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**The *Ghe-Wa* (Tibetan Death Rite) for
Pau Karma Wang Chuk Namgyal:
The Foundation's First Living Treasure**

By

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The early morning March sun and clear skies warmed the streets at Lakeside in Pokhara, Nepal, and offered a fine view of the white capped *Maccha Puchare* or Fish Tail mountain. The towering Himalayas are an awesome presence and are themselves considered to be deities. On clear days, they dominate the landscape. I had just arrived in Pokhara, and was walking to the home of Migmar and Yeshe Gyatso, wonderful friends whom I have known and worked with for more than a decade. They are expert Tibetan translators and always a great help in accessing the Tibetan shamans residing outside Pokhara at the refugee camp that H.H. The Dalai Lama named Tashi Palkhiel (Tibetan for “auspicious blooming”). The eldest of these shamans (*pau*) was Karma Wang Chuk.

The streets of Pokhara's Lakeside bazaar were quiet that morning. Perhaps it was too early for the many tourists who have flocked to Pokhara this year. Some of the shops had just opened and the street vendors were laying out their handicrafts on blankets. One of them recognized me and we spoke. “*Tashi deleg,*” she greeted me in Tibetan. When did you return? Have you heard about Wang Chuk?” I had been coming to Pokhara to meet with Wang Chuk and the other *pau* for 3-4 days a few times a year since 1994. I had seen many of his healings and heard many stories. And, on the streets that day, I

heard some of these stories again: about the day a young boy who had swallowed a coin and was near death when Wang Chuk, embodied by his deity, extracted the coin from the boy's throat using a hollow ram's horn, saving his life; or about the man who had swallowed a fishbone which had festered for days before Wang Chuk extracted it, now greatly enlarged, bloody, and filled with pus.

One day, I saw Wang Chuk do a divination for a colleague, David H., who, like me, is a student of Michael Harner and Core Shamanism, and had come to Nepal to learn and have initiation. It was probably the most powerful divination rite I had ever witnessed. Wang Chuk played his *damaru*, a small 2-sided hand drum, then laid it flat on the small table in front of the bed from which he worked. Now Wang Chuk scattered some white rice on the drum, sat back, said some *mantra*, and blew towards the drum. I watched as most grains of rice began to bounce and then turn counter-clockwise, following each other in a circle around the periphery of the drum skin. Meanwhile, many of the grains were spinning clockwise on their own axis. It was an amazing spectacle but, even more amazing was the divination that followed, i.e. what Wang Chuk saw in the dancing rice. Something like, "There is an accident back home; you should make contact." Indeed, there had been an auto accident back home, a door unhinged by a passing car that nearly missed David's wife and baby, as I recall. But all was O.K.; no one was hurt, as Wang Chuk had accurately divined.

Then there was Judy W, another Foundation student who has since passed on. I received a card from her some years ago with a picture of Wang Chuk performing a healing on her. The inside of the card read, "When I went to Nepal, I was sick with hepatitis-like symptoms. Here Wang Chuk, a traditional Tibetan shaman in a Tibetan

refugee camp outside Pokhara, Nepal, extracts a piece of porous bone from my chest. He removed it through his *damaru* (drum) and a very curly ram's horn. The symptoms went away and subsequent blood tests back home showed all normal levels. He did indicate that there were more serious problems. Love, Judy. December 2001.” Less than two years later, bone cancer caused Judy's death. Her presence alongside Wang Chuk is a vivid memory.

During all the years I came to visit with Wang Chuk, he was frail, about 5' tall, and thin (perhaps 90 lbs). He had bouts with tuberculosis and had trouble breathing, falling victim more than once to pneumonia, and requiring a small respirator before and after his rituals. Yet, he vigorously played his *damaru* in his right hand, and his *shang* (hand bell) in his left, jumping to his feet to dance, dressed in full regalia, with a *ringa* (crown) of the five Wisdom (*dhyana*) Buddhas with broad flapping rainbow wings on either side. He was a gentle soul and I will always remember him in the camp's center, smiling while turning a very large prayer wheel, and wearing around his neck dozens of the white bone cylinders strung together that he had worn out from the perpetual turning. There was a lot of tragedy in Wang Chuk's life. Driven from his homeland by the Chinese invasion, he came to Nepal with only what he could carry on his back. His wife, Tsering, is very withdrawn and rarely coherent, a condition which has worsened over the years. His elder son, who had served as the “intermediary” assisting Wang Chuk during shamanic healing rituals, died from alcoholism and having drunk poison. Some in the community blamed Wang Chuk, a back-biting I found very sad. At the time, I thought it must be common parlance since they were telling me, a virtual stranger. Despite all this hardship, Wang Chuk's shamanic work remained undaunted.

The Psychopompic rite given for Wang Chuk

The 49th day after death is the final day of the *ghe-wa*, an extraordinary psychopompic event. That day, numerous members of the camp came to give honor to Wang Chuk. The shaman, Richoe, came, as did the other shaman in the camp, Nyima. Nyima's brother and shamanic intermediary, Karma, was there for the entire ritual and was a big participant. Karma, along with ten men from the camp, sat around a large metal container and, with bare hands, kneaded a mixture of mostly *tsampa* (roasted barley flour), molasses, and milk to form many small cone-shaped sweet delicacies to be distributed to all who came to the *ghe-wa*, along with cookies, chips, rolls, bags of candy, cheese puffs, etc etc. Eventually, representatives from all six districts of the camp came and took large plastic bags full of goodies back to their areas. As I helped fill the bags, I was thinking that there wouldn't be one person in the perhaps 1000-person camp who wouldn't get at least one bag of goodies from Wang Chuk.

Wang Chuk died at about 5:30PM on January 25, 2008 at the age of 88. Triley, his youngest son, had brought him some tea and noticed he was not breathing. The lama, Nyedon Rinpoche, from the Karma Kagyu Dob Gyüd Chorling Manang Gompa, a large local monastery, was called in to test the pulse and breath and divine through astrology what should happen to the body. This Rinpoche, who would also conduct the entire *ghe-wa*, then determined whether Wang Chuk should be buried, burned, or cut-up and given to the birds, fish and other animals; as well how long to wait before any of this should occur. At this time, the Rinpoche also did a *pho-wa*, a rite in which the hair is pulled on the corpse, in order to open the top of the head. Yeshi and Migmar, my translators and

teachers who provided much of the information below, explained that *pho-wa* makes the “skull as soft as that of an infant” so that the soul can pass easily from the body. After this, a white scarf is wrapped around the neck so as to prohibit the soul from reentering and/or another spirit from reanimating the body. I was told that a butter lamp was lit and placed at the top of the bed where Wang Chuk had died and now lay, in order to send him good wishes, to light the way, and help remove any obstacles that might interfere with his soul’s journey through the *bardo*, that intermediary state between death and rebirth, as taught in the *Bardo Thödol*¹.

It is customary to place a *thangka* (a colorful painted sacred scroll framed in embroidered silk) of a specific deity, and a statue of a deity, on the altar in the room of the *ghe-wa*. The lama had previously divined that the deity Amitabha,² the red Buddha, should adorn the *thangka* and that the statue should be of Manjusri, an enlightened sage and Buddha of a former age. Thanks to the generosity of Michael Harner and the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, its members, field representatives, and others, these items were secured and had a prominent position and function during the rite.

The lama had the body removed from the house at 3AM and taken to the newly constructed *ghat*, a place where Wang Chuk’s body was burned at the edge of the white river below the camp. After the body was burned, the remaining bones were collected and kept for the following 49-day rite. The ashes were swept into the river.

¹ The Tibetan Book of the Dead (or the After-Death Experiences on the *Bardo* Plane) is an 8th century text attributed to Padma Sambhava (who is also called Guru Rinpoche) who brought Buddhism to Tibet and is said to have conquered the deities “of the old shamanic faith” (or Bön) and converted them to protectors of Buddhism (*dharmapala*).

² Amitabha is the Sanskrit name most often used in Buddhist literature for the Buddha of “boundless light” and eternal life. He is called Nang-wa-tha-ye (“infinite splendor”) or Od-pag-me (“infinite light”) in Tibetan.

It is written in the commentaries to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, which guides the lama's work during the *ghe-wa* for 49 days, that the text also has a profound effect on the living. In fact, to my perspective, Wang Chuk's *ghe-wa* was a great healing for the kin left behind. Wang Chuk's daughter Dolma, son-in-law Dawa, and their two children came from India to attend the funeral. Wang Chuk had only recently been reunited with them, after years of estrangement. Migmar said he was quite happy for the last year of his life. When they came for the *ghe-wa*, they went to Wang Chuk's son Triley's wife's parents' house and brought her back, as she had been separated from him. Further, they expressed care and concern about Triley's future as jobs are few and the economy in the camp, and around Nepal, is very weak. It was obvious that Wang Chuk's death would have dire financial consequences for the entire family.

For 49 days, there was supposed to be a butter lamp burning 24-hours each day. It is the family's responsibility to ensure this occurs. I observed that this was so on the days I was there, up to the end of the *ghe-wa* on March 14.

On the 3rd day after death, it is said that the deceased "wakes up" and has "clear thinking," even more so than before death. He is surprised to see others sad and tries to "sit with them," and speak, but to no avail. He looks around and sees the offerings, the lamps, and the food, his favorites left for him. Then the thought occurs that he "may be dead." And he tests to see if he "leaves footprints" or sees his "image in a mirror." Then he realizes that he is dead and is sad, and dies for a "second time" on that third day. That is to say his spirit comes to the realization of having died and this perception is traumatic. The family is implored not to cry for the spirit of the deceased is already in much pain

and will likely increase this if he sees them in tears. (The above account was given by Yeshe and Migmar, and from an interview with Karma.

On this important day, the lama also does a rite called *sur* in which five things for the senses are gathered: *tsampa* mixed with sugar is burned for its good smell; there is music from a conch; a mirror; and the deceased's favorite food is prepared – something for each of the senses. Triley told me Wang Chuk was left a cup of milk tea with each meal offering, as was his habit in life. Red and white cloth is used to serve as an image and substitute for the body (*lüd*, pronounced “luey”). All of these offerings are made to the luey at precise times three times for each following day as the spirit will likely be near his home and kin, so it is important to make these offerings for the deceased's happiness while the spirit is close.

On days 4, 5, 6 and 7, the lamas return to read from the Book of the Dead in order to guide the soul through the *bardo*, reminding it to merge with the great lights of the Wisdom Buddhas, that is to take refuge in them. Special attention is given to the red Buddha Amitabha on the 7th day, as the lamas speak directly to Wang Chuk's soul about this Buddha, who is depicted on the *thangka*, reminding the soul to take refuge there. Migmar explained that all Tibetans desire to take refuge in Amitabha, who is the spiritual father of Chenrezig, the patron saint of Tibet, the Bodhisattva of Compassion and is incarnated in each successive Dalai Lama.

Essentially this structure is maintained for all seven weeks, thus totaling 49 days. The middle of the 4th week after death, and the 49th day are very important days for the destiny of the soul. These two days have many similar elements. According to Yeshe and Migmar, those are the days on which the *bardo* journey comes to an end. That is, the

soul may be fortunate enough to complete its journey in half the time due to good karma. Still there is no guarantee and thus all 49 days of the rite must be completed. At mid-point day, Nyedon Rinpoche had divined that Wang Chuk's soul would be reborn to a household with three brothers. This was all that was said, but questions about the direction of the village and other circumstances of the rebirth may be foretold as well.

On these two important days, there are a number of remarkable aspects. The following account is from my notes on the 49th day, as I was not there to attend at mid-point. There was much discussion among the participants of what happened on the day of Wang Chuk's death. He had completed his work but instead of putting away his costume and ritual instruments, he left them out, which he had not done before. They were left unwrapped and not in his bag. Many who attended thought this indicated he had died almost immediately after completing a ritual. I had the opportunity, along with Triley, to prostrate myself to his gear, which had been left exactly where Wang Chuk left them. We also prostrated ourselves in front of the Amitabha *thangka*, and hung a silk greeting scarf (*khata*) around the *thangka* and the Manjusri statue. We also bowed to the collection of Wang Chuk's bones, some of which were mixed with his ashes and clay to form a mushroom-like structure called an *astu*, which would be left by Triley at the holy shrine of Muktinath, about a five-day walk, and at 12,500 ft altitude, after the ceremony. Also prominent in the room that day, as it had been on most days Wang Chuk was doing his healing work, was a *thangka* of Thangla, one of Wang Chuks' most important spirits. Thangla is depicted seated upon a white horse. He is a pre-Buddhist deity of the nomadic Tibetan shamans who, it is told, was converted to Buddhism by Padma Sambhava (see footnote 1).

Accompanied by the dramatic, transic musical mélange of cymbals, large hanging drums, resonant long horns, and intermittent chanting, Nyedon Rinpoche took a piece of paper with Tibetan prayers, mantra, and the name Wang Chuk written upon it, and then attached a photograph of Wang Chuk. The paper was fastened to a metal cross-like structure, then burned and the ashes collected in a bronze plate while the “waters of rebirth” were poured on them from a golden *bumba*, the auspicious “vessel of treasure.” At the same time, and with the same hand, the Rinpoche held the vessel, he also held a brass mirror (*melong*). Thus, when the picture and paper were in flames, the mirror was directly opposite and reflecting the fire. And, when the water was poured into the plate, the mirror tilted down towards the blackened paper. Yeshe explained that the water in the *bumba* were like the “endless river of long life....with all the benefits of liberation.”

As explained to me later by the shaman Nyima, the Rinpoche had called Wang Chuk’s soul into the mirror first, and then, when the soul sees its image being burned, it breaks all attachments to its current life and is reborn. Sitting in the little one-roomed house where Wang Chuk had conducted so many healings, watching his *ghe-wa*, I experienced a vivid memory of again seeing a great white eagle with golden beak perched outside the window while he worked. This had been a common occurrence on most of the days I visited with Wang Chuk. When I took a break and stepped outside, I noticed the bird circling not far from the house.

At nightfall, just before the ceremony ended, I read Michael Harner’s letter of condolence honoring Wang Chuk to the family. Migmar translated word for word. It touched everyone and I was very happy to have had that responsibility.

Final remarks

The *ghe-wa* of Wang Chuk psychopomped his soul through all the phases of the *bardo* between death and rebirth as mentioned in the Tibetan text. At the moment of death, the text describes, one finds oneself in the Chikhai Bardo of the Great White Light. Soon thereafter, it is said that, for those great Rinpoches who have attained enlightenment, a rainbow light surrounds the body of the deceased and takes it directly to heaven, leaving no physical trace behind. If the White Light *bardo* is missed, the soul has the opportunity of having vision of the Wisdom Buddhas of the five lights (yellow, white, red, green, and blue) of the Chönyid Bardo, the second *bardo* condition. These are the very Buddhas portrayed on the crown (*ringa*) worn by Wang Chuk and the other *pau*. By now, the soul has become aware of its death. The lamas and monks recite instructions to the soul, not to merge with the lesser lights of mundane desires but to see the great lights of the five rainbow colors and take refuge with the Buddhas therein. It is important that the soul recognize that obstacles of fear, wanting, and anger may arise in the form of frightening images. However, the soul is instructed to recognize these images as no other than aspects of oneself. If the soul retains that clear mirror-like consciousness and overcomes these obstacles, it can take refuge with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who have renounced nirvana in order to help us humans in the *bardo* between death and birth as well as birth and death.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead now turns to the Sidpa *bardo*, the third *bardo* condition, and gives instruction for the souls of those who missed the opportunity to take refuge in the Buddhas of the second *bardo*. The Sidpa *bardo* is the condition just prior to incarnation in which the soul is drawn by impulse to its future mother's womb and reborn

according to its karma. This could be in any of six worlds. The most fortunate is the human world, the realm into which Wang Chuk has again been born.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead and the *ghe-wa* I attended for Wang Chuk both seem to teach that consciousness (or soul) is eternal. Its destiny is set upon a great wheel, symbol of the endless cycle from birth to rebirth, over and over again until liberation is found from the obstacles we carry in heart and mind.

Such a psychologically depthful spiritual system, which is fundamental to the *ghe-wa*, resonates in the culture of the Tibetan people at the camp. Wang Chuk's *ghe-wa* had a deep affect on me. The 8 days I spent at play, visits, and learning in the camp is impossible to describe. There was much heart in that rite and from the people at the camp, and in the monks' ritual chanting at the *ghe-wa* and in the camp monastery rituals every morning and evening. Each day, so many gave so much love, even while they were suffering from their loss. In that camp, there is a slice of heaven. An auspicious blooming. A Tashi Palkhiel.