

Continuity Substances, Lineage, and Ritual Empowerment

This chapter discusses a group of complex consecrated compounds known as *papta* or *papgyün*, two alternative abbreviations of the term *papta gyünden* (*phab gta' rgyun ldan*),⁸⁷ loosely translated as “continuous pledge of a fermenting agent.” *Papta* have multiple meanings and applications that span medical, ritual, and religious realms and provide an important interface between them. They are situated among an array of especially powerful substances including *jinten* (*byin rten*), “receptacles of blessings”; *damdzé*, “commitment substances”;⁸⁸ *dütsi rilbu* or *mani rilbu*, “nectar pills”; *dütsi chömen*, “nectar dharma medicine”; and *mendrup*, “accomplished medicine.” Our aim is to position *papta* within this corpus of revered substances and examine their specific potencies, uses, and dynamics. In our Ladakhi fieldsites, we observed amchis adding minute amounts of *papta* to batches of medicine to enhance their potency, ensure the continuity of blessings or *jinlap*, and compensate for missing ingredients or errors during their preparation. We also documented *papta*’s role during and after elaborate rituals known as *mendrup*. *Mendrup* have multiple purposes and often take place at the intersection

87 On variant spellings see the next section.

88 Gentry (2017, 8–9) describes *damdzé* as the “most common Tibetan term for potent material sacra,” and probably originated as a translation of the Sanskrit *samaya-dravya* of Indian Buddhist scriptures. Depending on the context, *samaya-dravya* can be translated as “prescribed substance,” “oath substance,” “commitment substance,” or “bond substance.” In Tibet, *damdzé* came to be seen “as extensions or materializations of awakened buddhas and bodhisattvas” and to possess transformative properties beyond ritual consecration (9).

of Buddhism and Sowa Rigpa, although Sowa Rigpa is not necessarily involved.⁸⁹ When amchis do engage in *mendrup* events, these rituals have the potential not only to transform complex medicinal compounds into potent elixirs, but also to spiritually purify the practitioners involved, enhance their technical abilities, and grant them “supernormal powers” (Garrett 2009, 224).

The materials consecrated or “accomplished” during these rituals are also called *mendrup*. After such rituals, small *mendrup* pills, powder, or granules are distributed among the participating monastics, lay community members, and amchis, who either store them away or employ them as *papta* to consecrate other medicines. *Mendrup* rituals usually take place in the shrine rooms of Tibetan pharmacies (Garrett 2009) or in monasteries frequented by amchis (Blaikie 2014). Our *mendrup* ethnographies were documented at an amchi association in the upper Indus valley village of Nee in the Changthang-Rong region of Ladakh in 2007 (Blaikie) and 2018 (Gerke and Van der Valk), with follow-up interviews in 2022 (Blaikie, Van der Valk) and 2023 and 2024 (Blaikie, Gerke). We also interviewed physicians in Ladakh and Darjeeling connected to these *mendrup* events.

Our analysis builds upon studies of *mendrup* rituals by Anna Sehnalova (2015, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2019b) and Cathy Cantwell (2015, 2017, 2020), as well as work on powerful pills in tantric Buddhism by James Gentry (2017). Sehnalova examines the use of *papta* in Bönpo *mendrup* rituals, while Cantwell considers its role in Nyingma ritual contexts. We first review their analyses of *papta* as continuity substances or fermenting agents before considering Gentry’s perspective. We then complement this scholarship by exploring the forms, flows, uses, and effects of these potent substances in contemporary Ladakh.

Relying on ethnographic material collected over the last eighteen years, we examine how *papta* take on various material forms, properties, and meanings as they move through time and space. In particular, we trace patterns of confluence and diffusion as *papta* are produced, combined, added to other preparations, and circulated both within and beyond medico-spiritual lineages. Following the flow of several *papta* substances into and out of Nee, we discuss the transformations they undergo as they pass through various pharmacy activities, ritual practices, and social realms. This allows us to explore the types of potency that are generated or modulated through these processes (see Chapter 3), as well as the transformative effects *papta* exert as they travel.

89 Old Nyingma revelations, such as *The Eight Instructions, Assembly of the Sugatas (Bka’ brgyad bde gshegs ’dus pa)* by Nyangrel Nyima Özer (fl. twelfth century), have no apparent linkage with Sowa Rigpa (Cathy Cantwell, email to Gerke, March 5, 2024).

Papta of various origins are sometimes combined during *mendrup* rituals, drawing different lineages together.⁹⁰ We argue that regular *mendrup* rituals connect people to one another in numerous ways. They are times of confluence, convergence, and *communitas* that allow for interaction, exchange, and shared ritual practice. In between these events, *papta* substances circulate among practitioners and lay people alike. Through these processes of diffusion and dispersal the substances radiate outwards, beyond the individuals and lineages with which they are primarily associated.

Our main argument is that *papta* possess two distinct but connected sets of properties, relating to continuity and perpetuation on the one hand, and to transformation and catalyzation on the other. As continuity substances, *papta* serve as unbroken material expressions of medico-spiritual lineages and possess stable, never-diminishing *jinlap* properties. This aspect is enhanced through the role *papta* play as commitment substances, which materially represent the *samaya* vows (*dam tshig*) that bind lineage members together. Understood in the larger Buddhist context, commitment substances seamlessly connect material properties and spiritual promises. *Papta* also catalyze transformations within and between medical, ritual, religious, and social realms. They adopt a broad array of forms and acquire altered properties due to their catalytic mode of activity and tendency to diffuse widely, which enable transfers of potency, power, and authority across these fields. *Papta* substances and the ritual practices surrounding them also have important transformative effects upon the individuals involved. By engaging in related rituals and imbibing these blessed substances, participants purify their body-mind of obscurations and reach toward awakening.

In short, *papta* simultaneously enact lineage continuity, enhance the potencies of the medicines to which they are added, and transform those involved in the *mendrup* rituals associated with them. These observations open up broader questions about how such substances could be theorized and which frameworks best account for their material, spiritual, and relational complexities. We take this up in the discussion, testing the limits of the Ingoldian theoretical approaches and concepts drawn upon in this book, notably concerning meshworks, the notion of substances-in-becoming, and the relationship between material and immaterial properties.

90 This contrasts with Bönpo *mendrup* rituals, in which *papta* are specific to each ritual and cannot be combined (Anna Sehnalova, email to Gerke, November 4, 2024).

Plural meanings of *papta*

Our Ladakhi interlocutors variously translated *papta* into English as “fermenting agent,” “continuity catalyst, or yeast,” or “mother essence,” while Gentry refers to a “*samaya*, lineage or treasure substance” (Gentry 2017, 276). The word *gyün* (*rgyun*) indicates a continuum, an unceasing flow, or the continuity of a particular practice, pointing to the way that *papta*, or *papgyün*, imbue medicines with lineage power. Since *papta* is also considered a “horse” (*rta*) or a vehicle that carries or transfers potency, it is sometimes spelled *phabs rta* (Gentry 2017, 299n15).⁹¹ But one can also find the spelling *phab gta*’ (Cantwell 2017, 193).⁹² Gentry (2017, 276, 313) translates *gta*’ (or *gta*’ *ma*) as “collateral” referring to a pledge—an intriguing aspect that we explore further below.

Each of these terms reflects an important property of *papta*, but none fully expresses what they are, what they do, or what we might be able to learn from them about relationships between materiality, potency, and agency in Tibetan medico-religious practice. We start untangling these various properties and meanings by considering how they have been addressed in the scarce related literature. Following Gentry (2017), much of our discussion highlights *papta*’s properties as a catalyst (*phabs*) and “horse” or vehicle, but first we consider their connection to notions of fermentation.

Papta as fermenting agents in *mendrup* rituals

In *mendrup* literature, *papta* is variously translated as “continuum yeast,” “medicinal and ritual yeast ingredient” (Sehnałova 2018, 265), or “fermenting agent” (Cantwell, 2015, 63; 2017, 193; Sehnałova 2018, 31). This aspect is explored in Sehnałova’s (2018) ethnography of a Bönpo *mendrup* in Nepal, in which *papta* is “the most important ingredient” (265). It is first mixed with water, then added to the *mendrup* mixture, which is then kept in warm and damp conditions for several days, not unlike the process of making *chang* (barley beer):⁹³

91 The term “horse” in Tibetan medical texts refers to substances that carry the potency of other substances to their target in the body. Refer to *menta* in Chapter 3 (114–17) for further discussion.

92 For a more detailed overview of *papta* terminology, see Sehnałova 2018, 269.

93 “Beer essence” (*chang tsi*) is listed as a synonym of *phab* and *phabs* in Das’ *Tibetan-English Dictionary* (cited in Sehnałova 2018, 265n876).

I was often explained the effects of the Mendrup *papta* in a yogurt and *chang* simile: Neither yogurt nor *chang* would “be what they are,” [and] would not have the characteristic properties they are known for, without their fermenting agents. Similarly, Mendrup medicine is a powder of ingredients, but without the *papta* it does not acquire its main characteristic properties and effects. (Sehnałova 2018, 265–66)

The yogurt simile makes sense insofar as the addition of a starter is crucial to the transformation process that results in a new batch of yogurt, and the starter becomes indistinguishable from the yogurt it ferments: “By sight, touch, smell and taste, the *phabs gta*’ does not differ from the compounded *smān sgrub* mixture” (Sehnałova 2019b, 20). The properties and potencies of *papta* are thus continually carried forward through the addition of remnants of the previous batches of *mendrup* to subsequent iterations. Furthermore, yeast-like properties of material growth and expansion emerge from the mixing of liquid and dry substances during *mendrup* rituals, which cause the *mendrup* substance to expand in size. This evokes the auspicious abundance of blessings bestowed during the ritual and through imbibing the consecrated *mendrup*. However, as underscored by several of our Ladakhi interlocutors, comparisons between the properties of *papta* and those of yeasts during the making of *chang* or yogurt need careful qualification, as *papta* differ considerably from ordinary yeasts both materially and symbolically. Even a tiny piece of *papta* or *mendrup* has great value and power, whereas a small piece of yogurt starter has little value in itself. Moreover, there is no religious, ritual, or lineage connection in a yogurt or *chang* yeast, whereas *papta* carry an enormous symbolic charge (a point to which we will return).

During our fieldwork, we mostly saw *papta* substances in the form of *mendrup* granules (fig. 68) or occasionally pressed into molds to be stored in the form of a deity such as Dorjé Purpa (*rdo rje phur pa*) or Vajrakīlaya (fig. 69). We also came across some rare and highly valued forms of nectar dharma medicine, known as *dütsi chömen*, which had been prepared by senior masters in the past. These were circulated in small amounts and kept as valued *papta* “starters,” with the potential to consecrate new batches of *mendrup* compound. In 2022, Sonam Dorje, who participated in many *mendrup* rituals in Ladakh, offered Van der Valk some *dütsi chömen* that was made and empowered by Dudjom Rinpoche in Nepal in 1978 and presented to Sonam Dorje’s father, Amchi Tsering Paljor, in Ladakh a few years later (figs. 70–71). Sonam Dorje called it “mother of *papta*” and explained that it could be used in future *mendrup* rituals to potentiate many kilograms of new *mendrup*.⁹⁴

94 Sonam Dorje, interview with Van der Valk, Leh, August 5, 2022. Translated by Rigzin Chodon.



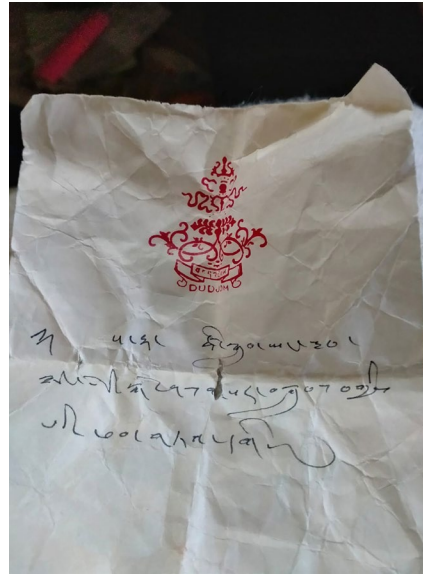
Figure 68 *Mendrup* granules from the 1992 *mendrup* that were distributed in Nee in 2018. Nee, August 2022. Photo J. van der Valk (CC-BY-SA 4.0).



Figure 69 “Mother of *papta*” molded into the form of Vajrakīlaya and held by Amchi Nawang Tangyas in a gesture of respect. Leh, September 2018. Photo courtesy of T.K. Shor (all rights reserved).

Papta can have a range of effects in social as well as material realms. Since they carry the potency of lineage, *papta* substances can bring people together but also mark their separation, especially if they become enmeshed in debates over ownership. The holding and passing on of *papta* substances can therefore have political and economic significance. Sehnalova (2018) offers an example in her discussion of a “secret” oral history of a Bönpo *papta* that can be traced back to a *terma* revelation in the tenth or eleventh centuries. The one surviving vessel containing the *papta* was kept at Menri monastery in Central Tibet, where it accumulated the power of blessings of each successive Menri abbot, whose relics were sometimes added to the *papta* (20). Later, it was moved to Kongpo by a former Menri abbot against the institution’s wishes and was carried from there into exile, first to the newly established Menri monastery in India but then to another Bönpo monastery in Nepal (32–33). The vessel containing the *papta* is considered essential for enabling further *mendrup* rituals. Whoever holds this *terma* vessel therefore also “owns” the economic, spiritual, and political aspects of the *mendrup*, conferring certain forms of authority and power while also potentially generating competition or conflict between institutions.

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Figures 70–71 A sample of the *dütshi chömen* made by Dudjom Rinpoche in Nepal in 1978 (fig. 70), originally wrapped in paper bearing Dudjom’s seal and handwriting (fig. 71) and labeled: “The freshly accomplished *papta*, prepared through the exceedingly profound long-life heart essence ritual in the earth horse year [1978], is meritorious” (*sa rta tshe sgrubs yang zab snying po sgo nas gsar bsgrubs bgyis pa’i phab gta’ dge*). Leh, August 2022. Photos J. van der Valk (CC-BY-SA 4.0).

When Cantwell observed a Dudjom-related *mendrup* ritual in Bhutan, she noted several substances that were added to the *mendrup* mixture, “especially pills from relevant deity practices of great lamas in one’s own lineage” (Cantwell 2015, 64). The main *papta* was made of consecrated pills called “commitment substance dharma medicine” (*dam rdzas chos sman*) to which “relics from the great lineage lamas of the past” were added (64). The Dudjom tradition is mainly based on the works of Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche (1904–1987), but the substances involved are traced back to mass ceremonies of the Nyingma master Terdak Lingpa (1646–1714) at Mindroling (east of Lhasa). This unbroken continuity is crucial to their value:

[*Papta*] are mixed in with the other medicinal powders, and many sacksful of pills might be prepared and consecrated during the ritual meditations throughout the Major Practice Session, finally to be distributed among participants at the end. But a small amount of concentrated pills will be retained by the lama for use in future batches, so that the sacred “fermenting agent” never runs out. The Jangsa Head Lama [Lama Kunzang Dorjee] told me that Dudjom

Rinpoche used to tell his students that, while there were many different specific lines through which the *phab gta*’ had been passed, all Nyingmapa lamas are connected since some component of everyone’s dharma pills ultimately stems back to Terdak Lingpa’s mass ceremonies. (Cantwell 2020, 98)

In the Nee *mendrup* we experienced in Ladakh, one of the *papta* came from Dudjom Rinpoche and thus connected the participants through the blessings of particular Nyingma lineage masters. It is difficult to retrospectively trace individual *papta* back to their original ritual cycle, or to know which powerful tantric substances (for example, the “five fleshies” or the “five elixirs”) were initially included. However, as Cantwell rightly emphasizes, the crucial point is that those conducting these rituals today feel connected to the blessings of earlier masters through receiving *mendrup* substances containing “original” *papta* produced or maintained by previous lineage holders. Dudjom Rinpoche himself acknowledged the difficulty in practice of using substances like the “five fleshies” and “five elixirs,” but noted that they were complete in the dharma medicine (*chos sman*) accomplished by the great masters of the past, and that *papta* transmitted through an unbroken lineage embodies the power of these original medicines (*Dudjom Rinpoche Collected Works*, Vol. Tha, 309, cited in Cantwell 2020, 195n33). In other words, the potency of these tantric substances resides in the *papta* of the great masters whether they are physically present or not.

To sum up, *papta* are important material carriers of unbroken lineage continuity, both perpetuating and accumulating blessings through successive ritual cycles. Through their catalytic properties, they can transform the many other compounds to which they are added, bringing this same stream of continuity into each new batch. These properties are manifested in the materials of various *mendrup* or dharma medicine formulas, each containing traces of many previous *mendrup* cycles. When conducted by highly accomplished practitioners under the correct conditions, these cycles can produce particularly valuable batches of *dütsi chömen*. These are carefully preserved and hold the potential to become *papta* as they can, in turn, be added to various newly-made *mendrup* compounds.

Papta as catalyst and vehicle

Two key properties of *papta* that emerge from the literature are those of “catalyst” and “horse” as a metaphor for a vehicle. At first sight these seem like opposing concepts, one concerning transformation and the other perpetuation, but they actually work together in interrelated ways due to the properties and potencies ascribed to *papta*, notably those associated with commitment and material “col-lateral.” These concepts and their relationship are outlined in Gentry’s elaborate

textual and historical discussion of the powerful pills made by the Tibetan physician and tantric master Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen (1552–1624):⁹⁵

As Sokdokpa mentions elsewhere, the previous “catalyst” (*phabs*), which he also at times calls a “vehicle,” constitutes all the primary ingredients of the pill concoction. Being a “catalyst,” a term that also denotes the starter yeast used to brew beer or ferment curd, it operates as the active agent ultimately responsible for the power of Sokdokpa’s pills. Yet, at the same time, it is also a “vehicle;” that is, it serves as the medium for the accrual of the blessings and power of the buddhas and past masters invoked through the visualizations, *mantras*, and other sensory media that figure in Sokdokpa’s accomplishment rite. (Gentry 2017, 313)

For Sokdokpa, *papta* compensate for unavailable original and powerful substances of Indian tantric (and often mythical) origin.⁹⁶ This resonates with Dudjom Rinpoche’s aforementioned comment on how *papta* act as substitutes for precious substances such as the “five fleshs.” Sokdokpa describes *papta* as materials that had been “interred within Tibetan soil for the interim and retrieved later as a Treasure substance ‘catalyst continuum’ (*phabs rgyun*)” (Gentry 2017, 319). In other words, they were hidden to reappear as treasures (*gter*) capable of filling in for the absent original *samaya* substances once the required accomplishment rites had rendered them actively potent, “based on only the previously derived material collateral (*gta*’) and catalyst (*phabs*)” substances (276).

This notion of material collateral signifies the enduring promise of earlier masters to benefit sentient beings, passed on to future generations through *papta*. New generations can thus evoke the previous masters’ compassion and pass on their blessings in new substantial and substantiated forms:

Collateral (*gta*’ = *gta*’ *ma*) ... is a general term used to denote an item of value that is temporarily forfeited to a lender as security in order to ensure the future repayment of a loan. This term signals, most generally, that Sokdokpa construes the power of flesh pills to be contingent upon a relationship of reciprocity with the past masters and buddhas whose flesh and other bodily fragments and fluids make up the pills’ ingredients. Modeled upon a relationship of money lending, it would appear that the bodily fragments of past buddhas and masters function

95 Gentry mentions the use of *papta* or *papgyün* repeatedly (2017, 276, 299, 311–13, 318–19, 325–27).

96 According to Sehnałova, Bönpo *papta* supposedly contain all the powerful tantric substances mentioned in the *mendrup* recipe, including the “five fleshs” and “five elixirs” (email to Gerke, November 4, 2024).

as “collateral” for the enduring promise of these figures. By this I mean their pact, rooted in boundless altruism, to beneficially intercede on the behalf of beings “until *samsāra* is void.” (Gentry 2017, 313)

In short, *papta*’s properties as both horse and catalyst emerge within a collateral relationship of reciprocity between previous masters and future individuals, all of which contribute to—and perpetuate—the potency of the *papta*. Similar notions also emerged during our fieldwork. For example, the director of Chagpori Tibetan Medical Institute in Darjeeling, Dr. Teinlay Palsang Trogawa, explained to Gerke in 2018:

I think the *papta* is more of a blessing of the previous masters, which is passed on to the future generations. We are not as fortunate to see all the former masters, but at least we can keep some form of blessings of those former masters. ... Kyabche Chatral Rinpoche⁹⁷ said not to look for his reincarnation anymore. Then in that way, it is a great loss for the people, but we have to respect the teacher’s wishes. He also left *papta* and *dütsi chömen* ... The blessing always stays, it never diminishes.

Within this continuum of undiminishing blessings, the nexus of potency expands.

Alongside the numerous substances involved, Sokdokpa attributed the final effects of a *papta*-containing pill to the ritualists and their practices, as well as to the karma (*las*) of those receiving it (Gentry 2017, 311). The qualities and motivations of those making and consecrating the pills are thus crucial, as are the intentions of the recipient. We heard similar statements concerning the importance of faith and pure motivation in gaining benefit from *mendrup* substances at the Nee *mendrup*. Our Ladakhi interlocutors also told us that *papta*-enriched *mendrup* substances play an important role in making up for missing ingredients during the preparation of medicines and can atone for inadequacies in medical practice. Furthermore, the daily prayer recitations during the *mendrup* ritual include elements of self-purification that enable the amchis to overcome their own faults and obscurations, make more potent medicines, and thus better benefit their patients. Their understandings thus resonate in many ways with those of Sokdokpa, for whom potency and power emerged from the combination of his own altruism with “the good karma of consumer recipients, the lineage of Treasure revealers, and the material catalyst continuum—the ‘vehicle’ of the pill’s main ingredients—which together account for the power of the pill to bring positive effects to those who encounter it” (Gentry 2017, 311).

97 Dzogchen master Chatral Sangye Dorje Rinpoche (1913–2015).

Jinten and *papta*

Tibetan traditions utilize many types of powerful substances, generally referred to as “receptacles of blessing” or *jinten* (*jin* means “blessings,” also “power”; *ten* means “to support”). *Jinten* can consist of a single powerful substance, such as a relic (*ring bsrel*), but the term also refers to complex pill compounds (*byin rten ril bu*) associated with particular lineages and recorded in catalogs of *jinten* (*byin rten dkar chag*) (Gerke 2019b). *Jinten* are also used to fill spaces within large statues and votive structures (Martin 1994) and are sometimes preserved in the form of small statuettes to ensure material stability over time (see fig. 3 in Gerke 2019b).

Small quantities of *jinten* substances can be added as *papta* during the compounding of new batches of medicine. All *papta* contain some form of *jinten* and *papta* substances are sometimes called *jinten*, as they physically embody undiminished blessings. Crucially, what defines *papta* is its use in the consecration and transformation of other compounds: *jinten* become *papta* the moment they are added to other compounds in the process of consecration.

To give an example from India, precious pills made at the Men-Tsee-Khang (MTK) in Dharamsala include consecrated substances from the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in the form of *dütsi chömen*, which is a type of *jinten*. The *dütsi chömen* is made at the MTK pharmacy and consecrated at the Dalai Lama’s temple before being added as a *papta* to the precious pills produced back at MTK (see Gerke 2019b). This *dütsi chömen* is a prime contemporary example of an institutionally made medical formula merged with the blessings of the Geluk school. It is made following a specific recipe containing more than one hundred ingredients, including several standard medicinal formulas.⁹⁸ When someone consumes precious pills to which the *dütsi chömen* has been added as a *papta*, they are simultaneously ingesting a complex medicinal compound and the spiritual blessings of the Dalai Lama, specifically the perceived potency related to this lineage as manifested in its *jinten*. In turn, affiliated private pharmacies use these precious pills as a *papta*, consecrating their medicines by crushing one precious pill into their own version of the same precious pill during production.⁹⁹ Such collaborations between Sowa Rigpa physicians and high-ranking Buddhist figures are tied to religious identity and patronage. Some patients who follow different schools, lamas, and lineages avoid MTK precious pills precisely because of the sectarian implications of the *jinten* they contain, particularly from historical figures.

98 Dr. Choelothar, conversation with Gerke, Chontra, April 21, 2017.

99 On the use of the Precious Old Turquoise 25 (Rin chen g.yu rnying nyer nga) pill as a *papta*, for example, see Gerke 2018a.

Tracing patterns of confluence and diffusion

One aspect of *papta* compounds that we particularly want to highlight in this chapter is their dynamics of confluence and diffusion. When *papta* substances are used to potentize *mendrup* or other nectar dharma medicines, various combinations of lamas and disciples come together in a ritual space to compound numerous blessed and special ingredients. These may include tantric substances, blessed pills, and *jinten* that the lamas received from their teachers, who received them in turn from their teachers and so on, stretching far back in time and often to historical Tibet. As we have seen, the head lama of Jangsa Gompa in Kalimpong located the mass ceremonies of Terdak Lingpa as the original practice session during which *papta* were made in the form of dharma pills (Cantwell 2020, 98). Thus, while the dharma pill's actual components might change over time, for example by accumulating various other *jinten*, their use as a *papta* retains those original blessings from batch to batch, uniting all Nyingmapa practitioners in a strong sense of connection to that original practice session.

This illustrates how *papta* serve both as a vehicle for the accumulation and conveyance of blessings, and as a catalyst for the transformation of substances, properties, and practitioners. They carry blessings across time and through various material forms, binding people together in commitment to the masters of their lineage and ritual community. At the same time, they enable the consecration of the other compounds to which they are added, as well as allowing for the transformation of the individuals involved. We now turn to our Nee ethnographies to trace these dynamics in greater detail. We follow the use of *papta* during and after *mendrup* rituals and in the making of *mendrup dütsi chömen*, revealing the confluence of substances and lineages through these processes.

Mendrup ritual cycles at Nee

Amchi Urgyen Chosphel (d. 1982) (fig. 72) and Amchi Tsering Paljor (1931–2007) (fig. 74) from Kairy village near Nee were two of the most famous Ladakhi amchis of the twentieth century. They were among the few (and last) in Ladakh to have studied Sowa Rigpa under renowned masters in Tibet. Both went on to teach numerous students from Ladakh's Changthang region, creating a strong extended lineage group. In the mid-1960s, Urgyen Chosphel started holding annual *mendrup* ceremonies, inviting many amchis from Changthang, other areas of Ladakh, and beyond. Every autumn, this group would gather to spend a week collectively empowering their medicines and ritually purifying themselves. The consecration and distribution of *mendrup dütsi chömen* was central to this annual event, which continues to this day.



Figure 72 Amchi Urgyen Chosphe, date unknown. Photo courtesy of Amchi Nawang Tangyas (all rights reserved).



Figure 73 Amchi Lama Rigzin, son of Amchi Urgyen Chosphe. Nee, August 2022. Photo courtesy of T.K. Shor (all rights reserved).



Figure 74 Amchi Tsering Paljor (back center) with Dudjom Rinpoche (left) and Dudjom Rinpoche's daughter, Tsering Penzom (front). Leh, 1975. Photo courtesy of Amchi Nawang Tangyas (all rights reserved).

Following Urgyen Chosphe's death in 1982, his son Amchi Lama Rigzin (fig. 73) took over responsibility for the annual *mendrup*. In 1991, he formally registered the group with the state government as the Tserig Chhimet Ghatsal Society, also known as Ogyan Sorig Tsogspa or Nee Amchi Association. Since then, this association has been managed by Lama Rigzin's disciple, Amchi Nawang Tsering, who developed it into a popular Sowa Rigpa pharmacy and clinic, alongside organizing many aspects of the annual *mendrup*.

Tsering Paljor was a renowned physician and ritualist. He studied Sowa Rigpa with Urgyen Chosphe for fourteen years and also trained with Lamempa Khyenrap Norbu (1883–1962) in Lhasa for a few months, as well as becoming a disciple of Dudjom Rinpoche (fig. 74). He played an important role in introducing the *mendrup* tradition to Ladakh in 1965 and helped to organize *mendrup* events over many years. According to his son—Sonam Dorje—Tsering Paljor prepared various *dütsi* “twenty to thirty times,” mostly in relation to his training under Dudjom Rinpoche, with whom he made *mendrup dütsi chömen* in Nepal in 1978.¹⁰⁰ Tsering Paljor first organized a *mendrup* around 1962 in Rewalsar (Himachal Pradesh) and held another in 1965 at Takpa House in Kairi (Ladakh).¹⁰¹ In 1967, the Sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje (1924–1981) visited Ladakh (Tsering, Tsering, and Russell 1984, 15). He stayed for three days with Tsering Paljor and brought many blessed substances with him, some of which he bestowed upon his host.¹⁰²

In 1992, Lama Rigzin and Tsering Paljor invited the renowned Sampel Norbu Trogawa Rinpoche (1932–2005) to Nee and organized a special *mendrup* in his honor. Trogawa Rinpoche was a Nyingma lama and eminent amchi trained in Lhasa, who founded the Chagpori Tibetan Medical Institute in Darjeeling in 1992, following his flight from occupied Tibet in the late 1950s. The *mendrup* was held at Nee old gompa (fig. 75) and Trogawa Rinpoche bestowed the *Yutok Nyingtik* initiation upon all those present. This was the beginning of an interaction that lasted twelve years until his passing (Gerke 2018b) and involved the making, consecration, and circulation of several powerful substances.

100 Sonam Dorje, interview with Van der Valk, Leh, August 5, 2022. Translated by Rigzin Chodon. Dudjom Rinpoche's journals contain no entry of this event, as they end in 1972 (Cathy Cantwell, email to Gerke, March 5, 2024).

101 Sonam Dorje, interview with Van der Valk, Leh, August 8, 2022. Translated by Rigzin Chodon.

102 Sonam Dorje, interview with Van der Valk, Leh, August 5, 2022. Translated by Rigzin Chodon.



Figure 75 The old Nee gompa (bottom left) where Trogawa Rinpoche presided over the *mendrup* ritual and made *dütsi chömen* in 1992, and Amchi Lama Rigzin’s newly built monastery (top) where the 2018 *mendrup* event took place. Nee, August 2018. Photo J. van der Valk (CC-BY-SA 4.0).

Confluence of lineages and *papta* in Nee, 1992

Four different *papta* were added to the *dütsi chömen* prepared at Nee in 1992, bringing together various substances and lineage blessings. These *papta* had their principal origins in Lhasa, eastern Tibet, Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Ladakh. Each consisted of numerous ingredients, as well as the accumulated blessings of previous respected Nyingma and Kagyü masters.

Urgyen Choshpel contributed one *papta* to the *mendrup dütsi chömen*, which he had personally brought back from Tibet. It carried the lineage of the fifth Drukpa Kagyü Lama Staktsang Rinpoche, who was long based at Ladakh’s Hemis monastery.¹⁰³ In his unpublished journal of 1935, Dudjom Rinpoche notes that “Ladakhi Taktsang Rinpoche” (*La dwags stag tshang rin po che*) visited Dudjom in

103 This reincarnation or *tülku* (*sprul sku*) lineage originated (retrospectively) with Taktsang Repa (1574–1651), who was born in Tibet but spent much of his later life in Ladakh, where he restored Hemis Monastery and established others (Gardner 2009). The sixth Staktsang Rinpoche turned 82 in 2022 (Reach Ladakh Bulletin 2022).

Lhasa and received the *Meteoric Iron Razor* Vajrakīlaya empowerment from him.¹⁰⁴ Tsering Paljor added the *papta* that was given to him by Dudjom Rinpoche to the *mendrup dütsi chömen*. He also included a “Karmapa *papta*”—one of the consecrated substances that the Karmapa gave to him in Kairy in 1967.

Trogawa Rinpoche contributed his own *papta*, which came from the lineage of his root guru, Dzongsar Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö (1893–1959), a well-known *rimé* (*ris med*, non-sectarian) lama who received transmissions from numerous masters of all Tibetan Buddhist schools prior to his passing in Sikkim in 1959. Chökyi Lodrö was considered the activity emanation¹⁰⁵ of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820–1892) from eastern Tibet, who together with Jamgön Kongtrul (1813–1899) inspired the *rimé* movement. Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo is said to have received transmissions from over 150 teachers from all schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Orgyen Topgyal Rinpoche 2005), and some of his *papta* was passed on to Trogawa Rinpoche.¹⁰⁶ It is most likely that it was a portion of this special *papta* that Trogawa Rinpoche added to the *mendrup dütsi chömen* in 1992.

Each of these four *papta* physically embody long and renowned lineages tracing back to historical Tibet. The Karmapa *papta* and that of Staktsang Rinpoche were strongly connected to the Karma Kagyü and Drukpa Kagyü schools, while the other two were primarily linked to Nyingma and Sakya traditions.¹⁰⁷ According to Amchi Nawang Tangyas, the *papta* from Dudjom Rinpoche and Trogawa Rinpoche contained relics of the Fifth Dalai Lama and other Geluk and Nyingma masters.¹⁰⁸ This approach to preparing *mendrup dütsi chömen* thus collected, combined, and transmitted teachings and blessings from different lineages rather than following sectarian divisions. This appears to have been accepted and followed by teachers and students alike.

The origins, components, and pathways of the *papta* that came together at Nee in 1992 are astounding. Each *papta* contained a vast number of individual ingredients, including *ringse* relics and other precious *jinten* materials assembled by successive generations of masters, as well as possibly having other, even older, *papta* blended within it. Each had been through many phases of accomplishment

104 Cathy Cantwell, email to Gerke, March 5, 2024.

105 Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö was one of several *tülku* of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, each of whom embodied aspects of the master’s body, speech, mind, qualities, or activities.

106 Dr. Teinlay Palsang Trogawa, interview with Gerke, Darjeeling, December 23, 2018.

107 The Sakya schools are represented through the transmissions received by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo.

108 Amchi Nawang Tangyas, conversation with Blaikie, Leh, May 27, 2022.

and other ritual processes. All of this (and more) merged together and became part of this single batch of *mendrup dütsi chömen* at Nee.

At this moment of confluence, the four *papta* brought amchis from shared lineages closer together and drew in others from different traditions. They also pulled together monastics and ritual specialists who otherwise had little connection to Sowa Rigpa, as well as lay community members, numerous raw materials, and all the mundane components necessary for the event to take place: an appropriate venue, the money needed to buy materials and support the ritual and its participants, and so on. Only by drawing all these diverse elements together could the *papta* be combined and the *mendrup dütsi chömen* be prepared and ritually accomplished. The *papta* thus acted as catalysts for these ritual and social interactions as well as for the transformation of medico-ritual substances. They served as important links between past and future and between different groupings at a single point in time. The four individual *papta* were transformed into a new *papta* substance—*mendrup dütsi chömen*—in the process. Further convergences and transformations then continued during subsequent *mendrup* rituals held at Nee.

Further convergences: The Nee *mendrup* of 1997 and 2004

In 1997, Amchi Tsering Paljor and Chatral Sangye Dorje Rinpoche, the famous Tibetan Dzogchen master and disciple of Dudjom Rinpoche, prepared a *papta* during a Vajrakīlaya *mendrup* ritual at Pharping in Nepal. Some of the resulting *mendrup* compound was pressed into statuette form for long-term storage. Tsering Paljor's nephew, Amchi Nawang Tangyas, was given several of these for safe-keeping prior to his uncle's death (fig. 76), which he showed to Gerke and Van der Valk in 2018 and Blaikie in 2022. He explained that this hard, molded *papta* is precious and should only be used if the granular form (fig. 77)—of which large amounts were made and distributed—is no longer available.¹⁰⁹ In such an eventuality, some powder could be grated from one of the statuettes and used in place of the standard granular material. He added that these *papta* contain secret *samaya* substances and relics from the traditions of Sangye Lingpa and Dudjom Lingpa.

During our visits, Nawang Tangyas repeatedly emphasized that these *papta* are incredibly precious and powerful and must be treated with the utmost respect, as they are continuously watched over by countless invisible protectors. He further explained that to even think about *papta* as a substance is to overlook the

109 Amchi Nawang Tangyas, conversation with Gerke and Van der Valk, Leh, September 3, 2018.

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Figures 76–77 The *mendrup dütsi chömen* made by Chatral Rinpoche in 1997, pressed into the form of four Vajrakīlayas and one small Guru Rinpoche (fig. 76), and in granular form (fig. 77). Both forms can be used as *papta*. Leh, September 2018. Photos courtesy of T.K. Shor (all rights reserved).

supramundane properties that properly characterize it: “For ordinary people it will be a *papta*, but for a Vajrayāna practitioner, looking at a *papta* will be like looking at your own pure perception.”¹¹⁰ For tantric adepts, the coarse substances comprising *papta* have been transformed into ambrosial nectar, whose properties manifest beyond the material plane, like a rainbow or a *dharmakāya*.¹¹¹

At the Nee *mendrup* of 1997, some of the Vajrakīlaya *papta* from Pharping was mixed into the *mendrup dütsi chömen*, adding one more *papta* to the four brought together five years earlier. Then in 2002, Trogawa Rinpoche returned to Nee to preside over the making of *tsotel*¹¹² through the special *menjor* process known as Great Mercury Refinement (*ngul chu btso bkru chen mo*) (see Gerke 2021, 122–27). A year before his demise, on his final visit to Nee in 2004, he led another special *mendrup* ritual where some of the *tsotel* made two years earlier was added to the *mendrup dütsi chömen*, showing the wide range of substances that can be employed as *papta*. Containing at least six different *papta* compounds and having undergone multiple rounds of ritual consecration, this 2004 batch of *dütsi chömen* is considered especially powerful and precious and has been carefully preserved and judiciously used at Nee ever since. But as we will see, it has also

110 Amchi Nawang Tangyas, conversation with Gerke, Leh, August 28, 2024.

111 The *dharmakāya* is the “truth body” of a Buddha, representing the ultimate, formless nature of reality and enlightened mind in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

112 *Tsotel* is a processed organometallic mercury sulfide complex in ash powder form and is used in the making of various precious pills. It can also be added to *mendrup dütsi chömen* or other pills as an especially powerful *papta* substance.

traveled onward from Nee in various ways, undergoing and enabling subsequent transformations on these journeys.

Papta in medicines: Diffusion and transformation

Participant numbers vary, but each year between ten and thirty amchis attend the Nee *mendrup* (figs. 78, 79).¹¹³ Each leaves with small bags of *mendrup dütsi chömen*, which they take home and use in their pharmacies in Changthang and other parts of Ladakh, adding tiny amounts to all of their own medicines. They also sometimes offer it as gifts to other amchis across the Himalayas or store it for future use. This material diffusion across time and space distributes *jinlap* blessings widely, as well as offering amchis a way to overcome difficulties in medicine making.

In Nee, small amounts of *mendrup dütsi chömen* are mixed as a *papta* into all the medicines made at the Ogyan Sorig Tsogspa pharmacy, run by Amchi Nawang Tsering. These are given to many patients across Changthang, for whom the *tsogspa* is a vital healthcare resource, as well as to visiting patients. Blaikie (2013, 2014) followed several *mendrup* participants from other villages back to their homes to document how they used *mendrup dütsi chömen* as *papta*. For example, in 2009 he observed Amchi Tashi Kundey (fig. 80) from Katphoo adding the *papta* during the compounding of Dali 16 (*da li bcu drug*; Rhododendron 16) (fig. 81) and several other formulas.

Adding *papta* to medicines activates several levels of *nüpa*: the potencies of blessings (*jinlap kyi nüpa*), meditative stabilization (*ting-ngédzin gyi nüpa*), and mantras (*ngak kyi nüpa*) (see Chapters 1–3). But it can also “fix” faults in the material potency (*dzé kyi nüpa*) of the medicines due to pharmacy errors or to missing or relatively low-quality medicinal substances, ensuring that the medicines are efficacious and beneficial. This especially matters to rural amchis, who often lack the resources to obtain all the ingredients needed to make complete formulas (Blaikie 2013, 2014, 2018).

Although *mendrup dütsi chömen* is usually added to medicines in only tiny amounts, it is a key ingredient in Dashel Dütsima (*zla shel bdud rtsi ma*; “Crystal Moon Ambrosia”), the only formula that, according to the textual sources,¹¹⁴

113 Based on ongoing fieldwork in Nee, we are able to confirm that the dynamics discussed in this section are current at the time of writing and therefore use the present tense. This is a conscious exception to our avoidance of the present tense in the rest of the book.

114 There are various text versions of this formula. In Nee they followed Trogawa Rinpoche’s recipe, which also contains *tsotel*.



Figure 78 Amchi participants of the 2018 *mendrup*. Nee, September 2018. Photo courtesy of T.K. Shor (all rights reserved).



Figure 79 The Nee group of amchis after the *mendrup* in 2007. Nee, September 2007. Photo C. Blaikie (all rights reserved).

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Figures 80–81 Amchi Tashi Kundey makes Dali 16 with Nee *mendrup dütsi chömen* (the red-colored powder on the right) added as a *papta*. Katphoo, Ladakh, 2009. Photos C. Blaikie (all rights reserved).

requires large amounts of *dütsi chömen*. As Nawang Tsering explained: “Dashel Dütsima means it has extra amounts of *dütsi chömen*, not just a small *papta* amount but a real amount according to the formula.” Each time he makes Dashel Dütsima, he adds ten to eleven pills from the previous batch as a *papta* to continue the *jinlap*.¹¹⁵ When making Dashel Dütsima in 2017, he also added some of the *tsotel*, first prepared with Trogawa Rinpoche at Nee in 1994, as an additional *papta*.

Dashel Dütsima is highly sought after across Ladakh and beyond. The high demand for this rare medicine has created tension between wealthy outsiders and the Ogyan Sorig Tsogspa’s main mission to serve the local community. Nawang Tsering explained: “Sometimes people demand rare kinds of medicine in large quantities, but we are trying to distribute them to many people, not only to one person. Other amchis are not making Dashel Dütsima because they cannot prepare the *mendrup*, so they take it from here and add it to their medicines in small quantities.”¹¹⁶ Amchis outside the immediate Nee group also add this medicine

115 Amchi Nawang Tsering, interview with Gerke and Van der Valk, Nee, September 22, 2018.

116 Amchi Nawang Tsering, conversation with Blaikie, Nee, October 26, 2007.

to their own formulas as a *papta*, further spreading its blessings and benefits into other areas and lineages.

It is not only Dashed Dötsima that travels well beyond the Changthang region; other medicines containing *dütsi chömen* also diffuse much further afield in several ways. Lama Rigzin takes many sacks of medicine away with him each year (fig. 82), which he uses to treat patients in the Manali area where he lives during winter, as well as on his numerous trips to Taiwan, Australia, and elsewhere where he sees international clients. The money he raises through these trips not only sustains his livelihood but also funded the construction of the new monastery in Nee (fig. 75) as well as parts of the annual *mendrup*, thus perpetuating the cycle. One of his disciples, Amchi Padma Tsetar, runs a successful cottage industry pharmacy in Leh, ensuring that medicines containing the Nee *mendrup papta* are used by many private amchis as well as in government-funded health centers right across Ladakh (Blaikie 2013, 2019).

In addition to their distribution among amchis, small bags of *dütsi chömen* are also given to all the lay people in the region who sponsor and/or attend the annual *mendrup* ritual. This is often shared and consumed within families, but also kept in safe places in case of emergencies. Here it serves as a powerful healing and protective substance in its own right, as well as a material symbol of their status as benefactors/donors (*sbyin bdag*). It thus mediates relationships between amchis, monastics, and lay people and supports the *mendrup* financially and socially, while also facilitating the accumulation of merit for all involved. In these and other ways, the *papta* diffuses out from Nee, retaining the form of *dütsi chömen* in some cases and in others becoming part of a myriad of other medicinal formulas. Each of these trajectories involves further connective, mediating, or catalytic activities across medical, ritual, and social fields.

It is important to note that not all Ladakhi amchis use *papta*. Amchi Tsultim Gyatso whom we met in Chapter 1, for example, is a Gelukpa monk and devout Buddhist practitioner who trained at MTK and does not have any additional family lineage training. He always recites mantras while making his medicines but never adds any *papta*, relying more on the potencies of substances or *dzé kyi nüpa* and mantras or *ngak kyi nüpa*. Amchi Ngawang Gluck in Choglamsar also reported never using *papta*, as did the Tibetan female Amchi Karma Choden, although she distributes *mani* pills consecrated at the Dalai Lama's temple in Dharamsala to her patients to achieve similar effects.¹¹⁷ It thus appears that the amchis who use *papta* are often linked to particular family lineages or have strong connections to Nyingma and Drukpa Kagyü traditions, while those lacking such backgrounds

117 On *mani* pill traditions see Gentry 2023a, 2023b.



Figure 82 Amchi Lama Rigzin leaving Nee with his medicines. Nee, September 2007. Photo C. Blaikie (all rights reserved).

tend not to add *papta* to their medicines. The practice of using *papta* in contemporary Sowa Rigpa is thus fairly widespread but also limited to amchis who share particular spiritual commitments and lineages.

Continuity and precarity

Amchi Nawang Tsering keeps some of the *dütsi chömen* prepared in 1992 and 2004 separately packed and stored because they have higher concentrations of *papta* than other batches. They are essential for making more *mendrup dütsi chömen* in the future when the right conditions arise, and therefore need to be carefully preserved.¹¹⁸ The production of *mendrup dütsi chömen* at Nee thus reflects a continuous tension between continuity and precarity. No new batches were prepared when we were present at the *mendrup* events of 2007 and 2018, and when we last visited in 2024 the amchis were still relying on the preserved stocks from 1992 and 2004. No opportunity to make new *dütsi chömen* had arisen in almost

118 Amchi Nawang Tsering, interview with Van der Valk, Nee, August 9, 2022.

thirty years.¹¹⁹ Nawang Tsering regularly commented on the dwindling stocks and expressed concern as to when and how they might be able to make it again.

Organizing a special *mendrup* has always been difficult, since it involves attracting monastics and ritual specialists with the correct knowledge and authority, gathering the required raw materials, mobilizing sufficient financial resources, and so on. It has become even harder recently since many associated amchis, monastics, and rinpoches are now deceased. Trogawa Rinpoche passed away in 2005 and Tsering Paljor in 2007, while Lama Rigzin grows increasingly frail. The younger generation appears to lack the connections and abilities required to bring similarly advanced practitioners to the region. Thus, we see how the webs of long-established patronage and social relations that enable continuity through *papta* practices are highly contingent and, in this case, increasingly precarious.¹²⁰

Rarity and precarity influence the way *papta* substances are valued and treated. The *dütsi chömen* produced at Nee has always had high value among those amchis connected to the *mendrup* cycle, but as the remaining stocks dwindle its value rises further. Nawang Tsering explained: “Years back, at the end of the *mendrup* we would distribute fifty grams of *mendrup* to each participant, then we reduced it to thirty grams, then twenty, and so on. Now we have stopped distributing it to everyone and only give a small bag to the participants who make a big contribution or are deeply involved in the ritual.”¹²¹ Demand is also driven up by people lacking close links to the Nee *mendrup* but who want large quantities of the rare medicines produced there, as shown above.

Decisions over how much can be distributed to whom will only grow more difficult until more can be made, but the path to producing a new batch is beset with obstacles. While the mundane aspects such as raising money and sourcing substances appear surmountable, greater challenges lie in attracting the high lamas and lineage holders able to preside over a *mendrup*. In their absence, Lama Rigzin has led the rituals over recent years. Unless existing lineage relations can be revitalized by the younger generation or new connections can be made to other experts with the ability and willingness to engage in such activities, the threat of rupture will only continue to grow. Having said that, only a small amount of

119 Sehnalova (2018, 96) mentions that a set of *mendrup* compounds at the Bönpo monastery in Nepal was meant to last for about twenty years. Historically in Tibet, each Menri abbot had to perform the *mendrup* once in his lifetime, translating into approximately one ritual every sixty years (Anna Sehnalova, email to Gerke, November 4, 2024).

120 This parallels the loss of such patronage relationships in the making of *tsotel* as described by Gerke (2021, 127–30).

121 Amchi Nawang Tsering, conversation with Blaikie, Nee, May 29, 2024.

dütsi chömen needs to be preserved in order to retain its ability to consecrate and potentize future batches. As long as some of this material remains in safe hands, any rupture can always be repaired and the unbroken stream of continuity resumed once the right conditions arise.

Discussion

This chapter set out to situate *papta* within Tibetan and Himalayan medico-ritual practice by examining its key properties and exploring its social, spatial, and temporal dynamics. The existing literature highlights some important characteristics of *papta* and *mendrup*, as well as their complex histories and varying textual descriptions. Tibetan authors from various traditions have long theorized and debated about these substances, as Gentry's work (2017, 2023a, 2023b) clearly shows. Overlooking this diversity risks erroneously presenting *papta* as singular, stable entities locked in a temporal vacuum. Our ethnographies showed how contemporary amchis in Ladakh perceive, use, and circulate consecrated substances, resonating in part with the reviewed literature while diverging in others. Pulling these various strands together here allows us to draw some conclusions about *papta* while also evaluating the extent to which Ingoldian frameworks can aid our understanding of potency and its crafting in Sowa Rigpa.

Approaching *papta* as emergent entities that combine numerous substances, potencies, and blessings, as well as ideals, values, and meanings, allows us to better understand their properties, movements, and effects. While a portion of any batch of *papta* will be retained in its original form to become part of the next iteration, the rest may take on numerous forms as it is blended into other formulas. This ability to endure, multiply, diffuse, and become part of other compounds while retaining its essential qualities is, as far as we know, unique to *papta*. This leads us to conclude that *papta* can simultaneously exist as enduring carriers of unbroken lineage continuity and as things-in-becoming. This aligns with Ingold's (2007b, 2010) emphasis on processes of change, interaction, and material agency, and his eschewal of the notion of finished products or stable forms.

We have shown how *papta* can take many forms. These include distinct substances maintained within specific lineages and preparations that incorporate *papta* from several lineages, as we saw at Nee. When other powerful and blessed substances are mixed into such compounds, these compounds can become even more potent. This was illustrated by the addition of *tsotel* to the *mendrup dütsi chömen* under the direction of Trogawa Rinpoche. We also showed how substances to which *papta* are added can become *papta* themselves. The Nee *dütsi chömen* became a *papta* when it was used to consecrate new batches of *dütsi chömen* and

other Sowa Rigpa medicines, all of which diffused in various forms and directions. This continual role in consecrating and transforming other compounds is what distinguishes *papta* from other *jinten* substances.

The addition of *papta* transforms medicines at the gross level of material potency, as well as through other registers of potency such as those of blessings, mantras, and meditative stabilization. By combining and essentializing the potencies generated through successive rituals, *papta* can transmit these potencies without the need for further ritual or meditative actions. This gives *papta* the capacity to correct mistakes in the material constitution of medicines and faults in pharmacy practice, thus further enhancing their potency. This aspect of *papta* also lends itself well to Ingoldian analysis, as their properties and effects emerge within ongoing flows or meshworks of materials in movement, rather than retaining singular, stable forms. However, by bringing us into the terrain of ritualized intentions, spiritual lineages, and the “lasting” potency of vow-bound substances, *papta* also extend beyond the reach of Ingoldian frameworks in several ways.

Papta act as catalysts by transforming the substances and practitioners they come into contact with, and as vehicles by carrying and transmitting the accumulated blessings, vows, and potencies of past masters across time, space, and compounds. *Papta* thus serve as a potent material substrate upon which blessings accumulate *and* simultaneously transfer those blessings and potencies to other entities. The idea that blessings “never diminish” points to a kind of durability grounded in spiritual commitments, ritual efficacy, and karmic intention. This is quite different from the durability that Ingold describes, which is grounded in the continued aliveness of materials through transformation.

Two recent publications propose ways to overcome the limitations of Ingold’s animist relational model, which foregrounds the materiality and agency of all life in an eco-phenomenological and holistic, yet rather secular and apolitical manner. Surbhi and Van der Valk (2025) introduce the concept of “ritualized meshworks,” which extends the Ingoldian framework to enable mantras, sacred landscapes, and more-than-human entities to be analyzed alongside physical properties and artisanal processes. This resonates strongly with our understanding of *papta*. We also find more general resonance with the “hylomorphic animism” favored by Kochan (2024), which provides conceptual space for norms, values, social practices, and cosmological entities to encode meanings into a thing differentially. This in turn shapes the effects that the thing subsequently exerts on other things within its sphere of influence. Taken together, these approaches enable us to better comprehend the complex synergies of potencies that emerge from interactions across material and immaterial planes in specific sociocultural settings and historical moments.

Such perspectives also help to explain how the production, possession, circulation, and application of *papta* activates connections within and between

generations of amchis and tantric practitioners. In their role as continuity or lineage substances, *papta* connect the current generation to past masters both materially and spiritually, thus embodying streams of continuous transmission. When amchis participate in *mendrup* rituals, they reenact their spiritual vows and *samaya* bonds while also purifying themselves, admitting their faults, and enhancing their technical abilities. These bonds are significant and endure through the collateral relationships of reciprocity between previous masters and future recipients that *papta* represent and materialize, binding them in a shared promise to benefit sentient beings.

Our research further suggests that *papta*'s movements through time and space follow repeating yet variable patterns of convergence, transformation, and diffusion. Repeated *mendrup* rituals often provide the focal points around which these patterns unfold within distinct lineages, but such events can also bring about interactions between different lineage groups. The confluence of various *papta* in the *mendrup dütsi chömen* prepared at Nee brought the accumulated *jinlap* of each lineage into this substance and, by drawing several lineages together, paved the way for further interactions, collective rituals, and medicine-making events. The *dütsi chömen* prepared during these special *mendrup* diffused widely, circulating not only among Ladakhi monks and nuns, amchis and patients, but also via members of other lineages residing far from Ladakh. *Papta* not only reaffirm existing bonds but also enable new connections and transfers of potency, authority, and memory within and across medical, ritual, and social fields.

Papta provide a medium for transformative interactions between skilled practitioners, diverse substances, and more-than-human entities such as protector deities within ritualized meshworks. They materially express partially overlapping forms of connection and exchange that crisscross the Tibetan cultural area and span long periods of time. *Papta* also confer authority to those using them. This contributes to the social status and medical power of *papta* and potentially increases demand for the medicines that contain them, as illustrated by the example of Dashel Dütsima. While this increased demand—and thus diffusion—may have positive effects under ordinary conditions, it relies on the ability of amchis to continue producing and consecrating such powerful substances. This appears to be more difficult to achieve in present-day Ladakh than in former decades. Even though only a tiny amount of *papta* needs to be retained to facilitate future consecration, a sense of precarity prevails and increases the value ascribed to the remaining stocks.

The precarious state of the Nee *mendrup* leads us to wonder about the changing position of Buddhism and ritual in contemporary Ladakh, and about evolving relationships between Sowa Rigpa, modern science, and the state in an era of increasing investment, regulation, and development in India (Blaikie 2019, 2025). In Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibetan regions in the PRC, annual *mendrup* rituals receive

widespread monastic and popular support and do not seem to be endangered. The remote rural location of Nee and its distance from large population centers is one contributing factor to the uncertain future of the *mendrup* ritual there, as is the relatively poor economic condition of the amchi association, which makes it difficult to offer appropriate accommodation and facilities to visiting masters,¹²² but further research is required to better understand this ongoing precarity.

Trying to adequately account for the fluidity of *papta* on the one hand, and the enduring potency of blessing and consecration on the other, takes us beyond the limits of the theoretical approaches introduced in this book. Statements such as “blessings never diminish” resonate on some level with the observation that substances-in-becoming “carry on or *perdure*” (Ingold 2013b, 31). But what exactly is it that perdures when substances are defined precisely by the encoding of both material and immaterial properties within them? Furthermore, is spiritual potency actually eternal in ordinary settings set about with doubt, limitations, and precarity? Our findings suggest that *papta* are not always as permanent or non-diminishing as it might seem. *Papta*’s potency may fade if exposed to “unclean” things or environments,¹²³ or if the spiritual commitments on which its continued transmission, diffusion, and dispersal depend are not renewed. Even supramundane manifestations of *nüpa*, which operate on the material plane while extending far beyond it, remain relational, contingent, and emergent within unfolding meshworks.

These observations raise deeper questions: How far can an Ingoldian approach help us understand the perduring yet impermanent properties of *papta*? Are we reaching the limits of idealized views of spiritual potency? While accepting that Ingoldian theory struggles to fully account for intangible, distributed, and socially encoded aspects of potency, our insistence on a more inclusive materialist ontology may have unearthed something that is perhaps more grounded—something that resists both the scientific insistence on the tangible and observable and the Buddhist philosophical penchant for the primacy of mind and its liberation from the mundane cycles of birth, old age, sickness, and death.

122 Amchi Nawang Tsering, conversation with Blaikie, Nee, May 29, 2024.

123 Here, “unclean” refers to all kinds of material and spiritual impurities or pollution known as *drip* (*grib*).