

The “Twenty or Eighteen” Texts of the Mind Series: Scripture, Transmission, and the Idea of Canon in the Early Great Perfection Literature

Manuel Lopez
(New College of Florida)

“Regarding the harmonious Dharma, [the books that you should take with you to a retreat are]: Kamalaśīla [’s *Bhāvanākrama*], [Hashang] Mahāyāna’s texts on contemplation, those of the profound Inner Yoga; the *Klong drug*, the *bZhi phrugs*, the *Six Tantras of Suchness*, and the *twenty or eighteen minor [texts of the] Mind*”

gNubs chen’s 9th century *The Lamp for the Eye in Meditation*

“Considerable confusion reigns over this list among the rNying ma pa works. Each claims to have eighteen, but often gives only sixteen or seventeen [...] The titles also vary from one source to another.”

Samten Karmay’s 1988 *The Great Perfection*

Introduction¹

The historical origins of the Great Perfection of Tibetan Buddhism and of its early literature have been a disputed topic since the tradition emerged on the Tibetan Plateau in the 9th century. There seems to be an agreement among scholars that the collection of texts known as the *Eighteen Texts of the Mind Series* (*Sems sde bco rgyad*)² is the earliest known corpus of Great Perfection literature, but as the two quotes, separated by a thousand years, introducing this article also reflect, there is a great deal of confusion about the actual contents of the collection, including if the numbers of texts within it were actually eighteen. The goal of this paper is to

¹ The research for this paper benefited from my participation in the Sems sde Project at the University of Virginia during my years as a graduate student. Led by Prof. David Germano and by Kurtis Schaeffer, and with the collaboration of then graduate student Dominic Sur, the project had as its goal to “sort out intertextuality among early Tibetan Great Perfection literature in an attempt to reconstruct the growth and development of this literature.” I want to thank them for sparking my interest in this literature as well as for their insights and help during the writing of this article. Prof. Germano’s research on the early Great Perfection literature, particularly his analysis of the Mind Series literature, and the *Eighteen Texts* in particular, in his unpublished manuscript *Mysticism and Rhetoric in the Great Perfection* has been invaluable. This article would not have been possible without it.

² I will refer to this collection as the *Eighteen Texts* from now on.

explore the transmission history of this literature from its very early reference as a corpus in gNubs chen’s 9th century *The Lamp for the Eye in Meditation*, its reception in the 11th and 12th century by figures such as Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po, Rog ban Shes rab ‘od, and Nyang ral Nyi ma ‘od zer, the role of the collection in the *Bai ro’i rgyud ‘bum*, its decline in the 13th century as reflected in both lDe’u histories and the incorporation of the texts as chapters of a larger tantra, the *All Sovereign King (Kun byed rgyal po)* and, finally, its reception in the 14th century by the great rNying ma scholar Klong chen pa in order to clarify the nature and actual contents of this collection of texts.³ As this paper outlines, the many lists of the *Eighteen Texts* that emerged between the 9th and the 14th century differ in their contents, there is no canonical collection of texts within the rNying ma tradition that includes all of the eighteen texts, and even texts with the same title can be remarkably different from one edition to the other, to the point that the only thing they have in common is their title and, as Karen Liljenberg has pointed out in her work,⁴ some of the texts of the collection may have disappeared in the rNying ma canon under new names. The main argument of this article is that there never was an actual collection of eighteen texts, and that following David Gray’s idea of the Tantric Canon as an idea,⁵ the name of this collection of texts had more symbolic than descriptive value, allowing the early Great Perfection tradition to define its early literature and practices within the confines of what was expected of all Buddhist traditions, mainly having a set of scriptures and a legitimate lineage of transmission.⁶

*The Origins of the Great Perfection in Tibet
and the Emergence of its Early Literature*

According to traditional Tibetan narratives within rNying ma literature,⁷ the Great Perfection tradition (Tib. *rDzogs chen*; Skt.

³ I have chosen the 14th century as an ending point for my study of the Mind Series literature since by this time the Great Perfection had shifted its focus to the Seminal Heart tradition, making the early Great Perfection texts and practices of the Mind Series a thing of the past.

⁴ See Liljenberg 2009 and 2012.

⁵ See Gray 2009.

⁶ The article has also been inspired by a similar project by Almogi (2013) on the Eighteen Mahāyoga Tantras.

⁷ Some of the oldest narratives can be found in Nyang ral’s 12th century *Copper Continent* and the 13th century *Mask of Bai ro tsa na*, which I discuss later in the

Atiyoga), considered “the realization of all the Buddhas of the three times [...], the essence of all the doctrines, the summit of all vehicles, the king of all tantras, the main point of all scriptures, [and] the root of all instructions,”⁸ was revealed for the first time by the Primordial Buddha Samantabhadra (Kun tu bzang po) to Vajrasattva (rDo rje sems dpa'), who, in turn, transmitted the teachings to the master from Oḍḍiyāna dGa' rab rdo rje.⁹ He was the first human to receive the teachings, and transmitted them to Śrī Siṃha (Shri sing ha),¹⁰ who would then teach them to the Tibetan translators Bai ro tsa na and Legs grub, who had been sent to India by the Tibetan Emperor Khri srong lde btsan as part of the Imperial project of bringing Buddhism to Tibet in the 8th century. Legs grub died on his way back to Tibet, but Bai ro tsa na was able to receive the transmission of the essential scriptures of the early Great Perfection tradition, *The Eighteen Texts of the Mind Series (Sems sde bco brgyad)*.¹¹ In his return to Tibet, he translated five of the *Eighteen Texts*, in what would be known as the *Five Early Translations (sNga 'gyur lnga)*, and Vimalamitra (Dri med bshes gnyen) translated the rest, known as the *Thirteen Later Translations (Phyi 'gyur bcu gsum)*. As the Great Perfection evolved and new scriptures and practices emerged, the tradition divided

article. More recent accounts can be found in Dudjom Rinpoche's *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*. Among contemporary Tibetan scholars, Namkhai Norbu, in *The Supreme Source*, for example, offers a slightly different account, placing more emphasis on the pre-Buddhist, Zhang zhung roots of the Great Perfection.

⁸ This is the narrative as found in *The Mask of Bai ro tsa na (Bai ro 'dra 'bag)*, one of the earliest accounts of the transmission of the Great Perfection teachings into Tibet. See Palmo 2005:5.

⁹ On the geographical location of Oḍḍiyāna see Hirshberg 2016: 6-7.

¹⁰ In the context of the origins of the Great Perfection, it is interesting to point out that Śrī Siṃha is considered to be born in China, although he later studied and taught in India. As Kapstein has discussed, the stories of the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet have focused on its Indian origins, while erasing any records of a more complex (and interesting) narratives in which borders and exchanges of ideas were much more fluid. See Kapstein 2000 for an exploration of a more complex historical account of the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet.

¹¹ The Great Perfection tradition talks about the *Eighteen Texts of the Mind Series* and the *Twenty-Five Tantras* as its early canonical literature, but as Germano has argued, “it seems likely that while the eighteen texts were partially of Indic origin, the twenty-five tantras were subsequent Tibetan compositions. This is indicated by their absence in other accounts of Śrī Siṃha's transmission, as well as Nub's omission of them within *The Lamp Eye of Contemplation*” (in Germano's *Mysticism and Rhetoric [unpublished]*, p. 112). In his *Secret History*, he also adds: “The eighteen mind series texts attributed to his transmission are clearly one of the very earliest matrixes of the Great Perfection in Tibet, though I am quite a bit more suspicious of the *Twenty-Five Tantras* also generally linked to [Śrī Siṃha] and Bai ro tsa na,” pp. 57-58.

them into a set of three distinctive classes of teachings: the Mind Series (*sems sde*), which would include the early translations by Bai ro tsa na and Vimalamitra, as well as a myriad of other texts that would focus on the nature of the mind; the Space Series (*klong sde*), which were never very popular within the Great Perfection tradition; and the Secret Instructions Series (*man ngag sde*), which by the 11th century started gaining popularity, and by the 18th century was the most popular form of Great Perfection practice.¹²

The early Great Perfection literature, as represented by the *Eighteen Texts*, reflects a tradition that focuses on the nature of the mind, is gnostic in nature, gives primacy to spontaneity over structure, values innate, primordial wisdom, and promotes a complete rejection, at least rhetorically, of practice that guides the practitioner not through a gradual set of contemplative practices, but through poetic, inspirational instructions that helps the practitioner recontextualize his/her understanding of the nature of self and reality. This is reflected in the earliest witnesses of this literature, as found in Dunhuang manuscripts such as the *Cuckoo of Awareness* (*Rig pa'i khu byug*).¹³ In Germano's description the emergence of a distinctive intellectual and textual tradition was a gradual process that was deeply rooted in a unique Tibetan understanding of Mahāyoga philosophy and contemplative practice. This process included the redaction of “an initial set of eighteen short texts in self-conscious mirroring of the canonical Eighteen Tantras of the Great Yoga, thus producing the first scriptural canon of the Great Perfection.” Originally, these texts were short, and lacked the traditional framework of other Buddhist tantras or a detailed description of contemplative practices.¹⁴

¹² According to Karmay (1988: 206), “the first two declined soon after the eleventh century and were finally extinguished as living religious practices, while the third which is in fact of relatively late origin, persisted and further developed all through the centuries until today.” For van Schaik (2004: 8), by the 18th century the Secret Instruction Series “supplanted entirely the Mind and Space series, becoming [...] the only form of Great Perfection still practiced.” In *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, Dudjom Rinpoche (1991: 319-334) spends four pages outlining the doctrines of the Space Series, seven for the Mind Series, and sixteen for the Secret Instructions.

¹³ A Dunhuang version of the text can be seen IOL Tib J 647.

¹⁴ Germano, *Mysticism and Rhetoric*, p. 93 (unpublished). He also argues that the label of *sems sde* became “a very loose rubric covering the majority of developments prior to the eleventh century, and their subsequent continuance by conservative authors. The texts that fall under this sub-rubric were thus authored over a lengthy time period, and are bound together (taking for granted the characteristic Great Perfection motifs and terminology) primarily by a common

As the Great Perfection literature grew and new systems emerged competing for patronage and followers, the most important texts of the Mind Series, the *Eighteen Texts* included, were collected, beginning in the 13th century, as chapters of what would become the most important tantra of the Mind Series tradition, the *All Sovereign King* (*Kun byed rgyal po*), which transformed a poetic and scattered literature collection into a cohesive and traditional tantric scripture, including a more standard Buddhist narrative of origins and transmission of the teachings.

While this narrative is widely accepted within the rNying ma tradition, the historical origins of the Great Perfection and of its early literature, though, have been a disputed and contested topic since the tradition emerged on the Tibetan plateau in the 8th century. In the 9th century the Great Perfection scholar gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes had to defend the tradition of the attacks claiming it to be a mere Tibetan copy of Chinese Chan.¹⁵ In the 11th century Lha bla ma Ye shes 'od, 959–1040 CE),¹⁶ as part of his project to reform Buddhist practices in Tibet after the collapse of the Tibetan Empire in the 9th century,¹⁷ attacked “the false doctrine of Dzogchen.”¹⁸ The Great Perfection in general, and gNubs chen in particular, will continue to be attacked in the 11th century by Ye shes 'od's nephew, Pho brang Zhi ba 'od, 1016–1111 CE),¹⁹ who dismissed gNubs chen's seminal work, the *Lamp for the Eye in Meditation*, as well as gNubs chen's commentaries on the Mind Series scriptures, like the *Rig pa'i nyi ma* (a commentary on the *Nam mkha' che*), as part of an attempt to create scriptures “composed in the guise of the word of the Buddha [while claiming] to be of Indian origin,” but which, in fact, were “produced by Tibetans,” and therefore “one can hardly accept them [...] since they may be the path leading into evil rebirths.”²⁰ Even

rejection of practice of any type, as well as by their rejection of funerary Buddhism,” p. 246.

¹⁵ gNubs chen acknowledges the similarities, particular in terms of rhetoric and their mutual rejection of any sort of practice, but he also stresses their differences.

¹⁶ For more on this figure, see the following Karmay (1998: 3-16), Karmay 2013, and Thakur 1994.

¹⁷ This project culminated with the invitation and subsequent arrival of Atīṣa (Atīṣa Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna, 980-1054 CE) to Tibet in 1040. On the topic of Atīṣa, see Chattopadhyaya 1988, Decler 1997, and Ruegg 1981.

¹⁸ See Karmay 1998: 10.

¹⁹ See Karmay 1998: 17-40.

²⁰ See Karmay 1998: 31, 37-38. The 11th century scholar, 'Gos Khug pa lhas btsas, in his *Refutation of False Mantra* (*sNgags log sun 'byin gyi skor*), also accuses gNubs chen of composing tantras in Tibet while claiming to be of Indian origin. Dalton translates this relevant passage from 'Gos Khug pa lhas btsas attacking gNubs chen: “Because of Nup Sangyé Rinchen, sources appeared in India. Some really

Sakya Paṇḍita in the 13th century referred to the Great Perfection as being influenced by Chinese Chan:

In the Mahāmudrā of today and in the Rdzogs-chen of the Chinese fashion, “fall from above” and “climb from below” [on the one hand] and “successively” and “simultaneously” [on the other] are only terminological variants. Where meaning is concerned, no distinction is made between them.²¹

Modern scholarship on this subject began in earnest with the publication in 1988 of Samten Karmay’s *The Great Perfection*, which argued for a more complex understanding of the origins of the tradition. According to Karmay, the early Great Perfection included “certain elements of the *cig car ba* [Chan] tradition, the *sems sde* type of teachings, and predominantly tantric doctrines expounded in Tantras such as [the *Guhyagarbha*].”²² With this work, Karmay acknowledged the syncretic nature of the tradition not as a weakness or as a proof of its lack of pedigree, but as a sign of the strength and creativity by which Tibetans absorbed, transformed, and reinterpreted the various forms of Buddhism that had made their way into Tibet since the 7th century.²³ In the following decades David Germano continued Karmay’s line of enquiry and explored the emergence of the Great Perfection tradition as a uniquely Tibetan innovation grounded in certain Indian Buddhist developments centered around the *Guhyagarbha* (*rGyud gsang ba’i snying po*) in the Mahāyoga tradition.²⁴ Dalton and van Schaik also brought some light

astonishing teachings were composed. **The five and the eighteen mantra-teachings, as well as *The Great Mental Arising*, are all false and corrupt teachings made up by Tibetans...** Also made up by Sangyé Rinpoché are [*The Tantra of*] *The Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*, the greater and lesser *Planet Tantras of the Rahula Cycle*, [*The Tantra of*] *The Ice-Faced One*, and so forth.” Bold is mine. See Dalton 2011: 8.

²¹ Sa skya pan chen, *Sdom gsum rab dbye*, fol. 25b, *Sa skya bka’ ’bum* ed. (Tokyo, 1968), 5:309, quoted from Stein, R.A. “Sudden Illumination or Simultaneous Comprehension.” In Gregory 1987:44.

²² See Karmay 1988: 212.

²³ For his analysis on the emergence of the Great Perfection, Karmay focuses on the *Man ngag lta ba’i phreng ba*, a commentary on the perfection phase practices as are described in the *Guhyagarbha*. In his opinion, “[b]eing the principal work dealing with the final stage of the process of the rdzogs rim meditation expounded in SNy, it is the original source that gave birth to what is known as the doctrine of rdzogs chen, a syncretic teaching mainly drawn from SNy and tinged with thoughts originating the Sems sde.” In Karmay 1988: 152. He dedicates the greater part of chapter six to that issue.

²⁴ See Germano 1994.

to the early stages of development of the Great Perfection tradition and its literature through their study of the Dunhuang manuscripts, and have also offered a more nuanced hermeneutical approach to our understanding of the origins of the tradition.²⁵ The work of Karen Liljenberg, particularly her findings of some of the lost scriptures belonging to the *Eighteen Texts*, reveal the way in which some of these texts disappeared under new titles, hiding in plain sight, or were incorporated as parts of larger texts during the process of creation of the various rNying ma canons in the 14th century.²⁶ The recent work of scholars such as Cabezón and his translation of Rog ban Shes rab 'od's *Lamp of the Teachings* (*Grub mtha' so so'i bzhed tshul gzhung gsal bar ston pa chos 'byung grub mtha' chen po bstan pa'i sgron me*),²⁷ and Sur,²⁸ with his translation of Rong zom's *Disclosing the Great Vehicle Approach* (*Theg chen tshul 'jug*), have also been invaluable to our understanding of the early reception and interpretation of the early Great Perfection literature in the context of the emergence of the gSar ma traditions in a post-Imperial Tibet.

While the existence and importance of the *Eighteen Texts* has never been disputed by traditional rNying ma and modern Tibetan scholars alike, the nature and content of this collection have been a recurring and puzzling question. As we will see, there is no agreement as to the actual contents of the collection or even the actual number of texts that compose it. This problem is compounded by the fact that an actual complete collection of the *Eighteen Texts* cannot be found in any of the various versions of the *Collection of the Ancients* (*rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*) in existence. This raises a variety of questions: Why are there so many different lists of them containing different titles? Why are scholars such as Klong chen pa offering different lists of the *Eighteen Texts* within the same work? Were there different canons circulating around under the same name? And where are those texts? The purpose of this article is to try to offer some answers to these questions through a careful study of the reception history of this collection from its first mention in gNubs chen's 9th century *Lamp for the Eye in Meditation*, until the references to it by Klong chen pa in the 14th century, a time where its relevance had faded in favor of other textual and contemplative traditions within the Great Perfection

²⁵ van Schaik proposes the use of the notion of “convergence” instead of “influence” when approaching the issue of the origins of the Great Perfection, and its relationship to other traditions such as Chinese Chan. See Van Schaik 2012.

²⁶ See Liljenberg 2009 and 2012.

²⁷ See Cabezón 2013.

²⁸ See Sur 2017.

tradition. As I have already pointed out, my assessment of the various lists of texts points toward the fact that an actual fixed collection of eighteen texts never really existed, and the label of “eighteen” did not operate as a concrete textual reality, but as an ideal canon that helped the early Great Perfection define itself as different and unique from other Buddhist traditions.

*The Eighteen Texts (or is it Twenty?) in the 9th Century:
gNubs chen’s Lamp for the Eye in Meditation*

The oldest recorded reference to the existence of the *Eighteen Texts* as a collection can be found in the 9th century text *The Lamp for the Eye in Meditation*²⁹ (*bSam gtan mig sgron*), a treatise written by the Tibetan scholar gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye she. The *Lamp* is a remarkable text for many reasons,³⁰ but for the argument that I want to make in this paper, it is important since it is the earliest and the most comprehensive treatise describing the emergence during this period of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) as an independent vehicle (*theg pa*),³¹ different and superior to those imported from India and China.³²

The *Lamp* is a doxography or a classification of views that organizes the various forms of Buddhism that made their way into

²⁹ I will refer to the text from now on simply as the *Lamp*.

³⁰ The *Lamp* is one of the few treatises that has survived from the so-called Tibetan Dark Age (842–978 CE), the period of social, political, and economic instability that followed the collapse of the Tibetan Empire (618–842 CE) in the 9th century. gNubs chen’s text is also the most detailed account of the diversity of Buddhist traditions introduced in Tibet (from India, Central Asia, and China) up to the 10th century, and it includes the most comprehensive discussion of the relevant philosophical debates of the period in Tibet, such as the tension between sudden vs. gradual approaches to enlightenment, and a critique of the popular but transgressive tantric practices of Mahāyoga that had been mostly censured by the empire, but had spread widely after its collapse. The *Lamp* was also the focus of my Ph.D. dissertation, see Lopez 2014.

³¹ As Sam van Schaik has argued there are earlier mentions of the term *rdzogs chen* (as a ritual moment, as a framework for tantric practice, as a textual category, etc.), and the parallel evolution of the term *Atiyoga*, which ended up becoming synonymous, but the *Lamp* is the first datable text that mentions the Great Perfection as a separate Buddhist vehicle. See van Schaik 2004.

³² “Given what we have seen in the *Sūtra* and Gnubs-chen’s *Mun pa’i go cha*, we can safely say that *rdzogs-chen* had been articulated as an independent vehicle by the late ninth century and that what should be included in this *atiyoga* was being hotly contested,” Dalton, 2002: 129. The point that I want to make is that gNubs chen is not creating the label, but he is at the forefront in the defense of the Great Perfection as an independent vehicle, and not as part of the dyad generation/perfection stage defended in other tantric traditions.

Tibet during gNubs chen's time into four basic approaches to meditation:³³ Gradual approach (*tšen men rim gyis 'jug pa*), which describes the traditional Mahāyāna textual and scholastic tradition coming mainly from India; Instantaneous approach (*ston mun cig car 'jug pa*), represented by Chinese Chan; Mahāyoga (*rnal 'byor pa chen po*), a tradition that represented the new tantric developments that had become popular during this period all across Asia, starting in the 7th-8th century; and Atiyoga (*rdzogs pa chen po*),³⁴ which can be seen to a great extent as a unique continuation of some meditational experiences of the Mahāyoga tradition, as well as a rejection of its rhetoric, and in particular of its sexual and wrathful practices.

In the *Lamp*, gNubs chen uses the doxographical genre not only to passively organize the various forms of Buddhism that were being imported into Tibet, but also to actively and creatively engage in the construction of a unique Tibetan Buddhist view, with the Gradual Approach at the bottom of the contemplative path, and Atiyoga or the Great Perfection at the top. In the chapters dedicated to each of the traditions, gNubs chen systematically outlines the philosophical view of each tradition (*lta ba*), their contemplative practices (*sgom pa*), their ethical guidelines (*spyod pa*), and the final goal of their practices (*'bras bu*). But gNubs chen does not only articulate the views of each tradition through their philosophy and practices, but also defines the boundaries that separates them by outlining their distinctive lineages of teachers, as well as their very unique corpus of scriptures.

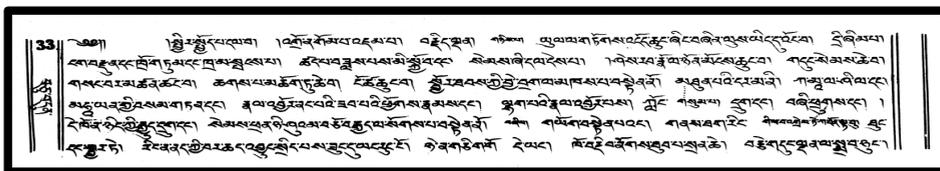
As I said, the *Lamp* has the oldest reference to the *Eighteen Texts* identified as a separate corpus of scriptures uniquely connected to the Great Perfection. The actual passage, in fact, makes a reference to all of the important scriptures that a meditator should take to a retreat in order to practice the contemplative techniques of each of the four traditions outlined in the *Lamp*:

“Regarding the harmonious Dharma [books that you should take with you to a retreat]: Kamalaśīla [’s *Bhāvanākrama*], [Hashang] Mahāyāna’s texts on contemplation, those of the profound Inner

³³ Jake Dalton (2005) traced some of the early historical developments of the doxographical tradition in India as well as in Tibet all the way up to gNubs chen, arguing that while in India the focus of doxographies were the organization of the constant ritual innovation within the tantric material, in Tibet, while this was also a concern, the focus shifted to doctrinal differences. This point becomes obvious in the *Lamp*, in which gNubs chen constructs his doxography around the understanding that different Buddhist traditions have of the notion of non-conceptuality (*mi rtog pa*), which allows him to position the Great Perfection away from ritual or contemplative contexts and engage the other traditions in the intellectual arena.

³⁴ gNubs chen offers an overview of this classification in chapter three of the *Lamp*.

Yoga; the *Klong drug*,³⁵ the *bZhi phrugs*³⁶ (whose commentary is like the primordial meaning), the *Six Tantras of Suchness*,³⁷ and *the twenty or eighteen minor [texts of the] Mind*³⁸



The page from gNubs chen's *Lamp for the Eye in Meditation* with the first recorded mention to the *Eighteen Texts*

³⁵ This text could be the *Kun tu bzang po Klong drug pa'i rgyud* attributed to Vimalamitra, but, as Karmay pointed out, since the text is not actually quoted in the *Lamp*, "there is no means of verifying it." He then adds, "Klong-chen rab-'byams uses it as one of the fundamental sources in his works, e.g. *Theg mchog mdzod*, ff. 190a5, 300a3 et passim; *Tshig don mdzod* ff. 4b2, 5b2, 6b3 et passim" in Karmay 2007: 97 n. 69. van Schaik, though, thinks that this text may be quoted in the *Lamp* under a slightly different name: "This is perhaps a commentary to the *mTsho Klong* (*Byang chub kyi sems rgya mtsho Klong dgu'i rgyud*, Tb.69), which is cited twice in the Atiyoga chapter. There is a commentary on the *Klong drug rgyud* attributed to Vimalamitra in the *bKa' ma shin tu rgyas pa* (vol.100) but as the root text is one of the Seminal Heart tantras which were not in circulation until the eleventh century at the earliest, this is most unlikely to be the text referred to here," in van Schaik 2004: 196.

³⁶ This is a text that I have not been able to identify. Karmay found a reference to it in Klong chen pa's *gNas lugs mdzod*, f. 72a "*lta sgom spyod 'bras bzhi phrugs cig lhun grub tu 'byung ste*—View, contemplation, conduct and the result, the four will come naturally and simultaneously," in Karmay 2007: 97 n. 70.

³⁷ Donati thinks that this commentary may "refer to the Three Outer Tantras of Kriyāyoga, Upayoga and Yoga and the Three Inner Tantras of Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga. This conjecture is confirmed by one passage I found in dPa' bo gtsug lag's *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*, vol. Tha, ff. 37b6-38a1; this passage, quoting a commentary to the *Guhya garbhatantra* written by rGyal ba g.Yung, relates that the teachings of the Three Outer Tantras of Kriyayoga, Upayoga and Yoga and of the Three Inner Tantras of Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga are the same as the [six kinds of] teachings regarding Thusness (*de kho na nyid ston pa rnams dang don gcig go zhes rgyal ba g.yung bzhed to*)." In Donati 2006: 151 n. 36. dPa' bo gtsug lag's *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* also offers a list of old Tibetan texts that include a title of the same name by the translators dPal brtsegs and Chog ro Klu'i rgyal mtshan: "dpal brtsegs dang klu'i rgyal mtshan gyi brgal lan bzhi phrugs" in dpa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa, *A Scholar's Feast* (*Chos 'Byung Mkhas Pa'i Dga' Ston*), TBRC W7499, Vol. 1, p. 402.

³⁸ In Tibetan: "*mthun <gsum pa /> pa'i dar ma ni / ka m'a la shi la dang / (33.4) mah'a yan gyi bsam gtan dang / rnal 'byor nang pa'i zab pa'i phyogs rnams dang / lhag pa'i rnal 'byor pas / Klong drug dang / bzhi phrugs <gis ba 'gyel te ka don lta bu /> dang / (33.5) de kho na nyid kyi rgyud drug dang / sems phran nyi shu'am bco brgyad la sogs pa bsten no.*" Italics are mine. *Lamp* 1974: 33.4-33.5.

Several things make this quote important in the context of our study of the history of the *Eighteen Texts*. First, this is the only explicit reference to the *Eighteen Texts* as a literary corpus in the whole treatise. gNubs chen will quote extensively from this collection, particularly in the chapter dedicated to the Great Perfection tradition, but he will not refer to them as a group again. Second, gNubs chen's reference is surprisingly vague. Are there eighteen or twenty texts? Does he not know? Are there different opinions on this matter? gNubs chen does not offer a list of the texts that comprise this corpus, but a survey of the *Lamp* comparing gNubs chen's citations with later lists of the *Eighteen Texts* shows that most of the texts considered by the later tradition to be a part of the collection are included in it, although the list veers towards twenty more than eighteen, and some of the texts that ended up not making it in the list, like *The Small Hidden Grain* (*rGum chung*) and *The Universally Definitive Perfection* (*rDzogs pa spyi spyod*), are actually quoted more times than some of the established texts like *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (*Rig pa'i khu byug*). Here are the texts cited by gNubs chen, listed for comparative purposes following the later standard division between the *Five Early Translations* (1-5) and the *Thirteen Later ones* (6-18), plus an additional two texts that make this early corpus one of twenty texts:

1. *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (*Rig pa'i khu byug*, here as *Khu byug*)
2. *Great Potency* (*rTsal chen sprugs pa*, here as *bTsal chen sprugs pa*)
3. *The Great Soaring Garuda* (*Khyung chen lding ba*, here as *Khyung chen*)
4. *Meditation on the Enlightened Mind* (*Byang chub sems bsgom pa*, here as *Sems bsgom*, as well as its alternative title of *rDo la gser zhun*)
5. *The Never Declining Banner of the Great Sky* (*Mi nub rgyal mtshan*, here as *Nam mkha' che*)
6. *The Supreme Lord* (*rJe btsan dam pa*)
7. *The Wish-fulfilling Gem* (*Yid bzhin nor bu*)
8. *The Victorious Emergence of the Peak* (*rTse mo byung rgyal*)
9. *The Inlaid Jewels of Bliss* (*bDe ba 'phra bkod*)
10. *The King of the Sky* (*Nam mkha' rgyal po*)
11. *The Wheel of Life* (*Srog gi 'khor lo*)
12. *The Epitome* (*sPyi 'chings*, here as *sPyi chings* and *sPhyi bcangs*)
13. *The Infinity of Bliss* (*bDe 'byams*)
14. *The Quintessential King* (*Yang tig rgyal po* or *Mi 'gyur thig le tig* or *Byang chub sems tig*)
15. *The Marvelous* (*rMad du byung ba*)
16. *The Six Spheres* (*Thig le drug pa*)

17. *The Accomplishment of Meditation* (*bsGom don grub pa*, here as *don grub*)
18. *The Compendium* (*Kun 'dus*, here as *Rin po che kun 'dus rig pa*)
19. *The Universally Definitive Perfection* (*rDzogs pa spyi spyod*, here as *sPhyi bcod*)
20. *The Small Hidden Grain* (*sBas pa'i rgum chung*)

The fact that gNubs chen seems unsure as to the number of texts that are part of this collection points, I would argue, not to some sort of confusion on his part, but to the fact that the Great Perfection tradition is, at the time of gNubs chen, in its very early stages, with a nascent and fluid sets of ideas, practices, and scriptures. This nascent nature of the tradition as well as its scriptural corpus would also explain why gNubs chen refers to it as *sems phran* or minor texts of the mind, instead of *sems sde* or Mind Series. The concept of a “Mind Series” would only make sense in the context of the triad of Mind Series (*ems sde*), Space Series (*klong sde*) and the Secret Instruction Series (*man ngag sde*) traditions that was created later to classify and organize the various teachings and lineages that were within the Great Perfection and that at the time of the *Lamp* either were not well established to merit a reference to them, or, as I believe, had not yet emerged.³⁹ Finally, gNubs chen does not divide the corpus into the later accepted division between the *Five Earlier Translations* by Bai ro tsa na, and the *Thirteen Later Translations* by Vimalamitra.⁴⁰

³⁹ Sur argues that there is the possibility that the Mind, Space, and Secret Instruction series of the Great Perfection emerged at the same time, and that the fact that some scholars such as gNubs chen or Rong zom only mentioned Mind Series literature cannot be attributed to the absence of other scriptures, but to some particular lineage or intellectual allegiance (Sur, p. 322). I would argue that while the lack of contrary evidence is not sufficient evidence, a close analysis of the textual reception seems to point towards the Mind texts as the earliest layer of Great Perfection literature.

⁴⁰ gNubs chen does mention Bai ro tsa na and Vimalamitra in the *Lamp*, although their names appear as part of the interlinear notes and not as part of the main text. This creates an issue, since the authorship of the footnotes has been debated by scholars. van Schaik (Sam van Schaik 2004: 165–206, 197) and Esler consider them a work of the author, while I tend to think that they are the work of some of his early disciples. Karmay, in his pioneer study of the early Great Perfection, and the first serious study of the *Lamp*, was skeptical regarding gNubs chen's authorship of the interlinear notes, particularly since they seem to include a few anachronisms, like the use of the name gLang dar ma to refer to King 'U'i dum brtan (Karmay, 1988:2007, 59-60). As Yamaguchi (1996) already argued, the use of the derogative name gLang dar ma cannot be found in any of the manuscripts of the Dunhuang cave, which probably indicates a late Dark Age or early Tibetan

Despite all of these issues, there is no doubt that gNubs chen relies heavily on this early corpus of literature in his depiction of the Great Perfection as a separate Buddhist vehicle. gNubs chen is using the early corpus of the *Eighteen Texts* to separate the Great Perfection from the other vehicles, showing that their particular philosophical vision is preserved in a different literary corpus, with a different lineage of transmission. gNubs chen uses these texts, with their particular denial of tantric rhetoric and practice, its poetic bent, its deconstructive approach to discourse, its emphasis on spontaneity and naturalness (what David Germano has called “Pristine Tantra”) to articulate a different approach to Buddhist thought and to those of the other Buddhist vehicles discussed in the *Lamp*.

The Eighteen Texts in gNubs chen’s Lamp for the Eye in Meditation

Title	Number of quotes
1. <i>The Cuckoo of Awareness (Rig pa’i khu byug, here as Khu byug)</i>	2
2. <i>Great Potency (rTsal chen sprugs pa, here as bTsal chen sprugs pa)</i>	3
3. <i>The Great Soaring Garuda (Khyung chen lding ba, here as Khyung chen)</i>	19
4. <i>Meditation on the Enlightened Mind (Byang chub sems bsgom pa, here as Sems bsgom, as well as its alternative title of rDo la gser zhun)</i>	11
5. <i>The Never Declining Banner of the Great Sky (Mi nub rgyal mtshan, here as Nam mkha’ che)</i>	37
6. <i>The Supreme Lord (rJe btsan dam pa)</i>	2
7. <i>The Wish-fulfilling Gem (Yid bzhin nor bu)</i>	1

Renaissance period for the composition of the interlinear notes. Carmen Meinert (2004: 238 n. 599), and Esler (2012: 129) have offered other convincing historical and grammatical arguments that seem to confirm Karmay’s early suspicions regarding the authorship of the notes, attributing them to close disciples, or to the later Tibetan tradition. I agree with the prevalent assessment of the interlinear notes being written not by gNubs chen, but by some close disciples or early custodians of gNubs chen’s tradition (probably, early members of the Zur tradition).

8. <i>The Victorious Emergence of the Peak</i> (<i>rTse mo byung rgyal</i>)	19
9. <i>The Inlaid Jewels of Bliss</i> (<i>bDe ba 'phra bkod</i>)	7
10. <i>The King of the Sky</i> (<i>Nam mkha' rgyal po</i>)	12
11. <i>The Wheel of Life</i> (<i>Srog gi 'khor lo</i>)	5
12. <i>The Epitome</i> (<i>sPyi 'chings</i> , here as <i>sPyi chings</i> and <i>sPhyi bcangs</i>)	3
13. <i>The Infinity of Bliss</i> (<i>bDe 'byams</i>)	6
14. <i>The Quintessential King</i> (<i>Yang tig rgyal po</i> or <i>Mi 'gyur thig le tig</i> or <i>Byang chub sems tig</i>)	1
15. <i>The Marvelous</i> (<i>rMad du byung ba</i>)	43
16. <i>The Six Spheres</i> (<i>Thig le drug pa</i>)	3
17. <i>The Accomplishment of Meditation</i> (<i>bsGom don grub pa</i> , here as <i>don grub</i>)	2
18. <i>The Compendium</i> (<i>Kun 'dus</i> , here as <i>Rin po che kun 'dus rig pa</i>)	15
19. <i>The Universally Definitive Perfection</i> (<i>rDzogs pa spyi spyod</i> , here as <i>sPhyi bcod</i>)	3
20. <i>The Small Hidden Grain</i> (<i>sBas pa'i rgum chung</i>)	5

To conclude this section, though, I think it is also worth mentioning another clue that points toward the emergent nature of the Great Perfection as a separate vehicle at the time of gNubs chen's *Lamp*. While the *Eighteen Texts* play a key role in the articulation of the Great Perfection philosophical view, none of the texts in the corpus is the most mentioned text in the *Lamp*, nor even in the chapter dedicated to the Great Perfection. In particular, this honor goes to the *Sūtra of the Gathered Intentions* (*dGongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*), which is mentioned ninety-nine times. The most mentioned Mind Series text in the *Lamp* is the *Marvelous* (*rMad du byung ba*), which is quoted forty-three times. In chapter seven, which is dedicated to the Great Perfection, the *Marvelous* is quoted forty-one times, still, the *Sūtra of*

the Gathered Intentions is quoted forty-five times, and the quotations are much longer. Why would that be? There may be several reasons, but, as I have said, I believe that the *Lamp* presents a Great Perfection tradition in its very early stages, and while the early Mind Series literature helps gNubs chen express a unique vision for the tradition, the texts also lack the philosophical sophistication to articulate and argue its own positions against those of other Buddhist traditions with more historical pedigree (we could say that the rhetoric of denial can only get you so far in an argument!). That's why gNubs chen repeatedly uses tantric material, in this case the *Sūtra of the Gathered Intentions* (*dGongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*), which helps him make his case for the Great Perfection as a separate vehicle.

*The Eighteen Texts in the 11th and 12th Centuries:
Rong zom, Rog ban, and Nyang ral*

gNubs chen's 9th century *Lamp for the Eye in Meditation* reflects, as we have seen, the Great Perfection as well as the collection of texts that became known as the *Eighteen Texts* of the Mind Series literature in its very early stages. The corpus of texts is still not defined in its number ("twenty or eighteen"), nor in its specific content, since the *Lamp* does not offer an actual list. It seems that at the time of gNubs chen's writing, the Mind Series literature is vaguely defined but relatively cohesive in tone and content, and its various texts are still fairly independent of each other since gNubs chen cites them as separate texts throughout the *Lamp*. Over the next four centuries we will see a general consensus by rNying ma scholars about the existence of an early canon of Great Perfection texts under the label of the *Eighteen Texts*, but, as we will see, there will be a complete lack of agreement about its actual composition. A brief analysis of the references to this corpus of scriptures by three different rNying ma scholars who lived in the 11th and 12th centuries, Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po, Rog ban Shes rab 'od, and Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer, will allow us to explore a period in the reception history of the Mind Series literature in which its scriptures are in an intermediate or transitional period between their circulation as independent texts, and their transformation in the late 12th–early 13th century as chapters of *The All Sovereign King* (*Kun byed rgyal po*), a scripture that will incorporate the Eighteen Texts as part of a new and larger textual tradition that will also incorporate new scriptures and practices within an evolving Great Perfection tradition that was also competing at the time with the New Translation movements that started to develop in Tibet in the post-Dark Age period.

Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po's
Disclosing the Great Vehicle Approach

After gNubs chen, the most important figure in the transmission of the early Great Perfection literature is the great 11th century scholar Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po (1012-1088).⁴¹ Rong zom is one of the intellectual pillars of the early rNying ma tradition, and one of the most articulate defenders of the Great Perfection tradition in the early post-Empire period, when the teachings, lineages, and scriptures associated with the early translation period came under assault by the new translation movements (*gSar ma*), as we saw in an earlier reference to the indictment of bla ma Ye shes 'od and his nephew Pho brang Zhi ba 'od.

An important work for our understanding of the reception history of the *Eighteen Texts* is Rong zom's treatise *Disclosing the Great Vehicle Approach* (*Theg chen tshul 'jug*),⁴² which Dominic Sur, in his great study of the text, has described as a “systematic analysis of various types of Buddhist thought and practices that situates them in relation to the Old School's lightly distinguished Great Perfection tradition.” According to Sur, Rong zom's understanding of the Great Perfection tradition is based on the early Mind Series literature, although, as he points out, “the Approach nowhere refers to a Mind Series or Mind Class” corpus of texts,⁴³ neither does he offer a list of eighteen texts connected to this genre of literature, although he relies heavily on them in his presentation of the Great Perfection. Rong zom also does not mention the *All Sovereign King* as a text.

The chapter of *The Approach* that offers a discussion of the Great Perfection “is the longest of the text, containing one hundred and eight citations.” Of those one hundred and eight citations, fifty correspond “to five works of the so-called *Eighteen Works of the Mind Series* (*Sems sde bco brgyad*), which were becoming increasingly available (and systematized) in the tenth century.”⁴⁴ The texts that he quotes are mainly from what will become known as the *Five Early Translations* by Bai ro tsa na:⁴⁵ *The Great Garuda* (*Khyung chen lding ba*),

⁴¹ The dates of Rong zom, very much like the dates of gNubs chen, are quite uncertain, although scholars place him with some degree of certainty in the 11th century, 1012-1131. See Sur 2015: 13.

⁴² TBRC W15575.

⁴³ See Sur 2015: 322.

⁴⁴ See Sur 2015: 313.

⁴⁵ Regarding the use of Mind literature in Rong zom, I rely on Sur (2015: 314-315): “the fifth chapter of *The Approach* is the longest of the text, containing one hundred and eight citations that structure the chapter's predominantly

The Great Potency (rTsal chen sprugs pa), *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (Rig pa khu byug),⁴⁶ *The Great Sky* (Nam mkha' che), and *The Six Spheres* (Thig le drug pa), with no references to the other texts mentioned by gNubs chen in the *Lamp* that were considered part of the corpus with the exception of *The Marvelous* (rMad du byung ba), which he only quotes once. His range of quotations of the early Great Perfection literature, centered on the *Five Early Translations*, is not as broad as gNubs chen's, but it still reflects the relevance of the *Eighteen Texts* in articulating the doctrine and practices of the early Great Perfection tradition.

Rog ban Shes rab's Lamp of the Teachings

In the 12th century, Rog ban Shes rab (1166–1244) or Rog ban, wrote *The Text that Explains the Beliefs of the Different Philosophical Schools. The Great Dharma History and Doxography: A Lamp of the Teachings* (Grub mtha' so so'i bzhed tshul gzhung gsal bar ston pa chos 'byung grub mtha' chen po bstan pa'i sgron me). Rog ban's treatise echoes the works of gNubs chen and Rong zom in which it is an attempt to establish

documentary domain and form the significant object of our attentions throughout this essay. These citations, which organize the discussion below, are categorized into three recognizable groups, with a more amorphous but discernible 'everything-else' group making a fourth. In the first group of citations we find fifty references to five different chapters the *Kun byed rgyal po*, each of which correspond to five works of so-called *Eighteen Works of the Mind Series* (*Sems sde bco brgyad*), which were becoming increasingly available (and systematized) in the tenth century." Here I make a different interpretation of Rong zom's sources from the one presented by Sur in his outstanding work on *The Approach*. According to Sur, Rong zom is not quoting from the collection of scriptures that will become known as the *Eighteen Texts* of the Mind Series, but from the *All Sovereign King*, a text that will incorporate most of those eighteen texts as chapters of a larger scripture, offering a more traditional Buddha narrative and framework to the Mind Series teachings. The problem with this assumption is that Rong zom does not mention the *All Sovereign King* as a text. When he quotes from the Mind Series corpus, he does refer to them by their individual names such as the *Great Sky* (Nam mkha' che), etc. Since Sur has found the exact quotes in the *All Sovereign King*, he assumes that Rong zom is quoting from the scripture (or an earlier version of it), but while this may be true, it would not make much sense that Rong zom does not refer to it by name. My argument is that at the time of Rong zom's writing, either the *All Sovereign King* has not been written, or that it has not yet supplanted the individual identity of the *Eighteen Texts*. It is possible that these texts may have circulated as a bundle of texts (as we find in some of the Dunhuang Manuscripts such as PT113), but at this time, they may not have lost yet their individual identity. For Sur's discussion on this topic, see Sur 2105: 328-29, also Higgins 2013: 33.

⁴⁶ As Sur points out (2015: 594 n. 1990), this text is referenced in *The Approach* under the name *rDo rje tshig drug pa*.

the legitimacy of the lineages and scriptures of the Great Perfection tradition in what it seems a not so welcoming intellectual environment in Tibet that looked with suspicion at scriptures that emerged during the post-Imperial period with dubious claims of Indian origins, and gave primacy to the new tantric scriptures that were being brought into Tibet by a diverse group of Tibetan translators.⁴⁷

As Cabezón points out in his translation of Rog ban’s work, “by the 12th century, the unwieldy Semde Tantras had already been systematized into ‘systems’ (*lugs*) that provided Great Perfection practitioners with the essential terminological, doctrinal, and technical instructions for the practice of Dzogchen”.⁴⁸ Rog ban, just as his contemporary, Rong zom, considers the Great Perfection to be the supreme Buddhist vehicle, and relies on Mind Series literature to make that case. Like Rong zom, he does not specifically mention the corpus of *Eighteen Texts*, and he quotes less frequently from them than gNubs chen and Rong zom, with only specific references to *The Great Garuḍa* (*Khyung chen lding ba*) and *The Great Sky* (*Nam mkha’ che*). In fact, many of the quotes are not attributed at all, and it is left to the reader to realize that he is citing from the Mind Series literature. A close reading of the text seems to point toward a transitional period when the *Eighteen Texts* existed as an independent group of closely-related texts, before the incorporation of those scriptures into the single text known as *The All Sovereign King* (*Kun byed rgyal po*), which will incorporate a diverse group of Mind Series literature beyond the early corpus of eighteen as individual chapters of a larger tantric text. That would explain the anonymity of many of the sources and the fact that many of them can be traced back to what would become the *All Sovereign King*.

Making a List and Checking it twice: Nyang ral Nyi ma ‘od zer and the Systematization of the Eighteen Texts of the Mind Series

The 12th century rNying ma scholar Nyang ral Nyi ma ‘od zer⁴⁹ is the first Tibetan author to offer a list of the *Eighteen Texts*, something that

⁴⁷ Like gNubs chen, Rog ban also organizes his explanation of each Buddhist vehicle by discussing 1) their philosophical view (*lta ba*); 2) their contemplative practices (*sgom pa*); their conduct (*spyod pa*); and 4) their goal (*bras bu*); Cabezón, p. 19. It is important to notice though, that Rog ban does not cite gNubs chen or any of his works.

⁴⁸ Cabezón 2013: 5-6.

⁴⁹ See Hirshberg 2016 for an excellent recent book on Nyang ral, which offers great insights on this figure and his role in the creation of early rNying ma identity.

he does not once, but actually twice, and with some significant difference between both lists. The two different lists can be found in the *Copper Continent* (*bKa' thang zangs gling ma*), and his *Religious History* (*Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud*). In both texts, the early Great Perfection texts are called the *Eighteen Great Scriptures* (*Lung chen po bco brgyad*), even though in the *Religious History* he only mentions seventeen of them. In neither of the lists does he make an explicit distinction between early and later translations, but this distinction is implicit in a later reference in the text.⁵⁰

*Nyang ral Nyi ma od' zer's Eighteen Texts
in The Copper Continent*⁵¹

1. *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (Tib. *Rig pa khu byug*, here as *Rig pa khu byug gi lung*)
2. *Great Potency* (Tib. *rTsal chen sprugs pa*, here as *Rig pa rTsal chen gi lung*)
3. *The Great Soaring Garuda* (Tib. *Khyung chen lding ba*, here as *lTa ba khyung chen gi lung*)
4. *Meditation on the Enlightened Mind* (Tib. *Byang chub sems sgom pa*, here as *rDo la gser zhun gi lung*)
5. *The Never Declining Banner of the Great Sky* (Tib. *Mi nub rgyal mtshan*, here as *Mi nub pa'i rgyal mtshan nam mkha' che*)
6. *The Marvelous* (Tib. *rMad du byung ba*, here as *Ye shes rmad byung ba'i lung*)
7. *The Accomplishment of Meditation* (Tib. *bsGom don grub pa'i lung*)

⁵⁰ There is a mention of the division between the *Five Early* and *Thirteen Later Translations*, although the attribution to Bai ro tsa na and Vimalamitra is not completely clear: "The king sent someone to find the yogi saying, "Find out who that yogi is!" The yogi was found sitting and drinking while flirting with a *chang* lady. When asked, "What is your name? Who is your teacher? What is the name of your teaching?" he answered, "I am Yudra Nyingpo. My teacher is Vairochana. My teaching is the sacred Great Perfection." This was reported to King Trisong Deutsen, who declared, "Invite him here! I must ask him for teachings!" Yudra Nyingpo was then placed on a throne of precious substances and offered a mandala of gold. The king and the close disciples received teachings from Master Virnalamitra in the morning and from Yudra Nyingpo in the afternoon. Thus, they received the *Five Early* and *Thirteen Later Translations* of the Great Perfection. As the teachings of the two masters turned out to be identical, the Tibetan ministers felt regret for having expelled Vairochana." See Kunsang 1999: 111.

⁵¹ The *Bka' thang zangs gling ma*, in the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* Volume 1 pp. 17-206.

8. *The Supreme Lord* (Tib. *rJe btsan dam pa as rJe btsun dam pa'i lung*)
9. *The Quintessential King* (Tib. *Yang tig rgyal po*, here as *sKye med ti la ka'i lung* or the *Mi 'gyur thig le tig*)
10. *The Wheel of Life* (Tib. *Srog gi 'khor lo'i lung*)
11. *The Wish-fulfilling Gem* (Tib. *Yid bzhin nor bu'i lung*)
12. *The Compendium* (Tib. *Kun 'dus*, here as *Rin po che kun 'dus kyi lung*)
13. *The King of the Sky* (Tib. *Nam mkha' rgyal po*, here as *Nam mkha' che ba rgyal po'i lung*)
14. *The Victorious Emergence of the Peak* (Tib. *rTse mo byung rgyal gyi lung*)
15. *The Infinity of Bliss* (Tib. *bDe ba rab 'byams kyi lung*)
16. *The Inlaid Jewels of Bliss* (Tib. *bDe ba 'phra bkod as bDe ba phra bkod kyi lung*)
17. *The Great Treasure of Variety* (as *sNa tshogs gter chen kyi lung*)
18. *The Epitome of Teachings Scripture* (as *bKa' lung gi spyi chings dang lung*)

*Nyang ral Nyi ma od' zer's Eighteen Texts
in the Religious History*⁵²

1. *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (Tib. *Rig pa khu byug*, here as *Rig pa khu byug gi lung*)
2. *Great Potency* (Tib. *rTsal chen sprugs pa*, here as *Rig pa rTsal chen gi lung*)
3. *The Great Soaring Garuda* (Tib. *Khyung chen lding ba*, here as *lTa ba khyung chen gi lung*)
4. *Meditation on the Enlightened Mind* (Tib. *Byang chub sems sgom pa*, here as *rDo la gser zhun gi lung*)
5. *The Never Declining Banner of the Great Sky* (Tib. *Mi nub rgyal mtshan*, here as *Mi nub pa'i rgyal mtshan nam mkha' che*)
6. *Arriving at the Crucial Point* (Tib. *gNad du gyur pa*)
7. *The Supreme Lord* (Tib. *rJe btsan dam pa*)
8. *The Quintessential King* (Tib. *Yang ti rgyal po as Yang tig*)
9. *The Wheel of Life* (Tib. *Srog gi 'khor lo*)
10. *The Wish-fulfilling Gem* (Tib. *Yid bzhin nor bu*)
11. *The Compendium* (Tib. *Kun 'dus*)
12. *The King of the Sky* (Tib. *Nam mkha' rgyal po*)

⁵² In Nyang ral's *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud*, 320-321.

13. *The Victorious Emergence of the Peak* (Tib. *rTse mo byung rgyal*)
14. *The Infinity of Bliss* (Tib. *bDe 'byams*)
15. *The Inlaid Jewels of Bliss* (Tib. *bDe ba 'phra bkod*, here as *bDe ba phra bkod*)
16. *Great Realization* (Tib. *rTogs chen*)⁵³
17. *The Epitome* (Tib. *sPyi 'chings*, here as *Chings*)

The first five texts in both lists are identical and coincide with the *Five Early Translations* later attributed to Bai ro tsa na, but there are some differences in the later thirteen attributed to Vimalamitra. To begin with, Nyang ral's *Religious History* only lists seventeen of them. Neither of the lists includes the *Six Seminal Nuclei* (*Thig le drug pa*), and some of the titles in both lists are unusual. In the *Copper Continent*, we find the *The Great Treasure of Variety* (*sNa tshogs gter chen kyi lung*), and in the *Religious History* we find *Arriving at the Crucial Point* (*gNad du gyur ba*) and the *Great Realization* (*rTog chen*). These names may be alternative titles for the texts missing in the lists, but they are quite unusual and odd in the various lists of the *Eighteen Texts*.

An important contribution by Nyang ral is that he does not only finally offer a list (or lists, as we just saw) of the *Eighteen Texts*, but he also offers a narrative of how these texts made it into Tibet. In the *Copper Continent*, Nyang ral weaves a narrative about the introduction of the Great Perfection into Tibet that centers on the Emperor Khri srong lde btsan and the Indian figure of Śrī Siṃha:

King Trisong Deutsen was told that the two most intelligent in Tibet were Vairochana of Pagor, the son of Hedo of Pagor, and Lekdrub of Tsang, the son of Plain God of Tsang. He sent them his command, and they received ordination from Master Bodhisattva. They learned the skill of translation, and Master Padma gave instructions on magical powers. The king furnished them each with a drey of gold dust and a gold *patra* and sent them off to bring back the sacred Great Perfection from India. When the translators arrived in India they inquired about who was the most learned in the sacred Great Perfection. All the replies were in agreement that the master Shri Singha was the most learned. Having spoken in this way, Shri Singha took them into a house surrounded by nine walls and conferred the empowerment of direct anointment. He then placed a huge copper vessel upon a tripod, and the master sat himself upon it. He donned a cotton robe

⁵³ According to Germano, this could correspond to the *Bsgom don grub pa*, in Germano, *Mysticism and Rhetoric in the Great Perfection*, 357.

with lattice work, put a copper pipe to his mouth, and gave teachings.⁵⁴

After this narrative account of the historical context of the arrival of the Great Perfection teachings to Tibet, Nyang ral proceeds to list the *Eighteen Texts of the Mind Series* and their individual meaning:

Having spoken in this way, Shri Singha took them into a house surrounded by nine walls and conferred the empowerment of direct anointment. He then placed a huge copper vessel upon a tripod, and the master sat himself upon it. He donned a cotton robe with lattice work, put a copper pipe to his mouth, and gave teachings. [...] Shri Singha taught the *Eighteen Major Scriptures*. Since everything originates from awakened mind, he taught the *Awareness Cuckoo Scripture*. To outshine all effort and fabrication, he taught the *Great Strength of Awareness Scripture*. Since the nature of mind is perfected within dharmadhatu, he taught the *Great Garuda View Scripture*. Since the nature of meditation is perfected within space, he taught the *Pure Gold on Stone Scripture*. To perfect the nature of meditation, he taught the *Great Space Never-Waning Banner Scripture*. To resolve the nature of mind to be emptiness, he taught the *Wonderful Wisdom Scripture*. To demonstrate the means of meditation, he taught the *Meditation Accomplishment Scripture*. To demonstrate that the nature of mind is naturally dharmakaya, he taught the *Supreme King Scripture*. To demonstrate that the nature of mind is the Single Sphere, he taught the *Non-arising Tilaka Scripture*. To turn the wheel in the three states of existence, showing that the nature of mind is beyond birth and death, he taught the *Wheel of Life-Force Scripture*. To demonstrate that desirable qualities originate from the nature of mind, he taught the *Wish-Fulfilling Scripture*. To let all conceptual thinking rest in the state of dharmata, he taught the *All-Embodying Jewel Scripture*. To demonstrate in full detail that all the vehicles are perfected and originate in the nature of mind, he taught the *Great Space King Scripture*. To demonstrate that resting in the nature of mind, the state of Samantabhadra, is unsurpassed, the summit amongst all, he taught the *Spontaneous Summit Scripture*. To demonstrate that the meaning of the nature of mind is devoid of fabrications and naturally rests in the state of ease, he taught the *All-Encompassing Bliss Scripture*. To demonstrate that awakened mind remains untainted by the defects of emotional disturbances and is ornamented with the jewelry of qualities, he taught the *Jewel-Studded Bliss Scripture*. To demonstrate that all of samsara and nirvana originates within the expanse of awakened mind, he taught the *Variiegated Great Treasury Scripture*. To demonstrate and epitomize all the vehicles within awakened mind, he

⁵⁴ Kunsang 2004: 90-91.

taught the *Epitome of Teachings Scripture*. Thus, he taught eighteen volumes of scriptures.⁵⁵

What is compelling about this narrative is how the origin of these scriptures, as well as the Great Perfection tradition, is not only weaved into part of the most glorious period of the Tibetan Empire, but also that it is linked all the way back to India. Previous scholars had tried to legitimize the Great Perfection teachings as having Indian origins before gNubs chen's *Lamp*, for example, including a list of the Indian teachers responsible for the early Great Perfection teachings, but this is the first time we have a lengthy narrative that is presented as an historical account of the transmission of the tradition into Tibet. It is important to note, though, that Nyang ral does not mention the *All Sovereign King* in the text, which seems to reinforce the argument that the text was probably not around, or was not an important aspect of the tradition until after the 12th century, since none of the great rNying ma scholars of the period (Rong zom, Rog ban, and Nyang ral) mention it.

*Clay Pots, Deerskin Hoods, and Goat's Milk Ink: Master Śrī Simha,
Bai ro tsa na, and the Eighteen Texts in the 13th Century*

The most detailed narrative account of the transmission of the *Eighteen Texts* into Tibet can be found in the 13th century text the *Mask of Bai ro tsa na*, (*Bairo'i 'dra 'bag chen mo*), which is included as the last volume (in fact as the last text) in the *Bairo'i rgyud 'bum*,⁵⁶ an anomalous collection of rNying ma literature that, unlike other canonical collections, includes only texts belonging to the Great Perfection tradition (no Mahāyoga or Anuyoga texts are included).⁵⁷ As we have seen, Nyang ral offers two lists of the texts that composed the corpus, and he also offers a narrative that links their transmission to the Emperor Khri srong lde btsan, as well as Bai ro tsa na. *The Mask of Bai ro tsa na* will also offer a comprehensive list as well as a narrative account, but there are important differences. As we will see, the composition of the list in *The Mask of Bai ro tsa na* and in Nyang ral's works is slightly different, and the narrative is much more developed in *The Mask* than in Nyang ral's *Copper Continent*.

⁵⁵ Kunsang 2004: 90-93 passim.

⁵⁶ Leh 1971: Vol. 8, 405-605. The list begins on p. 519.4; for an English translation see Palmo 2004.

⁵⁷ Karmay summarized the *Mask of Bai ro tsa na* in (2007 [1998]: 18), and argues that although the text probably took its present form in the 13th century, it contains some parts that are probably later.

The different narrative focus can be easily explained since Nyang ral's *Copper Continent* is attempting to create a narrative framework for the rNying ma tradition as a whole that focuses on Padmasambhava as the central transmitter of the rNying ma teachings into Tibet. *The Mask of Bai ro tsa na*, on the other hand, is trying to do the same, but, this time, establishing the Tibetan translator Bai ro tsa na as the central figure for the tradition.

The Mask of Bai ro tsa na seems to operate at two levels. On the one hand, it offers a biography of the extraordinary life of this unique Tibetan translator and of his trips to India in search of texts and teachings. On the other hand, it is an attempt to establish the legitimacy of the Great Perfection Tradition by offering an incredibly detailed narrative of the uninterrupted lineage of the Great Perfection teachings that goes not only back to the Buddha Sakyamuni himself, but also to their emergence in the celestial land of Akanishta.⁵⁸ In this sense, it seems that *The Mask* is trying to develop not only an historical, but also a mythological framework for the transmission of the teachings that links them to a primordial Buddha.

According to *The Mask*, the transmission of the Great Perfection teachings to Tibet begins with the Emperor Khri song lde btsan, who in a former life had been born in India as a monk called Avadhuti and had practiced Atiyoga. The Emperor realized that the Great Perfection is a teaching that transcends all other doctrines and that it should be brought to Tibet. In order to do so he sends two monks to India, Bai ro tsa na and Legs grub, who, once in India, meet with the main holder of the lineage, Master Śrī Simha.

The actual account of the transmission, although similar in content to that of Nyang ral, has enough differences that it warrants its full citation here:

Every day they listened to the Secret Mantra teachings based on the result from the later seven scholars and others. And every night they listened to Shri Singha's explanations on the pith instructions of the effortless Great Perfection, the heart of the doctrine.

⁵⁸ Here, I am reminded of John McRae (2003: 8) study of Chinese Chan lineages: "[L]ineage assertions are as wrong as they are strong." And as McRae has pointed out in his discussion of the emergence of the Chan tradition, the establishment of lineages "were polemical tools of self-assertion, not critical evaluations of chronological fact according to some modern concept of historical accuracy. To the extent that any lineage assertion is significant, it is also a misrepresentation; lineage assertions that can be shown to be historically accurate are also inevitably inconsequential as statements of religious identity," McRae 2003: xix.

Inside his room Master Shri Singha put a clay pot on top of three big stones and surrounded it with a net. He sat inside the pot and had the opening covered with a big lid on which a pan filled with water was placed. A pipe ran through a hole in the pot and crossed through a cleft in the wall outside of the house. At midnight, Vairotsana and Lekdrub listened outside as Shri Singha whispered the teachings through the tube. They each had on a big deerskin hood, carried loads on their shoulders, held walking sticks, wore their clothes backward, and had put on worn-out pairs of boots the wrong way around. Lekdrub wrote down the teachings in the waning moonlight with white goats' milk, while Vairotsana fully understood them by a mere indication and perfected the doctrine in his mind.

As a sign that the doctrine would come to Tibet, Shri Singha taught *Cuckoo of Awareness* (Tib. *Rig pa'i khu byug*). To express that everything is perfect, he taught *Shaking of Great Power* (Tib. *rTsal chen sprugs pa*). To express the meaning of meditation, he taught *Sixfold Sphere* (Tib. *Thig le drug pa*). To express the conclusion of the view and conduct of all the vehicles, he taught *Soaring Garuda* (Tib. *Khyung chen lding ba*). To show the superiority of Ati over the other vehicles, he taught the view of *Never-Waning Banner* (Tib. *Mi nub rgyal mtshan*). Then he asked, "Noble sons, are you satisfied?" And they answered, "We are overjoyed!"

Then, to show the unity of all philosophical views, he taught *Wish-Fulfilling Gem* (Tib. *Yid bzhin nor bu*). To show the greatness of the teachings and instructions, he taught *Supreme Lord* (Tib. *rJe btsan dam pa*). To indicate the need to recognize earlier and later flaws and qualities, he taught *King of Mental Action* (Tib. *Spyi gcod rgyal po*). To indicate the need to rely on the three types of knowledge, he taught *All-Embodying Jewel* (Tib. *Kun 'dus*). These are the four minor teachings.

To indicate that all knowledge should depend on the teachings, he taught *Infinite Bliss* (Tib. *Bde 'byams*). To show that the fruition is included in the body, speech, and mind, he taught the *Wheel of Life* (Tib. *Srog gi 'khor lo*). To indicate the need to depend on example, meaning, and symbol, he explained *Commentary on Mind* (Tib. *Yang tig rgyal po*) and *King of Space* (Tib. *Nam mkha' rgyal po*). These are the four medium teachings.

Indicating how to help others through the provisional and definitive meaning, he taught *Jewel-Studded Bliss* (Tib. *bDe ba 'phra bkod*). To indicate the need of distinguishing all vehicles, he taught *Universal Bondage* (Tib. *Spyi chings*). To avoid the arising of logical contradictions, he taught *Pure Gold on Stone* (Tib. *rDo la gser zhun = Byang chub sems bsgom pa*). And because the conduct and the precepts are the yogi's life-force, he taught *Spontaneous Summit* (Tib. *rTse mo byung rgyal*). These are the four greater classes.

To check whether a teaching is mistaken or valid, he taught the *Marvelous* (Tib. *rMad du byung ba*), and asked, "Are you satisfied with this?" They answered, "We are not satisfied yet. Please give us

the tantras and oral instructions that the Buddha taught on these pith instructions!” Upon their request, Shri Singha explained the Eighteen Tantras with the pointing out instructions and asked, “Are you satisfied now?” Lekdrub, because he wanted to impress the king, said, “I am satisfied,” and left. On the way (back to Tibet) he was killed by border guards and died at the age of forty-four.⁵⁹

The list as presented in the *Mask of Bai ro tsa na* is, then, as follows:

1. *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (*Rig pa khu byug*)
2. *Great Potency* (*rTsal chen sprugs pa*)
3. *The Six Spheres* (*Thig le drug pa*)
4. *The Great Soaring Garuda* (*Khyung chen lding ba*)
5. *The Never Declining Banner of the Great Sky* (*Mi nub rgyal mtshan*)

The Four Small Texts - (Tib. *Chung ba bzhi*)

6. *The Wish-fulfilling Gem* (*Yid bzhin nor bu*)
7. *The Supreme Lord* (*rJe btsan dam pa*)
8. *The Universally Definitive Perfection* (*rDzogs pa spyi gcod spyod*, here as *Spyi gcod rgyal po*)
9. *The Compendium* (*Kun 'dus*, here as *Kun 'dus rig pa*)

The Four Middle Texts (Tib. *'Bring po bzhi*)

10. *The Infinity of Bliss* (*bDe 'byam*)
11. *The Wheel of Life* (*Srog gi 'khor lo*)
12. *The Essence of Bodhicitta* (the *Byang chub sems tig*, here as *Sems gi tig*)
13. *The King of the Sky* (*Nam mkha' rgyal po*)

The Four Great Sections (Tib. *Che phyogs bzhi*)

14. *The Inlaid Jewels of Bliss* (*bDe ba 'phra bkod*)
15. *The Epitome* (*sPyi chings*)
16. *Gold Refined from Ore* (*rDo la gser zhun*, another name for the *Byang chub sems bsgom pa*)
17. *The Victorious Emergence of the Peak* (*rTse mo byung rgyal*)
18. *The Marvelous* (*rMad du byung ba*)

⁵⁹ From Jinba 2004: 118.

There are several interesting aspects to the account, the almost eccentric transmission itself, with Master Śrī Siṃha sitting inside a clay pot and transmitting the teachings through a pipe being one of them, but let us focus here on the actual list put forward in the narrative. To begin with, *The Mask* offers a slightly different list of texts from those offered by Nyang ral. If we compare *The Mask* with Nyang ral's *Copper Continent*, we see that the *Mask* doesn't include the *The Efficacious Meditation* (*bsGom don grub pa'i lung*) or *The Great Treasure of Variety*, instead including *The Six Spheres* and the *Essence of Bodhicitta* (*Sems gi tig*). Also, although *The Mask* will make a reference later in the text to the *Five Early Translations* attributed to Bai ro tsa na, and the *Thirteen Later Translations* by Vimalamitra, the account here offers a different classification with an unlabeled group of five that largely corresponds to the *Five Early Translations*, followed by a group of Four Small (*Chung ba bzhi*), Four Middle (*'Bring po bzhi*), and Four Great (*Che phyogs bzhi*) texts.

An important aspect for our study of the reception history of the *Eighteen Texts* is that *The Mask* does mention twice the *All Sovereign King*, which signals a key transitional point in the history of the Mind Series literature in which the *Eighteen Texts* as an independent collection and the *All Sovereign King*, the tantra that will end up collecting and replacing the *Eighteen Texts* as the key literature of the Mind Series, are mentioned in the same narrative. The first reference places Bai ro tsa na as translating the *All Sovereign King* (*All-Creating Monarch* in Ani Jinba's translation):

Of the tantric scriptural Dharma, he translated the Tantra of Yamantaka's Words, Precious Discourse Tantra, King of Mastery Tantra, Five Tantras including Great Space Tantra, the Marvelous, All-Creating Monarch Tantra [i.e. The All Sovereign King], Ten Sutras, and Ocean Expanse Instructions.⁶⁰

The second reference is to gNyags Jñānakumara, who received the transmission of the text from gYu sgra sNying po:

From Yudra [Nyingpo], [Nyang] Jnana received the *Five Early Translations* as well as the *Thirteen Later Translations*. He received the pith instructions of the Eighteen Tantras of the Mind Class, the earlier and final tantras of the All-Creating Monarch, and the Root Scripture, and Commentary Sutras.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Jinba 2004:148.

⁶¹ Ibid., 212.

The Mask, then, marks an important transitional moment in the transmission of the *Eighteen Texts*, one that will signal its importance as the key texts of the early Great Perfection tradition, but one that also points to its decline by introducing its successor, the *All Sovereign King*.

All Hail to the All Sovereign King:

The lDe'u jo sras and the Decline of the Eighteen Texts as a Corpus

An important reference for our understanding of the history of the early Great Perfection literature in general, and the *Eighteen Texts* in particular, can be found in the *lDe'u jo sras* history,⁶² a text composed in the first half of the 13th century,⁶³ and that, as van der Kuijp has pointed out in his study of the text, is among the earliest Tibetan histories to have included an account of Buddhism in India as well as of its introduction to Tibet. The text refers to the *Eighteen Texts* as the “eighteen minor [texts] of the Mind Section,” which are the root of the Mind Section (*sems phyogs rtsa ba sems smad bco brgyad*).⁶⁴ The text also offers a clear distinction between the *Five Early Translations* and the *Thirteen Later* ones. Here is the list:

Five Early Translations (lNga 'gyur lnga'o)

⁶² van der Kuijp (1992) wrote a seminal article in the history of the two *lDe'u* histories. The text is “ambiguously titled and undated; the editor ascribes it, for no self-evident reason, to a certain *lDe'u Jo-sras* and entitles it as *lDe'u chos-'byung*,” p. 468.

⁶³ The other *lDe'u* history, the *mKhas pa lDe'u*, written in the second half of the 13th century, also offers a list of Mind Series texts, but the reference is more vague, with only an enumeration of some of the texts that include a pretty standard version of the *Five Early Translations* (with the exception of the *Yul kun 'jug pa* instead of the *Nam mkha' che*). 1) *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (*Rig pa khu byug*), 2) *Great Potency* (*rTsal chen sprugs pa as rTsal chen sprug pa*), 3) *Yul kun nas 'jug pa* (Bg. 3), 4) *The Great Soaring Garuda* (*Khyung chen ldng ba*, here as the *Khyung chen*), 5) *Meditation on the Enlightened Mind* (*Byang chub sems sgom pa*), 6) *The Never Declining Banner of the Great Sky* (*Mi nub rgyal mtshan*, here as *Mi nub rgyal mtshan nam mkha' che*), 7) *The Marvelous* (*rMad byung ba*), and 8) *Man ngag rgya mtsho'i Klong* (there are two versions of this unusual text in Tb. 69 and Bg. 56).

⁶⁴ See *lDe'u chos 'byung* (W20831: 58-59) “*sems phyogs la rgyud du grags pa spyir mang yang ma nor ba rtsa ba'i rgyud kun byed rgyal po / bshad pa'i rgyud mdo bcu / sems phyogs rtsa ba sems smad bco brgyad yin te / nam ka che dang / Rtsal chen dang khyung chen dang rig pa khu yug dang / byang chub sems bsgom pa dang lnga ni lnga 'gyur lnga'o / byang chub sems mu gu dang / tig dang kun 'dus bde 'jam gnas yar 'debs / nam ka'i rgyal po / rdzogs pa spyir gcod/ rtse mo byung rgyal/ rje gtsun dam pa/ srog gi 'khor lo/ bde ba phra bkod de la sogs pa [59] rnam phyis 'gyur bcu gsum zhes bya'o”.*

1. *The Never Declining Banner of the Great Sky* (*Mi nub rgyal mtshan*, here as *Nam ka che*)
2. *Great Potency* (*rTsal chen sprugs pa*, here as *rTsal chen*)
3. *The Great Soaring Garuda* (*Khyung chen lding ba*, here as *Khyung chen*)
4. *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (*Rig pa'i khu byug*, here as *Rig pa khu yug*)
5. *Meditation on the Enlightened Mind* (*Byang chub sems bsgom pa*, here as *Byang chub sems bsgom pa*)

Thirteen Later Translations (*Phyis 'gyur bcu gsum zhes bya'o*)

6. *Byang chub sems myu gu* (this text is in Tk. 29 within a collection of the *Thirteen Later Translations*)
7. *Tig* (I have not been able to identify this text, which could refer to the *Yang tig rgyal po* or the *Thig le drug pa*)
8. *The Compendium* (*Kun 'dus*, here as *Kun 'dus*)
9. *The Infinity of Bliss* (*bDe ba rab 'byams kyi lung*, here as *bDe 'jam*)
10. *Gnas yar 'debs* (I have not been able to identify this text)
11. *The King of the Sky* (*Nam mkha' rgyal po*, here as *Nam ka'i rgyal po*)
12. *The Universally Definitive Perfection* (*rDzogs pa spyi gcod spyod*, here as *rdzogs pa spyir gcod*)
13. *The Victorious Emergence of the Peak* (*rTse mo byung rgyal gyi lung*, here as *rTse mo byung rgyal*)
14. *The Supreme Lord* (*rJe btsan dam pa*, here as *rJe gtsun dam pa*)
15. *The Wheel of Life* (*Srog gi 'khor lo'i lung*, here as *Srog gi 'khor lo*)
16. *The Inlaid Jewels of Bliss* (*bDe ba 'phra bkod*, here as *bDe ba phra bkod*)

The *Five Early Translations* correspond with what by this time seems like a standard, accepted list of texts, but the *Thirteen Later Translations* is a little unusual, and does not include texts like the *Epitome* (*Spyi chings*), the *Six Spheres* (*Thig le drug pa*, although it does mention a text by the name of "Tig," which could be a reference to it), or the *Efficacious Meditation* (*bsGom don grub pa*), including instead other unusual titles such as the *gNas yar 'debs*, which I have not been able to locate.

The most important point made in the text, though, is its statement that among all of the scriptures said to belong to the Mind Section, there is another text that is considered to be central to the tradition, the *All Sovereign King*: "As for the Mind Section, generally, many are said to be tantras [of this section], but without mistake, the

Root tantra is the *All Sovereign King*.”⁶⁵ So while the *lDe’u jo sras* acknowledged the historical importance of the *Eighteen Texts*, the texts also reveal a shift in the importance towards the *All Sovereign King*, which seems to have become by this time the central text of the Mind Series tradition.

How are we to explain the differences between *The Mask of Bai ro tsa na* and the *lDe’u jo sras*, both written in the 13th century? I would argue that by the 13th century the Great Perfection tradition as a whole is evolving and incorporating new teachings and scriptures, particularly those of the Seminal Heart (*snying thig*), which means that the early Mind Series is becoming, gradually, a thing of the past. Those scriptures are also being compiled into a single, larger text, the *All Sovereign King*, which will transform a diverse group of poetic exhortations, short in practical details and long in rhetoric, into a more traditional tantric scripture, with a defined Buddha narrative centered around the figure of the All Good (Tib. Kun tu bzang po, Skt. Samantabhadra) and a ritual framework. As the Great Perfection tradition was growing and becoming more diverse, there was a push to organize and structure the diverse groups of early teachings and the *All Sovereign King* did just that by transforming all of those early texts into chapters of a larger, more cohesive book. The different treatment of the *Eighteen Texts* between the *Mask of Bai ro tsa na* and the *lDe’u jo sras* could also be explained when taking into account their implicit audiences. As Cabezón has pointed out, the *lDe’u*, as a history that was trying to insert Tibetan Buddhism within the larger framework of Buddhism in India, took “a more conciliatory approach by arguing that the Old and New teachings, although perhaps using different nomenclature, were essentially the same.”⁶⁶ *The Mask of Bai ro tsa na*, instead, was trying to assert the supremacy of the Great Perfection not only from the developments of the New schools, but also from other developments within the rNying ma tradition, and therefore would still be more attached to a traditional presentation of the *Eighteen Texts* as a collection of independent texts.

*Trying to Make Sense of it All: Klong chen pa and the reception of the
Eighteen Texts in the 14th Century*

The 14th century is period of intense intellectual activity, with all of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism trying to make sense of their own

⁶⁵ In the original *lDe’u jo sras*: “*sems phyogs la rgyud du grags pa spyir mang yang ma nor ba rtsa ba’i rgyud kun byed rgyal po*,” p. 58.

⁶⁶ See Cabezón 2013: 8.

scriptural traditions. This is the period when the New Translation schools collect and systematize for the first time their scriptures into the two collections of the *bKa' 'gyur*, or the words of the Buddha, and the *bsTan 'gyur*, its commentaries.⁶⁷ As a response to the canon building project of the New Translation Schools (*gSar ma*), the rNying ma School created its own canon, known as *The Collected Tantras of the Ancients* (*rNying ma rgyud 'bum*), of which there will be different editions.⁶⁸

It is also during this century that one of the most important figures in the history of the rNying ma tradition, Klong chen rab 'byams Dri med 'od zer, looked back at the received legacy of the Great Perfection tradition and tried to make sense of it. Klong chen pa was a prolific scholar, and he reflects on the nature of the early Great Perfection Tradition and in its literature in many of his works. Klong chen pa is perfectly aware that there were many discrepancies in the historical description as well as well as the lists of the *Eighteen Texts* in rNying ma literature. Klong chen pa's corpus offers several references to the *Eighteen Texts*, and we can find interspersed throughout his collected works up to seven different lists and, in some cases, he even offers two different lists within the same text.

An interesting example of this can be found in the *Treasury of Spiritual and Philosophical Systems* (*Grub mtha' mdzod*), in which Klong chen pa offers two sets of lists. The first list, actually, includes a total of twenty-one texts, divided between the standard *Five Early Translations* (*sNga 'gyur lnga*), the *Thirteen Later Translations* (*Phyi 'gyur bcu gsum*), and then he adds three more texts to the list, the *All Sovereign King*, the *Marvelous* (*rMad byung*, which was traditionally seen as one of the eighteen), and the *Ten Sūtras* (*mDo bcu*) to round it up to twenty-one. Here is the list:⁶⁹

"The Five Early Translations" (*sNga 'gyur lnga*)

1. *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (*Rig pa'i khu byug*)
2. *Great Potency* (*rTsal chen sprugs pa*)
3. *The Great Soaring Garuda* (*Khyung chen lding ba*)
4. *Meditation on the Enlightened Mind* (*Byang chub sems bsgom pa*, although the title here is *rDo la gser zhun*)
5. *The Never Declining Banner of the Great Sky* (*Mi nub rgyal mtshan*, here as *Mi nub pa'i rgyal mtshan nam mkha' che*)

⁶⁷ For an account of the process see Schaeffer 2001.

⁶⁸ See Germano 2002 and Davidson 2005.

⁶⁹ See *Grub mtha' mdzod*, fol. 204, pp. 1169-1170.

The *Thirteen Later Translations* (*Phyir 'gyur bcu gsum*)

6. *The Victorious Emergence of the Peak* (*rTse mo byung rgyal*)
7. *The King of the Sky* (*Nam mkha' rgyal po*)
8. *The Inlaid Jewels of Bliss* (*bDe ba 'phra bkod here as bDe ba 'phrul bkod*)
9. *The Epitome* (*sPyi chings, here as rDzogs pa spyi chings*)
10. *The Quintessential King* (*Yang tig rgyal po, here as Byang chub sems tig*)
11. *The Infinity of Bliss* (*bDe 'byams, here as bDe bar 'byams*)
12. *The Wheel of Life* (*Srog gi 'khor lo*)
13. *The Six Spheres* (*Thig le drug pa*)
14. *The Universally Definitive Perfection* (*rDzogs pa spyi gcod spyod*)
15. *The Wish-fulfilling Gem* (*Yid bzhin nor bu*)
16. *The Compendium* (*Kun 'dus, here as Kun 'dus rig pa*)
17. *The Supreme Lord* (*rJe btsan dam pa*)
18. *The Accomplishment of Meditation* (*sGom don grub pa*)

And he adds the following three to transform the list of eighteen into one of twenty-one ("*de dag gi steng du be ros sngar bsgyur ba'i kun byed/ rmad byung/ mdo bcu gsum bsdoms pas sems sde nyer gcig go*"):

19. *The All Creating King* (*Kun byed*)
20. *The Marvelous* (*rMad byung*)
21. *The Ten Sūtras* (*mDo bcu*)

As we can see, the lists accept the difference between the traditional five and thirteen divisions, while adding another layer to incorporate later texts such as the *All Sovereign King* that have become central to the tradition in later centuries. It is also important to point out how Klong chen pa adds gNyags Jñānakumara and gYu sgra sNying po as translators or, at least, essential to the transmission of the *Thirteen Later Translations*.

The second list can be found later in the same work and it is described as the "Eighteen Sectioned Transmissions" (*lung bam po bco brgyad*):⁷⁰

1. *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (*Rig pa'i khu byug*)

⁷⁰ *Grub mtha'mdzod*, fol. 284/pp. 1173-1175. He concludes the list by saying, "These are called the general tantras, since they teach the essence of the definitive meaning in its entirety" ("*di dag tu nges pa'i don gyi snying po rnams yongs su tshang bar bstan pas/ spyi'i rgyud du rnam par gzhas pa yin no*").

2. *Great Potency* (*rTsal chen sprugs pa*)
3. *The Great Soaring Garuda* (*Khyung chen lding ba, here as Khyung chen rdzogs pa*)
4. *Meditation on the Enlightened Mind* (*Byang chub sems bsgom pa, here as rDo la gser zhun*)
5. *The Never Declining Banner of the Great Sky* (*Mi nub rgyal mtshan*)

6. *The Supreme Lord* (*rJe btsan dam pa, here as Ye shes dam pa*)
7. *The Wish-fulfilling Gem* (*Yid bzhin nor bu*)
8. *The Victorious Emergence of the Peak* (*rTse mo byung rgyal*)
9. *The Inlaid Jewels of Bliss* (*bDe ba 'phra bkod*)
10. *The King of the Sky* (*Nam mkha' rgyal po*)
11. *The Wheel of Life* (*Srog gi 'khor lo*)
12. *The Epitome* (*sPyi chings, here as Lhun rdzogs spyi chings*)
13. *The Infinity of Bliss* (*Bde 'byams, here as bDe bar rab 'byams*)
14. *The Quintessential King* (*Yang tig rgyal po*)
15. *The Marvelous* (*rMad du byung ba, here as rMad byung rgyal po*)
16. *The Six Spheres* (*Thig le drug pa, here as Thig le kun 'dus*)
17. *The Tantra of the Edge and the Center of the Sky* (*Nam mkha' mtha' dbus kyi rgyud, this is an unusual text*)

Klong chen pa does not offer a difference between the early and the later translations, and does not add the three additional texts to round the collection up to twenty-one. In fact, he does not offer a complete list of the eighteen and somehow only mentions seventeen. The contents of the lists are quite similar, although the order of the *Thirteen Texts* is different, and the *Marvelous* is here considered one of the eighteen, unlike in the previous list. How does Klong chen pa, then, reconcile the existence of two different lists within the same text with slightly different titles, a slightly different order, and even expanding the list in one case to twenty-one? He goes on to argue that the lists are different, since, in fact, there are two completely different sets of *Eighteen texts*:

"Though some of the listed titles for "the eighteen sectioned scriptures" (*Lung bam po bco brgyad*) are similar to the titles in "the eighteen subsequent mind series texts (*Sems smad bco brgyad*), in fact they differ in terms of being earlier and later, their length, and their translators (into Tibetan)."⁷¹

⁷¹ See Germano, *Mysticism and Rhetoric*: 94 (unpublished), and *Grub mtha' mdzod*, fol. 284/pp. 1169-1170.

It is difficult to corroborate Klong chen pa’s assertion that there were two different sets of *Eighteen Texts* since we cannot extrapolate the contents of the texts from their titles. Germano suggests that “Longchenpa’s presentation derives from the confusion of this repetition of titles and the existence of various rubrics for the set, rather than that he had access to two distinct bodies of literature with the specified contents (though this remains a possibility.)”⁷²

I would also add that the assertion points toward the fluidity of those texts that may have preserved titles, but they may have evolved, grown, and developed differently depending on their lines of transmission, and may have changed as they were being transmitted by different lineages. Nevertheless, what seems obvious when reading Klong chen pa’s works is that by the 14th century the Mind Series tradition is being relegated in importance in favor of new scriptures and practices belonging to the Seminal Heart, in which Klong chen pa plays a central role.

Finding the Needle in the Haystack: Looking for the Eighteen Texts in the Various rNying ma rgyud ‘bum Collections

Prior to the 14th century, our understanding of the *Eighteen Texts* as a corpus, but also as individual texts, was mostly possible through the various references to them in other works that we have explored in this article. The problem with this approach, though, is that we don’t have access to the actual texts. As Klong chen pa argued, there may have been titles within the collection with the same names, but with very different contents. So, when gNubs chen and Rong zom referred to the *Never Declining Banner*, for example, they may have been talking about two different texts with the same title, something not uncommon in Tibetan culture.

After the 14th century, though, after the emergence of different canonical collections of the *Collected Tantras of the Ancients*, we finally have access to the actual texts of the early Great Perfection tradition and we can add a new layer to our understanding of the nature and transmission of the *Eighteen Texts*. What we find is, at first, quite puzzling, since an actual collection of *Eighteen Texts* is nowhere to be found in any of the *Collected Tantras of the Ancients* collections. How is this possible? If the texts played such a central role during the early development of the Great Perfection, and the collection is constantly cited by important rNying ma scholars, how is it that we cannot find

⁷² See Germano, *Ibid.*, 95 (unpublished).

it in any of the canonical editions? As I pointed out in the introduction to this article, a close examination of the various canons and the lack of a full set of the *Eighteen Texts* in any of them, gives more credence to the possibility that there never was an established collection of eighteen texts in the first place. Here, I will limit my examination of those collections to the *Bai ro'i rgyud 'bum* and the mTshams brag edition of the rNying ma canon. The *Bai ro'i rgyud 'bum*, as I have pointed out, is a collection of rNying ma literature that only includes Great Perfection texts, and excludes Anuyoga and Mahāyoga literature. His exclusive focus on Great Perfection literature makes it an obvious place to search for a collection so important for its early history.

In the *Bai ro'i rgyud 'bum*, there is a collection of the the *Five Early Translations* (*rDzogs pa chen po snga 'gyur lnga*) in volume 5, but it only contains four of the texts, without the standard *Mi nub rgyal mtshan*. A version of this text can be found in volume 2 (Bg. 52), and there are versions of the texts in the same volume (Bg. 49-53, see list below).⁷³ It is interesting, though, that many of the *Thirteen Later Translations* are not included here, and the ones included are spread in various volumes. In volume 1 we find the *rTse mo byung rgyal* (Bg. 16), and *bDe ba 'phra bkod* (Bg. 21). Volume 2 has also a version of the *rMad du byung ba* in Bg. 43 and B.g 44, but the following ten texts are missing:

1. *The Supreme Lord* (*rJe btsan dam pa*)
2. *The Wish-fulfilling Gem* (*Yid bzhin nor bu*)
3. *The King of the Sky* (*Nam mkha' rgyal po*)
4. *The Wheel of Life* (*Srog gi 'khor lo*)
5. *The Epitome* (*sPyi 'chings*)
6. *The Infinity of Bliss* (*bDe 'byams*)
7. *The Quintessential King* (*Yang tig rgyal po*)

⁷³ It is also interesting that in Vol. 1 there is a series of twelve texts that "according to the introductory material to Bg.1, [...] appears to be Śrī Singha's esoteric instructions on the [Cuckoo of Awareness];" see Weinberger description of the first volume on the [Tibetan Himalayan Library](#). There are commentaries on some other texts of the *Five Early Translations*. The texts are: 1) *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (*Rig pa'i khu byug* as *Byang chub sems rig pa khu byug*, Vol. 5 Bg. 116), 2) *Great Potency* (*rTsal chen sprugs pa*, here as *Byang chub sems rtsal chen sprugs pa*, Vol. 5 Bg. 117), 3) *The Great Soaring Garuda* (*Khyung chen lding ba*, here as *Byang chub sems khyung chen*, Vol. 5 Bg. 118), 4) *Meditation on the Enlightened Mind* (*Byang chub sems bsgom pa*, Vol. 5 Bg. 119), 5) *The Never Declining Banner of the Great Sky* (*Mi nub rgyal mtshan*, Bg. 52), 6) *The Victorious Emergence of the Peak* (*rTse mo byung rgyal*, here as *Byang chub sems lta ba mkha' mnyam gyi rgyal rtse mo byung rgyal*, Vol. 1 Bg. 16), 7) *The Inlaid Jewels of Bliss* (*bDe ba 'phra bkod*, here as *Byang chub sems bde ba 'phra bkod*, Vol. 1 Bg. 21), 8) *The Marvelous* (*rMad du byung ba* in Bg. 43 and Bg. 44). The *Bai ro'i rgyud 'bum* also includes *The Universally Definitive Perfection* (*rDzogs pa spyi gcod* (*spyod*), Vol. 1 Bg. 15).

8. *The Six Spheres (Thig le drug pa)*
9. *The Accomplishment of Meditation (bsGom don grub pa)*
10. *The Compendium (Kun 'dus)*

In most of the other collections, the absence of these texts is not as dramatic as in this collection, but we find a similar pattern of inconsistency, with some texts missing, and also some of them scattered in different volumes and not as a single collection, or as part of other texts, mainly included as chapters of the *All Sovereign King*.

In the mTshams brag edition, many of the *Eighteen Texts* are not the earliest versions of the texts but longer versions of them. This is particularly interesting in the *Five Earlier Translations*, where only one of them is the earlier, shorter version. *The Five Earlier Translations* are in volume 1 (Tb. 19-23) but with the exception of the *Byang chub sems bsgom pa*, they are longer versions of the text. Most of the *Thirteen Later Translations* are also found in the same volume, although three texts with *The Marvelous (rMad du byung ba)* in their title are in vol. 2 (Tb. 54-56), and the *Six Spheres (Thig le drug pa)* is in vol. 5 Tb 124.⁷⁴ The three texts missing are: *The Wish-fulfilling Gem (Yid bzhin nor bu)*, *The Epitome (sPyi 'chings)*, and *The Accomplishment of Meditation (bsGom don grub pa)*. The *Eighteen Texts* as found in the mTsams brag edition are:

1. *The Cuckoo of Awareness (Rig pa khu byug, Tb. 19)*
2. *Great Potency (rTsal chen sprugs pa, Tb. 20)*
3. *The Great Soaring Garuda (Khyung chen lding ba, Tb. 21)*
4. *Meditation on the Enlightened Mind (Byang chub sems bsgom pa, Tb. 22)*
5. *The Never Declining Banner of the Great Sky (Mi nub rgyal mtshan, Tb. 23)*
6. *The Supreme Lord (rJe btsan dam pa, Tb. 25)*
7. *The Quintessential King (Yang tig rgyal po, here as Mi 'gyur ba'i thig le tig, Tb. 26)*
8. *The Wheel of Life (Srog gi 'khor lo, Tb. 27)*
9. *The King of the Sky (Nam mkha' rgyal po also as Nam mkha'i rgyal po, Tb. 28)*
10. *The Victorious Emergence of the Peak (rTse mo byung rgyal, Tb. 29)*
11. *The Infinity of Bliss (bDe 'jams, Tb. 30)*
12. *The Inlaid Jewels of Bliss (bDe ba 'phra bkod, here as bDe ba phra bkod, Tb. 31)*

⁷⁴ See Liljenberg 2012.

13. *The Compendium* (*Kun 'dus*, Tb. 32)
14. *The Unioersally Definitioe Perfection* (*rDzogs pa spyi gcod spyod*, Tb. 35)
15. *The Marvelous* (*rMad du byung ba*, Tb. 54 / 55/ 56)

The Six Spheres (*Thig le drug pa*) is included in the text *Nyi zla dang mnyam pa dri ma med pa'i rgyud* (Tb. 40)

What does this mean? How can there be constant references in rNying ma literature to this collection of texts, considered central to its early development, only to not have any complete record of it?

*When a Number is not a Number:
The Eighteen Texts as an Idea*

The confusion about the nature and actual content of the *Eighteen Texts* has been as obvious to traditional rNying ma scholars as to modern ones. Samten Karmay, in his groundbreaking study of Great Perfection literature, synthesizes this feeling, stating that: "Considerable confusion reigns over this list among the rNying ma pa works. Each claims to have eighteen, but often gives only sixteen or seventeen [...] The titles also vary from one source to another."⁷⁵ Germano has worked extensively in trying to map out the various lists and references to the *Eighteen Texts* in early Great Perfection literature.⁷⁶ Recent work by Karen Liljenberg has done very valuable work locating some of the *Eighteen Texts* that scholars have considered to be missing or lost in some of the editions of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*. In two articles, she found four of the texts that scholars had not been able to locate, hiding in plain sight, under different titles, or incorporated into larger texts. Those texts are the *Six Spheres* (*Thig le drug pa*), the *Epitome* (*sPyi chings*), the *Accomplishment of Meditation* (*bsGom pa don grub*), and the *Wish-fulfilling Gem* (*Yi bzhin nor bu*).

The "disappearance" of some of these texts could be explained by the fact that many of the *Eighteen Texts* ended up being incorporated into the larger and more popular *All Sovereign King*, transforming many of the independent texts into chapters of this tantra. But the lack of consistency among the various lists, and the remarkable differences between some of the texts that bear the same title, may also warrant a different approach to our study of this literature.

⁷⁵ Karmay 1988: 23-24.

⁷⁶ In his unpublished manuscript *Mysticism and Rhetoric in the Great Perfection*.

I would, in fact, argue that the discrepancies of the various lists can be explained by simply accepting that there was never a collection of *Eighteen Texts*, and that the collection operated more as an ideal than as a physical reality. As David Gray argued in his article “On the Very Idea of a Tantric Canon”:

Perhaps one of the most important and persistent ideas that underlies the tantric traditions of Buddhism is the notion that a complete collection of tantric scriptures [...] or Collection of Tantras (Tantrapīṭaka), either did exist in the past, and/or continues to exist in an alternate level of reality. This notion was advanced as an important legitimating ideology at the initial stage of the development of tantric traditions and their literature, and it has remained a widespread belief up until the present day [...] This belief, and the myths that express it, had a significant impact on the ways in which tantric traditions constructed their histories and identities, and in the ways in which they organized and understood their canons of literature.⁷⁷

The closer we examine the various lists, their discrepancies, and its absence as a complete collection in the canon, the more sense it makes that the strength of the idea of an early corpus of eighteen texts does not reside in its actual content, which as we have seen differs from author to author (sometimes even for the same author) and from period to period, but the strength lies in the “idea” that there is a closed canon transmitted by an Indian figure (Śrī Siṃha) to his Tibetan disciples. The notion of the eighteen operates as a framework (Gray calls this an “empty signifier”) that allows the early Great Perfection tradition to group a nascent but varied corpus of works under one umbrella and distinguish themselves from other Buddhist traditions. The most obvious similarity is in the Eighteen Tantras of Mahāyoga,⁷⁸ a collection that the early Great Perfection, with its connections to that tradition, may have tried to emulate in order to achieve legitimacy. But as Sur has also pointed out, eighteen also has important symbolic value for the Buddhist tradition, since it “evokes a sense of completeness. There are eighteen sciences (*aṣṭadaśavidyāsthāna*) to comprise knowledge, eighteen instruments (*rol mo’i bye brag*) to comprise music, eighteen mainstream Buddhist schools (*aṣṭadaśānikāya*) to comprise orthodoxy,” etc.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ See Gray 2009: 1-2.

⁷⁸ See Almogi 2014 and Eastman 1981.

⁷⁹ In fact, Sur (2015: 315 n. 622) also hints at the possibility of eighteen as a symbolic number when referring to the *Eighteen Texts* of the Mind Series: “It seems to me,

In conclusion, looking for the “original” texts, I believe, should not guide us into thinking that we can somehow “recover” the original versions of these texts or an original lost collection. These texts were, for the most part, works in progress, an inspiration for later generations of scholars that rewrote, changed, expanded, and commented on what we should see as a literary genre and not simply as a literary corpus or canon.

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and I am not certain of this, that eighteen operates symbolically – as a cipher, as it were.” Gray (2009: 13) also points out in his article the importance of other symbolic numbers such as one hundred thousand within the Buddhist tradition: “This is because the label ‘one hundred thousand’ quickly came to function in esoteric Buddhist discourse as an empty signifier, a signifier without a signified. As Ernesto Laclau argued, such signifiers are ‘signifiers of lack, an absent totality.’” Almogi (2013) makes the same argument about the Eighteen Mahāyoga Tantric Cycles.

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