From Metaphor to Commentary and from Commentary to Catechism: The Formation of a Bon po Scriptural Corpus and Its Authentication

Matthew T. Kapstein

(École Pratique des Hautes Études, PSL Research University, Paris, and The University of Chicago)

In fêting Dan Martin's many contributions to Tibetan Studies with an essay on an aspect of Bon, I fear that I may be acting as the proverbial bearer of coals to Newcastle. Nevertheless, I hope that this may be seen as a small addendum to his many accomplishments in this area, and not merely a reduplication of effort.

Some years ago, I became interested in a 12th-century collection of Bon po treatises, the *Commentaries of the Four Clever Men* (*mkhas pa mi bzhi'i 'grel pa*), devoted to an earlier corpus of scriptures entitled *Byang sems gab pa dgu bskor* (BGGK), or the "Ninefold Cycle of the Secrets of the Enlightened Mind." What interested me above all about these works was how they exemplified the appropriation by the Bon po of many of the tools of Buddhist śāstric commentary, but in the service of a distinctive contemplative tradition, cognate to that of the Great Perfection, which seems to defy the bivalent reasoning on which śāstric modes of analysis are based. My initial findings about this were published in the journal *East and West* and form the background for the present essay.[1] Here, however, I am concerned with the "Ninefold Cycle" itself; I wish to begin to clarify some aspects of its composition, with particular reference to the rhetorical strategies it employs to establish its preeminence as an authentic revelation of the teachings of one of the highest Bon po divinities, the Omnibeneficent White-Light God of the Gshen (*Kun tu bzang po Gshen lha 'od dkar*).

According to Bon po traditions, the "Ninefold Cycle" was first discovered and its primary texts established by the great creative figure in the early second millennium development of Bon, Gshen chen Klu dga' (996–1035).[2] It seems, however, that the redaction of the texts was due in large part to his disciple Zhu yas Legs po (1002–1081), who in

1 Kapstein 2009.

2 I follow the dates proposed by Martin 2001, pp. 88-89. See also pp. 253-255 on the Ninefold Cycle itself.

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his long life is credited with a cardinal role in giving enduring form to the prolific corpus attributed to his master. There are indications, too, that other successors also had a hand in the elaboration of parts of the "Ninefold Cycle." To assign the production of the main works of which the cycle is composed to roughly the half-century spanning the second two quarters of the eleventh century would probably not be far wrong, and, as we shall see, is consistent with their literary features, though there is no reason to exclude the possibility that the collection was given its final form somewhat later, perhaps during the first half of the twelfth century. This coheres well with the mid-twelfth century dating that is, I believe, warranted in the case of the *Commentaries of the Four Clever Men*.[3]

A further consideration in favor of this periodization is found in the fact that much of the redaction of the parallel Rnying ma pa contemplative system, that of the Rdzogs chen Sems phyogs, was accomplished also during the eleventh and early twelfth century by the masters of the Zur lineage, whose connections with their Bon po contemporaries are very well known.[4] In this context, this point must be stressed: both the Rnying ma pa and the Bon po were engaged, during the period under discussion, in promulgating as their supreme teachings closely similar "Great Perfection" systems of contemplation, which, whatever they may have owed to Indian or Chinese Buddhist antecedents, were not simple continuations of either. In some sense, then, we are dealing with a single contemplative tradition that has both Buddhist and Bon po iterations, that seem to emerge within both religious communities almost simultaneously, advanced by the interrelations and dissentions at once joining and dividing the communities in question.

The "Ninefold Cycle" does not, I must emphasize, actually speak of its teaching as "Great Perfection"; its preferred locution is simply "Enlightened Mind," that is, *byang chub kyi sems*, or *bodhicitta* in Sanskrit (a

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[3] In the present essay, however, I am excluding from further consideration the later commentarial elaborations of the Ninefold Cycle, including the *Commentaries of the Four Clever Men* and those by the founder of Sman ri Monastery, Mnyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1356–1415).

[4] Cordial relations between the Zur lineage founder, Zur po che Shākya 'byung gnas, and the Bon po are mentioned in the former's hagiography as given in the traditional Rnying ma pa histories, e.g., Dudjom 1991, pp. 632, 634-635. (Cf. the account of the Zur lineage in Roerich and Chopel 1976.) In the latter episode, following Zur po che's death, a Bon po priest is related as having done homage to, and then melting into light and dissolving into, the great statue of Dpal chen Heruka that Zur po che had miraculously constructed. The affinities we find between the Bon and Buddhist versions of the teachings we are considering here suggests that these legends have their basis in actual relations that existed between the traditions concerned. On the Rdzogs chen traditions current within the early Zur lineage, refer to Kapstein 2008, 2018.

language that these Bon po texts, of course, do not employ). This is sometimes expanded as the "Enlightened Mind that is the Ground of All," *kun gzhi byang chub kyi sems*. The teaching which discloses this principle is often referred to simply as the "Great Vehicle," *theg pa chen po*, the standard Tibetan equivalent of Mahāyāna. This intentionally skewed use of the term, to refer not to the path of the bodhisattva in general but just to what is asserted to be its supreme teaching, finds parallels in contemporaneous Rnying ma pa works,[5] and may have Chinese antecedents, as well. The famous "Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna," the *Dasheng qi xin lun*, for example, though virtually unknown in Tibet, uses "Mahāyāna" in a manner that much resembles the diction of our present texts.[6] Finally, *thig le nyag gcig*, the "sole seminal sphere," is also very frequently employed here as a synonym of Enlightened Mind, as indeed it is elsewhere in both the Bon po and Rnying ma pa Great Perfection traditions.[7]

The corpus of the "Ninefold Cycle" that is attributed to Gshen chen klu dga' comprises six major divisions:[8]

(1) a topical outline, *sa gcod kyi le'u* (3-18)[9]

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5 For instance, in the eleventh-century *Theg pa chen po'i tshul la 'jug pa* of Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po, now translated in Sur 2017.

6 As Girard 2004, xliii, puts it, "Le travail même de la Talité [= *tathātā*] sur tous les êtres pour les mouvoir vers l'éveil suprême est ce que le *Traité* entend par Grand Véhicule." Although the *Dasheng qi xin lun* is not known to have been translated into Tibetan in its entirety, that there was some knowledge of it in Tibetan Chan circles is established by quotations from it in the *Mdo sde brgyad bcu khungs* of Spug Ye shes dbyangs; see Tauscher 2021, p. 200. The surviving citations, however, do not directly concern the interpretation of the term *mahāyāna*.

7 See, for instance, Klein and Wangyal 2006, where "unbounded wholeness"—their translation of *thig le ngag gcig*—is the guiding theme of the work as a whole.

8 The text of the "Ninefold Cycle" that I follow here is a photocopy of a lithographic reproduction of an *dbu med* manuscript, perhaps from Dol po. Although there is no publication information in my copy, I believe that it is the text that was issued by the Tibetan Bonpo Monastic Community, Dolanji, H. P., in 1967. It appears to be identical to the version catalogued in Martin et al. 2003, no. 99, pp. 437-444, which should be consulted for further details of the colophons and authorship of the sections into which the Cycle is divided. (The six sections numbered (1)-(6) here are equivalent to 99.1-99.6 in that catalogue.) Two additional versions of the "Ninefold Cycle" are available in the BDRC archive: W1KG14500, Gangs ti se bon gzhung rig mdzod dpe tshogs chen mo, vol. 22 (Beijing 2009); and W21872, vols. 6312 and 6313, G.yung drung bon gyi bka' 'gyur, vols. 172-173 (Chengdu 1999). The former includes the *Byang sems gab 'grel nyi ma'i dkyil 'khor* of Mnyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan. I have not, however, consulted these versions of the Cycle in connection with the present essay.

9 The page numbers given here correspond to the Arabic numerals added to the folio sides, with the addition, when required, of a line number following a point.

(2) the primary text of the "Ninefold Cycle," entitled *byang chub sems gab pa dgu bskor* (19-192)[10] which, following the title page and introductory verses, includes:

[2.1] *lung gi yi ge dgu* "Nine Texts of the Transmission" (for this designation, see 64.2: *lung gi yi ge dgu rdzogs so*)

2.1a (22.4-27.3) *tha rams sngon po* "Blue Doorbolt"
2.1b (27.3-31.5) *'phrul gyi lde mig* "Magical Pass-key"
2.1c (31.6-45.1) *bdud rtsi zil thigs* "Ambrosia Dewdrops"
2.1d (45.1-47.2) *gser gyi nya mo* "Golden Fish"
2.1e (47.2-50.1) *bde ba che* "Great Happiness"
2.1f (50.1-52.5) *mnyam pa nyid* "Equipoise"
2.1g (52.5-59.4) *rig pa dmar thag* "Sunbeam of Awareness"
2.1h (59.4-61.6) *mi nub rgyal mtshan* "Unvanquished Ensign"
2.1i (61.6-64.2) *thig le nyag gcig* "Sole Seminal Sphere"

[2.2] The various subsections of the second division, which is lacking a general title, are shown by the topical outline (8.5-13.1) to be coordinated with the first eight of the foregoing nine topics (thus 2.2a relates back to 2.1a, etc.):[11]

2.2a (64.2-80.2) *bcing bkrol gyi skabs* the "section on the release of bonds"
2.2b (80.2-97.6) *gol sgribs sum cu rtsa gnyis kyi skabs* the "section on the 32 deviations and obscurations"
2.2c (97.6-100.6) *gzigs tshad kyi skabs* the "section on the measure of vision"
2.2d (100.6-109.4) *dems chen po bco brgyad kyi skabs* the "section on the 18 great containers"[12]
2.2e (109.4-113.6) *gzer bu nyi shu rtsa gcig gi skabs* the "section on the 21 nails"
2.2f (113.6-116.6) *tha snyad med pa'i skabs* the "section on the undesignated"
2.2g (116.6-120.5) *rtsol ba dang bral ba'i skabs* the "section on effortlessness"

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[10] My analysis of the main sections of this text, which is informed by the divisions listed in the topical outline (1), differs in part from that given in Martin et al. 2003, which was based primarily on the graphically marked divisions of the text.

[11] Most of these sections include several subsections, some of which have been entered into Martin et al. 2003 as separate chapters, because, once again, the graphic conventions used in the text are not quite clear in this respect. Here I include only the principal sections named in the *sa gcod* and ignore the subdivisions, whether marked or not.

[12] The word *dems* appears to be unknown, but the text sometimes also uses *dem*, which occurs in the lexicons with two definitions: a type of vessel or container; or a small footbridge (*dem tse*). As the notion of containment well suits the context we find within the text, I have provisionally settled on "container" here.

2.2h (120.5-125.4) *bcos su med pa'i skabs* the "section on lack of artifice"

[2.3] (125.4-143.1) *mgo mjug tu khyab pa'i yan lag bcu* "ten topics that pervade [the Ninefold Cycle] from beginning to end"

[2.4] (143.1-157.4) *zur brdeg gi yan lag lnga* "five topics that strike at the edges"

[2.5] (157.4-164.3) *mde'u thung gi yan lag bzhi* "four brief pith declarations" Note that the topical outline concludes with this section.

[2.6] (164.3-192.4) *'di ni dkyus las gus* (sic! = *gud*) *du bkol ba| mde'u thung gi yan lag ces kyang bya| gal po blo brdeg ces kyang bya| the tshom yi ge yang khol zhes kyang bya'o||*. This may have been composed subsequently as a sort of appendix to the preceding sections, as is suggested by the phrase *'di ni dkyus las gud du bkol ba* followed by a recapitulation of the titles of sections [2.4] and [2.5]. The final part of the title, the "rolling boil of texts on doubts" well accords with catechistic form of this section, on which see below.

Following this are two tantras elaborating the teaching of the "Ninefold Cycle":[13]

(3) *sdong po dgu 'dus lta ba'i rgyud chen* (1-100);[14] and

(4) *gsas mkhar g.yung drung ye khyebs lta ba'i rgyud* (101-194).[15]

(5) is an enormous commentary, the "Great Explanatory Commentary on the Ninefold Cycle of Secrets, the Transmission of Mind," *sems lung gab pa dgu skor gyi 'grel pa rgya chen bshad pa* (195-517 [518 is blank]).[16]

(6) offers a closing collection of brief prayers and benedictions, *gshen rab rnam par rgyal ba'i yi bzhin nor bu'i smon lam sogs smon lam rnam gsum* (519-539).

These major divisions of the cycle, and in particular the primary text of the Ninefold Cycle itself, are not in all cases structured as single

[13] The two tantras included here were in fact derived from the revelations of later *gter ston*s and seem not to be integral to the original form of the Cycle.

[14] The page numbers begin again at 1 at this point.

[15] The Arabic page numbers here are defective; the texts run from 101 to 132 and then skips ahead to 193, though no content seems to be missing. The Tibetan foliation shows (4) to have 17 folios, with no folio numbers skipped.

[16] Martin et al. 2003, p. 437, state that this commentary "properly belongs in the Tenjur." I believe, however, that because it was considered to have been included in Gshen chen Klu dga's original revelation of the Cycle it is treated as an integral part thereof and therefore does properly belong in the Kanjur.

works, but as rubrics each containing a number of titles.

In what follows, I wish to focus on three distinct rhetorical registers that are deployed in the elaboration of the primary text in this corpus, (2) containing the Ninefold Cycle.[17] The three—metaphor, commentary, and catechism, as I characterize them—are not the only forms of expression found here, but I believe them to be crucial for our understanding of the growth of the fundamental revealed texts into an authoritative scriptural collection. In advancing my sketch of these registers as they are found in the Ninefold Cycle, I will pay some attention, too, to their Buddhist analogues, for elements of the interaction between Buddhism and Bon in the area of scriptural formation may be discerned clearly not just in relation to theme and content, but also in the use of particular genres and the elements of style associated with them.

Of the three rhetorical registers that I wish to emphasize here, metaphor is predominant in what is clearly the earliest layer of the Ninefold Cycle, namely, the first, and major, portion of its primary text ([2.1] in the outline above), in which it is precisely the deployment of nine metaphors that explains why the cycle is ninefold. The sections that follow, amplifying and complementing the nine metaphors, probably represent a somewhat later step in the evolution of these materials, which begins to integrate them into the scholastic frameworks that were coming to dominate Tibetan learned discourse in the eleventh century and thereafter. There is, indeed, a commentarial aspect to be found even in the earliest parts of the collection, written in what I am terming the "metaphorical register," that consists primarily in discursive expansions of the metaphors themselves, sometimes engaging in folk etymology and similar wordplay, or in their elaboration in relations to lists of topics resembling those of the Abhidharma [2.2]. But this seems not yet controlled by methods of formalized analysis and argument that came to characterize later Tibetan scholasticism, including their presence in the developed commentaries belonging to the Ninefold Cycle itself, as represented first of all in the "Great Explanatory Commentary" (5). Finally, the third register, catechism, emerges in the later supplements to the primary work [2.3-2.6], the redaction of which perhaps closely followed the earlier parts of the text.

[17] The tantras listed as (3) and (4), the "Great Explanatory Commentary" (5), and the prayers and benedictions of (6) will not be addressed in the present discussion. All of them, and above all (5) and (6), would have their parts to play in a more complete account of the system of the Ninefold Cycle.

Metaphor

Let us begin with metaphor. A mentioned above, the very designation of this corpus as the "Ninefold Cycle" refers to a series of nine metaphors, considered as nine titles of the primary text:

> If [one enquires about] the enumeration of nine titles, [they are as follows]: (1) Enlightened Mind, the Ground of All, is the blue iron doorbolt; (2) Enlightened Mind, the Ground of All, is the magical pass-key that opens wide; (3) Enlightened Mind, the Ground of All, is the dewdrop of ambrosia; (4) Enlightened Mind, the Ground of All, is the golden fish of awareness, lying in the depths; (5) Enlightened Mind, the Ground of All, is great happiness; (6) Enlightened Mind, the Ground of All, is the equipoise of mind; (7) Enlightened Mind, the Ground of All, is the sunbeam of awareness; (8) Enlightened Mind, the Ground of All, is the unvanquished royal ensign; (9) Enlightened Mind, the Ground of All, is the seminal sphere of gnosis.[18]

The nine metaphors, once proclaimed, are then explored in detail in the main body of the text. The first three—the iron doorbolt, the magical pass key, and the dewdrop of ambrosia—are explained each in relation to 58 factors, reminiscent of the categories in the Buddhist Abhidharma.[19] As the same factors are repeated for each of the three, let us consider here the treatment of just the first of the 58, *nyon mongs*, or *kleśa*, as a common pattern is maintained throughout the elaborations we find here. To understand the third in what follows, we must point out that ambrosia in Tibetan, *bdud rtsi*, used to translate Sanskrit *amṛta*, means literally "demon-spirits":

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[18] 225.6-226.4: *mtshan gyi rnam grangs dgu na, kun gzhi byang chub kyi sems lcags kyi tha rams sngon po dang gcig. kun gzhi byang chub kyi sems 'phrul gyi lde mig yang 'byed dang gnyis. kun gzhi byang chub kyi sems bdud rtsi zil thigs dang gsum. kun gzhi byang chub kyi sems rig pa gser gyi nya mo bag la nyal ba dang bzhi. kun gzhi byang chub kyi sems bde ba chen po dang lnga. kun gzhi byang chub kyi sems mnyam pa nyid dang drug. kun gzhi byang chub kyi sems rig pa dmar thag dang bdun. kun gzhi byang chub kyi sems mi nub pa'i rgyal mtshan dang brgyad. kun gzhi byang chub kyi sems ye shes thig le dang dgu*.

[19] It is important to recall that the transmission of the Abhidharma did survive in Tibet during the period following the collapse of the ruling dynasty after the mid ninth century; the celebrated Bon po convert to Buddhism, Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal (10th c.), for instance, is named as a recipient of Abhidharma instruction. That the Abhidharma, therefore, may have influenced the development of a sort of Tibetan scholasticism preceding the renewed *phyi dar* influx of state-of-the-art methods of debate and textual analysis from India cannot be ruled out. The continuing Vinaya transmission of the period, also associated with the Bla chen, no doubt also played a role in this regard.

> 1 The blue doorbolt of the *kleśa*s is sealed fast, the magical key to open it lost.[20]
> 2. It is the magical key of compassion that opens the blue doorbolt of the *kleśa*s.[21]
> 3. The intellect [sullied by] *kleśa*s is like a demon, to which one applies the compassionate mind, like spirits, and so this is called "demon-spirits." In the primordially pure space that is the reality of Bon (*bon nyid*), the light of compassion [born from] the nature of mind emerges, and there appears the dew-like luster that is the equipoise of cause and effect. In the spatial expanse that is forever a capacious vessel, the watery dew of these demon-spirits [gathers in] drops, and hence this is called a "dew-drop."[22]

The first three metaphors, then, pertain respectively to aspects of our unrealized condition, its antidote, and the realization that emerges when the antidote is successfully applied. In the space of this brief essay, I will not explore the remaining six metaphors, those of the golden fish, etc., in detail, but these are related to the progression of practice, beginning with the emergence of a subtle disposition, like a fish beneath the water, that awakens to this teaching, and finally culminating in its fulfilment in the seminal sphere of gnosis.

Some remarks about the use of metaphor in the contemporaneous Buddhist literature of Tibet are perhaps in order. Metaphor and parable are, of course, very common rhetorical devices throughout the Buddhist sūtra literature. The *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, for instance, which was translated into Tibetan by the early ninth century, turns on a famous group of nine metaphors. There is indeed much that allies the "Ninefold Cycle" with *tathāgatagarbha*-thought, and we should recall, too, that *bodhicitta* itself was the subject of elaborate metaphorical description in some sūtras, notably the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. Moreover, in respect to two of the major Indian Buddhist śāstras studied in Tibet, the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, we find that the points of departure for the canonical Mahāyāna commentaries in treating these works are, respectively, their use of the nine metaphors from the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and of a series of twenty-two metaphors for

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20 22.4-5: *nyon mongs tha rams sngon po dam | de 'byed 'phrul gyi lde mig stor |*

21 27.3: *thugs rje 'phrul gyi lde mig gis | nyon mongs tha rams sngon po dbye |*

22 31.6-32.2: *nyon mongs blo ni bdud 'dra la | thugs rje'i sems ni rtsi 'dra gtong | bdud rtsi zhes kyang de la bya | bon nyid nam mkha' ye dag la | sems nyid thugs rje'i 'od byung bas | rgyu 'bras mnyam pa'i zil par chags | mkha' klong ye nas snod yangs su | bdud rtsi chu yi zil pa thigs | zil thig ces kyang de la bya |*

bodhicitta.[23]

Nevertheless, it seems unlikely to me that these or similar materials played a direct role in the elaboration of the "Ninefold Cycle." There is little evidence in its diction that the authors were aware of the *tathāgatagarbha* literature, and the *Ratnagotravibhāga* in any case probably became available in Tibetan only after the cycle had been for the most part completed. Although the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, by contrast, certainly did have some influence in Tibetan Buddhist circles during the period of its compilation, *bodhicitta* is used here in a very different sense than it is in that work, for here *bodhicitta* is the ultimate principle disclosed in awakening, and its role as motive and orientation of the path is at best left in the background. In other words, here we are almost exclusively in the domain of what is sometimes termed "absolute *bodhicitta*" (*don dam byang chub sems*) over and against the "ostensive *bodhicitta*" (*kun rdzob byang chub sems*) that is a focus in much of the Mahāyāna path-literature.

Although some degree of influence from Indian sources should not be excluded, however, more pertinent in the present case is probably the use of metaphor in near contemporaneous Tibetan religious discourse. For several of the metaphors employed here appear to be distinctively Tibetan: the blue iron doorbolt, the golden fish lying beneath the surface of the waters, the magical passkey, and the sunbeam of awareness, for instance, are not prominent, if indeed they occur, in Indian sources. In the case of the "unvanquished royal ensign," the text is clearly aligned with the Rdzogs chen Sems phyogs materials of the same epoch, for this title also designates an important body of texts therein.[24]

That we must look primarily to Tibetan developments is suggested, too, by the remarkable place of metaphor in the early literature of the Bka' gdams pa tradition that was forming during the same period as that with which we are concerned. The Indian works whose study was most encouraged by the early Bka' gdams pa – the so-called *Bka' gdams gzhung drug* – abound in metaphorical usage, and their impetus extended to the *blo sbyong* teachings of the first generations of the Bka' gdams pa masters themselves.[25] Among these latter, metaphors of Indian origin mixed easily with the proverbial sayings, *gtam dpe*, that seem forever to have been well-loved features of Tibetan rhetoric, as we know from their regular use in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* of ca. 800. The finest example of this in the early Bka' gdams pa literature is no

[23] The bibliography on these topics has now grown quite large. For just the essentials, as concern us here, see Conze 1954 and Takasaki 1966.

[24] Wilkinson 2012.

[25] On the *Bka' gdams gzhung drug* and their impact, refer to Kapstein 2013.

doubt the *Dpe chos rin chen spungs pa*, the "Jewel Heap of Metaphor," by the renowned teacher Po to ba Rin chen gsal (1027-1105), whose work is ordered according to the ascending stages of the Mahāyāna path and expounds its teachings through literally hundreds of metaphors presented in sequence. The root text, in fact, primarily consists in a very long list of metaphors, which, without the extensive commentaries that accompany it, would be all but impenetrable. *Bodhicitta* is the topic of over forty among the metaphors listed, but without any hint of "absolute *bodhicitta*" at all.[26]

In short, it appears that whatever impetus may have been provided by the Indian and Tibetan literature of the Mahāyāna in respect to the practice of "teaching by metaphor," this remains hidden in the background of our text. Though aspects of Buddhist categorial analysis seem indeed present, the metaphorical register deployed in our text accords with the demands of a distinctive tradition of teaching, shared by the Bon po and the Rnying ma pa alike, that was then emerging in Tibet.

Commentary

As is evident in the above, the commentarial voice is already present in the first part of the primary text [2.1], with its elaborations of 58 categories and etymological wordplay. The nine topics developed in section [2.2] continue to expand on topics introduced in the nine principal sections and in so doing serve as a further commentarial amplification of them. That this part of the text was meant to be taken in this way is underscored in the topical outline, which in fact interweaves these two parts of the text. For instance, following the introductory verses, which it treats as topic 1, the second topic is 2.1a "Blue Doorbolt," but the third is not 2.1b "Magical Passkey," which is instead the fourth, for the third is 2.2a the "section on the release of bonds," whose thematic relation to the topic of the doorbolt is at once evident, although this is never made quite explicit. (In fact, not all the connections between [2.1] and [2.2] are quite so obvious as this one is, but nonetheless they mostly do come clear as one works one's way through the text.)

The "section on the release of bonds," moreover, is notably methodical in its exposition (reflecting a possible influence of the Abhidharma, again?). It is divided into a series of four subsections treating:

- how one is bound by the bonds (*bcings tshad gyis gang bcings pa*);
- the eight bonds by which one is bound in meditation (*sgom du song*

[26] On Po to ba's work, see Roesler 2011.

ba la bcings tshad brgyad kyis bcings pa);[27]
- how one is released through the 22 measures of release (*khrol tshad nyi shu rtsa gnyis gang gis khrol pa*);
- the eight measures of release in the expanse during meditation (*sgom du song ba la klong du gyur ba'i khrol tshad brgyad*).

That there was an intention to attain a fair level of systematicity here, as we might expect in the development of a commentarial tradition, is apparent when we compare the first of the "eight bonds by which on is bound in meditation" with its counterpart in the list of "eight measures of release in the expanse":

> As failing to grasp the view of mind-as-such that is without a mote of conceptualization, is said to be a bond, this is called, in general, "bondage through conceptual grasping [that parts] from the view of Bon, [that of] Samantabhadra" (*sems nyid rnam par rtog pa rdul kyang med pa'i lta ba' ma zin te bcings zer na| spyi kun tu bzang po bon gyi lta ba las| rtog 'dzin gyis bcings zhes bya'o| |* 73.4-5).
>
> When one engages in meditation that is free from drifting into marvelous fantasies and conceptual grasping, because the nonconceptual enlightened mind (*bodhicitta*) causes all objects to melt into the expanse, one is released (*cho 'phrul dang rtog 'dzin la g.yos pa med par bsgom du song na| rnam par mi rtog pa'i byang chub sems kyis don kun klong du gyur pas khrol ba'o| |* 78.6-79.1).

It will not be possible on this occasion to enter into an exploration of the "Great Expository Commentary" (5), in which the commentarial gesture of the Ninefold Cycle reaches fruition. But I believe that this extensive addition to the Cycle, elevating it as a discursive object believed worthy of sustained reflection and comment, and embodying a significance that may be approached and isolated by means of commentary, marks a distinct step in the process of the Cycle's authentication. Its inclusion within the fundamental collection of the Ninefold Cycle, the portion that was later canonized within the Bon po Kanjur, therefore amounts to a remarkable coup, achieved in the first generations of its formation and quite possibly under the impetus of Gshen chen Klu dga' himself.

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[27] There is a serious scribal problem in this section of the text. The entire passage that includes these first two subsections was copied twice: 64.2-69.3 and 69.3-76.1. It appears that the second, slightly lengthier version corrects some errors in the first, but one nevertheless has the impression that what has occurred is in fact an extensive dittography.

Catechism

The exercise of catechism, as we find it exemplified in the Ninefold Cycle, merits consideration both in relation to its use within Tibetan Buddhist discourse and for its overall rhetorical impact. These two facets are by no means unrelated; a particular genre becomes historically favored within a given tradition in tandem with its perceived success as a rhetorical strategy. And, in connection with our present investigations, it is a strategy of particular interest precisely because, although catechism often adopts a quasi-dialogic form, it differs from dialogue proper in that, in relation to the question of authority, it is completely one-sided. A catechism never leaves us in doubt about who it is who has all the answers. In case one was wondering what permitted a collection of metaphors to become established as a sacred authority, we have here part of the answer: the tradition itself takes a step back from the fluidity of purely metaphorical expression and presents us with, as it were, a clear chain of command. Catechism-like passages occur throughout the later sections of the Ninefold Cycle [2.3-2.6], but above all in the final concluding section, which, as we have seen, was possibly a late addition. One of the authorities invoked in this case is the divinity Marvelous Gshen Illustrious ('Phrul gshen snang ldan), whose designation clearly aligns him with the Bon priesthood, the *gshen*, or *lha gshen*. In essence, the emerging Bon po order of the early second millennium was learning a trick we find in many other traditions that affirm an absolute that defies mundane dualities, namely, to place non-duality in the service of hierarchical order, paradoxical though this may sometimes seem:

> To the father, the Marvelous Gshen Illustrious, the son, Deathless Crest, [requested] a quintessential point (*mdo, sūtra*) to resolve his doubts: "Oh Teacher! the enlightened mind, unprejudiced compassion, is [here] given the designation 'secret' (*gab pa*), but isn't there a contradiction in calling it hidden and concealed?"
>
> The Marvelous Shen declared: "There is no contradiction. The example of the wish-granting gem [shows that the gem] must be wiped clean of dust, wrapped in silk, worshipped with the seven pure grains, attached to the pinnacle of the royal ensign and then given prayers, upon which all wishes are granted. But those who have not understood the mind are like those who obtain the wish-granting gem but hide it away in a foul container and then cast it into an unclean pit. By doing so, not even a single wished-for quality comes forth. Similarly, those who hear, reflect upon, and contemplate this profound transmission of the precepts of the enlightened

> mind and thereby understand it, carry off the prize, as it were, in their hands. But those who do not do so obtain no prize at all. In one sense, in a cave in a cliff oriented to the north, the sun never shines; though the sun itself does not vary, it never shines on that cliff. Similarly, although the compassionate spirit [*thugs rje*, here equivalent to the enlightened mind] does not vary, for those who do not understand the mind and dwell in ignorance, it remains as colors shown to the blind. It remains secret for them because there is no basis for their understanding and comprehending it by methodically cutting through to what is self-concealed (*rang gsang*)."[28]

In speaking of enlightened mind as "secret," therefore, one refers not to its proper nature, but to its circumstantial occlusion, when beings are blinded by ignorance. Deathless Crest then continues to raise doubts; the Marvelous Shen dispels each in turn.

What was the inspiration for presenting the teaching in the form of a catechistic dialogue? Catechism seems not very well developed as a literary device in Indian Buddhism. True, many sūtras and tantras take as their point of departure one or more questions posed by disciples, and some sūtras accentuate this by title, through their use of the term *paripṛcchā*, a "response to questions." Nevertheless, the often-meandering course adopted in the Buddhist canonical literature, distinguished by frequently digressive monologues in response to brief queries, seems rarely to have the same pointed interest in rectifying doctrinal understanding by offering the "right answers" in neat formulas as we find characteristically in catechism. Leaving aside the Brahmanical traditions, where works like the *Praśnottarī* attributed to Śaṅkarācārya are manifestly catechistic, the closest precedents for these sections of the Ninefold Cycle appear to be found, once more, in

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[28] 164.4-166.1: *yab 'phrul gshen snang ldan la, sras 'chi med gtsug phud kyis, the tshom gcod du byon pa'i mdo, ston pa lags byang chub kyi sems thugs rje bri bkol med pa la, mtshan gab par gsol nas gsang zhing sba bar gsungs pa mi 'gal lam? 'phrul gshen gyis bka' stsal ba, mi 'gal te dper na yi* (*sic*!) *bzhin gyi nor bu rin po che zhes bya ba yang, rdul* (165) *phyis bkrus bshal dar gyi lding khug du bcug, nas dkar mo 'bru bdun gyis mchod, rgyal mtshan gyi rtse mor btags nas smon lam btab na ci ltar 'dod pa bzhin 'byung ba yin te, sems ma rtogs pa la la zhig gis, yi bzhin gyi nor bu rnyed pa snod ngan pa'i nang du bcug nas, mi gtsang ba'i khung bur bskyur te btang ngo. de ltar btang na 'dod pa'i yon tan gcig kyang mi 'byung ste, dpe de dang 'dra bar na, byang chub sems man ngag zab mo'i lung 'di yang mnyan bsam bsgom pas rtogs par byas na, 'bras bu lag 'chang du thob pa yin pa las, de ltar ma byas na 'bras bu thob par kyang mi 'gyur ro. gnas* (*mchan*: *rnam pa*) *cig* (*mchan*: *tu na*) brag *phug kha byang du bltas pa la, nyi ma 'char ba'i dus med pa de, nyi ma la bri bkol med kyang, brag la mi 'char ba dang 'dra ste, thugs rje la bri bkol med kyang, sems ma rtogs pa gti mug gi rang bzhin du gnas pas, dmus long la mdog bstan pa ltar 'gyur te, rang gsang thabs kyi chod* (166) *chod nas rtogs shing go ba'i rgyu med pas kyang gab pa'o.*

early Rnying ma pa and Tibetan Chan materials.[29] The form is well known in other relatively early Bon po sources as well, notably in the *Gal mdo* collection, which, like the Ninefold Cycle, also demonstrates the growing impact of Buddhist scholastic practices on a contemplative tradition of the Great Perfection.[30]

Conclusion

The passage traversed by our texts, from metaphor to commentary, in some respects mirrors a pattern well-known in Indian Buddhism, whereby the metaphorical/imagistic register of the sūtra-literature gives way to a more or less rigorous formalization of doctrinal content in the *śāstra*s. The relationship between the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, to which I have referred earlier, is a case in point. It is striking, however, that in the Indian setting, as we have seen, more than rudimentary development of properly catechistic elaborations of doctrine seems to be wanting; the literary models for catechism, as this was elaborated in properly Tibetan traditions, both Buddhist and Bon, more likely were to be found in aspects of the Dunhuang Chan dossiers, and almost certainly became well known in tantric milieux through the *Vajrasattva Catechism*. With or without the emergence of catechism, however, the result is similar: a teaching that is in some sense fluid and poetic, escaping the rigid confines of propositional truth or falsehood, is objectified and codified, at least heuristically and tentatively, in clear-cut propositional terms. Whatever the utility of this reduction of the teaching to a body of established doctrine in terms of pedagogy, preservation of tradition, and such, it is clear that the process has much to do with the authority of the texts and teachings in question, and not merely edifying expedience. The primary text, in other words, becomes in some sense parasitic upon its commentaries for the authority it enjoys within the tradition. This is perhaps one of the reasons we see, in later Indian Buddhism, as well as other religions, and in both Buddhism and Bon in Tibet, for a turn to commentary as the major focus of study, the primary works often receding into the background, perhaps not ideologically, but in terms of their actual instructional roles. They become, as it were, caves facing north. That something of this sort occurred in the case of the "Ninefold Cycle of the Secrets of the Enlightened Mind" is in any case quite sure, for, indeed, the Cycle came to be studied and known for the most part not as much through the original sources that I have described briefly here,

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[29] For an example of Tibetan Chan catechism, see van Schaik 2015, pp. 31-41; cf. Mala and Kimura 1988. An early and important Rnying ma pa work in this form, the *Vajrasattva Catechism* (*Rdo rje sems dpa'i zhu lan*) is studied in Takahashi 2001.

[30] Klein and Wangyal 2006.

but rather via their twelfth-century elaboration in the *Commentaries of the Four Clever Men* and the later works of Mnyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan.

Of course, the commentaries in their turn derive their authority in part from the notion that that upon which they comment is authoritative, that is, as the Indian commentators like to say, they are not commenting upon treatises on "examining crow's teeth" or on "seizing the nāga-king's gem." So, authority is constructed within a variety of the famed hermeneutic circle, wherein several types of text serve to buttress and authenticate one another within the framework of a given tradition, rather as in a closed aristocrat circle in which grand honors and titles are bestowed by revered figures on one another, while the benighted commonfolk outside gaze up in awe.

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