

**life writing as
literary relic: image,
inscription, and
consecration in
tibetan biography
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ABSTRACT

This article addresses a largely unstudied form of writing inked on the rear face of Tibetan hanging scroll paintings. These are consecration inscriptions consisting of Buddhist mantras and other ritual formulas, and serve to ritually transform the image from static representation into a living manifestation of its subject. Since at least the eleventh century in Tibet, such inscriptions were composed as shaped texts, crafted in the form of a Buddhist reliquary or stūpa. In such cases, I suggest that the process of “entombing” a literary relic within an inscribed stūpa visually copies the ubiquitous Buddhist practice of interring corporeal relics inside three-dimensional monuments. In particular, this article examines a special form of shaped consecration inscription that replaces basic ritual formulas with biographical texts describing the life and qualities of the painted subject. It argues that such a text embodies its subject both literally and literarily, creating individuated relics that encapsulate not only the subject’s body but the entire range of his enlightened activities as well. The essay questions received notions about the forms and functions of Tibetan biographical literature by shifting from a strict analysis of narrative content toward an emphasis on the material forms of individual texts.

Keywords: Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism, biography, inscription, relics, consecration, Milarepa, Mi la ras pa, Alfred Gell

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Toward a Biographical Culture

There is a well-known story from the Pāli canon in which the wandering ascetic Vaccagotta asks the Buddha whether a Tathāgata exists after death. In response, the Buddha famously remained silent, declining to affirm—in typical Buddhist fashion—that he either exists, does not exist, both exists and does not exist, or neither.¹ This line of interrogation, according to tradition, formed one of the so-called undetermined questions (*avyākṛtavastu*), speculative tangents ripe for misinterpretation and a distraction from the central task of quieting the passions.

Despite the Buddha's reluctance to answer directly, innumerable Buddhist saints remained in the world long after their passing. They did so in part through the biographical traditions and cultic practices of their followers. Peter Brown famously described cults of Christian saints in late antiquity (principally relic cults) as mediators of the human and the divine, illustrating “the joining of Heaven and Earth, and the role, in this joining, of dead human beings.” In the present case, however, I am concerned not with corporeal relics, Brown's “dead human beings,” but *literary* relics—biographical texts that make present their subject and engage with their community in the same visceral way as do bone fragments or fingernail clippings.

In this article, I would like to reflect on the ways in which Tibetan life writing mediates a form of agency, establishing its subject as a living presence within a given community. In doing so, I want to explore the relationship between biography and the formation of cults of the saint, the ways in which hagiography takes shape and in turn shapes the world around it. In particular, I want to consider a form of writing often underestimated if not altogether overlooked: biographies executed as consecration inscriptions for painted portraits of Tibetan lamas.² Such works serve as the locus of the painting's ritual preparation and eventual consecration. Yet, they invariably appear on the painting's rear, out of sight, perhaps even out of mind. In this way they embody a special form of biographical writing intended not to record—or be read as—a life through narrative, but to vivify the image, thereby maintaining the subject's living presence within a community of viewers and worshipers. I hope, therefore, to suggest how at least some Tibetan biographers have responded to the Buddha's undetermined question with an unequivocal answer.

The text I am chiefly concerned with here is inscribed on the empty rear face of a traditional Tibetan portable scroll painting (*thang ka*) in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago; its subject is the acclaimed eleventh-century

Tibetan yogin and poet Milarepa (Mi la ras pa, c.1040–1123) (Figure 1). The text, expertly crafted in the shape of a stūpa, (Figure 2) is an extensive biographical prayer of supplication (*gsol 'debs*) in forty verses, and serves as the consecration inscription for the figure depicted on the front. (See the Appendix for the English translation and Tibetan transcription.) In this context, I will suggest that the biographical text effectively embodies its subject—literally and literarily—in the manner of a literary relic. Scholars of Buddhist traditions have begun to understand Buddhist relics not only as “the embodiments of a transcendent or imminent or otherwise absent Buddha, nor just as functionally equivalent to the departed Master, but as expressions and extensions of the Buddha’s biographical process” (Strong 2004: 5). Here I wish to turn this formulation around, viewing biographical texts as effective relic-like extensions of the subject’s life.

Moreover, the inscriptions examined here are shaped texts, constituting examples of “patterned” or “concrete” poetry. They invariably take the form of a classic Buddhist mortuary monument or reliquary—that is, the text is either shaped as, or inscribed within, a stūpa. I therefore want to further suggest that the process of “entombing” a literary relic within an inscribed stūpa visually copies the ubiquitous Buddhist practice of interring corporeal relics inside three-dimensional monuments—a tradition that famously began with Śākyamuni’s remains and continues to the present day. Such texts are important literary and artistic formations in their own right, creations Amy Heller has described as “visually impressive and aesthetically organized” and “almost as significant as the subject of the front of the painting” (2003: 2).

This study stems from an interest in a field I would like to broadly designate as Tibet’s *biographical culture*: the matrix of narratives, material objects, and practices that establish the cultic center of a Tibetan saint. As the study of Tibetan life writing expands into a subfield of its own, scholars have largely (and rightly) distanced themselves from the positivist concerns of separating historical truth from pious fiction, turning instead toward an understanding of local epistemologies, the modes through which the story of a life is imparted with meaning over time (Diemberger 2007; Gyatso 1999; Martin 2005; Quintman 2008, 2013, 2014; Schaeffer 2004; Yamamoto 2012). The emphasis, however, has tended to center on an analysis of literary genres, structures, and themes. This trend has begun to change with an increasing interest in the culture of Buddhist book production (Dudbridge 2000; Kara 2005; Kornicki 1997; McDermott 2006; Monius 2001; Schaeffer 2009; Veidlinger 2006). But there is still a tendency in



FIG 1

Milarepa on Mount Kailas, Tibet, c. fifteenth century, pigment and gold on cotton, 45.5 × 30 cm (17²⁹/₃₂ × 11¹³/₁₆ in.). (Asian Purchase Campaign Endowment and Robert Ross Fund, 1995.277, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.)

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FIG 2

Milarepa on Mount Kailas, verso inscription, Tibet, c. fifteenth century, pigment and gold on cotton, 45.5 x 30 cm (17²⁹/₃₂ x 11¹³/₁₆ in.). (Asian Purchase Campaign Endowment and Robert Ross Fund, 1995.277, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.)

some quarters at least to treat biographical narratives as disembodied entities largely divorced from their material forms (texts without books), and to ignore their wider effects and uses within a given community (texts without readers).

The notion of biographical culture thus serves as part of this corrective, combining an analysis of narratives, an examination of their material forms, and an exploration of the practices within the communities that produce and employ them. In this move toward localizing biography, I am increasingly drawn to consider the *material culture* of life writing in Tibet, paying attention not only to the stories narratives tell, but to the forms that embody them and in which traces of lives are preserved and transmitted: individual manuscripts, specific xylographic editions, inscriptions, illustrations, and ritual practices. Relics, of course, belong here too, but as we will see, textual objects themselves often appear to function as a kind of relic. In short, then, the study of biographical culture attends to the variety of discursive practices, the agencies and functions of life writing, the ways in which biographical narratives manifest beyond the text and persist over time.

It is now widely acknowledged that, for the devoted in many Buddhist communities, sacred images are neither simple representations nor mimetic simulacra (Germano and Trainor 2004; Gombrich 1966; Sharf and Sharf 2001; Swearer 1995, 2004; Trainor 1997, 2010). Through a processes of consecration, often involving the inscribing of ritual formulas called mantras and *dhāraṇīs* as well as the insertion of relics, the subject's numinous essence is invited to enter the image—which is imagined as a material receptacle or support (*ṛten*)—where it is fixed and made to remain for an extended period of time. These ideas are indeed reflected in the Sanskrit term for consecration, *pratiṣṭhā*, literally “to stand, stay, abide,” and carrying the broader meaning of remaining steadfast. Its Tibetan rendering *rab gnas* has a similar connotation of excellent or extended abiding. The result, tradition holds, is not merely a powerful likeness, but a fully present, socially effective manifestation of the subject itself. For the devotee, to stand before a consecrated image of the Buddha is thus to stand before the Buddha himself.

If the consecration of painted images typically draws from a somewhat shallow well of standard ritual formulas, there exists a unique form of consecration inscription in which the standard texts are superseded by the presence of biographical writing. The junction of image, inscription, and ritual process preserved in such works presents a useful starting point for thinking about the multivalent cultic applications of life writing. As a biographical narrative, such

a text *evokes* the subject's entire life and spiritual career. As a ritual document, it *invokes* his presence through the demarcation of a life fully lived.

In what follows I first briefly review some antecedents for patterned inscription practices found in East Asia, India, and Tibet. Next, I consider the Tibetan use of stūpa-shaped inscriptions in which the most basic ritual formulas serve as a kind of literary relic. I then turn to examine how forms of biographical literature (specifically biographical supplications) begin to supersede more rudimentary verses when used in conjunction with painted portraiture. Finally, I examine the elaborate inscription of the Chicago Mila painting as a means for reflecting on the function of life writing as a form of literary relic.

In this context, I have intentionally foregrounded correspondences between the painting's front and back, a relationship frequently neglected in discussions of Buddhist art. In doing so, I hope to complicate some received ideas about what biographical texts do (that they tell stories). I also want to question some basic assumptions about how they are used (that those stories are read.) In particular, I want to consider here the ways in which biographical narratives, their backs literally up against the wall, are perhaps not intended to tell a story or even to be read at all. Rather, they may serve a distinctly non-narrative function, employed to make present the painted subject through the inscription of his life, his deeds, and his teachings in iconic form.

Life Writing as Technology of Enchantment

Before turning to the images and texts themselves, I want to pause for a moment to comment on one of the broad lenses through which I have been considering these materials: the early work of noted anthropologist of art Alfred Gell. Gell's early writings on what he describes as the technology of enchantment piece together a theory about the efficacy of art objects (a category he defines broadly enough to include sculpture, dance, and performance, as well as poetry and the literary arts), without recourse to descriptions of their aesthetic properties or value. For Gell, art forms a special kind of technology, and art objects serve broad technical strategies; they can be understood as material things invested with the power to motivate particular responses or interpretations (Piney and Thomas 2001: 4).

For Gell, art objects are given meaning within networks of social interaction and exchange he defines as systems of technology. It is through the virtuosic application (or perhaps exploitation) of technical processes on the part of an artist—whether inscribing the intricate designs

of a Trobriand canoe-prow in Papua New Guinea or assembling an uncanny model of Salisbury Cathedral out of matchsticks—that the viewer is captivated, overwhelmed, dazzled, beguiled. “The power of art objects,” he argues, “stems from the technical processes they objectively embody” (Piney and Thomas 2001: 4). Technology is enchanting “because it is the outcome of some process of barely comprehensible virtuosity which exemplifies an ideal of magical efficacy” (3).

In the present context, I think we might likewise begin to understand biographical inscriptions as text-objects operating within a technical system of consecration—a “technology of enchantment” that effectively enlivens the image and mediates a relationship between author, biographical subject, consecration master, and receiving community. As an elaborate description of a person’s life, the text—and the image it inscribes—are understood as person-like and therefore targets for and sources of social agency (Gell 1998: 96).

If Gell’s theory is relevant here, it is certainly an imperfect model. To cite just one complication: in his system, the source of an object’s power stems from the artist’s virtuosity in producing an object both technically dazzling and beyond duplication. As is widely known, however, in many Buddhist contexts, an object’s locus of power—its life—is defined not so much through its outward construction or design as through the act of ritual vivification, which in these examples involves the use of extensive biographical texts. This account is further complicated by the profusion of naturally appearing, non-representational objects of power such as rocks and trees found throughout Buddhist Asia. Still, Gell’s notion of a technology of enchantment recalls precisely the processes of consecration we find in images such as this. The virtuoso practice, then, seems to lie less in the hands of the artisan than in the ritual performance of the officiating master.

Echoing Peter Berger’s famous call for “methodological atheism”—a process of scrutinizing religious beliefs free from the influence of theological convictions—Gell (1992: 41) advocated what he calls a methodological philistinism, a “resolute indifference toward the aesthetic value of works of art,” appealing instead to the social properties of art objects as things that are produced, circulated, and received. Following Gell, we might here profitably undertake a form of methodological illiteracy, moving away, at least in some instances, from an emphasis on literary and narrative analysis in order to examine the biographical text as an object within a system of cultural and religious exchange.

What do I mean by methodological illiteracy? To illustrate the problem encountered in viewing biographical inscriptions primarily as stories to be read, I turn to an early twentieth-century example from Mongolia. This complex painting (Figure 3), published in a recent exhibition catalog for the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, records episodes in the lives of a renowned nineteenth-century Mongolian Buddhist teacher, the eighth Bogdo Gegen (1870–1924), together with the predecessors in his lineage (Berger and Bartholomew 1995: 127–32, Fig. 18). Setting aside a detailed analysis of the painting's composition, I want to turn to the inscription on its rear face (Figure 4). The imposing text, here presented in the form of a rudimentary stūpa reliquary, identifies itself as a so-called “secret biography” of the portrait's subject or subjects (Berger and Bartholomew 1995: 307–9; Bosson 1995: 133–7). The exhibition catalog describes the text at length as a “convoluted series of religious verses conveying prayers and paeans,” a kind of “acrostic puzzle” whose hidden meaning could only be unlocked by the carefully

FIG 3

Meditations of the Bogdo Gegen, Mongolia, late nineteenth–early twentieth century, pigment on cotton, 265.6 × 151.4 cm (104⁵/₈ × 59⁵/₈ in.). (Bogdo Khan Palace Museum.)





FIG 4
 Meditations of the Bogdo Gergen
 verso inscription, Mongolia, late
 nineteenth–early twentieth century,
 pigment on cotton, 265.6 ×
 151.4 cm (104 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 59 $\frac{5}{8}$ in.).
 (Bogdo Khan Palace Museum.)

guarded oral commentary of a religious master. The translator admits, “Despite assiduous attempts, we have not been able to discover a pattern or system to decode the text” (Bosson 1995: 134). He further laments the lack of a written key and the disruption of any oral tradition by the religious purges in Mongolia of the 1930s.

The publication establishes the text as a major literary artifact, allocating nearly a dozen pages to its photographic reproduction, its transcription from the original Tibetan, and its rendering into English. The authors laud its value as both historical document and literary exemplar. Yet the central question, in my view, is nowhere raised: Who, if anyone, was its intended audience? Who was ever meant to read such a text? Here the term “secret biography” refers not to a private or hidden text, or to a story whose meaning is concealed as I think the catalog incorrectly suggests, but rather to a literary genre typically recording the visionary experiences and poetic reflections of a Buddhist saint—although the text does not do this either. Nevertheless, I find it unlikely that such a text was intended for public display or consumption, but would rather suggest that it was confined to the small community devoted to the production, consecration, and veneration of the painting. The inscription formed part of the

technological system for empowering the image, not as a narrative to be read or even scrutinized in an extensive or analytical fashion, but as a marker for the subject's life fully lived. Indeed, the text begins with a verse inviting the wisdom beings (S. *jñānasattva*, T. *ye shes sems dpa'*)—a personification of the subject's living essence—to enter and remain in the painting. This is an element overlooked in the translation. In this context, the inscription transforms the audience from a public sphere, and a general viewing audience, to a private one intended for the deities themselves.

Scholars and translators of Tibetan literature have tended to describe the genre of biography (*mam thar*) in its literal sense—that is, a narrative intended to be read as both a *model of* and a *model for* the religious life (using Clifford Geertz's well-known categories). But I would suggest that in the case of biographical inscriptions such as this Mongolian example and those that will follow the text serves as the focus of a consecration technology, first employed by a small group of ritual experts and later serving as a locus of devotional activity. The text, in a sense, is an object for worshipers, not a narrative for readers. As we read and study them as texts on the one hand, we might approach them as objects through a process of methodological illiteracy on the other. Understanding that inscriptions can function both as narrativized texts and material objects greatly expands the interpretive frame we bring to them. To view the narrative solely as a story to be read is to “literary historicize” the material—that is, to make it instead a product of the modern literary or art historian.³

Stūpa Inscriptions: Indian and Tibetan Antecedents

I would like to turn now to the internal logic of stūpa inscriptions more generally, and then to several concise biographical inscriptions that might serve as models for the more complex text to come. The use of shaped text—variously described as concrete poetry, pattern poetry, and visual poetry—appears in a broad range of geographical and historical contexts (Higgins 1987). Perhaps the earliest examples are the Greek *technopaegnia*, displays of literary dexterity that were also believed to exhibit magical or apotropaic properties, dating from the third century BCE. In China we find examples of Buddhist scriptures inscribed in the shape of stūpas beginning in the seventh or eighth centuries, including an inscription of the acclaimed *Heart Sūtra* preserved at the cave complex of Dunhuang (Tanabe 1988: 103). Far more elaborate constructions appear in thirteenth-century Japan, with the tradition of *hōtō*, or

so-called “jeweled stūpa maṇḍalas,” in which the entire text of the *Lotus Sūtra* was painstakingly inscribed in the form of pagodas surrounded by illustrations of the story it records (Tanabe 1988: 98–108). It is worth noting here that the actual reading of such texts in a literal or literary manner was a secondary concern, if not a practical impossibility altogether.

An elaborate approach to visual poetry also developed in India through the genre of literature known as Citrakāvya (Jhā 1975; Kapāḍiā 1954, 1955, 1956). Grammarians and authors delineated numerous poem designs (*bandhas*) affording complex and multivalent readings of the root text. These include wheels, lotus flowers, snakes, and umbrellas, as well as a zigzag pattern colorfully called the “cow-piss” design (*gomūtrikā bandha*) so named because it is said to resemble the marks left on the ground by a urinating bovine. The first complete works of this type began to appear in the seventh century, primarily at the hand of Jain authors. Forms of visual poetry were also known in Tibet, particularly “perfect circle” (*kun bzang 'khor lo*) and “zigzag/cow-piss” (*ba lang gcin*) designs, originating with translations of Daṇḍin’s *Kāvyaḍarṣa* in the thirteenth century. Such designs frequently decorate Tibetan temple and monastery walls where individual syllables are set within a multicolored checkerboard design, although other shapes such as wheels, vases, and umbrellas are also found. This tradition has yet to be studied in detail.

By the sixth or seventh centuries in India, Buddhist communities were also beginning to combine consecration inscriptions with images of stūpas on the rear of religious statuary, including representations of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni and other divinities (Huntington and Huntington 1989: 123–5). The text most frequently inscribed in the context of Buddhist consecration is known as the Verse on Dependent Origination (*Pratītyasamutpādagāthā*). These four lines, often referred to as the so-called “Buddhist Creed,” were believed to be particularly efficacious in the vivification of images (Bentor 1996: 114, n.120):

The Tathāgata has proclaimed the cause,
As well as the cessation,
Of all things arising from a cause.
This is the Great Śramaṇa’s teaching.⁴

In ritual contexts the Verse on Dependent Origination was believed to epitomize the Buddha’s teachings and thus to possess the power of Buddhist scripture. This follows the move toward cultic worship of books that appeared by the first centuries CE in India. Key Buddhist

scriptures such as the *Lotus Sūtra* and the various *Perfection of Wisdom* texts began incorporating a new discursive polemic praising the worship of the physical text in order to displace the cult of corporeal relics that had previously dominated the religious landscape. These texts described themselves as superior to the Buddha's relics, to be "valued not so much for what they say as for their inherent charismatic or apotropaic powers" (Sharf 1999: 77).

And indeed, by the sixth or seventh century in India—as the Verse on Dependent Origination begins to appear in conjunction with images of stūpas—its inscription was understood to actually embody the Buddha himself, becoming a "manifestation of the Buddha's real presence ... in the same way that relics were thought to infuse the living presence of the Buddha in stūpas" (Boucher 1991: 11). As Gregory Schopen (1987, 1988) has noted, Indian inscriptions dated as early as the second century BCE describe corporeal relics of Buddha Śākyamuni as living entities. Of more direct relevance here, however, is the fact that many early sources describe such relics as being "'informed,' 'parfumée,' 'saturated,' 'pervaded,' 'imbued' with just those characteristics that defined the living Buddha" (Schopen 1987: 126). In such cases, physical relics of the Buddha were believed to be infused with the qualities exemplified by the Buddha's life such as morality, concentration, and wisdom. In Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*, Schopen notes, the Buddha's relics are described as being "full of virtue" and "informed with universal benevolence" (1987: 127). The *Ye dharma* verse was considered to possess these same properties.

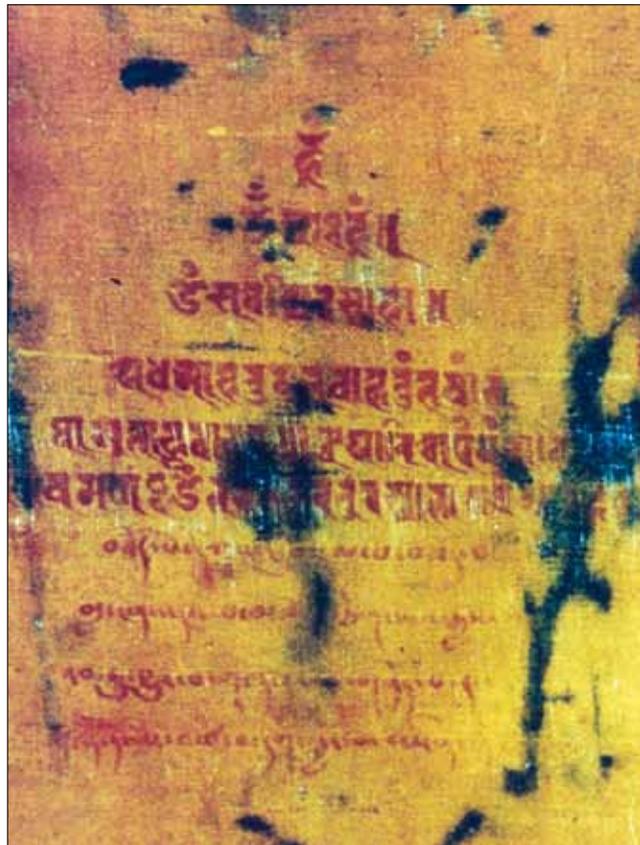
The verse was frequently written on scrolls and then deposited inside three-dimensional monumental stūpas as part of an elaborate consecration rite. In such cases, the text was referred to by the name *dharmadhātu*, a term that has been translated in this context as "dharma-relic" or perhaps scriptural relic (Bentor 1992). The seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang noted the Indian practice of depositing scriptural fragments inside small stūpas as a means of consecration; these were literary materials called *dharmasārīra* (Bentor 1995: 251). While in this context *dharma* refers to written scriptures, *sārīra* primarily designates the Buddha's relics in the form of corporeal remains, and thus we find here a conflation of text and body, literary corpus as physical corpse. Such inscriptions formed literary relics, the flesh made word.

Turning to Tibet, we find that many of the earliest extant scroll paintings—influenced by artisans in Pāla dynasty India—begin to employ a form of visual poetry combining literary relic inscriptions and stūpa imagery.

An eleventh-century image of the bodhisattva Tārā in the Ford Collection, one of the earliest extant Tibetan scroll paintings, is perhaps the best-known example of such an inscription. Recent studies have debated the work's provenance, attributing its style and composition to artists of either Tibetan or Indian origin (Kossak and Singer 1998: 54–9; Martin 2001; Singer 1998). Of interest in this context, however, are the lines in vermilion ink on the painting's back, forming a rudimentary stūpa (Figure 5). Following several introductory phrases, the inscription incorporates two principal ritual formulas. The first, written in ornamental Sanskrit, is the Verse on Dependent Origination described above. The second four lines, inked in a cursive Tibetan script, is a well-known stanza on the virtue of patience recorded in Tibetan translations of the rules for the monastic order:

Patience is the best ascetic practice; patience is
 Supreme nirvāṇa, say the Buddhas.
 The monk who harms others and
 Who injures others is no *śramaṇa*.⁵

FIG 5
 Tārā, verso inscription, central Tibet,
 c. mid to late eleventh century,
 Pigment on cotton, 122 × 80 cm
 (48 × 31½ in.). (The John and Berthe
 Ford Collection.)



By the following century, Tibetan authors were advising that these lines be added once the painting was complete. The intention here, it has recently been suggested, is to petition the Buddhas, reminding them of their “transcendent ‘forbearance’ in case of unwitting mistakes by the artist, scribe, or consecrator” (Martin 2001: 150). The verse here once again upturns the expectation that these words were intended for human readers and instead highlights the transactional nature of such objects with the deities they are meant to embody. The practice of inscribing these two verses in the shape of a stūpa, or within a sketched image of one, became increasingly common in Tibet. We find a proliferating number of such inscriptions attached to portraits of the historical Buddha and other deities.⁶

We also find evidence for the early Tibetan use of stūpa-shaped inscriptions, not only for consecrating images of Buddhas and divinities, but for portraits of historical figures as well. A portrait of the acclaimed Drigung Kagyu master Jikten Sumgon (’Jig rten gsum mgon, 1143–1217), recently published by Amy Heller (2005) and carbon-dated to the early thirteenth century, is inscribed with thirty-seven lines of text forming the outline of a stūpa. The inscription contains a series of mantras and *dhāraṇīs* in addition to the Verse on Dependent Origination and the stanza on patience (as well as several other verses drawn from the *Prātimokṣa Sūtra*). The painting’s early date leads Heller to describe the work as a “commemorative portrait” produced shortly after Jikten Sumgon’s death in 1217 (Heller 2005: 3). A portrait in the Pritzker Collection of the acclaimed Kagyu founder Marpa Chokyi Lodro (1012–97), similarly dated to the first half of the thirteenth century, contains a stūpa inscription that incorporates several descriptive verses about his life in addition to the verses on dependent origination and patience (Pal et al. 2003: 194, Fig. 127; Singer and Denwood 1997: 67, Fig. 48). Thus it is possible that we witness here a nascent tradition of associating the use of literary relics inscribed inside stūpas—the preeminent Buddhist mortuary monument—with the death, commemoration, and veneration of revered Buddhist teachers.

In any case, for paintings such as these, the inscription—especially the Verse on Dependent Origination—seems to retain its early relationship to the three-dimensional stūpa, functioning as a literary relic visually “entombed” within the monument it inscribes. It thereby serves as a manifestation of the teacher in two dimensions. The text’s semantic content and its exterior shape fuse together into a single iconic form serving as

the locus for the image's vivification. As we shall see, later traditions began to extend the range of inscription texts beyond the boilerplate mantras, *dhāraṇīs*, and verses just described. In at least some cases, the inscriptions become increasingly personalized, adopting a language that reflects a growing sense of biographical narrative.

Tibetan Biography as/in Inscription

Turning now to a model of how the biographical process in Tibet might intersect with these kinds of patterned inscriptions, we can first refer to a story of the acclaimed eleventh-century Bengali monk Atisha (984–1054)—a central figure in the early spread of Buddhism in Tibet—and his disciple Naktso Tsultrim Gyalwa (Nag tsho Tshul khriims rgyal ba, 1011–64), who played an active role in inviting Atisha to the high plateau (Martin 2001: 142ff.). In this account from Naktso's own biography, which takes place shortly after Atisha's death, the disciple commissions a scroll painting of the Bengali master from a skilled Indian artisan. The painting is a massive image some 24 feet high, depicting Atisha, his principal teachers, disciples, and scenes from his life: a composition perhaps not unlike the modern Mongolian image described earlier. Most importantly, on its back, the disciple inscribes an extensive narrative of Atisha's life as a hymn of praise in eighty verses.

At the time of the work's consecration, one traditional religious history tells us, "The Guru [Atisha] himself came down from Tuṣita Heaven and attested to it, and so it has been stated that this [painting] is indistinguishable from the Guru himself, that it is the greatest in blessing among the religious icons in Western Tibet" (Martin 2001). This is exactly the model for consecration commonly performed in Tibet, in which the subject's numinous essence is called to reside within the object. In this case, however, the formal inscription consists of a detailed biographical narrative. The fate of this painting and its inscription is unknown, but the work of Helmut Eimer has convincingly shown that this text, originally inked on the back of a portrait, is the earliest source, the point of origin, for the Bengali master's entire biographical tradition (Eimer 1977, 1982, 1989, 2000). The inscribed text was later preserved and published as an independent work—an indication that the function of such texts is not fixed but changes according to context. The inscription may act in a relic-like, and largely non-narrative, fashion when kept out of sight on the rear of a hanging portrait. But it serves as a more conventional biographical narrative when circulated independently.

While it is not implausible that this extended biographical inscription was set within an image of a

stūpa, no record survives. We can, however, point to several examples in which biographical text, consecration inscription, and stūpa imagery combine to form a literary relic. The portraits of two prelates from the atelier of Riwoché Monastery, a Taklung Kagyu religious center in eastern Tibet, are part of a larger lineage series and are each inscribed with gold letters against the red silhouette of a stūpa (Heller 1999: Plates 103–4). The first, a depiction of one Palden Rinchen (Dpal ldan rin chen, born c. fifteenth century), contains a thirteen-verse prayer (*gsol 'debs*) enumerating the subject's virtues, requesting his blessings, and supplicating his body, speech, and mind (Figure 6; detail Figure 7). The text of the second painting, a portrait of Riwoché throne holder Jikten Wangchuk ('Jig rten dbang phyug, 1454–1532), contains similar descriptions, praises, and petitions. It concludes by requesting that the lama infuse the physical support (*rten*)—in this case the painting—with blessings so that the power of such an excellent image remains present (Figure 8).

To these we may add a third image (Figure 9), perhaps part of the same or a similar series: a portrait of Milarepa

FIG 6

Portrait of Palden Rinchen, Tibet, sixteenth century, pigment on cotton, 37 × 31 cm (14½ × 12¼ in.). (R. R. E. Collection.)



FIG 7

Portrait of Palden Rinchen, verso inscription detail, Tibet, sixteenth century, pigment on cotton, 37 × 31 cm (14½ × 12¼ in.). (R. R. E. Collection.)



Life Writing as Literary Relic: Image, Inscription and Consecration in Tibetan Biography
Andrew Quintman

flanked on each side by a group of disciples (Singer and Denwood 1997: front piece and Plate 49).⁷ As before, the inscription (Figure 10) is set against the silhouette of a stūpa and forms a prayer in twelve verses, praising the yogin and his deeds. The final stanza likewise petitions that Milarepa's presence remain in the image: "Perfected in yogic activity and / Blessed by wisdom *ḍākinīs*, / Yogin of space, beyond compare— / May the goodness of Jetsün Mila remain present."⁸

The stūpa inscriptions in these three examples are biographical insofar as they refer to the qualities of their subjects' lives, albeit obliquely, through supplications (*gsol 'debs*) and encomia (*stod pa*)—forms of biographical writing that have only begun to receive careful attention. The inscriptions serve the portrait's vivification, replacing the more basic verses on dependent origination and patience witnessed above. In these cases, however, the text is dedicated to a single historical figure, "calling" the subject's living essence to reside within the portrait and providing a physical locus for such. The inscription thus

FIG 8

Portrait of Jikten Wangchuk, Tibet, sixteenth century, pigment on cotton, 37 × 31 cm (14½ × 12¼ in.). (R. R. E. Collection.)



once again serves as a literary relic, ritually preserved within the confines of the stūpa itself.

The Chicago Mila: Image, Text, Life

In light of these examples, we can turn to a brief examination of the portrait of Milarepa with which we began. This painting, in the collection of the Chicago Institute of Art, has been dated to about 1500 (Pal et al. 2003: 249), although evidence in the inscription should push this back at least several decades.⁹ The yogin rests before a range of snow peaks, his principal guru Marpa seated directly above his head. At his side stand six disciples and Milarepa's famed celestial followers, the five sisters of long life (Tshe ring mched Inga), hover at the painting's upper and lower margins.

The inscription forms a biographical work far more complex than those from Riwoché, reminding us of the extended text now known to have sparked Atisha's own biographical tradition. (For a full English translation and Tibetan transcription, see the Appendix.) Some ninety lines of dense cursive script delineate a stūpa covering the entire length of the canvas (Heller 2003: 4ff.; Pal et al. 2003: 293). The text no longer makes only brief laudatory



FIG 9
 Milarepa, Tibet, c. sixteenth century?,
 pigment on cotton, 30 × 37.5 cm
 (11¹³/₁₆ × 14³/₄ in.). (Private Collection.
 Photograph courtesy of John
 Eskenazi Ltd.)

references to the painting's subject. Instead, the inscription forms an autonomous and complete biographical narrative in the form of a supplication prayer (*gsol 'debs*), spanning the yogin's entire life and spiritual career. Its format follows a model established early on in Milarepa's biographical tradition, combining both biography (*nam thar*) and collected songs (*mgur 'bum*). The first and third sections (Appendix, stanzas 2–10, 31–36) together form the biography proper; the middle verses (Appendix, stanzas



FIG 10

Milarepa verso inscription, Tibet, c. sixteenth century?, pigment on cotton, 30 x 37.5 cm (11³/₁₆ x 14³/₄ in.). (Private Collection. Photograph courtesy of John Eskenazi Ltd.)

11–30) serve as an outline for the narrative cycles of the collected songs. It may be helpful to describe the narrative in further detail to give a sense of its detail and scope.

The opening verses present a summary of the life story, each stanza offering prayers to the yogin by invoking four different names correlating to four periods in his life: (1) the early years as Töpaga (Thos pa dga'), his name as a young boy; (2) the period of training in the black arts under the epithet Great Magician (*mthu chen*); (3) the period of training with his principal Buddhist teacher as Dorjé Gyaltsen (Rdo rje rgyal mtshan), his ordination name; and (4) the period of success in yogic practice as Zhepa Dorjé (Bzhad pa rdo rje), his tantric initiation name.

The inscription next provides a brief synopsis of the yogin's early religious life. Stanzas 5–7 describe his early training under Marpa and Lama Ngok and his eventual departure from across the Silma pass. Stanzas 8–10 then record the yogin's first meditation retreats at White Rock Horse Tooth (Brag dkar rta so), where he first attains the power of *tummo* or yogic heat. Some twenty stanzas follow (11–30), forming an abbreviated "collected songs" (*mgur 'bum*) recounting the activities of his mature teaching career: converting disciples, taming demons, performing miracles. The text emphasizes stories of the yogin's two main disciples Rechungpa (11–13, 30) and Gampopa (27, 29) but also names some fifteen other individuals in addition to the five long life goddesses. Verses 18 and 20 emphasize the central role of the tantric literary genre known as the aural transmissions (*snyan brgyud*), a feature likewise found in many of Milarepa's early biographies. This is perhaps evidence of an affiliation on the part of the individual(s) who commissioned this portrait with the Drukpa Kagyu tradition that preserved many of the aural transmission lineages. The biography ends with five verses describing the yogin's death, complete with miraculous appearances and heavenly manifestations. Several concluding prayers of blessing and good fortune follow. Unlike the previous examples, when read as a narrative, this text results in a finely crafted biography, recording the arc of a life fully lived, and following the standard literary conventions of the Tibetan biographical tradition.

Life as Inscription

With this sketch in mind, we can begin to reflect on some of the ways in which we might understand this extraordinary work. As mentioned earlier, these kinds of consecration inscriptions seem to illustrate two applications of life writing in the context of cultic practice: evocation and invocation. As biographical narrative in

the usual sense, the text *evokes* the subject's life and spiritual career in great detail. And reading the inscription's narrative content in a conventional way, we find the text closely follows the paradigm of Milarepa's early biographical tradition. Indeed, we are pressed to read it as we do other life stories: as a compelling narrative, a source for literary and historical data, an object of philological study.

But we may also approach this text in a different way—as an *invocation* of the subject within a technical system of consecration, an approach that challenges our understanding of what biographical texts are and what they do. On the back of a hanging scroll, this text would have been read infrequently, perhaps only once at the time of consecration. As a text without readers, the inscription's narrative value fades as it loses the rationale ordinarily ascribed to life writing in Tibet: didactic tool, means for staking out sectarian affiliation, source for legitimizing a particular lineage. We might further clarify this statement to suggest that the text had no living human readers, since the verses are intended for the subject of the praise—the yogin Milarepa—himself, urging him to embody the representation painted on the front. But the text also serves as a ritual object whose value lies beyond the story it tells. It becomes a special kind of relic: a *dharmasārīra*, a literary relic, a biographic relic embodying not so much the Buddha as it does the subject whose life its verses describe.

It is difficult at present to determine how widespread the use of biographical inscriptions were in Tibet. The transition from basic ritual formulas to biographical texts perhaps marks a nascent commemorative tradition tied to the passing of great masters, as with Jikten Sumgon's death in the early thirteenth century. It is also possible that the rise of biographical inscriptions roughly parallels the growing importance of biographical literature in Tibet writ large, which took off in the twelfth century and culminated in the massive published works that began to appear in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Further evidence, including a larger sample of documented inscriptions, will be necessary to better appreciate how the tradition developed.

Yet even in the single example of the Chicago Mila, we find some evidence for how such biographical inscriptions may have been understood. Like many consecrated Tibetan paintings, the Chicago Mila inscription marks the regions of the yogin's forehead, throat, and heart with the seed syllables *oṃ āḥ hūṃ*, written in an ornamental Sanskrit script, to signify the presence of the subject's body, speech, and mind. More generally, however, Tibetan

sacred objects are classified as individual supports for the body, speech, or mind of an awakened being. As part of a ritual ceremony, these are respectively signified by a statue of the Buddha, a volume of scripture, and a stūpa.

In the case of the Chicago painting, the presence of an extensive biographical inscription seems to have shifted the ways in which these traditional categories could be understood. The text concludes with a verse that explicitly describes the entire material object (painting, text, and stūpa) as a “body, speech, and mind support” (*sku gsung thugs rten*). Here, we might understand the body support as the yogin’s portrait, the speech support as the inscription forming a kind of canonical word (*buddhavacana*) recording his life, and the mind support as the stūpa that outlines the text. As a biography, however, the inscription seems to add another layer of meaning. Religious images, once they have been consecrated, can be referred to as a “fabricated emanation body” (*bzo sprul sku*), marking its transformation from empty likeness to embodied presence, whose status is not unlike that of “born emanation bodies” (*skye ba sprul sku*), referring to Tibet’s unique tradition of recognizing an individual’s successive reembodiments, as in the case of the Dalai Lama. The object, both image and text, here seem take on the status of an honorary person through the ritual inscribing of his life.

Indeed, within the technical system of consecration the complete object no longer simply signifies the subject’s body, speech, and mind. Rather, it seems to encapsulate the entire range of his activities: his aspirations, his trials, his austerities, his miraculous achievements, his taming the Tibetan landscape, his converting disciples, and his transmitting the dharma. In short, the text can be understood as embodying Milarepa through the traditional fivefold Tibetan formulation mentioned in verse 13 of the inscription: the yogin’s body, speech, and mind, but also the *qualities* and *activities* (comprising the standard categories of *sku*, *gsung*, *thugs*, *yon tan*, and *'phrin las*) of his life fully lived.

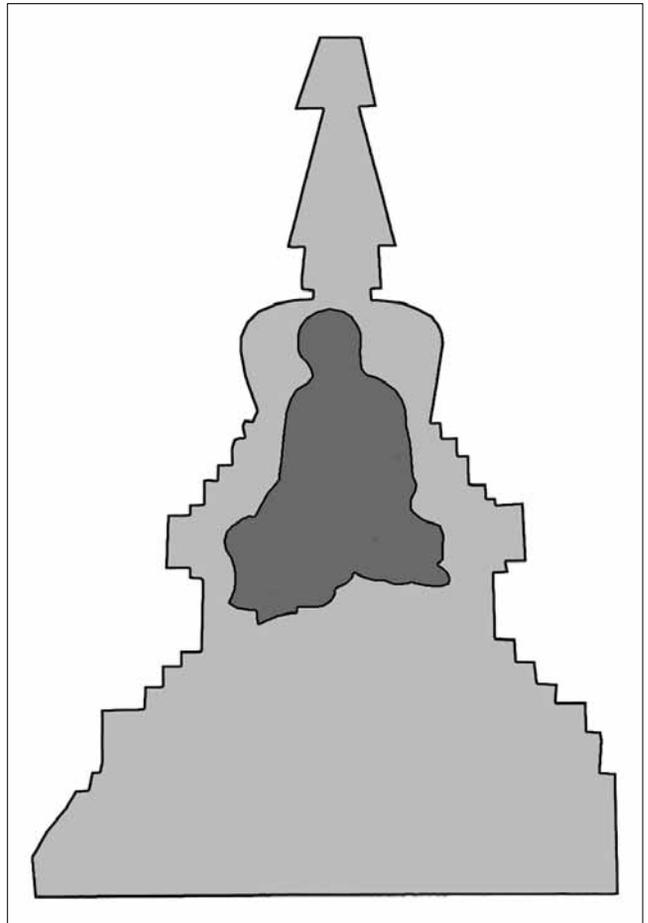
Gell himself observed that, within a Buddhist social context, if sacred images are to maintain their religious significance, they must also be understood as reliquaries. The icon thus becomes a kind of tomb, and in certain cases, this was literally true. In Japan there is at least one example of a stone image of Amida Buddha inside of which was interred the mummy of a Buddhist monk (Faure 1998: 770). According to Tibetan tradition, the stūpa’s architectural components are based upon the proportions of a Buddha’s perfected body. And indeed, the mummified body of a highly regarded teacher could be sealed inside

a monumental stūpa, perhaps with his face behind a death mask in gold leaf staring out through a window in the structure's spire. The process of entombing a literary relic within an inscribed stūpa serves as, in Gell's words, a technology of enchantment, a means of enlivening an image even as it implies a kind of death.

Likewise, Milarepa's death seems to be mirrored in the consecration of his own portrait, where literary relics play a particularly important role. In the most famous account of his passing, the yogin's corpse is cremated inside the chamber of a stūpa but leaves behind no physical relics, much to his disciples' dismay. We might therefore imagine that the individuals responsible for this painting (and perhaps the inscription too) understood the union of portrait and inscription, formed by superimposing the painting's front and rear faces (Figure 11), as a means of returning Milarepa's corporeal relics to the funeral stūpa left empty many centuries earlier. In doing so, the combination of text and image responds to Vaccagotta's unanswered

FIG 11

Milarepa "entombed" in a stūpa inscription, after Milarepa on Mount Kailas (Art Institute of Chicago). (Drawing courtesy of Eleanor Mannikka.)



question: given the proper nexus of visual, textual, and ritual media, the Tathāgata's living presence may indeed linger long after his death, for readers and viewers alike.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Amy Heller for her generous support during the course of this research. Dr. Heller first carried out the painstaking process of transcribing the inscriptions studied here, and this study largely builds on her work. Her pioneering efforts in the study of such materials has opened up important new avenues of inquiry. I am also grateful to Janet Gyatso, Charles Hallisey, Jinah Kim, Christian Luczanits, Elena Pakhutova, Nicole Willock, and two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments on previous versions of this essay

Appendix: English Translation

Full transcription of the Tibetan text is available at <http://www.andrewquintman.com/milainscription>.

Hūṃ
Om aḥ hūṃ svāhā
Om vajra garbha svāhā
Om dharmadhātu garbhe svāhā
Om supratīṣṭhā vajraye svāhā
Om <āḥ> namo guru vajra ketu xxx om hūṃ traṃ hrīḥ ...

1. xxx through the power of persistence in xxx
You gained accomplishment, both common and supreme.
Accomplished master of the snows xxx
To Lord xxx I address my prayers.
2. Born the son of Sher rgyal and Dkar legs
In Tsha ron, the land between Gung thang and India,
You satisfy all with your Brahmā-like speech.
To Jetsūn Thos pa dga' I address my prayers.
3. You relied on lamas such as G.yung ston and Gñub chung,
Crushed misleading forces with powerful magic,
Received the famed miraculous powers of Rdzogs chen from Lha dga.'
At the feet of Jetsūn Mthu chen [great magician] I address my prayers.
4. Accepted by Mar pa, supreme son of Na ro and Maitri,
You served him with body and speech
And thereby pleased the lama. You received his lineage and took the lay precepts.
At the feet of Rdo rje rgyal mtshan I address my prayers.
5. You understood without exception the perfect lama's instructions
And, supreme among his disciple-sons,

By the Great Glorious Cakrasaṃvara was named
Bzhad pa'i rdo rje, at your feet I address my prayers.

6. You aroused all the key points of the great Nāro's
Profound path of means and became a lineage holding
son.
It was foretold you'd attain supreme accomplishment in
one life.
To the heart essence of Mar and Rngog coalesced I
address my prayers.
7. Escorted by *ḍākinīs* on the Sil ma pass
You saw an example of illusion in the prison of xxx xxx.
To you who overcame saṃsāra's faults I address my
prayers.
8. Cut off for three years you perfected diligence
In one-pointed concentration at Spo mthon brag
And with most excellent devotion met the lord guru.
To [you] free from faults of the two obscurations I address
my prayers.
9. In great sacred sites such as Brag dkar rta so
You gained mastery and then perfected the clairvoyances
And the four joys, though your cranial bump could not be
seen.
To you the second Buddha I address my prayers.
10. With the bliss-warmth of *tummo* while you lived amid the
glaciers
Your cotton robe blazed like fire and the snows melted
away.
The Indian *ḍākinīs* fed you with absorption for food.
To you who gained supreme <meditation> I address my
prayers.
11. In the Snye <nam> mountains you liberated Ras chung
pa.
In Ling ba'i brag you bound a rock demoness under
oath.
The dialectics teachers, Dar lo and the rest,
To your transforming their outlook I address my prayers.
12. In Dpal mo dpal thang Ras chung pa's perception went
astray,
And to eliminate his pride you performed various kinds of
yogic activity.
You propelled the miserly up to the celestial realms.
To the overpowering of others' perceptions I address my
prayers.
13. At Mchong gling brag you burned the evil mantras up in
flames.
You showed signs of accomplishment of body, speech,
mind,
Qualities, and activities, and took off up in the sky.
To such marvelous wonders I address my prayers.

14. You established an impure Bon po in the state of
Buddhahood
And for gods and asuras and the six kinds of beings
You created many emanations and then set them in bliss.
To the fulfillment of the varied welfare of beings I address
my prayers.
15. For seven days you brought down rain and quelled the
people's dispute.
Jetsün Tārā urged the dharma king and
He offered *kashika* cloth and a golden [a ru ra] Rnam
rgyal.
To you who perfected blessings I address my prayers.
16. When meeting with Dam pa himself on the Thog pass
You made a garden of dharma speech and
demonstrated signs of accomplishment.
Dam pa carried stories of your fame to the land of India.
To you who pervades the whole world I address my
prayers.
17. In Skyi shang brag you liberated the hunter.
In Brin you tamed a demon. Conferring the wisdom
initiation,
The vase arrived [on its own] and the gods held flowers.
To the performance of amazing activities I address my
prayers.
18. To the foremost *repas*¹⁰ prophesied by *ḍākinīs*
You imparted instructions of the aural transmissions
completely, bar none.
Realization spread and they clearly reached the celestial
realms.
To the Jetsün who gained accomplishment I address my
prayers.
19. Dpa' Idar, Legs se, Gsal le, and Ras chung ma
Are your four female disciples so you gave instructions
without holding back.
They are a supreme assembly of coemergent *dāki*
goddesses.
To you who conducts the four kinds of activity I address
my prayers.
20. Bodhirāja requested four lines on the symbolism of the
staff and then
Became one of your four son-disciples. He became
A recipient maintaining the aural transmission
instructions.
To the spread of the aural transmission path of means I
address my prayers.
21. While cultivating one-pointed yogic concentration
At the blessed site Chu bar sprul sku
There were harmful spirits, five relatives led by a demon
god[dess]—
To their conversion into miraculous ornaments of dharma
I address my prayers.

22. Later they made prostrations and placed your feet on their heads.
They offered ox curds and a maṇḍala of polished silver.
You gave the four initiations and took them as your *karmamudrā*.
To you who attained supreme bliss-emptiness I address my prayers.
23. At Jo bo Bon ri you aroused in eight ascetic *repas*
Joy like that of the first bodhisattva level.
You beautifully sang the experiential Song of the Six Points.
To the expansion of your retinue of disciples I address my prayers.
24. Through your beggar's emanation, Ras chung was freed from a demon.
At Brag dkar rta so *ḍākinīs* gathered at a ritual feast.
A lineage holder is coming, you said.
To you who prophesied the future I address my prayers.
25. Merely hearing your name acts to liberate other's mind streams.
The four joys of stability from below were perfected in the wheel of great bliss.
All the gods and *asuras* bowed their heads in worship.
To the standard bearer of the practice lineage I address my prayers.
26. Your body of expansive youth has a smiling (*bzhad pa*) nature;
You attained the vajra (*rdō rje*) body and found independence of *prāṇa*-mind.¹¹
In just one life you gained supreme accomplishment.
To you the second victor's son I address my prayers.
27. You encouraged the regent Sgam po with three emanations
And then he arrived before you.
You knew him to be a supreme heart-son <lineage> holder.
To you who accepts worthy recipients I address my prayers.
28. Sgom stag, Jo dar, 'Bri sgom, and the rest,
Se ban, Ngam rdzong, Gung thang gnyen chung pa
xxx five *repas* and eight realized masters.
To the planting of the practice lineage's victory banner I address my prayers.
29. You said Sgam po would benefit countless beings
In the direction of Dbus, and sent him away.
You said, "He worked for the Buddha's teachings."
To you without rival I address my prayers.
30. You sent Ras chung to Lo ro to benefit beings.
You said, "In future times may the six kinds of beings
without exception

Follow me to the place called Abhirati.”
To the acceptance of those foretold I address my
prayers.

31. In the cloudless sky, pure reality's sphere,
Dharma listening *ḍākinīs*, gods, and goddesses
<Offer> flowers, music, parasols, and victory banners.
To the offerings that fill the sky I address my prayers.
32. In his eighty-eighth [year] on the nineteenth [day] of the
tiger [month]
To those of pure karmic perception you appeared
Riding a lion with a smile on your face.
To your passing, surrounded by *ḍākinīs*, I address my
prayers.
33. To those of impure perception, while your corpse was
cremated
The sky was filled with rainbows and flowers.
There was singing and music of innumerable gods and
goddesses—
To such <offerings> I address my prayers.
34. An unborn letter *a* gave an indication [of your presence].
For the mass of pearl relics, a *dharmakāya* globe,
There was a crystal radiating rainbow light, a full hand-
span in height.
To the emanation of the thousand Buddhas I address my
prayers.
35. You revealed a rainbow body twelve finger-spans in
height and then
To your disciples taught a great flood of dharma,
A prayer to the six dharmas, key points on the
intermediate state, and others.
To the enlightened activity of gathering those to be
tamed I address my prayers.
36. The great Jetsūn's rainbow body, the sixty-two-deity
maṇḍala of
Cakrasaṃvara, dissolved into the *dharmakāya*.
To revealing the thirty-two marks and eighty ornaments
As *saṃbhogakāya* I address my prayers.
37. In the supreme abode called Abhirati to the east
The chief Bhagavan victor is Akṣobhya.
In essence, you are his foremost heart-son.
To the emanation who ripens those to be tamed I
address my prayers.
38. For the accomplishments of the wisdom *ḍākinīs* to come
about
You have unpolluted food and stainless cotton robes.
To you who encompasses all beings <without exception>
and then
Opens the gates of the lower realms, I address my
prayers.

39. In the expanse of space whose nature is *dharmakāya*
Sambhogakāya clouds amass;
To the continual rain of *nirmāṇakāya* I address my
prayers.

40. All sentient beings of the six classes, myself and all the
rest
xxx six perfections.
Raising the sword of method and wisdom
May the attack of the five poisonous enemies be
repelled.

May this body, speech, and mind support, lacking no
qualities, grant blessings for one hundred lifetimes. May this
supreme support be auspicious.

notes and references

¹ Recorded, for example, in the *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta* of the Majjhima Nikāya. For further references to this account, see Lamotte (1988: 48 n. 97–8).

² One problem encountered in this project is the relative paucity of published data concerning Tibetan consecration inscriptions. While it has become increasingly common for art historical studies to transcribe them, it is still uncommon, and often impractical, to reproduce them visually. This makes a broad historical analysis of their prevalence, development, and spread extremely difficult. An unprecedented recent exhibition at the Rubin Museum of Art entitled *Flipside: the Unseen in Tibetan Art* (March 15–August 12, 2013), curated by Christian Luczanits, focused on inscriptions, imprints, texts, and images found on the rear of Tibetan artwork.

³ In describing the “literary historicizing” of biographical texts such as this and other inscriptions, I am following the argument made by Robert Brown (1997) in his analysis of the visual narratives at Borobudur depicting the lives of

the Buddha. In that context, Brown suggests that the complex imagery was established not so much for viewers (who could decode or read the elaborate stories they depict) as for worshipers (who, for example, might perform circumambulation and present offerings as part of a pilgrimage). For Brown, such narrative imagery “was not ‘read’ or even looked at in any logical or analytical fashion” (173). In his view, to characterize the individuals who traditionally came into contact with these images as “viewers” is to “art historicize” the material, making it “an issue between art historian and object” instead of one between “worshipper and deity.” For an elaboration on Brown’s theory, see Gifford (2011, especially pp. 69–73). Andy Rotman (2009: 179ff.) offers a more critical assessment of Brown’s argument.

⁴ *Ye dharmā hetuprabhavā
hetuṃ teṣāṃ tathāgato/ hy
avadat teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha evaṃ
vādimahāsramaṇaḥ.*

⁵ The verse is recorded in the *Prātimokṣa Sūtra* (Toh. 2, Derge vol. 5, 20a4) and *Bhikṣuṇī*

Prātimokṣa Sūtra (Toh. 4, Derge vol 7, 24b3) as follows: *bsod pa bka thub dam pa bzod pa ni|| mya ngan 'das pa mchog ces sangs rgyas gsung|| rab tu byung ba bzhan la gnod pa dang|| bzhan la 'tshel(r) ba dge sbyong ma yin no||* The version recorded in the *Udānavarga* contains several minor variants: *bzod pa dka' thub mchog ste bzod pa ni|| mya ngan 'das pa mchog ces sangs rgyas gsung|| rab tu byung ba gzhan la 'tshe ba dang|| gzhan la gnod pas dge sbyong ma yin no||*. See Zongtse and Dietz (1990: 255).

⁶ See, for example, the elaborate eleventh-century inscription on a painting of Śākyamuni in Pal et al. (2003: Plates 114, 175; Fig. 4, 289). Amy Heller has transcribed and summarized the text in Pal et al. (2003: 290). Heller calls this inscription “one of the earliest dedications on an extant painting,” (289) although “dedication” does not capture the full text’s full scope since it include the *Ye dharma* verse and several stanzas from the *pratimokṣa* (although not the verse on patience). As Heller notes, the inscription appears to catalog a collection of sacred objects (including the painting itself) deposited in a stūpa made following the death of acclaimed translator ‘Gos Khug pa Lhas btsas (b. eleventh century). Another early example is found on the rear of a mid eleventh-century painting of Vajradhātu Vairocana, reproduced in Huntington and Huntington (1989: Plate 106, 159–61). Compare these with several slightly later examples in Kossak and Singer (1998): the eleventh/twelfth-century painting of Uṣṇīṣavijayā from eastern India or central Tibet (Plate 6, 65; Fig. 49, 204) and the thirteenth-century portrait of Śākyamuni from central Tibet (Plate 16, 87; Fig. 10, 19). Heller (2003: Figs 5a, 5b) has also reproduced a fourteenth-century stūpa inscription for a painting of the deity Padma dbang drag.

⁷ Singer has dated the painting to the fourteenth century. Amy Heller has suggested pushing this date forward several centuries to bring it in line with the other paintings

in the series (2003: 4; Personal communication, February 2004).

⁸ *brtul shugs spyod pa mthar phyin cing|| ye shes mkha' 'gras byin gyis brlabs|| dpe bral nam mkha'i mal 'byor pa|| rje btsun mi la'i bkra shis shog||*.

⁹ The painting appears on the cover of Pal et al. (2003), and is described therein (Plate 162, 246–9). Based on stylistic analysis, Stephen Little (1996: 9) dated the painting to the fourteenth century in his original acquisition note. Pal (2003: 249) follows Amy Heller in arguing for a date of c.1500 based on an analysis of the inscription. However, using Tibetan sources unavailable at the time, we find convincing evidence that the text of the inscription is almost certainly based on the early tradition of Mi la ras pa’s life story, and therefore predates Gtsang smyon Heruka’s (1452–1507) standard account completed in 1488. Evidence for this appears in several places, perhaps most explicitly in the record of the yogin’s death, which according to this inscription occurred “In his eighty-eighth [year] on the nineteenth [day] of the tiger [month]” (*brgya cu rtsa brgyad sta* (rect. *stag*) *zla'i bcu dgu la*). This combination of age and date appears only in the early biographies known as *The Twelve Great Disciples* (*Bu chen bcu gnyis*) and *The Black Treasury* (*Mdzod nag ma*), which predate the standard version. In those works, Mi la ras pa is said to enter retreat on the fourteenth day of the tiger month and is found dead five days later, i.e. on the nineteenth. Nearly all of the later biographies, including Gtsang smyon Heruka’s, record that the yogin died in his eighty-fourth year. Furthermore, Heller identifies the appearance of Mi la ras pa’s ordination name Rdo rje rgyal mtshan in the inscription as a link to the standard account of 1488 (Pal et al. 2003: 293). However, this name appears for the first time in a version of *The Black Treasury* I have dated to 1373–1451 (DNM-I: 42; DNM-S: 27) and may also be associated with an earlier version of that work (DNM-Lhasa). For a study of *The Black Treasury* tradition,

see Quintman (2013, ch. 3). The name Rdo rje rgyal mtshan also appears in the religious history *Mig 'byed 'od stong* written in 1418 (Sørensen and Dolma 2007: 64). A number of other details further suggest an early source for the inscription, including the narrative chronology of verse 15, which is found only in sources that predate the standard account.

¹⁰ *zhug yas ras pa*. Unsure translation, although *zhug* may be emended to *bzhugs* in which case this line might refer to a grouping of seven major disciples found in the *Lho rong chos 'byung* called *mkha' spyod du bzhugs pa'i rnal 'byor pho mo bdun*. The third line of this stanza supports this idea.

¹¹ Bzhad pa rdo rje is Mi la ras pa's initiation name.

Tibetan Language Sources

DNM-I *Mdzod nag ma*, India edition, published as *Rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug mi la bzhad pa rdo rje'i gsung mgur ma mdzod nag ma zhes pa ka rma pa rang byung rdo rjes phyog bcig*. Dalhousie: Damchoe Sangpo, 1978, 2 vols.

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DNM-S *Mdzod nag ma*, Smith edition. Cover title: *Rje rnal sbyor gyi dbang phyug dpal bzhad pa'i rdo rje'i 'gur 'tshogs tshad phyogs gcig du bsgrig pa lo rgyus kyis sbas pa zhes bya ba bzhugs so*. Unpublished *dbu med* manuscript in the collection of E. Gene Smith.

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