



LAMAYURU (LADAKH) – CHENREZIK LHAKHANG THE BAR DO THOS GROL ILLUSTRATED AS A MURAL PAINTING

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According to a chronicle written by Bakula Rangdröl Nyima Rinpoche (Ba ku la rang grol nyi ma) in 1862,¹ Lamayuru monastery, built after Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo passed through the region in the 11th century, originally consisted of five temples, one in each of the four directions and one at the centre, with statues and images belonging to the four classes of tantra, and countless paintings. After the Dogra invasions of Ladakh between 1834 and 1842, the original buildings were all but destroyed, and all the artefacts looted or, if impossible to carry away, smashed to pieces. In his chronicle Bakula Rangdröl Nyima describes his anguish and utter incredulity at the destruction of a formerly blessed and thriving monastery; he narrates how he had to go begging to accumulate enough money to rebuild the monastery and re-establish the monastic community.

Here I would like to draw the attention to one rarely visited but very interesting temple in Lamayuru: the Chenrezik Lhakang, rising by the side of a thicket of willows in the northern section of the monastic compound, between the monastery kitchen and the small monks' school.

According to local sources, the location of this hall corresponds to the original site of the northernmost of the five temples.² The reconstruction and decoration of this temple seems to have been a project particularly dear to Rangdröl Nyima. The temple dedicated to Chenrezik (Avalokiteshvara) is used mainly when people congregate there to recite one hundred million Chenrezik mantras,³ especially in the first fifteen days of the Tibetan year and for one week during summer.

- 1 This unpublished chronicle, entitled *g.yung drung dgon dang po ji ltar chags rabs dang da ltar ji ltar gnas tshul gyi rnam dbye bi dza har tisma* is mentioned in Vets & Van Quaille, "Lamayuru, the symbolic architecture of light", p 87. It is being translated by K.H. Everding. Bakula Rangdröl Nyima was the abbot of Lamayuru monastery. The dates of his birth and death are unknown, but he was a contemporary of Tsultrim Nyima (1796-1872) of Rizong monastery, and the two worked closely together.
- 2 Lama Könchok Rigzin of the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (CIBS) in Choglamsar has provided me with some of the stories related to the Chenrezik Lhakang.
- 3 Ma ni dung sgrub, a collective practice done inside a temple, in which each participant recites the six syllable mantra Om Ma Ni Pad Me Hung from morning till evening for consecutive days; every evening the number of mantras recited by all the people is counted and the practice goes on until one hundred million mantras have been accumulated.





The main feature in the hall is a large eleven-headed and thousand-armed Chenrezik statue. A local informant told me that Bakula Rangdröl Nyima commissioned the paintings in the hall so as to instruct his people about what it takes to become a Buddha (the south-east wall at the sides and above the main entrance is covered with detailed mural paintings of the Jataka tales and the life of the Buddha) and the way to get there through the devotional practice of Avalokiteshvara.⁴ On the north-west wall, on the left near the door to the inner sanctum, there is a beautiful although very damaged painting of Avalokiteshvara, with rays of light emanating from his heart to each of the six realms of samsara in order to eliminate the suffering of all beings. The mural paintings on the right hand side (north-eastern direction), representing the visions one has during the intermediate state (*bar do*) between death and rebirth—which form the subject matter of this paper—follow the same rationale: they show how one can manage not to fall back into one of the six realms after death, and become enlightened instead.

My reasons for writing this paper are twofold: first, these murals depicting the intermediate state between death and rebirth seem to be unique in the Tibetan world. Nowhere else have I seen a complete representation of the imagery related to the *Bar do thos grol* literature, including all the details of the visions experienced by a deceased person before he arrives at the point of choosing his next incarnation. Mural paintings of the peaceful (*zhi*) and wrathful (*khro*) deities, especially of the main *zhi khro* deities, are found in many temples, either as a cycle of independent images, or, as for example in the Lukhang Temple behind the Potala in Lhasa,⁵ in a particular context referring to the *bar do* practice of the inner yogas. Professor

4 From an interview with Lama Könchok Gyatso in Lamayuru (June 2009) I learned that Rangdröl Nyima, while devoting all his efforts to rebuild the entire monastery, was particularly interested in the Chenrezik Temple because he had a very strong personal connection with Avalokiteshvara. From Lama Könchok Rigzin I heard that, while staying at Tritapuri during his pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, Rangdröl Nyima had apparently received an object with the Chenrezik mantra from a naga, and this has been put inside the main statue in the temple.

5 See Winkler, *The rdzogs chen Murals of the Klu Khang in Lhasa*: ‘Dividing the paintings on the northern wall on the second floor of the temple in 5 sections, section 3 is called “Peaceful and Wrathful Deities”. In this section is painted the whole cycle of peaceful and wrathful deities, while one yogin is seen meditating, which would suggest that he is meditating on the *zhi khro* deities as part of the practice on the *bar do* as contained in the *rdzogs chen kun bzang dgongs ’dus* “The Great Perfection, the Gathering of Samantabhadra’s Intention”, a tantra discovered by tertön O rgyan Padma gling pa that seems to be a source for the decoration of the northern section of the kLu khang.” Some of the images in the Lükhang murals may be seen in Baker & Laird, *The Dalai Lama’s Secret Temple*, p.73 and pp.93-94.





Tucci also speaks of one small temple at Chang in Upper Kinnaur, where the cycle of the *naraka*—infernal deities—is painted.⁶ But nowhere have I seen explicit illustrations of the *Bar do thos grol chen mo* ('Great Liberation through Hearing'). That this teaching cycle was known in Ladakh is not surprising considering that by the 18th century the cycle of *Kar gling zhi khro* texts⁷ had spread all over the Tibetan world,⁸ especially in the Nyingma and Kagyü lineages. These teachings were very popular in Bhutan, and we can imagine that from there they could have easily reached Ladakh through the Drukpa Kagyü lineages, or they could have spread from the Drigung Kagyü monasteries in Western Tibet. But the popularity of these teachings is not enough to explain why exactly they have been represented on a wall in Lamayuru. It took a special and unusual teacher such as Bakula Rangdröl Nyima to have them painted as a mural. If it is true that these paintings are unique, they are very precious and well worth illustrating, even if they are relatively recent and not so interesting from an art-historical point of view.

Secondly, the wall paintings are in a bad state of conservation. I must say first of all that the photographs used in this paper are outdated. The overview of the complete painting, as well as many details from Hilde Vets' pictures, was taken in 1995. In the last few years there has been a minimal intervention by the Archaeological Survey of India to secure the building: some earth has been put on the roof to avoid leakage, the walls have been secured, the cracks and holes have been filled with mud. For the time being, the paintings are safe. I hope that an analysis of the significance of these murals, and the originality with which the subject matter has been approached, may eventually encourage a more durable restoration.

Regarding the time of construction and decoration of the temple, from one inscription in the temple we learn that the Chenrezik Lhakhang was built and decorated in the 'year of the horse' a favourable year to go on pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. Most probably this must have been either 1846/1847 or 1858/1859.⁹

6 See Tucci, *The Temples of Western Tibet*, pp.122-140. Tucci (p.136) remarks that in Western Tibet he came across two thangkas depicting this cycle of deities, and he supposes that the fact that the region was under the influence of the Drugpa Kagyü school, in which this cycle of the *narakas* seemed to enjoy special diffusion, may explain its popularity in Western Tibet and Upper Kinnaur. I think that may hold true also for Ladakh.

7 A collection of texts started with a *gter ma* text hidden by Padmasambhava and revealed by the treasure discoverer (*gter ston*) Karma Lingpa in the 14th century, called *Zab chos zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol* (The Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: a profound teaching, natural liberation through [recognition of] enlightened intention).

8 See Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p.24.

9 On the right hand side near the entrance door to the Chenrezik Lhakhang (southeast direction) there is a small image of Mount Kailash, with three lamas admiring the sacred mountain. According to Lama Könchok Gyatso, this picture was made because the caretaker of the temple wanted to on a pilgrimage to the Mount Kailash in the year





As to the painter(s) of the images, we unfortunately have no clues.¹⁰

The Bar do Paintings on the North-east Wall

As mentioned above, the subject matter of the paintings on the northeast wall concerns the experiences that a deceased person goes through during the different

of the horse (most probably either 1846/1847 or 1858/1859), but he did not receive permission to do so because he had to take care of the ongoing decoration works in the temple. As a reward for his efforts he received permission to have an image of the Kailash painted on the wall, as explained in the inscription near the mountain. This reads as follows:

gtsug lag khang 'di'i lha tshogs bzhengs skabs dbyar thog lnga'i ring la bza' btung long spyod kyi bzhes pa'i do(ngo?) 'dzin khur len du seng ge sgangs pa'i tshe ring rgya mtsho bsdad del lhag bsam rnam par dag pa'i sgo nas dge ba'i 'brel bar lus ngag yid gsum bkol ba ni| dal 'byor gyi mi lus la snying po len pas skal pa che| rta lor gangs ti se'i gnas sgo'i mjal kha sleb nas dad ldan pho mo mang po gnas skor du song yang tshe ring rgya mtsho'i rta lo'i chos skal gang ri chen po ti se'i sku'i bkod pa 'di ru bzhengs pa yin| de hi ma la ya zhes yul nyi shu rtsa bshi'i ya gyal dang yang 'khor lo sdom pa'i pho brang rgyal bas lung bstan pa'i yongs grags kyi gnas khyad par can gang gyi rna bar thos tshad ngan song med pa sogs kyi phan yon che ba dang|sku'i bkod pa 'di mig gi mthong tshad gangs ri chen po dngos su mjal ba khyad par med pa mdo nas gsungs so|

While the [images of the] deities in this temple were being created, for the duration of five summers, Tsering Gyatso from Sengé Sgangspé's (Seng ge sgangs pa'i) [family] remained there, taking responsibility as caretaker for providing food and drinks. Engaging body, speech and mind in the practice of virtue in the purest possible way, this gave him the great fortune to use his precious human body with all its possibilities in its most meaningful way. When in the year of the horse the ideal opportunity arose for meeting the holy place of the Tise Snow Mountain, many faithful men and women went on pilgrimage; yet for Tsering Gyatso his portion of Dharma in the year of the horse was seeing to this composition of the image of the great Tise snow mountain right here. It is the foremost of the twenty-four holy places in the so-called Himalayas, and as prophesized by the Buddha it is the palace of Chakrasamvara. Whoever hears about this very special, universally famous holy place will obtain great benefits, such as not taking rebirth in the lower realms. Seeing this image with one's own eyes is no different from actually meeting the great Snow Mountain itself; thus it is said in the sutras (translation by the author).

10 Pallis, (*Peaks and Lamas*, p.241.) suggests that the figure compositions are 'probably mostly by Rigzin', a very famous painter from Khalatse identified by Lo Bue ('Lives and Works', pp.354-58) as Tsewang Rindzin (Tshe dbang Rig 'dzin), who was active in Lamayuru between the late 1920s and early 1930s. However, Pallis's and Lo Bue's suggestion that this painter may have been responsible for the decoration in this temple should be discarded on chronological grounds, though Tsewang Rindzin may well have worked in Lamayuru after the decoration of the Avalokiteshvara shrine had been completed.





stages between the moment of death and the start of a new life. From the *Bar do thos grol chen mo*,¹¹ known in the west as ‘The Tibetan Book of the Dead’,¹² one learns that from the moment of death the deceased will have to pass through three intermediate states (*bar do* in Tibetan), during which he will have a series of experiences that will bring him, after forty-nine days, to a new incarnation in one of six possible existences: as a god, a demi-god, a human being, an animal, a hungry ghost, or a hell-being. If a spiritual guide reads the text to the deceased person day by day, pointing out the kinds of visions that he will experience, and if the deceased is able to follow the indications given to him, there is a possibility that during this intermediate period he will be liberated from the cycle of conditioned existence, or that he will be able to choose to reincarnate in a place auspicious for his further progress on the path towards liberation. Hence the second part of the title: *thos grol*, liberation through hearing.

The text describes the three *bar do* states experienced after death: the intermediate state of the moment of death (*'chi kha'i bar do*), which starts at the time of death and ends with the manifestation of the ultimate nature of the mind; the intermediate state of ultimate reality (*chos nyid bar do*), in which the deceased experiences visions of deities, at first peaceful and, as time goes by, more and more wrathful and terrifying; and the intermediate state of becoming (*srid pa bar do*), with visions that will bring him to experience a new incarnation.

On our wall in Lamayuru all three phases are illustrated, and every detail is explained by an appropriate inscription.

Structure of the Mural Painting

The *bar do* mural, which is approximately 12 metres long and one and a half metres high, occupies the upper half of the wall; the lower section is painted in a plain brown colour.

11 The Tibetan title actually means ‘Great Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate States’; this text is a guidebook for people who are dying.

12 The various Western editions of the so-called ‘Tibetan book of the Dead’ are in fact translations of a few chapters of the *Bar do thos grol chen mo*, which belongs to a greater cycle of texts known as *Zab chos zhi khro dgongspa rang grol*, namely ‘The Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: a profound teaching, natural liberation through [recognition of] enlightened intention’. There have been several editions and partial translations of the *Bar do thos grol chen mo*, but its first complete translation was by Gyurme Dorje (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 2005). There the ‘Great Liberation through Hearing’ corresponds to the eleventh chapter.





Fig.1. Overview of the mural painting. Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

Structurally, the wall painting is divided in two rows: the upper row, starting with the image of Küntuzangpo, shows all the peaceful deities, first one by one, then all together, and finally the five Vidyadharas with their entourage.

The lower row, starting from the left, first shows each of the main wrathful deities, one by one, then the row divides into two. Above, we can see the host of wrathful deities with their entourage and a first image belonging to the *srid pa bar do*, and below various images of the *srid pa bar do*.

Detailed Analysis of the Mural Painting

1. The Intermediate State of the Moment of Death (*'chi kha'i bar do*)¹³



Fig. 2: Küntuzangpo/Samantabhadra with Küntuzangmo/Samatabhadri.
Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

¹³ In the *Bar do thos grol chen mo* text which I have followed this first couple of deities is included in the *bar do* of the moment of death, and the *chos nyid bar do* starts after the mind regains consciousness (see below). In some Dzogchen lineages the appearance of these two deities is considered already as part of the *chos nyid bar do*; they represent the peaceful manifestation of the indivisibility of space and awareness, whereas Chemchog Heruka and his consort represent the wrathful aspect of the same wisdom (see Dzogchen Ponlop, *Mind Beyond Death*, p.175).



The first image in the upper left corner of the wall painting shows Küntuzangpo/Samantabhadra in sexual union with his consort, Küntuzangmo/Samantabhadri. They symbolize the union of emptiness and luminosity, the characteristics of the nature of mind. According to the *Kar gling zhi khro*, at the moment of death each of the physical elements of the body dissolves into one of the other elements (earth into water, water into fire, fire into air, air into consciousness) and, once this process is completed, a state of pure light, the true nature of mind—the union of emptiness and luminosity symbolized in the image of Samantabhadra and his consort—appears for a very short moment and, if recognized, brings one to liberation. This first image has no inscription.

2. The Intermediate State of Ultimate Reality (*chos nyid bar do*)



Fig. 3: Main Peaceful Deities: the Tathagatas Vairochana, Akshobya-Vajrasattva, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi. Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

But this recognition is quite difficult; so, after the moment of clear light experience has passed, if it has not been recognized the deceased falls unconscious for three and a half days. When he regains consciousness he will have to continue and roam in the intermediate state of ultimate reality passing through a series of visual and auditory experiences. In a first phase he will be confronted with peaceful deities: day after day he will meet one of the five peaceful Tathagatas in sexual union with his consort. From the heart of each Tathagata a ray of pure, brilliant, dazzling primordial wisdom-light will reach the heart of the deceased, together with a ray of dull light from one of the six realms. In fact below each of the peaceful and wrathful deities on our mural there is the image of a deceased person confronted with two rays of light, one emanating from the heart of the deity, and the other from one of the six realms.



Figs. 4-5. The inscription below the Vairochana Buddha (appendix, inscription 1) reads, ‘On the first day after regaining consciousness, from the central pure land [called] Pervasive Seminal Point appears the Tathagata Vairochana, in yab yum [with his consort].’ The inscription for the wisdom light reads: ‘light of dharmadhatu wisdom’; the light from the six realms is the ‘white light of the god[s] realm’. Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

The inscriptions afford the name of each pure land and of the corresponding Buddha, together with the name of the particular wisdom aspect generating from his heart and the colour of the light of the particular realm of conditioned existence associated with it. In the *Bar do thos grol* text the spiritual guide will read out the characteristics of each deity and encourage the deceased to recognize the vision as an aspect of his own nature. Instead of fleeing from it, he should unite with the light, thus obtaining liberation. If he instead follows the softer and less fearful light of one of the six existences simultaneously manifesting with each of the Peaceful Buddhas, he will end up reincarnating in one of the six conditioned worlds of existence.



Fig. 6. On the sixth day of the *chos nyid bar do* the five peaceful Buddhas appear together, each with his consort. On top: Küntuzangpo with Küntuzangmo and the Buddhas of the six realms; around: four female and four male gatekeepers. Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus



However, becoming liberated at this point is not easy, and it is more likely that the deceased will let the opportunities pass without doing anything, thus arriving at the sixth day of the *bar do* of ‘ultimate reality’, in which the five peaceful deities with their consorts appear together, surrounded by male and female guardians, simultaneously with the lights of the six conditioned worlds. If the deceased recognizes these visions as aspects of his own mind and unites with them he will be liberated.

Otherwise, on the seventh day of the *chos nyid bar do* the five Vidyadharas/Awareness-holders—highly realized beings—will manifest, surrounded by yoginis, dakinis and spiritual heroes. If these are recognized by the deceased, he will be liberated.



Fig. 7. The inscription (see Appendix, inscription 4) reads: ‘On the seventh day from the pure land of Khechara, the Vidyadhara deities come to meet [the deceased]. From the Vidyadharas appear the five consorts and around them, a numberless assembly of dakinis appears: those from the cemeteries, those of the four families, those of the three places, those of the twenty-four sacred places, along with male and female

warriors, protectors and guardians.’ Each Vidyadhara is identified by an inscription: rNam par smin pa’i rig ’dzin, Sa la gnas pa’i rig ’dzin, Tshe la dbang ba’i rig ’dzin, Phyag rgya chen po’i rig ’dzin, Lhun gyis grub pa’i rig ’dzin. A five-coloured light of co-emergent pristine cognition (*Lhan cig skyes pa’i ye shes*) emanates from the heart of each Vidyadhara and reaches the heart of the deceased, together with the green dull light of the animal realm (*dud ’gro’i ’od ljang-khu*).

Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

After the visions of these peaceful deities, there follows a series of more terrifying experiences of wrathful deities. On the mural we now have to go to the second row of paintings, starting from the viewer’s left.



Fig.8. Main wrathful deities: Mahottara Heruka, Buddha Heruka, Vajra Heruka, Ratna Heruka, Padma Heruka and Karma Heruka, each with his consort. Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

One after the other, we see the wrathful blood-drinking deities, each united with his mystical consort, and identified by an inscription, with the image of the deceased below each. Surprisingly, by contrast with the text in the *Bar do thos grol*, on this mural there are six deities: the first one representing Mahottara/Chemchok Heruka (Che mchog He –ru ka), the wrathful aspect of Küntuzangpo, is not mentioned in the text. In the *Bar do thos grol* text the visions experienced by the deceased are described as dreadful: very bright lights, very intense rays of light, and violent sounds. But the person guiding him will explain all details of these visions and will encourage the deceased not to be afraid and to become one with the deities. If he recognizes all those appearances as manifestations of his own mind, he will be liberated.



Fig. 9. The assembly of the fifty-eight wrathful deities with their entourage. Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

After five more days the entire mandala of fifty-eight wrathful deities will manifest. Besides the Herukas, the female Gauris/Keurimas and Pishacis/Tramenmas (Phra men ma, with animal heads) now also appear, as well as the four female gatekeepers, and the twenty eight Ishvari goddesses, yoginis of the different directions with animal heads, and female and male guardians of the directions, each deity being identified by an inscription with her/his name (Appendix, inscription 5).





Figs. 10 and 11. Detail of 2 Keurima deities: Tseuri (Tse'u ri) and Tramo Marmo (Pra mo dmar mo); Figure 11: two Ishvari deities, yoginis of the southern direction: Gawa Marser (dGa' ba dmar gser) and Zhiwa Marmo (Zhi ba dmar mo).

Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

3. The Intermediate State of Becoming (*srid pa bar do*)

However, if one is swept away by one's own fearful visions and does not recognize them as aspects of one's own mind, one will have to proceed to the third phase, the intermediate state of becoming. One will have experiences such as being persecuted by the demons of one's own karma, being pushed into a snowstorm or into pitch dark, and one's sole desire will be to flee.



Fig. 12. First image of *srid pa bar do*. The inscriptions read: 'Many particular appearances arise: fierce winds, karmic flesh-eaters and cannibals brandishing many weapons, being followed by wild beast from the back, a very thick darkness in the front, hail storms, mountains collapsing, floods, blizzards, fire spreading, great winds, falling from a white, a black and a red mountain (Appendix, inscription 6). Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

Then one's own visions will assume the appearance of the Dharmaraja Yama, the Lord of Death, flanked by a white god and a black demon, each exposing a heap of small pebbles, white or black according to the good or bad deeds committed by the deceased.





Fig. 13. Inscriptions on the slate of the monkey-headed assistant: ‘letter of white and black deeds’. Below: Yama, ‘the Dharmaraja, Lord of Death, sees the white and black deeds in his mirror’. Below: ‘the inborn god and demon assemble white and black pebbles’ (Appendix, inscription 7).

Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

Looking in his mirror of karma, the Lord of Death will decide where the deceased is to be reborn, and the latter will be dragged there without being able to resist.

After all those terrifying appearances, the deceased will now want to find a place to take rebirth.



Fig. 14. Signs for places where the deceased is to take rebirth: lights of the six realms, and feeling of going up, sliding down or walking flat.

Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

Lights from the six samsaric realms will manifest, the brightest one indicating in which realm the karma of the deceased will lead him to reincarnate, and he will have the impression that he has to ascend a mountain (in which case he will take birth in the higher realms) or to descend (in case of rebirth in the lower realms) or else to walk horizontally (in case of rebirth in the human realm). But he is constantly haunted by fearful visions from which he wants to escape. So when he sees a couple making love he will be tempted to enter into the womb of the woman, thus taking rebirth. At that point several instructions from the *Bar*





do thos grol are read to the deceased to allow him to avoid entering a womb and either to enable him to be liberated or, if that is not possible, to choose a kind of life that will allow him to progress on the path towards liberation.



Fig. 15. Appearances arise such as whirlwinds, blizzards, hailstorms, darkness (Appendix, inscription 8). In the right corner below a couple is making love and that is where the deceased is tempted to flee (I have not been able to decipher the inscription below the couple).

Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

As the deceased will have now to choose a place for rebirth, it is very important that he receives advice on which to choose. So he will learn to recognize the signs of the four continents: the eastern continent has a lake with swans; the southern continent, Jambudvipa, where he should take rebirth, has nice mansions; the western continent has a lake with horses; and the northern continent has a lake with cattle and nice forests.



Fig.16. Image of the four continents. This portion of the paintings is badly damaged. Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

Then there will be appearances of the five realms he should avoid: nice houses and temples for the gods' realm, a pleasant forest and wheels of light for the demi-gods' realm, rocky caverns, crevices and straw sheds wrapped in dense fog





for the animals' realm, tree stumps, black protruding silhouettes, blind desolate gorges or total darkness for the hungry ghosts' realm, and a land of darkness with red and black cubes, black earth pits and black roads for the hell dwellers' realms. The text in the inscriptions advises him not to enter there.



Fig. 17. Image of five unfavourable realms where the deceased should not take rebirth: gods' realm, demi-gods' realm, animals' realm, hungry ghosts' realm (Appendix, inscription 9) and hell (Appendix, inscription 10)

For example, the inscription for the hungry ghosts' realm reads:

As for the signs of taking birth as a hungry ghost, [one finds oneself] in empty plains and blind desolate gorges, or sees jungles and black worlds. One should not enter there.

And for the hell realm one reads (the inscription is not complete):

If one is to take birth in hell, hearing the song of those with bad karma one wants to enter [there]; appearances arise of arriving in a dark country, of red and black houses, and black holes in the earth and a black road. Pursued from the back and drawn from the front by executioners, in darkness and tumult, snow and rain and strong hailstorms and turbulent blizzards, one flees there; fleeing there one seeks refuge and liberation inside a mansion, a shelter, a cave, a dark forest, a lotus flower and so forth, thinking: 'Now I should not get out of here' and through attachment [to the chosen place] one will assume an inferior body and feel suffering...

Having thus avoided an unfavourable rebirth, in the end the moment will come in which one can no longer delay rebirth. The inscription on the mural gives a few instructions: avoid attachment and aversion, and pray to be able to take a new birth that will be beneficial to others. If that is not possible, then pray to the Three Jewels or Chenrezik and, taking refuge in them, be born as a human or god.





Fig.18. The inscription for the last image is as follows (Appendix, inscription 11): ‘If one is to take rebirth in an impure place, one will perceive a good smell from impure [objects] and, being attached to that, one will take birth. Therefore one should abandon attraction and aversion towards whichever appearance arises, and one should enter [a womb/a place] thinking: ‘May I assume the body of a fortunate person capable of benefiting all sentient beings.’ Ordinary beings who are not able to remain free from attachment and aversion in this way should call the Three Rare and Precious ones by name and take refuge in them and pray to the Great Compassionate One. Then they should enter the blue light of the human [realm], the white light of the gods’ [realm], nice houses and the like.’

Photo: Kaya Dorjay Angdus

Comparing the Bar do thos grol text and the Mural Painting bar do in Lamayuru

From the above detailed analysis of the different features in the mural painting, it can clearly be seen that all the aspects described in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* have been scrupulously represented here, with only minor differences such as the addition of Chemchok Heruka and slight variations in the judgment scene.

However, there are a few differences as far as the presentation is concerned. First of all, the *Bar do thos grol*, a manual to be read by a person guiding a deceased, is styled in the vocative form, addressing the deceased in the second person. This obviously does not hold for the mural. The function of the mural is to make people become familiar with the appearances that will manifest at the time of death. Therefore, rather than being presented in the second person, the inscriptions are put in an impersonal form and remain merely descriptive. Lama Könchok Gyatso suggested to me that the mural should be considered as a *bar do mthong grol* (‘liberation in the intermediate state through seeing’) rather than a *bar do thos grol* (‘liberation in the intermediate state through hearing’). In this sense the mural could be considered more similar to the *gos chen thang ka* tradition, in which a large brocade image of a deity, believed to bring liberation through seeing, is displayed to devotees on a particularly auspicious day.





Secondly, after studying the inscriptions in the mural it also becomes clear that these are much simpler than the instructions given in the *Bar do thos grol*. Of course it would be impossible to write the full descriptions from the text on a wall, but that is not the only reason: the few instructions given, such as those reported in Figure 18, are themselves much simpler than the ones proposed in the *thos grol* text, where plenty of references are made to quite complicated meditation instructions belonging to the Dzogchen and the Mahamudra lineages, which require a thorough training in those meditation systems before they can be applied during the *bar do*. It seems that the mural painting is addressed to a different kind of public: the paintings with their more sober descriptions can be readily understood by the general public viewing them, even without the preparation of years of meditation. To me that seems to indicate that the mural falls totally in line with the general purpose behind the paintings in the Chenrezik temple as outlined in the introduction of this paper: Bakula Rangdröl Nyima wanted to instruct ordinary devotees so that at the moment of death they could take advantage of what they had seen by visiting this unique temple.





APPENDIX:

On some inscriptions in the Mural Painting of the Bardo

So far I have not had the opportunity to note down all the inscriptions on the wall. Below are some of those I was able to make out from Chiara Bellini's pictures.

1) Vairochana (Figs 4-5), bottom-left of the image:

brgyal sangs pa dang zhag dang po la dbus phyogs thig le gdal ba'i zhing khams nas bcom ldan bdas rnam par snang mdzad yab yum 'char.

The inscription for the wisdom light reads: chos kyi dbyings kyi ye shes 'od; the light from the six realms is the lha'i 'od dkar po

2) Amitabha, bottom-left of the image, above the deceased and the rays of light: yi dvags kyi 'od

Below the deceased:

sor rtogs ye shes kyi 'od
zhag bzhi pa la nub phyogs bde ba can gyi zhing khams nas bcom lden bdas [written in contracted form] snang ba mtha' yas 'khor bcas 'char:

'On the fourth day from the western pure land of Dewachen the Tathagata Amitabha appears with his retinue.'

3) Amoghasiddhi, above the rays: lha min gyi 'od

Below the rays: bya sgrub ye shes kyi 'od.

4) Five Vidyadharas (Fig. 7).

Each Vidyadhara is identified by an inscription, mentioning also the light from the animal realm:

rnam par smin pa'i rig 'dzin| tshe la dbang ba'i rig 'dzin| phyag rgya chen po'i rig 'dzin| sa la nas pa'i rig 'dzin| lhun gyis grup pa'i rig 'dzin| dud 'gro'i 'od.

On the right of the painting we find the following inscription:

zhag bdun pa la dag pa mkha' spyod kyi zhing khams nas rig 'dzin lha tshogs rnam kyi bsu ba la ong ste; rig 'dzin las yum lnga dang de'i phyi rim na mkha' 'gro ma'i tshogs dpag tu med pa | dur khrod kyi mkhro| rigs bzhi mkhro| gnas sum gyi mkhro| yul nyi shu rtsa bzhi mkhro rnam dang| dpa' bo dpa' mo chos skyong srung ma dang bcas pa 'char|





5) Host of wrathful deities (Fig. 8):

“From the available pictures I was able to identify some of the deities, almost halfway through the two lines of the inscription; the order is the same as in the text, with only minor differences in spelling”.

First line:

ke'u ri| tse'u ri| pra mo dmar mo| pe ta li| pu ka si| kasma ri| tsan da li| sma sha li| sing ha|
bya kri mu kha| sri la mu kha| msho na mu kha| tri ta mu kha|...
tshangs ma sbrul mgo ma| lha chen| rtog 'dod ma

Second line:

gzhon nu dmar mo| brgya byin dkar mo| dga' ba dmar ser| zhi ba dmar mo| bdud rtsi dmar
mo| zla ba dkar mo| be con ljang nag| srin mo ser nag| zla ba ljang nag bya rgod mgo|
dbang ldan dmar nag| stobs can dkar mo| {srin} mo ser mo' dod pa dmar mo|...rdo rje ser
mo| rdo rje dmar mo| rdo rje ljang nag|

6) Karmic appearances in srid pa bar do (Fig. 12):

“rlung dmar| las kyi sha za srin po mtshon cha thogs pa mang po| gcan zan gyis rgyab nas
'ded pa| mdun nas shin tu 'thibs pa'i mun nag| ser ba babs pa| ri nyil ba| chu lud pa| bu
yug| me mched pa| rlung chen po| ri dkar po| ri nag po| ri dmar po gsum las lhung la 'khad
pa'i snang ba 'byung ngo|”

7) Judgment scene (Fig. 13), on the slate held by monkey-headed:

las dkar nag gi yi ge|
below: lhan cig skyes pa'i lha dang 'dres rde'u dkar nag 'du ba|
below Dharmaraja: shin rje chos kyi rgyal pos las dkar nag me long la gzigs pa|

8) Scene illustrating the need to block entrance into womb (Fig. 15):

“rlung 'tshub dang bu yug dang ser ba dang mun nag sogs kyi snang ba byung
(I was unable to decipher the inscription below the couple making love)”.

9) Signs of rebirth in the hungry ghosts' realm (Fig. 17):

yi dvags su skye ltas ni thang stong dang grog po phug rdugs dang gnang nags sing [sic
for nag seng?] dang nag gling du mthong| der mi 'jug pa dgos|
[in the Bar do thos grol text: yi dvags su skye na ni: sdong dum dang: nag breng nge ba
dang: grog po phugs sdugs sam: nag ling bar mthong ngo|





“If you are to take birth as an anguished spirit, you will see tree stumps, black protruding silhouettes, blind desolate gorges, or total darkness” (translation Gyurme Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p.295).

10) Signs of rebirth in the hell realms (Fig. 17):

“*dmyal bar skye na ni las ngan pa'i glu dbyangs su thos pa'am 'jug dgos pa'am|mun nag gling dang|khang pa dmar po dang nag po dang sa dong nag po dang| lam nag po la sogs par phyin pa'i snang ba byung| der kyang gshed mas rgyab nas 'ded cing mdun nas 'khrid pa dang| mun nag| ku sgra| kha char| ser drag| bu yug 'tshub cing| der bros pa'i snang ba byung| der bros te skyabs 'tshol du phyin pas| khang bzang ngam| brag skyibs| sa phug| nags seb| me tok padma la sogs pa'i nang du thar pas| da 'di nas phyir thon na mi rung ngo snyams ste chags pas gang men {sic for man} pa'i lus blang nas sdug bsngal myong ba...*”

Comparison with the *bar do thos grol* text (Dharamsala edition, pp.245-247); the lines that are not reported on the mural painting are in italics.

dmyal bar skye na ni las ngan pa'i glu dbyangs su thos pa'am| dbang med du 'jug dgos pa byung na| mun nak gi gling dang| khang pa nak po dang| khang pa dmar po dang| sa dong nak po dang| lam nak po la phyin pa la sogs pa'i snang ba ong| der phyin na ni dmyal bar tshud dé| tsha grang gi sdug bsngal bzod glags med pa smyong ste| thon pa'i dus mi ong bas| de'i gseb tu mi 'gro bar gzab par bya'o |ci nas kyang ma tshüd par bya'o|mngal sgo bkag nas ru log dran par bya'o| zhes gsungs pa de dus da res dgos pa yin no| kye rigs kyi bu| khyod mi 'gro bar 'dod kyang rang la dbang med par 'gro dgos pa dang| mdun nas gshed ma dang srog gcod kyi khrid pa dang| mun nag dang| rlung dmar 'tshub ma chen po dang| ku dgra dang| kha char dang| ser ba dang| bu yug 'tshub cing bros pa'i snang ba khyod la 'ong ngo| der bred cing skyabs tshol ba la phyin pas|gong du bshad pa'i khang bzang sam|brag skyibs dang| sa phug dang| nags gseb dang| me tog padma la sogs kha zum pa'i nang du thar nas| de na gab ste phyir thon gyi dogs nas| nga 'di nas phyir thon na ni mi rung ngo snam nas| de dang bral gyis dogs pas khyod gnas de la shin tu chags par 'gyur ro| de nas phyi rol tu thon na ni bar do'i 'jigs skrag de rnamdang phrad kyis dogs pas| de dag la 'jigs shing dngangs pas nang du gab pas| gang nas man pa'i lus ngan pa cig blang nas| sdug bsngal rna tshogs nyams su myong tu 'ong bas....

Translation by Gyurme Dorje (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, pp.295-296):

If you are to take birth as a hell being, you will hear songs of those of negative past actions. Or, quite simply, you will feel powerless and compelled to enter. Whereupon, the perception will arise that you are moving into a land of darkness, where there are black and reddened houses, black earth-pits and black roads. Were you to be drawn to this place, you would enter the hells, and experience the [searing] unbearable sufferings of heat and cold. Be careful! Do not enter into the midst of this, for there will be no opportunity to turn back. Do not enter there, under any circumstances! As it is said [in the root verses]: ‘You must obstruct the womb entrances and call to mind the methods of reversal.’ These are [wholly] necessary now!





O, Child of Buddha Nature, although you do not wish to move forward, you are powerless not to do so. The avenging forces, who are the executors of the unfailing laws of cause and effect, will be pursuing you. You will have no choice but to move forward. Before you, the avengers and executors will be leading the way. The experience will arise of trying to flee from these forces, of trying to flee from the darkness, from the most violent windstorms, from the [thunderous] tumult, the snow, the rain, the hail and the turbulent blizzards, which swirl around you. [Frightened], you will set off to seek a refuge and you will find protection inside an enclosed space, such as within the mansions just described, or in rock-shelters, or holes in the ground, or amongst trees, or within the bud of a lotus flower. Hiding there, you will be very hesitant to come out, and you will think: 'I should not leave here now'. You will be very reluctant to be separated from this protected place and you will become utterly attached to it. Then, because you are so very reluctant to go outside, where you would be confronted by the fears and terrors of the intermediate state, you will, because of this fear and awe, continue to hide away. Thus, you will assume a body, however utterly bad that may be, and you will, [in time], come to experience all manner of sufferings...

11) Last image (Fig. 18):

“Mi gtsang ba'i khrod du skye ba zhig yin na ni| mi gtsang ba'i dri zhim pa'i 'du shes skyes nas der chags te skye bar 'gyur bas| de rnams kyi snang ba gang byung yang chags sdang spangs te| sems can thams chad kyi don byed nus pa'i bsod nams can gyi lus shig blang bar bya'o snyams nas 'jug pa las| de ltar chags sdang dang bral ma thub pa'i dbang po tha ma rnams kyis dkon mchog gsum gyi mtshan nas brjod cing skyabs su 'gro ba dang thugs rje chen po la gsol ba gdebs cing mi'i 'od sngon po dang lha'i 'od dkar po khang bzang la sogs la 'jugs dgos pas dge'o|”

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