

Signification and History in Zhang Nyi ma 'bum's *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*

Khenpo Yeshe and Jacob P. Dalton
(UC Berkeley)

Dany texts in Tibetan Buddhism speak to Buddhists' preference for meaning over word. Words may be necessary to access the truth, but they should not be mistaken for the goal. Thus the famous metaphor from the *Lañkāvatāra*, of mistaking the pointing finger for the referenced object. "Childish people," the passage concludes, "... abandon the object of the pointing fingertip, which is [itself] a mere signifier, and do not understand the true meaning."¹ Klong chen pa goes even further when he refutes what he considers to be the heretical view that word and meaning are connected at all. In his *White Lotus: A Commentary on the Precious Wish-Fulfilling Treasury* (*Yi bzhin rin po che'i mdzod kyi 'grel pa padma dkar po*), he writes: "There is no word that indicates any meaning, because the word is a mere signifier and the meaning lacks [any part of] that signifier; no connection between the two may be established."² Some five centuries later, Mi pham adds some further explanation of this view that mere words will never get you there: "Mistaking [the word] for being inherent [to the object], one understands it to be inherent to [that object]. However, apart from just being a general signifier, there is no word nor concept that could ever express directly what is truly inherent [to any object]; [words and concepts] are simply incapable of doing so."³ Not only are words inferior to meaning; for Klong chen pa and Mi pham, they do not even provide reliable pointers to that meaning.

Some Buddhist authors, however, take a markedly different approach. Great Perfection (*rDzogs chen*) authors of the early *sNying thig* tradition, at least in its twelfth-century form, repeatedly insist that word and meaning are in fact inseparable. The Vimalamitra-

¹ *Lang kar gshegs pa'i theg pa chen po'i mdo*, 133b.5-6: *sgra ji bzhin gyi sor mo'i rtse mo'i don spangs la/_don dam pa khong du chud par bya ba ni mi byed do*.

² *Yi bzhin rin po che'i mdzod kyi 'grel pa padma dkar po*, 413: *tshig gis don ston pa med de/ tshig sgra spyi dang/ don sgra med gnyis 'brel ba ma grub pa'i phyir*.

³ *brDa shan 'byed the tshom drwa ba gcod pa'i ral gri zhes bya ba mchan dang bcas*, p. 433: *rang mtshan du 'khrul nas rang mtshan go bar 'gyur tel spyi las gzhan du rang mtshan nyid/ dngos su rjen par brjod pa'i sgra dang rtog pa med de mi nus so*.

attributed commentary to the *sGra thal 'gyur*, for instance, explains that, "The connection between word and meaning is indivisible, like a thread. They inhere [within each other] continuously, like a sesame seed pervaded by its oil... Relying on words, one should teach the words and verses of scripture that directly settle the meaning in its immediacy."⁴

It is significant that Vimalamitra makes this claim, of a direct and immediate intertwining of word and meaning, from the perspective of the result, i.e. of ultimate realization. That the indivisibility of word and meaning is specific to the perfection of the path is borne out in another early *sNying thig* text that makes a similar claim. The *Sevenfold Opening of Sites* (*Gnas 'byed bdun pa*) appears in the second half of the *Great History* (*Lo rgyus chen mo*) and comprises a set of biographies of the early Indian lineage holders of the *sNying thig* tradition. When the all-important master Vimalamitra receives the last testament of his teacher, Jñānasūtra, in the form of a jeweled casket that descends into his hand, his final realization is described as follows: "Words lacked nothing, and meanings were unmistakable."⁵ Elsewhere, the first part of the *Great History*, a work likely compiled by Zhang ston bKra shis rdo rje (1097-1167), ends by describing the transmission of its teachings in nearly identical terms: "Its words lacked nothing, and its meanings were unmistakable, like a sealed jewelled vessel or a sealed royal decree."⁶ When all is at its best, then, as it is said to be in the *sNying thig* teachings, word and meaning are indivisible. It is only when we fall from this state of realization that the unbridgeable gulf opens between them.

This paper explores the unusual treatments of language, history, and time in Great Perfection *sNying thig* thought by focusing on the writings of Zhang Nyi ma 'bum (1158-1213), and particularly on the

⁴ *Pañ chen dri med bshes gnyen gyi dgongs nyams sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud sgra thal 'gyur rtsa 'grel*, 19: *tshig don 'brel pa dbyer mi phyed pa thag pa lta bu dang/ rgyun du gnas pa til 'bru la mar gyis khyab pa lta bu dang/... tshig la brten nas don mngon sum rang thog tu 'bebs par byed pa'i gzhung tshig dang yi ger bcad pa cig bstan par bya*. See also in the same commentary pp. 35.5: "Through relying on the signs of the transmission of accomplishment, one realizes the indivisibility of word and meaning" (*bsgrub brgyud kyi brda' la brten nas tshig don dbyer med du rtog[is] pa*).

⁵ *rDzogs pa chen po snying tig gi lo rgyus chen mo*, 196: *tshig la lthag chad med/ don la 'khrul ba med par gyur to*.

⁶ *rDzogs pa chen po snying tig gi lo rgyus chen mo*, 161: *tshig la lthag chad med cing don la 'khrul pa med pa stel dper na rin po che'i snod la rgyas btap pa lta bu dang/ rgyal po'i bka' rtags lta bu'o*. "These [pith instructions]," he concludes a few lines later, "are the thought transmission of the conquerors" (*de dag ni rgyal ba dgongs pa'i brgyud pa'o*), i.e. the immediate, non-dual transmission of awakening that occurs within the fourth time (on which more will be written below).

introductory comments that open his *Eleven Words and Meanings on The Great Perfection* (*Rdzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*). That the title of Nyi ma 'bum's work focuses on eleven "words and meanings" already suggests the centrality of this early *sNying thig* view of signifier and signified as indivisible. The eleven topics may be discussed in words, we seem to be told, but they are taught and should be read and understood in such a way as to allow their meanings to be established "immediately," in the very words themselves. How exactly one should do this remains a question, but it would seem to suggest an approach to reading that allows the words to enter the reader's present experience and transform him or her.

Nyi ma 'bum's father was none other than Zhang ston bKra shis rdo rje, and his mother was rGyal mo g.yang. It is said that when his mother was pregnant, she had a dream in which many suns rose simultaneously. Upon the child's birth, Zhang ston then proclaimed, "You will become the rays of the sun which will dispel the darkness of ignorance of all sentient beings." Thus he gave the name Nyi ma 'bum, meaning one hundred thousand suns. Zhang ston performed various rituals, including Vajrakīlaya and Yang dag to remove obstacles for his son.⁷

It is further said that Zhang ston interpreted his wife's dream of many suns to mean that the "Unsurpassable Secret Teachings" (*gSang ba bla ma med pa*) would benefit many sentient beings. What were these teachings? Earlier, according to Zhang ston's biography, he had received a vision of various spiritual beings informing him that the *Unsurpassable Secret Cycle of the Great Perfection Pith Instructions* (*Man ngag rdzogs pa chen po gsang ba bla na med pa'i skor*) were located at a lion-like rock.⁸ "You should bring these to benefit beings," he was told. Proceeding to this rock in 'O yug, Zhang ston revealed 108 "indexes" (*kha byang*) relating to these teachings. Further information on this revelation may be gleaned from the closing pages of the *Great History*, where we read:

In that way, thirty years after lCe btsun passed away into the invisible realm, lCe sgom nag po of mNar mda' in Rong revealed the spoken transmissions of the three—outer, inner, and secret—and

⁷ The biography also suggests that a certain passage in the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* offers a prophecy that considers Nyi ma 'bum to be an emanation of Vajrapāṇi; see *sGra thal 'gyur*, 41: *de 'og lag na rdo rje yi/ sprul pa badzra pha las 'dzin*. dPa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba also presents the lines as a prophecy of Nyi ma 'bum (see *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*, 576). For more on the biography of Nyi ma 'bum, see Achard's article in the forthcoming issue of the RET.

⁸ *Bla ma rgyal ba zhang chen po'i rnam par thar pa*, 126-27.

was instructed not to circulate them to others beyond himself. They were spread and promulgated in dBus and gTsang. Fifty years after lCe sgom revealed them, I [i.e. Zhang ston] revealed this cycle of the unsurpassed secret and was instructed not to circulate them to others beyond myself.⁹

Here, Zhang ston represents his new “Unsurpassed Secret Teachings” as exceeding the three cycles of Great Perfection teachings (i.e. outer, inner, and secret) that had previously been transmitted within the lCe clan, “presumably,” as Germano suggests, “to distinguish himself from other redactors/codifiers of the broader movement.”¹⁰ He is thus portrayed as the first to reveal and formulate what would become the *sNying thig* tradition, here under the name of the “Unsurpassable Secret Cycle” (*gsang ba bla na med pa'i skor*). And when Zhang ston, upon hearing his pregnant wife's dream of many suns, proclaimed that the suns were a portent both of his son's birth and of the great benefit that sentient beings would gain from the Unsurpassable Secret Teachings, he was in effect establishing his son Nyi ma 'bum as the heir to his *sNying thig* lineage.

Nyi ma 'bum's own text on the eleven words and meaning was extraordinarily influential in later *sNying thig* writings. Both Klong chen pa and rGod ldem can copy Nyi ma 'bum's work nearly *verbatim* into their famous *Treasury of Words and Meanings* (*Tshig don mdzod*) and *Great Aural Transmission of Vimalamitra* (*Bi ma mi tra'i snyan brgyud chen po*), respectively.¹¹ Nyi ma 'bum cites some precursors for his eleven-fold scheme, quoting two of the *Seventeen Tantras* (*rGyud bcu bdun*)—the *Unimpeded Sound* (*sGra thal 'gyur*) and, especially, the *Pearl Garland* (*Mu tig phreng ba*)¹²—but his primary

⁹ *rDzogs pa chen po snying tig gi lo rgyus chen mo*, 219: *de ltar lce btsun mi snang ba'i sar gshegs nas lo sum bcu na rong gi mnar mda'i lce sgom nag pos phyi nang gsang bag sum gyi bka' brgyud rnam bton nas rang las gzhan la ma spel bar gdams pa'o/ dbus gtsang du dar zhing rgyas par mdzad do/ lce sgom gyis thon nas lo lnga bcu na bdag gis gsang bla na med pa'i skor 'di rnam bton nas rang las gzhan la ma spel bar gdams pa'o.*

¹⁰ See Germano 2005, 18. The *Great History* claims that Śrī Simha had already established the four cycles at his time, presumably around the eighth century.

¹¹ Klong chen pa's collected works also contain an even more faithful copy of Nyi ma 'bum's work, that one titled *Tshig don bcu gcig pa*; on this work, see Scheidegger 2009. On rGod ldem's writings, see Turpeinen's piece in this same issue; for a translation of his *Great Aural Transmission of Vimalamitra*, see Smith 2016.

¹² See *Rin po che 'byung bar byed pa sgra thal 'gyur chen po'i rgyud*, 102.4-103.2, and *Mu tig rin po che'i phreng ba*, 535.4-536.5. Note that the *Unimpeded Sound* passage only includes Nyi ma 'bum's eleven topics embedded within a series of 168 questions that structure the tantra's overall content.

inspiration may have been his own father, Zhang ston, who introduces his *Great History* by describing it in the following terms:

Regarding that, I will explain the significance of the “history.”
 In this there are two aspects:
 On the history specific to buddhas,
 The eleven words and meanings have been taught before;
 The history of those [lineage-holders] who cherish that [i.e. the
 history of buddhas] will [now] be explained.¹³

Zhang ston thus presents the *Great History* as a history of the lineage-holders and the literary companion to a history of buddhas that was structured around eleven topics and had been written at some previous point. It is unclear whether Zhang ston refers here to an earlier text based on the eleven words and meanings that he had composed himself, or merely to the appearance of the eleven topics in the *Pearl Garland*, as mentioned above.

In Nyi ma 'bum's own discussion of his use of the term “history,” he very much follows his father's lead by distinguishing the history of buddhas from that of the lineage-holders: “There are two topics [in discussing] histories [that are taught] for belief: So that an individual who is the basis [for such stories] may gain attainment, the history of buddhas and the history of sentient beings are [both] established by means of precious narratives.”¹⁴

Zhang ston closes his *Great History* with a brief explanation of the term “history” (*lo rgyus*) as he uses it in that context: “History’ means familiarity (*rgyus*) with what occurred many years (*lo*) [prior]. Because it presents [those events] as if they were being seen right now, it is called a ‘history.’”¹⁵ This explanation is obviously relevant for the *Great History*, which (as we have seen) is a history of the lineage holders of the past, in that it brings their lives into the present experience of the reader. But the same explanation may also be understood as pertinent to the *Eleven Words and Meanings*, which are understood to constitute a “history of buddhas.” In this sense, the eleven topics tell the story of the entire arc of saṃsāra, from beginning to end. It is a cosmogonic history, yet it is one that brings

¹³ rDzogs pa chen po snying tig gi lo rgyus chen mo, 114-115: *de la lo rgyus don gyis bshad/ 'di la rnam pa gnyis yin te/ sangs rgyas nyid kyi lo rgyus ni/ tshig don bcu gcig gong du bstan/ de la gces pa'i lo rgyus bshad.*

¹⁴ rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa, 13: *yiid ches pa'i lo rgyus kyi don gnyis stel rten gyi gang zag cig thog par byed pa la sangs rgyas kyi lo rgyud dang/ sems can gyi lo rgyus gtam rgyud rin po ches gtan la phab pa'o.*

¹⁵ rDzogs pa chen po snying tig gi lo rgyus chen mo, 655.5-6: *lo rgyus zhes bya ba la du ma long pa'i rgyus/ da lta mthong ba dang 'dra bar gtan la phebs pas nas lo rgyus zhes bya'o.*

that cosmogony of the primordial buddha Samantabhadra into the present moment of the reader/practitioner, "as if they were being seen right now." It is not just an explanation of that history, according to Zhang ston, but a vehicle for its appearance in the present.

The very idea that the buddhas have a history at all is a strange one. Normally, given that buddhas are empty and thus beyond time and language, they would not partake of history, yet with his eleven words and meanings, Nyi ma 'bum proceeds and elaborates his "history of buddhas." It is a history, then, of events that never occur, a narrative that is somehow beyond time as it collapses past and present. Nyi ma 'bum justifies his writing such a history of buddhas, i.e. his elaboration of the eleven words and meanings, by presenting it as a response to critics who might complain that the Great Perfection teachings do not offer any practices. "Some people with misconceptions," he writes, "say that, while we may have the five excellences [of place, teacher, followers, teaching, and time] in this way [i.e. read as mere aspects of awareness], we lack procedures for clear realization that is gained through experiential integration, that is, the skillful means for achieving buddhahood."¹⁶ To answer this hypothetical complaint, he then lists the eleven topics and embarks on his presentation of them.

Some explanation may be needed here to make sense of Nyi ma 'bum's point: The five excellences (*phun sum tshogs pa lnga*) constitute a set of interpretive categories that are commonly used to set the stage for a given text: the place where it was originally taught, the teacher who taught it, the followers who received it, what the teaching actually was, and the time when it was taught. How this fivefold scheme applies to the *sNying thig* tantras is the focus of much of Nyi ma 'bum's "introduction" to his *Eleven Words and Meanings on The Great Perfection*. He starts by distinguishing the five excellences as seen through the lenses of his own "extraordinary" (*thun mong ma yin pa*) system and the "ordinary" (*thun mong*) systems of other Buddhists. The former he further subdivides into how the five excellences apply to (i) the ground (*gzhi*; Skt. *ālaya*) and (ii) how the teaching resides in the body. The five excellences of the ground are basically five aspects of awareness, taken from a non-dual perspective. Where the teaching resides in the body then involves a discussion of the Great Perfection subtle body and the visions of *thod rgal*. In both cases, Nyi ma 'bum's main point is that the five

¹⁶ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 13.

excellences, “the ‘place’ and so forth, do not need to be sought elsewhere; they are termed the ‘self-originating gnosis.’”¹⁷

One can see, then, how Nyi ma 'bum's presentation of the five excellences in this way lacks reference to any actual practice. He explains the followers as the five gnoses, five-colored lights, and so forth, i.e. the visions that accompany the teacher, awareness (*rang shes rig gi rgyal po*). He explains the teaching as the non-conceptual bliss that arises in dependence on the Great Perfection channels and winds (*rtsa rlung*). But nowhere in all of this does he describe any practice. To fill this lacuna, he offers his “history of buddhas,” the eleven words and meanings.

Despite his engagement with this history, however, Nyi ma 'bum constantly and in various ways reminds his readers that it is actually unfolding beyond time. From the ultimate perspective of the ground (the first topic), the idea that the three times and thus history exist is itself mistaken. When one strays from the ground in the second topic, one slips out of timelessness and into past, present, future, and the turmoil of history. The history then proceeds until the eleventh topic, when one returns to the ground and sees that history is in fact an illusion. In this sense, it is significant that Nyi ma 'bum describes this last eleventh topic of “liberation itself” as a return to “the beginning” (*grol ba nyid ni thog ma'o*). He explains this idea as follows: “‘The beginning’ is the entity of the initial ground, which is the natural way of abiding, the primordially pure gnosis, which I taught at the beginning of the eleven topics.”¹⁸ The “history” of the eleven words and meanings, then, is circular and ever recurring.

In this sense too, the ground pervades not only the first and last topics, but all eleven, for none of them is truly separate from the ground. Nonetheless, Nyi ma 'bum introduces his eleven words and meanings in the following terms:

1. The teaching on how, at the very beginning, the ground—the abiding reality of the nature of phenomena—abides prior to the emergence of either realization, i.e. of a buddha, or the absence of realization, i.e. of a sentient being;

¹⁷ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 7: *gnas la sogs pa gzhan nas btsal mi dgos pa rang byung gi ye shes zhes bya'o*. For the “ordinary,” non-Great Perfection perspective, he provides a fairly abstract reading of the same five excellences, each addressed in terms of the three bodies and the buddhafiels. Thus, for example, the *dharmakāya* place is the *dharmadhātu*, the *saṃbhogakāya* place is Ghanavyūha, and the *nirmāṇakāya* places are further fields such as Alakāvati (lCang lo can).

¹⁸ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, p. 119.

2. Establishing how confusion emerges within that way of abiding;
3. Teaching how, even if sentient beings are confused, the fields of completely perfect buddhas and the seeds [of awakening] still abide within them;
4. Precisely where that same abiding resides;
5. The pathways through which the gnosis that resides in that way emerges;
6. The gates through which the gnosis of awareness that has emerged through those pathways then dawns forth;
7. The objective sphere in which that gnosis of awareness that has dawned through the gateways now appears;
8. How that gnosis of awareness that appears within the objective sphere is then experientially integrated by qualified beings;
9. The signs and measures by which one can ascertain that experiential integration;
10. How all this dawns within the intermediate state of ultimate reality for those who do not have time to practice because [they are] distracted by indolence, even though they have the pith instructions;
11. Teaching the ultimate great liberation.¹⁹

In reading the *Eleven Words and Meanings*, one is led from the original ground of existence, through the arising of ignorance when one fails to recognize that ground. At this point sentient beings begin to differentiate from the ground-Samantabhadra (*gzhi kun tu bzang po*). In the third topic, one is reminded that, even so, Samantabhadra and oneself share the same nature, i.e. the ground, buddha-nature, or reflexive-awareness. The fourth topic leads us to the residence of that awareness within our embodied experience, and more specifically within our own fleshy hearts. The fifth, sixth, and seventh, and eighth topics then describe the channels running from our heart

¹⁹ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 13-14: *thog mar rtogs te sangs rgyas ma byung/ ma rtogs te sems can ma byung ba'i sngon rol nal/ gzhi dangos po gshis kyi gnas lugs ji ltar gnas pa bstan dang/ de lta bur gnas pa de las 'khrul pa ji ltar byung tshul gtan la dbab pa dang/ 'khrul na sems can la yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas kyi zhing khams sa bon ji ltar gnas bstan pa dang/ de nyid gnas pa rang gang na gnas pa dang/ de ltar gnas pa'i ye shes de lam gang nas byung dang/ de ltar lam nas 'byung ba'i rig pa'i ye shes sgo gang na 'char ba dang/ sgo nas shar ba'i rig pa'i ye shes de yul gang la snang ba dang/ yul la snang ba'i rig pa'i ye shes de rten gyi gang zag gis ji ltar nyams su blangs pa dang/ nyams su lon pa'i rtags dang tshad gang gis bzung ba dang/ 'di nyid de lta bu'i man ngag yod kyang le lo g.yengs nas nyams su len longs ma byung nal/ chos nyid kyi bar do la ji ltar 'char ba dang/ mthar thug grol ba chen po gang yin pa bstan pa'o.*

through which awareness travels, the gateways (our physical eyes) through which awareness emerges, the objective sphere within which awareness appears, and how those appearances are then engaged through contemplative practice. The ninth topic reviews the signs of one's progress in those practices. The tenth deals with the intermediate state of the *bardo*, and finally the eleven topic explores one's ultimate liberation.

Despite the clarity and sequential order of these eleven stages, the problems of such a historical approach haunt Nyi ma 'bum's presentation throughout. The very idea of a primordial ground and the original arising of ignorance already is problematic in Buddhist thought, which elsewhere consistently refuses to acknowledge a beginning to *samsāra*. Similarly, other Buddhists insist there was never a first buddha of the sort Samantabhadra seems to represent. In Sthiramati's commentary to the *Sūtrālaṅkāra*, for example, we read:

There is nothing whatsoever to call an original buddha. Why? Because it is not reasonable that one could become a buddha without accumulating the accumulations of merit and wisdom, and it is impossible for there not to have been another buddha who [previously] gave the teachings on that accumulation of merit and wisdom. Therefore, that buddha needs another buddha, and *that* buddha needs still further buddhas.²⁰

According to Sthiramati, the concept of an original buddha is impossible because the need for a teacher leads to an infinite regress of previous buddhas. Nonetheless, Nyi ma 'bum writes of the ground as a time before the emergence of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and thus before the original buddha Samantabhadra, apparently flying in the face of centuries of Buddhist thought. "Samantabhadra," he writes, "attains buddhahood without practicing the slightest particle of merit."²¹

In his *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (*Theg mchog mdzod*), Klong chen pa is careful to justify the *sNying thig* position on this point, almost as if in answer to Sthiramati: "It has been said that Samantabhadra attained buddhahood within the original ground without practicing the slightest particle of merit. Upon examination,

²⁰ *mDo sde'i rgyan gyi 'grel bshad*, 143b.5-6: *Thog ma'i sangs rgyas rgyas zhes bya ba gang yang med del ci'i phyir zhe na/ bsod nams dang ye shes kyi tshogs ma bsags par 'tshang rgya par ni mi rigs la bsod nams dang ye shes kyi tshogs kyang de'i lung 'bogs pa'i sangs rgyas gzhan med du mi rung bas sangs rgyas de'i lung 'bogs pa'i sangs rgyas gzhan yang dgos la/ de la yang sangs rgyas gzhan dag kyang dgos te.*

²¹ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 30: *Kun tu bzang po'i [sic] dge ba rdul tsam cig ma byas par sangs rgyas pa.*

[Samantabhadra's] self-recognition is an ocean of stainless self-originating merit, so his great merit is primordially complete."²² Klong chen pa's solution (and Nyi ma 'bum might agree) is thus to suggest that Samantabhadra's merit is self-originating, without any practice, nor even the thought to do so.

Nyi ma 'bum, and Klong chen pa following him, thus defy earlier Buddhist positions by introducing the idea of a primordial buddha. Such a starting point is necessary for the apparently linear narrative of the history of buddhas that Nyi ma 'bum was writing, and it leaves him to negotiate carefully between, on the one hand, the standard Buddhist view of saṃsāra as without beginning and without end and, on the other hand, the *sNying thig* view of a history that begins and ends with the ground-Samantabhadra.

Despite Nyi ma 'bum's narrative need for some kind of linearity, we have seen that his history is ultimately circular, ending where it begins. This is a point on which Klong chen pa parts ways with his predecessor, most explicitly in his *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, a work often paired with his *Treasury of Words and Meanings*.²³ When Nyi ma 'bum reaches his eleventh "word and meaning," he describes this last topic of liberation as a return to "the beginning" (*grol ba thog ma'o*), and basically the same line closes the *Pearl Garland*.²⁴ He explains this line as follows: "Regarding that, 'the beginning' is the entity of the initial ground, which is the natural way of abiding, the primordially pure gnosis, which I taught at the beginning of the eleven topics. Its actualization was taught by the Great Master Vimalamitra as final liberation."²⁵ As we have seen, for Nyi ma 'bum final liberation thus brings us full circle back to the beginning. For Klong chen pa, however, such a position is problematic:

Saying that [Samantabhadra] liberates right within the ground is clumsy (*rtsings*). He is liberated when the ground's manifestation dawns out of the ground. He is liberated at the moment of raising up from the ground. Where is he liberated? Saying he is liberated

²² *Theg pa'i mchog rin po che'i mdzod*, vol. 17, 355: *Kun tu bzang pos dge ba rdul tsam cig ma byas par gzhi thog nas sangs rgyas pa'o zhes grags kyang/ dpyad na rang ngo shes pa de zag med rang byung gi dge ba rgya mtsho yin pas/ tshogs chen yer rdzogs pa.*

²³ See Germano 1992, 1.

²⁴ *Mu tig rin po che'i phreng ba: grol sa nyid ni thog ma'o*. The slight difference between this line and Nyi ma 'bum's rendering of it will be addressed below; see n. 39.

²⁵ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, p. 119: *de la thog ma zhes bya ba ni/ thog ma'i gzhi dngos po gshis kyi gnas lugs ka nas dag pa'i ye shes nyid bcu gcig pa'i thog mar bstan cing/ de mngon du gyur pa mthar thug grol ba yin par/ slob dpon chen po bye ma la mi ſas gsungs pa.*

back into the ground is also clumsy. He is liberated in the place of spontaneously present completion.

If he were liberated back into the ground, he might relapse [back into to *samsāra*], because that ground has been posited as that within which confusion can occur, that is, because it is the ground of both *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Suppose one says, “in the line, ‘the place of liberation itself is the beginning,’ isn't this ground the beginning [ground]?” One can explain the way of abiding as the beginning,²⁶ but it is not the ground of the first [topic]. In short, when one recognizes one's own face (*rang ngo shes*), one completes the good qualities of the sphere, whereby one is liberated into fruition through being devoid of obscurations.²⁷

Here Klong chen pa insists that buddhahood cannot be identical with the ground, because that would entail the possibility that the buddha might stray back into *samsāra*, as described in the second topic. That the buddha could contain any such impurity that might give rise to ignorance and thus *samsāra* goes against all Buddhist teaching and would certainly open the *sNying thig* tradition to criticism by followers of other schools.

This is a substantial concern, but one that did not bother Nyi ma 'bum, perhaps because it rests on a reification of the eleven-part “history of buddhas,” a reification that Nyi ma 'bum does not accept. Indeed, in discussing final liberation, he raises the possibility of this very objection: “As for someone who objects to the line, ‘liberation is the beginning,’ [I would reply,] there really is nothing that relapses nor is a relapser, nor is there anything that seems to dissolve [into buddhahood]; the realization of the way of abiding has been explained above.”²⁸ There is no one, in other words, to fall into

²⁶ Dpal brtsegs mistakenly has *thog med* instead of *thog mar*, which is seen in other editions; see, for example, W22920, published in Chengdu in 1999.

²⁷ *Theg pa'i mchog rin po che'i mdzod*, vol. 17, 355: *gzhi thog nas grol zer ba rtsings te/ gzhi las gzhi snang du shar dus grol bas/ gzhi las 'phags pa'i skad cig la grol ba'o/ gang du grol na/ gzhi thog tu grol zer ba yang rtsings te/ mthar phyin lhun grub kyi sa la grol ba'o/ gal te gzhi thog tu grol na yang ldog par 'gyur te/ gzhi de 'khrul pa 'byung rung gi cha nas gzhas pa'i phyir te/ 'khor 'das kyi gzhi yin pa'i phyir ro/ grol sa nyid thog ma'o zhes/ gzhi thog ma yin nam zhe na/ gnas lugs la thog med [sic] bshad pa yin gyi/ dang po'i gzhi ma yin no/ mdror na rang ngo shes shes dus dbyings kyi yon tan mthar phyin te/ sgrib pa dang bral bas 'bras bur grol ba zhes bya'o.*

²⁸ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 127: *yang kha cig na re/ grol ba thog ma'o zhes gsungs la/ slar zlog bya dang zlog byed du yod pa'am/ thim pa lta bu cig yog pa lta bu ni ma yin ste/ gnas lugs rtogs par gong du bshad.* Note that Nyi ma 'bum's explanation here, which refers the reader to his discussion of the “way of abiding” (*gnas lugs*) may be precisely what Klong chen pa refers to in the above-cited passage when he writes, “One may explain the way of abiding as the beginning...”

samsāra, nor anyone who enters nirvāṇa. And even the *appearance* of these apparent events does not exist. For Nyi ma 'bum, what is important is whether one understands the way of abiding: "Our own scriptural system teaches the assertion of a special kind of understanding that is without consideration for whether it is deluded or undeluded—that is called 'awareness' or 'gnosis.'"²⁹ If there never really is any delusion nor slipping into samsāra, in other words, then there is no need to worry about the buddha slipping.

Nevertheless, the perceived possibility of a return is enough for Klong chen pa to draw a distinction between the ground of the first topic and that of the last, between the original ground and final buddhahood. Indeed, he does not even mention of the line, "the place of liberation itself is the beginning" anywhere in his treatment of the eleventh topic, despite the fact that he labels the topic with that very line from the *Pearl Garland* in his first chapter. Following his above-cited criticism of the "clumsy" view that one might be liberated back into the ground, he proceeds to set forth six qualities (*chos drug*), elsewhere called "the six distinctive qualities" (*khyad chos drug*), that distinguish Samantabhadra from the original ground: "He is raised up from the ground, he appears to himself, he distinguishes difference, he is liberated right within that distinction, he does not arise from other [conditions], and he rests in his own place."³⁰ Whereas the original ground is neutral, in that it is the basis for both samsāra and nirvāṇa to arise, Klong chen pa's final ground of liberation is distinct because it *knows*: "The original ground," he concludes, "and the ground's manifestation that has been liberated into fruition are distinguished by the wisdom of realization."³¹

In distinguishing the original ground from the ground of liberation, Klong chen pa takes a more linear view of the eleven topics than Nyi ma 'bum and his circular approach. In many respects, this more linear view does not fit comfortably with the overall

²⁹ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 30: 'khrul ma 'khrul gyi rtsis med shes pa'i khyad par 'dod pa rang gzhung du bstan pas rig pa'i zhes pa'am/ ye shes so zhes pa. It has to be said that Klong chen pa includes similar lines in his own writings. Thus at the beginning of the second topic, for example, he writes: "[Awareness] is not really deluded, but when the conditions are right, there is the imputation [of delusion]" (*Tshig don rin po che'i mdzod*, 26b.4: 'khrul pa dngos ma yin yang rkyen byas dus btags pa). Nonetheless, the possibility that the liberated ground (*grol gzhi*) could give rise to delusion appears to have been a serious problem in Klong chen pa's view.

³⁰ *Theg pa'i mchog rin po che'i mdzod*, vol. 17, 356: *gzhi las 'phags pa/ rang ngor snang ba/ bye brag phyed pa/ phyed thog grol ba/ gzhan las ma byung ba/ rang sar gnas pa*.

³¹ *Theg pa'i mchog rin po che'i mdzod*, vol. 17, 356: *gdod ma'i gzhi dang gzhi snang 'bras bur grol ba ni/ rtogs pa'i shes rab kyis byed pa ste*. Here we read *phyed pa* in place of *byed pa*.

narrative of the eleven words and meanings, which were originally intended as a history of buddhas that never really goes anywhere. Nyi ma 'bum's history that ends where it begins is a narrative non-event, and as such it threatens to undo the entire rationale for the Buddhist path.

Four centuries later, 'Jigs med gling pa goes out of his way to emphasize the alleged importance of Klong chen pa's distinction:

Most people assert this place of liberation as being right back into the initial ground. However, if that were the case, since the ground is asserted as an aspect in which delusion can arise, it would have the flaw that delusion can always arise again. Therefore this is a very terrible point of error. As Klong chen pa says: "Both the primordially pure final place of liberation and the indeterminate spontaneously present ground may be alike in their qualities of awareness—in their essence, nature, compassion, and so on—but they are differentiated by the one being pure of stains and the other not, and by one acting as the ground for delusion and the other not. It is very important that people of our school should understand this, so they should not make clumsy assertions, saying that fruition is liberation within the original ground." Someone might wonder, "But doesn't the *Pearl Garland* say, 'the place of liberation itself is the beginning'?" Regarding that, having recognized with awareness the primordial purity of the beginning, one attains awakening in the place of the two purities. By that means, the cause is reversed and the ground of delusion is thereafter extinct, whereupon its name changes to "the place of liberation" or "fruition." As explained above in the context of the ground, the crucial point is to understand that they are distinguished by having stains or not.³²

We may surmise that Klong chen pa's distinction was still not fully appreciated even in the eighteenth century. This is somewhat understandable given what 'Jigs med gling pa writes here. That Klong chen pa's original ground simply withers on the vine, "extinct" and abandoned upon liberation, is clearly not what Nyi ma

³² *Dri lan rin po che'i bstan bcos lung gi gter mdzod*, 133a.5-133b.2: *phal cher gyis grol sa 'di thog ma'i gzhi thog tu 'dod pa yod de/ de lta na gzhi de 'khrul ba 'byung rung gi cha nas bzhag pa'i phyir da dung 'khrul ba'i skyon yod pas nor sa rngam po che yin te/ kun mkhyen chen pos mthar thug gi grol sa ka dag dang/ nges med gzhi'i lhun grub gnyis rig pa'i yon tan ngo bo rang bzhin thug rje la sogs pa 'dra yang/ dri ma dag ma dag dang 'khrul gzhi byed mi byed kyis khyad yod do/ rang gi sde bas khyad 'di shes pa gal che bas/ 'bras bu gzhi thog tu grol zer nas rtsing por ma smra zhig/ ces gsungs so/ 'o na mu tig phreng ba las/ grol sa nyid ni thog ma'o/ zhes pas bstan pa ma yin nam snyam na/ de ni thog ma'i ka dag la rig par ngo shes nas dag pa gnyis ldan gyi sar byang chub pas/ phyin chad rgyur ldog pa'i 'khrul gzhi zad pas grol sa'am 'bras bu zhes bya bar ming 'gyur ba yin no/ gong du gzhi'i skabs su bshad pa ltar khyad par dri ma yod med kyis phyee ba shes par bya ba gnad dam pa'o.*

'bum (nor the *Pearl Garland* when it ends as it does) intended. When Nyi ma 'bum writes that the ground is “primordially pure, pure from the very first, and thus originally pure, pure from the beginning,”³³ the idea that the ground is stained with impurities is hard to understand. In a non-dual system in which words and their meanings arise simultaneously and interdependently, with the ultimate meaning immediately complete within the word, the idea that final awakening is distinct and not the same as the ground makes an ill fit.

Why, then, is Klong chen pa so much more concerned than Nyi ma 'bum about the possibility of the buddha slipping back into saṃsāra? Possible factors are suggested when we consider some other differences between the two authors' presentations of the eleven words and meanings. Nyi ma 'bum's writings are significantly more closely involved with the *Seventeen Tantras*, most of which were probably compiled during the century just prior to his writing. In the homage that opens his “introduction,” for example, the twelfth-century author focuses on Mahāvajradhara, the highest buddha in the tantric literature of the gSar ma schools but rarely seen in early rDzogs chen supplications. One other place where he does appear is in chapter eight of the *Pearl Garland*, which frames its canonical presentation of the eleven topics by praising “Vajradhara of the sixth family” for his teaching of all the tantras condensed into this single eleven-fold teaching.³⁴ This is one of only five occurrences of Vajradhara in the tantra and the only presentation of the eleven topics used by Nyi ma 'bum that appears in the *Seventeen Tantras*,³⁵ so it makes sense that Nyi ma 'bum supplicates this same buddha in the opening homage to his own text on the eleven words and meanings. It also indicates just how involved with the nuances of the *Seventeen Tantras* Nyi ma 'bum was.

Klong chen pa, however, focuses his own opening praises for his *Treasury of Words and Meanings* on Samantabhadra, perhaps reflecting his temporal distance, relative to Nyi ma 'bum, from the *Seventeen Tantras*. By the fourteenth century, Klong chen pa appears to have been less concerned with making the sNying thig tradition cohere with the *Seventeen Tantras* and more with bringing it into line with wider Buddhist norms. Indeed, in his *Treasury of Words and Meanings* and *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, he quotes regularly from exoteric

³³ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 23-24: *dang po nas dag pas thog ma dag la gdod ma nas dag pa zhes bya*.

³⁴ *Mu tig rin po che phreng ba*, 534.

³⁵ As mentioned above (n. 12), the *Unimpeded Sound* does include the eleven topics embedded within a larger structure.

Buddhist sūtras, a fact that contrasts sharply with Nyi ma 'bum, who works exclusively from the *Seventeen Tantras* and, only occasionally, other rNying ma and gSar ma tantras.

Nyi ma 'bum's more inward-looking writings reflect a period when the *sNying thig* tradition was still in flux in other ways too. Not surprisingly, given that Zhang ston was the first to reveal these "Unsurpassable Secret Teachings," Nyi ma 'bum still had to defend their authenticity. Thus he goes to considerable lengths to defend the opening words, "Thus have I taught," (*'di skad bdag gis bstan pa yin*), that open some Great Perfection tantras in place of the more common "thus have I heard."³⁶ Nyi ma 'bum's response is to point to the **Guhyagarbha*, which opens similarly, a move that suggests that the criticisms he addresses were coming from within the rNying ma school, from rNying ma pa who readily accepted the authority of the **Guhyagarbha* but had yet to accept the recently revealed *Seventeen Tantras*. Compare this to Klong chen pa's introduction to his *Treasury of Words and Meanings*, which is comprised of a lengthy supplication but lacks any defense against critics.

Similarly, in the supplication section of his "Introduction," Nyi ma 'bum complains that, "the words taught by the buddhas are corrupted by those who hope to be experts in commentaries and writings."³⁷ Nyi ma 'bum's comment here suggests that *sNying thig* orthodoxy had yet to be fully established, and again, Klong chen pa's work is less explicitly concerned with controlling the *Seventeen Tantras* and their doctrinal standards.

Stylistically too we see differences between Nyi ma 'bum and Klong chen pa that may relate to their doctrinal disagreement, for Nyi ma 'bum writes in what might be called a less linear way. Perhaps as a result of his being so strongly rooted in the *Seventeen Tantras*, when he quotes them, he often does so in an idiosyncratic way, taking lines from different parts of a given chapter and reordering them to make his own point. In discussing the excellence of time, for example, he cites the *Jewel Mound* (*Rin chen spungs pa*) as follows:

Within the non-existent empty source of phenomena (*dharmodaya*),
 Out of the distinctive features of the awareness and gnosis
 Of the very first primordial buddha,
 The self-resounding of the emptiness of reality
 Is the turning of the primordial wheel of dharma;

³⁶ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 11-12.

³⁷ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 1-2.

It is without beginning, middle, or end.³⁸

With only minor differences, these lines all appear in the *Jewel Mound*, but Nyi ma 'bum draws them from various places. Most are from chapter two, pages 84-5, but one line is from chapter one, page 78. And whereas Nyi ma 'bum quotes these lines in the context of the excellence of time, the tantra itself uses them in discussing the followers. For Nyi ma 'bum, the *Seventeen Tantras* were still very much alive and open to reinterpretation.

All this is quite unlike Klong chen pa, who follows the tantras precisely when quoting them. For him, the *Seventeen Tantras* represent a closed canon, sacred texts to be cited word-for-word alongside other *sNying thig* sources such as the *Bi ma snying thig*, the *mKha' 'gro snying thig*, and so on.

Perhaps, then, Klong chen pa's more linear interpretation of the eleven words and meanings is rooted in his interests in working the *sNying thig* teachings into the larger world of Tibetan Buddhism, of grounding it in exoteric sutras, careful canonical citations, and sometimes even the language of *pramāṇa*. Nyi ma 'bum's earlier approach, being closer to the revelatory roots of the tradition, is characterized by more paradoxical, radical understandings of signification and history.

In this paper, we have attempted to define some unique features of Nyi ma 'bum's *Eleven Words and Meanings on The Great Perfection*. In particular, we have highlighted his treatments both of word and meaning and of the original ground and buddhahood. In each case, we have seen that he takes a markedly circular approach, such that meaning is established immediately upon reading the word, and buddhahood is identical with the original ground. Each of Nyi ma 'bum's eleven words and meanings circles upon itself, its illusory dualities collapsing back into the ground, and each doing so within the larger circular trajectory of the history as a whole. This circularity allows Nyi ma 'bum to claim that everything happens simultaneously, yet nothing ever happens. For him, Great Perfection history—be it a history of sentient beings or buddhas—brings the past into the present, unfolding in the immediacy of one's experience through the reading of the tantras. All of this is quite different from the approach seen in the later writings of Klong chen pa and 'Jigs med gling pa, both of whom prefer a more linear understanding of the eleven words and meanings. Close readings of the *sNying thig*

³⁸ *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 5: *med pa stong pa'i chos 'byung nas/ ye thog dang po'i sangs rgyas kyi/ rig dang ye shes khyad par las/ chos nyid stong pa'i rang sgra ni/ ye nas chos kyi 'khor lo bskor/ thog ma bar mtha' med pa'o.*

teachings in their earliest formulations thus reveal how the tradition developed between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, as it gained acceptance within the rNying ma school and became increasingly concerned with its reputation among the followers of other Tibetan Buddhist schools.

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