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The Second Pawo Rinpoché, Tsuklak Trengwa (1504–1566): Visions in Meditation and Dream

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief introduction to the secret level of Tibetan spiritual biographies (*gsang ba'i rnam thar*) and autobiographies (*gsang ba'i rang nam*) with a focus on visions in meditation and dreams. In the analysis section, some appropriately selected episodes of such secret aspects taken from one of the spiritual autobiographies of the Second Pawo, Tsuklak Trengwa (*dpa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba*; 1504–1566), called *The Mirror Reflecting the Illusory Countenance* (*'khrul pa'i bzhin ras 'char ba'i me long*) are presented and interpreted.

KEYWORDS: *dPa' bo gTsug lag phreng ba*, autobiography, visions, dreams, meditative experience, secret rnam thar

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *dPa' bo gTsug lag phreng ba*, autobiografia, wizje, sny, doświadczenie medytacyjne, tajemne rnam thar

1. Introduction¹

The Second Pawo, Tsuklak Trengwa (*dpa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba*; 1504–1566)², is certainly most well-known as a historian for his meticulous historiographical opus, *The Feast of the Wise* (*mkhas pa'i dga' ston*), which is a comprehensive Religious History (*chos 'byung*) with a strong focus on his own tradition – the Karma Kagyü (*karma bka' brgyud*).³ Recently, Tsuklak Trengwa attracted fresh scholarly attention in the form of two articles. The first presents his *Feast of the Wise* with respect to content and structure and the textual witnesses available (Dell 2021a). The second presents the different biographical and autobiographical sources about his life, according to which it summarises the main events. Eventually, it supplements his life story by a brief characterisation of his main works showing that apart from his *Religious History*, he also authored some other important works that are still used in tradition today (Bjerregaard and Dell 2022).

When it comes to Tibetan life writing, “biography” or “autobiography” are certainly not the best terms to be used, as the connotation of these Western terms invokes a somewhat incomplete picture and does not place the emphasis where it should lie. The Tibetans use the term *namtar* (*rnam thar*), which can be translated as “[the story of a person’s] complete liberation” and hence includes a spiritual dimension. Many have used the term “hagiography,” which is justified to some extent as it shares many features with this originally Christian genre. Nevertheless, the main aspect of these stories—the Buddhist concept of complete liberation (from

¹ Statement of contribution: Maria Bjerregaard selected and translated the episodes presented here and contributed to the analysis and conclusion sections; Dominik Dell wrote the introduction and contributed to the analysis and conclusion sections.

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² In this paper, we use the “THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription” (Germano and Tournadre 2003) for Tibetan names and terms in the running text and provide the Wylie transliteration (Wylie 1959) in brackets at their first occurrence. Quotations of Tibetan text in footnotes will be provided in Wylie transliteration.

³ There are various editions, but one of the most commonly used and easily accessible ones is Tsuklak Trengwa 1986. For more editions, see Dell 2021a, 126–141.



the two obscurations: afflictional and cognitional)—is foreign to the Christian idea of hagiography.⁴ For this paper, we use the terms “spiritual biography” (*rnam thar*) and “spiritual autobiography” (*rang rnam*) to render the Tibetan terms into English, as they seem to fit quite well and also gained some popularity among scholars.⁵

Traditionally, spiritual biographies are classified into three levels or types. The outer level (*phyi'i rnam thar*) corresponds to the biography proper as understood in the Western sense. The inner level (*nang gi rnam thar*) deals with the teachings, initiations and practices received, while the secret level (*gsang ba'i rnam thar*) describes visions, miracles, meditative experiences, and dreams that represent the protagonist's realisation of the nature of mind.⁶ The same may be applied to spiritual autobiographies. Sometimes different texts cover different levels, but very often one text comprises more than one level, where the focus may vary. The article about Tsuklak Trengwa's life mentioned above (Bjerregaard and Dell 2022) focuses very much on the outer and inner levels. Nevertheless, Tsuklak Trengwa's three known autobiographies also contain aspects of the secret level to a differing extent. In this paper, we limit ourselves to his most well-known autobiography *The Mirror Reflecting the Illusory Countenance*.⁷ Among the more outer and inner aspects, this text also contains many descriptions of dreams and meditative experiences pertaining to the secret level. In this paper, a selection of such episodes shall be presented.⁸

⁴ For a more extensive version of this discussion, see Dell 2021b, 12–14.

⁵ E.g., Rheingans 2017 and 2021a. For a list of other English renderings, see Roesler 2014, 117, Rheingans 2010, 252–253, and 2014, 69–70. These papers are not only interesting for their list, but they discuss different aspects of the genre of spiritual biography. In the introduction to his autobiography, Jamgön Kongtrul provides a traditional explanation of the term “complete liberation (*rnam thar*); see Barron 2003, 3.

⁶ Vostrikov 1994, 186–187. This classification is ascribed to Desi Sangyé Gyatso (*sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*; 1653–1705). For a brief and accessible explanation of the three levels, see also Choegyal Gyamtso Tulku 2000, 21–22.

⁷ Tsuklak Trengwa 2010. For a characterisation of, and references to, other sources about his life, see Bjerregaard and Dell 2022, 134–140. There, also the different extant editions of *The Mirror Reflecting the Illusory Countenance* are mentioned. For this paper, we only use one edition: Tsuklak Trengwa 2010.

⁸ Even though, in this paper we look at meditative experiences in the context of autobiography (*rang rnam*), there are other genres that deal with the topic. For



According to tradition, there are three kinds of visions: visions in reality (*dgnos*), meditation (*nyams*), and dream (*rmi lam*) (Gyatso 1981, 72).⁹ The episodes that shall be presented in the main part of the paper fit into the categories of meditation and dream.¹⁰ Generally, visions are considered a result of successful Buddhist practice (Gyatso 1981, 69). Hence, the description of such visions in a life story is a sign of accomplishment. Visions always played an important role in the Kagyü (*bka' brgyud*) tradition, starting with Marpa and Milarepa¹¹.

Usually, Tibetan Buddhist lamas ask their disciples not to talk about their meditative experiences with their fellows in order to avoid confusion or expectations concerning their own practice. The case is different with realised masters: they would sometimes share accounts of their own meditative experiences and the like with their disciples either in speaking or writing. For the disciples, these rather intimate moments are exciting. There is a human being in front of them that appears essentially not too different from themselves. Hence, identification with the teacher is relatively easy. At the same time, the teacher, at best, is a realised master. Sharing such experiences can, on the one hand, immensely increase the trust and devotion of the disciples towards this lama—this representation of the Buddha—whose qualities they aim to develop themselves. On the other hand, if there is already a huge amount of trust and devotion, such moments might enable the disciples to further their development through identification with the given example. In any case, such accounts that bear witness to the realisation of the teacher play an important role in the setting of Vajrayana Buddhism, where the student-teacher relationship is

instance, one of Tsuklak Trengwa's most important teachers, the First Karma Trinlépa (*karma 'phrin las pa*; 1456–1539), composed songs (*mgur*) and ballads (*glu*) to describe his meditative experiences. For a translation and analysis of several of these, see Rheingans 2021b.

⁹ For further elaborations on these categories in the context of life stories, see Verhufen 1992, 50–52; for an application to examples, see also Dell 2021b.

¹⁰ It might be argued that some of the meditative experiences presented in the next section rather be classified as visions in reality. Even though in some cases, the visions resemble meditative experience, they do not always occur during formal practice, but rather in ordinary situations.

¹¹ For an example of Milarepa, see Evans-Wentz and Yeeling 1969, 217–218. For Marpa's famous visionary dream of Saraha, see Tsang Nyön Heruka 1982, 42–48.



of the utmost importance. Guru devotion and identification are seen as a fast track to Buddhahood. In this way, not only meditative experiences, but all parts of a spiritual (auto-)biography that pertain to the secret level are meant to foster and strengthen trust and devotion in the disciples. Usually, these experiences are not described like the state of meditation of a perfect and fully developed Buddha. Instead, experiences are often described as somewhat advanced, not really matching the regular experience of an ordinary practitioner, but at the same time bear an element of greater or lesser imperfection. The accounts show someone on the path, someone developing towards complete liberation (*rnam thar*). That is what makes it easier for the practitioner to relate to this example and be inspired by it, and it is exactly what the genre of *namtar* is about (considered the literal meaning): presenting an account of complete liberation.

Dream narratives already go back to the life story of the Buddha, e.g., the famous conception dream of the Buddha's mother, Queen Māyā.¹² However, dream accounts are an even more predominant topic in Tibetan life writing and especially in spiritual autobiographies.¹³ Here one finds both continuities of dream experience from the Buddha's life story as well as innovations (Young 1999, 2). The life stories of the early Kagyü masters such as Marpa (*mar pa*; 1012–1097), Milarepa (*mi la ras pa*; 1040–1123), Gampopa (*sgam po pa*; 1079–1153) and Rechungpa (*ras chung pa*; 1084–1161)—the spiritual forefathers of Tsuklak Trengwa—provide a wealth of dreams of different kinds.¹⁴ In her book about Buddhist dream narratives, Young presents different categories of dreams (Young 1999). In our context, “dreams as sings of spiritual accomplishment” are particularly relevant (Young 1999, 95). Among the dreams that fall into this category are prophetic ones such as Milarepa's famous

¹² See, for examples, Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2013, paragraphs 6.3–6.5.

¹³ A prominent example featuring a large number of dream accounts is Jamgön Kongtrul's spiritual autobiography; see Barron 2003. Another example famous for its dreams is Marpa's spiritual biography; see Tsang Nyön Heruka 1982.

¹⁴ For some examples, see Young 1999, 97–105. For Marpa's life, see Ducher 2017 and Tsang Nyön Heruka 1982; for Milarepa's life, see Tsangnyön Heruka 2010 and Lhalungpa 1977; for Rechungpa's life, see Roberts 2007; for Gampopa's life, see Stewart 2004.



dream about the four great pillars foretelling the future of the Kagyü lineage interpreted by Marpa (Young 1999, 98–99). According to tradition, prophetic dreams do not appear to just anyone, but they “come to people who have accrued merit,” which creates a kind of “dreaming elite” (Young 1999, 2). Another kind of dream that falls into this category is one where the Buddhist saint or adept is conferred some kind of spiritual power or siddhi. In these cases, the dreamer either obtains a new ability directly upon waking up or the new ability manifests only later in life (Young 1999, 95). In the case of Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa, we find both kinds of dreams and respective examples are presented in this paper.

2. Analysis

In the analysis part of the paper, selected episodes illustrating different aspects of Tsuklak Trengwa’s meditative experiences and dreams are presented and put into context.

Meditative Experiences

In his spiritual autobiography, Tsuklak Trengwa writes that he already had meditative experiences at a very young age. One example of this is when he was approximately five years old and engaged in solitary contemplation in a mountain cave. Since the cave was surrounded by a beautiful mountain view, grassy plains, and wild animals, he would sometimes become distracted in contemplation on the magnificent colours and fragrance of the flowers in the landscape. These contemplations would last long periods of time and once in a while, feelings of happiness and sorrow would arise simultaneously. When he would wake up from these experiences, he would not be able to remember any of the appearances through conceptual means, but they would only appear as vivid objects in his mind. Tsuklak Trengwa did not know at that time whether these experiences were caused by habitual tendencies from his previous life, the gathering of his inner winds or channels or whatever it was he allowed to arise. This little episode is poetically described throughout two pages in his spiritual autobiography and it clearly opens up the door of Tsuklak Trengwa’s perception and inner



experiences as a young boy.¹⁵ It shows that he was an unusual child and already had certain meditative inclinations at a very young age. It also reminds one of Buddha Śākyamuni's account of his first experience of the four levels of meditative concentration or absorption (Skt. *dhyāna*) when as a child he was sitting under a tree by a field. The Buddha would later remember this episode when he practiced severe asceticism and understood from it that asceticism was an extreme practice whereas his experience as a child was a natural middle way.¹⁶

Another significant experience depicted by Tsuklak Trengwa took place when he had reached six years of age and was about to spend the next two years in solitary retreat. At this point, Tsuklak Trengwa was learning the alphabet and after some time he learned to recite certain texts such as the “Prajñāpāramitā in 8000 verses” (*brgyad stong pa*), “Reciting the Names of Mañjuśrī” (*tshan brjod*, Skt. *nāmasaṅgīti*) and the Vajrayoginī ritual (*phag mo'i cho ga*). He also read and memorised the spiritual biography of the Indian siddha Mitra (12th–13th cent.)¹⁷ and the “Profound Inner Meaning” (*zab mo nang don*)¹⁸, but he did not understand much of the word's meaning. Tsuklak Trengwa writes that through these studies, sometimes, sadness would arise and throughout long periods of time, he would cry out of compassion for sentient beings. At this point, many signs of both pleasant and terrifying appearances arose spontaneously. Tsuklak Trengwa writes:

In particular, lines of stringed circles without space between them continuously emerged. Sometimes, inside the various subtle coloured lines of stringed circles, [I] saw the appearances of beautiful male and female deities. [They] were endowed with different coloured silk garments, carrying many parasols and victory banners and

¹⁵ For the Tibetan text of this passage, see Tsuklak Trengwa 2010, 234–36.

¹⁶ Among other places, this is described in the *Lalitavistara sūtra*; see Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2013, paragraphs 11.1–11.39, 18.25.

¹⁷ For a summary of his life and related Tibetan sources, see May 2019.

¹⁸ This text is one of the major works of the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorjé (*rang 'byung rdo rje*; 1284–1339), dealing with Vajrayana meditation practice. For a translation of the text itself and of a commentary by Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé (*'jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas*; 1813–1899), see Rangjung Dorje 2014. For the life and works of the Third Karmapa, see Seegers 2009 and Gamble 2020.



ornamented with many precious jewels. From these great visions, [my] mind became very joyous. On other days, these [pleasant experiences] did not appear, and inside the circles, [I instead] saw many decorations of armour and weapons like when men depart for the battlefield. Sometimes, [I] saw that they were hitting me with their weapons and [I] got terrified and panicked. I would fall unconscious and get [problems with my] heart-wind.¹⁹

Tsuklak Trengwa designates these experiences as “signs on the path” (*lam rtags*) and writes that they appeared because of purifying smaller obscurations. Tsuklak Trengwa concludes by stating that he did not know how to progress to a higher level at this point, because he had not yet found a spiritual friend.²⁰ From his life story, we know that he only met his root teacher, the Eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorjé (*mi bskyod rdo rje*; 1507–1554), at the age of twenty-nine. Other important teachers of his were the Fourth Shamarpa, Chödrak Yeshé (*zhwa dmar pa chos grags ye shes*; 1453–1524), and Karma Trinlépa (*karma 'phrin las pa*; 1456–1539) whom he met both when he was nine years old, and Ünyön Künga Zangpo (*dbus smyon kun dga' bzang po*; 1458–1532) whom he met when he was twelve years old.²¹ The episode at hand took place even before those meetings. Therefore, Tsuklak Trengwa mentioned the lack of a spiritual friend. In this episode, Tsuklak Trengwa again intimately conveys his meditative experiences. These types of descriptions appear repeatedly throughout his spiritual

¹⁹ Tsuklak Trengwa 2010, 236–237: *khyad par thig le thig phran lu gu rgyud/ bar snang thabs cad chod par tag tu shar/ ci zhig tshe na thig le thig phran rnam/ kha dog sna tshogs phra ba'i nang rol nas/ lha dang lha mo'i gzugs brnyan rab mdzas pa/ kha dog sna tshogs dar gyi sham tabs can/ gdugs dang rgyal mtshan ba dan mang thogs pa/ rin chen rgyan gyis brgyan pa mang mthong nas/ de la ltad mo che snyam yid rab dga'/ zhag 'ga' nas ni de dag mi snang bar/ thig le'i nang du go mtshon gyis spras pa/ skyes pa g.yul ngor chas 'dra mang du mthong/ ci zhig nas ni de dag mams kyis mtshon/ lhan cig bdag la rdag pa nyid mthong nas/ skag zhing dngangs ste brgyal nas snying rlung gyur/.*

²⁰ Tsuklak Trengwa 2010, 237: *de dag lam rtags phra mor 'dug na yang/ nyams can dge ba'i bshes kyis ma zin pas/ gong ma'i lam du dbugs phyin ma gyur to/.*

²¹ For a more detailed description of Tsuklak Trengwa's relationship with his teachers, see Bjerregaard and Dell 2022, 149–156. For an extensive treatment of Chödrak Yeshé's life, see Mojzes forthcoming; for Mikyö Dorjé's life and works, see Rheingans 2017; for Karma Trinlépa, see Rheingans 2021a; for Ünyön Künga Zangpo, see DiValerio 2016 and 2018.



autobiography and provide insight into his rich inner life and spiritual accomplishments.

During another interesting episode in Tsuklak Trengwa's youth, he was staying in an institute for higher learning in the beginning of his twenties.²² This episode does not pertain to actual visions like before, but rather to his commitment to practice and his experience of getting closer to knowing the nature of his mind. Tsuklak Trengwa writes that, in general, since the time he was a small boy, he wanted to spend his life roaming around in solitary places and to make his life indivisible from practice. He writes that he had made this commitment to himself, and even later when he would "sink in the mud of distraction" (*g.yeng ba'i 'dam du bying*), this heartfelt promise would not degenerate. Based on this explanation, Tsuklak Trengwa further elaborates:

In particular, when [I] was doing my daily practice, minor karmic residues of meditative concentration awakened, also minor obscurations were purified, and sadness for sentient beings in cyclic existence arose. Because of that, appearances arose vividly like a dream. The consciousness was uncontaminated by all conceptual fabrications [in the shape of] objects and subjects, and [it] arose nakedly like quicksilver spilled on the ground. From the depth of awareness, natural clarity free from fabrication, undefeated spontaneous nature of reality, arose like the luminous sun rays at a rainy sunrise in the summertime, when the clouds and fog are cleared away, the rain has stopped and the wind is still.²³

In this way, Tsuklak Trengwa poetically describes his *vipaśyanā*-like experiences in meditation. Usually, *śamatha* (*shi gnas*; "calm abiding") and *vipaśyanā* (*lhag mthong*; "insight") are seen as a pair where

²² The institute where Tsuklak Trengwa is studying at this point could not be located. Generally, for this education, see Bjerregaard and Dell 2022, 149–156.

²³ Tsuklak Trengwa 2010, 246: *khyad par klog pa kha thon dgyid pa'i tshes/ bsam gtan las 'phros cung zad pa'm/ yang na cung zad sgrub pa dag pa'i rgyus/ nang gi 'khor la skyo bas rkyen byas ste/ snang ba rmi lam lta bur yal gyis shar/ dngul chu sa la bo ba ji bzhin du/ yul dang yul can spros mtshan thams cad dang/ shes pa 'dre ba med par rjen la bud/ dbyar dus char chen bab pa'i nyi shar la/ sprin dang na bun sangs cing char pa chad/ skyi ser mi g.yo nyi 'od gsal 'dra ba'i/ shes pa gting nas rang dangs spros bral ba/ bcom min gnyug ma'i ngo bo ngang gis shar/.*



śamatha, which leads to the attainment of meditative absorption (*dhyāna*), is, to a certain extent, a prerequisite for *vipaśyanā*, which is defined as the direct intuition of impermanence, suffering and nonself and ultimately leads to enlightenment.²⁴ Directly following this episode, Tsuklak Trengwa writes that also in post-meditation when he, for example, was in the middle of a great assembly of monks, he would experience everything as being liberated by itself and then again, illusion would reappear by itself. He says that even though he did not make much effort when he listened to the teachings, he understood each word, obtained the full meaning, and was able to apply it all in his mind.²⁵

All these experiences are unique first-hand descriptions from Tsuklak Trengwa's spiritual autobiography. Instead of only depicting some outer general circumstances about his life, Tsuklak Trengwa moves further into a more intimate and inner level of his experiences. This fits very well with Smith's characterisation of a spiritual biography being "a practical instruction, a guide to the experience, insights and vision of one developed being" (Smith 2001, 14).

Dreams

A large part of Tsuklak Trengwa's spiritual autobiography deals with his extraordinary dream experiences. They appear as prophecies and signs of accomplishment, blessing and devotion.

The first dream that one comes across in Tsuklak Trengwa's text took place in the male wood-monkey year (1524) when he was twenty years old. At this point, Tsuklak Trengwa was studying at a higher institute for learning (see previous section) where he

²⁴ There are more complex views on the relationship between *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* and it also depends on the tradition looked at. The subject is treated in some length in the eighth chapter of the *Samdhinirmocana sūtra*. For an English translation, see Cleary 1995, 42–68, or Powers 1995, 147–218. For a treatment of the subject with a Karma Kagyü background, see Karmapa Wangchug Dorje 2009, 112–203.

²⁵ Tsuklak Trengwa 2010, 246: *klog pa'i tshogs chen nang na 'dug tshe yang/ thams cad na bun lang lon g.yo ba 'am/ mig snyu'i char chen 'bab pa ji lta bar/ ngang gis grol ste sgyu ma rang shar byung/ thos pa'i gnas la ha cang ma 'bad kyang/ tshig re la yang go don mang du brnyed/ kun yang rang gi rgyud la 'byor snyam byed/.*



received training from the teacher Khyenrap Namgyel (*mkhyen rab rnam rgyal*; b. sixteenth cent.) in the two grammar texts (*sum rtags rnam gnyis*) by Tönmi Sambhota (*thon mi sam+b+ho Ta*; b. seventh cent.)²⁶ and the five condensed texts on astrology (*byed pa'i rtsis kyi lnga bsdus*). In this dream, Tsuklak Trengwa was in the mountains and saw the Fourth Shamarpa, Chödrak Yeshé, from afar. He was walking away, and Tsuklak Trengwa was unable to stop him. This dream functioned as a prophesy, because when he woke up from his dream, he heard that the Fourth Shamarpa had passed away. Tsuklak Trengwa writes:

When I was staying in the fragrance of the southern mountains, [I] saw the victorious master Chökyi Drakpa (*chos kyi grags pa*) wearing a red crown and riding a horse at the peak of the high northern mountains, which were filled with rainbow mansions, male and female deities holding parasols and victory banners, and on top of which, many flowers were gently falling. Then he turned his face in the western direction and left. Even though [I] requested him to stay, he didn't [and] smiled.²⁷

In this way, Tsuklak Trengwa received a prophesy about Shamarpa Chödrak Yeshé's passing. It is, however, highly likely that the interpretation of the dream as an omen postdates the Shamarpa's passing as he had already died when Tsuklak Trengwa had the dream. It, therefore, is a retrospective interpretation, which is not unusual in texts of this kind. Nevertheless, through Tsuklak Trengwa's explanation of this dream, one is further acquainted with him as a person in so far as it reveals his intimate relationship with his teacher Shamarpa Chödrak Yeshé. There can be no doubt that the Fourth Shamarpa was a significant figure in the young

²⁶ According to tradition, Tönmi Sambhota is said to have invented the Tibetan script based on Indian scripts and to have composed six Tibetan grammar treatises of which two were preserved in the Tengyur (*Bstan 'gyur*). Their titles are *Lung ston pa la rtsa ba sum cu pa* and *Rtags kyi 'jug pa* (Chhosphel 2010).

²⁷ Tsuklak Trengwa 2010, 245–246: *lho phyogs ri bo'i spos la bdag 'dug tshe/ byang ri mthon po'i rtse na 'ja' tshin gyi/ khang brtsegs lha dang lha mo rnam mang po/ gdugs dang rgyal mtshan 'dzin pas rab gang zhing/ me tog char mang lang long 'bab pa'i steng/ rgyal ba gar dbang chos kyi grags pa ni/ zhwa dmar bsnabs cing rta la chibs mdzad nas/ nub kyi phyogs su zhal bsgyur gshegs pa mthong/*



Tsuklak Trengwa's life, and in the following incarnations, they keep this close student-teacher relationship.²⁸

This dream applies quite a range of symbolism. First of all, the read crown is the sign of the Shamarpas as an incarnation lineage. The title Shamarpa (*zhwa dmar pa*) literally means “the one [with] the red hat.”²⁹ In a world before cars, trains and planes, the horse was the swiftest means of transport available and was therefore highly esteemed. Hence, it stands for qualities such as swiftness and power (Beer 1999, 60). The sunless north Shamarpa is riding towards in the dream may be equated with winter or symbolically with the end of life, thus hinting at his death. According to tradition, rainbows are typical omens witnessed at the demise of a great master (or at his birth) and they already appear in the life story of the Buddha at various occasions (Beer 1999, 32). Parasols and victory banners held by the deities in the dream are both part of the eight auspicious symbols. The parasol symbolises protection and royalty. The more parasols borne by an entourage, the higher the social rank of a dignitary (Beer 1999, 176). The victory banner, originally a military standard carried in warfare, “was adopted by early Buddhism as an emblem of the Buddha's victorious enlightenment and his vanquishing of the armies of Mara” (Beer 1999, 180). Therefore, the entourage of deities bearing parasols and victory banners symbolise the Shamarpa's high (spiritual) status and achievements. Rain of flowers are a characteristic already found in the Buddha's life story and signify the presence of beings from the god realms showing their veneration.³⁰ West is the direction

²⁸ In his future incarnation, the Fifth Shamarpa, Könchok Yenlak (*dkon mchog yan lag*; 1525–1583), attended Tsuklak Trengwa as his close student and took ordination in his presence when he was fourteen years old; see Könchok Yenlak 1974, 164: *de nas rang lo bcu bzhi pa na mkhan po rje karma pa dgung lo so gnyis pa/ las slob rje karma phrin las pa sgung lo brgyad cu gya gsum/ dus sgo ba rje dpa' bo sku skyes sum cu so lnga pa zhig gis gtsos pa'i drung du/ dge tshul sgrubs lag pas/ bdag gis rgyud la bslabs gsum mthar physis ste/*

²⁹ His incarnations alternate with those of the Karmapas in heading the Karma Kagyü lineage, where the Karmapas are also known as the Shanakpas (*zhwa nag pa*), the “black hat” lamas.

³⁰ For rains of flowers in connection with the Buddha's birth, see, for example, Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2013, paragraphs 7.21, 7.33, 7.37, 7.59, 7.150.



of Buddha Amitābha, one of the five *dhyāni* buddhas.³¹ His pure land is Sukhāvātī (*bde ba can*, “great bliss”) and is—not only in Tibetan Buddhism—considered a place or state that is desirable and relatively easy to reach after one’s death. When the Shamarpa turns to the western direction and leaves, this might symbolise his departure to Sukhāvātī. This interpretation fits even more taking into account that the Shamarpa is considered an emanation of Amitābha.

The next significant dream to be included here is not a predictive dream but rather a dream experience that shows signs of accomplishment in a different way. Tsuklak Trengwa experiences this dream when he is in Kongpo (*kong po*) in his late twenties. He was honoured with the request to write down and compile the Karmapa’s teachings on the “Single Intention” (*dgongs pa gcig pa* or short *dgongs gcig*)³², and right after this, Tsuklak Trengwa has this beautiful dream:

In this dream, I directly held a very beautiful handle of a victory banner made of divine cloth in my hand. [The victory banner] had a special height of many hundred mountains, [and] at the top, the core of the golden sun was adorned with marvellous shining light. Because it was exactly at midday, the fiercely falling sun rays came into contact with the top of the victory banner, and because of that, the two lights radiated inseparably. Through this, all worlds were elucidated like the illumination gathered in a thousand days. At that time, in the middle of all the skies, many echoes of musical instruments sounded, and various coloured flowers, especially most of them blue [in colour], slowly fell on me and the victory banner.³³

³¹ For an explanation of the *dhyāni* buddhas, see, e.g., Bhattacharyya 1964, 128–130.

³² The Eighth Karmapa composed a commentary on the “Single Intention” teaching. For this episode, see also Bjerregaard and Dell 2022, 155. On the “Single Intention” and its original authors, see Sobisch 2002, 329–341, and for a translation of the original text and several commentaries, see Sobisch 2020.

³³ Tsuklak Trengwa 2010, 259–260: *de tshe rmi lam na yang lha’i gos kyi/ rgyal mtshan gser gyi yu ba rab mdzas pa/ mtho khyad ri bo brgya phrag du ma’i tshad/ rtse mor gser gyi nyi ma’i snying po ni’od ‘bar rmad du byung bas rab spras pa/ bdag gi lag gis mngon par bzung ste ‘dug/ nyi ma’ang gung gi thig ler bab pa’i phyir/ nyi ma’i ‘od zer mdung tshugs lhung ba ni/ rgyal mtshan tog la rab tu reg pa yis/ de gnyis ‘od zer dbyer med ‘phros pa yis/ nyin mo stong phrag bsdus pa’i snang ba bzhin/ ‘jig rten thams cad rab tu gsal bar gyur/ de tshe steng gi nam mkha’ thams cad la/ rol mo’i sgra brnyan mang po rab brag zhing/ me*



When Tsuklak Trengwa woke up, he knew that this dream was a sign that he would be able to benefit the Dharma.³⁴ This dream reveals a significant shift in Tsuklak Trengwa's activity, and it is certainly a sign of victory and conquest. It shows that his encounter with the Eighth Karmapa and the tasks that he was assigned were pivotal for himself and his work.

The dream can be analysed further as follows. In the context of the previous dream, we have already seen that the victory banner is an emblem of the Buddha's victorious enlightenment. The immense size of the victory banner might symbolise the spiritual attainment of Tsuklak Trengwa's teacher, the Eighth Karmapa, as seen by Tsuklak Trengwa or his own attainment or capacity after finally having met his teacher. Generally, the "miraculous appearance of several suns in the sky simultaneously foretells a major event, such as the birth of a highly realised being" (Beer 1999, 32). In this case, the significant event might rather be the start of a fruitful student-teacher relationship. The "real" sun, which might stand for the Karmapa, came into contact with his own sun on the victory banner, and both suns were shining together inseparably. The elucidation of all worlds might symbolise the benefit and teaching activity that both masters together bring to beings. The sound of musical instruments appears in the Buddha's life story at multiple occasions—e.g., when the Buddha-to-be is reminded to leave the celestial palace in the god's realm where he is dwelling before his birth or when directly after his birth he makes seven steps.³⁵ They seem to be a reminder to benefit and teach beings and probably carry the same symbolism in Tsuklak Trengwa's case. Just like the rain of flowers, they are connected to the gods' attention and witnessing.

These are just a few selected examples of Tsuklak Trengwa's numerous experiences found in his spiritual autobiography. Similar to the meditative experiences described in the previous section,

tog char chen kha don sna tshogs pa/ khyad par sngon po shas cher gyur ba yis/ bdag dang rgyal mtshan de la 'thor ba mthong/.

³⁴ The ability to interpret one's own dreams as well as the dreams of others, is a typical sign that distinguishes accomplished masters from ordinary dreamers (Young 1999, 95).

³⁵ Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2013, paragraphs 2.14, 7.33, and other places.



these two dreams described here provide insight into Tsuklak Trengwa's personal experience and have the function of bringing about devotion in the minds of his followers.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, some glimpses into Tsuklak Trengwa's experiences in meditation and dreams were provided. These passages function as a practical instruction to his disciples by constituting a guide to his insights and visions as an accomplished being. The passages show that his spiritual autobiography, in fact, not only contains passages that belong to the level of outer and inner, but also to the level of secret spiritual autobiography (*gsang ba'i rang rnam*). It exhibits accounts of Tsuklak Trengwa's experiences that are not perceived by ordinary people and are most probably meant to be read by an inner circle of his followers to foster trust and devotion in them.

It would certainly be interesting to compare such accounts of the secret level in Tsuklak Trengwa's spiritual autobiography with those of other masters. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, there are three different autobiographies of Tsuklak Trengwa's. Comparing them with respect to the secret level could be a rewarding enterprise. In particular, there is one spiritual autobiography called *The Very Hidden Talk* that is explicitly described as secret.³⁶ It might be interesting to analyse this text as a representative of such purely secret life stories.

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³⁶ Tsuklak Trengwa n.d. For a translation of the colophon, see Bjerregaard and Dell 2022, 137–138.



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