


Preface: The Tulku (*sprul sku*) Institution in Tibetan Buddhism

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n the eve of the Buddha's enlightenment experience in Bodhgaya, India two and a half millennia ago, his hagiographies report that he fell into a deep contemplative reverie through which he was able to recall his five hundred previous births. He remembers the conditions of each birth, the causes that had impelled it, and the karmic implications of his own and others' conduct during each lifetime. These memories, gathered together in popular collections such as the *Birth Stories of the Buddha* or *Jātaka Tales*, have persisted as a core conception throughout the history of Buddhism: reincarnation meaningfully connects consecutive lifetimes of single individuals, and their remembrance, both as the authentication of genuine realization and as pedagogical tools, is documented in some of the earliest evidence of the religion.

Over time, particularly as the Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism articulated more elaborate conceptions of the metaphysical nature of Buddhahood, efforts were made to provide an account for its precise nature and functioning. The *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, one of the Five Treatises of Maitreya, is the earliest Buddhist source that introduces the concept of three buddha bodies (*sku gsum, trīkāya*). The reality body (*chos sku, dharmakāya*), blissful body (*longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku, sambhogakāya*), and emanation body (*sprul pa'i sku, nirmānakāya*) manifest simultaneously in countless universes as the culmination of the path tread by a bodhisattva for eons. In its strict early doctrinal use of the term, *tulku* refers to the earthly, corporeal manifestation that appears in the impure world, with the classic Indian example being Śākyamuni Buddha himself.

From the earliest forms so far identified in Tibet, the concept, function, and personification of tulku can be seen to serve a multiplicity of societal needs, and up to the present day, it continues to provide a framework within which new problems and opportunities are addressed. Once indigenous Tibetan lineages

became well-established and long-lived, more Tibetan personalities populated incarnation lineages, and the identification of incarnations could serve to establish symbolic connections along regional, noble, patronage, doctrinal, or other lines, as the situation demanded. Variations on the model of catenate incarnation began to appear, including deity emanation, co-incarnation, and female tulku lineages.

In time, the tulku concept proved to be so adaptable and enduring that attendant cultural forms were invented, such as the various means of identifying tulkus by lottery or divination; the practice of transmitting estates or labrangts through the generations of incarnations; the institution of appointed regents—sometimes tulkus themselves—who maintained continuity following the death of one member of the series and during the minority of the successor; the relationships between great tulkus and their powerful transnational patrons from China, Manchuria, and Mongolia; complex multi-generational networks of tulkus serving as each other's teachers and disciples, sometimes transcending ethnic and national divisions; and finally, the elaborate ideologies through which key tulkus defined a national identity with architectural, artistic, liturgical, ritual, and symbolic dimensions. The tulku model provided a political counterpoint to the power of the nobility, a rallying point during times of national turmoil, and a means of succession among celibate monastics.

Since the Communist upheaval in Mongolia nearly a century ago, and especially in the decades since the Dalai Lama went into exile in 1959, an entirely new set of forces have shaped Tibet, the Himalayas, and the larger Inner Asia sphere in which the influence of Tibetan culture has been felt. Soviet and Maoist anti-religious pogroms, world wars, the encroachment of modernity, the encounter with contemporary science, exile, and globalism have all called forth new forms of cultural adaptation, many of them configured in terms of the tulku institution. This varied cultural expression has served in bewilderingly diverse ways, and it promises to continue to do so.

In sum, it is in Tibet that the concept of tulku as “magical emanation” finds its most prolific use, elaboration, and innovative application, whereby it comes to serve a variety of social, political, economic, and religious objectives. Many volumes have explored the religious histories of individual tulku lineages, especially the Dalai Lamas, the Pañchen Lamas, and the Karmapas, and yet few efforts have been made to give a general account of the nature of the tulku institution.

To address this particular gap, a conference was held at the University of San Francisco on February 15–16, 2013. Convened and hosted by Tsering Wangchuk, one of the co-editors of this special

issue, and sponsored by both the University of San Francisco and East Carolina State University,¹ the conference attracted the papers in the present volume, and one other has been added as well.²

In the preliminary planning that led up to the conference, several questions were posed. What is a tulku? How did the institution originate? How does it connect to antecedents in classical Indian Buddhism? What purposes did it serve in Tibet and the cultural regions influenced by Tibetan Buddhism? The editors sought to include scholarly voices that were diverse in terms of disciplinary methodology, regional focus, doctrinal tradition, and temporal period. In the end, the collection gathered here represents, we feel, the broadest and most comprehensive discussion of this fascinating institution available. If this issue has one single organizing thesis, it is that the tulku institution evolved into such a creative and versatile model that it could be employed to address a diverse array of social, historical, political, economic, and religious. The fine scholarship of the contributors elaborates this thesis in splendid detail, attesting to the ongoing vitality, adaptability, and utility of the tulku institution.

The editors wish to thank all the scholars who contributed papers to the conference and to this special issue, the donors who supported this effort, and the hardworking support staff at the University of San Francisco for their efforts during the conference. Derek and Tsering, the original editors of the volume, would like to express their gratitude to Dan Hirshberg, who joined the editorial team later, completed the final editing, formatting, and typesetting, and submitted the volume for publication with *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*. We also thank Jean-Luc Achard of *RET* for his help in facilitating a swift release of this special issue. Last, the editors and contributors elected to retain Tibetan phonetics in the body of the text so as to preserve its accessibility to non-specialists. Wylie transliteration is provided at first occurrence, in footnotes, and/or appendices.



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² Gray Tuttle's paper was not presented at the conference.