

# Deathbed visions in medieval Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism

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Not surprisingly both Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism have developed teachings applicable by deathbed, which provide visions and means for the dying to travel safely from this world to the other. It is intriguing to find however that certain elements from these two branches of Buddhist teachings seemed to be combined in one manuscript (at least) – a treasure text (*gter ma*) discovered in 14th century Tibet. We can simply regard this as a “phenomenon” in the progress of doctrinal compilation in Buddhist history. However, what makes it interesting is the fact that the composite teaching constantly dominates believers’ thought and influences their lives up to this day. Based on this combined version, *’pho ba* yoga was established as an important festival of pilgrimage and religious instruction later in 17th century Tibet. This festival/practice is not only alive in Tibet but also has spread to the world where Tibetan culture and religions are active.

It is not my intention to investigate the modern development of this festival but rather place emphasis on the emergence of Buddha Amitabha in the *’pho ba* yoga (the teaching of transferring consciousness). In the primary narrative of *’pho ba* teaching in the 10th century, there is no specific Buddha and Buddha-field indicated. However, in its 14th century treasure version, Amitabha is described as the initiator of this teaching and who naturally become the ultimate saviour of the dying.

The emergence of Amitabha in the revealed version of *’pho ba* yoga reflects various aspects of religious phenomena in 14th century Tibet. How exactly does Amitabha associate with tantric *’pho ba* yoga? Why is it Amitabha but not others? What type of devotion to Amitabha has been absorbed in the medieval *’pho ba* practice? To figure out these puzzles, I shall first clarify the fundamental issue: the nature of the connection between *’pho ba* yoga and Amitabha traditions.

Long before Buddhism had been transplanted into Tibet, Amitabha tradition earned its populace among certain groups in North India and East Asia. However it remains implicit as to when and how the belief of Amitabha was introduced to Tibetan people. Thus, my research will hopefully bring light to the mystery and contribute to our understanding of Amitabha tradition in Tibet.

A number of reasons bring me to the belief that the 14th century is an important period to explore. Firstly, it was at this time that there was large-scale development of the *gter ma* movement. This background makes the discovery of *’pho ba* by rNying ma masters more interesting since *’pho ba* is supposed to be transmitted by the bKa’ brgyud pas.

One approach of my study is to extend the survey among these rNying ma pas and try to understand what is the common thought dissimilated in their contemporary.

Secondly, both the land of Tibet and China was under the control of the Mongolian regime during the 14th century. They had frequent contacts back to the time of late Tang and Sung periods. The particular information I would like to mention here is, in the border region Szechwan, visualization yoga and breath-controlled meditation were widely promoted by some Chinese Ch'an and Pure Land masters. Also this trend of practice had penetrated to the lay practitioners. Against this, I assume that the parcel of thought related to Amitabha teaching which can be seen in 'pho ba yoga could possibly have been derived from Chinese Pure Land tradition.

The paper I shall present here is set in this framework. The specific theme I shall discuss is the similarities found in both 'pho ba yoga and Pure Land teachings. This paper will consist of three sections.

In the first section, I shall briefly describe the early transmission of 'pho ba yoga and its content. The treasure version of this yoga, 'pho ba 'jag tshugs ma, uncovered by the 14th century treasure-revealer Nyi zla sangs rgyas, will then be presented. I will discuss the extent of difference among these 'pho ba texts in the change of time and pinpoint the thoughts related to Amitabha teaching seen in the latter revealed text.

The second section will focus on a specific Pure Land Sutra, its commentators and their works. In my preliminary studies, I put forward that the *Sutra of Visualization on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* (Kuan Wu Liang Shou Fo Ching) bear interesting elements for scrutinizing the similarities. The commentaries made by the early patriarchs of Pure Land tradition provide an abundance of data as well. Study on the biography and hagiography sources of these patriarchs such as Shandao and Fazho could broaden our view on different aspects of Pure Land tradition. I shall discuss in this paper that both Shandao and Fazho promoted the combination of visualizing meditation and breath controlling technique. Fazho was even seen as the reincarnation of Shandao in some hagiography source.

In the last section I will interpret the "mystery" elements in the lineage of Shandao and Fazho, which have been neglected in the studies of Pure Land Buddhism. This in turn will raise the issue of how difficult it is to draw the line between esoteric and exoteric Buddhism. I shall further analyse thoughts extracted from 'pho ba and survey their relationship to Chinese Pure Land teachings.