

Lopez will be speaking at Crazy Wisdom on Thursday, May 12th

Interviewed by Karl Pohrt  
Photography by Susan Ayer

(Donald Lopez, one of the nation's leading scholars of Buddhism, teaches at the University of Michigan. He is the Arthur E. Link Distinguished University Professor of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies, and currently serves as chair of the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures and chair of the Michigan Society of Fellows. He is the author of many books, most recently *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*, published by Princeton University Press. He will talk about his new book at a Crazy Wisdom Salon on the evening of Thursday, May 12th.

I recently interviewed Professor Lopez about *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography* at his home on the northeast side of Ann Arbor. He is gracious, curious, quick to laugh, and obviously deeply engaged with the world of Buddhism.)

**Karl Pohrt:** Your biography of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is an amazing story, beautifully told and darkly amusing. Your book makes it very clear that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* does not have the religious and cultural authority it claims. You say that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is not really Tibetan, it is not really a book, and it is not really about death.

**Donald Lopez:** What we call *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a work that was published in 1927, is really the product of Walter Evans-Wentz, its editor. It's not Tibetan in the sense that most of what you read in the book, including the prefaces and forwards and his copious footnotes, are in many cases quite unrelated to Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhist practice.

"It's not really about death. [*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*] is much more about rebirth and how one might use the process of death and rebirth and what is called the "intermediate state" to transform death into enlightenment."

Evans-Wentz was able to acquire a Tibetan text while he was visiting Darjeeling in 1919. He couldn't read Tibetan, so he took it to the local English teacher at the Maharaja's Boys School in Gangtok, Sikkim, and he had him translate various chapters out of this much larger work. It is selections, in some ways random selections, from a much larger Tibetan text. And so the book that we have does not correspond to the book as it exists in Tibet.

And it's not really about death. It is much more about rebirth and how one might use the process of death and rebirth and what is called the "intermediate state" to transform death into enlightenment.

In Tibetan Buddhism and some other forms of Buddhism, there is the idea of an intermediate state—the *Bardo* realm—a time between death and rebirth that can last from one instant up to 49 days. This is a liminal period in which

many things can happen, and if you know what you're doing during that state, you can ideally become a Buddha or at least have a good rebirth. If things go badly, you have a bad rebirth. So the Tibetan book that Evans-Wentz had translated is really about the state between death and rebirth, its opportunities and its dangers. It's not about death in the more conventional sense of the term.

"I think that Evans-Wentz was quite well intentioned, but the work that he presented was ultimately one that was in many ways quite at odds with what we now know about Tibetan Buddhist practice and literature."

**Karl Pohrt:** My first encounter with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was in the late 1960s when I saw a stack of copies in a bookshop on State Street. I noticed that it was published by Oxford University Press, one of the oldest and most prestigious academic presses in the English-speaking world. The Oxford imprint carries a certain cache, and I assumed it was legitimate. When I finished your book I was reminded of Dostoyevsky's remark that *Don Quixote* was the saddest book he'd ever read. Cervantes says Don Quixote's "brain dried up" because he believed everything he read. The lesson is that whatever the reputation a text has, we should always read it critically. Is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* a fraud?

**Donald Lopez:** It certainly was not meant as a fraud. When we use the word fraud we're usually thinking about some sort of intentional deceit. I think that Evans-Wentz was quite well intentioned, but the work that he presented was ultimately one that was in many ways quite at odds with what we now know about Tibetan Buddhist practice and literature.

You have to remember that this was a time when it was very difficult for Europeans or Americans to go into Tibet. Evans-Wentz never went himself. He was just in the borderlands, in Sikkim and North India. Very few Tibetan texts had made their way out and very few people could read Tibetan. So I think we have to cut him a little slack based on what was available to him, but he also had a very distinct agenda with which he undertook this project. He was a Theosophist.

**Karl Pohrt:** Of course, does it matter whether or not it's a fraud? All sacred texts take on a life of their own, however spurious their origins. *The Lotus Sutra*, which claims to present teachings of the Buddha toward the end of his life, appeared five hundred years after the death of the Buddha. And New Testament scholars generally agree that the earliest of the synoptic gospels—Mark—was written sometime after 70 AD at the earliest. The other gospels came later, even though they read like they were written by contemporaries of Jesus. My grandfather memorized *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, a poem which claims to be a translation of verses composed by Omar Khayyaam, a medieval Persian poet. The poem by Edward FitzGerald, a Victorian poet, is not noted for its fidelity to the original, but I don't think my grandfather cared a

## Karl Pohrt Talks to Professor Donald Lopez

Continued from page 33

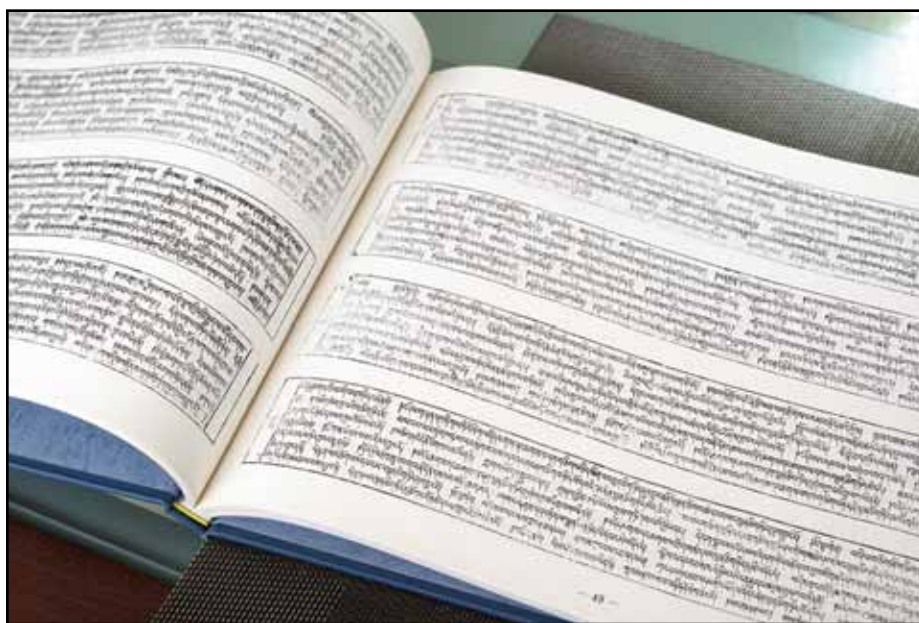
whit about that. The poem spoke to him. This is what you call Reception History. Could you talk about that?

**Donald Lopez:** What you say is exactly right. It is certainly true in the case of the Buddha himself. We know that nothing the Buddha said was written down until some four hundred years after his death. If we're worried about figuring out what Jesus said from something that was written forty years after his crucifixion—now multiply that by ten.

However, those books are what we have. Those are the books that have been canonized and that have become the basis for the religion. There are certain things that are unrecoverable. We cannot recover exactly what it was that Jesus taught and exactly what it was that the Buddha taught. But I think we are bound to try as hard as we can and to establish the limits of what we can know and what we can't know.

In the case of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, we now know a lot about where this Tibetan text came from. So you're right. It really is like *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. To a certain extent it is something that has taken on a life of its own, and it's very important to know that life story well. The book I've written is a history of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the book Evans-Wentz produced and published in 1927. I think that ideally one can know the history well, one can understand as much as it is possible to know about the process by which it was constructed, and still find inspiration there. I don't see the critical or historical approach and the religious or spiritual approach as necessarily being antithetical.

Your mention of Omar Khayyam reminds me of Borges' essay "The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald." Borges ponders the miracle of an Englishman translating a selection of five hundred quatrains by a Persian astronomer of the thirteenth century and producing one of the most popular works of Victorian literature. According to Borges, the case calls for "conjecture of a metaphysical nature," and he wonders whether Omar may have been reincarnated in England or whether the spirit of Omar possessed FitzGerald around 1857.



"I think *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* has had several lives and has died and been reborn several times."

**Karl Pohrt:** Who vetted the manuscript at Oxford?

**Donald Lopez:** Walter Evans-Wentz's real name was Walter Wentz—Walt Wentz from Trenton, New Jersey. He got his B.A. at Stanford and then went to England for further study at Oxford. While he was there he saw that many upper class British had hyphenated names and so he took his mother's maiden name and became Walter Evans-Wentz.



Karl Pohrt (the founder and long-time owner of Shaman Drum Bookshop) and Professor Donald Lopez discussing his new book, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*. There will be a Crazy Wisdom Salon entitled **An Evening with Buddhist Scholar Donald Lopez** on Thursday, May 12th at 7 pm --- Lopez will be discussing his book and engaging with the audience on Buddhist topics.

Again, we need to acknowledge that there was relatively little available on Tibet back then, yet the fascination with Tibet was almost as strong as it is today. So when he came forward with this translation—and the translation itself is quite good—I assume that Oxford was happy to publish it. And given how many copies it has sold, they're undoubtedly still very happy.

**Karl Pohrt:** *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* gained traction in America at that moment when the taboos surrounding death began to give way. Everyone is anxious to know what happens after death, but *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is still a fairly exotic explanation.

**Donald Lopez:** I think *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* has had several lives and has died and been reborn several times. As

we know from the various editions and the new prefaces that were added, it has found an audience in each generation. The 60s was really the time—as you recall—when there was an explosion of interest in Asian religions. Part of that was because of the Vietnam War, part of that was just a sense we had that there was something profoundly corrupt about Western culture in all its manifestations, and the idea, which has turned out to be a romantic one, that some sort of alternative could be found in "the East" or "the Orient" as we used to call it, this vague undifferentiated area that we used to talk about. There were the "Eastern Religions" and we somehow imagined that Hinduism and Buddhism and Daoism and Confucianism and Shintoism were all of a piece. So there was a kind of naïveté at that time, a naïveté which in retrospect is rather poignant. At that same time there was this whole explosion of work on death and how one dies and there was the Hospice Movement. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote *On Death and Dying* and Raymond Moody wrote *Life After Life*. In the midst of all that, this old 1927 book came back and was picked up by Timothy Leary and the Beatles; it was ancient wisdom, perennial wisdom to be tapped.

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**Karl Pohrt:** You couple the story of Joseph Smith's discovery of the sacred plates buried in upstate New York with the discovery of sacred texts supposedly hidden in Tibet by the tantric master Padmasambhava in a way that is wonderfully respectful of both religious traditions. You do this without challenging the truth claims of either the Mormons or the Tibetans.

**Donald Lopez:** In Tibetan Buddhism there is a genre of literature called *terma*, which literally means "treasure." The idea is that the great tantric master Padmasambhava came to Tibet in the late 700s and he couldn't stay very long, and he had various things that he knew the Tibetans would need in the future. As the story goes, he dictated these scriptures in a kind of coded script and buried them all over the country—in mountains and rocks and at the bottom of lakes and inside pillars. Those texts began to be discovered some centuries later and were even discovered into the twentieth century. They have become one of the most important genres of Tibetan literature over the centuries. The Tibetan work that became *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was such a text, buried in the eighth century and unearthed in the fourteenth century.

Of course, scholars have to look at these buried "treasure texts" with a great deal of skepticism because they're not written in Tibetan. They're written in a language that only the person who discovers them can read and that person translates them into Tibetan so that others can read them.

This is a controversial point in the field of Tibetan Studies because from one perspective—to use your term—they look a lot like frauds. It looks like someone trying to gain spiritual authority for himself by saying *look what I just found*. Nonetheless, they have become part of the canon. We have a structurally similar case of the discovery of sacred scriptures when Joseph Smith unearths the tablets of *The Book of Mormon* in upstate New York.

To get back to the issue of how one can be both a critical scholar and also a religious person—I was very struck and moved by the story of Smith because everything he did occurred not on the other side of the world, but in upstate New York. This is not a place we would consider exotic. And it occurred not in the 700s, but in the early 1800s.

It happened, in other words, in the light of history. American historians and Mormon scholars know a lot about everything that Smith did. We have letters and all sorts of pamphlets and papers—all the kinds of documents that we don't have in the case of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. That places a different onus of credibility and authority on *The Book of Mormon*. It has been said that Mormonism or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the most American of all religions, and one reason it is so American is because it sanctified American soil. Smith dug down into the dirt of upstate New York and he found a sacred book.

And the Tibetans did a rather similar thing. They couldn't go to India anymore. Buddhism had essentially disappeared there. So how do you find new scriptures? You dig them up.

In 2007, I gave some lectures in Puerto Rico, where Buddhism is becoming popular. Two Nyingma Lamas had been there to give some teachings. My hosts said, "They told us that Padmasambhava came to Puerto Rico and left some texts in the mountains."

**Karl Pohrt:** From our vantage point, it is easy to dismiss Evans-Wentz, who was born in Trenton, New Jersey, and never learned the Tibetan language, or Lama Govinda, who was born Ernst Hoffman in Germany, or Madame Blavatsky, a Russian medium who started the Theosophical Society as—at best—romantic amateurs who misrepresented and twisted Hinduism and Buddhism to fit their own agendas. But is this too harsh a judgment? Maybe the window through which we observe others is always cloudy. Evans-Wentz, Govinda, and Blavatsky were also early western pioneers in the encounter with Asian religious traditions.



"It's probably the case that every great religion began as a cult or as somebody calling it a cult and calling its founder a fraud. We know this is the case with Jesus, Mohammed, and the Buddha from their own scriptures. The question is: Why did these cults turn into world religions?"

**Donald Lopez:** I agree entirely. I've often tried to talk about the importance, especially, of Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society. In the late 1800s, India and Asia were being overrun by Christian missionaries who were telling the Buddhists that their religion was idolatry and superstition. Madame Blavatsky, a Russian medium, and her friend Colonel Olcott, an American Civil War veteran, sailed to Sri Lanka to defend the Buddhists against the British and they went to India to defend the Hindus against the British. There's something quite heroic about them. They believed that there is a single mystical tradition from which all religions spring, an idea that continues to this day. And so the fact that they were trying to see Hinduism and Buddhism through that lens is not surprising in the least.

Returning to this theme of the light of history, we know a great deal about these people and therefore it's very easy to see their faults. It's like the first time you see high definition television. Do you really want to look into the pores of your favorite actors?

It's probably the case that every great religion began as a cult or as somebody calling it a cult and calling its founder a fraud. We know this is the case with Jesus, Mohammed, and the Buddha from their own scriptures. The question is: Why did these cults turn into world religions? Why did these "frauds" turn into founders and saints? I've always found the study of this process fascinating. Most of the so-called frauds and cults fall by the wayside—they become heresies. But others survive, and it's often for more worldly reasons than because the truth they have is better than the truth someone else has.

**Karl Pohrt:** And finally, what do you make of the late Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa's strange comment, which you quote, that the animal realm is characterized by the absence of a sense of humor? My cat has a fine sense of humor unless he's hungry or he thinks my grandchildren are teasing him.

**Donald Lopez:** My dear departed cat Benny was one of the funniest sentient beings I've ever met in my life. I miss him for his sense of humor above all.

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(The interviewer, Karl Pohrt, was the founder and long-time owner of Shaman Drum Bookshop, an Ann Arbor literary institution for 29 years.)

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