Title page: Fig. 1
Initiation Card
Tibet; 11th-12 century (lender’s dating)
Pigments on paper
Navin Kumar Collection, New York
(HAR 70628)

Above: Fig. 2
Fragment of a Throne Back (Torana)
Tibet; 14th century
Wood panel with pigments
22 x 9 3/4 x 1 in. (55.9 x 24.8 x 2.5 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.28.3 (HAR 65651)

Opposite (detail): Fig. 1
Initiation Card

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BON
The Magic Word
The Indigenous Religion of Tibet

SAMTEN G. KARMAY and JEFF WATT, EDITORS

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TSEWANG RIGDZIN
The Bon Tradition of Sacred Geography

CHARLES RAMBLE

The Rubin Museum of Art's painting of Tsewang Rigdzin (whose main stylistic features have already been described by Kathryn Selig Brown in the catalogue of an earlier exhibition held at the Rubin Museum) clearly depicts themes that bear on two important and closely related domains in Tibetan religious culture: the traditions of sacred geography and pilgrimage. It would, in fact, be hard to find a tangka that served as a better point of departure for such an exploration, since it is so eloquent about the most important themes underlying this cultural complex—the imperative to travel to places of special significance, the transformative power of these places for those who visit them, and (though we understand this not from the painting itself but the literary source on which it is based) the notion of subjugation. But before exploring these phenomena in more detail, we need to know more about the elusive figure who occupies such a central position in the Bonpo cult of power-places, Tsewang Rigdzin himself.

Tsewang Rigdzin’s father was the eighth-century magus Drenpa Namka. In Buddhist sources, the latter is a relatively minor figure who converted to Buddhism for reasons of expedience when the Bon religion, of which he was an eminent exponent, was persecuted by the Emperor Tri Songdetsen (742–797). Bonpo histories, by contrast, accord Drenpa Namka an elevated status and a range of accomplishments analogous to the place occupied by Padmasambhava in the Buddhist tradition. He married a woman variously named Oden Barma and Nyima Nyingpo Obarna, the daughter of an Indian Brahman. She bore him twin sons, of whom the firstborn was “as clear as crystal, with the mark of a swastika in the middle of his forehead; he foresaw the future clearly, and unwaveringly dedicated
himself to the cultivation of passivity.” The younger twin was “deep brown and majestic, with bulging eyes and a nose that was wrinkled in anger; his gaping mouth was triangular and his hands made ferocious ritual gestures, while his feet danced.” The older son was named Yungdrung Donsal, and the younger Pema Tongdrol, whom Bon tradition identifies with the Buddhist Padmasambhava. The meditations performed by the elder brother—who would later be given the name Tsewang Rigdzin—were rewarded with the gift of long life, while Pema Tongdrol’s austerities predictably won him more devastating magical powers. The parents fell out and quarrelled over custody of the children, but the matter was solved when the boys themselves proposed a settlement: the elder would stay with the father,
and the younger would depart with the implacable mother. Pema Tongdrol set off with his mother for India, where he was subsequently adopted by a childless royal couple and found many an opportunity to demonstrate his spectacular gifts, while Yungdrung Donsal retreated into a life of quiet abstraction from the everyday world.\textsuperscript{ii}

The content and composition of the painting are not the result of the artist’s fertile imagination but are clearly based on a description contained in a set of prayers dedicated to Tsewang Rigdzin. They form part of a larger work called \textit{Tsewang Boyulma}, “[The Life of] Tsewang [Rigdzin] in Tibet.” Classified as a terma or “treasure-text,” the work was discovered by a treasure revealer whose dual identity as a Bonpo and a Nyingmapa Buddhist is indicated by his two names: Bonshig Yungdrung Lingpa and Dorje Lingpa. Two other accounts, \textit{Tsewang Gyagarma} and the lost \textit{Tsewang Shangshungma}, deal respectively with his activities in India and the land of Shangshung. The prayers in \textit{Tsewang Boyulma} follow a common Tibetan literary classification into “outer,” “inner,” and “secret” components, and it is evidently the “inner” prayer that provided the main inspiration for the painting. The central figure is described as follows:

He has a red-brown body, blazing in awesome light; his hair is in a topknot, with a fluttering band of silk and a flower attached, and he is adorned with golden earrings; in his right hand he holds a drum and in his left a cymbal; he wears bone ornaments, sits on a tiger skin and is bedecked with jewels; he is seated in the half-lotus posture, with one foot extended and the other drawn in.\textsuperscript{iii}

A glance at the painting belies one detail in this description—Tsewang Rigdzin is not holding a drum in his left hand; in this case, the artist has in fact taken his cue from the “secret” prayer, according to which the object in his left hand is “a skull-cup filled with nectar.”

The text also describes Tsewang Rigdzin’s consort, Nyima Obar, who is:

\textsuperscript{127}
red in color, holding objects of power, her hair in tangled locks and wearing golden earrings; in her right hand she grasps a crescent knife and in her left a cranium of blood, with only the six-fold bone ornament to cover her beautiful nakedness. She sits in a dancing-posture, with one leg extended and the other drawn in. iv

The prayer has something to say about most of the other figures in the painting, but there is one set that is of particular interest to us here: the six that are located to the immediate left and right of the central couple. These are, in short, representations of the form and attributes of Tsewang Rigdzin when he visited certain Bonpo power places in Tibet. The top left-hand cameo illustrates a passage that reads:

When he was at Mount Tise (Kailash), he was white in color and he rode a rainbow; he had silk ribbons in his hair, and wore jewelled earrings, while adopting a dance posture and playing melodies on a lute; he was surrounded by fearsome kandroma, daughters of the gods; he subjugated the gods.

His appearance at the other sites may be listed more briefly
(following the sequence of the prayer as it tacks from left to right down the painting):

When he went to Langchen Gyingri, he was red in color and rode a sunbeam.... At the holy place of Pori Ngeden he was blue-green in color, and rode a horned eagle.... At the holy place of Yungdrung Sabten he was yellow and rode a rainbow.... When he came to Shenri Deden he was brown in color and rode the quick lightning.... At the snow mountain Chugmo Pari, he was blue in color and rode the rumbling thunder-dragon.

In addition to providing information on the other characters in the painting, the text tells us certain things that are not represented there at all. We learn, for example, that Tsewang Rigdzin's particular achievements at each of these places were the subjugation, respectively, of gods, fragrance-eaters (driza), serpent spirits (hu), titans (thamin), demons, and humans, and for each of these defeated classes of beings, their daughters formed his entourage.

**A Living Landscape**

The idea that the Tibetan earth is not merely an inert physical entity is certainly an ancient belief, and one that features in the myth of the introduction of Buddhism to the country. The seventh-century emperor of Tibet, Songtsen Gampo, set out to build a temple in which to house the Buddha-image that had been brought to Lhasa by his Chinese bride, Kongjo. But the building—the future Jokhang—repeatedly collapsed during construction. Thanks to her geomantic skills, Kongjo had earlier identified the reason for resistance that Buddhism was facing: the land of Tibet was in fact a vast demoness, lying on her back. This demoness was implacably hostile to the new religion and would need to be pacified by having temples built on her flailing limbs before any progress could be made with the missionary enterprise.

In addition to this well-known story, there are many examples in both Tibet and the adjacent Himalayas of human or animal forms
being projected onto a more local landscape. The underlying imperative in all such cases is surely the need to organize and make sense of a complex world by establishing analogies with what is most familiar. And what could be more familiar than the family? All over Tibet it is possible to find such family networks: in the western region, for instance, most of the mountains of any significance are regarded as the cousins or offspring or aunts of the patriarch Tise or are more vaguely identified as members of his “circle.”

A Chinese author recently raised the question of why the Tibetans obeyed without hesitation the Red Guards’ orders to destroy their religious heritage during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Remarking that they had simply replaced one symbol of supreme authority (the Dalai Lama and the Buddhist church) for another (Chairman Mao and the Party), the author maintained that the Tibetans were conditioned to this slave mentality by the awesome environment in which they lived; the savagery of the elements and the grandeur of the mountains had long ago persuaded them to abdicate all sense of agency. The possibility that the Red Guards gave the Tibetans very little choice in the matter seems not to have occurred to this author, but then Tibet has always been a fertile subject for speculation and fantasy on the part of outsiders.

As a matter of fact, Tibetans have rarely had unkind words to say about their natural environment (unlike the seventeenth-century English, for example, who referred to hills and mountains as “deformities,” “warts,” “boils,” “monstrous excrescences,” and “Nature’s pudenda”). This is not to say that the Tibetan outdoors is a kind place—far from it—but rather that the culture has done a very successful job of landscaping it, as it were, in song, poetry, and religious practice. Among Tibetan nomads the sky is not characterized as a vacuum of terrifying infinity but rather the friendly dome of a tent; and—in an adage that goes back to the earliest written sources—the mountains are simultaneously the poles that hold up the vault of the sheltering heavens and the tent pegs that pin their hem to the earth. The Tibetan outdoors is not only vast, but also strikingly vertical, and it is no surprise that the sheer uprightness of the topo-
graphy should be one of the commonest subjects of folksongs. A recurring motif is the stereotype of a mountain in which the song works its way down in successive verses from top to bottom, descending down seven levels and extolling the animals, real or mythic, with which each is associated. The animals at each level are: the snow lion on the glaciers; the griffon vulture on the bare crags; the wild yak on the slates; the deer on the alpine pastures; the tiger in the forest; the kyang (wild ass), on the steppes; and the fish in the rivers.

Beyond these natural denizens, the Tibetan earth is peopled by a pantheon of invisibles: mountain gods of the snow peaks, serpent spirits of the underworld, aerial warrior demons, rock sprites, and many others for which the English language has no equivalents. The generic name for these is sabdag, “lords of the earth.” All can be highly dangerous if disturbed, provoking drought, hail, earthquakes, disease, and madness. The trick, quite simply, is not to upset them: show respect and healthy caution, and instead of misery they will bring gentle rain and snow, fertility, prosperity, and general protection. The term sabdag also means “landlord,” and that is exactly how these elementals are seen. At least once a year, in the course of a special ritual, the village priest invokes them and invites them to a feast of beer, grain, and incense, and addresses them in these words:

Above: Fig. 69
Darchen, the point of departure for the circuit of Mount Tise, full moon, May 2002. The merit to be gained by visiting the mountain is vastly increased in a Horse year, which falls every twelve years. Festivities revolve around the great prayer flag (darchen) that is raised at the location.

Photograph by Thomas Kelly
You are the hosts, and we are the guests: abide by your promise of hospitality!
When we go forth, be our escort, and receive us when we return;
If we follow you, be our companions on the way;
If we go onto the crags, be our steps and ladders;
If we pass through water, be our bridges;
If we walk on the trails, be our props;
If we travel in darkness, be lamps to guide our way;
Ward off enemies who bear us malice;
Subdue the obstructive demons who would harm us;
Reverse the misfortunes caused by hindrances!

Treat the landlords properly and there should be no trouble with the bailiffs.

These spirits are not the transcendent divinities of Bon and Buddhism but earthly powers hitched to the wheel of death and rebirth, just as we are. For the most part, they were once truly hostile beings that were subdued and bound by saints and lamas with oaths to serve the Doctrine.

Pilgrimage

What do Tibetans understand by pilgrimage? Sacred journeys of long duration feature in many civilisations, and, even in the Christian tradition, the idea of pilgrimage evokes a wide range of activities undertaken by travelers in as many frames of mind. The quest by a shipload of uncompromising seventeenth-century Puritans in search of a New World is a far cry from the trek to Canterbury undertaken by an unlikely crew of Chaucerian storytellers, and neither has much in common with Hilaire Belloc’s solitary and wine-sodden Path to Rome.

The English word “pilgrimage” does duty for a number of Tibetan words, all of which have something to do with “place”: nekor, for example, means “going around places,” and nejel “visiting places.” The word for “place” here, ne, doesn’t refer to just any location, and
Translators often try to convey this significance by rendering it as “sacred site” or “power-place.”

What makes a place a ne, a power-place, to which pilgrims will make long and arduous journeys to visit? Specifically, these places are geographical records of happenings, the heroic achievements of masters such as Tsewang Rigdzin, whose spiritual powers converted the earth gods to their faith. The creation of a sacred place isn’t a one-off event but a long process, a series of episodes occurring over the course of centuries and extending back into the era of myth.

Whatever circumstances are believed to be at the origin of sacred places, tradition has selected a certain number as being of particular
Pilgrims make their devotions at one of the many sacred locations on the perimeter of Mount Tise.
Photograph by Thomas Kelly
importance as pilgrimage sites. It is frequently stated by Bonpos that the three most significant sites are, in descending order of sanctity, Kongpo Bonri, Gang Tise (Mount Kailash), and Shele Gyakar, of which we shall see more below. One of the most important compendia of sacred sites in the Bon tradition is the Zurjang, an abbreviated form of a title meaning “The Guide that has Been Excerpted and Set Aside” (Zur du phyung ba'i kha'byang), indicating that it is a sort of free-standing extract from the longer prophecy of its author, Loden Nyingpo (b. 1360). The author provides the context in which these places are enumerated by receiving instructions from none other than Tsewang Rigdzin himself, who is "present in a secret body." The master embarks on a discourse concerning the types of activities that are appropriate for the body,
speech, and mind in this degenerate age. The ideal occupation for the
first of these is to “visit vital places of meditation,” and he proceeds to
describe twenty such sites that are the “sovereign holy places.” The name
of each place is followed by a prescription of what one should do there
and a summary of the ways in which devoted pilgrims might expect
to be transformed by their visit. A few examples will suffice. In the
following excerpt, Mapang Yutso (Manasarovar) is the huge lake into
which the melting snows of Tise (Kailash) flow; Pori Ngeden, the
“Fragrant Incense Mountain” (which Tsewang Rigidzin also visits in the
painting), is a smaller but very sacred mountain just to the north of
Tise. Collectively, these three are referred to in Bon scriptures as “the
Mountain Lake Triad.” Gyimsho Shele Gyagar, also known as Kyungpo
Ritsedrug, the “Six-Peaked Mountain of Kyungpo,” is situated at the
opposite end of Tibet in the province of Kham.

Whoever visits Tise, the navel of the world, will achieve
liberation after three lives; whoever drinks from the blue lake
of Mapang Yutso (Manasarovar) will purge the sins of
successive lives; if you spend a day on Pori Ngeden in
Shangshung, you will achieve peace; whoever visits the
supreme holy place of Triden in Kashmir will win liberation
after four lives; ... if you meditate on the benign and wrathful gods at Gyimsho Shele Gyagar, you will achieve enlightenment in this life. ix

This process whereby a mountain becomes a ne may be illustrated with reference to two of the sites visited by Tsewang Rigdzin in his travels. One of these is Shenri Deden, where he was “brown in color and rode the quick lightning.” This mountain, more commonly referred to as Shenri Demdem, is one of several peaks on Kongpo Bonri, located in southeastern Tibet, which surpasses even Mount Tise in sanctity for the Bonpos. What makes Bonri holy? In the thirteenth century a lama called Ripa Drugse visited the mountain. Seeing that he was a magus of the Bon religion, the indigenous spirits of the place attacked him, but his spiritual training prevailed, and he succeeded in subduing them. In his meditation on the forested slopes of the mountain the lama saw that he was merely completing a mission that had been initiated by the founder of the Bon religion, Tonpa Shenrab himself, thousands of years earlier. Ripa Drugse recorded his exploits and visions in his writings, and “opened” Bonri as a pilgrimage place for adherents of his faith. Over the centuries other lamas followed him, writing down their own achievements and visions. The creation of Bonri as a holy mountain was
thus a cumulative process, and all these accounts were later compiled, in
the eighteenth century, in a neyig, a sacred “guidebook” to the area.

Every ne has a neyig, a sort of Baedeker that recounts the myths and
history surrounding the site. These compilations are not merely
descriptive, but prescriptive: they tell pilgrims what to do and how they
should perceive the sites they visit. According to the compounded
visions of saintly authors, these places become progressively less natural
and more stylized. The process is best understood in terms of the notion
of *dulwá*, “conversion” or “taming,” in which the anarchy of nature is
organized and brought into the service of the conquering religion. In
the case of Tsewang Rigdzin, this all-important act is epitomized by his
subjugation of the natural denizens of each location, but the full process
of conversion is far more wide-ranging than this. Topography is
idealized in such a way that natural features (lakes, caves, and so on) are
disposed according to the quincunx pattern of a mandala, like the five
on a dice-cube; these and other features are counted in auspicious
numbers; saints and luminaries leave the prints of their feet and other
parts of their bodies in stone and bury treasure at various points; rocks
are given the likeness of various conventional images; and the wildlife is
literally tamed. The authority for the conquest of a site derives from
revelation, which might itself attend the opening of the site, or else may
reaffirm its inclusion within the territory of the religion.

The images used to describe the natural features of sacred sites are
for the most part conventional, involving either animals, whether real or
fantastic, or items of ritual gadgetry. One guidebook tells us of certain
“rocks and crags which have the appearance of the signs of the five
Buddha families, swords, mirrors, and the eight auspicious symbols,”
and a village “that looks like a bronze mirror, a drum, and a flat bell.”
There are occasional elaborations, such as the rock that resembles a
“three-edged blazing jewel” and another “seemingly a pendant victory
banner that will never droop.”

The animal likenesses, too, tend largely to be the application of
convention rather than a serious attempt to help a visitor to identify the
sites. We find the singularly unhelpful mention of a rock “the size of a
horned eagle’s egg.” Sometimes there is a more inventive flourish, such
as “a golden rock that looks like a mother vulture being affectionate with its chick” and “crags that give the impression of scattered vultures.” Just occasionally, the author’s playful deviation from convention comes as something of a relief: “a turquoise-colored rock which looks like a lady hiding herself and laughing.”

Mount Tise, too, has several Bonpo guidebooks. The most important of these was compiled in the nineteenth century by a famous lama called Karu Druwang Tenzin Rinchen and represents a masterpiece of systematization. Following a description of the formation of the phenomenal world and the appearance of Tise, along with a list of seventeen names by which it is known in various places, the work goes on to describe the features of its outer, inner, and arcane circuits. These features—mountains, lakes, plants, forests, caves, streams, roads, cemeteries, and various other natural and man-made sites—are organized in numerical sets, mainly of four, although other auspicious numbers, especially thirteen, also recur.

One of the earliest episodes recounted in the same author’s autobiography is a vision of Tise that he had at the age of five, when the mountain is revealed to him in neatly schematic terms. The form is strict and quite elaborate, and it is perhaps surprising that the content of the vision is not incorporated into the later guidebook. In this vision, he observes that most of local phenomena are disposed in groups of thirty-

Above: Fig. 75
Lake Dangra Yutso, a Bonpo sacred site in western Tibet, seen across the rooftops of the village of Ombu. Dangra is regarded as the female consort of Mount Targo, whose snow-capped peaks can be seen in the background.
Photograph by Charles Ramble
three: thirty-three divine communities, fountains of medicine, forests of perfumed incense that cure the 400-odd ailments, thirty-three sandalwood trees and flowers that protect one from fear, thirty-three lotuses with thirty-three petals each, thirty-three medicinal trees, followed by sets of thirty-three gods, Bon priests, ministers, generals, treasures, divine bulls, divine horses, and so on. Tise does of course figure in numerous early Bon works, but Karu develops it into a veritable citadel of his religion. He takes a quite uncompromising line with regard to what he evidently sees as a Buddhist usurpation of the place, and his remarks concerning the legendary conquest of the mountain on behalf of Buddhism by Milarepa are barbed, to say the least.

Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, the main Teacher of all the Bonpos, is himself the author of a recent work on pilgrimage entitled A Guide for the Blind. Although this is a fairly short work, it examines in varying detail some 150 sacred places in the course of a journey the author made across most of Tibet and northern Nepal in the 1940s. The work is, among other things, an attempt to discipline the business of pilgrimage by instilling a certain rigor into the cult of sacred places.

For Bonpos and Buddhists alike, the great majority of followers are safely confined to the paths of righteous action, pious devotion, and simple practice. A few, however, are equipped to face the challenges of increasingly subtle and complex, but potentially dangerous, meditations and rituals. The Guide for the Blind sets out the place of pilgrimage in the hierarchy of possible religious disciplines.

The highest form is represented by the practitioners of the contemplative system called Dzogchen, who spend their lives in lonely places. After them come the Tantric adepts. Then come those who adhere to the vows of the Bonpo monastic order:

people who pass their lives in purifying their minds by hearing, pondering and meditating on the Master's widely diffused original teachings, who hold to these things and live in accordance with them. The Zurjang tells us that "faithful people of lower intellect will be taught by the Bon doctrine of Disciplinary Law." They explain, too, how merit might be
accumulated by those who are unable to undertake these religious activities by dedicating their body, speech and mind with suitable virtue and faith: people—men and women alike—who enter the path, in order to clear away the defilements of the three spheres of action, should with their bodies visit sources of blessings and places where saints have meditated, with their speech they should chant recitations or hymns of praise, and with their minds they should be faithful and reverent and well-intentioned. If they have a rough knowledge of the stories behind these holy mountains, and visit them, that is a powerful asset for increasing their faith and wishes.xiii

At one level, then, pilgrimage belongs to the lowest of religious activities, along with prostration, turning prayer wheels, and suchlike—a sort of boot camp for aspirants to the contemplative life. However, visiting recognized shrines, caves, lakes, and holy mountains can also be a supplementary activity to higher spiritual practice: meditating in power-places can greatly enhance the results of an ascetic's endeavors. These places are deeply imbued with the spiritual benefits absorbed from the presence of generations of saints and magi. Pilgrims will try to ingest these properties by bathing in the streams and lakes of a holy place and even consuming small amounts of its earth, stones, and water.

Walking around a place can be interpreted in many ways, but most often it is a declaration of possession, whether in the case of a Roman farmer declaring ownership of a field, or a tiger marking out his forest domain. The tradition of pilgrimage is more popular now in Tibet than at any time in the past. A certain degree of religious freedom has been restored by the authorities since the 1980s, but this phenomenon may have less to do with spiritual devotion than with a visceral longing on the part of an entire people to reclaim a lost birthright.
Key to 66b

1. Tsewang Rigdzin
2. Nyima Obar
3. Two of the four dakinis in the entourage of Nyima Obar. The other two stand to the left of the central couple
4. Five animals at the base of the lotus throne: elephant, lion, dragon, horse and khyung
5. Tsewang Rigdzin at Shenri Deden; inscription reads gshen ri bde ldan
6. Tsewang Rigdzin at Pori Ngaden; inscription reads pos ri ngad ldan ri bo
7. Tsewang Rigdzin at Tise; inscription reads gang ri khar ti se
8. Kuntu Zangpo; inscription reads kun tu bzang po
9. Drenpa Namka and his consort, the parents of Tsewang Rigdzin
10. Sangwa Dupa, an early incarnation of Tsewang Rigdzin; inscription reads gshen ba 'dus pa
11. Tsewang Rigdzin at Langchen Gyingri; inscription reads gshen gying ri
12. Tsewang Rigdzin at Yungdrung Sabten; inscription reads gu yung drung sra brtan ri bo
13. Tsewang Rigdzin at Chugmo Pari; inscription reads phyug mo dpal ri.
15. Unidentified
16. Nyamme Sherab Gyaltsen (1356-1415), a celebrated Bonpo reformer
17. A Bonpo protective divinity, probably Abse Dungmar
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NOTES

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ii The source of this account is Khyentse Wangpo (mKhyen-brtse'i dbang po), rGyal sras pad ma byung gnas kyi rnam par thar pa mdor dril ba bsgrags pa bon lungs ston pa bzugs so, in Rin chen gter mdzod: A Reproduction of the Stod lung Mtshur phu Redaction of 'Jam mgon Kong sprul's Great Work on the Unity of the gter ma Traditions of Tibet, with Supplemental Texts from the Dpal spungs Redaction and Other Manuscripts (Paro, Bhutan: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976–80). For a detailed study of this work see Anne-

iii Bon zhig g.yung drung gling pa. Yang zah bya med rdzongs pa chen po'i gdams khris the dbang bod yul ma'e sgrub pa bcos kyi guang pod (A Cycle of Bonpo Life Consecration Precepts and Ritual and Meditational Instructions Rediscovered from its Place of Concealment at Nyang stod phyug mo dpal by Bon zhig g.yung drung gling pa) (New Thobgyal: Tibetan Bonpo Monastic Centre Distributor, 1973).

iv Ibid.


vi Recitation by Chodrak Gyatso, Lama of Tshognam, in Mustang, Nepal. (Recorded by Charles Ramble, 1993.)


viii Ibid., 173.

ix Ibid., 177–78.


xiii Ibid., 55.
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