

TEXT AS THANG-KA: A POSSIBLE ROUTE THROUGH THE SECRET BIOGRAPHY OF THE SIXTH DALAI LAMA

The nature of religious imagery is to inspire and to pervade the mind, to inhabit all dimensions through the single portal of the eye. The thang-ka tradition of Tibet is one in which the object of contemplation, the adamant essence of reality, is portrayed in human(oid) form, that the human(oid) meditator might real-ise this essence within themselves.

Thang-kas take many forms and have a long and varied tradition in Tibetan culture. They hang in monasteries as frequently as in the caves of hermits and ascetics; they can be of the richest colors and materials and they can be an image inscribed on a stone or a piece of paper. The act of creation, of inscribing the image, of applying paint to canvas, is the act of investing, of in-spiration, of transforming a random piece of cloth or paper or stone into the very center of the universe, the still point around which and with(in) which everything - immediately and eternally, momentarily and universally - revolves and takes its natural place.

Thus, the process of creation is one in which the perfect Buddha appears, in its own way, instantaneously, just as the moment of enlightenment appears, in its own way, instantaneously: the work of a thang-ka artist is the work of meditation and contemplation, just as, in the formal act of meditation one is real-ising and creating oneself as the Buddha.

The point of completion is the moment at which the eyes are given life through the application of pigment: before that moment, the image is simply an image: color opens the eyes, symbolically awakens the two-dimensional image into three-dimensionality. But still the image is just a three-dimensional life masquerading as a two-dimensional image: it is not the center of the universe, it is not yet real-ised.

The act which opens the image, which transmutes it into omnidimensionality, is the inscribing on the reverse of the image of the syllables OM AH HUNG, the verbal manifestation of the natural state, of the Buddha Nature, of the Buddha. OM is the mind, AH the speech, HUNG the body of the Buddha; the act of inscription not only enlivens and inspires the thang-ka, it also creates the act whereby the meditator's limited body, speech and mind can realise its unlimited reality: Tibetan has different words for both forms, *lus*, *ngag* and *sems* for the first, the limited physical embodiment, and *sku*, *gsung* and *thugs* for the second, the unlimited metaphysical embodiment.

A thang-ka painter, as I have suggested, treats his work as an act of meditation, both for himself and for the practitioners who would benefit from the image he creates. He enters into a relationship with the subject of the thang-ka, in a sense he becomes it. How then might we understand Dar-rgyas Nomunqan's relationship with the subject of the secret biography? How does his act of writing the text compare to the artist's act of painting the thang-ka?

We can best address these questions by looking at the nature of the text itself. The secret biography presents us with a series of events, connected by passages in which nothing, with the exception of coming and going, really happens. From a purely linear point of view, then, the text is a picaresque narrative, perhaps paralleled in western literature by early forms of the novel, such as *Tirant lo Blanc* or *Gulliver's Travels* or *Don Quixote*: the central character moves through the world, acting upon, or being enacted by, the world. In the second part of the secret biography - and remember that this is a narrative spoken by the bla-ma (impostor) to his amanuensis Dar-rgyas Nomunqan - Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho functions both as himself and as a cipher for an enlightened presence: his interactions are both human (as when he cares for the children with smallpox or when he shows his ignorance of quotidian life during his meeting with the nomads) and metahuman (as when he disappears for a week with Vajrayogini inside a large rock).

We can see a similar structure within the imagery of a thang-ka. The central character (bla-ma or yi-dam) resides at the heart of the image, with representative subimages deployed around her or him. In the depiction of a human subject, these subimages function as mnemonic devices, to illustrate the way in which the character lived their life, to show their interaction with nonhuman

figures. So a figure from a point in space and time is shown as transcending space and time, whilst retaining certain human characteristics: they have a body¹, they inhabit an earthly landscape and they are frequently looking out 1 Or, at least, they are embodied (for some have multiple heads and arms): if this sounds a perverse

That the subject of the image is gazing observation, we should remember that in certain towards, and thus engaging, the meditator Islamic cultures, for instance, the depiction of God is highly significant. As with the ikons forbidden; although the images on a thang-ka are not found in the eastern orthodox churches², God per se, they are nonetheless the embodiment of the thang-ka invites us to contemplate the perfection and so occupy a similar conceptual space. image with all its 2 And in the ikons of western secular art too. Think of the *Mona Lisa*, for myriad implica- instance, of Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* or *Olympia* (and from *Olympia*, of tions: the course, to the classic pornographic shot), all of which show (female) subjects theotokos moves gazing out at the viewer, inviting a psychophysical (and erotic) connection. us towards com-

passion, the wounded Christ to feel the pain of our errors³, the Pantocrator to universalise our experience and enchrist ourselves throughout space and time. Thus the thang-ka exists to help us realise the Buddha nature which 3 I deliberately avoid here the word "sin". The reason for this resides within ourselves and with- is twofold: first, the Greek word *hamartia*, so frequently out, the natural state which we can translated as "sin" is in fact a word - archaic already in New at any moment awaken. Thang-ka Testament Greek - extracted from the lexicon of archery, indi- imagery tends constantly to be cating a misfire, where the archer fails to hit the target; sec- revealing this instressed buddha- ondly, it seems to me much more appropriate to link the idea hood through various iconographic of erroneous behavior in Christianity with what Buddhist phi- devices: Manjusri's sword (cutting losophy might describe as karmically negative actions. momentarily through ignorance), Sakyamuni's earth-touching mudra (calling on the earth to witness his enlightenment), the god- pas Ma-gcig Lab-sgron and Pha-dam-pa Sangs-rgyas playing the damaru to cut through attachment with its thud-thudding beat - all these and more show us the realisation of our true nature *now!* rather than a theory which we might realise at some point in the future.

As I have suggested elsewhere, the second part of the secret biography exists, in some ways, outside spacetime; it also, however, exists as a narrative whole, charting the journey of one human being over ten years. Of course, the linear nature of writing is such that it is a hard medi- um through which to express non-linear ideas. Unlike a thang-ka, where images can sit next to

each other without any indication as to tempo- 4 This might well be one of the reasons as to ral order or specific geographical distribution why it is (seemingly, thus far) spiritual experience (thang-kas are clearly situated in a Himalayan (as opposed to religious belief) is impossible to landscape, although this could be explained as express in language. Poetry (or poetic prose) comes close from time to time (Rumi, Gerald being the only landscape available to the minds of the artists), a text offers us no way to ThomasTraherne come to mind) but words and indicate the absence (as opposed to the ideas still follow one another and remain res- rearrangement) of spacetime⁴. In order to illus- olutely linear (unlike the universal and absolute, trate this metalevel, Tshangs-dbyangs rGya- of course).

mtsho enters and exits through portals which I have likened elsewhere to the wardrobe in CS Lewis' Narnia books, in which the world is transformed through a process which warps reality.

This warping of reality, like Einstein's warped spacetime, creates a world which is at once familiar and unfamiliar, a constant instability shifting from one state to another. Such is the nature of myth - close enough to us that we can understand it, far away enough for it to be fantastic. This warping of reality transmits the message, that there is an aspect of the world in which the mundane is recognised and transcended, where the human level touches the nonhu- man level, where heaven and hell touch the earth and where the mind remains unchanged by that in which it resides, like the lotus flowering in a muddy pool.

We can probe further, beyond the structure of the text, and see the way in which the characters in Tsang-dbyangs rGya-mtsho's narrative can be seen as analogs for the characters imaged in a thang-ka. A thang-ka, after all, is more than a set of images: it is the environment which the subject inhabits, it is the pure and fully-realised world: it is the locus of truth⁵.

A close(r)-reading of one event in the narrative might be helpful here. In section 2.9 ("A Meeting with Dakinis") the lama is invited by a woman in a cotton silk robe to a *ganacakra* offering. This is maybe the one story in the text which seeks to represent the spatiotemporal dislocation which I have already indicated is central to the thang-ka tradition.

The lama sets out with the woman and with an unnamed monk. They come to a rock, which they enter through a door which appears suddenly before them. The woman now sends the monk away saying "You don't have to stay here", an act which can be seen to represent our relationship with the text, both as a thang-ka and as a literary work.

We could identify this monk as a kind of everyman, and I would suggest that his presence has great significance for the way in which we read the text. First of all, we are the reader and we continue to follow the development of events inside the rock. But we can also identify ourselves with the monk (otherwise why include him in the narrative⁶?): we random readers, Tibetans or Buddhists or neither of the above, are unlikely to be on the spiritual (or sociocultural) level of Avalokitesvara (whose earthly form the Dalai Lamas are held to be) and so we, like the monk, are sent away.

The fact that we have seen that the rock has already opened should alert us to the presence of divine (or at least nonhuman) intervention; the fact that the monk has already stepped through the opening suggests to us that he - we? - indeed has a foot in the door of spiritual practise. But note that he has only received a glimpse of the natural state⁷: we could liken this perhaps to a person meditating with people who are practising an unknown sadhana - s/he understands the context and the words which are being recited but, crucially, s/he has not the depth of understanding to appreciate the depth of experience.

7 Tibetan literature (but the secret biography is an exaggerated case) frequently features bizarre events, such as the door opening in the rock. What I mean here by "the natural state" is that, in a world where we do not get entrained by our patterns, that which happens before our eyes (or our ears or within our heartminds [I have chosen, in this context, to follow the Tibetan practise and conflate the words for heart and mind]) is as true or as false as anything else. The interpenetration of the human and nonhuman worlds, with all that that entails, is not unusual in Tibetan (Buddhist) culture (although the influence of the west among the diasporic community and of Chinese socialist philosophy in the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region has begun to challenge this): I think that one of the purposes in including the monk here is to show him as the regular guy who sees something far from regular and who lives to tell the tale. Translated beyond the confines of the text, he becomes an incredibly powerful figure for those of us who would open our minds beyond the everyday.

out to be a *tshogs* (*ganacakra*) offering. This scenario is reminiscent of the feast to which the lama is invited by a sngags-pa in section 2.6 ("The sNags-pa's Feast"), except that there the sngags-pa sounds his rkan-gling to invite what we should probably understand as nonhuman beings dressed as nomads⁸.

8 The use of the thigh-bone trumpet in inviting nonhuman guests to ganacakra offerings is a common element in the Vajrayana tradition. The language which

Inside the rock, on the other hand, the lama finds a group of dakinis (*mkha'-gro-ma*), including one whom he imagined to be Vajrayogini, *rDo-rje rNal-'byor-ma* (my version of the Tibetan phrase *rdo-rje rnal-'byor-ma yin nam snyam*).

And the dakinis are dancing and singing and "performing extraordinary things" (*ngo-mtshar mang-po bstan*). On any number of *thang-kas*, we can see (and hear, perhaps, too) the dakinis celebrating in this way, surrounding Vajrayogini, but this to me is more an initiation (*dbang*), where the realisation is transmitted through the images of the text.

But to whom is the initiation being given? If we consider the lama as the true Tshangs-dbyangs *rGya-mtsho*⁹, then he is embodied and infused by Avalokitesvara: this would suggest that there is a mutuality between him and Vajrayogini and that, in a different scenario, it could be him dancing before a human manifestation of Vajrayogini. This would suggest an ongoing coinitiation of two (although the use of number creates a false limitation) enlightened minds.

The other possibility is that the initiation is being given to us via the narrative. If we consider the nature of the initiation as generally presented in Vajrayana praxis, it takes place at the point when the enlightened body, speech and mind are transmitted to the practitioner through the *bum-pa*: it is a total act, constrained neither by the language through which the transmission is described, nor by the (relative) minds of lama (the embodiment, for the duration of the initiation, of the *yi-dam*) and practitioner, nor by their physical forms within the physical world. It may seem far-fetched to suggest that this event might function as an initiation, but if we trust Dar-rgyas Nomunqan's faith in the lama's identity, we have to ask why he is relating to us what he is being told, if not for spiritual inspiration (which is, after all, the essential *raison d'être* of a *nam-thar*).

This is a very brief vignette in the series of events covered by the second part of the secret biography and, were this a complete rendition, there would be little more to say about it. But, there remains a vital element: the lama finishes his story by saying, "After what I reckoned must have been about a day, I came out and found that I had actually been away for a week". Again we are offered a detemporalised narrative - or, rather, an experience (later narrated) in which detemporalisation takes place: we are offered a dream, but with the dream and the warping of time (and space too of course)

we are also offered the classic descriptive model of exstasy (literally *ek-stasis*, an indication of spatio[temporal] warp) - in this context, the exstasy of spiritual practise¹⁰. All his coördinates are misplaced and subsumed: he watches and experiences but does not claim to participate: there is no direct involvement, the true vision remains a dream - a lucid dream, but a dream nonetheless.

the lama uses in his description of this event indicates the spiritual (or magico-spiritual, shamanic) power of the *sngags-pa*: the group (was) gathered (*'dus byung*) at the sound of the *rkan-gling* and was then dismissed (*bkye*) at the close of the feast. This observation points not only to the efficacy of the *sngags-pa*'s practise but also to the relationship which the lama - for it is his story - sets up between himself and other practitioners: whereas the *sngags-pa* and the lama share this vision, the monk is sent away and not permitted to experience/realise the presence of the dakinis and of Vajrayogini.

⁹ And we need to accept this, since it would be unlikely that a random itinerant lama would be invited to such a feast.

¹⁰ I'm deliberately differentiating here between the exstasy of so-called exstatic religions (charismatic Christianity, certain Hindu [or Hindu-based] religions [Chaitanya Vaisnavism - Hare Krsna to you and me - springs to mind, but there are others] and indigenous religious traditions around the world) and the literally ek-static experience of Buddhism (think of the enlightenment experiences of Tibetan and Japanese practitioners) or of the mystical tradition of pre-modern Christianity (such as are found in the writings of mystics such as Meister Eckhardt, Teresa de Ávila and Hildegard von Bingen).

So what is the import of this slight narrative within a much larger one? Remember that the second part of the secret biography is as if separate from the rest of the text, that it inhabits maybe another dimension, both in terms of import and in terms of the structure of its own psychic world: a *thang-ka* - like an ikon - can be said to fulfill the same function on a visual level. This particular event takes us into yet another conceptual realm, symbolised by the rock and the pres-

ence, within this new conceptual realm, of the nonhuman dakinis. And as with a thang-ka, there are other levels on which to read the story: a small group down to the left could be Vajrayogini surrounded by her entourage of dakinis - and without that group there would be, not only a visual lacuna in the image (which could be filled by something else), but a conceptual lacuna in the mind and a spiritual lacuna in the heart: in order to real-ise one's place within the universe (and the universe's place within oneself¹¹) one needs to perceive the natural state in all things at all times (hence the collapse of space and time, which are thereby seen as unstable and therefore, in absolute sense, unreal).

But if both the thang-ka and the secret biography are multidimensional, if they both reside at once in themselves (as image and text) and, on a different level, as an exemplar of the natural state, then they have also to bridge the gap between the absolute and the relative truths: they have to be transformative, they have to mediate the spiritual transformation which they seek to catalyse.

The psychology of vajrayana Buddhism rests upon the replacement of destructive patterns with constructive patterns. Through the visualisation of and association with an aspect of Buddha nature (for instance, Avalokitesvara is a medium for the generation of compassion), a practitioner gradually comes to entrain her mind and to respond to the world in a way informed by that aspect. The Tibetan word used for these entrainment images is *yi-dam*, literally something to bind the mind and we can see how, by investing one's energy in creating the image of a *yi-dam* (whether on canvas or in one's mind), one can begin truly to become inseparable from the *yi-dam*¹².

This second part of the secret biography is clearly intended by Dar-rgyas Nomunqan to be used as a spiritual handbook. He closes each section with his own verse commentary on the events which he has recorded, pointing both to the enlightened nature of the lama and to the ways in which we as practitioners might learn from the story. So we can see this as his book more than the lama's - it's a record of what he wants to tell us about the lama. Much as a *sadhana* or *nam-thar* is used by an artist to fashion a thang-ka, so Dar-rgyas Nomunqan has taken the lama's story and from it fashioned an inspirational narrative.

The nature of the (enlightened) mind, of course, makes it impossible for us to identify, with anything but direct experience, the essence of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho within the text or within a thang-ka. Nonetheless, there are certain pointers (like the finger pointing at the moon in Ch'an/Zen Buddhist texts) which might indicate certain paths of contemplation.

We could perhaps see this part of the text as revealing the enlightened body-speech-mind, accessed via the transformative prisms of the dust storm and the gNas-chung oracle's trance. It is not so much that there is a physical transformation as a transformation of perception: we view the lama from a different angle, he becomes in a way translucent, we glimpse his true nature: there is nothing in the remainder of the secret biography to compare with the events of this section, it is as though the lama takes on a different hue, much in the same way that a figure in a thang-ka is enhanced by the real-isation of the artist¹³.

To advance the idea that a literary text is not simply a metaphor but a literal representation of the enlightened mind is, in twenty-first century western society, palpably bizarre. Nonetheless, in the context of its composition, at least the second part of the secret biography is formally and conceptually ripe for such an interpretation.

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13 This is a slippery statement. The enlightened mind of the subject is not altered by a poor pictorial rendition: what is altered is our perception of that individual: as the texts say, if we have pure perception, even the least accomplished picture can be regarded as the true nature once its blessing has been awakened through the syllables OM AH HUNG.