YOGA IN TIBET

Naomi Worth

Introduction: yoga comes to Tibet

When Tibetan scholars translated the term *yoga* from Sanskrit into Tibetan in the eighth century, they contended with a fundamental philosophical discrepancy between Buddhist and non-Buddhist worldviews. *Naljor* (*rnal ’byor*) is the Tibetan word for ‘yoga’, and its etymology demonstrates an implicit shift to non-theism, an important distinction between Buddhist and Hindu yoga systems that frequently share practices. Instead of just rendering *naljor* as ‘union’, the Tibetan etymology literally means ‘union with the natural, pristine reality’ (Hopkins 2005: 24). In Tibetan Buddhism, contemplative techniques involving body, speech and mind alike are referred to as *naljor*, and the culmination of ascetic practice is union with the fundamental nature of reality itself.

*Naljor* is used broadly in Tibetan Buddhism to mean ‘contemplative practice’, but its historical usage in tantric literature demonstrates *naljor’s* broad and shifting scope. While a comprehensive history of the term has yet to be written, this chapter captures some important usages of *naljor* and how they are tied to Tibetan Buddhist tantra. First, the etymology of *naljor* highlights the importance of philosophy in contemplative practice. Second, *naljor* was used by early Tibetan scholars who organised the influx of tantras from India to Tibet. Those early scholars delineated tantric doxographical categories that have gone on to define contemplative and ritual practice systems in enduring ways. A third common use of *naljor* is as a moniker for ancillary branch yoga systems, such as Kālacakra’s six yogas and the four yogas of Mahāmudrā. These practice traditions demonstrate how tantric philosophy comes to life through practices that constantly refer back to Buddha-nature theory. Special attention in the chapter is thus given to Buddha-nature theory, which maps both emptiness and the fullness of the experience of a Buddha onto the body using tantric embodiment theory. Finally, the chapter ends by turning to yogis – *naljorpa* – beginning with an introduction to Tibet’s most famous yogi, Milarepa (eleventh century), who used Tibet’s emic form of tantric yoga – inner heat – to attain enlightenment. A contemporary case study of Tibetan Buddhist monastics who also practice inner heat yoga as part of a comprehensive contemplative training programme at Namdroling Monastery and Nunnery in South India showcases a continuous yoga practice lineage that reaches back to its clear origins in seventeenth-century Tibet.

Buddhist philosophy as the foundation of tantra and yoga

If you have visited a Tibetan Buddhist temple or monastery, you may have been surprised to note that, contrary to popular opinion, Tibetan Buddhism is not atheistic per se. The alternatively
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wrathful and seductive faces of deities are delicately painted on nearly every surface. However, recourse to Buddhist philosophy tells us that even deities must be interpreted according to the doctrine of emptiness, the lack of a fixed quality to things. In one of Tibet’s most important practices, ‘deity yoga’ (lha yi rnal ‘byor), a mainstream tantric technique where the empty self and empty deity are identified as one in contemplative performance, the term ‘deity’ (lha) must be added to naljor. In practice, the self-identification is explicitly non-dual. The act of arising as a deity is meant to undermine fixed notions of both the self and the divine. Visualising oneself as a divine being who embodies the Buddhist ideals of wisdom and compassion forges a path of bliss, clarity and non-conceptuality into consciousness by connecting the qualities of Buddhas to ordinary experiences (Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé 2007: 106–107).

Buddha-nature theory maps both emptiness and the potential for Buddhahood onto the body as the Threefold Buddha Bodies (sku gsum) shared by Buddhas and sentient beings alike. Buddhist yogic practices seek to uncover this Buddha-nature located in the body. In the Ancient Order’s (rNying ma) interpretation, the dharmakāya (chos sku), the reality body, is emptiness itself and the foundation of the others. ‘Primordially pure’ (ka dag) and ‘free from conceptual elaborations’ (spros pa med pa), it is the basic voidness that underlies the constantly changing stream of causes and conditions of the manifest world. Its attributive aspect is luminosity, radiance and fullness. The second level of embodiment is the sambhogakāya (longs sku), the bliss body. In yogic contexts, this is often equated with the network of channels, winds and seminal essences (rtsa rlung thig le; Skt.: nadi, vāyu, bindu) shared with Hindu and other tantric systems. The third level of embodiment, the nirmanakāya (sprul sku), the emanation body, is the result of practice. This level of Buddha-embodiment empowers one to emanate as a Buddha to benefit others (Gyatso 1998).

Tantric literature on winds, channels and seminal essences weave Buddha-nature into the subtlest recesses of the human body in detailed descriptions of tantric anatomy and physiology. Buddhist yogic techniques focus on clearing away the karmic winds, and also train awareness to ‘recognise’ the natural state of the body, the ‘innately real’. When the tantric body is optimised through praxis, the winds enter and abide in the central channel. As the seminal essences (thig le; Skt.: bindu) travel through the central channel, they break up the cakras (‘khor lo), which causes the practitioner to transcend conditioned reality and experience great bliss (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991). The key difference between flawed embodiment and the flawless embodiment of a buddha is recognition: enlightenment is a matter of perception.

Tibetan yoga in the three main canons

When early Tibetan scholars translated yoga as naljor, they included an implicit semantic shift away from theism by adding the prefix nalma (rnal ma) to the semantic head jor (‘byor-union). In tantric Buddhist philosophy, nalma is ‘the innate, real condition’, and Buddha-nature is what is fundamentally real (Wangchuk 2004). Taken together, Tibetan dictionaries define naljor according to its use: ‘To be subdued by the authentic path’, or ‘Contemplation and so forth’, or ‘Effortlessly connecting the mind to the natural state.’

Naljor is a term that exemplifies ‘philosophical tantra’, where praxis systems are unremittingly entangled with Buddhist philosophy. It showcases Tibetan Buddhist praxis systems’ deep commitment to philosophy. Tibetan Buddhism is pervasively tantric yet deeply logical (Germano 2002). Its yogic techniques are so enmeshed in philosophy that the somewhat unconventional twentieth-century translator Herbert Guenther rendered naljorpa (Skt.: yogin) as ‘philosopher’ (Bharati 1965). Naljor was translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit during the...
massive translation project from the eighth to the twelfth centuries that catalysed the development of Tibetan Buddhism. As texts were transferred from India to Tibet, scholars faced a dizzying array of literature. In what came to be characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism’s propensity to organise its teachings into categories, organisational schemes were established that both reflected and created streams of Buddhist thought. By the fourteenth century, three stable Buddhist collections were redacted, and the term naljor was used as a technical term to demarcate tantric doxographies such as Yoga Tantra (rnal ’byor rgyud), Anuttara Yoga Tantra (bla na med pa’i rnal ’byor gyi rgyud), Mahāyoga (rnal ’byor chen po), Anuyoga (rjes su rnal ’byor) and Atiyoga (shin tu rnal ’byor). In this context, the term explicitly refers to internally oriented contemplative practices, in contrast to earlier forms of tantra focused on external ritual activities.

Buton Rinchen Drup (Bu ston rin chen grub, 1290–1364) was an early seminal redactor of the Tibetan Buddhist canons, which came to be divided between the Kangyur (bka’ ’gyur), the words of the historical Buddha in India; and the Tengyur (bstan ’gyur), a collection of classical Buddhist treatises attributed to various human authors from India. He notoriously excluded the Ancient (rNying ma) Order, causing the emergence of a collection of tantras as their own canon, the Nyingma Gyubum (rnying me rgyud ‘bum) (Schaeffer, unpublished work).

In a late edition of the canons from the famous print house in Degê, Kham (Eastern Tibet), 8,815 instances of the term naljor appear in the Kangyur (c. 1733), with an additional 1,517 entries for yogin (rnal ’byor pa). In the Tengyur (c. 1744), there are 19,712 instances of naljor. The preponderance of naljor testifies to the long tradition and range of use of the term yoga in premodern India (Samuel 2008). The vast proliferation of texts written in Tibet afterward and not included in these canons also frequently refer to naljor, with the most common usages discussed next.

**Yoga as a doxographical category: the four-fold and six-fold classes of tantra**

Tantra was flourishing in India while Buddhism was being integrated into Tibetan society from the eighth to the twelfth centuries. By the twelfth century, Tibetans recognised that Buddhism was in serious decline in India, and had come to feel responsible for its preservation. In that process, scholars bundled practices, initiations, rituals and contemplative techniques together into increasingly formalised tantric doxographies (Dalton 2005: 116–7). Western scholarship prefers the term doxography, following the ancient Greeks’ usage to delineate philosophical schools. The emic category is ‘vehicle’ (theg pa; Skt.: yāna), which is likewise divided first and foremost according to the philosophical view (lta ba). While all the vehicles lead to the goal of enlightenment, their approaches differ not only in theory, but also in the ritual and praxis techniques used to attain that state (Bstan dzin rgya mtsho 2005: 14). Each vehicle packages rituals, initiations, texts and practices. These early literary organisational schemes gave birth to trends in Buddhist philosophy and praxis that went on to define sectarian lines in enduring ways.

A fundamental division in tantric versions of such doxographies is between the Ancient and New orders of Tibetan Buddhism. The Ancients’ nine-vehicle (theg pa dgu) system dates back to the eighth century and organises tantra into the last six of the nine vehicles. By the twelfth century, the New Order’s (gsar ma) popular four-fold classificatory tantra scheme was in place. These tantric doxographies were unprecedented in Indian Buddhism (Dalton 2005: 118). The New and Ancient orders share partially overlapping territory: Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra, the last and highest category for the New orders, roughly maps onto the fourth and fifth categories of the tradition of the Ancients: Mahāyoga and Anuyoga (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 34).
The Ancient tradition: six classes of tantra culminating in ‘Supreme Yoga’

Only six of the Ancient tradition’s nine vehicles (theg pa dgu) are tantric, and only the four highest levels are explicitly labelled as types of naljor. Some say that the vehicles are divided according to the acumen of practitioners, so that Atiyoga, which is the highest vehicle, serves the most efficient methods to the most intelligent people (Karmay 2007: 146–7). Others assert that each of the nine vehicles address a type of delusion. Yet another explanation of the shades of naljor is that the last four vehicles are gradients of concentration (Skt.: samādhi) (Dalton 2005: 118). This last explanation resonates with the way samādhi is used in Indian religious contexts to describe gnoseological states that are the resultant realisations of the yogic path.

Atiyoga’s more common name is Dzokchen (rdzogs chen), the ‘Great Perfection’. Early forms stress transcendence of all religious practice, including whatever is referred to as yoga. Over time, with the emergence of new traditions by the eleventh and twelfth centuries such as the Seminal Heart (snying thig) tradition, such religious practices re-emerge, including somatic yogas such as deity yoga, inner heat yoga and sexual yoga. Atiyoga’s predominant motif is the rhetoric of relaxation, where practices aim to drop conceptual thoughts and relax into the natural state of ‘self-radiant awareness’ (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 34). The Dzokchen tradition took models of mind defined by Indian Buddhist philosophers roughly 1,000 years earlier as their basis and added categories such as ‘primordial mind’ (ye shes) and ‘open awareness’ (rig pa). For Dzokchen, because normal conceptuality (rnam par rtog pa) – the ongoing stream of thought – indirectly perceives objects through a veil of delusion, it is the cause of human suffering. Atiyoga contemplations use conceptual, indirect perception to navigate toward non-conceptual, direct perception (Komarovski 2015: 47–52).

Atiyoga has its own take on the Threefold Buddha-body theory. The ordinary minds of people have a natural state (sems nyid) tantamount to a Buddha’s mind that is present throughout the body. This ‘primordial awareness’ (ye shes) of a Buddha flows as embodied awareness through the body’s subtle channels. The mind is mapped across the body via three pan-tantric components: channels, winds and seminal essences (rtsa rlung thig le; Skt.: nādi vāyu bindu). Cosmologically, both karmic winds (las kyi rlung) and wisdom winds (ye shes kyi rlung) emerge out of the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra (Kun tu bzang po), but at the level of the individual the karmic winds obscure the wisdom winds. The yogi’s task is to reveal the natural presence of the wisdom winds by clearing away the karmic body through yogic techniques (Higgins 2013: 62–64). Ultimately, the human body is problematised as being made of karma (las) and habitual tendencies (bag chags; Skt.: vāsanā).

The New orders of Tibetan Buddhism and the four classes of tantra

The New orders (Geluk, Kagyü, Sakya and others) have a well-known four-fold classificatory scheme for tantra: Kriyā-, Caryā-, Yoga- and Anuttarayoga. The characteristics vary according to sect, historical time period and even individual interpretation. The following are some examples:

• Kriyātantra (bya rgyud) focuses on ritual techniques with an external support such as a shrine or visualised image of a deity while philosophically upholding subject–object duality. Of the four traditional tantric empowerment schemes widespread in Tibetan Buddhism (though not universal), only the vase and crown empowerments are given (Tulku Thondub 1995: 118). Such practices reflect pre-eighth-century Indian Buddhist tantra (Dalton 2005: 123). They are for practitioners of the lowest capacity, and enlightenment takes up to seven lifetimes.
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- Caryātantra (spyod rgyud), aka Udbhayatantra (gnyis rgyud), has two names, and there is some confusion over whether Tibetan doxographers meant to include this intermediate class of tantra. In practice, it is similar to kriyā tantra. Some interpret the two names as dual emphasis on both philosophical view and conduct, but this may be a reflection of the comprehensiveness with which Tibetans invoke hermeneutics, even retroactively. Practices include seed-syllable meditation like bija mantras, mudrās, deity meditation and contemplation on ultimate reality without signs. Empowerments include the five tantric Buddhas, and a practitioner can attain enlightenment within five lifetimes (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 33). These first two classes are likely extensions of ritual, yogic and devotional practices common in early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism beginning in the fourth century (Kragh 2015: 68).

- Yoga Tantra (rnal ’byor bgyud) shifts the ritual gaze inwardly, into the body and mind of a practitioner, rather than focusing on external ritual actions (Dalton 2005: 124). Practitioners visualise themselves as a deity and ‘unite’ that with the wisdom that realises emptiness (ston pa nyid; Skt.: śūnyatā). Empowerments include the five tantric Buddha families, various deities and the master-disciple relationship.

- Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra (bla na med pa’i rgyud; Skt.: Anuttarayogatantra) philosophically abandons duality (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 33). Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra is divided into ‘mother’ tantras, liturgical practices that emphasise wisdom as the realisation of emptiness, and ‘father’ tantras, which prioritise the method of bodhicitta, the altruistic mind (Bstan dzin rgya mtsho 2005: 24). Its first stage, Generation Stage (skyed rim), consists mostly of deity yoga, where one visualises the self arising as a tantric deity while simultaneously contemplating one’s own empty nature. In the second phase of practice, completion stage (rdzogs rim), techniques centre on the ‘body within the body’ or ‘tantric body’. Empowerments include the widely known four-fold sequence of vase, secret, wisdom and word, and enlightenment is possible within a single lifetime.

Naljor in ancillary branch systems

We now turn to a different use of naljor as a moniker for popular Tibetan Buddhist groupings of practices in integrated sequences, such as the famed ‘six yogas (’byor drug) of the Kālacakra’. These all find a home among the tantric doxographies in the completion stage of Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra (bla na med pa’i rgyud). It is noteworthy that the term naljor does not actually appear in the bundled families of techniques compiled by Nāropa and Niguma. When twentieth-century scholars erroneously rendered the ‘six doctrines of Nāropa’ (Nā ro chos drug) as the ‘six yogas of Nāropa’, they left a legacy of confusion (Lopez 2000). They earned their place in this chapter mostly because erroneous modern scholarship popularised them as ‘Tibetan yoga’. The rubric instead uses another key term with a wide valence: ‘cho’ (chos), which means ‘dharma’ or doctrine. While Nāropa and Niguma’s groupings of practices are not naljor by name, it is easy to see why they were linked: technically, they meet the definition of naljor presented here as ‘contemplative practices, especially tantric in nature’. These ancillary branch systems share an emphasis on the tantric energy body, the system of winds, channels and seminal essences that locates every aspect of emotion and cognition across the body. A popular Tibetan Buddhist metaphor for the tantric energy body is a horse and rider: the seminal essences represent units of consciousness that ‘ride’ the body’s winds like a lame rider on a blind horse. Being lame, the rider is unable to walk; being blind, the horse unable to see. They depend on each other to move about. In the same way, controlling the breath controls consciousness and harnesses the body’s inherent power (Wallace 2010).
Kālacakra’s six yogas

The Kālacakra Tantra (‘Cycle of Time’; dus kyi ’khor ló) is an eleventh Unsurpassed Yoga tantra, characteristic of late Indian Buddhism, with a continuous history of transmission in Tibet documented by a stream of commentaries across the history of Tibetan Buddhism. Nowadays, the Kālacakra initiation is one of the main activities of the 14th Dalai Lama who, in his expanded transmission of Buddhism, brings esoteric yoga into the lives of people worldwide. While some Tibetan Buddhist yogins actually perform Kālacakra six-branch yoga techniques, the vast majority of people receive the Kālacakra initiation as a blessing and way to connect with the Dalai Lama, who links the practice to world peace.

The six yogas of Kālacakra follow a prerequisite contemplative curriculum that consists of the standard foundational practices (sngon ’gro) and generation-stage tantra. The six yogas are listed below, following Vesna Wallace’s scholarship. Five are identical in name to five of the eight branches of aṣṭāṅga yoga in Patañjali’s Yogasūtra, although the order differs (Wallace 2001: 45).

1. Wind control (srog rtsol; Skt.: prāṇāyāma) brings the prāna and apāna winds into the central channel.
2. Retraction (so sor sdud pa; Skt.: pratyāhāra) is meditative absorption free from mental activity.
3. Meditative stabilisation (bsam gtan; Skt.: dhyāna) is the single-pointed settling of the mind on empty forms.
4. Concentration (’dzin pa; Skt.: dhāraṇā) is the dissolution of the winds into the central channel as a continuation of breath control.
5. Recollection (rjes dran; Skt.: anusmṛti) is the consummation of the winds practices.
6. Concentration (ting nge ’dzin; Skt.: samādhi) is absorption into unchanging bliss and compassion.

The Kālacakratantra’s detailed Indian eleventh-century commentary, Stainless Light (Vimalaprabha), is divided into two topics: ‘sciences’ that describe knowledge of the world, and meditation. The Buddhist sciences analyse phenomena in the natural world alongside the doctrine of emptiness to facilitate purification of the physical and mental aspects of human life. The Kālacakra connects cycles such as the passage of days, seasons and years to the movement of prānas in the human body. In that way the individual is a microcosmic representation of the macrocosmos.

The tantra mentions haṭhayoga briefly in the section on preserving health with Buddhist tantric medicine. Buddhism has been concerned with physical health from its earliest stages, and this became paramount in tantra where the body is a main condition for the attainment of supernatural powers (dngos grub; Skt.: siddhis). The Stainless Light recommends postures as medical interventions, such as vajra posture (vajrāsana) to eliminate backaches or headstand (śīrṣāsana) as an antidote for diseases caused by phlegm disorders. The Kālacakratantra became a repository for alternative healing remedies to be used in conjunction with each other. As complementary disciplines, medical practitioners could draw upon the four sciences – religion, ayurveda, alchemy and medicine – as needed. A healer might prescribe mantras, herbal medications, dietary therapy, āsana, prāṇāyāma, tantric rites of healing, massage, precious stones, visualisation of deities and/or recommendations based on astrology.

The Stainless Light enjoins practitioners to use force (haṭhena) to draw the body’s vital energies into the central channel, and recommends sexual yoga as a method to do so. Here, yoga is defined as the union of bliss and emptiness, a Buddhist non-dual foregrounding of gnosis.
that polemically seeks to negate and disparage the Śaiva tantric tradition’s emphasis on the Lord (Īśvara). Yogins are defined as initiated completion-stage practitioners for whom initiation originates in their own minds, which is justified by tantric embodiment theory. With the gnostic body as the container of Buddha-nature underlying the physical body, access to initiation from a Buddha can be found in the body (Wallace 2001: 6–12).

**Mahāmudrā’s four yogas**

_Mahāmudrā_ (phyag rgya chen po) literally means the ‘great seal’, and it uses _naljor_ to refer to epistemological states on a contemplative path. The term _mahāmudrā_ is featured in both Buddhist and Hindu tantras, as well as in Svātmarama’s fifteenth-century _Haṭhapradīpikā_. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is an influential meditation system associated with the New Orders of Tibetan Buddhism with a formidable trail of literature and lineage that dates back to the eleventh century and continues today. It is often compared to Atiyoga. A unique facet of the Mahāmudrā movement is its integration of non-tantric Mahāyāna Buddhism with Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra approaches. The redactors of the system aimed to remove the obstacle that obligatory tantric initiation posed, but also decontextualised meditation from sexual settings prohibited for celibate monastics. The Mahāmudrā movement freed up monastics to take on the life of yogis as opposed to a sole focus on scholastic activities and non-tantric forms of contemplation. Mahāmudrā was radical and timely, and led to the establishment of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism (Kragh 2015: 30–1).

Mahāmudrā follows a typical organisational scheme for contemplation called base (_gzhi_), path (_lam_) and result (*.bras bu*). The base is the philosophical view, which in tantra is the innate perfection of every experience, tantamount to the _dharmakāya_, the state of mind that is naturally empty and free from conceptual entanglement. The path is the method to uncover that which is already present, i.e. co-emergent emptiness. When practicing Mahāmudrā, thoughts should be seen as ‘self-arisen’ (_rang snang_) and allowed to dissolve naturally back into their own essence. Guru yoga is the key to circumventing the empowerments: aligning oneself with the guru leads the practitioner to the teacher’s level of realisation.

The ‘four yogas’ (_rnal ’byor bzhi_; Skt.: _caturyoga_) of Mahāmudrā are the result of practice. They are four progressive mental stages of settling into a natural, uncontrived state where every thought and perception is yoked with the _dharmakāya_. They are:

1. Single-pointedness (_rtse gcig_; Skt.: _ekāgra_)
2. Freedom from conceptual entanglement (_spros bral_; Skt.: _nisprapañca_)
3. One taste (_ro gcig_; Skt.: _ekarasa_)
4. Great meditative absorption (_myna bhat chen po_; Skt.: _mahāsamāhita_).

_(Kragh 2015: 72–73)_

**Naropa’s six doctrines**

The six doctrines of Naropa (ṇa ro chos drug) is a set of practices that targets states of consciousness governed by the body’s natural processes, such as waking, orgasm, dreaming and dying. Among the New Order’s four-fold division of tantra, this bundle is also categorised in the completion stage of Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra. Naropa was a tenth–eleventh-century Indian who received the six-fold instructions from the Bengali yogin Tilopa. They likely represent a
A collection of tantric teachings current in Bengal in the eleventh century. Tilopa conveyed them to the Indian siddha Marpa, who transmitted them to Tibet (Mullin 1997: 13).

The first three doctrines are foremost because they can be endeavoured during this lifetime. The others, on the bardo, consciousness transference and changing bodily residence (S. Harding, personal communication, 3 March 2020), are related to death. Iterations of the list vary, but include:

1a. Inner heat (gtum mo) – includes central channel yoga and postural yoga techniques
1b. Sexual consort (las kyi phyag rgya)
2. Illusory body (sgyu lus)
3. Clear light (’od gsal)
4. Dreaming (rmi lam)
5. Intermediate state (bar do)
6a. Consciousness transference (’pho ba) to a Buddhist pure land
6b. Changing residence (gong ’jug) – transferring consciousness to another body.

(Lopez 2000: 3)

Inner heat and sexual yoga are often treated as alternative techniques to each other because they both train practitioners to manipulate their bodies to produce great bliss. Inner heat can also be used as a preliminary practice for sexual yoga. Control over the body’s energy using postural yoga, breath retention and complex visualisations should prepare one to be able to control their mind under the sway of even more powerful sexual energies.

Both inner heat and sexual yoga manipulate the body’s energies. The body is said to have 72,000 channels, but it is common in the completion stage to focus on three main channels, or even only one: the central channel. The two side channels represent attachment and aversion, i.e. desire and hatred. When the central channel is not optimised through yogic techniques, it represents ignorance. The cakras are psycho-physical centres that relate to personality traits, cognition and bodily processes. However, in practice contexts the cakras are visualised as stopping points along the path of the central channel and are used to generate heat. When the winds enter the central channel, the meditator accesses profound states such as the mind of clear light (’od gsal), which is the radiance of the dharmakāya, the first Buddha-body.

Yogins familiar with the mind of clear light during the day are better equipped to recognise it during sleep, dying and sexual arousal. Nāropa’s doctrine on dreaming teaches how to locate and make use of the mind of clear light during sleep (Lopez 2000: 4). The yoga of dying exemplifies how the mind and body are deeply interconnected, and how practitioners can take advantage of that situation. During the process of dying, the body’s functions cease to operate in a predictable sequence, and aspects of consciousness come to the foreground in ways not apparent when the body is fully operational. Meditation during life prepares one to recognise the set of luminous apparitions that reveal themselves naturally while dying.

Sexual arousal is yet another powerful mental state that yogins take advantage of in Nāropa’s techniques. Such practices that intentionally induce arousal require a high degree of awareness and restraint. That is one reason why these tantric techniques are shrouded in secrecy: most people lack the requisite training and discipline. Carried away by desire, things can easily get out of control. Tibetan Buddhist tantric techniques are meant to be performed accompanied by the altruistic motivation to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, called bodhicitta. If, under the sway of desire, one forgets their compassionate motivation to serve others, the yogin is liable to behave in injurious ways, and the laws of karma that undergird all of Buddhism are just as applicable in tantric practice. In Buddhist cosmology there are special ‘tantric hells’ for people who break vows when they try to practise tantra but fail.
Niguma’s six dharmas

Niguma was a ēkini, a term varyingly used for celestial beings such as Buddhist goddesses and guardian spirits, but also for real women in their roles as consorts and female practitioners. These paradigmatic female figures are important to the transmission and preservation of texts across generations, as well as male access to them. For example, a sexual encounter with a consort is often required for a treasure revealer (gter ston) to understand the secret, coded language in which the hidden texts (gter ma) are written – ēkini code language (mkha’ ‘gro ‘i bnda’ skad).

As a ēkini, Niguma gave the transmission of her six doctrines to Khyungpa Naljor, and together they became the ‘root’ of the Shangpa Kagyu lineage. As the root, they support the main practice of Mahāmudrā, making Niguma’s doctrines a preliminary practice for that lineage. Like the related six doctrines of Nāropa, these techniques control the tantric body as part of the Completion Phase of Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra. In Vajra Lines of the Six Doctrines, Niguma says ‘One’s own body is the means: three channels and four chakras’. Her six doctrines have much in common with Nāropa’s. They are:

1. Inner fire (gtum mo)
2. Illusory body (gyud lus)
3. Dreaming (rmi lam)
4. Clear light (’od gsal)
5. Transference of consciousness (’pho ba)

Niguma was Kashmiri and lived in the tenth or eleventh century. At that time, Kashmir was a centre of tantric activity where Buddhist and Śaiva traditions frequently exchanged philosophy and practices. Little was written down about Niguma compared to her family members and even her disciples, but what is available portrays her as a spiritual virtuoso who had practised for many lifetimes. Niguma was likely Nāropa’s sister, and was revered as a highly realised being who attained the rainbow body, the outward manifestation of Buddha-nature obscured within the depths of the tantric body.

Nāropa’s disciple Marpa is said to have received teachings from Niguma, but in literary accounts his female teacher is merely referred to as the ēkini who is ‘Adorned with Bone Ornaments’, which is not sufficient evidence to claim that this female figure was actually Niguma. Scholar Sarah Harding argues that Niguma has been at the centre of scholarly portrayals that present sexy tales about female figures rather than facts (Harding 2010: 3–17). In Niguma’s description of inner heat yoga, she covers the yogin’s relationship to food and clothes: ‘inner space of fire, the vital point of the body, eating the food of inner heat, wearing the clothing, spreading the seat, receiving the empowerment of existence, naturally liberating obstructing forces, and riding the horse of energy [vital] currents’ (Harding 2010: 140). Food and clothes are commonly addressed in Tibetan practices that target energetic blockages made of the network of karmic propensities that permeate the unconscious mind. A mundane way to think about the yogas of food and clothing is that they help yogins in isolated retreat to generate dietary nourishment and warmth when access to supplies is scarce. Alchemy (bcud len) in Tibet became the process by which yogins took the essences of substances in order to transform non-traditional sources into biological sustenance. Tibetan yogins have been known to eat stones, herbs, metals, the breath and their own excrement (Germano 1997). We will now turn to practitioners of yoga.
Tibetan yogis

There is a vast literary record of the life stories (rnam thar) of Tibetan yogis who claim to have attained freedom from the cycle of existence, saṃsāra, through their contemplative practices. Many went on to become extraordinary teachers, or simply lived out their lives in retreat. What is a Tibetan Buddhist yogi? For modern practitioners, the term naljorpa (yogi) has the widest valence. It applies to practitioners engaged in contemplative lifestyles, typically spent in long retreats, whether monastic or lay. Another group called ‘yogis’ but for whom a more precise translation would be ‘tantrists’ or ‘tantrikas’ is the ngakpas (sngags pa; Skt.: māntrik). Literally ‘reciters of mantras’, the related term ngakrim (sngags rim) refers to the ‘tantric path’. Ngakpas are ordained, non-celibate, tantric practitioners. They typically wear red and white robes, sport dreadlocks (or at least never cut their hair) and hold vows that enable them to perform clerical functions for their local communities. They often live in retreat or semi-retreat, but can have families. A final group of naljorpas is Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns engaged in tantric retreats, who are only likely to refer to themselves as such during or after retreats. Long retreat is a trademark of authentic contemplative engagement in the Tibetan tradition. Buddhist meditation and yoga requires a level of dedication that involves partial or full renunciation of worldly life and isolation from mainstream society in order to achieve the highest goals. Yogis dwell together or alone, typically for periods of months or years. The most well-known format is the traditional three-year, three-month retreat. When no longer forced to entertain the demands of worldly life, ideally the yogin is free to turn their mind inward without distraction. Tibetan Buddhist yogis are dedicated to conquering their negative emotions: anger, jealousy, pride, desire/attachment and misunderstanding or ignorance. They apply a wide range of contemplative techniques.

Milarepa, Tibet’s most famous yogi

Jetsun Milarepa (rje btsun mi la ras pa; 1028/40–1111/23) is the paradigmatic Tibetan yogi. Milarepa attained enlightenment by means of the yoga of inner heat, the practice that has come to be known as ‘Tibetan yoga’ in the contemporary period because of its use of postures, breath retention and tantric body theory. With this practice, he was able to control his pulse, stop his heartbeat, arrest haemorrhage, rapidly heal and display many other supernatural powers (siddhi) (Quintman 2014). Milarepa defined his success solely by his relationship to his Bengali guru Marpa who lived in Tibet, an irascible man who would be called abusive by contemporary standards. Despite the fact that his guru tested him with great physical and emotional hardships, Milarepa always treated Marpa with respect, humble obeisance and unquestioning devotion. Marpa made Milarepa build and tear down several houses with his bare hands (Mi-la-ras-pa et al. 1972: 4). Milarepa is considered by many to be a Tibetan Buddha, the first to be born and enlightened in Tibet instead of India (Quintman 2014: 9).

Case study: monastic yogins at Namdroling Monastery and Nunnery in South India

Nowadays, Tibetan yoga practices continue both inside and outside of Tibet. Just two hours from Mysore, Karnataka, which itself is a world-leading hub for modern yoga, sits Namdroling Monastery and Nunnery amidst a dusty and ageing Tibetan refugee camp. Since 1973, Namdroling monks, nuns and Tibetan refugees have quietly been practicing Sky Dharma (gNam chos), a set of contemplative manuals revealed by Namchö Mingyur Dorje (gnam chos mi ’gyur
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rdo rje; 1645–1667) in Tibet. The modern-day saint and visionary lama Penor Rinpoche (1932–2009) founded Namdroling in 1963, just four years after he undertook the perilous journey on foot from Tibet to India to escape Chinese military rule. He was among the great lamas of the twentieth century instrumental in establishing Tibetan Buddhism outside of Tibet. Along with other Nyingma masters such as Dudjom Rinpoche and Chatrul Rinpoche, they carried the jewel of the dharma across the border from Tibet to India and Nepal in the form of their own education and spiritual realisations. Their mission was to keep the teachings alive, a veritable return home for Buddhism after roughly nine centuries of near absence in India. Namdroling provides a top-notch education in Buddhist philosophy to around 5,000 monastics. The education of monks and nuns is largely equal, an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of Buddhism and a manifestation of modernity; the nunnery was founded in 1993. Namdroling graduates make up a new cohort of teachers who are revitalising Buddhist education and practice in traditionally Buddhist Himalayan regions and across the globe. This includes teachings on Tibetan postural yoga as part of the inner heat practice.

Sky Dharma (gnam chos) is a three-phase contemplative manual in the Dzokchen tradition that was maintained by the Palyul monastic lineage in Kham, Tibet, one of the Ancient traditions’ ‘Six Mother Monasteries’. Recently some of the senior Namdroling monks have returned to Tibet to teach at Palyul to contribute to the revitalisation of the lineage in post-Chinese Cultural Revolution Tibet. Book Two of the Sky Dharma series is titled ‘Winds, Channels, and Inner Heat’ (rtsa rlung gtum mo), referred to here as ‘Tibetan yoga’ for short. The book describes the steps of nine trulkhor (’phrul ’khor), dynamic postural sequences coupled with simultaneous breath retentions, tantric deity yoga and subtle body visualisations. The practices are physically challenging and dynamic, and unfold within the wider context of wisdom teachings on emptiness and method teachings on compassion. The monks and nuns at Namdroling largely hail from traditionally Buddhist regions in the Himalayas of Nepal, India, Tibet and Bhutan that had little access to a scholastically rigorous education until Tibetan Buddhist monasteries were established in exile in India and Nepal. Monks and nuns undertake retreats during their monastic education when they are young (teens to forties, but mostly in their twenties). As students, they only have the opportunity to practise one month out of the year and are not accomplished yogis per se, although some become accomplished through participating in the retreats several times. A handful of monks and nuns teach the yoga practices, some of whom possess a high level of expertise.

Namdroling is having an enormous impact on global modern Buddhism. Each year it sends its highly trained cohort of graduates across the globe as resident teachers in Asia, Europe and the Americas. They teach both Buddhist philosophy and the Sky Dharma contemplative training programme. One of the striking features of the Namdroling monks is that they replicate the precise ritual crafts of the monastery when they travel. They bring a professor-type lecturer (khenpo), a chanting master (umse), sand mandala artists, ritual musicians, ritual dancers and, last but not least, years of training in philosophy, ethics and contemplation.

The annual retreats

Two weeks after the Tibetan New year, Namdroling hosts its annual, month-long retreats, which follow the Sky Dharma manuals word-by-word and have done so since the seventeenth century in Tibet. One must ‘sit’ the retreats in the order arranged by the manuals. The first book covers the tantric Foundational practices (sngon ’gro), which train in basic Buddhist philosophy and the fundamentals of tantric meditation. Practitioners are expected to accumulate 100,000 repetitions of each of the following scripted contemplations, to achieve a total of...
500,000 (hum lnga): refuge (kyab ’gro) in the Three Jewels; the generation of bodhicitta (byang chub kyi sems); mandala offering (man殊 ‘bul ba); Vajrasattva purification (rdo rje sens dpa’); and guru yoga (bla ma’i rnal ’byor). Transference of consciousness (’pho ba) is also taught at the end of the Foundational practices, but one need not accumulate that practice in large numbers. This is the first practice where the tantric body takes centre stage, and it is a preparation for death. Practitioners learn to eject their consciousness from the crown of the head at death, the optimal location for inducing a favourable rebirth. The second phase of contemplative practice is tsalung tummo, ‘winds, channels, and inner heat’, while the third phase covers Dzokchen meditation. In this final stage, the yogin enters in a vision-centred contemplative path. Open-eye meditations such as sky-gazing examine light and form as apparitions of emptiness, and postures are used to aid in the production of visions. The format for each retreat is the three-fold empowerment (dbang), transmission (rlung) and explanation (’khrid) model. The rest of this section will discuss the ‘winds, channels, and inner heat’ retreat.

It begins with empowerment

The empowerment takes place on the first morning of the retreat. The social realities of lineage and power in tantric Buddhism are on full display in the empowerment ceremony. Lamas (practitioners who have completed three-year retreat), tulkus (reincarnated teachers) and khenpos (scholars with advanced monastic degrees) arrange themselves hierarchically according to rank – an outer reflection of their inner access to power based on experience in practice, including in past lives. After everyone drinks saffron water for purification to make themselves fit to receive the transmission, the monks walk in a procession carrying holy objects. They gently tap participants on the head with initiation cards, Tibetan texts, vases and statues.

Motivation setting

Every retreat activity at Namdroling, whether a discourse, meditation or yoga session, begins with the generation of bodhicitta: the motivation to liberate sentient beings from the suffering of cyclic existence and lead them to enlightenment. Recognising that motivation wanes over time, a major part of the lamas’ job is to keep spirits high and to inspire work towards this higher purpose. Because Namdroling adheres to a Dzokchen philosophical worldview, they add the motivation to drop conceptual thoughts, which is necessary to receive the blessings for successful practice.

Rhythmic group recitation of prayers and texts accompanied by drums, horns and bells takes up a significant portion of the four sessions of each day in retreat. Chanting serves several functions. As a pedagogy, the prayers are philosophically rich and review Buddhist teachings. Socially, one recites the lineage list all the way back to the Buddha, which defines the tantric family and includes the retreatants as the final members. This places the budding yogins in the company of greats and creates a strong group identity. Economically, the prayers are a source of income for the monastery. Lay people sponsor prayers as a way of accumulating merit to support their own practice, either in this lifetime or in the future.

The yoga practice

Winds, channels and inner heat practice is taught using three pedagogies. First, every three days the most senior khenpo (scholar) present at the monastery reads the instruction manual aloud and comments on it to the combined group of male and female participants. There are a total
of nine teachings, one for each yoga sequence, and they take place in a large and well-appointed
temple/teaching hall on the monks’ campus.

The second venue is in gender-separated classrooms in the monastery and nunnery, respect-
ively, which have campuses about two kilometres apart in the fourth camp of Bylakuppe. At the
monastery, if the Tibetan yoga lineage holder is present, he demonstrates the posture sequences
and offers ample advice on the meditations, breathing techniques and poses. In 2018 at the
nunnery, two young nuns who were proficient in the postures but not comfortable giving
advice on the inner, contemplative methods led the practice sessions. The following year, the
yoga master made several trips to the nunnery despite the gender difference between him and
the nuns. These sessions include movement drills, rehearsal of sequences and student-led ses-
sions that serve as exams. The third teaching style consists of open practice periods where experienced
practitioners coach newer participants individually or in small groups. Here, participants break
movements down into smaller chunks and repeat them until they attain mastery. Some people
focus on extending the length of time they can hold the breath. Small, mixed-level breakout
groups rehearse the posture sequences to commit them to memory.

The sequences

The postural yoga sequences begin by sitting on the floor in half lotus position on a stuffed
cotton mat, which measures around 3 feet x 3 feet and 6 inches high. The exercises share
common elements such as:
• Rigorous rubbing along meridian lines
• Circular rotations of the waist
• ‘Beps’, which are five styles of jumps
• Retention of the inhalation during the entire sequence.

Tibetan yoga is likened to cleaning a dirty pot: when you first add water, it becomes filthy.
While Buddha-nature is located in the body, it is not readily apparent because it is obscured by
karma (las) and mental impressions or habits (bag chags). By stirring the pot with postural yoga,
pranayama and meditation, the obstacles that karma and mental habits impose are purified. This
manifests as physical and mental pain in the Tibetan yoga retreat. Almost everyone takes their
turn: practitioners regularly limp, cry and get scared or hopeless. Students are encouraged to see
pain as a sign that the practice is working. A main goal of inner heat yoga is the purification of
karma. Practitioners typically experience less mental and physical anguish the second time they
sit in the retreat, and even enjoy it, much to the dismay of the novice practitioners.

Conclusion

‘Tibetan yoga’ is a neologism that situates an ancient tradition in the modern transnational yoga
scene. Nowadays, even at Namdroling, the Sanskrit term yoga is retroactively applied to tsalung
trulkhor practice. Monks and nuns are aware that Sky Dharma’s dynamic postural techniques
have much in common with the form of Indian postural yoga. However, as we have seen, naljor’s
most common use in Tibetan Buddhism is to describe contemplative practice and the tantric
doxographical categories. Tibetan yoga’s clear roots in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy harken back
to the early meaning of naljor: they seek to unite practitioners with emptiness and Buddha-
nature. The monastics at Namdroling spend years studying and contemplating these profound
concepts, which inform their yoga practice. Tibetan Buddhism’s postural yoga practices have
remained secret until the present time, including in this chapter. While tsalung trulkhor is certainly a type of naljor, the wide semantic range of naljor is preserved in the Tibetan language, while the Sanskrit term yoga nowadays globally refers to contemplative practice involving physical exertion and postures. Prior to the modern period, Tibetan scholars used naljor to demarcate tantric systems and practices, many of which had little to do with postural yoga, but much to do with tantric contemplation.

Glossary

'byor (jor), to unite
'dzin pa (dzin pa) (Skt. dhārāṇā), concentration
'pho ba (powa), transference of consciousness
'khor lo (khor lo) (Skt. cakra), chakra; wheel
'phrul 'khor (trulkhor), a set of practices that coordinates postural sequences with breath retentions, deity yoga and subtle body visualisations

bag chags (bak chak) (Skt. vāsanā), habitual tendencies
bla ma'i rnal 'byor (la mé naljor), guru yoga
bla na med pa'i rnal 'byor gyi rgyud (la na mé pé naljor gyi gyü) (Skt.: Anutarrayogatantra) Anuttara Yoga Tantra; Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra
bsam gtan (sam ten) (Skt.: dhyāna), meditative stabilisation
bya rgyud (ja gyü) (Skt.: kriyātantra), action tantra
byang chub kyi sens (jang chup kyi sem), the generation of bodhicitta
chos (chö), doctrine
chos sku (chö ku) (Skt.: dharma), the reality body, the first level of embodiment in the Buddha-body schema
dngos grub (ṅgro dngup) (Skt.: siddhi), supernatural powers
dus kyi 'khor lo (dū kyi khor lo) (Skt.: Kālacakra), Cycle of Time
Kun tu bzang po (Kūn tu zang po), the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra
kyab 'gro (kyap drol) (Skt. śaraṇa), refuge in the Three Jewels
las (lē), karma
las kyi rlung (lē kyi lung), karmic winds
lha yi rnal 'byor (lha yi naljor), deity yoga
longs sku (long ku) (Skt.: sambhogakāya), bliss body, the second level of embodiment in the Buddha-body schema
ltu ba (tawā), philosophical view
maṇḍal 'bul ba (mandel buḷwa), mandala offering
na ro chos drug (nā ro chö druk), six doctrines of Nāropa
phyag rgya chen po (chak gya chen po) (Skt.: mahāmudrā), the ‘Great Seal’
redo rje sens dpa’ (dor jé sem pa), Vajrasattva purification
rdzogs rimm (dzok rim), completion stage
rig pa (rik pa), open awareness; the substratum of consciousness
rjes dran (jé dren) (Skt.: anumṛtī), recollection; remembrance
rjes su rnal 'byor (jé su naljor), Anuyoga
rjes su rnal 'byor (jé su naljor) (Skt.: anuyoga), subsequent yoga
rnal 'byor chen po (naljor chen po), Mahāyoga
rnal 'byor pa (yogin), yoga practitioner; yogi
rnal 'byor rgyud (naljor gyü), Yoga Tantra
rnal 'byor (naljor), yoga
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Yoga (Skt. caturyoga), four yogas [of Mahāmudrā]:
rnal ’byor bzhi (naljor zhi) (Skt.: caturyoga), four yogas [of Mahāmudrā]
rnal ’byor chen po (naljor chen po) (Skt.: mahāyoga), great yoga
rnal ma (nalma) the innate, real condition
ro gis (ro chik) (Skt.: ekārāsa), one taste
rtsa lhun thig le (tsa lung tik lé) (Skt.: nādi, vāyu, bindu), winds, channels, and seminal essences
rtsa gis (tse chik) (Skt.: ekāgāra), single-pointedness
shin tu rnal ’byor (shin tu naljor), Atiyoga
shin tu rnal ’byor (shin tu naljor) (Skt.: atiyoga), Dzokchen, the Great Perfection
sku gsum (ku sum), three [Buddha] bodies
skyed rim (kyé rim), Generation Stage
sngags pa (ngakpa) (Skt.: mātṛta), tantrists or tantrikas; literally, reciters of mantras
sngags rim (ngakrim), the tantric path
sngon ’gro (ngōn dro), tantric foundational practices
so sor sdbus pa (so sor dū pa) (Skt.: pratyahāra), retraction
spros bral (tro drel) (Skt.: nisprapaṇa), freedom from conceptual entanglement
sprul sku (nimāṇakāya), emanation body
spyod rgyud (chō gyi) (Skt.: caryātantra), conduct tantra
srog rtso (sok tsōl) (Skt.: prāṇāyāma), wind control; breath control
stong pa nnyid (tong pa nnyi) (Skt.: śīnyatā), emptiness
theg pa (tek pa) (Skt.: yāna), vehicle
theg pa dgu (tek pa gu); Ancient’s nine-vehicle system for classifying different paths to enlightenment
thig le (tik lé) (Skt.: bindu), seminal essence
ting nge ’dzin (tīng ngé dzin) (Skt.: samādhi), absorption
ye shes (yé shé), primordial mind; the primordial awareness of a Buddha
ye shes kyi lhun (yé shé kyi lung), wisdom winds

Notes
1 ‘yoga(s) rnal ’byor: lit. ‘union in fundamental reality’ (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991).
2 While this chapter examines various practice systems, this section focuses on the Ancient Order’s perspective. Because of significant sectarian divergences, there is no one-size-fits-all Buddhist philosophy.
3 Tshig mdzod chen mo, ‘Yang dag pa’i lam dbang du gyur ba’/, 1,577.
5 Bstan lha, ‘Bya ba rnal ma la rtso medi kyi ngang gis ’byor’/, 141.
6 See chapter 3 of the fifteenth-century yoga manual Hathānapādipikā, which is on mudrās.
7 Most Tibetan Buddhist tantric traditions have been guarded with secrecy for hundreds of years, but that is slowly changing. I have permission from Namdroling to discuss this practice in a general way, but not to provide instructions or mantras.

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