

Restoring the text of a Mahāyoga tantra witnessed in Early Tibet: an early version of the '*'Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa pad ma 'phreng gi don bsdud pa*'¹

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Since the advent of the New Translation Schools in Tibet from the eleventh century CE, there have been uncertainties and controversies over the texts of the Buddhist traditions which had been established earlier, stemming from the translations begun during the Imperial period. Apart from polemical attacks on the Ancient or Rnying ma texts as inauthentic or degenerate transmissions, there have also been problems of generations of scribal corruption, rendering some texts within the Rnying ma tantra corpus almost unreadable, even by erudite scholarly lamas. The Rnying ma tantras did not generally receive the editorial attention which the commonly shared collection of tantric scriptures, the Kanjur (*bka' 'gyur*), received, and there was only one printed version of the Ancient Tantra Collection (*Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum* or NGB), the Sde dge xylograph edition, for which the blockprints were made in the late eighteenth century. Moreover, the dominance of the Gter ma or Revelatory traditions from the twelfth century meant that the root tantras themselves perhaps received rather less attention than they might otherwise have done,² and that many of these tantras retained only their ritual transmissions, and not their explanatory teachings.³

Modern academic scholars do not take at face value the colophons or traditional attributions linking specific tantric texts to famous translators from the Imperial period. However, recent scholarship has tended to confirm the antiquity of materials from the Ancient Tantra Collection, even if it is not possible to trace them back further

¹ Our grateful thanks to the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK, who funded the research on which this paper is based.

² The transmission was, "complicated by the fact that numerous *gter-ston*... appeared to restore and renew spiritual practices in Tibet.... While the *bka' ma*... declined, the *gter ma* flourished" (Pemala 1982: 2)

³ Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche wrote that masters such as Mnga' ris pañ chen, Smin gling gter chen and their students, helped to preserve the commentarial tradition of the *Sgyu 'phrul* (of which the *Rgyud gsang ba snying po* is the main tantra), but other NGB tantras retain (only) their traditions for empowerment and reading transmission ("mnga' ris pañ chen sku mched dang/ smin gling gter chen yab sras kyi bka' drin las da lta'i bar sgyu 'phrul gyi bshad rgyud dang/ gzhan dbang lung gi rgyun ma nyams par bzhugs pa rnams" Gting skyes *Rñiñ ma rgyud 'bum*, Preface, 1v.4-5).

than the post-Imperial period. In this paper, we would like to summarise briefly some results from a four year research project on an important Rnying ma tantra and its commentary, the '*'Phags pa Thabs kyi zhags pa padma 'phreng gi don bs dus pa* (A Noble Noose of Methods, the Lotus Garland Synopsis, hereafter abbreviated as *Thabs zhags*). This famous Mahāyoga root tantra is in fact witnessed not only in the Ancient Tantra Collection but also in those Kanjur (*bka' gyur*) editions which include an additional supplementary section of Rnying ma tantras. Unusually for Rnying ma tantras, the text has a commentary, witnessed in three versions of the canonical commentarial writings, the Tenjur (*bstan 'gyur*), and also in a Dunhuang manuscript kept in London (IOL Tib J 321). Critically editing the root text, with reference to some twenty-one editions of the text (including the root text lemmata within the commentary editions), has brought to light a rather startling discovery. All the principal transmitted editions of the root text, including the printed Kanjur editions and other Kanjur texts of the Tshal pa line, as well as the influential Ancient Tantra Collection versions of Sde dge and of the Bhutanese manuscripts, have inherited shared indicative scribal corruptions. Textual scholars can trace the lines of descent of a text by identifying shared errors between groups of manuscripts, since these errors demonstrate that they must be related and descend from a common ancestor not shared with other versions of the text. Such errors must be significant enough that once they have entered the transmission, the earlier text could not be recovered simply by conjecture, that is, by guessing what the text ought to read. In this case of shared indicative corruptions in the Tshal pa Kanjur, the Sde dge and Bhutanese Ancient Tantra Collection texts, the errors are also found in the Dunhuang manuscript, so they must have entered the tradition by the time the Dunhuang text was copied, perhaps in the tenth century. However, the errors are avoided both in the South Central Ancient Tantra Collection manuscripts, and also in three local Kanjur manuscripts. With the help of these texts, we can now restore the archetype (that is, the ancestor of all extant versions) for much of the text.

Here, we present a summary of the evidence and reasoning which has led to our conclusions on the principal stemmatic relationships between the different editions.⁴ Examination of the textual variants of the twenty-one different witnesses of the root text we consulted demonstrated that they can be considered to represent eight different versions of the root text. Four appear to descend unproblematically from an archetypal root text, independently of one another. These direct descendants of an

⁴ For a fuller account, see Cantwell and Mayer, 2012.

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archetypal root text are the three texts of the South Central Ancient Tantra Collection grouping, and the local Kanjurs of Tawang, Hemis and Bathang.

We can deduce that two further textual groupings descended from a word-by-word commentarial text that contained the root text as lemmata. The first of these comprises the eight Tshal pa Kanjur texts, which here must include the Sde dge xylograph Ancient Tantra Collection because it re-used the woodblocks of the Sde dge Kanjur. The other grouping comprises the four Bhutanese Ancient Tantra Collection manuscripts. It became clear to us that these two versions represent two separate attempts to extract the root text from the commentary, since they include substantial yet different selections of additional commentarial text, and they also both omit very much smaller portions of root text, which their editors must have incorrectly identified as commentary. Their apparent inability to identify the root text correctly seems to be due to the fact that the commentary does not always or consistently mark off the citations of root text. Clearly, under such circumstances, an editor is more likely to be cautious and include text where it may be doubtful whether it is root text or commentary, so both versions are significantly longer than the earlier root text, and the Tshal pa Kanjur version is very much longer.

A further textual grouping and one more single witness have still retained their full commentarial character and are thus witnesses to the root text only through the lemmata they contain. These are the three versions of the Tenjur commentary, and the single witness Dunhuang manuscript commentary.

The Eight Versions of the Root text

i. *The Four Versions apparently descended independently from the same Root Tantra Archetype*

The South Central Tibetan Ancient Tantra Collection <i>(Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum)</i>	The local (incomplete) Kanjur Collection from Bathang (held in the Newark Museum, New York, and thus sometimes called, the Newark Manuscript Kanjur)	The local (incomplete) Kanjur Collection from Hemis Tshoms lha khang (He)	The local Kanjur Collection from Tawang , originally from the O rgyan gling Temple (Ogl)
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	(Bth)		
Gting skyes (T)			
Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang nor bu (R)			
Kathmandu (K)			

ii. *The Two Root Texts apparently descended from the Commentary through extraction of its Lemmata*

The Kanjur (bka' 'gyur) texts (Tshal pa line)	The Bhutanese Ancient Tantra Collection (Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum)
'Jang sa tham or Lithang Kanjur (J)	Mtshams brag (M)
Peking Kanjur (Qk)	Sgang steng-a (G-a)
Snar thang Kanjur (Nk)	Sgang steng-b (G)
Urga Kanjur (U)	Dgra med rtse (Gr)
Sde dge Kanjur (and Sde dge Ancient Tantra Collection) (Dk, D)	
Lha sa Kanjur (Hk)	
Ulan Bator Kanjur (V)	

iii. *The Two Commentarial texts that contain the Root text as Lemmata*

Lemmata of the root text within the Dunhuang manuscript of the commentary (Ms)	Lemmata of the root text within the Tenjur (bstan 'gyur) version of the commentary
	Peking Tenjur (Qt)
	Golden Tenjur (Gt)
	Snar thang Tenjur (Nt)

Stemmatic analysis of relations between these eight versions show that the Dunhuang manuscript, the Tshal pa Kanjur texts, and the Bhutanese Ancient Tantra Collection edition share indicative errors, including a significant accidental loss of a long passage

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of text in the final section of Chapter 10. This error is avoided in the South Central Ancient Tantra Collection, the local Kanjur versions which give this chapter, and the Tenjur edition. Thus, on the stemma diagram (see below), the loss must have taken place in a now lost manuscript labelled c. Unfortunately, the Tenjur has an even greater lapse at this point, losing several chapters of text starting in the middle of Chapter 6. It picks up the text again a few lines before the end of Chapter 10, before the end of the material lost by the Dunhuang, Tshal pa Kanjur, and Bhutanese witnesses, showing that it did not share their ancestor who lost the passage. There is little doubt that this additional material, found in full in the South Central Ancient Tantra Collection and two local Kanjur texts, is both appropriate and necessary here. Even before we had collated the local Kanjur witnesses, we had concluded that it was unlikely that the South Central tradition's ancestor had composed the passage and inserted it to fill the gap. The subsequent collation of the local Kanjur witnesses, coming from regionally distant areas, confirmed the conclusion that the passage must have been in the archetype.

The evidence is as follows. Chapter 10 is on the mudrās of the deities of the peaceful maṇḍala, who are listed in full in the Commentary's Chapter 7, while their mantras have just been given in a clear order in Chapter 9. The lost passage in the final section of the chapter continues exactly in sequence following on from the mudrās of the deities given in the chapter so far. The chapter gives first the mudrās for the male peaceful deities, although it appears to omit the four males in Vairocana's circle. Where we would expect them to occur, the mudrās for the female deities commence, at first in no obvious logical sequence, which might suggest that we might have some textual corruption at this point. On the other hand, the original tantra may not have had such an orderly schema as that outlined in the commentary's Chapter 7, which in any case does not entirely correspond clearly to either the root text's mantra or mudrā list. However, following what seem most likely to represent the mudrās of most of the principal female deities, the text begins with the females of the retinues in a clear logical order corresponding to their layout in the maṇḍala, as described in the commentary's Chapter 7, and given in precisely the same order as the sequence of mantras in the root text's Chapter 9. The chapter stops abruptly in the versions which share the loss of the passage, with the second female member of Ratnasambhava's retinue (*rdo rje 'phreng ba*), omitting the others of Ratnasambhava's group, as well as those of Amitabha's, Amoghasiddhi's and Vairocana's groups. The closing passage, given in full in the South Central Tibetan version, and also in the Tawang and Bathang

local Kanjurs,⁵ begins at the correct place, with the third female member of Ratnasambhava's retinue (*rdo rje me tog ma*), and continues as we would expect, apart from a puzzle in the final lines of the text.

There is one just conceivable – but extremely unlikely – alternative explanation to the hypothesis that the South Central Tibetan, Tawang and Bathang versions preserve a passage once witnessed in the earlier archetype of all the current versions. In this scenario, the editors of an ancestor of the South Central Tibetan, Bathang, Tawang and Tenjur versions might have inherited the already corrupted version, noticed the omission of a large number of mudrās, and attempted to restore the text by writing the extra lines. It would seem safe to discount this unlikely possibility, especially given the distances separating these editions, as well as other evidence suggesting, for example, that the Bathang Kanjur has texts which represent a tradition of extremely early readings.⁶ Furthermore, Tibetan editors of such scriptural collections seem rarely to re-write or add large sections of text, even where they find significant corruptions. There are other incoherencies in the *Thabs zhags* text – including the apparent loss of order in middle of the Chapter 10 mudrās mentioned above – which none of our editions has attempted to resolve. Moreover, if the final passage were a deliberate construction, one would have expected it to supply all the missing mudrās, taking care that they correspond to the correct deities' names. However, the final few appear to muddle Vairocana's male and female retinue, giving

⁵ Unfortunately, we are missing the Hemis folios at this point, although the number of its missing folios would seem appropriately to correspond to the length of the missing text, including this passage.

⁶ Peter Skilling (2001) reviews features of the Bathang Kanjur, and for our purposes here, makes two important points. First, he points out that the collection must be a copy of venerable exemplar(s): "Its antiquity may be seen from the orthography (particularly the transliteration of Sanskrit), the arrangement of contents, and the inclusion of texts excluded from or missing in the comprehensive Tshal pa edition, which was compiled in CE 1347-51". Secondly, Skilling's specific study of the Mahāśūtras, "suggests that the Newark Kanjur belongs to an old and independent textual transmission that predates the compilation of the Tshal pa and Them spangs ma collections" (2001: 74-75). Michael Zimmermann's detailed work on the different editions of the *Tathāgathagarbha Sūtra* confirms this picture. Zimmermann makes clear that, "Bth is the only known representative of a separate, paracanonical translation of the *Tathāgathagarbha Sūtra*. Judging from its terminology and syntax, it must have been executed before translations became more standardized following the compilation of compendiums like the MVy [Mahāvyutpatti] and the *Sgra sbyor bam po gnyis pa*, that is, before the early ninth century" (2002a: 166-167). He argues (1998: 35) that this translation seems to have been based on an identical or very similar Indic original to that used by the later translation, but that it seems very unlikely that the later translators/editors had access to this earlier work. Moreover, not only does the Bathang version of the text fail to use the standard translation vocabulary, it also uses terminology which has parallels in other early translations, while its translation seems to attempt to keep so close to the Sanskrit source text that it is stilted and partly unintelligible in places (Zimmermann 1998: 46-49). See also Zimmermann 2002a: 24-26, and 2002b. Siglinde Dietz (2002: 17) also attests to the "frequent independent readings" found in the Bathang Kanjur version of the *'Jig rten gzhag pa*.

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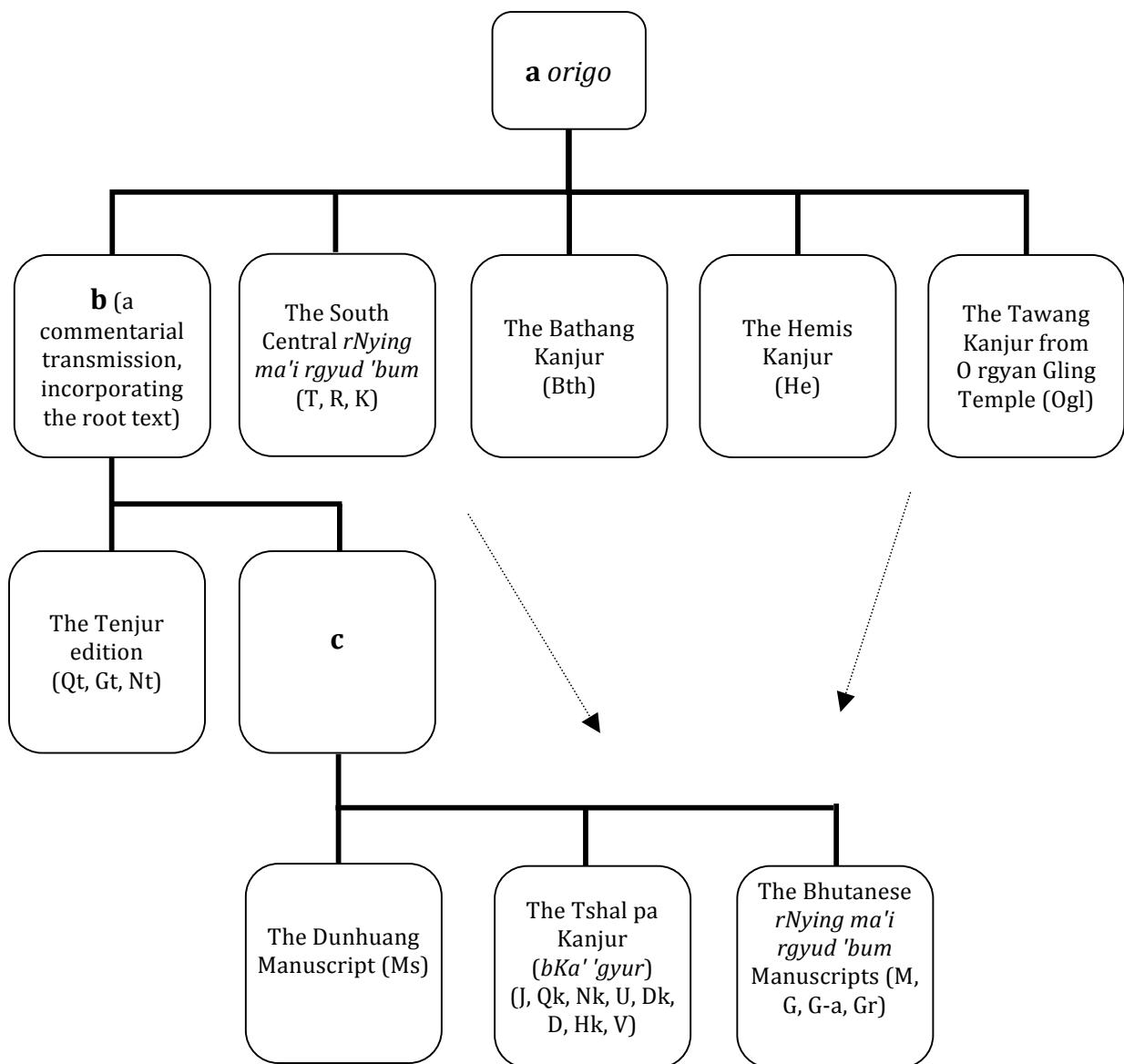
the male names with female particles, and at the end, we still seem to be missing one of the principal female deities. If Vairocana's male retinue is intended for the final names, it would surely make more sense for an editor involved in substantial re-writing, to insert them in their logical place earlier in the chapter. Perhaps one slightly more conceivable possibility is that rather than a re-writing job, the editors found another tantra with the same set of deities and inserted the missing list from its list of mudrās, thereby explaining the slightly odd presentation of the mudrās for the final deities. This hypothesis would gain support if such a text were identified, especially if it has female versions of the list of Vairocana's male retinue as found in the *Thabs zhags*. However, unless such a text were to be identified, it would seem almost certain that the South Central Tibetan, Tawang and Bathang texts have preserved text which genuinely goes back to an earlier version before the loss of the passage in the other editions. When added to the further evidence of shared errors in the Dunhuang, Tshal pa Kanjur and Bhutanese editions, we can feel confident that the most straightforward explanation for the loss of the passage – a scribal corruption within the Dunhuang, Tshal pa Kanjur and Bhutanese branch – is the correct one.

Other errors reinforce the picture of the Dunhuang, Tshal pa Kanjur and Bhutanese texts forming one branch of the transmission. However, some of their shared errors and readings may in fact represent a larger group including the Tenjur as well. Unfortunately, the Tenjur version of the commentary has lost perhaps thirty percent of the text. Clearly, a similar proportion of its root text is thus also missing. We can therefore divide the distinctive variants into those which the Tenjur definitely avoids (as in the case of the Chapter 10 passage loss) and those where the Tenjur is missing, so its reading is unknown.

Minor errors and numerous shared readings between the Dunhuang, Tshal pa Kanjur, and Bhutanese texts, together with the Tenjur texts, indicate that these groups can together be considered to constitute a single major branch of the transmission, against the South Central Ancient Tantra Collection and the local Kanjur texts. Comparison of these five separate branches, which most likely descended from the archetype separately, has helped to restore the readings which were most likely to have been present in the archetype, for much of the root text. Where a reading is supported by a majority of the five branches, it is most likely the earlier reading. There is only real uncertainty where there is no clear picture, such as when the commentarial branch has a single reading that is unlikely to be archetypal, while the four descendants of the stand-alone root text are equally divided. Such cases generally concern only very minor variants.

**Diagram of the proposed Stemma of The Root Text of the
'Phags pa Thabs kyi zhags pa padma 'phreng gi don bsdus pa**

Note that the solid lines of descent indicate merely the direction of transmission, often through many generations of copying, and the length of these lines has no significance. Thus, the South Central transmission is likely to have descended through far more copyings than the Dunhuang manuscript. The arrows represent tentative possible directions of limited contamination, from a branch other than b.



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For those who may doubt the antiquity of the Rnying ma tantras, it is worth reflecting not only that the existence of the Dunhuang manuscript demonstrates that the *Thabs zhags* and its commentary must date from some point prior to this tenth or eleventh century copy, but that one branch of the Ancient Tantra Collection transmission preserves text which must descend from a version of the text pre-dating the omission which the Dunhuang manuscript shares. Often, the assumption is that the highest status, most carefully edited editions of a tantric text will be the "best", and this is often the case, especially if one is looking for accurate spellings and a minimum of careless scribal errors. For example, the Tshal pa Kanjur texts tend to have conventionally accurate spellings and grammar, and contrast with less carefully made editions, such as the Bathang local Kanjur manuscript, which has innumerable omissions and corruptions throughout. Yet once a serious corruption has entered the transmission, every direct descendant will share it. Moreover, in pre-modern Tibet, there was not always the opportunity to seek out alternative editions: in this case, in two separate incidents, important editions depended on a root text extracted from the commentary, presumably because the root text itself was not available to the compilers of the edition. Hence, we witness a situation in which all the mainstream branches of the transmission, including the printed Kanjur and Ancient Tantra Collection editions, share a major loss of text in Chapter 10, as well as confusion between the boundaries of the root and commentarial texts, and a host of other errors. On the other hand, texts preserved in outlying areas have avoided these problems, even though they vary considerably in other respects. Thus, as mentioned above, the Bathang Kanjur manuscript version is full of careless mistakes, while generations of scribal copyings have resulted in a fair number of errors in the South Central Tibetan manuscripts. In contrast, however, the local Kanjur manuscripts from Tawang O rgyan gling, and from Hemis, are rather remarkable in showing few errors of any kind. Some apparent spelling variants may in some cases simply represent archaic or non-standard spellings rather than later corruptions, and they are seemingly very close to our reconstructed archetype. Unfortunately, a few folios of the Hemis manuscript are now lost, but the entire text of the Tawang O rgyan gling manuscript is intact. Its only significant error is in Chapter 10, where it identifies a mudrā as that of *rdo rje sems pa* rather than *rdo rje legs pa*, a rather impressive achievement in some fourteen folios of text. This manuscript Kanjur came originally from the Sixth Dalai Lama's family temple.⁷ Copies

⁷ See Jampa Samten 1994. This edition of the Kanjur had been commissioned and copied in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries at the temple of O rgyan gling (the Sixth Dalai Lama's family temple), on the basis of an earlier gold and silver illuminated Kanjur (*gser chos bka' 'gyur*).

of it are not yet widely available, but we can conclude that recent and ongoing scholarship on the various local Kanjur manuscript editions may hold in store further discoveries quite likely to help to illuminate our understanding of early Tibetan Buddhist texts.

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The *Golden bsTan 'gyur (gser gyi lag bris ma)* [Gt], produced between 1731-1741, currently held at Ganden Monastery; published in Tianjing 1988, digitally scanned for TBRC, New Delhi 2002. A CD version is available from the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center, New York (W23702). The '*Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa padmo 'phreng gi don bsdus pa'i 'grel pa* commentary is in Volume *rgyud 'grel Bu* (78): 243-321.

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Local Kanjurs: copies of the Local Kanjurs of **Bathang** [Bth], which is held in the Newark Museum, New York, of **Hemis** [He], from Hemis Tshoms lha khang, and of **Tawang**, **O rgyan gling** [Ogl] (of which a microfiche copy is held at the Central University of Tibetan Studies in Sarnath), have not yet been made available in published form. The '*Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa pad mo 'phreng gis don bsdus pa* occurs in Volume *rgyud A* of the Bathang Kanjur, ff.204r-214r; the '*Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa padmo phreng gyi don bsdus pa* occurs in Volume *brgyud ka* of the Hemis Kanjur, ff.31r-45v; and the '*Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa pad mo 'phreng gyi don bsdus pa* occurs in Volume *rgyud Nya* of the Tawang O rgyan gling, ff.367v-381r.

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