

Chapter 11

Seeing the Gods: Divine Embodiment through
Visualisation in Tantric Buddhist Practice

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This chapter will explore notions of seeing in Buddhism with a focus on the visions and visualisations found in tantric practices and how these engender deity embodiment as lived reality. Sight in tantric Buddhism is, in effect, blind-sighted. This is because to visualise does not require the physical ability to see. In fact, during the death process, so vital for the direction of reincarnation, the practitioner's deity yoga, involving single-pointed concentration on the tutelary deity and absorption of the deity is an internal process not reliant on (often failing) physical sight. In visualisation one's seeing is internal, subtle. The starting point for it may be hearing words about the appearance of the deity and/or the eyes gazing upon an image or statue of the deity figure, but the sight is then internalised and takes place on a much subtler level than physical seeing: the level of the yogic, subtle body. Ultimately, Buddhist thought holds that mind and form are inextricably interconnected, so visualisation forms the basis for a transformation of the subtle aggregates of being such that a new tantric reality emerges; an embodied divinity. Such visualisations, within the context of deity yoga practice, can create visions—both dreaming and waking—of deity worlds. The practitioner's experience of the world is transformed through visualisation such that this subtler reality ceases to become a visualisation and instead is lived as 'real' by those practitioners who have accomplished such profound psychophysical transformation. This type of 'seeing' in Buddhism thus transforms the practitioner's psychophysical aggregates and, in doing so, their lived realities. It is also thought to give them the ability to transform the worlds of those around them, since such

practitioners are credited with enhanced abilities to affect the lives of others through their relationship with deity worlds. The present chapter will explore how this plays out in the case of one such tantric practitioner on the Tibetan Plateau, the Pelden Lawa of Rebgong.

Vision according to Buddhist thought is founded on one of six sense bases (P. *āyatana*),¹ or foundations in the senses. The act of seeing is both based in the eye faculty and simultaneously an act of consciousness. It is the same for all other 'sense doors' through which consciousnesses arise: hearing, tasting, touching, smelling and thinking. The early Buddhist textual traditions of the Theravāda Pāli Canon are contained in a tripartite division of 'baskets' (P. *piṭaka*): collections of narrative teachings (P. *sutta*), discourses on the monastic way of life (P. *vinaya*), and systematic theoretical exposition of Buddhist thought, or 'higher teaching' (P. *abhidhamma*). The Pāli literature can be broadly structured around seven core themes, of which the sense faculties are one, and this forms the frame for the epistemological works of the *abhidhamma* (Gethin 2001: 21–22), which further divides these into detailed subcategories.

CONTEMPLATIVE SEEING

In exploring vision in the context of Buddhist practice, I would like to highlight here its role in contemplation. One of the major collections of texts of the Pāli Canon, the *Dīgha Nikāya*, contains a discourse on mindfulness known as the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta*. Here, in the section concerning the sense bases, we read:

...a monk abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in respect of the six internal and external sense bases. How does he do so? Here a monk knows the eye, knows sight objects, and he knows whatever fetter arises dependent on the two. (Walshe 1995: 342)

As can be seen here, the foundation of vision is twofold; the sense faculty is understood to include the 'internal' aspect, meaning the eye itself, and the 'external' aspect, meaning the eye's objects, external forms; vision entails an inextricable relationship between seeing and its object. Through contemplation of this in respect of all the senses, Buddhism posits that

1 All non-English terms in brackets will be labelled as follows: P: Pāli; S: Sanskrit; T: Tibetan. Tibetan terms will be transliterated using the Wylie system of transliteration.

their six doors can be closed, leading ultimately to liberation from the fetters binding us to continual rebirth in an unenlightened, cyclical existence (*S. saṃsāra*); in other words, to enlightenment (*P. nibbāna*; *S. nirvāṇa*).

The essential motif of this enlightened vision is that the mediator understands there is no self in the seeing, no doer outside of the conglomerate of aggregates (including the sense faculties) constituting 'a being,' and no object of seeing either. All components of the universe (*P. dhamma*) interdependently arise and dissolve in a state of constant change. No person who sees, nor object seen, has any inherently enduring selfhood or essence. A person who leaves the householder life in search of liberation from the round of rebirth and takes up the life of a homeless wanderer is thus described metaphorically as 'not being bound to the impressions of the six senses' (Collins 1982: 169). Therefore, the meditator who goes to the forest, the root of a tree or an empty place, considers 'eye is not-self, as are material objects, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the body and what is tangible, the mind and mental objects' (Collins 1982: 114, drawing on the *Atharva Veda* 109).

This type of contemplative 'seeing' became thematic throughout developments in Buddhist philosophic discourse, particularly after the early first century work of Nāgārjuna, who is credited with originating the influential Mahāyāna school of philosophy known as the school of the 'Middle Way' (*Madhyamaka*), and whose salient legacy is his deconstructionist 'emptiness' (*S. śūnyatā*); the realisation of how things and events truly exist. In his elucidating work on 'seeing' in a Buddhist philosophic sense, Malcolm David Eckel chooses as his lens the work of the sixth century *Madhyamaka* philosopher Bhāvaviveka. Following Collins (1982: 3), his rationale for this choice rests not only on Bhāvaviveka's philosophic rigour and insight, but on his eloquent use of metaphor 'to bring the complex and abstract concepts of Buddhist Philosophy down to earth' (Eckel 1992: 2). Indeed, the notion of metaphor itself, as word-picture, could be considered allegoric for Buddhist notions of vision, entailing as they do a sense of bodily eye function, the act of seeing and perception of object as mutually arising parts to a non-substantial whole. Contemplative seeing not only enables philosophic insight but Buddhist thought holds that it can lead to the 'direct perception' of an absent Buddha; an ultimate reality. This notion is imbued with a visual aspect in that such perception of how things and events actually exist enable visions and even embodiments of other realms. It is this type of seeing that the esoteric Buddhist systems explore in the visualisations of tantric deity yoga practices.

The continual contemplation of representations of deities such as this Medicine Buddha (**Figure 11.1**) is foundational to the revelatory visions reported throughout Buddhist mythohistories. As Eckel observes, the process of visualisation entailed in esoteric Buddhist systems can produce an experience which is reportedly one wherein absorption can be so deep that the practitioner loses all awareness of surroundings, yet sensory experience is enhanced (Eckel 1992: 134). The type of vision described here is one in which 'seeing' is taking place with an inner eye whose ability to paint in vibrantly emotive imagery is far more advanced than the bodily eye has capacity for.

Here I would like to mention the work of Hugues de Montalembert, a French writer, painter and documentary filmmaker who lost his physical



Figure 11.1 A Tibetan silk painting (*T. thang kha*) depicting the divine realm (*S. maṇḍala*) of the Medicine Buddha. Photo by Dawn H. Collins.

fieldwork,⁵ and oriented to the mountain gods and other local deities such as the *le* (T. *klu*), serpent deities of the underworlds. The *Leru* could be described as a ritual based upon a shamanic idiom in which the deity is called down into the person of the spirit-medium, a *lawa* (T. *lha pa*), through possession (Figure 11.2). In this type of ritual, the participants 'see' the deity through the person of the *lawa* whose body becomes the instrument of the divine force inhabiting it.

Such shamanic paradigms are often presented in anthropological literature as contrasted with an idiom of specialist rituals, such as the tantric rituals found in Tibetan cultural regions, in which the deity is evoked rather than called down through possession. As with the *Leru* and its shamanic idiom, the participation in group tantric rituals is thought to enhance well-being. Benefits such as the promotion of health and longevity, healing illness and protection from harm are thought to accrue not only to those directly facilitating the ritual but to its spectators. Such benefits are referred to in Tibetan as descending from the gods, literally 'blessings descend,' *chinbab* (T. *chin babs*).

The deity yoga practised by Tibetan tantric adepts, *nukwa* (T. *sngags pa*),⁶ in direct contrast to the type of shamanic idiom of a *lawa*, is a highly structured and controlled affair (Figure 11.3). An assortment of parallel innovations in Indian Śaivite and Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions from the seventh century onward gradually became labelled '*tantra*' and formed the basis for tantric Buddhism (S. *vajrayāna*) as received and now practised among Tibetan communities. This emergent Vajrayāna Buddhism drew on the deity visualisation practices of the Mahāyāna Buddhism already established by the sixth century (Samuel 2008: 291). As discussed, these were underpinned by a contemplative 'seeing' based in the philosophical thought attributed to Indian philosophers such as Nāgārjuna. The practices of Indian *siddha* adepts, from whom the Vajrayāna tantric practice found in Tibetan regions can be said to originate (cf. Samuel 2005: 57), underlie a meditative practice involving the transformation of individuals and their environs into deities and deity abodes (S. *maṇḍala*) respectively. Tantric practice usually involves the recitation of texts. Texts in contemporary Tibetan cultural regions are vital. They are embodied in the way in which they are chanted out loud; voiced into being by the practitioners

5 The Rebong Valley is located in China's Qinghai Province and sits on the northeastern Tibetan Plateau to the south side of the Yellow River.

6 The phonetic rendition of this term '*nukwa*' follows a pronunciation used in the region of the ethnographic section to follow.



Figure 11.3 Tantric practitioners in Rebong. Photo by Dawn H. Collins.

who seek to evoke deity and spirit worlds in doing so. Texts thus form part of living traditions designed to (re)create the presence of deity worlds and the embodied landscapes they (re)create as sacred.

The different tantric *sādhana*, or 'practice manuals,' found across Tibetan Buddhist traditions require having received initiation from a qualified teacher, a *lama*. Indeed, the initiation ritual itself may be considered a *sādhana* in that the *lama* concerned performs a ritual self-initiation as deity, following the format of *sādhana*, as preparation for bestowing this on others.⁷ Hence, an outline of the *sādhana* format will provide insight into the elements designating it as *tantric*.

The main visualisation processes involving the evocation of the deity are preceded by preliminaries purifying or establishing the place for the ritual, and followed by the dissolution of visualisations and other concluding rites. The 'one who practices the *sādhana*' (S. *sādhaka*) may begin by generating self as a wrathful deity who dispels all obstacles to the successful completion of the ritual, thereby purifying the place. S/he then

7 The *lama* performs multiple roles within this ritual as guide, even taking into account what dreams occur as part of his ritual role (Lamb 1994: 23).

sight in a New York apartment burglary in 1978. He has since written an acclaimed autobiographical book, *Eclipse* (1985), which describes the process of becoming blinded and the journey towards publishing his written work. Eight years after his 'blinding,' he said in an interview that he sees so clearly when he writes that, sometimes, when he becomes tired and stops writing, he finds himself looking around, blaming his glasses for his sudden lack of vision.² In *Eclipse* and the subsequent film based on his work, *Black Sun* (2005),³ he explores experiences of vision that are clearly non-sight-dependent in the types of ways pointed towards by Buddhist philosophers. In an interview with his publisher, he says:

You don't necessarily have a vision. Maybe you have only a perception. And I came to the point that probably to see, to see really, is a creation. And if you speak with painters or architects, it's very strongly there that vision is a creation. (Hugues de Montalembert, interview with Simon and Schuster Books, February 2010)⁴

SEEING DIVINE REALMS

Following Buddhist thought regarding the sense faculties as described in Tibetan cultural contexts, it does not make sense to talk of the body or matter in separation from heart-mind; the world around us, the perceiver and the perceived arise in symbiotic non-dual moments of experience. This thinking has underpinned much of scholarship in this area and is in keeping with tantric notions of the universe. Samuel described this orientation as 'mind-body-world' (Samuel 2001). Craig uses a common anthropological model in referring to it as 'biopsychosocial,' reflecting that 'environment' in this context includes beings (Craig 2012). These beings encompass a range of deity and spirit forces who animate the landscape to form distinct ecologies. A world of deities and other spirit beings have

- 2 From an article in *People* by Joshua Hammer, 18 February 1986 (<https://people.com/archive/injured-in-a-1978-mugging-artist-hugues-de-montalembert-finds-hope-and-light-in-his-blindness-vol-25-no-7/>, last accessed 13 April 2019).
- 3 The filmmaker Gary Tarn produced a film based on *Eclipse* (1985) in collaboration with Hugues de Montalembert, called *Black Sun* (2005). See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0478101/>, last accessed 13 April 2019.
- 4 Hugues de Montalembert, interview with his publisher Simon and Schuster Books, February 2010 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68vSVilenMs>, last accessed 13 April 2019).

inhabited Tibetan landscapes since as far back as it is possible historically to trace peoples self-designating with Tibetan identities (cf. Van Schaik 2013 [2011]). They play an important role in terms of the meanings that rituals hold for the peoples of Tibetan regions. One such ritual is that of the Leru (T. *klu rol*), particular to Rebong where I undertook my doctoral



Figure 11.2 Rebong spirit-medium (*lawa*) at the Leru. Photo by Dawn H. Collins.

protects that ritual arena with a visualised *vajra*⁸ tent. Preliminaries may include the generation of motivational intent accompanied by activities to prepare the *sādhaka*, such as recitation of the refuge formula and prostrations. They may also entail the setting of the philosophical scene in terms of recollection of the 'four abidings' and 'emptiness' (*S. śūnyatā*), which are the basis for the realisation of means and wisdom respectively. Preliminary offerings may be made to the teachers of the lineage, emphasising the importance of devotion to the *lama* who gave initiation into the *tantra*, and to the host of deities to be invoked.

The deities are visualised as emerging from within their envisaged palace, or *maṇḍala*. They are created firstly as pledge-beings (*S. samaya-sattva*), which are then consecrated by the evocation of their respective knowledge-beings (*S. jñānasattva*) from out of 'emptiness,' utilising light from their seed syllables (*S. bīja*), which are invited to become inseparable from them. At this point, the deity, whether seen as before the *sādhaka*, or seen as the *sādhaka*, is considered to be actually present. Praises, offerings and requests are then made to the deity, accompanied by ritual hand gestures (*S. mudrā*). This second phase can be viewed, in some *sādhana*, as the 'completion stage,' the stages prior to this being termed the 'generation stage' of the practice. The recitation of *mantra* may be accompanied by various practices of breath control designed to harness the energy winds flowing along the channels and *cakra* of the subtle body. It is, therefore, on the basis of the corporal body that the subtle levels of being are transformed, and on the basis of this that the practitioner will come to embody the deity s/he contemplates. In the completion stage *sādhana*, these breath control yoga practices are subdivided into those 'with sign' and those without, the 'sign' being the *maṇḍala* of the deity and its inhabitants.

The concluding rites include dispersing the wisdom-beings and the absorption of the pledge-being by the *sādhaka*, before specific requests and aspirations are laid before the deities on the premise that, should the ritual have been successfully accomplished, they are obliged to grant these. At the conclusion of the completion stage *sādhana*, the *sādhaka* arises as the deity from a 'signless' yoga (Skorupski 2002). At the highest levels of tantric practice, it is taught that the prerequisite for completion stage yoga is the ability at generation stage to be able to hold a complete and detailed visualisation of the deity's form, *maṇḍala* and retinue, in the size

8 The *vajra*, as the ritual implement that has come to symbolise Tantric Buddhism, is the embodiment of its power and represents 'means' [the bell, with which it is usually held in practice, represents its counterpart: 'wisdom' (*S. prajñā*)].

of the head of a pin, for four hours straight in complete absorption. As can be seen, in tantric deity yoga practice, it is through visualisations of deities and their abodes that the practitioner either becomes, unifies with or realises true nature as deity. The ability to generate such visualisations through intensive practice in contemplative seeing is thus the foundation for enlightenment according to a Buddhist tantric understanding. These same meditative techniques are applied during the death process to enable liberation from unenlightened existence and the cycle of rebirth, since the death process is an opportunity, as the vision of this life fades, to transform one's vision of existence. The practitioner's deity yoga, involving single-pointed concentration on tutelary deity and absorption of deity is an internal process not reliant on an (often failing) physical sight (cf. Coleman 2006). Ultimately, in Buddhist thought, we are enlightened, if we could only see it. Therefore, tantric practices aim, through the transformation of the senses and an internalisation of seeing via contemplation and visualisation, to create the practitioner's world as that of deity. As will be seen in the ethnography to follow below, those who have accomplished this acquire the ability to transform those around them and their environs. The ethnography describes how a tantric adept uses such visionary practices to evoke the presence of the deity Palden Lhamo, yet in this rite not as tantric tutelary deity but as the deity ruling his subtle body's energetic channels, in an act of embodiment characterised as mediumship, i.e. as a *lawa*.

EMBODIED VISIONS

In the ethnography below, this Rebgong adept, famous in the traditional Amdo region⁹ of the Tibetan Plateau for his ability to heal, would become possessed not by a mountain deity but by a deity of the entourage of the powerful Buddhist protector deity Palden Lhamo (*T. dPal ldan lha mo*). It is hardly surprising that an adept *nukwa*, a tantric practitioner who embodies such deities during yogic practice and then in addition is able to become possessed by Palden Lhamo or her retinue during a ritual for healing the sick, would be much in demand amongst Tibetan communities, as was the case with the *nukwa lawa* here. This *nukwa* was reputedly a very powerful

9 The term Amdo refers to a historical Tibetan regional division of the Plateau into the tripartite provinces (*T. chol kha gsum*) of Ütsang, Kham and Amdo (*T. dBus gtsang, Khams and A mdo*).

healer, known for his healing powers not only as a *nukwa* but as a *lawa*, and because of this is known locally as the Pelden Lawa.¹⁰ He was attributed the ability to 'see' in a clairvoyant, divinatory sense, and also with the deep knowledge of contemplative seeing that comes with being a tantric adept.

Palden Lhamo is important in various ways throughout Tibetan regions in different contexts. She is a major focus of national identity as the wrathful protector deity of the Tibetans and the Dalai Lama, the Gelukpa (T. dGe lugs pa)¹¹ rulers of Tibetan regions in a reincarnation lineage since the mid-seventeenth century. Veneration of her is not limited to Buddhists, since she is a straight adaptation of the pre-Buddhist Bön deity Sipéjermo (T. Srid pa'i gyal mo), one of the major Bön deities. To the Bön, Sipéjermo is known as the 'Queen of the World,' having birthed twenty-seven daughters from eggs, nine of them central in her entourage. She is consort to a variety of tantric deities and a protector deity with nine hundred heads, one thousand arms and a chameleon-like complexion said to change six times in every twenty-four hours. It is said that 'half the sky is her canopy and half the earth is her mate'¹² (Karmay, 2013: 20–21).

In one of their most commonly known aspects, both Sipéjermo and Palden Lhamo ride a mule, as shown in the image here (Figure 11.4). Palden Lhamo is accorded a high status within Buddhism as supreme protector, and her power is considered much greater than that of the local deities and spirits. She is venerated by a large number of people in Tibetan cultural regions as attested to by the proliferation of her images and communal observances.¹³ Palden Lhamo, apart from being Buddhism's most important protector, is also known for her clairvoyant powers and ability in divination. It was traditionally through recourse to her divinatory powers that successive reincarnations of the Dalai Lama were determined. Lhamolhatso is her sacred lake and it was in its waters that these visionary divinations of future Dalai Lama were sought by those seeking to maintain

10 This is a pseudonym. The *nukwa* was particularly concerned to preserve his anonymity and I promised to do so as far as possible, hence I have not included details of his native village, etc. anywhere in my research.

11 The Gelukpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, whose founder Tsongkhapa (T. Tsong kha pa) was born near modern-day Xining, first began to establish itself in Rebong early in the seventeenth century (Dhondup 2011: 42).

12 'gnam phyed bla yi khebs / sa phyed 'od gi gdam' (translation Karmay 2013).

13 I was fortunate to experience myself in both 2006 and 2007 an annual Lhasa festival day held in her honour, in which her images are particularly venerated and women can be made offerings to as sacred reflections of the protector goddess.



Figure 11.4 Palden Lhamo statue in a Rebong temple for the local deities. Photo by Dawn H. Collins.

the line of reincarnatory succession (Goldstein 1989: 310ff). The lake is a major pilgrimage site and many travel there hoping to receive a blessing or vision from its waters (Figure 11.5). Those pilgrims who make the journey will often spend hours sitting beside the lake or on the mountains



Figure 11.5 Lhamolhatso Lake. Photo by Dawn H. Collins.

above it, praying for such a vision. This implies the belief that a non-sight-dependent seeing can arise due to blessing from a divine power at a location in the natural world especially linked to that power. Sitting there for hours listening to the sound of *mantra* chanting by the pilgrims awaiting such blessed vision, it is clear that this is perceived as perfectly possible.¹⁴

Palden Lhamo's power in divination extends beyond mundane affairs in that she is said to be able to predict karmic outcomes for an individual; something ordinarily only considered possible for an enlightened being in the context of Buddhism (Beer 2003: 156–159). Her mythohistory has her taking the life of her son in order to protect Buddhism, after clairvoyantly perceiving the threat he would pose to it should she not do so. This ability in clairvoyance makes her practice particularly helpful in the divinatory treatment of disease. As can be seen from the above, the ability to 'see' here includes non-sight-dependent visions in water and clairvoyant 'seeing' the future. These types of non-ordinary seeing are interwoven with the capacity to divine and to heal, intrinsic to both of which is the ability to 'see' karmic outcomes.

14 This was my sense from visiting Lhamolhatso in September 2006.

It is worth noting here the significance of *karma* in ways of seeing. According to a Buddhist view, insofar as we are unenlightened, we are all reincarnated in an endless cycle of becoming in which the aspects of being which pass from life to life are attached to numerous bodies in the course of their rebirths. Past thought-actions and present mental states create karmic winds, propelling continuums of being into rebirth as spider, fly, bird, elephant, dolphin, bee, human, *nāga*, hell-being, demon, tree-spirit, and so on. The physiological aspects of sight are affected by bodily capacities, such as having eight eyes, the capacity to see colour or polarised light. To know what others see is an experiential impossibility, as Adrian Horridge eloquently expressed in relation to the honeybee:

However deep our understanding, we will never know every detail of the bee's visual system, or that of any other simple brain, because...we...omit the essential settings of the gain, noise, time constants, feedback loops, ionic changes and hormonal effects, as well as the processes of growth and decay that all contribute to neural activity. (Horridge 2009: xv)

In short, only those with the karmic propensities resultant in rebirth as a bee can know what it is to see as a bee. In the same way, the aspects of sight which involve consciousness are karmically propelled to discriminate on the basis of physiological vision. For example, in the case of the subjective ability to 'see' beauty. As the ancient Greek poet Sappho said,

Some say thronging cavalry, some say foot soldiers, others call a fleet the most beautiful of sights the dark earth offers, but I say it's whatever you love best. (Powell [trans.] 2007: 6–7)

The way in which a being sees is dependent on bodily formations, mental formations and, ultimately, the karmic winds which guide these towards perceptions of self and the world. Buddhist thought holds that through practices such as those of tantric deity yoga, these aspects of sight can be transformed, as per the karmic propensities to reproduce them. This results in an increasingly subtle relation to self and the divine, in which one's perception of self and world become aligned to the divine; to a clear vision of the world in ultimate terms. Enlightenment is not only to see the gods but to see as them; the ability to see and know oneself, the natural world and its beings from the perspective of profound insight into the actual nature of all.

To return to the healer of the ethnographic account to follow, the Pelden Lawa had a special reputation for curing illness precisely because

of his reputation as such an adept; combining the abilities of a high-level tantric practitioner and *lawa*; someone who can see the gods and, in some profound sense, see and heal as them. Many Rebgong residents told me they were acquainted with somebody who had been assisted by him. I was told that his 'cures' involved performing physical feats under possession that would not be possible under normal conditions: in this case, piercing his tongue with a metal spike or stirring boiling oil with his bare hands. I was not privy to any such dramatic events with this *lawa*, who was quite reticent initially about talking to me at all. However, I include here a brief ethnography describing one ritual healing performed by the Pelden Lawa, with assistance from several *nukwa*, which he permitted me to attend during the course of my fieldwork. This ritual was hosted in a sponsor's house, borrowed for the occasion, since a good deal of space was needed to accommodate all the parties involved. My account begins in that household's large walled courtyard in Torjia (T. Tho gyal) county.¹⁵

The sick man entered the dusty courtyard supported by a man on either side. He attempted to place one foot in front of the other but his legs kept buckling underneath him. His clothes were dirty and dishevelled. He and his brothers had travelled far to see the Pelden Lawa, who would perform a ritual hoped to be of powerful benefit for the sick man's health. It had been more than a year that Tenzin could hardly walk. He was not yet even forty years old, yet he was semi-paralysed and crippled with pain. His brothers had taken him to their nearest State biomedical hospital, where the doctors had been unable to help. His relatives had even taken him to Lhasa, to the traditional Tibetan medicine hospital (T. *sMan rtsis khang*), but to no avail.

After they had deposited Tenzin inside the house on a bed in the room where the ritual would take place, the brothers joined me on wooden benches in the courtyard where butter tea was being served for the various people peripheral to the ritual. The brothers started to talk about their hopes for the ritual healing.¹⁶ Three donkeys arrived with provisions and the *nukwa*'s trusted assistants rushed in and out unloading the donkeys

15 All the information contained in this account was collected through unstructured interviews in my limited Amdo dialect with those involved in the rites. Separate interviews with the Pelden Lawa were conducted both before and after the ritual. One of these was conducted via an interpreter translating to Lhasa dialect. I am indebted to Nicholas Silhé for joining me at this interview and kindly sharing his transcripts.

16 All information about the case of this man, given the pseudonym Tenzin, and the ritual performed for his health, is taken from notes made during fieldwork conducted in Rebgong during 2009, unless otherwise stated.

and galvanising others into action preparing the space. After the donkeys had been unloaded and the courtyard was peaceful again, I forced down another mouthful of butter tea and waited for the brothers to resume. They began recounting an oral history demonstrating the reputed power of the Pelden Lawa which had drawn them to this place. In the early 1980s, 'Wenchen Rinpoché', the tenth in the line of incarnations of the Panchen Lama, and second only in lamaic status to the Dalai Lama, had visited the area. Many of the local *lawa* had gone into possession, channelling the local mountain deities to greet this high Buddhist *lama*. However, since these deities were local deities, they could not approach the Panchen Lama because of his Buddhist refuge and the power of his practice. In contrast, when the Pelden Lawa came towards the Panchen Lama in full possession, he presented an offering scarf in full view of everyone. This story was concrete proof for Tenzin's brothers of the Pelden Lawa's powers. As they began reminiscing in their dialect, I escaped to the preparation room before another butter tea was offered to me.

The room in which the preparations for the Jelwa ritual (T. *bsGral ba*) were almost complete was wall-papered with toy rabbits holding balloons (Figure 11.6). They smiled down on all the flags depicting the lords of



Figure 11.6 Shurwu Tongdok ritual offerings. Photo by Dawn H. Collins.

sickness in eerie dissonance. The Jelwa can be a family or village ritual, but in the case of Tenzin, since his illness was so severe, it needed to be the large Jelwa by a practitioner as powerful as the Pelden Lawa to stand any chance of having an effect. It was a purification ritual to clear the sick man's channels (T. *rtsa*) of the malevolent spirits possessing him. This type of ritual was the forté of the Pelden Lawa, who travelled far and wide on demand to help those afflicted with various types of illnesses believed to have been caused by spirit harm. He made a living from this practice, both for himself and the entourage of younger *nukwa* who assisted him. He gave a portion of the money donated to him by the families of those he healed to the community of *nukwa* to which he belonged, and was also using a portion to assist in rebuilding a local *nukwa* temple.

As later explained in interview with the Pelden Lawa, via a translator, the particular Jelwa ritual to be performed for Tenzin's benefit was called Shurwu Tongdok (T. Phur pu gtong 'dogs). In it the Pelden Lawa would become possessed, not by a mountain deity but by a deity of the entourage of the powerful Buddhist protector deity Palden Lhamo. This deity, the ruler of the Pelden Lawa's channels or *tsadak* (T. *rtsa bdag*), is known as Chötsen Donchen (T. Chu srin gdong can), the Crocodile Faced One. She and the rather better-known Sengé Donchen (T. Seng ge gdong can) regularly accompany Palden Lhamo. Both these female attendants of Palden Lhamo are animal-headed. Chötsen Donchen, who has the head of a *makara*, is the *ḍākinī* on Palden Lhamo's right. She wears a human skin, holds a noose or snare in her right hand and the reins of Palden Lhamo's mule in her left, as can be seen in the illustration here. The more well-known *ḍākinī*, Sengé Donchen, has a lion's head, and is seen at Palden Lhamo's left. She is red in colour and holds a noose and a skull cup (Figure 11.7).¹⁷

In the Shurwu Tongdok ritual, and typically for healing rituals conducted by the Pelden Lawa, he creates drawn effigies of all the harmful agents, the spirit beings, lords of sickness (T. *nad bdag*) attacking the patient. Once the Pelden Lawa has been entered by Chötsen Donchen and so filled with the power of this deity, with the other deities of Palden Lhamo's entourage lending their support, each drawn effigy is burnt and the ash thrown into boiling oil which the Pelden Lawa reportedly stirs with his bare hands. In accordance with a characteristic description of *dulwa*, the Pelden Lawa's own description of this ritual process made the distinction that it was the harm that was ritualistically being destroyed, not the



Figure 11.7 A *thang kha* depicting Palden Lhamo with retinue, Chötsen Donchen to her right and Sengé Donchen to her left. Charitable Assistance Society, Phuntsok Cho Ling Buddhist Centre, public domain.

17 <http://www.casotac.com/CASonline%20Articles/IMG-20120619-0028221.jpg> (last accessed 3 May 2019).

harmful deities themselves. He said he would visualise the harm dissolving and that the fact that it did was due to the blessing, the *chinlab*, of the lama-yidam, the deity of his root tantric practice. At the end of the Shurwu Tongdok, one of the *nukwa* who had been assisting the Pelden Lawa came to tell Tenzin's brothers that the dream signs were good and so the ritual had been effective.

The case of the Pelden Lawa is the only case I have come across in Rebong in which one individual performs the function of both a tantric practitioner, a *nukwa*, and a *lawa*, a spirit-medium. One explanation or frame for why this is possible in his particular case could lie in the fact that the deity he embodies as spirit-medium is from the entourage of a high Buddhist protector deity, and so not in precisely the same order of beings as the mountain deities who are *tsadak* (channels) of most, if not all, other spirit-mediums in Rebong. The Buddhist protector deities are considered as primarily concerned with other-worldly goals in that, if not enlightened, they are at least upholding enlightenment as the goal and protecting practitioners towards that end, rather than being primarily concerned with things of this life, such as protecting crops and so forth. In the case of the Pelden Lawa, the deity is perceived to work through him, one individual, as both Buddhist tantric practitioner and spirit-medium. It could be said that the deities work through the tantric practitioners, whose practice has brought them to a state in which they embody the deities they invoke. This transmitted healing derives from an empowerment from the deity, a blessing descending through the practitioner's deity yoga, key to which is a contemplative seeing; a visualisation process resultant in embodiment.

This aspect of seeing in Buddhist thought and practice is the inner seeing of our dreams and visions. It is broadly founded on theories of non-self, wherein the faculty of the eye is understood as encompassing seeing and its object as mutually arising and intrinsically empty of any permanent, substantial entity. As such, the sense sphere of the eye is, as with other sense spheres, a door to awareness. Seeing transforms with awareness. Key to this, from early Buddhism through to present-day lived religious practice, is the meditative act of contemplating the sense doors. This contemplative seeing, developed through practice, is non-sight-dependent, illuminating the object of sight with mind. Just as for a blind person there is still a form of seeing, the development of this inner vision prepares the ground for a clearer awareness; for seeing the true nature of things and events. A process of developing visualisation practice on the basis of this contemplative ability and its insights is core to the esoteric deity yoga practices of tantric Buddhism. Sight in tantric Buddhism, in effect, is blind-sighted because to

visualise does not require the physical ability to see. In visualisation one's seeing is internal, subtle, creating one's seeing anew from within. The type of vision developed through these practices is what we experience in dreams when our bodily eyes are closed, and during the death process, and it is reported by religious adepts across multiple religions when they speak of seeing waking visions. Bringing this theoretical frame into a lived reality in a Tibetan Buddhist community, as exemplified in the above ethnography, an adept with high levels of ability to 'see' deity worlds becomes them. Through this embodiment deity worlds become a lived reality and the practitioner is understood as able to transform the 'seeing' of those around; to cause others to see differently; to heal and to be healed.

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Religion and Sight

