

# Early Developments in Snying thig Practice: The Eighth Topic of Zhang Nyi ma 'bum's *Rdzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*

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**I**n a 2018 paper on “Signification and History in Zhang Nyi ma 'bum's *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*,” the present authors offered some preliminary reflections on the overall structure of Nyi ma 'bum's influential text. More specifically, we focused on the work's unusual treatments of language, history, and time vis-a-vis those of later Great Perfection authors such as Klong chen pa and 'Jigs med gling pa. In the present paper, we focus on the same work's eighth topic (*tshig don*) on Great Perfection practice (*nyams su blangs ba*), the longest and most complex of the work's eleven topics. In our analysis of the topic, we offer observations on how Nyi ma 'bum's treatment compares to those of later authors, particularly Klong chen pa and Rig 'dzin Rgod ldem, both of whom incorporated large portions of Nyi ma 'bum's ground-breaking treatise into their own writings.

## I. Introduction to the Text

In 2001, Alak Zengkar Rinpoche negotiated an agreement with Dpal spungs, whereby his organization would pay for new bookshelves in exchange for access to the famous monastery's library. Subsequently, in March 2002, Karma Delek, head of dPal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang, discovered a manuscript containing the long-lost that is the focus of this paper: The *Rdzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa* by the late-twelfth-to-early-thirteenth-century author, Zhang Nyi ma 'bum (1158–1213). This attribution is claimed by the colophon that closes the text:

For those in these times who have an understanding [born] of study, contemplation, and meditation, this clarification of the “words and meanings” (*tshig don*) from the Seventeen Tantras of the Great Perfection, which is the realization of the nine vehicles, has been composed

by him who has the name of “scholar,” Nyi ‘bum. May fortunate beings of later times complete the two goals. May there be virtue and auspiciousness!<sup>1</sup>

To this is added a secondary colophon, apparently added to an earlier copy of the text:

This distillation of all the vehicles, a clarification of the “words and meaning,” written by the yogin of the most profound Great Perfection, Nyi ‘bum himself, was precisely copied by the Śākya monk Sangs rgyas bkra shis. Through the virtue of that, may sentient beings equal to space, starting with one’s father and mother, attain the realm of Amitābha.<sup>2</sup>

The identity of this earlier scribe, Sangs rgyas bkra shis, remains unknown to us.<sup>3</sup>

Still a further, tertiary colophon is appended to the text in cursive (*khyug yig*). This one may be specific to our received manuscript:

This extraordinary treatise on the Great Perfection Pith Instruction Class is written by the son of Zhang ston Bkra shis rdo rje, the Zhang scholar Nyi ‘bum, who is prophesied in the *Root Tantra of Unimpeded Sound* and gained knowledge and accomplishment in the path of the Luminous Great Perfection. This text is exceedingly rare, and it is renowned that the Omniscient Dharmarāja [i.e. Klong chen pa] relied on this scripture in composing his own works such as the *Tshig don mdzod*.<sup>4</sup>

The larger manuscript within which our text appears is actually a collection of six texts. We may learn still more about the manuscript’s origins from a yet further colophonic note found at the end of the entire

<sup>1</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 96b.1-3: *deng sang dus ‘dir thos bsam sgom pa’i blo gros can/ theg pa rim dgu’i dngongs pa rdzogs chen gyi/ bcu bdun rgyud las tshig don gsal ba ‘di/ mkhas pa’i ming can nyi ‘bum nyid kyis bkod/ phyi rabs skal ldan don gnyis mthar phyin shog/ dge zhing bkra shis par gyur cig.*

<sup>2</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 96b.3-5: *yang zab rdzogs pa chen po’i rnal ‘byor nyi ‘bum nyid mdzad pa/ theg pa kun gyi don bsdus pa/ tshig don gsal bar bris pa ‘di/ shAkya’i dge tshul sangs rgyas bkra shis kyis/ lhag chad med par ‘di bris dge ba des/ pha mas gtso byas mkha’ myyam sems can rnams/ ‘od dpag med pa’i gnas rab thob par shog.*

<sup>3</sup> The passage’s final phrase, *‘od dpag med pa’i gnas rab thob par shog*, is from the *Ārya-Bhadracaryāpranīdhānarāja* (Toh. 1095), but this tells us nothing about the possible dates of our scribe.

<sup>4</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 96b.5-97a.1: *rdzogs pa chen po man ngag sde’i bstan bcos khyad par can ‘di zhang stong bkra shis rdo rje’i sras zhang mkhas pa nyi ‘bum zhes sgra thal ‘gyur rtsa ba’i rgyud las lung bstan cing/ ‘od gsal rdzogs pa chen po’i lam la mkhas shing dngos grub brnyes pa de nyid kyis mdzad pa dpe rgyud shin tu dkon pa stel kun mkhyen chos kyi rgyal pos kyang tshig don mdzod sogs gzhung ‘di brten nas mdzad par grags so.*

collection. The whole manuscript consists of 135 folios (270 sides), the first 97 folios of which contain Nyi ma 'bum's work, after which the remaining 35 folios (75 sides) contain five short works on the Anuyoga class of Rnying ma teachings. Appended to the final text in the collection (that being a short work by Kaḥ thog Dam pa bde gshegs on chapter 61 of the *Dgongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*), is a note that reads as follows:

This too Jamgön Vajradhara Khyentse Wangpo ordered to be correctly copied from Kaḥ Dam pa bde gshegs' Collected Works. Accordingly, I believe that my understanding is correct. Together with the numbering system and interlinear notes, this was penned by the treasure student Karma 'Dul 'dzin Matiratna.<sup>5</sup>

Here, the initial “this too” (*'di yang*) might suggest that the note references not only the last text but the entire collection. Assuming this is correct, we may conclude that the whole manuscript was penned at the request of 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po (1820–1892), probably in the late nineteenth century.

While there is little in terms of content to link Nyi ma 'bum's work with the five Anuyoga texts accompanying it, their coexistence within a single manuscript may be explained by their shared status as rare books. Four of the five Anuyoga texts are attributed to early masters of the Mdo dbang tradition, the first three to Indian masters held to have lived at the very beginnings of that tradition. The five Anuyoga works are: (1) *Lung a nu yo ga 'dus pa mdo'i rgyud kyi gsang ba'i don bsdus pa* by Dharmabodhi, perhaps corresponding to the *Don bsdus chung ba* mentioned by Dam pa bde gshegs in his *Mdo phran khog dbub*;<sup>6</sup> (2) the *Skabs 'grel bye brag tu bshad pa*, attributed to Sthiramati, found in some of today's *bstan 'gyur* collections, e.g. Q. 4752; (3) *Byang chub sems dpa' kyi ljon shing*, also attributed to Sthiramati and corresponding to Q.4753; (4) the *Lung a nu yo ga'i dam tshig bye brag pa cung zad gsal bar bshad pa'i le'u tshan*, unidentified; (5) the *Mdo le'u drug bcu rtsa gcig pa'i rnal 'byor pa'i sgron me'i rnam 'byed rgyu skar phreng ba*, unidentified but attributed to Kaḥ thog Dam pa bde gshegs. All qualify as rare texts within the tantric corpus of the Rnying ma school, like the *Eleven Topics*.

Turning to Nyi ma 'bum's text, as the title suggests, it provides a

<sup>5</sup> *Mdo le'u drug bcu rtsa gcig pa'i rnal 'byor pa'i sgron me'i rnam 'byed rgyu skar phreng ba* (TBRC WID: W3CN607), 3b.2-4: *'di yang 'jam mgon rdo rje 'chang mkhyen brtse'i dbang po'i zhal snga nas ka: dam pa bde gshegs kyi gsung 'bum las byung ba'i 'di yi ge dag par gyis la bris shig ces bka' stsal phebs pa ltar rang gi go tshod dag par rlom ste ang 'gi'i grangs dang mchan bu'i dbye ba dang bcas te gter slob kar+ma 'dul 'dzin ma ti rat+na bris pa.*

<sup>6</sup> See Dalton 2016, 180 n. 31.

discussion of eleven topics that seem to be unique to the Snying thig.<sup>7</sup> The earliest references to these topics appear in two of the Seventeen Tantras. In chapter two of the *Sgral thal 'gyur*, they appear embedded within a larger list of twenty-eight questions that structure the chapter. They appear again, this time in the form used by Nyi ma 'bum, at the very end of the *Mu tig phreng ba*. Their position within this tantra suggests they *may* have been appended after the work's initial composition, but this remains speculative. In any case, both the *Sgra thal 'gyur* and the *Mu tig phreng ba* are cited by Nyi ma 'bum as his sources for his elevenfold scheme.<sup>8</sup>

The eleven topics constitute a comprehensive roadmap to awakening that begins with the primordial ground and traces its history (*lo rgyus*) through the separation of this ground into *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, the subsequent contemplative practices required to return, and the final rejoining of the fully awakened state. The eleven topics thus offer a master narrative for Snying thig thought and practice, a structure that Klong chen pa and other later Rdzogs chen masters draw upon, making it one of the earliest comprehensive codifications of Snying thig cosmology, philosophy, doctrine, and practice.<sup>9</sup>

Nyi ma 'bum's text, like the Snying thig tradition itself, seems to have been a relatively minor tradition through the thirteenth century. The biographies of the early Snying thig lineage holders, many of which are found in the volume four of the *Bi ma snying thig*, portray their subjects as often poverty-stricken and lacking institutional support. All this changed with the fourteenth century, when the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339) and others drew attention to the tradition. Nyi ma 'bum's text soon enjoyed a renaissance and was copied by numerous authors, being incorporated into Klong chen pa's *Tshig don mdzod*, copied almost verbatim as a Vimalamitra-attributed treasure text by Rig 'dzin Rgod ldem (1337–1409), and closely relied

<sup>7</sup> The Tibetan term *tshig don* translates the Sanskrit *padārtha*, which usually means something like "topic." In Tibetan, as in Sanskrit, the word is a compound literally meaning "words and meanings." In our earlier article, we showed how Nyi ma 'bum makes use of these two elements in his interpretations of Great Perfection writings, playing on a circular relationship between word and meaning, a relationship that mirrors the larger circularity of the eleven topics as a whole. In the present paper, however, for simplicity's sake, we translate *tshig don* as "topic".

<sup>8</sup> See *Rdzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> The other somewhat comprehensive presentation of Snying thig practice (more than theory) appears in the introduction to the Vimalamitra-attributed commentary to the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, though even there it is not as systematic as Nyi ma 'bum's discussion.

upon by Sangs rgyas gling pa (1340–1396) as a Padmasambhava treasure.<sup>10</sup> Still another, more abbreviated version appears in volume four of the *Bi ma snying thig* under the title, *Tshig don bcu gcig pa*. Again attributed to Klong chen pa, it is a more-or-less verbatim copy of Nyi ma 'bum's work but without the many quotations.<sup>11</sup>

In incorporating Nyi ma 'bum's text, all of these later authors went to some lengths to clean up his quotations and bring them more strictly into line with the early Snying thig's *Seventeen Tantras*. As we noted in our first article, Nyi ma 'bum is remarkably loose in his approach to quoting from the *Seventeen Tantras*. He often cobbles together his passages using lines drawn from different parts of a given tantra. Sometimes he puts the passages he cites to new ends; sometimes he shortens passages, apparently to make his point more succinctly. As we suggested in our first article, this may reflect Nyi ma 'bum's closeness to the *Seventeen Tantras* and the fact that they were still very much alive for him and open to reinterpretation.<sup>12</sup> The fourteenth-century authors who borrowed from Nyi ma 'bum preferred a more conservative approach, treating the *Seventeen Tantras* as a more closed canon.

## II. Structural Analysis of the Eighth Topic

With the beginning of Nyi ma 'bum's eighth topic comes an important transition in his text. Immediately preceding the section break, the coming shift is explained in these terms:

Up to now I have been teaching the goal to be realized, that is, the natural way. The first [topic] and the first half of the second topic taught the natural way of the primordial ground. From the second half of the second and the third [topics] through the seventh [topic]

<sup>10</sup> Rig 'dzin Rgod Idem's text has been translated by Smith 2016. Sangs rgyas gling pa placed Nyi ma 'bum's work alongside Zhang ston's *Lo rgyus chen mo* in his *Rdzogs chen snying po gser gyi yang zhun gyi rgyab chos spyi sdom dgongs don 'dus pa*. A Bon po rendition of Nyi ma 'bum's text is also found in the *Dgos 'dod gsal byed bshad gzhi'i mthong*. The colophon to this work attributes it to Sprul sku Lung ston lha gnyan (sometimes Lung bon lha gnyan), whom others have dated to the eleventh to twelfth centuries (see, e.g., Karmay 1977, 11; Achard 1999, 230). A quick comparison suggests, however, that the Bon work probably postdates Nyi ma 'bum's. We understand that Jean-Luc Achard is working on a fuller study of this text and its relationship to Nyi ma 'bum's work, and we look forward to learning more from Achard.

<sup>11</sup> The work hews more closely to Nyi ma 'bum's text than the *Tshig don mdzod*, in which Klong chen pa departs from Nyi ma 'bum on numerous points, as discussed below. For more on this text, see Scheidegger 2004. It is the only text attributed to Klong chen pa in the *Bi ma snying thig*. Note too that the work is absent from the *Bi ma snying thig* catalogue (*Bi ma snying thig gi dkar chag nyin mor byed pa*) made by Zhe chen dbon sprul 'Gyur med mthu stobs rnam rgyal (1787-1854).

<sup>12</sup> See Yeshe and Dalton 2018, 270-71.

taught the natural way of persons who constitute the supports [for that realization]. The means for realizing that are [taught in] the three [topics] of the eighth, ninth, and tenth. The actualization of the realization, which is the liberation of the final fruition, is taught in the eleventh [topic].<sup>13</sup>

The eighth topic thus marks the beginning of Nyi ma 'bum's discussion of the main contemplative practices of the Śnying thig tradition. What follows is by far the longest of the topics, filling nearly a third of the whole text (44 of the 131 pages in the modern book format). Nyi ma 'bum is interested in organizing his tradition, and he arranges his discussion of the eighth topic around a complex structure that is not always made explicit. Only careful analysis reveals the full structure, which we provide here in outline form to help others understand the chapter more easily:

Eighth Topic: The means for how to practice (*nyams su ji ltar blangs ba'i thabs*)

I. The initiation that is a method for ripening the extraordinary practitioner (*rten khyad par can sgrub pa po smin par byed pa'i thabs dbang*)

A. The necessary characteristics of the teacher and the student

1. Analyzing the teacher
2. Analyzing the student

B. Four initiations

1. Elaborated (*spros bcas*)
2. Unelaborated (*spros med*)
3. Very unelaborated (*shin tu spros med*)
4. Utterly unelaborated (*rab tu spros med*)

C. Samaya vows

II. Practicing the lama's instructions which offer the means for liberation (*sgrol bar byed pa'i thabs bla ma'i gdams ngag nyams su blangs pa*)

A. How the person should act while practicing (*gang zag gi spyod pa ji lta bus nyams su blangs pa*)

1. Acting like a beggar
2. Acting like a deer

<sup>13</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 54: *de yan chad kyis rtogs par bya ba'i don ngos po'am gnas lugs bstan te/ dang po dang gnyis pa'i stod kyis thog ma gzhi'i gnas lugs ston pa ni/ gnyis pa'i pad+mo dang gsum pa nas bzung ste/ bdun pa'i bar gyis rten gyi gang zag gi gnas lugs bstan no/ de rtogs par byed pa'i thabs brgyad pa dgu pa bcu pa gsum yin no/ rtogs pa mngon du gyur pa mthar thug 'bras bu'i grol ba ni/ bcu gcig par bstan pa yin no.*

- B. The actual means for practice (*nyams su blangs pa'i thabs dngos*)
1. The supportive conditions for accomplishing that [practice] (*de grub par byed pa'i grogs*)<sup>14</sup>
  2. Practicing the means for liberating in two stages (*grol bar byed pa'i thabs rim pa gnyis su nyams su blangs pa*)
    - a. The generation stage of the path (*lam bskyed pa'i rim pa*)
      - i. Generation stage of wisdom (*shes rab skyed pa'i rim pa*)
      - ii. Generation stage of means (*thabs skyed pa'i rim pa*)
    - b. The perfection stage of the path (*lam rdzogs pa'i rim pa*)
      - i. Practice by those with a mind for referential objects (*dmigs yul gyi blo can gyis nyams su blangs ba*)
        - (I) The five sections of practicing the conduct continuously (*spyod pa la rgyun du byed pa'i rnal 'byor*),
          - (A) The yogin who practices continuously performs mastery over appearances.
            - (1) The conduct of beginners is to practice unerringly the sequence of the ten conducts.
            - (2) The conduct of distinguishing samsara and nirvana
            - (3) The seven *vratas* for controlling the winds:
              - (a) Bee-like conduct
              - (b) Swallow-like
              - (c) Deer-like
              - (d) Mute-like
              - (e) Crazy-like
              - (f) Dog- and Pig-like
              - (g) Lion-like
          - (B) The pith instructions (*man ngag*) that [offer] a method for settling that nakedly settles appearances (*snang ba gcer bzhag*).
          - (C) What sort of realization (*dgongs pa*) arises? It is a realization of appearances and existence emerging as the ground.
          - (D) So where do those abandoned afflictions (*nyon mong*s) go? They transform.
          - (E) The person (*gang zag*) at that time "enters the dharma."
- (II) The five sections of teachings on continuously *meditating* (*sgom pa*):
  - (A) The meditations that unify day and night (*sgom pa nyin mtshan kha sbyor*),
    - (1) The bodhisattva dhyānas (*byang chub sems dpa'i bsam*)

<sup>14</sup> Here we reverse 1. and 2. for the clarity of our outline, though Nyi ma 'bum introduces them in the opposite order. He does, however, likewise go on to explain #2 first.

*gtan*),

- (a) The natural *dhyāna*
- (b) The *dhyānas* of dwelling on the levels
- (c) The customized *dhyānas* are for two kinds of dangers to yogins.
  - (i) Doses of *dhyāna* for attachment to food
  - (ii) Doses of *dhyāna* for attachment to clothing,
  - (iii) The doses of *dhyāna* for dreams
  - (iv) In the doses of dhyana for *vāsanās*.

(2) The meditation of the profound Secret Mantra (*gsang sngags zab mo'i sgom pa*),

- (a) The yoga of winds (*rlung gi rnal 'byor*)
- (b) The treatment of channels (*rtsa'i sbyor ba*),
- (c) The yoga of seminal drops (*thig le'i rnal 'byor*).

(3) The mental concentrations of gods and humans (*lha dang mi sems 'dzin pa*),

- (a) Training with supporting focus
- (b) Training without support

(4) The realization (*dgongs pa*) of tathāgatas (*bde bar gshegs pa'i dgongs pa*).

(B) The pith instructions on that have the intention of immediately settling the ocean (*de'i man ngag rgya mtsho lcog bzhag gi dgongs pa*),

(C) At that time, the realization (*dgongs pa*) is the realization of appearance and existence settling into the ground (*de'i dus na dgongs pa snang srid gzhir bzhag gi dgongs pa*),

(D) At that time, the afflictions are sealed off (*de'i tshe nyon mong pa rgyas gdab song ba*),

(E) The person at the time of "dwelling in dharma" (*gang zag chos la gnas pa'i dus*).

(III) The five sections of the yoga of continuously practicing the view (*lta ba la rgyun du byed pa'i rnal 'byor*)

(A) The view that severs the stream into the city (*lta ba grong khyer rgyun gcod*)

(1) Outer views (of the other vehicles)

(2) Our own view (*rdzogs pa chen po bya bral klong chen gyi lta ba*)

(B) Pith instructions on immediately settling the mountain



(*mang ngag ri bo lcogs bzhag*)<sup>15</sup>

(C) The realization of complete liberation from the three realms (*dgongs pa khams gsum yongs grol*)

(D) The afflictions are purified in place (*nyon mongs pa gnas dag*)

(E) The time when the person discards the dharma (*gang zag chos bor ba'i dus*)

(IV) The five sections of the yoga of continuously practicing the result (*'bras bu la rgyud du byed pa'i rnal 'byor*)

(A) The naturally pure result (*rang bzhin rnam dag gi 'bras bu*)

(B) The pith instructions that immediately settle awareness (*man ngag rig pa lcogs bzhag*)

(C) The realization of all three cyclic existences being pure (*dgongs pa srid gsum ka dag*)

(D) The afflictions are innately liberating (*nyon mongs rang grol du song ba*)

(E) The person who has transcended phenomena (*gang zag chos las 'das pa*)

ii. Practice by those with a mind for awareness' own appearance (*rig pa rang snang gi blo can gyis nyams su blangs pa*)

(I) Seven crucial points that make this superior to the ordinary ones

(A) The crucial point of there being no sharper nor duller faculties,

(B) ... of there being no awakening through words,

(C) ... of there being no good nor bad karma,

(D) ... of there being no merit nor sin,

(E) ... of other vehicles being [mere] conceptual analysis,

(F) ... of being established by sense faculties,

(G) ... of the three bodies being appearances on the path.

(II) The instructions (*gdams ngag*)

(A) The practice of cutting through (*khregs chod du nyams su blangs pa*)

(1) Establishing mind's natural way (*gnas lugs*) that is to be realized,

(2) The crucial points for realizing that, i.e. the lama's pith

<sup>15</sup> For some reason, when he first introduces this topic, Nyi ma 'bum lists it as *mang ngag ngo sprod lcogs bzhag* (p. 80), despite using that title nowhere else. Both Klong chen pa (*Tshig don mdzod*, 196) and Rig 'dzin Rgod Idem (*Bi ma la'i snyan brgyud 'grel tig chen mo*, 68a.2) correct the line to *ri bo cog bzhag*. Seeing no significant reason for the anomalous reading, we follow the later authors.

instructions.

(B) The practice of direct transcendence (*thod rgal du nyams su blangs pa*)

(1) Preliminary practices (*sngon 'gro*)

(a) Guiding the three bodies

(b) Guiding the mind

(c) Guiding awareness

(2) The main practice (*dnegos gzhi*)

(a) Targeting the crucial points of body, speech, and mind (*lus ngag yid gi gnad gzir ba*),

(b) Establishing in itself the immediacy of reality (*chos nyid mngon sum rang thog du dbab pa*),

(c) How the four appearances dawn (*snang ba bzhi ji ltar 'char ba*),

(d) Supporting pith instructions (*mtha' rten gyi man ngag*)

(i) The three immobilities (*mi 'gul ba gsum*),

(ii) The three stillnessness (*sdod pa gsum*),

(iii) The three attainments (*thob pa gsum*).

### III. Preparatory Practices

Already by Nyi ma 'bum's time, the Snying thig tradition had its own set of initiations. Like any other tantric system, its practitioners were required to receive these initiations before embarking on its path. Nyi ma 'bum opens his discussion of the eighth topic with these initiations, first addressing the necessary characteristics of the teacher and student and then the initiations proper. Inappropriate teachers are described first, being those who have not properly received initiation and so on. Of note is Nyi ma 'bum's suggestion that any teacher who "restricts [their student] to his own place and does not let him go to others' places" should be avoided.<sup>16</sup> What exactly Nyi ma 'bum means here is unclear. It may be that early Snying thig teachers, or Nyi ma 'bum at least, did not demand exclusive allegiance of their students and even encouraged a certain degree of eclecticism. The ideal teacher allowed his students to travel and study multiple systems under different teachers. This mirrors Nyi ma 'bum's own biography, where he is said to have studied not only the Snying thig under his father but other teachings with numerous Sakya and other lamas. At eighteen, for ex-

<sup>16</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 55: *rang gi sar bcings nas gzhan gyi sar mi stong [gtong] pa'o*.

ample, he received “higher initiations” (*dbang gong ma*) from an unnamed vajra-master. At twenty, he studied the new translation *tantras* and pith instructions under Rngog Rgyal tsha rdor seng. At twenty-seven, he studied the Mal gyo tradition of *Cakrasaṃvara* with Sa skya Grags pa rgyal mtshan and Bla ma Stag so ba. At thirty, he studied the A phyi tradition of *Cakrasaṃvara* and other new translation tantric teachings under Bla ma Skyi ston grags pa.<sup>17</sup> Such eclecticism was likely relatively common in the later dispensation period of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries.

Klong chen pa, on the other hand, prefers a different reading of Nyi ma ‘bum’s line. The parallel passage in his *Tshig don mdzod* describes the teacher who should be rejected as, “one who teaches this-worldly chores and housekeeping and, restricting [his student] to his own place, who closes the intelligence of his student’s eyes and makes him lose the path to liberation.”<sup>18</sup> Here, Klong chen pa seems less interested in the ideal teacher allowing his student to study elsewhere and more concerned about teachers who keep their students busy with worldly chores that keep them from actual practice. While it is possible this is what Nyi ma ‘bum meant, there may be a difference here, one that suggests that, by the time of Klong chen pa, the idea that a disciple could find everything he needs in the Snying thig tradition alone made more sense.

Turning to the qualities a teacher should have, Nyi ma ‘bum makes a related point:

One who is endowed with faith [should look to]: one who is open-minded and learned in the tantras, who in general understands much of the tantric classes of Secret Mantra and who in particular understands how to perform the tantric Phur pa [rites], one who knows how to put the words of the tantras into practice. Even that is not enough. Regarding his achievement of familiarity and habituation, he [should be] one who knows how to practice the four branches of propitiation and accomplishment, who has the power of expertise in protecting and expelling by means of mantras for inciting, sending forth, and killing. Even that is not enough. [He should be] one who has realized and who is expert in the view, one who understands and has realized the outer views, i.e. of the nine vehicles, and who is expert in our own view, who has seen reality directly.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Zhang nyi ma ‘bum gyi rnam thar, 133. For a translation of this biography, see Achard 2018, 235ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Tshig don mdzod*, 154: *tshé ‘di’i bya ba dang so tshigs slob cing rang gi sar bcings nas slob ma blo gros kyi mig zum thar ba’i lam stor bar byed pa ste.*

<sup>19</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 55: *bdag dad pa ldan pa gcig gis blo yangs shing rgyud la mkhas pa/ spyir gsang sngags kyi rgyud sde mang po shes pa/ khyad par rgyud kyi phur pa ‘don shes pa/ rgyud tshig rnams lag len du ston shes pa/ des kyang mi chog ste/ goms shing ‘dris pa sgrub pa la/ bsnyen bsgrub yan lag bzhi’i lag len ston shes pa/ rbed*

Klong chen pa includes a passage that similarly requires the ideal teacher to be familiar with other tantric vehicles, but he does not mention the wrathful practices of Phur pa nor the practices of “inciting, sending forth, and killing” (*rbod rbad gsad*). It seems Nyi ma ‘bum felt these were foundational to Snying thig practice. His specificity is somewhat unusual from a later perspective but perhaps again reflects the extent to which his early Snying thig tradition (which was inaugurated only one generation earlier, by his father Zhang ston Bkra shis rdo rje) was enmeshed with other tantric practices, and how local the tradition still was. In any case, Nyi ma ‘bum’s instruction fits with his interest in the proper teacher being one who encourages his students to study other traditions as well.

Nyi ma ‘bum explains that the student should request the initiations many years in advance (a request accompanied with *maṅḍalas* of jewels). “Please grant me initiation in seven, five, or three years from now,” he has them say.<sup>20</sup> For reasons that are not entirely clear, Klong chen pa does not include this detail, nor does he specify that *gaṇacakra* feasts should be offered after each of the four Snying thig initiations, i.e. the elaborated, unelaborated, very unelaborated, and the utterly unelaborated. Rather, he has a single feast to be offered at the end of all four. Even so, both authors agree that the initiations may be granted all at once or spread out across several months or even years.<sup>21</sup>

According to Nyi ma ‘bum, the first, elaborated initiation involves a series of nine initiations, one for each of the nine vehicles, from the Śrāvakayāna to Atiyoga. For this last vehicle, he mentions granting the “great perfection dynamism of awareness initiation (*rdzogs pa chen po rig pa’i rtsal dbang*). More-or-less the same series of initiations is described in the Vimalamitra commentary to the *Sgra thal ‘gyur*. There, we also learn that the dynamism of awareness initiation, at least in that context, refers to a series of eighteen initiations, each with its own *maṅḍala*. It is likely that these correlate to the eighteen root tantras of the Mind Class (*sems sde*).<sup>22</sup> In later centuries, the name of the dynamism

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[sic for *rbod*] *rbad gsad pa’i sngags kyis srung zlog la mkhas pa’i nus pa thon pa/ des kyang mi chog ste/ rtogs shing lta ba la mkhas pa/ phyi’i lta ba theg rim pa dgu rnam shes shing rtogs pa dang/ rang gi lta ba la mkhas pa chos nyid mngon sum du mthong ba’o.*

<sup>20</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 57. *lo bdun nam lnga’am gsum na dbang bskur bar zhu.*

<sup>21</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 59; *Tshig don mdzod*, 161.

<sup>22</sup> *Pan chen dri med bshes gnyen gyi dgongs nyams sgron ma snang byed ‘bar ba’i gsang rgyud sgra thal ‘gyur rtsa ‘grel*, 141a. *de nas rdzogs pa chen po’i rig pa rtsal gyi dbang bcwo bryad la dal zhal mi ‘dra ba bcwo bryad du bskur zhing/ zhag bcwo bryad kyi bar du bskur ro.* The fourteenth-century author, G.yung ston Rdo rje dpal bzang authored a text on these eighteen initiations called: *Sems sde ma bu bco bryad kyi dgongs pa ngo sprad pa’i thabs rig pa rtsal gyi dbang bco bryad bskur ba’i chog khrigs bla*

of awareness initiation came to be used in different contexts.<sup>23</sup>

For the second, unelaborated initiation, the master relies on a *maṅḍala* and vase to grant initiation using verses (*tshigs su bcad pa*). For the third, very unelaborated initiation the disciple performs “distinguishing *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*” (*’khor ’das ru shan*) as a preparation for receiving the initiation. The initiation itself still relies on a *maṅḍala* and is granted using encoded language (*brda*; referred to as *brjod pa’i brda* in the Vimalamitra commentary to the *Sgra thal ’gyur*).<sup>24</sup> Finally, the fourth, utterly unelaborated initiation relies only on a “mind *maṅḍala*” and involves teaching the postures and gazes for *thod rgal* practice.

After a discussion of the *samaya* vows (which is roughly triple the length in Klong chen pa’s *Tshig don mdzod*), Nyi ma ’bum now turns to the practices proper. He first divides the topic into two: how the practitioner should behave and the actual practice. He names two forms of behavior: behaving like a beggar or like a wild herbivore (*ri dwags*). Like a beggar, one wanders in a state of complete humility, though secure in one’s own accomplishments. Like a wild herbivore, one lives in isolated places, not talking, and giving up all work, so that the body, channels, and conceptualizing mind relax.

#### IV. Practice by Those with Minds for Referential Objects

In introducing the actual practice, Nyi ma ’bum frames his discussion with several layers of outline (*sa bcad*), most of which are not adopted by Klong chen pa. First, he distinguishes the supportive conditions for practice (*grub par byed pa’i grogs*), which he does not really address, pointing his reader instead to the *Sgra thal ’gyur*. Second, he divides the methods for liberation into the stages of generation and perfection. Having introduced these, however, he once more passes over the generation stage in silence, noting only that it may be further divided according to wisdom and means. Instead, he devotes the rest of the chap-

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*ma’i zhal gdams*, found today in volume 31 of the *Rnying ma bka’ ma shin tu rgyas pa*, in the *sems sde* section of that collection.

<sup>23</sup> By the time of Klong chen pa’s *Mkha’ ’gro yang tig*, for example, we see a *rig pa’i rtsal dbang* being added to the four Snying thig initiations (which there are correlated with the four tantric initiations of vase, secret, wisdom-gnosis, and word) to make a fifth Snying thig initiation; see *Mkha’ ’gro yang tig*, p. 346-47, and the following discussions of each initiation on pages 347, 363, 366, 393, and 395, respectively. The same fivefold system is adopted by Tshé dbang nor bu (1698-1755), in his *Khrid yig ’chad thabs ’od kyi ’khor lo*, a practice manual for the *Dgongs pa zang thal*, as noted by Arguillère 2018, p. 240.

<sup>24</sup> In addition to the further details offered by the *Sgra thal ’gyur* commentary, manuals for granting these initiations appear in the *Bi ma snying thig*, volumes three and four.

ter to the perfection stage, which he further subdivides into: (1) Practice by those with minds for referential objects (*dmigs yul gyi blo can gyis nyams su blangs ba*), and (2) Practice by those with minds for awareness' own appearance (*rig pa rang snang gi blo can gyis nyams su blangs pa*). These two categories are further divided into a set of "four yogas of continuous practice" (*rgyun du byed pa'i rnal 'byor bzhi*), and the two contemplations of cutting through and direct transcendence, respectively.

The two subdivisions of those with minds for referential objects and those with minds for awareness' own appearance are seen in the Vimalamitra-attributed commentary to the *Mu tig phreng ba*, specifically where it comments on the tantra's closing list of the eleven topics. The tantra lists the eighth topic as, "the practice consists of cutting through and direct transcendence" (*nyams blangs khregs chod thod rgal lo*), while the commentary explains that the topic includes practices for those with minds for referential objects and for awareness' own appearance. "Here," it says, "the practice of those with minds for awareness' own appearance has two [types], the practice of cutting through and the practice of direct transcendence." Despite cutting through and direct transcendence being central to Rdzogs chen practice, Nyi ma 'bum devotes more of his discussion to the *first* subdivision, i.e. for those with minds for referential objects (21 pages vs. 14 pages on the second subdivision), apparently so as to incorporate all the many assorted kinds of practices found throughout the *Seventeen Tantras*, especially in the *Sgra thal 'gyur*.

This begs the question, which was written first, the *Mu ti phreng ba's* Vimalamitra commentary or Nyi ma 'bum's treatise? The colophon to the commentary ends with the statement: "At the meditation hermitage that was like Akaniṣṭha, I, the Turkic Jo 'bum, like Vajrapāṇi, received the *Mu tig phreng ba* that introduces reality from the Guru Jo 'ber, who was like Vajradhāra... This is the sacred dharma of the Turkic monk Dbus pa Jo 'bum."<sup>25</sup> Gu ru Jo 'ber (1196–1255) is said to have

<sup>25</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen po mu tig phreng rgyud gsal byed*, 490.3-5. 'og min gnas 'dra bsgoms la dgon pa ru/ rdo rje 'chang 'dra gu ru jo 'ber las/ gsang bdag dang mtshungs gru gu'i jo 'bum ngas/ chos nyid rang nga sprod pa mu tig 'phreng ba zhus... gru gu'i ban d+he dbus pa jo 'bum gyi dam chos so. Note that the colophon to the Vimalamitra-attributed commentary to the *Sgra thal 'gyur* appears to say it was composed by "myself, a minor monk" (*Pan chen dri med bshes gnyen gyi dgongs nyams sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud sgra thal 'gyur rtsa 'grel*, 338a, 6: *ban chung bdag gis*), but it remains unclear whether this *ban chung* is the same person as Gru gu'i ban d+he. (In the latter colophon, we understand its emphasis on the extreme care its author took in writing the text to suggest that it is talking about his composition and not mere copying: *ban chung bdag gis gus pa'i sems bzung nas rang ris nag nog cal bcol la sogs spangs/ shes pas mi gtong sems pa'i thul tshul bor/ legs pa'i yid dang gus pa'i sems kyis bsgrims*.)

been Nyi ma 'bum's closest disciple and his nephew. It is therefore at least likely that the Vimalamitra commentary and Nyi ma 'bum's treatise emerged from the same close circle. In comparing Jo 'ber's meditation hermitage to Akaniṣṭha, Jo 'ber to Vajradhāra, and himself to Vajrapāṇi, Jo 'bum is drawing a clear parallel between his reception of the text and the mythic encounter between Vajradhāra and Vajrapāṇi in which the tantras were first taught in the heaven of Akaniṣṭha. In the myth, Vajrapāṇi writes down Vajradhāra's teaching in the role of the "reciter" or "compiler" (Skt. *saṃgītikāra*; Tib. *sdud pa po*).<sup>26</sup> The comparison drawn here suggests that Jo 'ber was the author of the commentary, while his disciple, Jo 'bum, served as his scribe. If this interpretation is accurate, it would mean the *Mu tig phreng ba* commentary was composed by Jo 'ber, i.e. one generation after Nyi ma 'bum.

As stated above, the practices for those with minds for referential objects are categorized into four "yogas of continually practicing," yogas that focus on the familiar foursome of conduct, meditation, view, and result. Each of these is addressed, in turn, according to five subsections. The first section changes according to each of the four yogas. Thus, for practice (*nyams su blangs ba*), the first subsection is on conduct (*spyod pa*), for meditation, it is on meditation, and so on. After this, the remaining subsections are addressed: (2) pith instructions (*man ngag*), (3) realization (*dgongs pa*), (4) afflictions to be abandoned (*nyon mongs*), (5) the person who results from practicing that yoga (*gang zag*). In what follows, for the sake of what we hope is clarity (and we recognize this is getting complicated), we have broken from the order followed in Nyi ma 'bum's text (and thus represented in the outline above) and chosen instead to address all of the first subsections for each of the four yogas first, then all of the second subsections (on the pith instructions for each of the four yogas), then all the third subsections (on the realizations), then all the fourth subsections (on the afflictions), and finally all the fifth subsections (on the person achieving each yoga).

The first subsection for the first yoga, of continually practicing conduct, is also called "mastery over appearances" (*snang ba dbang bsgyur ci* [sic for *gyi*] *spyod pa*). This involves the seven kinds of behaviors (*brtul zhugs*; Skt. *vrata*).<sup>27</sup> One checks different teachings like a bee testing holes in a cliff-face for her nest; one becomes decided like a swallow swooping straight into her nest; one flees alone to isolated places like a wounded wild herbivore. The behavior of a mute is then missing from Nyi ma 'bum's list, probably the result of a copying error, since

<sup>26</sup> Szántó 2012, 201.

<sup>27</sup> Nyi ma 'bum cites the *Nyi zla kha sbyor* as the source for these behaviors, but there twenty-one are listed. He explains that he focuses only on the main seven. Klong chen pa does the same.

it does appear in Klong chen pa's discussion.<sup>28</sup> The behavior of a crazy person focuses mostly on speech, involving uncontrolled, incoherent jabberings. Behaving like a dog or a pig, one is unconcerned with what is pure or impure. Finally, one behaves like a lion, unafraid, with mastery over the world and magical powers.

The first subsection of the second yoga, of continually practicing meditation, also called "meditation day and night" (*sgom pa nyin mtshan kha sbyor*), at eleven pages (67-78) in Nyi ma 'bum's book, is the longest of the twenty subsections that together comprise his discussion of the practice by those with a mind for referential objects.<sup>29</sup> Nyi ma 'bum divides his discussion of meditation here into four types: (1) the bodhisattva *dhyānas*, (2) the meditation of profound Secret Mantra, (3) the mental concentrations of gods and humans, and (4) the realization of *tathāgatas*. Within the bodhisattva *dhyānas*, after quickly covering natural *dhyāna* and the *dhyānas* of dwelling of the levels, he devotes more time to the "customized *dhyānas*" for avoiding two kinds of dangers to yogins, i.e. the situational dangers of (i-ii) food and clothing, and the deeper dangers of (iii-iv) one's dreams and latent dispositions (Tib. *bag chags*; Skt. *vāsanās*). For the former, he provides teachings on (i) *bcud len* (Skt. *rasāyana*) and (ii) a combination of breathing practices with eating certain compounds. For the latter, one works with one's dreams in order, ideally, to make them cease, or at least to recognize and achieve lucidity, or failing that, at the very least to make one's dreams related to the dharma. Then one purifies one's latent dispositions through a practice that closely resembles the Rdzogs chen technique of cutting through.

Regarding the session of *dhyāna* for purifying latent dispositions and cutting off craving, one should not intentionally reject what is present, nor run after what is not present. Nor should one cling to what is present. Don't seek the footprint of the past, nor invite expectation of the future. In the present, don't [allow] habitual tendencies and their antidotes any support in one's mental continuum. Thereby, appearances are liberated as they appear, so clinging to the *bardo* as substantial is purified in its own place. Furthermore, since appearances themselves are liberated in the immediacy of their appearing, it will be like a little bird [flying through space] being snatched by a falcon. The movements of consciousness are liberated in the immediacy of their moving, like a breeze wafting through space. Since appearance and the consciousness [of that] are liberated as one (*gnyis med du*), [one's experience] is like water dissolving into water. Because it trans-

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<sup>28</sup> *Tshig don mdzod*, 175.

<sup>29</sup> The subsection is also long in Klong chen pa's *Tshig don mdzod*, filling pages 176-195 in the 2009 publication.



cends the realm of deluded latent dispositions, egoic clinging is severed.<sup>30</sup>

The presence of this passage at this point in the text is somewhat unexpected, since Nyi ma 'bum only addresses Snying thig proper later, under the heading of "practice by those with a mind for awareness' own appearance." Moreover, more-or-less the same passage also appears in the Vimalamitra commentary to the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, and there it is presented as part of *Rdzogs chen*, specifically as distinct from the teachings of other "ordinary" vehicles (*theg pa thun mong*).<sup>31</sup> Here one sees how, even when writing about lower practices, such as those for people with minds for referential objects as he is here, Nyi ma 'bum's discussions are nonetheless colored by his Snying thig interests. His blurring of doxographical lines may also be a result of the *Seventeen Tantras'* own tendency to include all sorts of practices, from *bcud len* to *rtsa rlung*, though often with a Snying thig spin. Even as Nyi ma 'bum works to organize all this into distinct doxographical categories, he remains part of the world of the *Seventeen Tantras* and their more wholistic (not to say grab-bag) approach.

Continuing his discussion of "meditation day and night," Nyi ma 'bum next turns to the meditation of profound Secret Mantra. Here, he presents the yogas of channels, winds, and drops. Though he lists them in this order, he addresses the winds first. Klong chen pa corrects this and adds a longer quotation about the channels from the *Sgra thal 'gyur*. Nonetheless, both authors' discussions of all three elements are brief and consist primarily of quotations from the *Sgra thal 'gyur* with little explanation. Beyond this, Nyi ma 'bum writes, the reader "should learn about the methods for practicing such things from elsewhere."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 72. *Bag chags sbyang zhing zhen pa bcad pa bsam gtan gyi thun ni/ yod pa tshad du mi spang/ med pa thad du mi btsal/ yod pa la mngon par zhen par mi bya'ol de yang 'das pa'i rje ma bcad/ ma 'ongs pa'i sngon mi bsul da ltar bag chags gnyen po dang bcas pa rgyud la ma brten pas/ snang ba snang ba nas grol bas bar do dngos por 'dzin pa rang sar dag/ de yang snang ba nyid snang thog tu grol bas bye'u khras khyer ba lta bu 'byung ngo/ 'gyu ba 'gyus thog du grol bas bar snang gi bser bu lta bu'ol snang shes gnyis med du grol bas/ chu bo la chu bo thim pa lta bu'ol de ni bag chags 'khrul pa'i yul 'das pas/ bdag tu lta ba'i zhen pa bcad pa'o.*

<sup>31</sup> Compare *Pan chen dri med bshes gnyen gyi dgongs nyams sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud sgra thal 'gyur rtsa 'grel*, 154a3-4. The passage appears immediately after the commentator's discussion (on 151a.1-153b.5) of "the special way that is superior to the common vehicles" (*theg pa thun mong ba las ji ltar 'phags lugs khyad par can*).

<sup>32</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 74. *nyams su blang pa'i thabs ni/ gzhan du shes par bya'o*. It is in this section that the folios in the original manuscript have been switched. Unfortunately, the book version follows this scrambled order. Thus, from (book 73.6) *bar chad sel ba'i yi ge phaT... down to... de nas skya sang seng du gyur pa dang* (74.6), needs to be moved down to right after: *skye med bsam blo dang bral ba'i nyams su myong pa mi skye mi srid do* (76.7), i.e. just before *de ma mos na*.

In fact, he repeats this admonition four times in the brief space of this section. Here at least, then, he maintains a stricter boundary between Rdzogs chen and ordinary tantric practice.

Next, he turns to the third type of “meditation day and night,” i.e. the mental concentrations of gods and humans, which he divides into those meditations with supports and those without (*dmigs pa rten can dang rten med*). Klong chen pa refers to the same distinction using slightly different terms, so that both kinds of meditations have supports, the former with coarse supports and the latter with subtle (*dmigs rten rags pa dang phra ba*). The former are drawn, once more, from the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, and consist of a series of meditations on sensory experiences such as music, smells, and so on. Klong chen pa adds some helpful instruction that is not present in Nyi ma 'bum, explaining that the practitioner should meditate with eyes open and focus on the sensory experiences while remaining in the present moment, without past or future. Here again, Nyi ma 'bum prefers to direct his reader to “other tantras and pith instructions” for more detail. He does go into greater depth on the meditations without support, noting that the *Nyi zla kha sbyor* lists twenty-one different practices that are relevant, but that he here condenses them into seven. Thus, Klong chen pa provides the entire *Nyi zla kha sbyor* quotation, but Nyi ma 'bum chops it up, selecting just seven out of the twenty-one practices (nos. 1, 4-7, 15, and 16). Nyi ma 'bum also mentions that the *Snying gzer chen po* offers more specifics on the techniques, a fact that Klong chen pa excludes. This work may no longer be extant but does appear in the catalogues of the “119 Pith Instructions” (*Man ngag brgya bcu dgu*) of the *Bi ma snying thig*.<sup>33</sup> Oddly, when Nyi ma 'bum proceeds to discuss his seven practices in more detail, he follows an order that is yet different from the one offered in his chopped-up quotation (nos. 1, 7, 6, 5, 4, 15, 16). Each practice involves a brief meditation, combining movements of the breath and body, focusing on syllables, or deconstructing reality into emptiness, finally resulting in some sort of non-conceptual state.

The fourth and final type of “meditation day and night” involves a short discussion of meditating day and night without distinction. Because it is the realization of *tathāgatas*, there is apparently not much to say.

Now we turn to the first subsection of the *third* yoga, of continuously practicing the view: “the view that severs the stream into the city” (*lta ba grong khyer rgyun gcod*). (The city is that of the womb and thus of rebirth.) Nyi ma 'bum begins with a brief mention of the “gen-

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, *Man ngag nges pa'i kha byang ming rnam par bkod pa*, in *Bi ma snying thig* (Dpal brtsegs), vol. 2, p. 240.

eral views" (*phyi yi lta ba*) of the eight vehicles beneath Atiyoga. Having dispensed with those, he focuses his attention on the view of the ninth vehicle of the Great Perfection. What follows is a discussion of the view in which all things are seen as empty, illusory, dream-like, and so on. The discussion is divided according to outer, inner, and secret views. In the context of the latter, he mentions seeing the linked chains (*lu gu rgyud*) of awareness. In doing so, Nyi ma 'bum again blurs the line between other practices (for those with minds for referential objects) and Snying thig-specific ones (for those with minds for awareness' own appearance). The discussion is notably removed by Klong chen pa, perhaps because he preferred not to address such visions until the section on practices for those with a mind for awareness' own appearance (see below).

Next we have the first subsection of the fourth, and last yoga, of continuously practicing the result, also called "the naturally pure result" (*rang bzhin rnam dag gi 'bras bu*). Nyi ma 'bum's central concern in this section is to clarify that the result of these practices by "those with a mind for referential objects" is irreversible. He compares it to Bhallātaka nut, which is used to draw permanent marks on things. He also compares it to a king's irreversible rule after he takes over a country and kills or imprisons all opposition.<sup>34</sup> In explaining these metaphors, Nyi ma 'bum says that "the true result does not revert to being a cause."<sup>35</sup>

At this point, we have finished explaining the first subsection for each of the yogas of continuous practice. Now we turn to the second subsection of the pith instructions for each. These four instructions correspond to the well-known four kinds of direct settling (*cog bzhag rnam pa bzhi*), also referred to by Nyi ma 'bum as nakedly settling ((g)cer bzhag).<sup>36</sup> In later times, this foursome would be extracted from Nyi ma 'bum's wider discussion of the practices by those with minds for referential objects and made central to the practice of cutting through.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> While not with the same wording, a similar metaphor of a new king imprisoning the old ministers is also seen in the *gsang skor* tantra, the *Thig le kun gsal chen po'i rgyud*, 145.6-146.2. For more on this text, see below, n. 59.

<sup>35</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 83: *don gyi 'bras bu bsgyur mi 'dogs pa*, which we correct to: *don gyi 'bras bu rgyur mi ldog pa*, following *Tshig don mdzod*, 198, and *Bi ma la'i snyan brgyud 'grel tig chen mo*, 70b.2-3. Regarding the metaphor of the Bhallāka nut, see also *Dgos 'dod gsal byed bshad gzhi'i mchong*, 258, where he writes that its color does not change, though he has the fruit as a jackfruit (*pa na se'i 'bras bu*).

<sup>36</sup> See *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 66; Klong chen pa follows suit--see *Tshig don mdzod*, 176.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Klong chen pa's *Gnad gsum chos nyid kyi 'khor lo*, in *Bla ma yang thig*, vol. 10, 126-28, a teaching on the four settlings that ends with the summary statement, "In this way, all that is taught here liberates without trace immediately upon contact and gathers within the state of resting naturally without hopes and

In his *Tshig don mdzod*, Klong chen pa draws on the same foursome in discussing direct transcendence.<sup>38</sup>

The first settling, which forms the pith instructions of the yoga of continuously practicing the conduct, is called "the nakedly settling appearances" (*snang ba gcer bzhang*). Nyi ma 'bum distinguishes two kinds. In the first, by training in the various qualities of one's fragmented experience (*chos can dum bu*), allowing them to come and go, one purifies these reflections of awareness. In the second, by training more generally in the shared aspect of those qualities (*chos can spyi'i rnam pa*), one purifies their nature. The second settling, belonging to the yoga of meditating, is "the immediately settling ocean" (*rgya mtsho lcog bzhang*). This is a meditation for settling the eyes (which are commonly associated with the ocean, because of their watery nature) and the visual consciousness so that they no longer chase after visual experiences, just as the ocean remains unperturbed by the reflections of the stars and moon on its surface. The third settling, which constitutes the second sub-section of the yoga of the view, is "immediately settling the mountain" (*ri bo lcog bzhang*). Here, the view is compared to a mountain, both in the sense of its stability (*mi 'gyur ba*) and in that one can comprehend all the lower vehicles from on high. Finally, the fourth settling for the result is immediately settling awareness (*rig pa lcog bzhang*), whereby awareness accompanies any appearances that occur. In this way, the four settlings map a progression from how to relate to appearances, through settling one's eyes, then realizing the view, and finally seeing all appearances as the play of awareness.

The remaining three subsections--of realization, afflictions, and kinds of person--are short and quite clear, so we have chosen not to address them here. With this, then, our discussion of the practices for those with minds for referential objects comes to an end.

### V. Practices by Those with Minds for Awareness' Own Appearance

Nyi ma 'bum turns next to the central practices of the Snying thig tradition, i.e. cutting through and direct transcendence, which he terms practices for those with minds for awareness' own appearance. He

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fears. These are the means for practicing the essence of cutting through, which [constitutes] the foundation" (*de ltar bstan pa thams cad kyang thugs phrad rjes med du grol nas/ sor gzhag re dogs med pa'i ngang du 'dus tel/ gzhi khregs chod kyi ngo bo nyams su blang thabs so*).

<sup>38</sup> *Tshig don mdzod*, 253-56. There, however, he lists them in a slightly different order and describes them more in terms of the four visions. He lists them as: (1) *ri bo cog gzhag*, (2) *rgya mtsho cog gzhag*, (3) *rig pa cog gzhag*, (4) *snang ba cog gzhag*. Closely following the *Yi ge med pa'i rgyud* (226-27), he also associates each with *lta ba*, *dgongs pa*, *man ngag*, and *thabs*.

opens his discussion with a list of seven crucial points (*gnad bdun*) that distinguish Rdzogs chen from the “common” (*tha mal pa*) practices addressed above:

- The crucial point of there being no difference between those of sharp or dull faculties.
- The crucial point of not attaining buddhahood through words.
- The crucial point of awareness having nothing positive nor negative.
- The crucial point of karma having no virtue nor sin.<sup>39</sup>
- The crucial point of the other vehicles being [nothing but] conceptual fabrications.
- The crucial point of determining by means of the senses.
- The crucial point of the three [awakened] bodies already being the appearances of the path.

Following this list, Nyi ma ‘bum proceeds to his presentation of cutting through, which he divides into (1) establishing that which is to be realized and (2) the lama’s pith instructions on how to realize that. Klong chen pa opts instead to follow Śrī Siṃha by dividing the topic into three teachings that play on the very Tibetan image of a travelling caravan passing through mountainous terrain: (i) resolving (lit. “cresting the pass”) the exhaustion of phenomena as the great primordial purity, (ii) confining (lit. “restricting to the gorge”) non-action to naked unimpededness, (iii) tightly binding (lit. “cinching down”) total liberation within the great equality.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Klong chen pa’s entire discussion of cutting through, largely consisting of a series of long quotations, represents a significant break from his usual pattern of copying Nyi ma ‘bum.

In his treatment of direct transcendence, Klong chen pa again breaks from Nyi ma ‘bum by inserting a long introductory discussion of the practice’s superiority to cutting through. He begins with a list of seven differences between the two practices. More-or-less the same list also appears in his *Theg mchog mdzod*, though in a different order, and it is perhaps significant that Rig ‘dzin Rgod ldem inserts the same list into his *Bi ma la’i snyan brgyud ‘grel tig chen mo*, though following the

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<sup>39</sup> Here, the manuscript (at 61b.6-62a.1) appears to be corrupt due to a scribal copying error. Following Rig ‘dzin Rgod ldem’s *Bi ma la’i snyan brgyud ‘grel tig chen mo* (71b.5), we read the lines as: [*rig pa*] *las la bzang ngan med pa’i* [*gnad*] *las la dge sdig med pa’i gnad*.

<sup>40</sup> *Tshig don mdzod*, 202.

order in the *Theg mchog mdzod*.<sup>41</sup> This raises the question of the relationship between Rig 'dzin Rgod ldem's work and the writings of Klong chen pa, who was his senior by twenty-nine years, but this issue is beyond the scope of the present article.

Nyi ma 'bum has no such sevenfold list and turns instead to a set of preliminary practices specific to direct transcendence. He categorizes them as the three guidings (*sna khrid pa gsum*): "guiding the three bodies," "guiding the mind," and "guiding awareness." The three guidings also appear in the Vimalamitra-attributed commentary to the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, but they are not seen in any of the *Seventeen Tantras*. This said, the practices that comprise each guiding do appear in the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, scattered across its first chapter.<sup>42</sup> Guiding the three bodies involves training in the sounds of the four elements; guiding the mind involves the preliminary purifications of body, speech, and mind; guiding awareness involves the practice of separating *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* (*'khor 'das ru shan*). In the *Sgra thal 'gyur* itself, only the second of these sets of practices, i.e. the purifications of body, speech, and mind are termed "preliminary practices" (*sngon du 'gro ba*); the practices comprising the other two sets are simply discussed as particular Great Perfection practices. The *Sgra thal 'gyur* commentary, however, frames all three sets as preliminary practices.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, both the commentary's author and Nyi ma 'bum appear to have extracted training in the sounds of the elements and separating *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* from the tantra and repackaged them, alongside the *Sgra thal 'gyur* tantra's own threefold preliminary practices, under the labels of the three guidings *qua* three sets of preliminaries for direct transcendence. In this way, certain practices that were central to the *Sgra thal 'gyur* (particularly training in the sounds of the elements) appear to have been

<sup>41</sup> Compare *Tshig don mdzod*, 231, *Theg mchog mdzod*, 229-230, and *Bi ma la'i snyan brgyud 'grel tig chen mo*, 336.

<sup>42</sup> For the passages corresponding to the three guidings in the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, see: the answer to question twenty-five (54.2-55.2), on the *sku gsum ngo bo ci ltar bslab* (= *sku gsum gyi sna 'khrid pa*); the answer to question twenty-nine (60.2-61.2), on *sems 'dul bsgom pa gang la bgyi* (= *sems gyi sna 'khrid pa*); and the answer to question fifty-eight (92.1-93.5), on *'khor 'das ru shan gang gis phyed* (= *rig pa'i sna 'khrid pa*).

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, *Pan chen dri med bshes gnyen gyi dgongs nyams sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud sgra thal 'gyur rtsa 'grel*, 84b-85a (e.g.: *sngon du 'gro ba'i gnad chen po lugs gsum yod de...*). Note that on 8a, the same text correlates the three guidings to those preliminary practices for oneself (= *'khor 'das ru shan*), others (training in the sounds of the elements), and those that do not distinguish oneself and others (i.e. guiding the mind), implying that guiding the mind was still held in the highest regard. Elsewhere again (4b), the commentary presents the preliminaries as composed of the purifications of body, speech, and mind, with no mention of the other guidings. Still another approach to the three guidings is seen on 23b.

downgraded to preliminary practices soon after the tantra's composition. By the time of 'Jigs med gling pa's *Khrid yig ye shes bla ma*, all three sets of preliminary practices were being presented as the preliminaries for not just direct transcendence but all of the Great Perfection.<sup>44</sup> In the same passage, 'Jigs med gling pa goes on to explain that in his day training in the sounds of the elements was no longer practiced, so despite its presence in the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, it could now be ignored.

In turning to the main topic of direct transcendence, we should first note a possibly significant difference between Nyi ma 'bum and Klong chen pa in their initial presentation of cutting through and direct transcendence. Just after listing the seven crucial points that distinguish Rdzogs chen (see above), Nyi ma 'bum writes:

Regarding these extraordinary instructions, there is [i] the practice of cutting through in which the lazy attain buddhahood immediately, without meditation, and [ii] the practice of direct transcendence in which the diligent attain buddhahood gradually with meditation.<sup>45</sup>

When we turn to the parallel passage in Klong chen pa's *Tshig don mdzod*, we see that he largely follows Nyi ma 'bum's lead but removes all mention of the sudden and gradual approaches:

Furthermore, cutting through is a path that effortlessly self-liberates, the practice of naked awareness without relying on visions (*snang ba*), the crucial points for those of sharp faculties, in which the lazy attain buddhahood without meditation. Direct transcendence is that which liberates with effort, in which, through relying on visions of clear light, the diligent attain buddhahood in this life, purifying one's corporeal body into a body of light.<sup>46</sup>

It seems that Klong chen pa may have resisted framing direct transcendence as a gradual path. That he specifies that direct transcendence grants buddhahood in this very life may reflect his view of it as a supremely transformative practice. Following his discussion of cutting through, when Klong chen pa introduces the subject of direct transcendence, he refers to it as a practice for "the diligent to be liberated

<sup>44</sup> *Khrid yig ye shes bla ma*, 309-310.

<sup>45</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 84. *Khyad par du 'phags pa'i gdams ngag 'di la le lo can ma bsgom par lam cig char du sangs rgyas par byed pa khriigs chod du nyams su blangs par byed pa dang/ brtson 'grus can sgoms te lam rims kyis sangs rgyas par byed pa thod rgal du nyams su blangs pa'o.*

<sup>46</sup> *Tshig don 'dzod*, 201. *de yang khregs chod ni lam 'bad med du rang grol ba snang ba la ma ltos par rig pa rjen pa nyams su len pa le lo can ma bsgoms par 'tshang rgya ba dbang po rnon po'i gnad yin la/ thod rgal ni 'bad bcas su grol ba 'od gsal gyi snang ba la ltos nas brtson 'grus can tshe 'di nyid du rdos bcas 'od lus su dag nas 'tshang rgya ba ste.*

right on the path."<sup>47</sup> It is at this point that Klong chen pa also inserts his list of seven differences between cutting through and direct transcendence. Taken together, these seven differences imply direct transcendence's superiority to cutting through. All this may be a reflection of the growing centrality of direct transcendence in the Snying thig tradition.

When we look even further back, before Nyi ma 'bum and even his father, Zhang ston, into the texts of the so-called Secret Cycle (*gsang skor*), we see indications that a visionary practice like that of direct transcendence was still considered somehow inferior to a simpler cutting through-like meditation. First, we read: "For those yogins with wisdom of little power, it is taught that without meditation there will be no awakening."<sup>48</sup> Then, a few pages later, chapter forty-two opens as follows:

Then again the Lord of the Guhyakas asked:  
"O Bhagavan Vajradhara! Please teach the [practice] with meditation."

The teacher replied:  
"Vajrapāni, attend carefully!  
I will teach meditation for those of different minds [i.e. practice with meditation].

If you do not understand the [practice] without meditation,  
You will be mentally engaged without awareness, and  
Not realize that which is beyond deliberate action.  
You will not reach the meaning through continual concentration.

If you do not understand the [practice] with meditation,  
You will be no different from normal people.  
You will stray into mediocrity.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Tshig don mdzod*, 231. brtson 'grus can lam thog nas grol bar byed pa.

<sup>48</sup> *Thig le kun gsal chen po'i rgyud*, 140.1. Rnal 'byor shes rab rtsal chung la/ ma bsgoms sangs mi rgya bar bstan.

<sup>49</sup> *Thig le kun gsal chen po'i rgyud*, 144.4-6. *De nas yang gsang ba'i bdag pos zhus pa/ kye kye bcom ldan rdo rje 'chang/ bsgom du yod pa bshad du gsol/ zhes zhus sol/ ston pas bka' sstal pa/ rdo rje 'dzin pa nges zung zhig/ blo gzhan rnams la bsgom pa bstan/ bsgom du med par ma shes na/ ma tshor yid la byed pa dang/ bya rtsol 'das par mi rtogs tel rgyun gyi ting nge 'dzin gyis don mi rnyed/ bsgom du yod par ma shes na/ skye bo rnams dang khyad par med/ tha mal rang rgyud gol bar 'gro.* The same passage also opens chapter fifty-nine in the closely related (and in many parts largely identical) *Spros bral don gsal chen po'i rgyud* (see 141.6-142.2). Higgins 2013, 19 n. 6, inconclusively wonders which of these two works might be earlier. Regarding this question, it may be notable that the *Thig le kun gsal*, which is classified in the Rnying ma rgyud 'bum as a *gsang skor* work, includes a colophon that reads: "One like me, this humble practitioner Bdud 'dul, endowed with the residue of earlier karma, encountered this king of tantras, [*Thig le kun gsal*] (*bdag 'dra ban chung bdud 'dul 'di/ sngon gyi las*



The chapter proceeds “to teach the topic of [practice] with meditation,” and it is here that we find a description of a practice very much resembling direct transcendence, with three lamps (instead of the four or more known in the later Snying thig) and so on.<sup>50</sup> From this, we may extrapolate that, in the Secret Cycle at least, the practice with meditation corresponds to direct transcendence and is for those inferior yogins who are unable to achieve buddhahood without meditation.

## VI. Exhaustion of reality: Appearance or Disappearance?<sup>51</sup>

Apart from Klong chen pa’s list of the seven differences between cutting through and direct transcendence, his discussion of the latter largely mirrors Nyi ma ‘bum’s. He does insert many more quotations from various Snying thig tantras, but his interpretations remain similar. Until, that is, he reaches the final fourth vision of exhaustion of reality. On this point, Nyi ma ‘bum is quite brief, introducing the topic with a short but intriguing line: “Through the exhaustion of those [visions’] increase, those appearing experiences [are seen to] have no essence of appearing whatsoever. This is termed, ‘the vision of the exhaustion of reality.’”<sup>52</sup> Beyond this, Nyi ma ‘bum only quotes a few tantras and adds that “when the four visions are completed, the fortunate one will definitely attain buddhahood without the appearance of defiled aggregates.”<sup>53</sup>

Taken together, the two statements raise the question of the place

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*‘phro ldan pa yis/ rgyud rgyal kun gsal ‘di dang ‘phrad*). Similar language is seen in the colophon to the *Rdo rje rtse mo*, another *gsang skor* tantra, where Lce btsun Seng ge dbang phyug is named more explicitly as, “I, Lce btsun Seng ge, endowed with the fortunate residue of karma,...” (*las ‘phro skal bar ldan pa’i lce btsun seng ge bdag*). Given the similar language, we would suggest that the *Thig le kun gsal* may have also been “revealed” by Lce btsun, which would match the *Rdzogs pa chen po snying tig gi lo rgyus chen mo*’s account that the Secret Cycle was revealed and held by Lce tsun and Lce sgom nag po prior to Zhang ston and the formation of the Nying thig/Yang *gsang bla na med pa’i skor*.

<sup>50</sup> Here we understand the three lamps to be the eyes, the external space, and the *thig le*, though only two are listed on p. 146. On p. 147, however, the three are listed separately, though named “the triad of appearances” (*snang ba gsum sbyor*). Note that here, in this tantra of the Secret Cycle which therefore is likely prior to Zhang ston’s formalization of the Snying thig (*gsang ba bla na med’i skor*), the lamps (*sgron ma*) and the appearances/visions (*snang ba*) seem to be used interchangeably.

<sup>51</sup> James Gentry has an excellent forthcoming article (see Bibliography for details) on differing opinions regarding the status of appearance in the fourth vision. Our observations below build on, and benefit from, his insights.

<sup>52</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 98: *de dag gi ‘phel ba zad pas snang ba’i nyams de dag gang du snang ba’i ngo bo med pa ni/ chos nyid zad pa’i snang ba zhes tha snyad du bya ba’o/*

<sup>53</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 98: *de ltar snang ba bzhi mother phyin pa’i dus nal skal ldan de zag pa dang bcas pa’i phung po mi snang par sangs rgya bar nges so.*

of appearances in the final fourth vision. Here it is significant that Nyi ma 'bum understands that which is exhausted to be the *increase* in visions, i.e. the increase that characterizes the two previous stages of direct transcendence (*nyams gong 'phel* and *rig pa tshad phebs*).<sup>54</sup> This, then, would appear to be not an exhaustion of all appearances but only of their continued development.<sup>55</sup> The rest of Nyi ma 'bum's first line offers the paradoxical statement that, within this state, any meditative appearances still may appear yet they have "no essence of appearing"-the usual nature of appearance is missing; in some sense, appearance finds no purchase. This can be read two ways. It may say there are no appearances, or that appearances are imbued with essencelessness. Nyi ma 'bum seems not to foreclose either reading. His second sentence on the results of direct transcendence provides further clarification: "When the four visions are completed, the fortunate one will definitely attain buddhahood without the appearance of defiled aggregates." Here, he says there is no appearance of defiled forms within buddhahood, however, this still allows for the possibility of pure appearances. To support such a view, Nyi ma 'bum cites two passages from the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*. First: "This vision of exhaustion of reality, having emptied experiential appearances, also exhausts the body and the sensory objects. Having freed one from erroneous thoughts, it is beyond expressible words." Second: "In that way, having severed the continuum of the elemental body, without the defiled aggregates appearing, buddhahood is attained in this very life."<sup>56</sup> Both of these sentences allow for the possibility of pure appearances continuing.

It may be said, however, that Nyi ma 'bum seems to have "cherry-picked" these two lines to support his reading, for other parts of the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* suggest a very different interpretation of the result. Take, for example, this passage on the final result of Great Perfection practice:

<sup>54</sup> In doing so, he agrees with many other authors, including the *Bu gcig gi gsang 'grel*, *Sangs rgyas sras gcig*, *Bi ma snying thig*, vol. 1, p. 140: *zad pa'i zhes pa gong du 'phel rgyu*.

<sup>55</sup> The exhaustion of increase is mentioned in other works too; see, for example, the *Mkha' 'gro thams cad kyi snying khrag klong gsal 'bar ma nyi ma'i gsang rgyud*, 274.4-5, and the Vimalamitra-attributed commentary to the *Sgron ma 'bar ba* (*Gser gyi me tog mdzes pa rin po che 'bar ba'i rgyud don gsal bar byed pa mu tig phreng ba brgyus*, 264.1-2).

<sup>56</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 98: *chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba 'di/ nyams kyi snang ba stongs nas ni/ lus zad dbang po'i yul kyang zad/ rtog tshogs 'khrul pa las grol nas/ brjod pa'i tshig dang bral ba'o*. And: *de ltar 'byung lus rgyun chad nas/ zag bcas phung po mi snang bar/ tshe 'di nyi la sangs rgya'o*. Earlier, when Nyi ma 'bum first introduces the four visions of direct transcendence, he quotes another line from the *Sgra thal 'gyur* that supports his more positive reading of essenceless visions; see p. 93: *chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba yis/ khams gsum 'khor ba'i rgyun thag bcad*.

Though the result is inexpressible,  
 When one reaches the stage of the exhaustion of phenomena,  
 One's own tenet system collapses.  
 At this point, the lama's pith instructions fade away.  
 The ways of view, meditation, and action are voided,  
 So there are no phenomena to appear.  
 The continua of buddha-bodies and gnosis cease,<sup>57</sup>  
 So there is no buddha and no sentient being.  
 In short, nothing at all remains.  
 Since nothing has gone before, nothing is to come.<sup>58</sup>

Such a passage takes a far more extreme position vis-a-vis appearances within buddhahood, allowing for nothing, not even gnosis, buddha-bodies, nor buddhas.

Right at the end of Nyi ma 'bum's text, he addresses more directly this question of appearances within the fourth vision. There, we encounter the following detailed discussion of his complex position:

Some people, out of mistaken understanding, [claim] that after exhaustion of reality (*chos nyid zad*), it is not reasonable for there to be appearances. This should be refuted, saying, if that were true, then how would buddhas, bhagavans, bodhisattvas, empty luminosity, and so forth be reasonable? Some others assert that nothing whatsoever appears. Then there would be an absolute<sup>59</sup> void--the exhaustion of causes and the exhaustion of conditions; that would be nihilism, or a total void.<sup>60</sup>

Regarding the line, 'liberation is the beginning,' [some say this means] there is a place to return and a returner, or that there is something like a dissolution [into buddhahood]. This is not the case. [Liberation is just] a realization of the way of abiding, as explained above.<sup>61</sup> Some others posit that, because the final [result] is Vajradhara, it cannot be an exhaustion

<sup>57</sup> This line is relevant to our discussion of the presence (or lack thereof) of the three bodies and the five gnoses within the final result; see below.

<sup>58</sup> *Sgra thal 'gyur*, 97.1-3. 'bras bu brjod par mi nus kyang/ chos rnam zad sar phyin pa dang/ rang gi grub pa'i mtha' yang 'jig/ 'di dus bla ma'i man ngag nub/ blta sgom spyod pa'i mtha' stongs pas/ chos su snang ba yod ma yin/ sku dang ye shes rgyun chad pas/ sangs rgyas med cing sems can med/ mdor na gang yang gnas pa med/ song ba med pas 'ong ba med pa'o.

<sup>59</sup> *stong pa lhang ba med par 'gyur*: Rig 'dzin Rgod ldem reads *lhang ba* as *ldang ba*, while Sangs rgyas gling pa prefers *snang ba*.

<sup>60</sup> Here we follow both Rig 'dzin Rgod ldem and Sangs rgyas gling pa in correcting *sems stong* to *bem stong*.

<sup>61</sup> In Yeshi and Dalton 2018, 266, we translated this same passage. Since that time, we have revised our understanding of its significance. We now take the *slar zlog bya* to be referring to the return to the original ground upon liberation, rather than a "relapse" into *samsāra* following liberation. The central point, that Nyi ma 'bum is insisting on there being no change upon liberation, remains intact.

of reality. If that were the case, then there would come the faults of [i] it following that the [other] buddhas become non-buddhas and of [ii] the three buddha-bodies being separate and [the buddhas would be ranked according to] better or worse. Alternatively, there would come the many faults of [those other buddhas] being absolutely non-existent. Furthermore, even when others assert that [the final result] consists of four or five buddha-bodies, they are [just] differentiating the qualities of the *dharmakāya*, but there is no [real] difference in [the buddhas'] knowing nor realization. As it is said: "The essence of total non-conceptuality itself is the unchanging vajra body."

Still others say the three bodies and the five gnoses are the path but not the result.<sup>62</sup> Regarding the three bodies and the five gnoses being the path, [this is valid, because] the entirety of Secret Mantra asserts that the result is taken as the path. Regarding the claim that they are not the result, [such a statement] is only intended to free one from a fixated clinging that is attached to the result being the three bodies, or alternatively to refute those who assert that the ultimate has six--the three bodies plus the three interiors for a total of six.<sup>63</sup>

This is a rather dense passage. In line with his cherry-picking of quotations above, Nyi ma 'bum begins by critiquing the view that there are no appearances in the final state of exhaustion of reality. Such a view, he writes, would entail there being no buddhas nor luminosity and would result in nihilism. This said, he then turns to other views

<sup>62</sup> Here we follow *Bi ma la'i snyan brgyud 'grel tig chen mo*, 397.5, which corrects Nyi ma 'bum's *lam gyi 'bras bu ma yin to lan yin gyis 'bras bu ma yin*.

<sup>63</sup> *Rdzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 127-28. *gang zag kha cig gis log par rtog pas/ chos nyid zad nas snang ba mi rigs so zhe na/ de ltar na sangs rgyas dang/ bcom ldan 'das dang/ byang chub dang/ stong gsal la sogs pa yang ci la rigs zhes zlog par bya 'o/ yang kha cig nas cir yang mi snang zer na rgyu zad rkyen zad kyi stong pa lhang ba med par 'gyur ba ni/ mu stegs par 'gyur la/ yang na sems stong du 'gyur ro/ 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 yod pa lta bu ni ma yin stel/ gnas lugs rtogs par gong du bshad/ kha cig mthar rdo rje 'dzin par bzhad pas/ chos nyid zad par mi 'gyur ro/ zhes zer nas/ de ltar na sangs rgyas kyang sangs rgyas ma yin par thal ba dang sku gsum kyang tha dad dam bzang ngan du 'gyur ba 'i skyon dang/ yang na chang chad du 'gyur ba 'i skyon du ma zhig 'byung bar 'gyur ro/ yang kha cig sku bzhi dang lnga la sogs pa 'dod na'ang chos sku nyid kyi yon tan so sor phyee ba yin gyil/ mkhyen cha'am dgongs pa la khyad par yod pa ni ma yin te/ kun tu mi rtog ngo bo nyid/ 'gyur ba med pa rdo rje 'i sku/ zhes gsungs pa lta bu 'o/ yang kha cig sku gsum ye shes lnga lam gyi 'bras bu ma yin zhes bya ba yang/ sku gsum ye shes lnga lam yin pa ni/ gsang sngags mtha' dag 'bras bu lam du byed pa zhes bya bar 'dod pa yin/ 'bras bu ma yin zhes zer ba ni/ 'bras bu sku gsum du zhen pa 'i mthar 'dzin bral ba la dgongs pa'am/ yang sku gsum nyid las sbubs gsum mthar thug drug 'dod pa de 'gengs pa'o. The last sentence here may be corrupt; see Klong chen pa's corrections below. Regarding the three interiors mentioned at the end here, see Klong chen pa's *Zab mo yang tig*, vol. 12, 277, where he lists them as: *rin chen sbubs*, 'od kyi sbubs, and *bag chags sbubs*. The triad maps roughly onto the three bodies or *ngo bo-rang bzhin-thugs rje*.*

that posit a more reified buddhahood. Referencing the line that summarizes the eleventh topic, “liberation is the beginning,” he insists that awakening involves no place nor person.<sup>64</sup> He considers a prevalent claim that final awakening is identical with the *dharmakāya* buddha Vajradhara alone. Such a claim makes no sense, he writes, as it would create a hierarchy of buddhas with Vajradhara at the top, or else entail that all other buddhas cease to exist. It would also separate the *sambhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya* from the *dharmakāya*, relegating them to an inferior status. Here, despite just having criticized the nonexistence of buddhas within exhaustion of reality, in these sentences Nyi ma ‘bum now implies that all buddhas are exhausted. All that is left is “the essence of non-conceptuality.” Finally, having thus highlighted the problems with saying either that there are no appearances or that there are appearances, Nyi ma ‘bum ends with an unexpected discussion of the three bodies and the five gnoses. He accepts claims that the three bodies and five gnoses are integral to the path, noting that taking the result as the path is central to much of tantric Buddhism. He then addresses claims that the three bodies and the five gnoses are not present within the result. While he accepts such statements, he is careful to clarify that they are intended only for severing possible attachments to the three bodies and five gnoses; such statements do not mean, he insists, that the bodies and the gnoses are not present within the result.<sup>65</sup> In the end, then, Nyi ma ‘bum concludes with a somewhat more positive position, though one that eludes any conceptualization. Such a position is in line with his discussion of the exhaustion of reality outlined above (“those appearing experiences have no essence of appearing whatsoever”).

Nyi ma ‘bum’s claim that the three bodies and the five gnoses are present within the result is specifically targeted by Klong chen pa. In his *Theg mchog mdzod* he writes:

Suppose an opponent says that [claiming there is no appearance in the result] contradicts the explanation of the three bodies appearing as the path. Some lamas of earlier generations claim: “Regarding the claim that [the three bodies] are not the result, [such a statement] is only intended to free one from a fixated clinging that is attached to the result being the three bodies, or alternatively to refute those who assert that, apart from the three bodies, the three interiors are in the ultimate.” In resolving those contradictions, [this person] posits that in reality [the three bodies] are the result. However, this shows that

<sup>64</sup> For more on Nyi ma ‘bum’s interpretation of this line, see Yeshe and Dalton 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Note that the Dga’ rab rdo rje-attributed commentary to the *Sangs rgyas sras gcig* agrees with this assessment; see *Bu gcig gyi gsang ‘grel*, 140.

he has not understood the essence of primordially pure inner expanse, so this is extremely wrong and not good.<sup>66</sup>

For Klong chen pa, then, it is a terrible mistake to believe that the three bodies are the result. That the quotation he provides matches so closely to Nyi ma 'bum's discussion translated above suggests he is criticizing Nyi ma 'bum in particular. Klong chen pa proceeds to explain that, though the form bodies emerge from the result to help beings, they are not identical with that result. "Apart from the aspect of intrinsic appearance, the *sambhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya* arise in the perception of beings and thereby benefit them. They may be the same in being the [outward] play of awareness, but there remains a difference between the intrinsic appearance [of awareness], which is not seen by beings, and [the form bodies] that arises from that, which are [commonly] seen. Therefore, it is taught that one should distinguish between these two [i.e. intrinsic and outward appearance] that are so similar."<sup>67</sup> In these arguments, then, Klong chen pa goes to considerable lengths to preserve the result, or reality (*chos nyid*), as different from the realm of the appearances of buddhahood. We shall return below to this vehement disagreement the Klong chen pa has with Nyi ma 'bum.

Turning to Rig 'dzin Rgod ldem's version of Nyi ma 'bum's text, we find an approach to the exhaustion of reality that is far more positive. Whereas Rgod ldem tends to copy Nyi ma 'bum on most topics, when it comes to the end of our eighth topic and exhaustion of reality, he makes a significant intervention. He follows Nyi ma 'bum in suggesting that what is exhausted is any further increase, thus leaving open the question of the exhaustion of appearances themselves. However, in place of Nyi ma 'bum's brief statement about appearances being without essence, Rgod ldem offers these lines:

At this time [at the end of the third vision], since awareness has been optimized, not practicing is permissible. However, to liberate [ordinary] forms as gnosis-bodies, one strives at practice, whereby those gnosis-bodies gradually increase. Then, eventually, those increasing signs become exhausted; all appearances are illuminated as the un-

<sup>66</sup> *Theg mchog mdzod*, vol. 2, 479: *sku gsum lam snang du bshad pa dang 'gal lo zhe na/ bla ma snga rabs pa dag na re/ 'bras bu ma yin zhes zer ba ni/ 'bras bu sku gsum du zhen pa'i mthar 'dzin dang bral bar byed pa la dgongs pa'am/ skor [sic for sku] gsum sbubs gsum mthar thug tu 'dod pa de dgag pa la dgongs pa'o zhes 'gal spong mdzad nas/ don la 'bras bur 'jog pa'ang/ ka dag gi nang dbyings kyi ngo bo ma dgongs pa'i rnam 'gyur yin pas shin tu nor te mi legs so.*

<sup>67</sup> *Theg mchog mdzod*, vol. 18, 480: *rang snang gi cha las gdul bya'i snang ngor longs sprul 'char bas don mdzad pa'ang/ rig pa'i rol par gcig kyang/ rang snang gdul byas mi mthong la/ de las shar ba de mthong ba'i khyad yod pas 'dra gnyis shan phyed par bstan pa.*

wavering, unmoving spontaneously present *maṇḍala*. Because the increase of reality is exhausted within that [*maṇḍala*], that is called “the vision of the exhaustion of reality.” The signs of gnosis are perfected, so it is also called “abiding in the state of the Great Perfection.”<sup>68</sup>

Here it becomes apparent that Rig ‘dzin Rgod ldem understands the fourth vision as a time to continue one’s practice.

All this is quite unlike Klong chen pa’s treatment of the exhaustion of reality, at least in his *Tshig don mdzod*. There we read statements of this sort: “Furthermore, external appearances dissolve into the expanse, whereby appearing phenomena dissolve into reality, a reality of which there is absolutely nothing to think or say. That is called exhaustion of reality.”<sup>69</sup> For the most part, Klong chen pa follows such an interpretation, with no appearances possible within the fourth vision. A more detailed, step-by-step account of the exhaustion of reality appears just two pages later, where Klong chen pa traces the process through a series of external, internal, and secret dissolutions. First, externally, all elemental objects—both other objects and one’s own body—cease. Then, internally, one’s mental activities collapse, and finally the secret appearance of clear light dissolves:

As for that [i.e. the vision of exhaustion of reality], by tuning in the crucial points of body and speech, the winds are purified right where they are, whereupon the aspect of the mistaken appearance of external elemental objects and the mind and mental arisings of internal mistaken concepts cease by themselves. As the appearance of the secret clear light increases, all the movements of wind are purified [i.e. cease]. At that time, even the appearance of clear light reaches the point of exhaustion of reality and is liberated into the primordially pure *dharmakāya*. Thus it is said, “all appearing forms are *nirvāṇa*.”<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> *Bi ma la’i snyan brgyud ‘grel tig chen mo*, 348.1-4: ‘*di yi dus su tshad la phebs pas nyams su ma blangs kyang chog la/ ‘on kyang gzugs ye shes kyi sku ru grol bar bya ba’i phyir/ nyams len la brtson par byas pas/ [snga ma] ye shes kyi sku de dag rim par ‘phel bas nal de’i dus su ‘phel ba’i rtags zad de/ snang ba thams cad g.yo ‘gul med par lhun gyis grub pa’i dkyl ‘khor du gsal lo/ de la chos nyid kyi ‘phel zad pas/ chos nyid zad pa’i snang ba zhes kyang bya/ ye shes kyi rtags rdzogs pas rdzogs pa chen po’i ngang la gnas pa zhes kyang bya’o*. Note that the Nechung edition of this passage (vol. 3, 127.2-5) adds *snga ma* to the line: *snga ma ye shes kyi sku de dag*. While this does not disturb our interpretation of line, since it is not present in the Adzom edition, we suspect it to be a later addition so do not translate it. Note too that Rgod ldem’s interpretation of the fourth vision requires us to change our translation from “exhaustion of reality” to “exhaustion of reality.”

<sup>69</sup> *Tshig don mdzod*, 269. *de’ang phyir snang dbyings su thim pas snang ba chos can chos nyid la thim nas chos nyid gang du’ang bsam brjod med pa la chos nyid zad pa zhe bya’o*.

<sup>70</sup> *Tshig don mdzod*, 271. *de la lus ngag gi gnad gcun pas rlung rang sar dag nas phyi byung yul ‘khrul snang gi cha dang/ nang ‘khrul rtog sems sems byung rang ‘gags te/ gsang ba ‘od gsal gyi snang ba gong du ‘phel bas rlung gi g.yo ba thams cad dag dus ‘od gsal gyi*

In his *Tshig don mdzod*, then, which represents Klong chen pa's primary response to Nyi ma 'bum's work, all disappears in the exhaustion of reality, even the clear light of gnosis.

Strangely, however, in his *Bla ma yang thig*, Klong chen pa allows for a somewhat more positive approach in a passage that seems to parallel the quotation above:

Regarding the fourth vision of exhaustion of reality: external and internal physical matter, as well as mistaken mental concepts, along with the increase of appearances, are exhausted. Thus, "reality" is the space-like nature of awareness. "Exhaustion" is the nonexistence of appearances, from external earth, stones, rocks, and mountains, to internal matter such as the illusory body, to the secret oscillations of concepts. As for the "vision," the appearance of compassionate gnosis appears unceasingly, like a sun free of clouds, self-illuminating.<sup>71</sup>

Here, Klong chen pa offers quite a different account of the dissolutions, starting from "external" physical matter, to one's "internal" illusory body, and finally one's "secret" mental activities. (Note that the "illusory body" (*sgyu lus*) here is not the special body achieved in dream or meditation but the ordinary physical body.) Whereas in the *Tshig don mdzod*, the secret dissolution exhausted even the clear light, here it exhausts only conceptual thinking, leaving a kind of "vision" of compassionate gnosis continuing to manifest. While this "vision" has no specificity in terms of "appearances," it would seem, at the very least, to correspond to the clear light mentioned in the earlier passage. Such an approach seems different, then, from the one Klong chen pa takes in his *Tshig don mdzod*. The reason for this difference remains unclear, but it seems Klong chen pa changes his opinions across different texts or perhaps times in his life.

## VI. Conclusions

This paper offered some analysis of the eighth topic of the *Rdzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*. The outline provided represents an initial contribution toward the study of this important chapter, and we hope it helps others to read this crucial work more easily. Nyi ma 'bum's

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*snang ba yang chos nyid zad sar thug nas ngo bo ka dag gi chos skur grol tel/ gzugs snang thams cad mya ngan las 'das pa zhes bya'o*

<sup>71</sup> *Dngos gzhi 'od gsal snying po'i don khrid* (in the *Bla ma yang tig*, vol. 9), p. 202. *bzhi pa chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba ni/ phyi nang gi rdos bcas sems kyi 'khrul rtog snang ba'i 'phel dang bcas pa zad pa'ol/ de'ang chos nyid ni rig pa'i gshis nam mkha' lta bu'ol/ zad pa ni/ phyi sa rdo ri brag/ nang sgyu lus rdos bcas/ gsang ba rnam rtog 'phro 'dus'i snang ba med pa'ol/ snang ba ni nyi ma sprin dang bral ba rang gsal ba bzhin du/ thugs rje ye shes kyi snang ba rgyun mi 'chad par snang ba'o.*



text may represent the earliest comprehensive treatise on the Snying thig tradition as a whole. While Nyi ma 'bum worked very much within the world of the *Seventeen Tantras*, and especially the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, there are occasional moments where his text parts from the tantras to produce a more coherent system. One particularly clear example comes in his treatment of the preliminary practices, which he organizes into the "three guidings" (*sna khrid pa gsum*), a triad cobbled together from practices found scattered throughout the *Sgra thal 'gyur*. The same triad does also appear in the Vimalamitra-attributed commentary to the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, and it remains unclear whether that work was composed before or after Nyi ma 'bum, but in any case, we can see developments within a generation or two of the *Seventeen Tantras* being codified.

As each section was examined herein, some key differences between Nyi ma 'bum's work and the approaches of later authors were highlighted, revealing further points of change within the tradition. For example, where Nyi ma 'bum often blurs the lines between the practices "by those with minds for referential objects" and the classical practices of Rdzogs chen Snying thig, i.e. cutting through and direct transcendence, Klong chen pa clarifies the dividing line, moving elements such as the four immediate settlings out of the section on practices for those with minds for referential objects and into his discussions of cutting through proper.

Finally, some observations are offered on the differences between Nyi ma 'bum's treatment of the result of Snying thig practice, the fourth vision of exhaustion of reality. While Nyi ma 'bum generally resists making a definitive statement, his sympathies seem to lie with the possibility of continued appearances within final buddhahood. Such a view is similar to that of Rig 'dzin Rgod ldem, though this later figure states the case for continued appearances still more clearly. Both authors differ from Klong chen pa in this regard, especially from his earlier writings as represented by the *Tshig don mdzod*. Some of Klong chen pa's other writings, however, such as the *Bla ma yang thig*, show some evidence of a shift in his thinking toward a more positive view of luminous appearances within the final state. Further work is needed on this question and the many other issues involved in the historical development of the rich tradition of Rdzogs chen Snying thig.

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