In total, there were several research trips made. Early in my planning it became clear that I would not be able to go to Kathmandu, Nepal, nor to Karnataka in the South of India, where a Protected Area Permit (PAP) was required to enter, but which takes several months to process. So I decided instead to focus on Himachal Pradesh, Northern India, and planned my trip accordingly.

I secured permits from the Tibetan Government in Exile Department of Home to research and film at the Jampaling elder home in Dharamsala, as well as getting permission to work at the Tibetan elder home of Sherab Ling monastery near Bir, Himachal Pradesh. And I organized my travel, bought plane tickets, etc.

My first trip to India took place Aug 15 – Sept 3, 2017. This was in the Himalayan foothills of Himachal Pradesh, in the Tibetan exile communities around Dharamsala and Bir. I spent time at the above mentioned elder people’s homes, following, interviewing, and filming Tibetan elders – especially more advanced meditation practitioners. I tried to get a sense of the end-of-life-world of elderly Tibetans, how they deal with old age and impending death. Overall, I found their experience to be thoroughly shot through with Tibetan Buddhist ideas and practices, which most of the elderly engaged in for a good part of the day as preparation for death. This is the life-world in which contemplative tukdam-deaths are produced. I spent several days with elite elderly meditators who have been in retreat for decades in the forested mountains above Dharamsala; all aspects of their daily life – from waking to sleeping and everything in
between – incorporated Tibetan Buddhist narratives, views, and practices, and the retreatants would typically spend 10-12 hours per day in meditation. I filmed their daily routine, and gathered very interesting in-depth interview material about the practices, processes and theories involved in tukdam deaths from these elderly monks, who form the most likely group to eventually pass away in tukdam. Such conceptualizing and experiencing of the body and its death process could be seen to reflect, and be constitutive of, a distinct Tibetan tantric-medical body and death; observations and interviews here made provide me with material to further explore these ideas. I did more in-depth research on cases I had previously investigated in the region, especially the tukdam death of Rolmo Tulku (2010), in Bir, Himachal Pradesh. On this trip I spent many days with Rolmo Tulku’s family (his two daughters, grandchildren, and widow), also getting a sense of how such a contemplative death impacts the immediate social environment, and shapes the grieving process, etc. I also interviewed Tibetan Buddhist Lamas and traditional doctors about the Tibetan tantric-medical body, and its death process both in Dharamsala and the many monasteries around Bir, H.P. For this purpose, I also purchased some literature in Dharamsala on the death process from a Tibetan point of view. For this entire trip, I had local translators, and many Tibetans spoke English.

From Kuala Lumpur, I travelled back to India for a second research trip, to continue the work started in August-September. On this trip, I did further research with Rolmo Tulku’s family, on the long-term effects of a contemplative tukdam-death on the social circle and local community of the deceased. And I devoted much of this trip for research on tantric Buddhist / Tibetan medical traditions, their physiologies and understandings of the death process, and tukdam, in particular. I did this based in Sherab Ling monastery near Bir, where many Tibetan doctors, expert lamas, and meditators reside. I again used local translation, and many of the interviews were conducted in English, as quite a few of the interviewees spoke good English.

Testimonial about Benefits of Fellowship

The SVA Robert Lemelson Foundation Fellowship helped me to begin exploring a visual anthropological mode of enquiry with image and sound. This is a new field for me, differing on the one hand from anthropology as text, and, on the other, from more commercial and journalistic documentary filmmaking that I have been involved in. With the funds, I got to develop my visual anthropological project on meditative tukdam deaths among Tibetan Buddhist contemplatives and end-of-life among elderly Tibetans (mainly in exile communities in India). The funds were crucial to this project, in allowing me to get a camera, paying for travel expenses to field, etc. Even more importantly, the fellowship gave me an opportunity to focus on audiovisual exploration of anthropological issues and sites, free from the constraints of more “mainstream” media productions usually following stereotypical scripts, and with severe time constraints preventing in-depth immersion in different cultural worlds. Thus the fellowship has opened an interesting third way between more traditional academia and the often formulaic media world, as a space for me to work and explore issues I’m interested in. I see this as a new career path, among the paths I have been treading, and one which this fellowship has given me the inspiration and impetus to keep on exploring further.