



THE ILLUMINATED LIFE OF THE GREAT YOLMOWA



BENJAMIN BOGIN

Yolmo Tenzin Norbu (1598–1644) was a Tibetan Buddhist reincarnate lama, painter, ritual master, meditator, teacher, poet, and autobiographer. His accomplishments and renown during his lifetime led his contemporary, the Fifth Dalai Lama, to refer to him as “the Great Yolmowa.” Yet, unlike many famous figures in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, Tenzin Norbu never established a monastery or retreat centre devoted to the practise of his teachings and revelations, and so over the centuries his name has faded to the margins of Tibetan Buddhist history. His writings survived only in manuscript form, never afforded the wider circulation made possible by being carved onto wooden blocks for printing.

Among the four known collections of his writings, the one preserved at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India includes a nine-folio set of remarkable autobiographical paintings, the only known example of Tibetan visual autobiography. These dynamic and colorful scenes provide a window into the world of seventeenth-century Tibetan Buddhism that differs greatly from the better-known religious histories and the static iconography of most thangka paintings. They are presented here for the first time.

Part One, “The World of Tenzin Norbu”, introduces the reader who may be unfamiliar with Tibetan Buddhism to the implications of the events most central to his formation: his identification during childhood as the *tulku* (or intentional rebirth) of a particular deceased lama, his monastic training, and his decision to abandon his monastic vows in order to follow the path of a non-celibate tantric priest (or *ngakpa*). The 44 plates in **Part Two** of the book are in 2 sets. The first 12 plates consist of the illuminations in Tenzin Norbu’s previous lives, depicting the artist in the lifetimes that he deemed most significant, from his life as a poultry-woman’s servant in Nepal up to his immediate predecessor, the Second Yolmo Tulku, Namkha Gyajin. These are followed by a second set of 32 scenes that fill the 9-folio illustrated autobiography. Each painting is accompanied by the artist’s own caption, all translated here. **Part Three** of the book consists of the complete annotated translation of Tenzin Norbu’s autobiography, ‘The Sāraṅgī with the Vajra-Sound’. Beyond the value of the work as an eyewitness account of one of the most tumultuous and fertile periods in Tibetan history, Tenzin Norbu’s particular voice stands out as extraordinary. As an observer of the world around him, Tenzin Norbu exhibits both an attention to meaningful detail as well as a critical eye for conventions and hypocrisy, softened by his humour and self-deprecation. Rather than a narrative demonstration of the qualities described in Buddhist treatises on perfected beings, Tenzin Norbu’s life story is a finely crafted account of the struggles faced by someone attempting to make sense of the goal of enlightenment in a complex and troubled world that is all too human.

