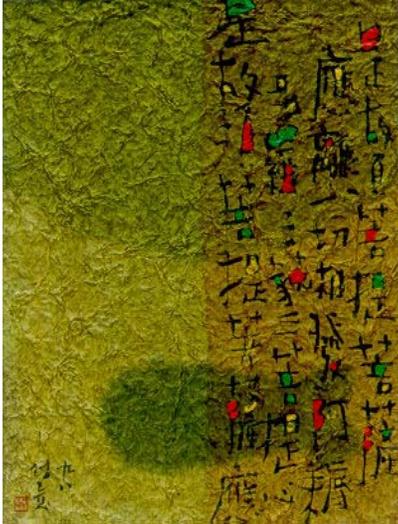


Research Article

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Interpreting the Diamond Way: Contemporary Convert Buddhism in Transition

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Research Article

Interpreting the Diamond Way:
Contemporary Convert Buddhism in Transition

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Abstract: This paper addresses the broader issues of continuity and change during the transition of Tibetan Buddhism from Asia to the West. It looks at the Diamond Way, a contemporary Karma bKa' brgyud lay movement founded by the Danish lay teacher Ole Nydahl. The paper aims to open this area of study by employing a balanced approach between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of trust, and by adding the historical-critical approach of Tibetan Buddhist Studies to the perspectives of sociology and cultural anthropology. Acknowledging Nydahl as both a charismatic and controversial figure within contemporary Buddhism, the discussion focuses on notions of lay and yogi Buddhism in the Diamond Way and on the question of westernization in Diamond Way practices. The paper concludes by raising questions about the future, continuity and change of Nydahl's heritage after his death.

Introduction

Contemporary Tibetan Buddhism can be seen as a patchwork of disparate yet linked religious identities and observances resulting from the multi-layered process of change, which started with the communist Chinese occupation of Tibet in the 1950s. This so-called "peaceful liberation" resulted in the exile of the Dalai Lama and initially around 70,000 Tibetans (Lopez 1995: 263), including many spiritual and political leaders from Tibet into the Diaspora. Tibetan Buddhism(s) dissipated gradually from Nepal and India to North America and Europe. The transition triggered can be described as equally dramatic and transformative as the "later dissemination" (*phyi dar / phyi 'gyur*): the final transition of late Indian Buddhism to Tibet in the eleventh to thirteenth century C.E. The physical and intellectual bloodshed at the beginning of the exile prompted a poignant policy of centralization by the newly established Tibetan Government in Exile led by the dGe lugs, although attempts to subsume the non-dGe lugs schools under the dGe lugs umbrella ultimately failed. Still, the exile initially formed a strong challenge to the sectarian diversification of Tibetan Buddhism. This differentiation had originally seen fluid and intertwining transmission lineages develop into divergent school identities from the thirteenth century onwards and led to sectarian rivalry and occasional open hostility until the twentieth century. The perceived political need for unified leadership first led to a rhetoric of central political responsibilities in the hands of one communal hierarch in each for the four main living branches of Tibetan Buddhism - even though traditionally all rNying ma, bKa' brgyud and Sa skya sub-branches had held very diverse and decentralized structures of spiritual, political and economic power. Moreover, the dGe lugs representation of Tibetan Buddhism has dominated the academic discourse at American and European universities since

the first decades of the exile until today.

Fifty years into the exile, the situation is changing. The political rhetoric has not resulted into large, centralized structures, and it seems that lineal personal affiliation has re-instated itself as the driving force of Tibetan Buddhism(s) rather than ideas of centralized uniformity. Academic discourse, which has long been dominated by the dGe lugs, is slowly diversifying.

In the study of contemporary Buddhism(s) outside of Asia, the categories "ethnic" and "convert" Buddhism(s) are widely used to make a distinction between the expression of migrant Buddhists and the new converts from the respective dominant Western cultural backgrounds. This dichotomy is questionable. Firstly, there are methodological concerns not only due to its binary simplicity, but also because it constructs and emphasizes authenticities and continuities (migration) vs. cultural discontinuities (conversion). Furthermore, from a phenomenological point of view, it does not sufficiently cover movements of preservation vs. movements of reform. Martin Baumann has therefore suggested using the categories "traditionalist" vs. "modernist," although he has admitted that these might only have value for the next decade of research (Baumann 2002a: 62). Moreover, as he himself has conceded (2002a: 59), these categories seem ill-fitting in the case of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, it seems justified, as proposed by Paul David Numrich, to cautiously retain the category of "convert Buddhism" for our purposes. For Tibetan Buddhism(s) in transition, the position of lay practitioners and the relationship of Western converts to "tradition and modernity" form decisive challenges.

In Tibetan Buddhism(s)'s process of encountering and inhabiting the "West," the question of monasticism has

become a key issue. Although processes of "positive orientalism" (Tibet perceived as Shangri-La) and self-mystification skillfully used by Tibetans in exile resulted in a very positive reception of Tibetan Buddhist spirituality in general, modern as well as postmodern Western society seems to struggle with structures of traditional Tibetan monasticism that appear more feudal. The need of convert lay practitioners for spiritual instructions and guidance, even in advanced meditation, has formed a unique challenge for "traditionalist" and "ethnic" Tibetan Buddhism. The following analysis focuses on a particular Western Karma bKa' brgyud lay movement, Ole Nydahl's *Diamond Way*. At the centre of this investigation lie questions of legitimization, continuity and change of this modern Buddhist movement. I argue for a revision of the scholarly discourse on the *Diamond Way* in light of a Tibetan-Buddhist-Studies-based hermeneutics of recovery or trust.

Karma bKa' brgyud: Paradigms from the Past

The bKa' brgyud pa's ("oral explanation lineage") and specifically their largest sub-branch, the Karma bKa' brgyud, became important players in the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in exile. The name bKa' brgyud already hints at the importance of the teacher-student relationship, generally constructed as an unbroken lineage of transmission from either the historical Buddha Śākyamuni or a Tantric Buddha as an expression of the *dharmakāya*, usually Vajradhara. The bKa' brgyud branches trace back to the Indian Mahāsiddhas Tillipa/Tellopāda/Tilopa and Nāḍapāda/Nāropa (eleventh century C.E.) and to the Tibetan translator Mar pa Chos kyī blo gros (1012-97), whose main disciple was the "Great Yogi" Mi la ras pa (1040-1123). The Karma bKa' brgyud, the largest of the four major and eight minor

Dwags po bKa' brgyud sub-branches, was founded by Dus gsum mkhyen pa (1110-1193). He is thought to be the first of the oldest line of consciously reborn realized masters in Tibetan Buddhism - the line of the Karma pa hierarchs. One special feature of the bKa' brgyud schools is their explicit, close relationship to the late Indian Tantric practitioners called Mahāsiddhas. The teachings and practices of the bKa' brgyud schools are presented as the continuation (by transmission) of this unique form of late Indian Buddhism. Characteristics of this form of Buddhism include the unconventional yogi outside a monastic society, the utilization of transgressive, secretive imagery and practices of power/subjugation (especially in the *Mahāyoga Tantra* tradition) and sexuality (especially in the *Yoginī Tantra* tradition) for the realization of non-dual totality called the "Great Seal" (*mahāmudrā*, Tibetan: *phyag rgya chen po*): the inseparable union of wisdom/emptiness/space (female) and bliss/compassion (male). During the Tibetan assimilation of late Indian Buddhism, the tradition of the unconventional, non-monastic yogi-practitioner clashed with the establishment of a monastic society. Geoffrey Samuel has described this process using the poles "shamanic" vs. "clerical" (Samuel 1993: 12-22).¹ The tantric practices of subjugation and cosmic rule and their focus on the yogic body as the microcosmic stage for the macrocosmic totality of enlightened experience were moulded into a monastic system of gradual training. This was later called "*mantra mahāmudrā*" in the lineage of Nāropa. However, sGam po pa favored teaching the Great Seal outside of the tantric, gradual path based on the Sahajayāna of Saraha and Maitripāda / Advayavajra. This path was later called "*essence mahāmudrā*" and became the continuous subject of inter- and cross-sectarian polemics, most notably with Sa skya Paṇḍita, a proponent of a strictly tantric gradualist approach.² Additionally, the heritage of the Mahāsiddhas

continued in a particular bKa' brgyud movement of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the "holy madmen" or "crazy yogis" (smyon pa) such as gTsang smyon He ru ka (1452-1507). Lay practitioners, both patrons and tantric adepts, played a decisive role in the process of assimilation that formed Tibetan Buddhism(s). In the same way, lay people are now playing a key role during the westernization of Tibetan Buddhism(s). The Mahāsiddha / crazy yogi heritage and the medieval Tibetan doctrinal debate about teaching the Great Seal outside of the Tantra prove to be highly relevant historical precedents in the interpretation of unconventional modern/contemporary yogic/lay teachers such as the late Chogyam Trungpa and Ole Nydahl.

Ole Nydahl

Unravelling Nydahl's life story is not a straightforward task. Nydahl (*1941) has given his own account of his life, conversion and subsequent activities as a Buddhist teacher until 1994. His book *Entering the Diamond Way* (first published in 1985 - second edition 1999), originally written in German,³ covers the years of his conversion and Buddhist training in the Himalaya from 1968-1972. His book *Riding the Tiger* (published in 1992), also originally written in German, picks up the thread with his and his wife's (Hannah Nydahl) return to Copenhagen on 7 October 1972 and describes his activities into the early 1990s.⁴ Stylized as autobiographical accounts, these books are the results of a team effort led by Nydahl himself, who drafts, corrects, finalizes, and authorizes the German and English versions of the manuscripts. Nydahl uses this method for all of his books. Still, the core author team designates itself as "TCHO", comprised of Ole Nydahl, Hannah Nydahl (1946-2007), Nydahl's Polish student Tomek Lehnert, and his once long-term girlfriend Cathrin (Caty) Hartung, aided by a further

circle of volunteers. The books can be described as part of an ongoing hagiographical process consisting of various publications, interviews and especially lectures and courses. Indeed, *Diamond Way* hagiography and legitimization form an intrinsic part of almost every public lecture given by Nydahl.

Verifiable elements in Nydahl's biography include the following: his middle-class upbringing; his early interest in languages and philosophy; his Hippie years, drugs, drug dealing and boxing, while studying English, German and philosophy at Copenhagen University from 1960-1969 (leaving a Ph.D. on Aldous Huxley uncompleted); his marriage to Hannah Nydahl in 1968; their first journey to Nepal (also in 1968) and the end of their drug dealing career in 1969 with four months in prison; Buddhist refuge and meeting the Sixteenth Karma pa in 1969; and his final return to Copenhagen 1972 and the founding of meditation groups, initially in Denmark and Germany. In addition, it can be substantiated that Nydahl received the following important Tibetan Buddhist (rNying ma and bKa' brgyud) transmissions from high lamas: the kLong chen snying thig 'pho ba from A yang sprul sku (1972), the "Six Yogas of Nāropa" (nā ro chos drug, 1975) and the bKa' brgyud sngags mdzod (1976) from the Sixteenth Karma pa, and the Rin chen gter mdzod from Ka lu Rin po che (1983). In a ceremony in 1994, the late sLop dpon Tshe chu Rin po che officially made Nydahl the holder of several Kālacakra transmission lineages in the Buddhist retreat center Karma Guen, Spain.

Standard hagiographical elements include for example Nydahl's childhood visions of his previous life as a soldier-protector in Eastern Tibet,⁵ his troubled years and reformation through Buddhism, and his recognition by the Sixteenth Karma pa, Tshe chu Rin po che and himself

as a protector or Mahākāla.⁶

Nydahl is apparently a charismatic figure, both personally and as a teacher. Nydahl's activities, however, have attracted criticism, rendering him a controversial figure in contemporary Buddhism. At this point, it is worth noting that Nydahl, both in his books and public lectures, is very open about controversial details in his biography and lifestyle, for example his drug dealing in the 1960s and his sexual promiscuity. In fairness, one should contrast this "lay/yogic" honesty to the rather frequent scandals due to the breaking of celibacy vows in both Tibetan and Western convert monastic contexts.⁷ Nydahl's honesty is conducive to a hermeneutics of trust in which biographical elements and personality are interpreted against the background of Nydahl's own understanding of Buddhism. Still, Nydahl's reception (and lack thereof) in recent scholarship is driven by a primarily etic hermeneutics of suspicion. However, the considerable contribution Nydahl has made to the spread of Buddhism among converts in the West can also be analyzed with a hermeneutics of trust and by including the emic parameters of the Tibetan Karma bKa' brgyud tradition.

Diamond Way

Ole Nydahl's *Diamond Way* is, in Lionel Obadia's words, a "Western-style, lay-oriented branch of the Tibetan Karma bKa' brgyud school of Buddhism" (Obadia 2002b: 182). As of August 2008, the organization consists of over 586 centers in fifty-five countries worldwide.⁸ An approximation of the number of Nydahl's adherents has to remain rather speculative, but the total of paying memberships in the different national organizations can be estimated conservatively at 15,000, with perhaps a total of 70,000 students in the grey areas between devoted followers and casual sympathizers. For example, in

Germany - one of the countries with the largest number of *Diamond Way* followers - the German Buddhist Union (DBU) estimates that the number of regular visitors of *Diamond Way* centers and groups is 20,000.⁹ The German *Diamond Way* umbrella association "Buddhistischer Dachverband Diamantweg", or BDD, estimates its (paying) memberships at 6,000.¹⁰ As of October 2008, the *Diamond Way Buddhist Network News* (DWBN news) e-mail list has 10,000 subscribers.¹¹ A total of 4,500 participants attended the 2008 international meditation course at the newly purchased "Europe-Center."¹² Nydahl himself has stated that he has given one of his trademark special teachings, the transference of consciousness at the moment of death (Tibetan: *'pho ba*), to around 70,000 people.

The *Diamond Way* can be meaningfully interpreted in sociological terms as a "movement" and as an "organization." Groups and centers form a network tied together by regional and national umbrella organizations of diverse legal organizational status. The mission statement of these communes is laid out in the presentation of the new Europe Center:

*Diamond Way Buddhism is built on an international network of friendship and idealism. We master the greatest challenges, because we: - all work together for the benefit of all beings; - make the best out of every situation, flexibly; - bear our responsibility, free from hierarchies.*¹³

Instead of hierarchies, "friendship and idealism" are supposed to lead to what Nydahl likes to call "meritocracy." In a 2003 lecture series on "centers and their functions" in Edmonton, he called these "flat hierarchies" the "principle of the soft middle." Centers are meant for what could be called the critical elite, and their

function is "to offer a spiritual way to those who are too critical and independent for anything else" (Nydahl 1995: 25). However, claim and reality do not always correspond, and one obvious reason that Nydahl has such an intense global traveling schedule is to keep in touch with his 500+ centers. The same is true for his circle of International Traveling Teachers who visit the centers and (are encouraged to) report back to Nydahl. Via a hermeneutics of suspicion, one could perceive a missionary drive here, as well as empire building and a discourse of power. Via a hermeneutics of trust, one could see a genuine endeavor to benefit beings. The question whether the *Diamond Way* needs to be analyzed in sociological terms as a proselytizing or missionary movement is complicated by the fact that in its "doctrinal dimension" (in Smart's terms), it adheres strictly to the Buddhist rhetoric of non-proselytizing. Additionally, the *Diamond Way* rhetoric clearly displays the same sort of soteriological elitism (or snobbism), which characterizes most of Buddhism. On the other hand, this finding is in paradoxical contrast to its "organizational dimension"; by its own parameters of growth, the *Diamond Way* is clearly a rapidly expanding and - especially in Central and Eastern Europe - extremely successful movement. This in itself might warrant the label of a missionary religious movement.¹⁴

One further issue worth analyzing in the *Diamond Way* is the center of power around Nydahl himself. Nydahl has shared more and more practical responsibilities with his inner circle who draft and co-author his books, control access to Nydahl in the scant time available outside of public lectures, organize his travels and receive and answer his e-mails. Although Nydahl sees himself just as a "program" teaching Buddhism¹⁵ and a "Buddhist manager" for his centers, he has delegated much organizational power to this inner circle. Until recently,

he worked closely with his wife Hannah, who kept important contacts with the "ethnic" Karma bKa' brgyud in Asia. Nydahl travelled either with her and/or his second main consort Cathrin Hartung. The situation changed after the publicly announced end of the intimate relationship with Hartung in 2004 and the death of Hannah Nydahl in spring 2007. Additionally, the fourth pillar in the core team "TCHO", Nydahl's close student Tomek Lehnert, finally dropped out in August 2007 due to serious health problems, having only returned that very year following previous time out. At the *International Center Meeting* on 24 August at the Europe Center, Nydahl explicitly called Hartung the "organizer" and the "practical guide," while reserving the "spiritual guidance" for himself. And true enough, neither Lehnert nor Hartung have ever made claims of realization. Still, both have held (and Hartung still holds) key functions of power and leadership, which occasionally clash with the demands of spiritual guidance and realized leadership. The question of power within the *Diamond Way* will play a role in the concluding assessment of Nydahl's legacy and its future.

Re-Interpreting the *Diamond Way*

It is surprising to realize how little academic research has been done on a worldwide organization whose adherents form the largest number of convert Buddhists in many European countries and possibly the largest convert Buddhist movement in the whole of Europe and South America. This lack of research might partly be due to the fact that the *Diamond Way* is still of rather negligible relevance in France and the Anglo-Saxon world. Another factor is the academic bias, especially in current North-American Buddhist and Tibetan Studies, whose scholars/practitioners overwhelmingly come from the dGe lugs school or the more vocal other side of the

divided Karma bKa' brgyud community. They are supported by large and influential Buddhist publishing houses such as the dGe lugs-associated *Wisdom* and *Snow Lion* and institutions such as the *Tsadra Foundation*. In the controversy about the recognition of the Seventeenth Karma pa hierarch, this group favors one-sidedly the Si tu pa candidate, Ugyen Trinley (O rgyan 'phrin las), who is recognized by the surprising alliance of the Chinese occupants of Tibet and the Dalai Lama. The supporters of this candidate try to monopolize the academic and public discourse by attacking or ignoring Thaye Dorje (mTha' yas rdo rje), the candidate supported by Nydahl and his *Diamond Way*; Thaye Dorje was recognized by the "Red Hat Karma pa," the Fourteenth Zhwa dmar pa hierarch. The latter is, after the Karma pa, the second in the Karma bKa' brgyud hierarchy. Commenting on this ongoing academic partisanship, the Fourteenth Zhwa dmar pa has coined the term "package believer" for those Western supporters who, in their bias, "fail to examine the details of any given situation."¹⁶ One example of this climate of scholarship is the embarrassingly biased entry "Karma pa" by Andrew Quintman in the American, 2004 *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. This entry is illustrated solely and programmatically by a large picture of the Chinese candidate as the Seventeenth Karma pa (p. 418). It is clear that the author intentionally misleads when he anecdotally mentions the schism only as a dispute about the recognition "by a small number of followers" (p. 419) and when he also wrongly attributes the support of the majority of the Western Buddhist community to the Chinese candidate. In fact, it can be argued that most Western (though not US) Karma bKa' brgyud followers support the Zhwa dmar pa candidate. In contrast, the British 2007 *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* demonstrates better editorial choice.¹⁷

Nydahl's reception in academia begins with a critical paragraph in Stephen Batchelor's 400-page work on Buddhism and the West (published in 1994). A Buddhist teacher and westernizer of Buddhism himself, Batchelor describes Nydahl as "one of the Karmapa's most effective, albeit controversial, agents in Europe", a "sun-tanned Viking" projecting an "ecstatic, sensuous version of Tantric Buddhism," whose approach shows "fundamentalist and sectarian overtones" (p. 115). Helen Waterhouse's balanced study on the impact of the undecided Karma pa controversy on a local English west country *sangha* (Bath) refers to Nydahl as a "loyal disciple" of Zhwa dmar pa and acknowledges his influence in Germany (Waterhouse 1995).

The few more recent references to Nydahl in academic research also mention the mixed reception of Nydahl's personal style, political views,¹⁸ and his alleged spiritual elitism.¹⁹ Martin Baumann has asked legitimate questions about some Western peculiarities of the *Diamond Way*, such as the election and education of the so-called Traveling Teachers. In this context, he criticizes the *Diamond Way* and its "Westernization" of Buddhist transmission and warns of diluting the teachings "into a form of 'instant-Buddhism'" (Baumann 2005: 377). In an earlier sociological study devoted to Kagyu converts in Germany, Eva Saalfrank noted the same criticism of "instant-enlightenment" and "instant-Buddhism" referring to Nydahl's teaching of advanced tantric practices (Saalfrank 1997: 138).

Hence, the little recent academic attention Nydahl has drawn so far come, interestingly, from European sociologists of religions who specialize in New Religious Movements and Contemporary Religions/Buddhism(s). The neglect of Modern Tibetan Buddhist movements by classically trained Tibetologists is deplorable; the

historical-critical methodology of Tibetan Studies can complement sociology and anthropology and add greatly to the discourses about authenticity and legitimization of movements such as Nydahl's *Diamond Way*.

A New Reading of the Diamond Way

The few, fleeting academic comments are predominantly and understandingly made from the angle of a "hermeneutics of suspicion," to use Ricoeur's terminology. In the following, when employing a "hermeneutics of trust", I argue that Nydahl's activities can be meaningfully interpreted within the emic paradigms of Tibetan Buddhism.

Nydahl consciously propagates his *Diamond Way* as lay and yogi Buddhism. In his introductory lectures as well as in his key publication *The Way Things Are*, which appeared in 2008 in revised form, he always adheres to conventional Tibetan hermeneutics of Buddhist diversity in terms of Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma. Here, he attributes monasticism to the first level of Buddhist teachings, the "Small Way" level, stressing cause and effect (*karma*), avoidance of disturbing emotions and outer promises. He sees laicity on the second level, Mahāyāna, stressing wisdom and compassion, idealist activity and transforming disturbing emotions. He sees the third level, the *Diamond Way*, progressing to the yogi ideal, emphasizing identity with enlightenment and behaving like a Buddha until one is a Buddha. These levels do not relate simplistically to different Buddhisms rather to levels of what Nydahl terms the "pillars" of view, meditation and application / conduct. These levels are to be applied to the best of one's ability in every single circumstance. The superiority of the lay and yogi approach is concisely formulated in an interview given by Nydahl in 2001, entitled "Crazy

Wisdom," which has been translated into several languages. It appeared first in an abridged English version in 2003 and finally in 2004 in an unabridged German version. Here, Nydahl simply asserts, "If one can speak of any hierarchy in the Diamond Way, we surely have the yogis on top" (p. 52). At the same time, when referring to a standard classification of the traditional number of 84,000 lessons the historical Buddha supposedly gave, Nydahl maintains that the 21,000 sūtric lessons are especially intended for lay people, while the 21,000 teachings on *vinaya* - rather obviously - relate to monastics (Nydahl 2008a: 66).

In his 2000 article "Changing the Face of the Sangha", Nydahl links Buddhist laicity explicitly with Western modernity and values:

What opens the needed new dimensions and possibilities for growth today, when Buddhism increasingly inspires the West, is our empowered lay practitioners, who are now freer than ever to utilize life's possibilities. Democracy, transparency, education, critical thinking and the Internet all enable beings to share and partake in Buddhist information and fit it into their lives. For these reasons, Buddhism now reaches many in relevant and convincing ways, and one may talk of a recent landslide of interest in mind's potential in Western democracies. (Nydahl 2000: 32)

Nydahl's self-identification and legitimization as a Western Karma bKa' brgyud lay teacher stems from his interpretation of the mission given to him by the Sixteenth Karma pa. His frequently repeated autobiographical authorization account - a decisive part of the continual hagiographical tradition he and his inner circle are writing and rewriting - claims that the late Karma bKa' brgyud hierarch had given Nydahl the West

as field of (lay) conversion. The exception to this was France, which was reserved for the continuation of the Karma bKa' brgyud monastic traditions in the West. In just one of the numerous oral and published examples of this legitimization account, Nydahl asserts in a characteristically succinct way: "He [Karmapa] gave Hannah and me the Western world, minus France, and also responsibility for lay Buddhism. He gave France to Gendun Rinpoche and the monasteries there" (Nydahl 2003: 52).

Although acknowledging the rich monastic heritage of the Karma bKa' brgyud, it is clear that Nydahl sees lay Buddhism as the Buddhism of the future in the West. He favors the lay practitioner who earns his/her own money, has a family and, while not avoiding the struggles of everyday life and human relationships, adopts the yogi view that expresses itself in their meditation practice, dharma work and dharma travel. The imperative of laicity has been recently broadened to include the policy that all *Diamond Way* students of Nydahl who travel and teach in his centers ("Traveling Teachers") work for the dharma as volunteers, that is they have to sustain themselves and earn their livelihood independently of the *sangha*, usually through paid employment.

Nydahl links himself explicitly to the Mahāsiddha tradition in the key interview "Crazy Wisdom," which appeared in several languages. One of Nydahl's most influential Tibetan mentors and supporter of his activities in the West, his first refuge Lama, Lopon Tsechu Rinpoche (sLob dpon Tshe chu Rin po che, 1918-2003), also interpreted Nydahl's activity explicitly in the context of the Mahāsiddha tradition and the yogi/accomplisher. In an interview given in the context of a tantric blessing-initiation (*rjes gnang*) into the eighty-four Mahāsiddhas on 21 May 1997 in Karma Guen, Spain, he

reflects on Buddhism in the Western world and Nydahl's activities:

Almost all of the 84 Mahasiddhas followed the Lay Way, only a few of them were monks and nuns. Nowadays, the Lay Way is natural and beneficial for many people. It is my opinion that LAMA OLE NYDAHL's approach is really able to benefit a great number of beings. The teachings were given in order to benefit beings. This is the purpose of the teachings. They must touch us, change our state of mind, help us understand the workings of cause and effect, and change our lives in a positive way. LAMA OLE's work does exactly this. Not only does he benefit many beings by teaching them the great Vajrayana practise of Phowa, he also constantly approaches others and benefits them by changing their lives in a positive way. I support and value his activity in every way (Tsechu Rinpoche 2004: 15).

In the context of Nydahl's "yogi style," controversies arose pertaining both to Nydahl himself and the emulation of his style by his often more devoted than critical students. In a 1997 German interview, Nydahl freely admits that part of the controversy is due to his personal polarizing style. He explains that he enacts his function as a Buddhist protector (Nydahl 1997: 31). Many points of controversy relate to the enactment of the lay-yogi element in the *Diamond Way*.²⁰ Just how relevant the lay/yogi/mahāsiddha narrative is for Nydahl and the *Diamond Way* is demonstrated by the fact that this very statement by Tsechu Rinpoche was quoted on 12 August 2008 in Hartung's eulogizing inauguration speech of the new international hub of the *Diamond Way* organization, the Europe Center in Hochreute near Immenstadt. Hartung introduced this quote with the programmatic statement: "Your life story is evidence that the trust in the Sixteenth Karma pa in combination with

the power of the transmission lineage can awaken and protect our freedom." Hence the Europe Center's inauguration strikes the key chords of Nydahl's self-representation, which implicitly addresses three key critiques:

- His legitimate place within the living transmission of the Karma bKa' brgyud as a lay and yogi teacher in the tradition of the Mahāsiddhas, *smyon pa's* and their crazy wisdom. This addresses Nydahl's unconventional spiritual formation and education outside the prescribed curriculum of three-year retreats.²¹
- His undeniable trust and devotion to the Sixteenth Karma pa. Even his strongest critics have admitted Nydahl's complete loyalty to the late Karma bKa' brgyud hierarch.²²
- His function as a Buddhist teacher and protector of Western freedom. This addresses his legitimization narrative of himself as emanation of a Buddhist protector and his Kālacakra-linked fierce interpretation of Islam in particular as a key threat to Western freedom and human, especially women's rights.²³

Hence, we get a rare glimpse into the remarkable process of living hagiography-in-the-making.

At this point, it is useful to take a look at the Buddhist practice propagated by Nydahl. Is the *Diamond Way* merely a "lifestyle Buddhism" as the Church appointed Political Scientist Christian Ruch argues in a polemical pamphlet issued by the German Protestant Churches (Ruch 2006)? Would it be valid to extend the

abovementioned criticism of the *Diamond Way* as "instant-Buddhism" or "Buddhism *light*" to the core rituals and practices performed in the *Diamond Way*?

The *Diamond Way* practitioner's core practice is the guru yoga on the Sixteenth Karma pa, also known as the "three lights meditation," which constitutes an essentialized Tantric meditation on the teacher as the Yidam (meditational deity), in this case in the form of a self-empowerment. This meditation was composed in 1959 and transmitted to Nydahl in 1970 and again later repeatedly by the Sixteenth Karma pa for use in the Western Karma bKa' brgyud centers that Nydahl was commissioned to establish. In the beginning, Nydahl's centers also clung to the traditional Tibetan *pūja* practices, which are seen as appropriate for all but the advanced Karma bKa' brgyud practitioners, monks, nuns and lay people alike. The "three lights meditation" was also initially practiced in Tibetan style but was soon westernized. Local (European) languages were used and the (translated) *sādhana* underwent an ongoing process of adaptation. In the German special anniversary edition of the meditation issued by the KKD Wuppertal in 1999, Nydahl legitimizes this adaptation with the wishes of the Sixteenth Karma pa "to transmit it always in a fresh and up-to-date (*zeitgemäß*) way and in the respective national language." (KKD 1999: [2])

Hence, although the guided meditation in Nydahl's centers is always conducted in the respective local languages rather than in Tibetan, every meditation and lecture ends with the traditional sung invocation of the Karma bKa' brgyud protector Mahākāla Ber nag can, which is ascribed to the Eighth Karma pa. This invocation is part of the daily ritual in any contemporary Karma bKa' brgyud monastery (on both sides of the schism). It is a quite long, poetic ritual text, which is by no means

immediately accessible, and includes visualized Tantric offerings and wishes for the activity of the Karma pa. This practice clearly links the *Diamond Way* with the global Karma bKa' brgyud Buddhist community. Nydahl's resistance to modernize this part of traditional demonstrates that he is not a westernizer simply for the sake of westernization. Rather, he understands his activity in devout compliance with the late Sixteenth Karma pa's wishes as an integrated part of the wider Karma bKa' brgyud community.

Nydahl also transmits the practice of "Conscious Dying" or Phowa (*pho ba*) in its entirety in the traditional way, sung in Tibetan. The transmission of this teaching has become one of Nydahl's trademarks. He teaches this advanced practice outside of the "Six Yogas of Nāropa", eight to twelve times a year across the world, at courses attended by up to 2000 people. Nydahl's own transmission originates from the kLong chen snying thig (rNying ma) tradition. Hence, the completion of extensive preliminary practices is not a prerequisite for this practice, although Buddhist refuge is required. Nydahl's meticulous adherence to the traditional form and content of this Tantric practice is inconsistent with an interpretation of the *Diamond Way* as an easy, lifestyle Buddhism. In the same way, Nydahl's emphasis on the traditional lengthy Tantric gradual training, called the special preliminary practices or *sngon 'gro*, is not easily compatible with his alleged propagation of an "Instant-Buddhism". The *sngon 'gro* form long purification and merit collecting meditations. In the *Diamond Way*, unlike in the monastic tradition, these meditations are not practiced during a three-year-retreat, but rather form part of the encouraged daily meditation routine of the serious practitioners. Also these four Preliminary Practices have been translated into local languages and are now being practiced alternatively in

Tibetan and in the respective local languages; the translations have been meticulously checked by Hannah Nydahl and Western Tibetan Studies scholars in collaboration with Tibetan scholar-monks (*mkhan po*). The same holds true for the most common - but not sole - advanced practice utilized after the *sngon 'gro*: the guru yoga on the eighth Karma pa in the *Yoginī Tantra* tradition of Cakrasaṃvara. From this perspective, the *Diamond Way* does not appear to be "Buddhism *light*."

Still, it is hard to quantify how many of Nydahl's students really progress to the post *sngon 'gro* stage. Taking the comparably small numbers of participants at post *sngon 'gro* courses as an indication, it is feasible to estimate that the number is not much higher than 15 per cent of all of his students. Therefore, the Traveling Teachers are encouraged to teach *sngon 'gro* primarily. However, some of these teachers have not finished *sngon 'gro* themselves (and consequently do not teach it), and some do not practice at all. Baumann's 2005 criticism of "instant Buddhism" seems to apply here justly. When confronted with the latter point in a 2007 interview, Nydahl expressed surprise, but quickly referred to the active work in the centers as the motor for development and maturity (Nydahl 2007: 8). One can see here the reflection of Nydahl's own life story. Although Nydahl wanted to go into three-year retreats, which render the traditional qualification as a lama, he was not permitted to do so by the Sixteenth Karma. Instead, Nydahl successfully and with evidently unceasing effort built up Buddhist centers. The argument that Dharma work and meditation both bring development is thus imperative for the credibility of his own life story.

Can the criticism of an "instant Buddhism" also be applied to yet another aspect of Nydahl's teaching activities? On many occasions, Nydahl has taught the

most advanced bKa' brgyud teachings, the *mahāmudrā* (Great Seal) even to beginners and, occasionally, even to those who don't have Buddhist refuge. In other words, Nydahl often teaches about the ultimate experience of the inseparability of space and bliss in introductory lectures that are open to the general public. In recent years, he has stressed that these teachings on the union of space and bliss can be seen as *bde stong* (bliss-emptiness), a third level of emptiness teaching beyond the predominantly dGe lugs favored *rang stong* (empty in itself) and the mainly *gsar ma* (rNying ma, bKa' brgyud and Sa skya) favoured *gzhan stong* (empty of other).²⁴ Thus, there is an aspect to the *Diamond Way* which connects it with the early bKa' brgyud simultaneists. In this tradition, Nydahl is teaching the Great Seal outside of the Tantra (the gradual Tantric trajectory), and we can see a reflection of the Tibetan medieval debate between gradualists and simultaneists mentioned in the very beginning of this paper. In this sense, the *Diamond Way* has an aspect of the "instant" or better "co-emergent", "simultaneously-arising" (*sahaja*).

Conclusion: The Future of the *Diamond Way*

The previous discussion has shown that the construction of continuity and transmission is pivotal to the doctrinal dimension of the *Diamond Way*. Nydahl is presented as a modern yogi in the authentic transmission of the Karma bKa' brgyud school and its *mahāsiddha* tradition. It is also clear that the *Diamond Way* is firmly rooted in global Karma bKa' brgyud Buddhism due to its unreserved endorsement by the highest Karma bKa' brgyud teachers and transmission holders on the Zhwa dmar pa side of the Karma bKa' brgyud schism. Although other Karma bKa' brgyud groups on the same side of the schism have sometimes ventured strong criticism against Nydahl, they have never been able to find support in the Karma bKa'

brgyud hierarchy. At the same time, Nydahl takes great care to maintain essential points of transmission in the meditation practices. In the Buddhist practices taught by Nydahl, features of continuity with the Tibetan tradition can be seen to be in balance with features of change. As a modern Western Karma bKa' brgyud lay organization, the *Diamond Way* under his leadership has sufficiently established itself at least in Continental Europe.

Alternative meaningful readings of the *Diamond Way* can emerge by interpreting Nydahl's activity not solely from discourse analysis and a hermeneutics of suspicion, but also from the background of its precedent in the historical development and practice of Tibetan Buddhism and from a hermeneutics of trust.

What will be crucial for the future development of the *Diamond Way* is the problem of how the transmission will be continued after Nydahl's death. His own near-fatal skydiving accident of 2003 and the death of his wife Hannah in 2007 have raised this question for Nydahl's followers. Nydahl has addressed this question on different levels. Although he has ventured doubts about the usefulness of the Tibetan *sprul sku* (*tulku*, consciously reborn master) system for "Western societies" in the past, he clearly states that he himself will be reborn, with recognizable characteristics.²⁵ For the interim, he intends to place different spiritual responsibilities in the hands of different senior students. Nevertheless, the interim period might prove to be the real litmus test for Nydahl's heritage and the future of the *Diamond Way*. As it stands now, the *Diamond Way* is an integral part of global Karma bKa' brgyud and is positioned at the mTha' yas rdo rje/Zhwa dmar pa side of the schism. High Tibetan transmission holders from this side play a vital part in the spiritual life of the *Diamond Way*. Will they, who are emically seen as realized masters

take greater responsibility for the transmission after Nydahl's death? Centres of power and the empire-building by people with no claim to realization in the organization around Nydahl are other factors that can be perceived as worrisome. In the interview of 2007 and the quoted 2008 talks, Nydahl clearly speaks of Hartung and himself as a "we," and as the leaders. Further, due to the importance of English in the age of globalization, and despite the relatively negligible relevance of the *Diamond Way* in the U.K. and the U.S., American and British students can be seen to hold a disproportionate share in the organizational power, while the structure and central position of the German *Diamantweg Stiftung* both stabilizes the movement and creates a possibly unwanted hierarchy. It is hard to foresee how a clash between the organizational leaders in power and the yet to be appointed spiritual successors can be avoided. The very rationale for the introduction of the *tulku* system in Tibet - recognizability and continuity of spiritual leadership - has from its very beginnings also led to abuse and purely politically and/or economically motivated recognitions. The hereditary alternative, as for example practiced in the Sa skya sub-schools, has proven equally problematic and failing. In the case of the *Diamond Way*, the likely future conflict between organizational power and spirituality after Nydahl's death may ultimately be the decisive factor for the *Diamond Way's* survival.

Notes

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earlier stage of this paper, and to Jozach Miller, Linda Smith and *Carter Communication* (Berlin) for their meticulous proofreading. Needless to say, all remaining infelicities are my own.

1. Samuel argues that these poles resurface during the Westernization of Tibetan Buddhism in the form of "yogic" and "textual" approaches (Samuel 2005: 324-329).

2. On the simultaneist vs. gradualist Great Seal in the bKa' brgyud tradition, see Mathes, 2006; on the Sa skya Paṇḍita and the critique of the "white panacea" (*dkar po chig thub*, the single means to enlightenment), see Jackson 1994.

3. The original German had appeared already in 1979 as *Die Buddhas vom Dach der Welt: Mein Weg zu den Lamas*; it formed the basis of the earlier 1985 English edition. The second German edition from 1989 saw Nydahl's "Danish-German" thoroughly revised by two Austrian students who were very close to him at this time. Also, an interview from 1982 for the magazine *Esotera* was appended. The appendix and some other "dated" material were omitted for the third German edition 1994, which forms the basis of the current, 1999 English edition. The current 2003 German version was completely revised and reformulated by Nydahl's German team. The meditations included in all versions from the second German edition onwards have been constantly modified and modernized.

4. The second German edition of this book (German: *Über alle Grenzen*) of 1994 and also e.g. the 2000 Dutch translation take his activities until 1994. The third German edition includes a two page conclusion on Nydahl's activities till 2005 ("Ausblick 1994-2005," pp. 440-441).

5. See, e.g., Nydahl [1985] 1999, p. 2; Nydahl 1996, p. 33; Nydahl 1997, p. 31.

6. See, e.g., Nydahl 1992, pp. 213-214; Nydahl 1996, p.

33; Nydahl 1997, p. 31.

7. Compare, e.g., the recent (2007) and prominent scandal around the retreat preceptor of the Karma bKa' brgyud retreat center in Le Bost, France

8. Numbers given by Ole Nydahl at the public *International Centers' Meeting* on 24 August 2008 in the Europe Center in Hochreute near Immenstadt. Nydahl's 2009 New Year's letter to all *Diamond Way* centers (dated 29 December 2008) speaks of "our, so far 600, centers in spiritually free countries world wide."

9. <http://dharma.de/dbu/frameset.php#>, accessed 16 August 2008.

10. <http://www.diamantweg.de/zentren/bdd/index.html>, accessed 16 August 2008.

11. Numbers given at the German-speaking centers' meeting in Braunschweig, 25 October 2008.

12. Numbers given by Ole Nydahl at the public *International Centers' Meeting* on 24 August 2008 in the Europe Center in Hochreute near Immenstadt.

13. <http://www.europe-center.org/index.php?id=6>, accessed 16 August 2008.

14. On the sociological analysis of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism in the West against the paradigm of "missionary religion" see Lionel Obadia's 2001 case study of France.

15. See, e.g., recently Nydahl 2008b, p. 33.

16. The Fourteenth Zhwa dmar pa. "Letter to Robert A. F. Thurman" 6 June 2006, http://www.karmapa-issue.org/news/open_letter_thurman.htm, accessed 16 August 2008.

17. Here, the dGe lugs-affiliated John Powers depicts the "currently raging" and still undecided "bitter dispute" in a much more balanced way (p. 440). It is worth noting that the current controversy has its natural precedents in Tibetan religious history where the politics surrounding the recognition of high tulkus continuously influenced and flawed this system of spiritual succession. See e.g.

Kapstein 2006, pp. 105 and 109. For the historical precedent of the controversy around the recognition of the 8th Karma pa, see now Rheingans 2008, pp. 99-112.

18. Freiburger 2001, pp. 65 and 70 note 30, and Baumann 2002b, p. 99.

19. Obadia 2002a, p. 399.

20. I have analyzed and interpreted these points of controversies in depth in the original paper given at the World Lay Buddhist Forum, 16-20 October 2008 in Seoul, Korea. These discussions will be published in a separate article.

21. Nydahl was addressed as a "Buddhist teacher" by the Sixteenth Karma pa from 1972. From 1983 he has been called a "Buddhist Master" by the Zhwa dmar pa. The usage of the title "Lama" for Nydahl by the Karma bKa' brgyud lineage holders has been documented since 1995.

22. For example, Mick Brown, one of the hagiographers of the other Karma pa candidate and author of the devotional *Dance of the 17 Lives: The Incredible True Story of Tibet's 17th Karmapa* (Bloomsbury, 2004), described Nydahl in an BBC interview as "a very devout and a very industrious student of the Sixteenth Karma pa" (Sunday, BBC Radio 4, 7 August 2005).

23. See, e.g., Nydahl 1997, pp. 22-25.

24. Nydahl utilized and explained this division recently e.g. at the Europe Center inauguration, 12 August 2008 and in his most recent article "The Power of the Diamond Way" (Nydahl 2008b, p. 35).

25. See, e.g., Nydahl 1997, p. 37.

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