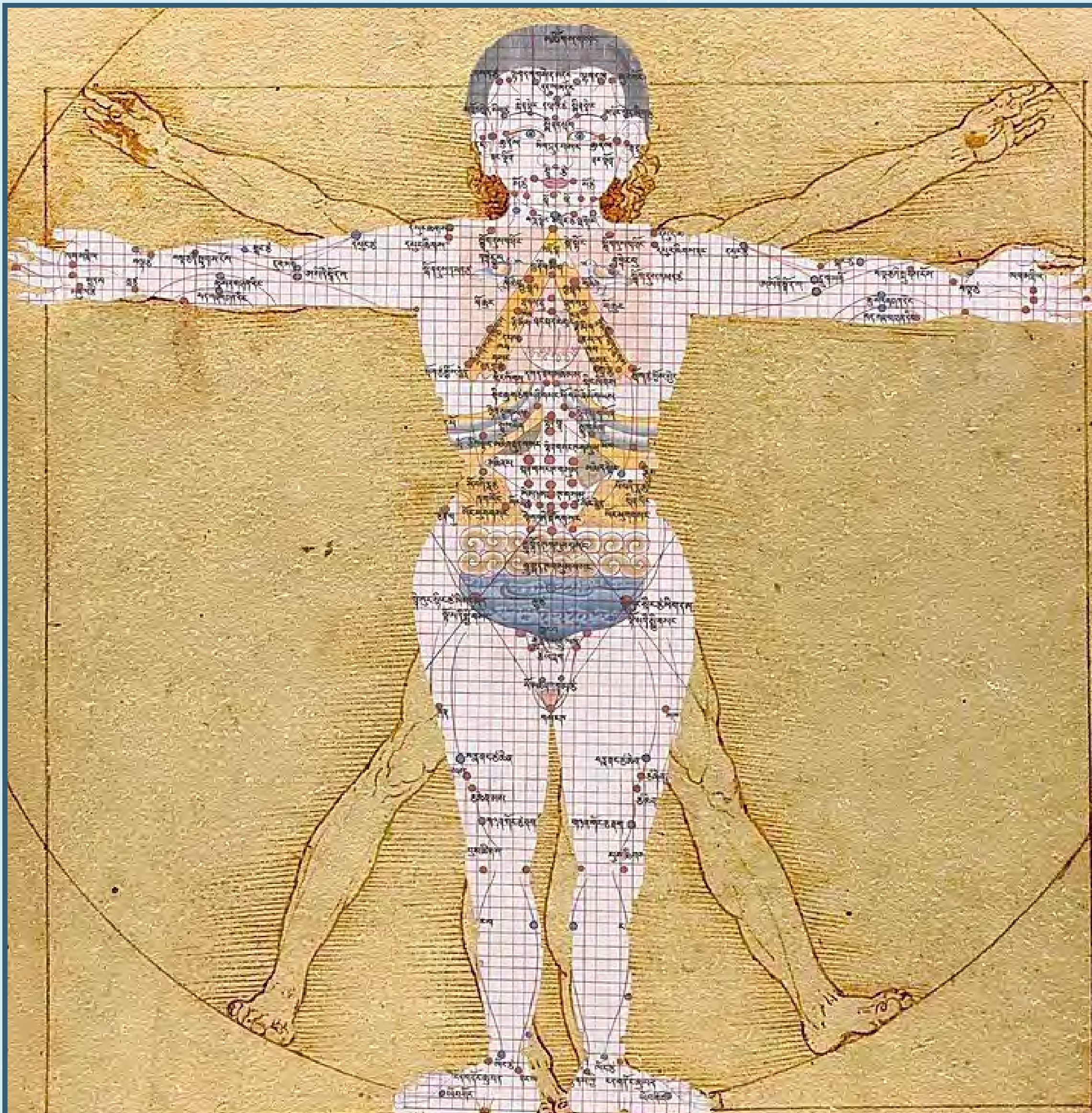


JHB318

Jackman Humanities Building

170 St. George Street



61 / 19
04 / 19

Buddhism & the Body in Tibet Schedule



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation
Centre for Buddhist Studies

Organized by:

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Conference Abstract

In recent years, the study of religion and the body has flourished as a multidisciplinary site of scholarly investigation. Understanding that “the body is at once biological and cultural” (Fuller 2015), some scholars have emphasized the importance of culture in constructing human thought and behavior, whereas others have focused on how our biology influences religious thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and so forth. Given the complex nature of the body and its numerous interactions with the world at large (whether social, biological, political, ritual, cosmological, and so forth), the body has been described as a “kind of Rorschach ink blot onto which particular cultures project preoccupations that are social and local” (Fuller 2015).

The aim of this symposium is to interrogate the category of the body within Tibetan Buddhist contexts. We seek to understand some of the culturally specific ways Tibetan Buddhists have understood the body, and in particular, how Tibetan notions of the body might challenge modes of explanation based in biology, genetics, and so forth. We also plan to explore how these notions of the body have interacted with other Tibetan frameworks such as philosophy, medicine, cosmology, ritual, and so forth. Lastly, we will imagine how Tibetan understandings of the body might contribute to the broader academic study of the body or to how the body is imagined in a cross-cultural perspective.

9:25

Event Welcome

Pamela Klassen and Michael Ium



9:30 -

“Bodies, Environments, and Their Elemental Entanglements in the Seventeen Great Perfection

10:15

Tantras (Rdzogs chen rgyu bcu bdun)”

Devin Zuckerman, University of Virginia

Respondent: Frances Garrett, University of Toronto



10:15 -

“Destroying the Nyen Mountain: Landscape, Body, and Plague in Tibet”

11:00

William McGrath, New York University



11:00 -

“The Porosity of Bodies: Yab Yum Motif in Tibetan Great Perfection (rdzogs chen)”

11:45

Kali Cape, Georgia State Universtiy



11:45 - Lunch

2:15

2:15 - “Instituting Flesh, Enfleshing Institutions: The Rise and Spread of the Geluk Maṅi Pill Tradition”
3:00 James Gentry, Stanford University



3:00 - “Body as Method: Appearance, Experience, and Transformation in the Sakyapa Tantric Path.”
3:45 Rae Erin Dachille, University of Arizona



3:45 - Coffee Break
4:00



4:00 - “Holy Bodies, Wholly Relics: Tibetan Buddhist Methods for Preserving the “Special Dead”
4:45 Julia Hirsch, Stanford University
Respondent: Rory Lindsay, University of Toronto



4:45 - Group Discussion
6:00

Devin Zuckerman

University of Virginia

“Bodies, Environments, and Their Elemental Entanglements in the Seventeen Great Perfection Tantras (Rdzogs chen rgyu bcu bdun)”

An enduring motif in Buddhist writings on the primary elements (‘byung ba) of earth, water, fire, wind, and space is the distribution of matter into “inner” elements of the human body and “outer” elements of the surrounding environment. But the significance of this idea varies across Buddhist scholarly and practical contexts.

In eleventh and twelfth century Great Perfection Heart Essence (Rdzogs chen snying thig) texts known as the Seventeen Tantras (Rgyud bcu bdun), the inner and outer elements paradigm functions to order and cohere various perceptual, experiential, and doctrinal binaries and boundaries: between bodies and environments; individuals and worlds; and relative and ultimate dimensions of religious experience. Collocating these ideas with ecological feminisms that propose new ethical figurations of the body in its transcorporeal interconnection with material environments, this paper explores a Great Perfection Buddhist theory of body-world entanglement construed in terms of the elements.

William McGrath

New York University

“Destroying the Nyen Mountain: Landscape, Body, and Plague in Tibet”

On January 26th, 2020, the Tibetan Medicine Administration for the Tibet Autonomous Region officially reported that the spreading COVID outbreak was a type of “nyen fever” (gnyan rims) and that, to treat it, physicians should “destroy the nyen mountain” (gnyan gyi ri bo snyil).

This presentation will explore the concept of “nyen mountain” in early Tibetan medical sources, both Buddhist and Bönpo, arguing that the concept emerged during an outbreak of the bubonic plague in Tibet. Following its canonization in the medical scripture of the Four Tantras, however, “destroying the nyen mountain” has taken on new meanings. At once an outgrowth on the Tibetan plateau and on the bodies of Tibetan people, the nyen mountain creates a relationship between landscape, body, and disease that persists and will continue to persist from past to present and even future plagues.

Kali Cape

Georgia State University

“The Porosity of Bodies: Yab Yum Motif in Tibetan Great Perfection (rdzogs chen)”

This paper explores how a Tibetan Great Perfection (rdzogs chen) scripture uses the buddha couple (yab yum) as an interpretive structure that illuminates doctrines of non-duality. It unites pairs of concepts such as emptiness and gnosis, male and female, individual and cosmos through the motif of porous bodies enmeshed with others. This porosity is underscored in cosmological, contemplative, liturgical, and social domains, with multi-genres sketching out a vision relational ontology. The motif of religious sexuality serves to illustrate how male bodies are full of female bodies, buddha couples, and enmeshed with planetary bodies, in a vision of liberation through transcorporeality.

The focus of this research is an influential fourteenth century esoteric Buddhist scripture known as The Seminal Heart of the Dākinī (Mkha' 'gro snying thig). There are multiple tropes of non-duality espoused in this scripture, yet the present research explores those discourses in their ontological, aesthetic, and transcorporeal functions while also addressing the non-dual yab yum's role promoting female inclusion in the fourteenth century post-tantric literature. This article also includes a discussion of the female centric yab yum figures presented by the scripture, underscoring that yab yum does not have a singular meaning, in Great Perfection literature, it is deployed to illustrate multiple paradigms.

James Gentry

Stanford University

“Instituting Flesh, Enfleshing Institutions: The Rise and Spread of the Geluk Maṇi Pill Tradition”

This paper traces the history of the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism’s maṇi-pill tradition from its inception in the middle of the seventeenth century to the present, focusing on three pivotal events: the inauguration of the tradition in the seventeenth century by the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso (1617–1682); its diversification and institutionalization at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Jamyang Shepé Dorjé (1648–1721/22); and its subsequent spread to the Qing Dynasty court and Mongolia under the auspices of Tuwen Lobzang Chökyi Nyima (1737–1802) and others. It argues that the Geluk maṇi-pill drew inspiration from a Nyingma relic-flesh-pill tradition centering on ritualized commensality with the flesh of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, but systematically elided and added key elements over the years—material ingredients, liturgical language, ritual procedures, iconographic features, scriptural citations, and more—to craft different sets of associations appropriate for large-scale Geluk monastic institutional rituals. These new arrangements nonetheless functioned much like their Nyingma prototype to induct wide audiences of Tibetans, Mongols, and now, the Manchu Qing court, into a shared aesthetic sensibility—a sense of kindred spirit—through consuming together in pill form the spiritual concentrate of the Dalai Lama cum Avalokiteśvara.

In charting these transformations, this talk aims to show more broadly how understanding shifting attitudes about the ritual use of human flesh and other substances through the lens of the maṇi pill’s vicissitudes over time can shed light on the material cultural history of Buddhist Tantra in Tibet.

Rae Erin Dachille

University of Arizona

“Body as Method: Appearance, Experience, and Transformation in the Sakyapa Tantric Path.”

How can the body be approached as a method for advancing toward liberation? In the Sakyapa Path and Fruit [Lam ‘bras] tradition, the body is framed as one member of a triad of three “continua” [rgyud]. As the “method continuum” [thabs rgyud], the body is related to both the cause and of the fruit of realization. In this paper I explore the tools provided by Sakyapa thinkers for navigating the connections of embodiment with appearance, conceptuality, and wisdom alongside its function as a context for experience and a support for transformation. In the process, I consider performative and phenomenological frameworks for making sense of the role of the body in tantric practice. Finally, I contemplate how the teachings of the Path and Fruit may enrich our understanding of what transformation means in the tantric context with regard to both body and mind.

Julia Hirsch

Stanford University

“Holy Bodies, Wholly Relics: Tibetan Buddhist Methods for Preserving the “Special Dead”

Tibetan traditions of bodily preservation harken back to the imperial period (c. 650–950), when royal figures were occasionally mummified and interred. Medico-ritual technologies used to mummify the bodies of religious and political elites have endured over the centuries and survive today. This talk will explore the creative ways in which Tibetan Buddhists preserve the remains of the “special dead” and transform living bodies into powerful relics. To ground this inquiry, I will look at the production of the Sixth Ling Rinpoche’s whole-body relic (sku gdung) in Dharamsala, India in the late twentieth-century, with recourse to a funerary and meditation manual that provided step-by-step guidelines for handling his corpse. This talk will also delve into the colorful history and uses of embalming salts (pur tshwa) by looking at historical vignettes from Tibet and India from the late seventeenth to twentieth centuries. Paying close attention to the relic-making process as well as vital materials that are used during the embalming procedure allows notions of skill, efficacy, and the sacred to emerge in embodied and embedded terms.