

THE VIEW OF *SPYI TI YOGA**

Jean-Luc Achard

CNRS, CRCAO, Paris

Great Perfection (rDzogs chen) teachings are generally understood as being classified into three categories of instructions known as the Mind Series (*sems sde*), the Expanse Series (*klong sde*), and the Precepts Series (*Man ngag sde*). The origin of this tripartition is traditionally credited to Mañjuśrīmitra, the main disciple of dGa' rab rdo rje.¹ A little later, Śrī Siṃha (8th century), a disciple of both dGa' rab rdo rje and Mañjuśrīmitra, is said to have divided the texts belonging to the Precepts Series into four cycles: outer (*phyi*), inner (*nang*), secret (*gsang*), and innermost secret (*yang gsang* or *gsang ba bla na med pa*).² A few centuries later, another classification of what are obviously works belonging to the innermost secret section started to be used in the works of Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192) and later by Gu ru Chos dbang (1212–1270). In some of these works, the highest teachings of the Great Perfection were presented as being classified into: 1. *A ti yoga* (the Supreme Yoga, most obviously the works belonging to the innermost secret cycle), 2. *sPyi ti yoga* (Yoga of the Crown), 3. *Yang ti yoga* (Yoga of the Quintessence) and 4. *mTha' chen* (the Great Limit).³

* I would like to thank Marianne Ginalski and Windsor Viney for their suggestions and corrections on earlier drafts of this paper.

1 The historical existence of dGa' rab rdo rje has not been proved so far and the hagiographic events occurring during his life have been questioned by historians. There are elements reminiscent of the birth of 'Chi med gtsug phud in the Bon tradition, which have an allegorical (or even alchemical) meaning whose interpretation seems to have been lost (if it was ever known) by the rNying ma tradition. Upon discussing the matter of 'Chi med gtsug phud's birth with modern Bon po lineage holders, it seems that the symbolical meaning of its unfolding is totally unknown to them and that it is simply taken as face value or as a proto-historical account. In other words, the narrative is not something that needs to be interpreted but should be considered as an historical account. It should also be noted that comparing the births of dGa' rab rdo rje and 'Chi med gtsug phud with that of Moses (Guenther, *Wholeness Lost*, p.26 n. 56, the myth actually comes from the legend of Sargon the Great) only takes into account superficial narrative elements, instead of hermetic features such as the encoded meaning of their fate as children abandoned in a pit of ashes (for dGa' rab rdo rje and 'Chi med gtsug phud [on the meaning of the ash pit, see Claudine Leduc, "Mythologie, théologie,...", p.145]) and to the flow of the Niles (for Moses). From an alchemical perspective, the difference is more than pertinent. A convincing hermetic interpretation of these births still remains to be formulated with a perfect knowledge of the symbolism behind the so-called narrative elements.

2 G. Dorje & M. Kaptsein, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, pp.332-333. This fourfold classification is actually the result of a complex approach to classifying the teachings of the Great Perfection. On this theme, see also Klong chen pa, *Theg mchog mdzod*, vol. I, pp.82 *et seq.* It is interesting to note that Klong chen pa does not use the classification of *A ti*, *sPyi ti* and *Yang ti* in his exegetical works such as the *Treasury of Philosophical Tenets* (*Grub mtha' mdzod*) for instance, whereas he actually quotes the *Thig le kun gsal* (one of the major *sPyi ti* Tantras) in several of his works (*gNas lugs mdzod*, *Bla ma yang tig*, etc.).

3 In the vast majority of these works, the classification is presented as threefold (*A ti*, *sPyi ti* and *Yang ti*). In some cases, *Thod rgal* (as a Vehicle, see below) is added instead of the Great Limit, the recurrent set being that of *A ti*, *sPyi ti* and *Yang ti*.

Since the system of *sPyi ti yoga* will be the main theme discussed in this paper, I will only very briefly introduce the basics of *A ti*, *Yang ti* and *mTha' chen*. As stated above, the *A ti* class seems to correspond, in the later system of Nyang ral and Gu ru Chos dbang, to what are generally known as the *Seventeen Tantras* (*rGyud bcu bdun*).⁴

As to the corpus of *Yang ti*, it is generally presented as being divided into two groups: 1. the cycle of the Black Quintessence (*Yang ti nag po'i skor*), and 2. the cycle of the Brahmins' Quintessence (*yang ti bram ze'i skor*). The texts making up these two groups are to be found in the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* collections.⁵ In the course of time, several revelations pertaining to the *Black Quintessence* were made, down to the 20th century, whereas it would seem that the corpus of the *Brahmins' Quintessence* remained limited to the set of Tantras of this group included in the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*. In other words, it would seem that all *Yang ti* revelations made from the 14th to the 20th century belong to the Black Quintessence only.⁶

The system of *mTha' chen* or “Great Limit” is said to be entirely “oral”, even though some mentions of the term *mTha' chen* appears here and there in the *gter ma* literature, down to the late 19th century with for example reference to it in mChog gyur gling pa's *Bar chad kun sel*.⁷ So far, I have not noticed any mention of this *mTha' chen* expression in works at my disposal, be they twentieth-century indigenous texts or original works written during these first years of the twenty-first century. Several modern masters questioned on this subject have simply confessed to not knowing anything about it.⁸ The problem with this *mTha' chen* system is that its name seems to be used with various meanings or referents. For instance, in O rgyan gling pa, it stands for the ultimate stage, above that of *Ati yoga* and realized at the level of the eleventh *bhūmi*, Kun tu 'od kyi sa.⁹ Still in O rgyan gling pa's

4 On these texts, see Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, pp.85-94. In this classificatory mode, *A ti* seems to cover the *Man ngag sde* (with its fourfold subdivisions) as well as *Klong sde* and *Sems sde*. Otherwise, *A ti* is sometimes considered as a generic expression covering all doxographical subdivisions of rDzogs chen, as in dGe rtse rin po che's doxographical presentation of his *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* edition. See Achard, “Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang mchog grub...”, p.48. See also Thub bstan chos dar, *rNying ma rgyud 'bum gyi dkar chag gsal ma'i me long*, pp.58 *et seq.*

5 See Achard, “Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang mchog grub...”, pp.50-53 (nos. 1-34).

6 So far, I have been unable to identify any cycle of instructions associated with this second series of *Yang ti* teachings. I hope to have the opportunity to publish in the future an on-going study on the comparison of the main themes and lexicon between these two *Yang ti* traditions.

7 See gTer slob Dharma rāja, *Padma'i snying po rgyud kyi tshig don gsal byed*, p.383. In *L'Essence Perlée du Secret* (p.59 n. 22), I have attributed this work to mChog gyur gling pa when it is actually a work authored by one of his disciples (as indicated by the expression *gter slob*), gTer slob Dharma rāja about whom I have not found any information. One may venture as this being one of the multiple names used by mKhan po Karma ratna (1823-?) but this is pure speculation.

8 I will discuss the little information I have discovered about this system in a forthcoming paper provisionally entitled “The System of the Great Limit of Dzogchen — an inquiry into a possibly disappeared tradition among the rNying ma school of Tibetan Buddhism”. To my knowledge, the first mention of the *mTha' chen* was made by Tucci in his *Minor Buddhist Texts II* (p.102), although it is unclear whether or not he understood what this was exactly referring to. The next mention appears in my *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, pp.57-59. Since then, as far as I am aware, no mention of this expression has appeared in either academic or non-academic works.

9 *Lo paṅ bka' thang*, p.382: *sa bcu gcig kun tu 'od/ a ti yo ga mtha' chen bstan/*.

bKa' thang sde lnga, it is clearly presented as the last of the twelve Vehicles, and it appears generally, as we have seen above, in the fourfold scheme of *A ti*, *sPyi ti*, *Yang ti*, and *mTha' chen*.¹⁰

1. Studies on *sPyi ti Yoga*

The system of *sPyi ti yoga* has been the object of an interesting study by H.V. Guenther, although both the rendering of the translated excerpts and the lexicon used by the author have prevented him from actually conveying the real meaning of this system of practice.¹¹ When reading Guenther's work on this subject, one has the strong impression that *sPyi ti* is an over-philosophical system with no practice whatsoever.¹² In fact, as in several of his works, Guenther has failed to understand the difference between the ultimate state described in rDzogs chen texts and the actual Path leading to that same state. Therefore, most of his renditions of the texts and the conclusions he draws from his readings give a very partial view of the actual teachings of the Great Perfection. I do not intend to condemn him here in any derogatory way: on the contrary, one should definitely appreciate the fact that he was one of the first individuals (in some cases more than 60 years ago) to actually use rDzogs chen texts in his researches and published works. However, one must also insist on the fact that the lexicon he used — elaborated by late-twentieth-century thinkers (heavily influenced by phenomenology and modern physics) — has without doubt totally undermined his capacity to convey the true meaning of these texts. Even though Guenther regularly criticized “ethnic” translators, he himself created and maintained his own work in a sometimes grotesque lexical cage from which barely any meaning found a way to escape, and this, despite his vast knowledge of Buddhist lore.

The next work officially published¹³ on *sPyi ti* was my own *Le Cycle de l'Immortalité Adamantine* which represents a later stage of the *sPyi ti* teachings, organized in a mode that

10 Even though *sPyi ti* and *Yang ti* are current doxographical representations in Nyang ral and Gu ru Chos dbang, I have yet to locate any mention of the Great Limit in their works. This will probably be easily determined when access to electronically inputted version of their Tantras become available. It is also possible that the Great Limit is the same as the *thod rgal theg pa* or *yongs rdzogs thod rgal [bla med] theg pa* that is found in some of the Nyang ral revelations (such as the *Nyi zla snying po*, fol. 21b). On the description of *thod rgal* as a Vehicle in Nyang ral works, see Achard, *Le Pic des Visions*, pp.23-25. See also the explicit mention of Nyang ral's discovery of “the cycles of *A ti*, *Yang ti*, *sPyi ti* and *thod rgal* of the Great Perfection” (*rdzogs pa chen po a ti yang ti spyi ti thod rgal gyi bskor dang/...*, in *mNga' bdag myang nyi ma 'od zer gyi nram thar gsal ba'i me long*, p.139).

11 See H.V. Guenther, *The Teachings of Padmasambhava*, Brill, 1996.

12 The same problem affects Guenther's other works (including individual papers, etc.). This recurrent straying from the actual intent of the rDzogs chen texts studied by Guenther has forced some to even create a *Guenthausorus*, in order to equate the ethnic guentherian lexicon with that used by those Guenther considered as ethnic Buddhist translators.

13 I have issued in 1995 a privately published French translation of the *Nam mkha' 'bar ba'i rgyud* (*rGyud thams cad kyi rtse rgyal nam mkha' 'bar ba'i rgyud*) which will be reprinted in the near future. I have yet to find any information regarding possibly privately published works on the subject of *sPyi ti* by other researchers or translators.

is definitely quite similar to that of the innermost secret cycle of the Precepts Section.¹⁴ For instance, this cycle revealed by sPa gro gter ston introduces the main practice (*dngos gzhi*) of rDzogs chen according to the standard *sNying thig* scheme of Cutting through Rigidity (*khregs chod*) and Passing over the Crest (*thod rgal*).¹⁵ *sPyi ti* Tantras do not use this terminology to describe the practice of the Great Perfection, nor do they use the very specific terminology of the *sNying thig*-related cycles, such as the “Four Visions” (*snang ba bzhi*), or the “Four (or Six) Lamps” (*sgron ma bzhi/drug*).¹⁶ It is interesting to note that with sPa gro gter ston, the practice of *sPyi ti yoga* falls within the structural lines expounded in the *sNying thig* literature. Nothing of the sort was clearly evident in earlier expositions of *sPyi ti* teachings (in Nyang ral and Gu ru Chos dbang), not even in O rgyan gling pa’s *bKa’ thang sde lnga* which describes *sPyi ti* as a Vehicle (*theg pa*).¹⁷

Since the publication of these two studies a short but interesting presentation of the doxographical category of *sPyi ti* has appeared in D. Germano’s paper entitled “The Funerary Transformation of the Great Perfection”.¹⁸

Before moving on to the description of the view of *sPyi ti*, it should be mentioned that the practice texts of *sPyi ti* exhibit salient differences with the actual class of *sPyi ti* Tantras. From the practice texts, it is clear that we are on a similar ground to that of the *sNying thig*, as can be seen in sPa gro gter ston’s cycle of instructions, but also in the individual works of the *sPyi ti* category in bDud ’dul rdo rje and Klong gsal snying po revelations.¹⁹ We can also see that Sog bzlog pa considered *sPyi ti* and *Yang ti* as ranges of *thod rgal* practice, which means he certainly had in mind the practice-oriented cycles, rather than the Tantras of these two classes.²⁰

14 See Achard, *Le Cycle de l’Immortalité Adamantine*, éd. Khyung-Lung, 2009, *passim*.

15 *Id.*, pp.51-76. This includes a description of dark retreats (*mun mtshams*, pp.59-64) but this kind of practice is not restricted to the *Man ngag sde*, since there exist dark retreats in the context of *Klong sde* teachings (as well as in the Kālacakra).

16 The system of the Four Visions is included in the revelation of sPa gro gter ston (see *op. cit.*, pp.57-58) but there is no special description of the Lamps, only the Lamp of the Empty Thigles (*thig le stong pa’i sgron ma*) is mentioned in the cycle (p.62).

17 Achard, *L’Essence Perlée du Secret*, pp.54-58. In the *Lo pan bka’ thang*, O rgyan gling pa describes the View of *sPyi ti* as being beyond duality and dual classifications. It is also clearly defined as Space and Awareness not subject to union or separation (*dbyings rig ’du bral med pa*, *Lo pan bka’ thang*, chap. 31, p.381). The definition of undifferentiated Space and Awareness (*dbying rig dbyer med*) is the same as that of Emptiness and Clarity (*stong gsal dbyer med*), both classical syntheses of the View of the natural state according to Dzogchen.

18 Germano, “The Funerary Transformation of the Great Perfection” pp.21-24.

19 I will come back to these texts elsewhere with a presentation of relevant translations. Here it suffices to say that these cycles include traditional *Man ngag sde* practices such as the separation of Samsara and Nirvana (*’khor ’das ru shan dbye ba*), the training of the three doors (*sgo gsum sbyang ba*), *khregs chod*, *thod rgal*, instructions on *bar do* states, etc.

20 He says (*Collected Works*, vol. 1, p.249): «... the practice of light and darkness of spontaneous *thod rgal*, such as *sPyi ti* and *Yang ti*...» (... *spyi ti dang yang ti sogs lhun grub thod rgal snang mun gyi nyams len*). The “light practice” of *thod rgal* refers to supports (*rten*) such as the sun, the sky, etc. the “darkness practice” refers to dark retreats (*mun mtshams*) which, as we have seen, are also included in the practice texts of *sPyi ti* (while not a single explicit mention of such a yoga appears in the *sPyi ti* Tantras).

In particular, the *sPyi ti* Tantras do not show any of the characteristics of *thod rgal* practice, either in its preliminary form or in its main practice.

2. The actual view of *sPyi ti*

Since Guenther's study of *sPyi ti* has baffled many a reader, I want to address here, as one of several contributions planned on the same subject, what is traditionally defined as "the View of *sPyi ti*" (*spyi ti'i lta ba*) in its own words. The notion of a View (*lta ba*) in Buddhism has nothing to do with how one envisions the world or anything else, as some modern Tibetan Lamas teach these days, but rather it concerns the actual philosophical perspective one must maintain in order to progress on the practice of the Path, without straying into deviations (*gol sa*).²¹ In other words, what is experienced during the practice of the Path must be evaluated according to the diverse modalities composing the View or theory which precisely prevents erring into deviations. In most cases, explanations dealing with the View of Dzogchen actually describe what is defined as the natural state of the Base (*gzhi'i gnas lugs*), the Base being the actual, authentic abiding mode of the Mind. In this respect, the View explains three main modalities designated as the three wisdoms of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen gyi ye shes gsum*): Essence (*ngo bo*), Nature (*rang bzhin*) and Compassion (*thugs rje*). The undifferentiated expression of these three wisdoms is what is designated as the Great Primordial Purity (*ka dag chen po*) which is the main representation used to describe the View in *sPyi ti* Tantras. In this respect, according to the mTshams brag *Collection of Ancient Tantras* (vol. 10, p.641-642), the view of the *sPyi ti yoga* is defined as follows:

Then gSal dag rin chen asked
The Revealer sKye med ka dag:
«— How is the uppermost *sPyi ti yoga* (explained)?»

The Revealer replied to his retinue:
«— *Emaho!* Ô most extraordinary marvel!
This *sPyi ti yoga* which is the Peak of the Nine Vehicles
Is not found from the outside but found within oneself.
As to this particularly special and extraordinary supreme Vehicle,
The view of the *sPyi ti* of the Great Perfection is as follows:
The world of appearances and existence, of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa, is entirely
Liberated as the great Primordial Purity without support
(Within which) arises the Contemplation free from being, non-being,
and intentions.

21 The classical notion of View belongs to a fourfold scheme of specific representations concerning: 1. View (*lta ba*), 2. Meditation (*sgom pa*), 3. Conduct (*spyod pa*), and 4. Fruit (*'bras bu*). The theoretical ideas expounded in the View are thus put into practice following the applying of specific key point (*gnad*) during Meditation sessions. Then, the experiences obtained during Meditation are "boosted" through the applying of specific behaviors pertaining to Conduct, so that when reaching a non-regressive stage in which the principles of the View are totally integrated by the individual, the Fruit can be achieved (either in this lifetime, after death, or even after an ultimate rebirth).

(Therefore) abide naturally in this unaltered (state)
 Which is devoid of action, effort and exertion,
 Unborn, insubstantial, and transcending the mental in its result.
Ema! Such an extraordinary and wonderful teaching
 Does not come from anywhere other than the “A”.
 Alala ho! Everything entirely liberates within this Great Primordial Purity.»²²

Thus he spoke.

*From the Tantra of the Clear Expanse of the utterly pure Ocean, the
 Celestial Expanse blazing with the lights of the Sun and Moon,
 the Victorious Peak of (all) Tantras,
 Such is the ninth chapter, revealing the Vehicle of sPyi ti.*

3. The text of the chapter

This short abstract has been translated using three different versions of the text, all quite close to one another, as can be seen in the annotated transcription below. I have primarily used the mTshams brag edition of the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* (manuscript), and checked the gTing skyes version (manuscript), as well as the sDe dge xylographic edition.²³

rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum (mTshams brag ed., vol. 10, pp.641-642)

/de nas gsal dag rin chen gyis/ /skye med ka dag ston pa la/ /gong rgal²⁴ spyi ti ji ltar lags/ /zhes
 zhus pas/

ston pas 'khor la bka' stsal pa/ (p.642)/

e ma ho²⁵ ngo mtshar khyad par 'phags/ /theg pa dgu rtse spyi ti yo ga 'di/ /gzhan nas mi
 rnyed rang las rnyed/ /theg mchog ngo mtshar khyad par can/ /rdzogs chen spyi ti'i lta ba ni/ /
 snang srid 'khor 'das ma lus par²⁶/ /ka dag rten med chen por grol²⁷/ /yin min rtsis gdab²⁸ med
 pa'i dgongs pa²⁹ shar/ /bya btsal rtsol bsgrub³⁰ med pa ru//zang ka rnal³¹ mar gnas pa'o//skye med

22 See the “translation” of this section of the chapter in Guenther, *The Teachings of Padmasambhava*, p.21. In this passage, Guenther’s ethnic lexicon simply renders the meaning incomprehensible and obviously not consistent with the original intent of the chapter. In fact, translation theory, it would be exactly a counter-example of what is expected from a translator.

23 I have used only the edition that are at my disposal. I have not searched other versions, for lack of access to them.

24 sDe dge: *brgal*.

25 gTing skyes: *ho//*.

26 sDe dge: *pa*; gTing skyes: *par*.

27 gTing skyes: *gol* (evidently a mistake which is probably due to the reproduction of the manuscript).

28 gTing skyes: *gdabs*.

29 gTing skyes: *par*.

30 sDe dge: *sgrub*.

31 The subscribed *ra* is strangely missing from *mTshams brag*. The *la* in *rnal* is barely readable in the reproduction of the gTing skyes manuscript at my disposal (although one can obviously deduce it from the context).

dngos med 'bras bur blo las 'das//e ma ngo mtshar rmad byung chos/ /gzhan nas³² mi 'byung a las byung/ /a la la ho³³ ma lus ril por ka dag chen por grol/ /ces gsungs so/ /rgyud kyi rtse rgyal nyi zla 'od 'bar mkha' klong rnam dag rgya mtsho klong gsal gyi rgyud las/ /spyi ti'i theg pa bstan pa'i le'u ste dgu pa'o/.

4. Commentary

Then gSal dag rin chen asked

The Revealer sKye med ka dag :

gSal dag rin chen is a bodhisattvic figure belonging to the retinue of the Buddha sKye med ka dag in the present text, i.e. the *Tantra of the Luminous Expanse* revealed by Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer.³⁴ His name means the “Pure and Luminous Jewel”. He plays a crucial role in the *sPyi ti* teachings since he is defined as the compiler (*sdud pa po*) of some of them, as well as the main interlocutor of the Buddha revealing these texts. In the *Tantra of the Blazing Lights of the Lamps*,³⁵ he appears as a compiler of the Buddha's teachings, as well as the enunciator of all the requests made to the Buddha and forming the general structure of the Tantra itself. He is evidently the same as gSal dag khye'u chung who appears in the *Tantra of the Blazing Lights of the Lamps* (*sGron ma 'od 'bar ba'i rgyud*), as well as Rang snang gsal dag appearing in the *Tantra of the Quintessence of the Sun and the Moon* (*Nyi zla snying po'i rgyud*).

The Buddha sKye med ka dag is the Revealer (*ston pa*) of the Tantra. His name means “Unborn Primordial Purity”. He is evidently the same as dNgos med ka dag chos sku (“the Insubstantial and Primordially Pure Absolute Body”) or Ka dag dngos med chos sku of the *Blazing Lights of the Lamps* (*sGron ma 'od 'bar, passim*). This Tantra also shows that this Revealer is none other than Samantabhadra for he is sometimes designated dNgos rnal ma kun bzang, (“Samantabhadra, the Insubstantial Genuine State”).³⁶

In fact the two figures of gSal dag rin chen and sKye me ka dag are simply symbols for the two aspects of the natural state: Clarity (*gsal ba*, with gSal dag rin chen) and Emptiness (*stong pa*, with sKye med ka dag). The entire Tantra thus appears as an atemporal dialogue between the Clarity aspect (*gsal cha*) of the natural state, and its counterpart known as the Empty aspect (*stong cha*) of this state.³⁷

32 sDe dge: las.

33 sDe dge: ho/. Ho is missing in gTing skyes (p.542).

34 *Klong gsal 'bar ba'i rgyud*, the first of the *Klong gsal* Tantras, belonging to the category of *Yang ti* teachings. This text is also quoted in this paper under its abbreviated title as *Nyi zla 'od 'bar*. On the various *Klong gsal* Tantras and their connection to Padma Las 'brel rtsal's *mKha' 'gro snying thig*, see Achard, *Le Pic des Visions*, p.37 n. 89.

35 *sGron ma 'od 'bar ba'i rgyud*, fol. 318a.

36 *sGron ma 'od 'bar ba'i rgyud*, fol. 319a.

37 The natural undifferentiation between Emptiness and Clarity (*stong gsal dbyer med*) is the classical definition of the natural state according to Dzogchen teachings.

«— **How is the uppermost *sPyi ti yoga* (explained)?»**

The request formulated by gSal dag rin chen sets the subject matter of the present chapter. Its main theme is thus the definition of what *sPyi ti yoga* is. In general, *sPyi ti* is understood as meaning something general (*spyi*) but this is actually not the case here, since the various topics that are dealt with within *sPyi ti* Tantras are anything but general. The texts of this category clearly define *sPyi ti* as the uppermost (*gong rgal*) or highest category among all Dzogchen teachings.³⁸ This might create some doxographical confusion though, in particular when comparing its instructions with those of *Yang ti* or the Great Limit (*mtha' chen*).

The Revealer replied to his retinue:

This means that the rest of the chapter contains the actual explanation of the Buddha sKye med ka dag himself.

«— ***Emaho!* Ô most extraordinary marvel!**

This refers to two things: the extraordinary nature of the request which enables the Buddha to set the wheel of his teachings into action and the extraordinary nature of the contents of its teachings.

This *sPyi ti yoga* which is the Peak of the Nine Vehicles

In the Nyingma tradition, there are several ways of classifying the teachings of the Buddha into nine, ten, and sometimes twelve Vehicles.³⁹ Most of these classifications have not survived in practical usage, except for that into nine.⁴⁰ In this case, the ninth is considered to be the Vehicle of Dzogchen and its ultimate peak is represented by the *sPyi ti yoga* teachings. The instructions pertaining to that category are usually associated with Padmasambhava (8th c.) and their rediscoveries by Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1136-1204) and Gu ru Chos dbang (1212-1270).⁴¹

38 The expression *gong rgal* reminds us of the famed *thod rgal* term so crucial in the standard *Man ngag sde* literature. One should remember that *thod rgal* was also conceived of as a Vehicle in the Nyang ral revelations. See Achard, *Le Pic des Visions*, pp.23-24. In the *Yang ti* and *sPyi ti* Tantras, *gong rgal* (or *brgal*) is used as an indicator of a superior layer of teachings. For instance, the *Ati yoga* system is defined as *a nu'i gong rgal*, i.e. the uppermost teaching crossing (*rgal*) over (*gong*) the Anuyoga system (see *Nam mkha' 'bar ba'i rgyud*, fol. 99b). In a similar way, the vehicle of the Great Perfection is defined as crossing (*brgal*) over (*gong*) [all] Vehicles (*theg pa'i gong brgal rdzogs chen*) in the *Blazing Lights of the Sun and the Moon* (*Nyi zla 'od 'bar*, fol. 125a). There are of course other occurrences of this expression which I have not mentioned here.

39 On these classifications, see Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, pp.54-59. The classifications in eleven and twelve Vehicles can be found in O rgyan gling pa's *bKa' thang sde lnga* (and in particular in the *Blon po'i bka' thang*).

40 See however a late, surviving classification in eleven Vehicles in rDo rje bde chen gling pa, *rTsa gsum dgongs pa 'dus pa'i dbang gi sgo 'byed theg pa'i dbang rin chen phreng ba* (=Theg pa bcu gcig gi dbang yig), in *rDo rje bde chen gling pa'i gter chos*, vol. Ga, pp. 45-83. In the case of this text, the extra vehicles do not result from a further subdivision of the *Ati yoga* class as usual, but rather from two extra initiations which are given before the initiations of the lower vehicles.

41 There are of course other *sPyi ti* lines of transmission, such as the one centered around the revelations of sPa gro gter ston Tshe ring rdo rje whose *gter ma* were included in the *Rin chen gter mdzod* by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (in volume 90, pp.373-434). On sPa gro gter ston's *gter ma* teachings, see Achard, *Le Cycle de l'Immortalité Adamantine*, Khyung-Lung, 2009, *passim*.

In the classification into twelve Vehicles (such as in the surviving proto-doxographical works of O rgyan gling pa), Dzogchen is the ninth Vehicle as usual, but it is composed of three subdivisions which are also styled Vehicles (*theg pa*). In this case, Dzogchen is equated with *Ati yoga*. Then, the tenth Vehicle is that of the *sPyi ti yoga* ; the eleventh is that of the *Yang ti yoga* ; and the twelfth is the vehicle of the Great Limit (*mtha' chen*).

Such references to higher categories of Dzogchen teachings, said to surpass those of *Ati yoga stricto sensu*, have survived at least down to the revelations of mChog gyur gling pa in the 19th century. Since then, practically no one has used these unusual categories, especially that of the Great Limit which remains more than obscure.

Is not found from the outside but found within oneself.

This verse is actually very explicit. Its subject is given in the previous line, and is the *sPyi ti yoga* itself. In this context, this does not really refer to a doxographical element among the Nine Vehicles, but it rather refers to the state of Dzogchen as expressed in the *sPyi ti yoga*. This state is our natural, authentic condition, expressed in terms of Emptiness (*stong pa*) and Clarity (*gsal ba*). Such a state is not to be found outside oneself, in vain quests or research.⁴² It is the true nature of the Mind which is therefore to be found within oneself. In technical terms, it is defined as the abiding mode (*gnas lugs*) of our real nature.

As to this particularly special and extraordinary supreme Vehicle,

The Vehicle of the *sPyi ti yoga* is said to be special, extraordinary, and supreme basically because its perspective and contents are actually superior to those of other Vehicles. Its superiorities are defined as threefold :

1. It is particularly special (*khyad par can*) because it contains the instructions through which one is directly introduced to one's true nature ; in other words, the teachings of the *sPyi ti yoga* are based on the direct introduction (*ngo sprod*) to the nature of the mind. This does not actually differ from other rDzogs chen teachings, but it describes this nature in terms which are said to be both understandable by erudite scholars and non-erudite practitioners,⁴³

42 This idea centered on the absence of any need to seek (*ma btsal*) such a state is a *leitmotiv* of the Dzogchen Tantras. It is clearly associated with the fact that the state of rDzogs chen is to be found within oneself in numerous sources of this category. See for instance the *rDzogs pa chen po nges don 'dus pa*, fol. 220a. The very same principle is expressed in nearly identical terms in the *rDzogs pa chen po lta ba ye shes gting nas rdzogs pa'i rgyud*, fol. 166b. It is evidently the same subject that is brought about by the *Rin po che bdud rtsi bcud thigs* (fol. 282a) in verses such as “The Great Bliss which is not to be sought is found within oneself” (*btsal med bde chen rang las rnyed*). The state of *sPyi ti* that is not to be sought is clearly explained as being that of Buddhahood itself in the *sGron ma brtsegs pa'i rgyud* (fol. 332b) which says: “The Buddha to which one aspires is found within oneself” (*smon pa'i sangs rgyas rang las rnyed*), and (*op. cit.*, fol. 332b): “The Quintessence, the Absolute Body, is found within oneself” (*snying po chos sku rang las rnyed*).

43 Furthermore, in the *Tantra of Mountain Stacks* (*Ri bo brtsegs pa'i rgyud*) the notion of being special is explicitly linked to superiority (*khyad par 'phags*). Referring to the Contemplation of all Buddhas (*sangs rgyas kun gyi dgongs pa*), it says that since (*sPyi ti*) is superior to the Nine Vehicles, it is called “*sPyi ti yoga*, the peak of the Nine” (*dgu rtse*). See *Ri bo brtsegs pa'i rgyud*, fol. 5b. In the *Tantra of the Stacked Lamps* (*sGron ma brtsegs pa'i rgyud*), similar ideas are expounded regarding the superiority of *sPyi ti*.

2. It is defined as extraordinary (*ngo mtshar*) because it describes the key points (*gnad*) of the main practice of rDzogs chen, namely *khregs chod* and *thod rgal*, in a way which is comprehensive and profound.⁴⁴ It does so because it is said to be entirely based on the experiences of the Buddhas and Knowledge-Holders (*rig 'dzin*) of the lineage (and in particular on Padmasambhava's teachings and instructions),⁴⁵

3. It is styled as supreme (*mchog*) because there is no teaching superior to it among the Nine Vehicles⁴⁶ and because, through the realization of its actual meaning and its practice, the supreme qualities of the natural state are experienced by the practitioner in a way which is both swift and easy.⁴⁷

The view of the *sPyi ti* of the Great Perfection is as follows:

This line simply announces what the View (*lta ba*) of the *sPyi ti yoga* is and how it is defined. As other doxographical components, the *sPyi ti* has a specific Meditation (*sgom pa*), a particular Conduct (*spyod pa*) and a Fruit (*'bras bu*). As explained in the next verses of the root-text, the main definition of the *sPyi ti yoga* View is that of the Great Primordial Purity (*ka dag chen po*).⁴⁸ This aspect of the original condition of the natural state is actually the same as the pure realm of the Youthful Vase Body (*gzhon nu bum sku'i zhing*),⁴⁹ namely the

There (fol. 330a), the Buddha explicitly states that *sPyi ti* must not be envisioned through the dualistic approach of the two truths (*bden gnyis*) since it radically eradicates elaborations associated with phenomena which are dualistically grasped. This superiority of the *sPyi ti* to those teachings based on the two truths is affirmed because the actual experience of the natural state is defined as “particularly superior to the intellect and its grasping thoughts” (fol. 330a: *gnyis bzung chos rnams spros pa gcod*). Basically, *sPyi ti*, as are all other rDzogs chen teachings, is considered as superior (*'phags*) because it transcends the intellect absorbed into striving and achievement (fol. 332a: *rtsol bsgrub blo las khyad par 'phags*).

44 On should remember here that the terms *khregs chod* and *thod rgal* are not used in *sPyi ti* Tantras, except for the latter described as a Vehicle (*theg pa*) and not as a practice based on the six key points (*gnad drug*), the four Visions (*snang ba bzhi*), the four Lamps (*sgron ma bzhi*), etc. It is only in the *practice* texts of *sPyi ti* that one finds instructions pertaining to *khregs chod* and *thod rgal* in the sense these expressions are used in the *sNying thig* literature.

45 So far, I have not found any *sPyi ti* teachings which is not, one way or the other, trans-historically associated with Padmasambhava. Some people think this is also the case with *Yang ti*, but this is a mistake since some *Yang ti* teachings are explicitly associated with Vimalamitra (see for example the cycle of the *rDzogs pa chen po nges don 'dus pa* [NGB, no. 17] and related Tantras), while still others are associated with Śrī Simha (such as the cycle of the *rDzogs pa chen po ye shes gsal bar ston pa'i rgyud* [no. 28] and its various suites [nos. 29-30]).

46 This is of course to be understood in the terms of the *sPyi ti*'s self-advertising rhetoric. Doxographically, it is however surpassed by *Yang ti* and *mTha' chen*.

47. Theoretical swiftness and absence of difficulties are representations which are currently used to describe the practice of the Great Perfection. These ideas are however often misunderstood in the same way the state of rDzogs chen is misunderstood for the state of the individual. Lopön Tenzin Namdak has discussed these problems in many of his teachings; see for instance his fascinating and highly critical discussion of the current misunderstandings about rDzogs chen in the *Dogs sel 'ga'zhig gleng ba'i le'u rin chen gtsag bu*, pp.357-379.

48 This is also defined in a similar way in chapter thirteen of Nyang ral's *Klong gsal*, fol. 128b: “— Since the Great Primordial Purity of Reality/ Is free from (notions of) both purity and impurity/The View of *sPyi ti* is naturally perfect” (*chos nyid ka dag chen po la/ 'dag dang ma dag gnyis med pas/ 'sPyi ti'i lta ba ngang gis rdzogs/*).

49 Note that to my knowledge, the expression “Youthful Vase Body” does not appear in the Tantras of *sPyi ti*.

state of the Absolute Body (*chos sku*) endowed with the qualities of abandonment (*spangs*, of obscurations) and realization (*rtogs*, of the true nature of the mind). This state is defined by Klong chen pa in his *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* as that of the Inner Clarity (*nang gsal*) of the natural state.

In the *Tantra of the Beautiful Auspiciousness* (*bKra shis mdzes ldan gyi rgyud*), this Great Primordial Purity is defined as follows :

*What is known as the Great Primordial Purity”
Is the state abiding before authentic Buddhas arose
And before impure sentient beings appeared ;
It is called the Great Primordial radiance of immutable Awareness.*⁵⁰

The world of appearances and existence, of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa, ...

This verse covers three different themes: 1. the world of appearances and existence (*snang srid*), 2. Saṃsāra (*'khor ba*), and 3. Nirvāṇa (*'das pa*). This threefold complex thus refers to the realm of phenomena (*snang srid* and *'khor ba*) as well as to the unconditioned state beyond conditioned phenomena (*'das pa*).⁵¹

[1]. The world of appearances (*snang ba*) and existence (*srid pa*) concerns everything that manifests as a knowable object, both in terms of relative or absolute truth. According to some interpretations, appearances refer to the universe and its display in the ten directions and the three times, while existence refers to beings living within this universe. But in a simpler way, the expression “appearances-cum-existence“ (*snang srid*) points to whatever exists and manifests as opposed to nothingness. All that manifests in this way pertains to the category of Saṃsāra or to that of Nirvāṇa, depending on its being conditioned or not. In this verse, the text actually refers to “everything” in the largest and most common usage of the term.

[2]. Saṃsāra is the conditioned mode of being. Some people regard Saṃsāra as the outside world, whereas in its actual, true meaning Saṃsāra is nothing else than dualistic grasping, ignorance and reification. The outer world is not Saṃsāra. Otherwise, when reaching Nirvāṇa

50 *bKra shis mdzes ldan*, p.218: *ka dag chen po zhes bya ste/ yang dag pa'i sangs rgyas ma byung/ ma dag pa'i sems can ma byung ba'i gnas/ rig pa ma g.yos pa'i ye gdangs chen po zhes bya'ol*. This state is however not only limited to the exposition of the principles associated with the Base (*gzhi*) but, since it defines the natural state itself, it is also associated with the actual Fruit (*'bras bu*) of the Path (*lam*). Thus, in the *Quintessence of the Sun and the Moon* (*Nyi zla'i snying po*, fol. 22b), it is said: «— The Fruit (consisting in) the freedom of Awareness/ Is the obtainment of Great Primordial Purity without birth» (*rig pa grol ba'i 'bras bu ni/ skye med ka dag chen po thob/*). This theme of the Great Primordial Purity is not very developed within the corpus of the *Seventeen Tantras of sPyi ti*; it is mentioned only a few times in this collection of texts, and each time without an explicit description or definition. The *sGron ma 'od 'bar ba'i rgyud* gives a very short explanation, describing this state as that which abides primordially since the beginning (*gdod ma ye nas gnas pa*, fol. 319b).

51 *sNang srid 'khor 'das* [*kyi chos*] is of course a thematic *leitmotiv* which is quite recurrent in traditional Tibetan Buddhist literature. It lexically connects relative truth (*kun rdzob*) represented by appearances (worlds, etc., in the sense of outer chalice [*phyi snod*]), existence (beings in the sense of inner elixirs [*nang bcud*]) and conditioned existence (*'khor ba*) to absolute truth (*don dam*) represented by the unconditioned state of Nirvāṇa. The equivalences between relative truth and Saṃsāra, on the one hand, and absolute truth and Nirvāṇa, on the other hand, has been interestingly discussed in the context of Madhyamaka in Huntington, “The System of the Two Truths”, pp.77 *et seq.*

a Buddha would leave our world. The Nirvāṇa of Buddha Śākyamuni demonstrates the contrary and illustrates the reason why there is no contradiction in having a Buddha concretely reach the unconditioned state of Buddhahood in this conditioned world.

[3]. Nirvāṇa is the non-conditioned mode of being.⁵² It is characterized by the absence of dualistic grasping and of ignorance. Generally, “Nirvāṇa” is defined as the non-conditioned state beyond sorrow, and here it refers to the opposite of Saṃsāra since the text’s purpose in this line is to encompass all phenomena and states beyond and embracing conditioned phenomena.⁵³

... is entirely

Liberated as the great Primordial Purity without support

In this statement, the Buddha sKye med ka dag explains that everything is already entirely liberated in its own nature. What does that mean? It means that once one abides in the real nature of one’s mind, nothing (such as passions, poisons, etc.) needs to be liberated since the non-regressing abiding in that state is entirely perfect in itself.⁵⁴ However, it is precisely at that point that numerous practitioners deviate from the correct View (*lta ba yang dag pa*). What the Buddha sKye med ka dag describes is the condition of the natural state of rDzogs chen, not the state of the *rDzogs chen pa* (who until realization is ultimately obtained remains conditioned by many things). As Lopön Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche has said numerous times in his teachings: «The natural state is itself perfect but the practitioner is not.» This means that the practitioner has to improve his own condition in order to reach a threshold of authentic realization from which he will not regress.⁵⁵

52 There would be of course a lot of things to add here, but I want to limit the interpretation to how rDzogs chen teachings understand that traditional technical word. On the general meaning of Nirvāṇa, see Vallée-Poussin’s *Nirvāṇa*, which still remains one of the best studies on this subject. See also *inter alia* K.R. Norman, “Mistaken Ideas about Nibbāna, *The Buddhist Forum*, vol. III, London, 1994, pp.211-225.

53 The rDzogs chen view of Nirvāṇa does not differ from that of general Mahāyāna works. It is, for instance, consistent with Nagārjuna and Candrakīrti’s Madhyamaka approach, but it is also characterized by specific representations which are, to my knowledge, alien to Madhyamaka. The obtainment of the Rainbow Body (*’ja’ lus*) is one of these alien key elements occurring in the classic description of the Fruit of Buddhahood according to rDzogs chen: it is actually simply an outer sign demonstrating the realization of the Sambhogakāya but it remains frequently associated with the Fruit of the *thod rgal* path, so much so that many people identify this sign (*rtags*) with the realization (*rtogs*) of Full Buddhahood. In rDzogs chen, as shown in the *Seventeen Tantras* and other related material, Buddhahood is expressed in terms of Bodies (*sku*) and Wisdoms (*ye shes*). See Klong chen pa, *Theg mchog mdzod*, vol. 2, pp.542-591.

54 In other words, such a state does not need to be altered in any way whatsoever, since it is perfect as it is, without the need to add to it or to take away anything from it in order to give it its natural perfection. This directly echoes the classical rDzogs chen *leitmotiv ma btsal bzhag pa* (“established without having to be sought”) which one finds in numerous Great Perfection Tantras. See for instance *sKu gdung ’bar ba ’i rgyud*, p.132; *Rin chen spungs pa ’i rgyud*, p.99; *Nyi zla kha sbyor*, p.159. See also the variants *ma btsal rdzogs* or *ma btsal lhun grub* in the *Seng ge rtsal rdzogs* (p.350 and 379 respectively).

55 Arriving at such a threshold without regression is totally different from having a concrete knowledge of Awareness (*rig pa*) or the natural state of the Base (*gzhi yi gnas lugs*). The concrete knowledge of the natural state is not something that can be lost once one has clearly understood its abiding mode as Emptiness-cum-Clarity (*stong gsal*). However, sustaining that knowledge so as to reach a level of experiential realization is another matter. I think that one of the best examples illustrating that difference in the history of rDzogs chen literature is the story of sGom chen ’bar ba who, after having obtained the clear knowledge of

In this respect, simply being introduced to the natural state and understanding how it “works” is far from enough. One needs to become familiar with it through actual practice, such as that of sky gazing (*nam mkha'ar gtad*),⁵⁶ etc., and through the integration of four things into the experience of the natural state. These four things are : 1. integrating the activities of the three doors, 2. integrating the six associations of consciousnesses, 3. integrating the specific activities of the mind, and 4. integrating the diversity of situations likely to arise during the practice and outside formal sessions.⁵⁷

The Great Primordial Purity of the natural state is defined in the original verse given above as without support (*rten med*) because it does not depend on anything that might support it, create it or affect it in one way or another. This state remains entirely pure of all karma and karmic traces, and abides in its own primeval condition as the coalescence of Emptiness and Clarity (*stong gsal*).

It should be mentioned here that, even though the Great Primordial Purity (*ka dag chen po*) is the central conception regarding the View of *sPyi ti*, it is not discussed at length in the *sPyi ti* Tantras. Of course it is mentioned in some of them (in a very limited way, and not in all of them), but it is never described. Generally, it is said in these texts that the Fruit consists in obtaining the Great Primordial Purity, or some similar statements. However, no description of this state is given in these texts. In the *Commentary on the sGron ma 'bar ba'i rgyud* (pp.234-235), the Great Primordial Purity is described as the state of the primeval essence (*thog ma'i ngo bo*) abiding before any Buddha or sentient being arose. It is of course the coalescence of Emptiness and Clarity (*stong gsal*), and it is from its natural potential that the wisdom of the spontaneous Nature (*rang bzhin lhun grub kyi ye shes*) arose with all its fivefold characteristics, enabling the natural dynamism (*rtsal*) of this state to manifest in its unceasing, manifold variety. In the *Commentary on the sKu gdung 'bar ba'i rgyud* (pp.518-519), this Great Primordial Purity is conceived as the Base (*gzhi*) or essence of authentic Reality (*yang dag pa'i chos nyid*) which has primordially never experienced delusion. It is therefore the state of the Mind (*sems nyid*) existing before the arising of delusion, before the epiphanic manifestations of the Base (*gzhi snang*).⁵⁸

Awareness, simply went back to his ordinary habits of life and regressed from the level of realization he had reached during the direct introduction (*ngo sprod*). See P. Kvaerne, “Bonpo Studies”, pp.37-38; Achard, *Les Instructions sur le A Primordial*, pp.40-41. It is also interesting to note that the whole process behind the direct introduction is to reach an instantaneous (*cig car*) understanding which itself leads to a gradual (*rim gyis*) realization through the process of familiarization (*goms pa*) with this state.

56 Except for later texts such as those of the tradition of Pa gro gter ston or bDud 'dul rdo rje and Klong gsal snying po, there is no explicit description of such practice in the texts of *sPyi ti*. For the time being, I should most certainly limit that assertion to the *sPyi ti* Tantras only, and consider it as a provisional observation until the peculiarities of the practice of *sPyi ti* appear more clearly from the study of the Tantras themselves. It is however clear that the differences between the cycles of practice (*sgrub sde*, i.e. the later *gter mas* of the three *gter ston* mentioned above in this note) and the corpus of *sPyi ti* Tantras (*rgyud sde*) show a definite influence from the classical *Man ngag sde* practice on the former.

57 In general, this constitutes the program of integrating (*bsre ba*) the experience of the natural state, in the context of *khregs chod*, into every activity. This program is of course progressive and is actually performed during an eighteen months retreat.

58 In the *Tantra of the Natural Arising of Awareness (Rig pa rang shar)*, the Great Primordial Purity is defined one of the two aspects of the primordial Base itself. It says: «— It is stated that the Base is of two sorts:/ The Base of the Great Primordial Purity and/ The base of the manifoldness of Spontaneity» (p.632: *gzhi la nram pa gnyis su gsungs/ ka dag chen po gzhi dang ni/ lhun grub sna tshogs gzhi ru 'dod*).

(Within which) arises the Contemplation free from being, non-being, and intentions.

The state of Contemplation (*dgongs pa*) which arises by itself when one abides in the non-regressing experience of the natural state is a state of pure and total knowledge devoid of subject and objects.⁵⁹ It is a state in which mental projections about its own nature, etc., simply vanish by themselves.⁶⁰ Thus, while abiding in this state of Contemplation, the Mind is not focused on anything nor is it thinking “this state is existent” or “this state does not exist”, etc. It is even beyond intentions (*rtsis gdab*) which are simply mental elaborations incapable of “grasping” the true nature of the mind. Therefore, entrance into this state of Contemplation is direct, even though the path leading to it might be gradual, depending on the capacities of the individual.

(Therefore) abide naturally in this unaltered (state)

The practice leading to the access to the state of Contemplation is the core of all rDzogs chen teachings. It relies on what could actually be described as an actual *absence* of particular practice. One should just enter the state of Contemplation (*dgongs pa*) without any artifice.⁶¹ This means that this practice does not rely on specific key points such as those of the Generation (*bskyed rim*) and Perfection Stages (*rdzogs rim*), although these same key points might induce in some practitioners such a state.⁶² However, for strict rDzogs chen practitioners, Guru-Yoga and Sky Gazing are the main means enabling the access to the state of Contemplation in a totally unaltered mode.⁶³

59 This spontaneous absence of duality is due to the fact that the Contemplation of the natural state has no objects except itself. In other words, Awareness (*rig pa*), as the knowledge of the natural state, is simply the knowledge with which that state is spontaneously endowed and which does not differ from it in any way whatsoever. This is why the definition of this state in purely rDzogs chen terms is that of the Single Thiglé (*thig le nyag gcig*). On this expression, see Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, p.118 n. 55; Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, p.103 n. 9. See also Slob dpon bstan 'dzin nam dag, *gSang sngags bka' 'grel*, p.21 et seq.

60 This however does not imply that thoughts are automatically eliminated from that state. Such an idea would contradict that of *shar grol* (“Arising-cum-liberating”) which means that thoughts simply arise spontaneously and are automatically liberated from grasping. *Grol* here does not mean that thoughts disappear for good (since there will be thoughts so long as the aggregate of consciousness lasts), but that they are directly liberated from grasping as soon as they arise, in the same way snow flakes dissolve automatically into water. See an interesting and lively definition of *shar grol* in Namkhai Norbu, *The Crystal and the Way of Light*, p.118. In his *Theg mchog mdzod*, Klong chen pa discusses *shar grol* on several occasions, the first of which, interestingly enough, occurs in the definition of the Black Expanse of Compassion (*thugs rje klong nag*, I, p.152). In his definition, it is clear that he understands *shar grol* differently in the context of the Black Expanse in which *shar* refers to wisdom (*ye shes*) and *grol* to mind (*sems*).

61 This is possible only through or after the direct introduction (*ngo sprod*) transmitted by a qualified master. At that time, the real nature of the primordial state is pointed out and should be perfectly understood. After that, there is a period of compulsory retreat (*mtshams*) during which that state is experienced again without artifice and stabilized (*brtan*) through familiarization (*goms*). Furthermore, it is crucial that at the end of such a retreat the state experienced by the disciple be confirmed by the master.

62 For instance, in theory, the samādhi of Suchness (*de bzhin nyid kyi ting nge 'dzin*) in Mahāyoga is nothing other than the actual experience of the natural state of the mind. See for instance Kunkyen Tenpe Nyima & Sechen Gyaltap IV, *Vajra Wisdom*, pp.40, 148-150.

63 Still such means must be applied after having received the direct introduction (*ngo sprod*) since, in rDzogs chen, all practices must be performed within the experience of the natural state.

Which is devoid of action, effort and exertion,

The direct experience of the state of Contemplation (*dgongs pa*) is that of the flawless flow of Reality (*chos nyid*) in which Mind itself (*sems nyid*) is both the subject and object of the Contemplation. Therefore, there is no action to accomplish in order to enter that knowledge, no effort to produce in order to experience it, and no exertion to cultivate in order to maintain it.⁶⁴ One should just remain in this self-discerning (*rang rig*) nature which is likely to host thoughts or non-discursive experiences.⁶⁵

Unborn, insubstantial, and transcending the mental in its result.

When clearly experienced, the state of Contemplation is lived through as a continuity which is defined as unborn (*skye med*) because it has never been created by any cause (*rgyu*) and will never be destroyed by any circumstances (*rkyen*).⁶⁶ It is insubstantial because it does not exist within the confines of matter, form, color, etc., which are the characteristics of conditioned phenomena.⁶⁷ It transcends the mental (*blo*) because it is entirely beyond the scope and possibilities of the mind (*sems*) since the latter is entirely dependent on sense data as well as self-referential elaborations. This state of utter perfection transcends dualistic grasping characterized by ignorance (*ma rig pa*) and abides in the sapiential mode of Awareness (*rig pa*).⁶⁸ In its ultimate aspect, i.e. at the stage

64 In other words, there is nothing to look for since the state that one is looking for already abides within oneself. This conception is pregnant throughout rDzogs chen teachings.

65 Several other *sPyi ti* Tantras share a similar approach and wording in order to define the natural state beyond seeking, effort, etc. For instance, in the *sNang srid kha sbyor*, the Victorious Samantabhadra explicitly states: «— That which exists from the beginning within us/ Does not have to be sought through effort, exertion, or action» (fol. 216a: *rang la ye nas yod pa la/ rtsol bsgrub bya btsal mi 'tshal te/*). This primordial principle existing within each sentient being is the Sugatagarbha (*bde gshegs snying po*), on which see Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, pp.184-185. One should also note that the technical expression *bde gshegs snying po* does not occur in the *sPyi ti* Tantras themselves.

66 This unborn Essence of the primordial state is designated “the Absolute Body” (*chos sku*) in rDzogs chen literature. This is in conformity with the association of the three wisdoms of the Base (Essence, Nature and Compassion) with the three Bodies (*sku gsum*). One should note, though, that *sPyi ti* Tantras sometimes reverse the equivalences between Essence (*ngo bo*) and Nature (*rang bzhin*), so that the semantic field usually associated with “Essence” in other rDzogs chen texts is applied to “Nature”. In this respect, Nature becomes associated with Primordial Purity (*ka dag*), Absolute Body (*chos sku*), etc. See for instance *sGron ma brtsegs pa*, fol. 329a. The same inversion also occurs in the *Kun byed rgyal po*.

67 Insubstantiality (*dnogs med*) is a crucial expression recurring in *sPyi ti* Tantras often associated with the notion of Primordial Purity (*dnogs med ka dag*). See, for instance, *sGron ma 'od 'bar ba'i rgyud*, fol. 320b-321a. See also *Nam mkha' klong yangs*, chap.3, fol. 337a) and throughout that text, in which homage is paid to the Universal Lord of Insubstantiality (*dnogs med kun gvi rje*, fol. 318a).

68 As is obvious, Awareness is the most important conception of rDzogs chen teachings, and is defined as the non-discursive knowledge of the Base (*gzhi*). In the *Dri med ka dag gi rgyud*, it is defined as the Precious Clear-Light pure from the beginning (*rig pa ka dag rin po che 'od gsal*). As in other *Man ngag sde* texts in which Awareness is clearly associated with the fourth Lamp of *thod rgal* practice — the Lamp of the Self-Arisen Sublime Knowledge (*shes rab rang byung gi sgron ma*) — Awareness is also associated with *prajñā* in *sPyi ti* Tantras. For example, in the *Dri med ka dag gi rgyud*, it is said (13b): «— From the unborn and unceasing primordial Wisdom/ Radiates the impartial Sublime Knowledge/ Which itself radiates as the Single Awareness» (*skye 'gag med pa'i ye shes las/ phyogs lung med pa'i shes rab gsal/ de nyid rig pa nyag gcig gsal/*). The expression *rig pa nyag gcig* is rather rare but not unknown, appearing, for example, in the corpus of the *Seventeen Tantras* (*rGyud bcu bdun*), in which it occurs in the *Ngo sprod spras pa'i rgyud*, p.106.

of the result or Fruit of the Path, this state is experienced within the natural display of Bodies and Wisdoms which are the true expression of the natural state itself.⁶⁹

***Ema!* Such an extraordinary and wonderful teaching**

With the interjection *Ema!*, the Buddha sKye med ka dag expresses his marvelous recognition of the natural splendors of this state. In the logic of these *sPyi ti* texts and instructions, there is nothing more direct and more precise in the revelation of the natural state than these extraordinary teachings of rDzogs chen.⁷⁰ Their nature, styled here as wonderful (*rmad byung*), is beyond the causal Paths of Sūtras and Tantras.⁷¹

Does not come from anywhere other than the “A”.

If one were to summarize all the texts and secret instructions of Dzogchen, then one should simply say “A”, which is the symbol of the natural state itself. It symbolizes the primordial Base (*gzhi*) of this state, as well as its visionary Path (*lam*) and perfect Fruit (*'bras bu*). In fact, all teachings of the Great Perfection are not revealing anything else than the pure essence of the natural state of the Mind, rendered here by the symbolic letter “A”, the source of everything.⁷²

***Alala ho!* Everything entirely liberates within this Great Primordial Purity.**

Alala ho! is also an interjection here expressing the amazement the Buddha experiences at revealing these teachings of rDzogs chen. The primordial A which symbolizes the original, everlasting purity of the natural state, is used to illustrate the state in which everything liberates naturally without any effort, or artifice.⁷³ Simply abiding in this unadulterated condition of the

69 Bodies (*sku*) and Wisdoms (*ye shes*) are the potential (lit. “primordial”, *ye*) expression of the natural state at the level of the Base (*gzhi*). This potential is gradually made “manifest” (*mngon sum*) by the practice of the Path (*lam*), until it is entirely perfected (*rdzogs*) at the level of the Fruit (*'bras bu*). This is the theory of the three kinds of Buddhahood (Buddhahood of the Base, the Path and the Fruit).

70 Hence their inclusion on the top (*spyi*, for *spyi phud*) of the doxographical ladder of the Nine Vehicles (*theg pa rim dgu*).

71 rDzogs chen teachings are entirely based on the direct introduction (*ngo sprod*) occurring at the beginning of the Path. In this respect, it is not caused-based like teachings belonging to the Path of Renunciation (*spang lam*, i.e. Sūtras) or to the Path of Transformation (*bsgyur lam*, i.e. Tantras): it actually constitutes a whole Path in itself, designated as the Path of Liberation (*grol lam*) in which passions are naturally liberated (*rang grol*) instead of being renounced or transformed.

72 The meaning of the letter A is extensively discussed in the commentarial literature to the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* (V-1) and related texts. In a parallel context, see F. Rambelli, “Tantric Buddhism and Chinese Thought in East Asia”, pp.372-374. Several individual works are discussing the meaning of this letter, either as their main subject or as a section of their teachings. Some are concerned with the manner of interpreting it in a practice perspective, such as in the *Sems sde a don rab gsal* composed by mKhan po Karma Ratna (1823-?) and associated with the *rDzogs chen sde gsum* revelations of mChog gyur gling pa (1829-1870); see Karma Ratna, *Sems sde 'i nyams len a don rab gsal, mChog gyur gling pa gTer 'bum*, vol. 23, pp.391-393.

73 In other words, when one abides in this state, there is nothing to liberate intentionally, nor is there anything to alter in order to reach the utter perfection of rDzogs chen. Non-alteration or non-modification (*ma bcos*) is a key term occurring in the three contexts of the Base, the Path and the Fruit, each time with the exact same meaning discovered at the time of the direct introduction (*ngo sprod*). This means that non-modification that is experienced at the level of the Base, is cultivated without artifices during the practice of the Path, and eventually experienced in a non-regressive way at the time

natural state, not regressing from it and contemplating the natural arising of its visionary marvels, this is the true purpose of the practice of rDzogs chen.

As we have seen, the *sPyi ti* definition of the rDzogs chen view is mostly centered on the notion of Great Primordial Purity (*ka dag chen po*), a particular representation which is consistent with the rest of the *Man ngag sde* literature in general. It must be stated though that this Great Primordial Purity should not be identified with one of the seven statements regarding the Base (*gzhi bdun*), namely the statement defining the Base (*gzhi*) of the natural state as being pure from the beginning (*ka dag*).⁷⁴ In his *Theg mchog mdzod*, Klong chen pa has demonstrated that this definition is partial and not consistent with the actual experience of the natural state. Indeed, this Great Primordial Purity is conceived as the undifferentiation of Emptiness and Clarity (*stong gsal dbyer med*), in which Emptiness corresponds to Primordial Purity (*ka dag*) and Clarity to Spontaneity (*lhun grub*). Therefore, the definition of the Base as the Great Primordial Purity as it is defined in *sPyi ti* Tantras fits perfectly well with that of the rest of the Great Perfection literature on the subject.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Western sources

Achard, Jean-Luc

- *Le Pic des Visions, Etude sur deux techniques contemplatives dans les traditions rNying-ma-pa et Bon-po de la Grande Perfection*, Mémoire de l'EPHE, Paris, 1992, 284 pages, inédit.
- *L'Essence Perlée du Secret, Recherches philologiques et historiques sur l'origine de la Grande Perfection dans la tradition rNying ma pa*, Brepols, EPHE, 1999.
- “Rig ’dzin Tshe dbang mchog grub (1761-1829) et la constitution du rNying ma rgyud ’bum de sDe dge”, *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 3, Paris, Juin 2003, pp.43-89.
- *Les Instructions sur le A Primordial*, volume I, Histoire de la lignée, Sumène, éd. Khyung-Lung, 2007.
- *Le Cycle de l’Immortalité Adamantine*, Sumène, éd. Khyung-Lung, 2009.
- *La Base Primordiale de l’état naturel*, *Tibetica Hermetica II*, Sumène, éd. Khyung-Lung, 2012.

of the Fruit. However, as exemplified by the touching mistake of the young Milarepa when he received his first rDzogs chen teaching, the practice of the Path without alteration does not entail doing nothing at all. On *ma bcos*, see in particular Klong chen pa, *gZhi ma bcos ji bzhin du ngo sprod pa’i rim pa*, pp.253-259.

⁷⁴ On these seven statements, see Achard, *La Base Primordiale de l’état naturel*, pp.11-44. See also Natsok Rangdrol, *The Circle of the Sun*, pp.3-5. Sources in tibetan owe much on this subject to Klong chen pa’s *Theg mchog mdzod* on this subject, vol. I, chapter 8.

Dorje G. & Kaptsein, M.

The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1991.

Germano, D.

“The Funerary Transformation of the Great Perfection”, *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, no. 1, October 2005, pp.1-54 (www.thdl.org?id=T1219).

Guenther, H.V.

—— *Wholeness Lost and Wholeness Regained, Forgotten Tales of Individuation from Ancient Tibet*, New York, 1994, State University of New York Press.

—— *The Teachings of Padmasambhava*, Brill, Leiden, 1996.

Huntington JR, C.W.

“The System of the Two Truths in the Prasannapada and the Madhyamakavatara: A Study in Madhyamika Soteriology”, in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, no. 11, Boston, 1983, pp.77-106.

Karmay, S.G.

The Great Perfection, A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1988.

Kunyen Tenpe Nyima & Sechen Gyaltsap IV

Vajra Wisdom, Deity Practice in Tibetan Buddhism, Dharmachakra Translation Committee, Snow Lion, Boston, 2012.

Kvaerne, P.

“Bonpo Studies I&II: The A-khrid System of Meditation”, *Kailsah* I n°1 pp.1-50, IV n°4, 1973, pp.247-332.

Leduc, Claudine

“Mythologie, théologie et sémiologie en pays grec”, in M-M. Mactoux & E. Geny (éds.), *Discours religieux dans l'Antiquité*, Actes du Colloque, Besançon 27-28 Janvier 1995, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1995, pp.131-150.

Namkhai Norbu,

The Crystal and the Way of Light, Arcana, Penguin Books, London, 1986.

Natsok Rangdrol, Tsele

The Circle of the Sun, Rangjung Yeshe Publications, Kathamandu, 1990.

Norman, K.R.

“Mistaken Ideas about Nibbāna”, *The Buddhist Forum*, vol. III, London, 1994, pp.211-225.

Rambelli, F.

“Tantric Buddhism and Chinese Thought in East Asia”, in *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David Gordon White, Princeton University Press, 2000, pp.361-380.

Tucci, G.

Minor Buddhist Texts, Parts One and Two, Motilal Barnarsidass, Delhi, 1986.

Vallée-Poussin, L. de la

Nirvāṇa, éd. Dharma, 1997.

2. Tibetan sources

Collective

mNga' bdag myang nyi ma 'od zer gyi rnam thar gsal ba'i me long, in *mNga' bdag bla ma brgyud pa'i rnam thart*, *The biography of the early masters in the transmission lineage of the Bka' brgyud Bde gshegs 'dus pa teachings revealed by Mnga-bdag Myang-ral Nyi-ma-'od-zer*, Indo-Tibetan Buddhist literature series, vol. 122, Rewalsar, 1985, pp.1-163.

Klong chen pa (1308-1364)

— *gZhi ma bcos ji bzhin du ngo sprod pa'i rim pa*, in *Zab mo yang tig*, Delhi, 1976, vol. I, pp.253-259.

— *Theg mchog mdzod : Theg pa'i mchog rin po che'i mdzod* vol. I & II, in *Klong chen mdzod bdun*, Gangtok, 1983, vol. I (Ga) & II (Nga).

mKhan po Karma Ratna (1823- ?)

Sems sde'i nyams len a don rab gsal, mChog gyur gling pa'i gter gсар, Paro, Bhutan, vol. 23, p.391-393.

gTer slob Dharma rāja

Bla ma'i thugs grub bar chad kun sel las/ rang byung bklag pas grol ba padma'i snying po'i rgyud kyi tshig don gsal byed nor bu'i sgron gsal, in *The Expanded Redaction of the Mchog gyur bde chen gling pa Revelations*, vol. 4, p.369-396.

Thub bstan chos dar

rNying ma rgyud 'bum gyi dkar chag gsal ma'i me long, Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Beijing, 2008.

rDo rje bde chen gling pa (ca. 1875-ca. 1928)

rTsa gsum dgongs pa 'dus pa'i dbang gi sgo 'byed theg pa'i dbang rin chen phreng ba (=Theg pa bcu gcig gi dbang yig), in *rDo rje bde chen gling pa'i gter chos*, Chengdu, 2000, vol. Ga, pp. 45-83.

sPa gro gter ston Tshe ring rdo rje (16th century)

(Untitled *sPyi ti* revelation), in *Rin chen gter mdzod*, Paro, 1976, volume 90, pp.373-434.

Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552-1624)

Collected writings of Sog-bzlog-pa Blo-gros-rgyal-mtshan, New Delhi, 1975, 2 volumes.

Slob dpon bstan 'dzin rnam dag

— *gSang sngags bka' 'grel : gSang sngags kyi rnam bshad bka' 'grel gsal byed*, in *Gangs ti se bon gzhung*, Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Beijing, 2010, vol. 17, pp.1-196.

— *Dogs sel 'ga'zhig gleng ba'i le'u rin chen gtsag bu*, in *ib.*, vol. 19, pp.357-379.

O rgyan gling pa (1323-1360?)

bKa' thang sde lnga, Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Beijing, 1986.

3. Original Tantras

3-1. *Yang ti* and *sPyi ti* Tantras

- *Klong gsal 'bar ba'i rgyud*: *rGyud kyi rtse rgyal nyi zla 'od 'bar mkha' klong rnam dag rgya mtsho klong gsal gyi rgyud*, *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, sDe dge ed., vol. Ka fol. 121a-135a.
- *sGron ma brtsegs pa'i rgyud*: *bDud rtsi bcud thigs sgron ma brtsegs pa'i rgyud*, *ib.*, vol. Kha, fol. 322b-335b.
- *sGron ma 'od 'bar ba'i rgyud*: *Thig le ye shes bcud spungs sgron ma 'od 'bar ba'i rgyud*, *ib.*, vol. Kha, fol. 317b-322b.
- *Nyi zla snying po* : *rGyud thams cad kyi rgyal po nyi zla 'i snying po 'od 'bar ba bdud rtsi rgya mtsho 'khyil ba'i rgyud*, *ib.*, vol. Ga, fol. 18b-46b.
- *Dri med ka dag gi rgyud*: *Dri med ka dag gi rgyud rin po che gsal ba chen po*, *ib.*, vol. Ga, fol. 12b-18b.
- *Nam mkha' klong yangs*: *sNying po bcud spungs nam mkha' klong yangs*, *ib.*, fol. 335b-343a.
- *Nam mkha' 'bar ba'i rgyud*: *rGyud thams cad kyi rtse rgyal nam mkha' 'bar ba'i rgyud*, *ib.*, vol. Ka, fol. 89b-101a.
- *sNang srid kha sbyor*: *sNang srid kha sbyor bdud rtsi bcud thigs 'khor ba thog mtha' gcod pa'i rgyud*, *ib.*, vol. Kha, fol. 204a-265b.
- *rDzogs pa chen po nges don 'dus pa*, *ib.*, vol. Ka, fol. 176b-222a.
- *rDzogs pa chen po lta ba ye shes gting nas rdzogs pa'i rgyud*: *rDzogs pa chen po ma rig mun pa rab tu sel bar byed pa lta ba ye shes gting nas rdzogs pa'i rgyud*, *ib.*, vol. Kha, fol. 147b-168a.
- *rDzogs pa chen po ye shes gsal bar ston pa'i rgyud*, *ib.*, vol. Kha, fol. 181b-187b.
- *Ri bo brtsegs pa'i rgyud*, *ib.* vol. Ga, fol. 1b-12a.
- *Rin po che bdud rtsi bcud thigs* : *Rin po che bdud rtsi bcud thigs kyi rgyud*, *ib.*, vol. Kha, fol. 277a-287a.

3-2. Tantras from the Vimalamitra tradition

- *sKu gdung 'bar ba'i rgyud*, Collected Nyingmapa tantras of the Man ngag sde class of the Ati yoga, New Delhi, 1989, vol. III, pp.115-151.
- *bKra shis mdzes ldan*, in *ib.*, vol. I, pp.207-232.
- *Ngo sprod spras pa'i rgyud*, in *ib.*, vol. II, pp.77-109.
- *Nyi zla kha sbyor*, in *ib.*, vol. III, pp.153-233.
- *Rig pa rang shar*, in *ib.*, vol. I, pp.389-855.
- *Rin chen spungs pa'i rgyud*, in *ib.*, vol. III, pp.73-114.
- *Seng ge rtsal rdzogs*, in *ib.*, vol. II, pp.245-415.