the opportunity to devote their lives to the dharma. To a lay audience, this regret would signify the superiority of a religiously inclined life, over one concerned with worldly, material matters. This is not to say that the intention of the délog narratives was to discourage Tibetans from domestic lives. Dawa Drolma was not a monastic, yet her devotion and meritorious actions during life are highly praised. The intent, rather, is to remind lay practitioners of the importance of the dharma. In Buddhism a human life is regarded as highly precious, because it is the only one in which liberation may be attained. To waste it away by ignoring the dharma is a grave sin. Religious practice is further emphasized by Jampa Délek, Jangchup Sengé, and Dorjé Dhundil. By attempting to practice meditation or phowa, they show that being well-practiced at the time of death is of great benefit.
As stated above, portray Buddhist beliefs in a more comprehensible way through their own experience. In Tibetan medicinal texts and *Liberation Upon Hearing in the Bardo*, the process of dying is described extensively. This will only be helpful if you have read the texts, which is unlikely of most lay practitioners in the 16th to 18th centuries. In these texts, there are inner, outer, and secret signs which precede coming death. Death is accompanied by the destruction of the life channel where the prana that supports the physical body dwells. With the destruction of this channel comes the disintegration of the five pranas and the five elements that we are made up of (Rinpoche 2003:82-89). For people who have not read descriptions of dying in Buddhist texts and therefore do not know what to expect, the délogs are a guide, describing, as they experience them, the dissolution of the elements and subsequent death.

The pain and fear experienced sends a clear message to the audience about the nature and result of attachment. Dying with attachment and longing will cause much suffering and anguish; Buddhism teaches that attachment is, in fact, suffering. All the délogs except for Dawa Drolma experience pain during their deaths, because they die consumed with worldly matters, whether domestic or political. Dawa Drolma, however, dies without attachment, and hers is a tranquil, lucid death. She experiences none of the delusion and confusion that her counterparts do.

After the experience of dying, the délogs do not go immediately to the hell realms. Rather, separate from their body, they wander around in the human realm, the Natural Bardo, until they realize that they are dead and are escorted to hell.

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17 Due to the nature of the translations obtained for the biographies of Nangsa Wobum and Dorjé Dhundil Rinpoche, this is not certain. I have conjectured their experiences of death based on the other biographies.
"Death is one of two things. Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything; or, as we are told, it is really a change: a migration of the soul from one place to another."

-Socrates

The délogs then regain consciousness, finding themselves still in the human realm, unaware of having died. Because they do not know that they have died, they experience confusion, annoyance and eventually anger towards family and friends seem to ignore them. They perceive their corpse as a dead animal with repulsion and fear, feel hungry and thirsty, and totally dazed. Finally, in most of the biographies they become fed up and decide to leave, at which point a guide or voice calls out to them, and they are transported to the hell realms.

*Lingza Chokyi and Karma Wangzin*

Lingza finds herself in her bedroom staring at her bed, in which she sees the corpse of a large pig dressed in her clothes. Her family, friends, and neighbors are also gathered in the room, appearing to mourn the pig’s corpse, which causes physical agony to Lingza:

"Some wrung their hands and wept... Then a hail of pus and blood, the size of eggs, fell and it hurt intolerably. As soon as they stopped crying, the roaring and hail stopped, as well as my pain." (Epstein 1983:42)

Lingza watches on as an argument ensues between her son and husband about proper funerary arrangements. Although she was a Buddhist, her husband was Bon. Family dramas in this time period sparked by differences in Buddhism and native Bon were probably common. Even though it is clear they are talking about her, Lingza does
not know that she has died, and tries to tell her family that she feels much better. Because the living cannot hear or see the dead, Lingza’s please are ignored.

Instances of Buddhist ritual are described in Lingza’s and other délog biographies which, because of the described effect on the deceased, are a blatant promotion and legitimization of Buddhist practice. When a lama in the home does a refuge formula and says some Buddhist rites, Lingza tells us “I felt a great joy” (Epstein 44). Feeling hungry and thirsty, Lingza watches unhappily as food is burnt in the fire. Upon smelling the smoke, she has a vision of eating and drinking, and feels satisfied. She becomes joyous when he pronounces the syllable “PHAT,” signifying the completion of phowa. After this transference separating mind and body, she notes that “my mind and body could not stay together” (Cuevas 2008:33). These instances show to the audience the effectiveness of several Buddhist rituals, promoting them to the audience.

After attempts to talk to her sons, daughter and husband, Lingza concludes that her family must be angry with her. She gives up and prepares to go, at which point a person calls out to her.

“I went to look [who it was]. I thought it might be my father. The person said, ‘Follow me, I have something to show you.’ Then he said, ‘I’ll send you back quickly.’” (Cuevas 2008:34)

Karma Wangzin suffers similar experiences as Lingza. She comes back to consciousness in her bedroom, witnesses her husbands grief, and good and bad things being said about her. Unaware that she’s died, she is extremely offended at not being offered tea and food when everybody else eats, and decides that, since everyone must be

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18 A mantric syllable, the activating word that marks the separation of the mind from the body during phowa, the transference of consciousness (Cuevas 2008:35)
mad at her, she should leave. As soon as this thought arises, Karma arrives at her parents' house, only to be barked at by dogs that had once been tame. Symbolically, dogs are closely related to death in Buddhism. They are depicted as companions of Yama in early Indian myths, helping to guard the entrance to heaven. In Tibetan culture, they are found roaming cemeteries and cremation grounds looking for remains to be eaten. Thus, dogs naturally bear strong funerary associations in Indian and Tibetan societies (Cuevas 2008:61). After this treatment from the family dogs, Karma is 'shunned' by her mother, who does not respond to her arrival. Distressed, Karma begins to realize what is going on, looking for signs indicating that she had died: “Thinking ‘I seem to have died,’ I looked at my body to see if it cast a shadow and it didn’t.” (Cuevas 2008:84)

After the realization of her death, Karma is confronted by a woman in white, who tells her that she will be her companion on their journey into the next world.

_Jampa Délek and Jangchup Sengé_

Also bearing ties to the imagery of dogs, Jampa Délek arrives in his house after dying, and perceives his corpse as dog-like and shriveled, wearing his cloak. He sees funerary preparations being made, though he does not realize he is dead. Like Lingza, the mourning of others causes him intense pain:

“With their cries, a hail of pus, blood, and weapons rained down upon me, and my body felt like it was being torn into pieces. I asked [my lama] the wisdom deity what was happening, but there was no reply.” (Cuevas 2008:61)

In this passage we see that by mourning over his death, Jampa’s friends cause him intense suffering in his state. Also, he describes being ignored by someone that he tries talking to, which clearly upsets him. In this stage in the délog biographies, over and over
again they attempt to communicate with their family, friends, or teachers, only to be completely frustrated in their attempts. Both of these occurrences carry important messages about the nature of attachment, which will be discussed at the end of this section.

The last biography that lends itself to this section is that of Jangchup Sengé. After being ignored by people around him, Jangchup decides to leave, whereupon he has several encounters with people that signify the dead still have some power to interfere in the realm of the living. He reaches to take water from a girl's bucket, causing it to fall off her shoulders and burst open, grabs a horse's tail making it collapse, and is followed by a dog which nips at his feet. These and other events show that although the living may not be able to hear or see the dead, they retain some power to affect this realm. Several times, Jangchup is referred to as a ghost, reflecting Tibetan superstition and beliefs. Although there is some ability to interact with the world, the dead still cannot do things like cast shadows, or leave footprints; these inabilities can trigger the délogs' realization of their death. Arriving home, he discovers a corpse stretched out on his bed, with two hunting dogs at its feet. He recalls, "I was terribly frightened. I then thought, 'it seems I've died,' and as soon as this crossed my mind I arrived outside [in front of] a large mountain." (Cuevas 2008:112)

Though the time that the délogs spend wandering in the human realm before they are struck with the realization of their death is brief, it is nonetheless extremely important in what it expounds of Buddhist ideology. Attachment to this life is a strong theme in each biography. It is not considered beneficial to the deceased to show abundant outward displays of sadness at death. Prayer, puja, and other meritorious acts dedicated to the
departed are considered much more beneficial. These acts of merit will help to ensure a better rebirth for the departed. Therefore, the strong imagery of a rain of puss, blood, and even weapons which rain down on the délog, causing them intense misery, is likely a direct message to the audience of the futility and potential harm their tears cause. Seeing this, they are intended to realize that crying is of no use, and that more productive actions can be taken following death. The colors of puss and blood are also significant. Lawrence Epstein has conjectured that white puss (representative of the male/father element of semen) and red blood (representative of the mother) symbolize an unhealthy sexual and social attachment on the part of the deceased.

A further admonition against attachment can be derived from the dead persons' futile and frustrating attempts to communicate with loved ones. Buddhist masters tell us that no matter how much you care for or need a person in this life, they cannot come with you and cannot help you after it. All that will help at this point is dharma practice done while alive. This message is driven home as each délog, over and over, tries in vain to talk to people they knew in life. We see through their eyes that when we die, those remaining in the living realm are separated from us, and cannot help other than through puja and other merit dedication.

It is also significant that the délogs do not see their own corpse, but rather that of some grotesque animal. There is a form of serious Buddhist meditation in which the practitioner is instructed to meditate upon the impermanence of their own body, visualizing it as it goes through the stages of decay. Perhaps this grotesque animal imagery is designed to shock the audience away from attachment to their physical body, the appearance of which we tend to be overly concerned with. It is also possible that
different animal shapes are symbolic ( Cuevas 2008 : 28 ) Often in the center of paintings of dharmachakras, the Wheel of Life, a rooster, snake and pig are drawn in the center. These represent lust, hatred, and ignorance respectively. When Lingza Chokyi describes her corpse as a rotting pig, it is perhaps symbolic of her ignorance, either of being dead, or on a larger scale, of not having followed the Buddhist path, as she should have.

Not only is Buddhist ideology regarding attachment alluded to throughout the above section, but several rituals and beliefs are also given experiential validity by the délogs. Burning food offerings for the dead was a common practice. In the narratives we see that when the délog smells the smoke, they feel nourishment and have visions of eating, showing the audience that this practice is not in vain. Rituals such as this, phowa and puja reflect the idea that the destiny of the dead can still be altered; this is certainly reflected in detail by the experiences of the délogs.

The last image is that of a person or voice appearing to the délog. This is a guide, who will accompany the délog as he or she ventures into the hell realms and appears before the Lord of the Dead in his court. Whether the guide is male or female, ordinary or deity, seems to depend on the specific délog. There is also a belief that your guide will be a being of the afterlife with the head of an animal, corresponding to your astrological sign and the year you were born ( Karma 2009 ).

**GONE TO HELL**

Perhaps we are too confused after death, even upon realizing we’ve died, to navigate alone through the next stage of existence. The mysteriousness of death can be a great source of fear and anxiety to people; the appearance of a being whose purpose is to help explain and direct the délog down each path of their journey
may be a great source of comfort to the people that hear their stories, especially after the strong imagery expounded as the délog is systematically separated from everything they knew and loved in life.

**Guidance from Beyond**

Karma, Dawa and Jangchup all have in common that their guides are divine bodhisattvas, though the level of interaction they have with them varies. Lingza’s account of her guide is much more vague, and it is unclear what kind of being accompanies her.

Lingza’s guide is not described as a man or a woman, and she does not say if the person was familiar to her in her human life. Though the guide stays with her throughout her time in the hell realms, it is only referred to as a friend or companion (Cuevas 2008:41). Divine emanations of Tara are the companions of both Dawa Drolma and Karma Wangzin, while a man in black robes carrying a banner tied to a spear escorts Jampa Délek. Jangchup Sengé’s guide, in the form of a young boy, is none other than the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokitesvara. Possibly his guide is the same emanation that appeared to him in the dream he doubted shortly before his death. In both, Avalokitesvara takes the form of a young boy.

No matter who they are, or in what form the guides provide valuable explanation and assistance, even at times in the court of Yama, discussed later.

**Geography of Hell**

It is widely agreed that the hell realms are not a physical place, but rather a delusion caused by our lack of understanding of the nature of mind (Rabjam 2009). When

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19 Witnessing the suffering of beings in the hell realms, the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokitesvara, cried. His left tear became Green Tara, and his right tear became White Tara. (Rabjam 2009) Emanations of Tara are highly worshipped in Tantric Buddhism. White Tara is the form appearing in both délog narratives.
she asks how to return home, Karma’s guide tells her that because her ignorance is so severe “your own visions rise up as enemies.” She goes on, “even though you belong to a lama’s family you haven’t recognized your hallucinations and so for a little while you have to experience more suffering.” (Cuevas 2008:87) The hell realms are able to exist because of the impure and unrealized nature of our minds. This does not, however, mean that the descriptions of the hell realms are without abundant geographical details. The Bardo is often depicted as a vast landscape with uncertain boundaries, but familiar geographical features. The délogs describe at length these geographical features. They travel through vast expanses of desert devoid of plants, over mountains, pits of fire and molten metal, and forests. They venture down narrow passageways, into dark holes. They come across man-made features like towns and villages, inhabited by thousands of suffering beings, sometimes people the délog had known. There are also a few accounts of pristine celestial palaces of gods and bodhisattvas. Dawa Drolma devotes the first section of her tale to lengthily describing dozens upon dozens of such heavenly abodes and their inhabitants. From accounts read and interviews conducted, I’ve concluded that travels into heavenly realms of the gods are not common or well known, and most people seemed to think that a délog only visits the hells.

A recurring feature is that of a river and bridge, over which one must cross to reach the hells. This imagery reflects the idea that there is a boundary between this realm and the next. In other words, there is a cross-over, a transition that must be made. Dorjé Dhundil’s description of the bridge he comes across describes perfectly the transition, tying it to karmic law:
He came across a hellish dead river. The wide river was full of metal cast iron and sea monsters. For those who had already purified their bad karma, the dead bridge was wide and unobstructed... But for those who had cultivated terrible karma, the bridge was as narrow as five hairs from a horse’s tail; and as armed hell workers herded them across, beings fell into the river and became food for the sea monsters. The number of dead walking the wide bridge was very small, and thousands of beings had fallen into the river...” (Yangshan 2009).

Dorjé’s description is of a barrier that must be crossed after death, and is a visual display of karma. The message: those with good karma will go easy into the next life; those with bad karma will suffer and struggle. Presumably describing the same bridge, Dawa Drolma recalls that “the fearsome six-arched bridge of the dead chilled my blood.” (Barron 1995:40) Similarly, when Lingza comes upon the bridge, she asks her guide whom the people crossing it are. Her guide tells her, “This is the border between the living and the dead, those who have passed on from the human realm” (Cuevas 2008:41). She goes on to explain that the people who have not crossed over are waiting for acts of merit to be dedicated to them. This reminds the audience that the dead are helpless in this realm, and require assistance from their loved ones. This idea is supported in the next category of délog experience; their interactions with suffering beings.

Meeting the Damned

The Buddha’s disciple Maudgalyayana, when he goes to hell to find his mother, also comes across priests of different religions, who are suffering immensely because, among other reasons, their disciples are still sacrificing animals in their honor. They appeal to Maudgalyayana to send messages to their disciples telling them the correct way
to live (Rabjam 2009). The intention of this is two-fold; the priests seek to help themselves, and help their disciples to not have the same fate. Through the discussions that délogs have with beings suffering their karmic consequences in hell, the most important purpose of the délog becomes known; messenger of the dead. In addition to providing experiential evidence about the afterlife the délogs transmit direct messages given from the dead to the living; requests for more puja and prayers, and warnings about the consequences of their evil deeds. The consequences of negative karma are strongly portrayed through the gruesome depictions of the agonizing misery those in the hells suffer because of their past lives.

Dawa Drolma comes across a man chained to a bridge in immense pain. In life, though he had been wealthy, he “did not distribute wealth and food or dispense justice properly…” (Barron 1995:53). The man tells Dawa that the recitation of the mani mantra would relieve some of his suffering by beginning to purify his sins, and requests that his sins be confessed by others on his behalf.

She also witnesses a group of beings being barraged by weapons, having their heads torn off, lungs, hearts and livers gouged out. She notes: “Such is the danger facing lecherous lamas and worldly monks, nuns who abort their illegitimate offspring, and men who rape nuns or who, not content with their own wives, consort with other women.” (Barron 1995:57). A wide, and darkly creative, array of tortures of hell is portrayed. Beings suffer from hunger and thirst, are chased by “flesh-eating demons” (Yangsham 2009), attacked with weapons, cut, gouged, stabbed, burned, decapitated and disemboweled. Wrathful minions prevent escape and torment the damned at every turn, who cry remembering “the unvirtues they cultivated during their lives.” (Yangsham
Various types of weather are also described, such as horrible blizzards, thunderstorms, and freezing rain.

Whether the délogs speak personally to the suffering person, or is told of their sinful karma by their guide, the plentiful interactions between délog and dead allow us to see, scene after scene, the different ramifications of various karmic actions, from killing animals to sexual impropriety to not following the dharma. Some suffer in hell because their family neglected the proper funerary arrangements, others because of a bookkeeping error on the part of Yama’s minions. (Epstein 1993:49) Though it is believed that the dead only remain in this intermediate bardo for 49 days, (Chosang 2009) some beings have been there much longer, waiting to stand trial in the court of Yama, Lord of the Dead.

**JUDGEMENT BEFORE THE THRONE**

"Lofty status, ruthless might and power, the wealth of the rich, the lovely bodies of the beautiful, artful wit, and clever explanations cannot beguile or fool the lord of death."

-Dawa Drolma (Barron 1995:35)

After an arduous journey, the délogs arrive before Yama in his court, witnessing the trial and judgment of others, and standing trial themselves. The wrathful Lord of the Dead is fearsome looking, best described by Dawa Drolma:

"His form a dark purplish brown, he was terrifying, wrathful, and fierce...On his upper body he wore the fresh hide of an elephant, around his middle the flayed skin of a human being, around his lower body a skirt of tiger skin...In his right hand he bore a crosshatched board of fate, in his left the mirror of karma." (Barron 1995:41)
Yama, also referred to as Shinje Choky Gelpo, or the Dharmaraja, is seated on a high throne, flanked by minions, called yamas. Dawa Drolma refers to these by name, while explaining that ignorance and recognition alter our perceptions of the bardo after death:

"If there is recognition, there is Buddha Vajrasattva; if not, there is Malevolence with a serpent’s head. If there is recognition, there is the Buddha Ratnasambhava; if not, there is Pride with a lion’s head. If there is recognition, there is Buddha Amitabha; if not, there is Destiny with a monkey’s head..." (Barron 1995:42).

Yama and his animal-headed minions listen to the cases made by two beings, dark and light, who argue the case of the deceased. These beings have roots in the Bhaisajyaguru-sutra, which describes a “spontaneously born spirit that follows after [all] human beings ...[to] record in writing all virtues and sins...” (Cuevas 2008:46). In the délog literature two such beings, rather than one, are described: divine and demonic. Dawa Drolma describes them as “children, fair and dark.” (Barron 1995:70). The symbolism of white and black is clear; white represents good karma, black; bad karma. The karmic beings measure deeds with white and black pebbles respectively, as they argue the deceased’s case before the Lord of the Dead. A scale of justice (for the pebbles) and mirror of karma are consulted, and Yama decides to which hell, and for how long, one is to be sent. These trials clearly outline the punishments of the wicked, and are the culmination of the wider message of délog literature on the importance of accumulating good karma on the Buddhist path.

Trials of the Damned
Jampa Délek and Jangchup Sengé only describe the trials of the damned in general terms; they speak of the laws of karmic effect without individual details. Deviating from this traditional style, Lingza Chokyí's accounts are highly personalized. She sees a princess who died an untimely death come before the court, and she presents her own case, recalling her virtuous life. Yama consults his mirror of karma and proclaims that while she was telling the truth, she also slandered a yogi in her life, and "will have retribution for your perverse faith.” (Cuevas 2008:50) While being led to the Howling Hell\textsuperscript{20}, she warns Lingza, "slander is a terrible fault.” (Cuevas 2008:50) Dawa Drolma watches as a girl who flirted with lamas is sentenced to hell “with no chance of being freed for thousands of aeons,” (Barron 1995:45) In another instance, a sinful woman is brought before the court. When the children of her karma are asked about her merits, “the fair one seemed to have nothing to say; his face turned black as coal.” (Barron 1995:61) The dark child gleefully recounts the woman’s sins, and the scale topples over as her karma is weighed. She is then led away to the Crushing Hell, after Yama draws a mark on the board of fate.

In an interesting example, the karmic children of one woman both make good cases. The Lord of Death notes that it seems they were both speaking the truth, and he would have to weigh the case on the balance of virtuous and harmful actions. The balance is tipped over by harmful actions, and the woman is led away. This event shows that you cannot escape or hide from your karma. Although this woman’s fair child advocated for her, the scale and mirror will reveal the truth, enforcing the ultimate nature of karmic law.

\textsuperscript{20} The Howling Hell is one of the hells to which Yama sentences the dead. Other hells referenced in délog commentaries are Reviving Hell, Black Thread Hell, Crushing Hell, Hell of Intense Heat, Hell of Constant Torment, Plain of Hot Embers, Swamp of Rotting Corpses, and the Shêlmari Mountain of Weapons.
The individual trials before Yama are numerous and could be devoted volumes.
For the purpose of this study, it is sufficient to establish that in each, the person either argues their own case or it is argued by the karmic beings. Yama ultimately decides whether the person is good or bad, and then appropriates a sentence. Délog accounts are predominantly concerned with those who are damned to hell. The bottom line is that as the trials unfold, dozens of honorable and wicked deeds are listed, and it is abundantly clear to anyone listening what you should and shouldn’t do in this life. When a person is sentenced to thousands of aeons for killing animals, the audience is being told not to kill animals. When Yama is pleased by meritorious actions such as pilgrimage, the audience in turn is encouraged to go on pilgrimage. Each judgment scene illustrates positive and negative actions that we can do in this life, and their corresponding ramifications.

The délogs only look on as others are judged for a time, before they too are brought before the throne. Here we learn their true purposes, as Yama’s intent by sending them back is made known.

**Délogs before the Court**

In court, Lingza learns that her death was an accident; a case of mistaken identity. Though she was not supposed to die, Yama still has a purpose in mind for her. Before allowing Lingza to return, he asks her to relay “my message to the world... [that] to obtain a body without virtue is to return empty-handed without the dharma,” and warns her to “work diligently on the side of virtue, and remember seeing the benefits of virtue and the harmfulness of sin.” (Cuevas 2008:52) Karma Wangzin’s death, on the other hand, is not an accident, which Yama is careful to make known. He sends her home with two other girls; one from Dartséndo, and a Bonpo girl from Kham. He sends each girl
back with a message, the reason they’re being given a second chance. To the former, he warns “don’t mix virtue and sin.” (Cuevas 2008:91) The Bonpo girl is sent back to convert to Buddhism, a clear stand against the indigenous religion in Tibet that Buddhism had to compete with in this time period. Before leaving, Yama tells Karma that she is being sent back to be a messenger about what awaits in the bardo between death and the next life, and also to devote her life to working for sentient beings.

Jangchup Sengé is exhorted to mend his ways and, like Karma, commit to a life of religious service. Dorjé Dhundil is instructed to “go back to the human realm, and describe to everyone the suffering he had witnessed, to compel them to accumulate virtues and give up sin.” (Yangsham 2009)

After receiving instruction from the Dharmaraja, the délog goes home, usually by envisioning themselves there and then arriving upon that thought. Not surprisingly, there is alarm and confusion upon the reanimation of the délogs’ corpses. The délog is able to convince their families that they are not rolang,21 by explaining where they have been and what they’ve seen. (Dawa 2009). They then go on to do what they had promised Yama, namely fervently adopting the religious path, and spreading their stories to the population.

CONCLUSION

Délogs are not heroes; they are not saints. They do not charge valiantly into hell’s abyss in the name of dharma. But it is what they aren’t that facilitates what they are: messengers. Though the begin their journey unintentionally, the culmination of sights and events they are witness to transform their confused journey into a religious quest, as the Lord of the Dead ushers them back to life to spread awareness of

21 Zombies
the afterlife, and the infallibility of karmic law; its positive and negative ramifications. Because they are ordinary people, the audiences that hear their stories can relate more easily than they can to Maudgalyayana or mystic saints (Chosang 2009). Délogs teach us that by controlling our actions, we are the masters of our destiny; but to act negatively is to throw ourselves on the mercy of karmic law, symbolized by Yama’s court. As we follow their tale through death, hell, and into the court of karma, they provide insight to many facets of Tibetan society and religion, and play an important role in offering insight about what awaits between death and rebirth. In their deaths, we are shown the importance of funerary customs, prayers, puja, and offerings, are encouraged to practice the dharma through the regret of not practicing, and are taught lessons about attachment leading to suffering. When the délog enters hell and meet its prisoners, many sinful deeds are listed, and the visual effect of such negative karma is apparent. Yama’s court represents the authority and inescapable justice of karma, as well as the punishments that await sinners. All this would be lost, though, if the délogs did not fulfill their purpose; to act as hell’s messenger. Because of them, Tibetan lay audiences, especially in the 16th – 18th centuries, get this information that they would have been unable to get from Buddhist texts.

GLOSSARY of TERMS: ENGLISH AND UCHEN

Bardo
Chenrezi
Délog
Lhamo

Mani-pa
Phowa
Puja

35
DiSante

Rolang
Rinpoche
Shinje Chokyi Gelpo

Délog Names
Dawa Drolma
Dorje Dhundil
Karma Wangzin
Jampa Délek

Interviewee Names
Ani Tenzin Palmo
Gegen...
Karma Lama
Poppa Rabjam

Samten Dhondrup
Tashi Dawa
Tenzin Phuntsok
Venerable Tenzin Chosang

FUTURE RESEARCH

I came across two topics that would be interesting areas of further study:

- There is a tradition in Tantric Buddhism where if a child dies very young (in the first couple of years) the family can obtain a priest to carry out very specific rituals insuring that the same child will be born again to that family. This happened to the younger brother of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Ngari Rinpoche, who died as a young child and was reborn a year later to the same family.
Lamas staying in *tugdum*, a state after death in which the body does not decompose for a few days, and the person stays in meditative postures. An example of this happened in south India in September 2008. The Venerable Tenzin Chosang at Namgyal Monastery was present when his root lama, Ghaden Tripa, died and remained in *tugdam*. Medical doctors were called to take the vital signs of the body, finding core heat and a brain wave. Doctor Tenzin Tenam, now in America, was on that team of doctors. Both of these people may be available for interviews on this topic.

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