

The Great Perfection in the Early Biographies of the Northern Treasure Tradition: An Introduction to and Translation of *The Life of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan**

Jay Holt Valentine
(Troy University)

The corpus that constitutes the scriptures of the Northern Treasure Tradition (*Byang gter*) was revealed by a series of treasure revelators¹ who lived between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries in Tibet. While the bulk of these sacred writings are preoccupied with normative *Mahāyoga* cycles² that focus on specific Buddhist divinities, the Great Perfection (*rDzogs chen*) anthology entitled *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra*, which was revealed by Rigs 'dzin³ rGod ldem (1337–1409), is the most celebrated of the treasures belonging to this northern tradition.⁴ In a recent, thorough study of the five volumes of *The Unimpeded*, Katarina Turpeinen has offered a masterful analysis of the internal themes and divisions of the anthology and has shed light on the relationship

* The research that resulted in this article was funded in part by the generous support of the Dean of Arts and Sciences and the Faculty Development Committee of Troy University.

¹ Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem is the founding treasure revealer, but bZang po grags pa (14th c.) preceded him and many others followed him including: 'Jam dbyangs bla ma (14th c.), bsTan gnyis gling pa (148–1535), Legs ldan rdo rje (1512–1580), Padma dbang rgyal (1487–1542), bKra shis stobs rgyal (1550–1603), Gar dbang rdo rje (1640–1685), and sKal bzang padma dbang phyug (1720–1770).

² For a detailed list of the ritual cycles of the Northern Treasure Tradition, see Turpeinen 2015, pp. 22–23.

³ In most other contexts, this word is spelled “rig 'dzin,” which means “awareness-holder.” While there are, in fact, twelve instances of this spelling of the term in *The Collected Biographies and Prophecies of the Northern Treasure Tradition* (Padma las 'brel rtsal 1983), none of them appears in the biographies of the nine patriarchs used for this article. On the other hand, there are sixty-six separate appearances of “rigs 'dzin,” which I take to mean something more like “holder of the lineage” or “holder of the family lineage.”

⁴ More precisely, the first four volumes of the anthology are entitled *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po'i dgongs pa zang thal*), and the fifth volume is entitled *The Self-Emergent Self-Arisen Primordial Purity* (*Ka dag rang byung rang shar*). It is, however, customary to refer to the entire anthology as *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra* or simply *The Unimpeded*.

between its content and earlier Great Perfection literature.⁵ She has identified, for example, strong parallels between the content of *The Unimpeded* and *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinīs* (*mKha' 'gro snying tig*), which was revealed by Tshul khriṃs rdo rje (1291–1317) and later included in *The Seminal Heart in Four Parts* (*sNyīng tig ya bzhi*) by the great Klong chen pa (1308–1364).⁶ These resemblances strongly suggest that Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem must have been familiar with a wide range of Seminal Heart teachings, perhaps including those of Klong chen pa himself.

In what follows, I will offer a summary and analysis of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem's training in the Great Perfection based on the fifteenth and sixteenth century biographies of rGod ldem and his direct disciples.⁷ While the biography of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem does not offer enough evidence to fully account for the Seminal Heart content of *The Unimpeded*, much can be inferred with the aid of the biographies of his disciples. I will then offer a wealth of evidence regarding the role of the Great Perfection in the biographies of eight patriarchs who carried the Northern Treasures through the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It is fitting to conclude this study with a translation of the biography of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan (1454–1541) for a number of reasons. First among them is the fact that he received a much wider training in the Seminal Heart than any of his predecessors. However, in addition to that, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's life is a meaningful stopping point because he was the last of the illustrious patriarchs to be claimed both by the branch of the Northern Treasure Tradition that remained in Ngam ring and the branch that was later established at rDo rje brag Monastery in Central Tibet.

Before proceeding, it will be helpful to briefly describe the Great Perfection and the various rubrics that are employed to distinguish its internal categories. I prefer characterizing the Great Perfection as a post-tantric tradition of Tibetan Buddhism in that it was originally distinguished by its simple, free-form practices that in some sense "came after" the complex ritual of *Mahāyoga* Tantra involving deity yoga, visualizations of mandalas, chanting of mantras, and a host of often wrathful, Buddhist divinities. The developmental history of the Great Perfection can be described as a process, beginning in the eighth century, by which "funerary" elements with strong affinities to the

⁵ See Turpeinen 2015.

⁶ Turpeinen 2015, pp. 210-229. For an introduction to the life of Klong chen pa, see Germano 2005b.

⁷ Methodologically speaking, this is a historiographic study of the Great Perfection as it is discussed in a specific set of narratives preserved in *The Collected Biographies and Prophecies of the Northern Treasure Tradition*. For a more complete description of this collection, see Valentine 2016, pp. 133-134.

Yogini Tantras are gradually introduced to an earlier “pristine” tradition that focused on simplicity and was characterized by the absence of these funerary elements.⁸ This process of transformation is reflected in the following system of classification, which is drawn from *The Collected Tantras of the Ancients* (*rNying ma rgyud 'bum*) and accounts for all of the major developments within the Great Perfection prior to the fourteenth century.⁹

The Three Series: Mind Series (*Sems sde*), Space Series (*Klong sde*), and Esoteric Precept Series (*Man ngag sde*)

The Four Cycles: External Cycle (*Phyi skor*), Internal Cycle (*Nang skor*), Secret Cycle (*gSang skor*), and Unsurpassed Secret Cycle (*Bla na med pa'i gsang skor*), which is also known as the Seminal Heart (*sNying thig*)

The Three Piths: Transcendent Pith (*A ti*), Crown Pith (*sPyi ti*), and Ultra Pith (*Yang ti*)

The Mind Series includes the texts that are most representative of the pristine tradition, while the Space Series, Esoteric Precept Series, and the first three of the Four Cycles demonstrate an increasing degree of funerary elements. The Unsurpassed Secret Cycle, which is synonymous with the Seminal Heart, is the tradition in which the funerary elements are the most completely integrated.¹⁰ The grouping of the Three Piths breaks somewhat from this progressive scheme; it will be explained in more detail below as it pertains to the training of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem.

While the earliest of the scriptures of the Seminal Heart, particularly *The Seventeen Tantras* (*rGyud bcu bdun*), are found within *The Collected Tantras of the Ancients*, the vast majority of the literature—those attributed to Padma las 'brel rtsal (1291–1315), Klong chen pa, Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem, rDo rje gling pa (1346–1405), Padma gling pa (1450–1521), etc.—are not included in this canon. These treasures and many, many more are canonized to an extent in 'Jam mgon kong sprul's (1813–1899) *The Great Treasury of Rediscovered Teachings* (*Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*).¹¹

⁸ This method for explaining the nature of the Great Perfection and its internal classifications is drawn from Germano 2005a, pp. 2–13.

⁹ Germano 2005a, p. 7.

¹⁰ Germano 2005a, p. 14.

¹¹ Schwiieger points out that this compendium does not comprehensively contain all of the treasure texts of all of the treasure revealers. Instead, it houses important samples from each along with the manuals that are required for training in each

While the Great Perfection anthology of the Northern Treasure Tradition includes extensive preliminary practices, subtle body yogas, alchemical yogas, cutting practices, and instructions for liberation through wearing amulets, the core of the compendium is constituted by the oral transmissions of three separate masters—Vairocana (8th c.), Padmasambhava (8th c.), and Vimalamitra (8th–9th c.). Tradition maintains that these three received different parts of the Great Perfection from Śrī Siṃha (8thc.) in India and brought them separately to Tibet, where they were transmitted to Khri srong lde btsan (742–796; r. 756–796) and his court and also concealed as treasure.¹² The Oral Transmissions of Vairocana are primarily concerned with a type of formless meditation or contemplation called Breakthrough (*khregs chod*), which is representative of the pristine aspects of the early Great Perfection found in the Mind Series.¹³ The Oral Transmissions of Padmasambhava, on the other hand, are representative of the Seminal Heart in that they focus on the visionary practice called Direct Transcendence (*thod rgal*), which integrates the purity and spontaneity of the Great Perfection with a full spectrum of funerary imagery.¹⁴ Lastly, The Oral Transmission of Vimalamitra is a unified, scholarly elucidation of the Seminal Heart by way of eleven topics, which are the universal ground, the arising of samsara, Buddha nature, the location of wisdom in the human body, the pathways of wisdom, the gateways of wisdom, the objective sphere, the method of practice, the signs of accomplishment, the intermediate states, and liberation.¹⁵ According to Turpeinen, The Oral Transmission of Vimalamitra is just one example within the anthology of material that was directly borrowed from preexisting Seminal Heart literature attributed to figures such as mKhas pa nyi 'bum (1158–1213).¹⁶ In fact, although there are certainly innovative elements that distinguish *The Unimpeded* from other Seminal Heart cycles, it is inconceivable that this anthology could have been compiled without access to an extensive collection of earlier Great Perfection literature, including scriptures belonging to the Seminal Heart. The guiding question for the following investigation is, therefore, what evidence is there in the early biographies of the Northern Treasure Tradition to corroborate the notion that Rigs 'dzin rGod lde m had access to such a wide range of Great Perfection teachings?

According to the fifteenth century biography of Rigs 'dzin rGod

cycle. See Schwieger 2010, pp. 329-331.

¹² Turpeinen 2015, p. 170.

¹³ Turpeinen 2015, pp. 170-183.

¹⁴ Turpeinen 2015, pp. 183-193.

¹⁵ Turpeinen 2015, pp. 193-198.

¹⁶ Turpeinen 2015, pp. 194-195.

Idem, which was written by one of his direct disciples (i.e., Se ston Nyi ma bzang po, 14th–15th c.), the founding revelator of the Northern Treasure Tradition was descended from a lineage of De gyin hor masters who practiced *The Brahmin's Tradition of the Great Perfection* (*Bram ze'i skor*).¹⁷ Although his father died before he began his spiritual training, the biography leads one to believe that *The Brahmin's Tradition* may have been among the teachings that were transmitted to Rigs 'dzin rGod Idem by a pair of benefactors from the Se clan—brothers named dPal chen 'bum pa (14th c.) and Legs pa ba (14th c.)—who took it upon themselves to educate the fatherless child in his family's traditions.¹⁸ In *The Collected Tantras of the Ancients*, this corpus of texts is categorized as belonging to the Ultra Pith, which is the highest of the Three Piths of the Great Perfection. *The Brahmin's Tradition* appears to have developed parallel to the Seminal Heart in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but the spiritual lineage of the tradition is traced much further back in history to Vimalamitra (8th–9th c.), who was an Indian of the Brahmin caste.¹⁹

Later, at the age of twenty-four, just prior to the start of his career as a revelator, Rigs 'dzin rGod Idem received the treasures of Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192) and his reincarnation, Gu ru Chos dbang (1212–1270), from lCang ma ba (14th c.) and sNang ldan rgyal po (14th c.) respectively.²⁰ The only transmission that is mentioned by name, *Embodiment of the Master's Secret* (*Bla ma gsang 'dus*), is not a Great Perfection text; it is, however, an integral part of the yearly *Mahāyoga* ritual cycle at monasteries that are affiliated with rDo rje brag, the Nyingmapa “mother” monastery that has been the epicenter of the Northern Treasure Tradition since the seventeenth century.²¹ The language of the biography, however, suggests that Rigs 'dzin rGod Idem received the entirety—or at least large quantities—of the treasuries of Nyang ral and Gu ru Chos dbang, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that he received their Great Perfection treasures at that time. Within *The Collected Tantras of the Ancients*, the revealed

¹⁷ Nyi ma bzang po 1983, p. 59. Because there is only this single mention of the cycle in the entire biographical collection, it is unclear which specific texts of *The Brahmin's Tradition* were held by Rigs 'dzin rGod Idem's forefathers. For a list of the texts in this cycle, see Germano 2005a, pp. 47-52. For a detailed summary of Rigs 'dzin rGod Idem's biography, see Herweg 1994.

¹⁸ Nyi ma bzang po 1983, pp. 66. The biography does not actually state that these benefactors taught Rigs 'dzin rGod Idem the Brahmin's Tradition; it is only implied.

¹⁹ Germano 2005a, pp. 24-25. For a discussion of the rNying ma pa masters of the Rong Tradition who held the Brahmin's Tradition of the Great Perfection as early as the twelfth century, see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 650-655.

²⁰ Nyi ma bzang po 1983, p. 68.

²¹ Boord 1993, p. 32.

scriptures of Nyang ral and Gu ru Chos dbang are found in the sections dedicated to the Crown Pith as well as the Ultra Pith. Unlike *The Brahmin's Tradition*, however, the Ultra Pith treasures of Nyang ral and Gu ru Chos dbang are traced through Padmasambhava, rather than Vimalamitra.²²

Since two of the Three Piths appear to have been among Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem's Great Perfection influences, a brief explanation of this system of categorization and its content is warranted. The Crown Pith²³ is best understood as an attempt by Nyang ral to pull together a collection of teachings that preserve and champion the pristine elements of the Great Perfection that originally distinguished this post-tantric tradition from the elaborate ritualism and increasingly wrathful imagery of *Mahāyoga* Tantra.²⁴ From this perspective, the Crown Pith is conceived as the highest set of Great Perfection teachings and as specifically superior to the Transcendent Pith, which is presumably a general term signifying the entire range of earlier traditions that had assimilated various funerary practices and motifs. Later, Nyang ral and Gu ru Chos dbang championed what came to be known as the Ultra Pith, which is in fact characterized by the same funerary elements that were exorcised from the Crown Pith. It has been hypothesized that the popularity of the funerary-infused Great Perfection teachings, particularly those of the Seminal Heart, was significant enough to lead Nyang ral to abandon the objectives of the Crown Pith and to recognize its inferiority to the Ultra Pith teachings.²⁵

There are interesting parallels between these Ultra Pith influences and Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem's *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra*. For example, two of the major divisions within *The Unimpeded* are, as discussed above, The Oral Transmissions of Vimalamitra and the Oral Transmissions of Padmasambhava, who are also the primary sources of Ultra Pith. And, while the funerary components of *The Brahmin's Tradition* are significantly less developed than what is found in standard Seminal Heart sources, the Padmasambhava-Ultra Pith contains funerary content borrowed directly from *The Totally Radiant Seminal Nucleus (Thig le kun gsal)*, a Secret Cycle text that is significantly closer in content to the Seminal Heart.²⁶ Nevertheless, there are significant elements of the Seminal Heart—such as the practice of Direct Transcendence—that are featured in *the Unimpeded* that are not found in the Ultra Pith. It is

²² Germano 2005a, p. 24.

²³ For an explanation of the view of the Crown Pith, see Achard 2015.

²⁴ Germano 2005a, pp. 23-24.

²⁵ Germano 2005a, p. 27.

²⁶ Germano 2005a, pp. 16-17, 27.

possible that Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem later received these Seminal Heart teachings as part of his training in the Great Perfection with Brag lung pa mKhas btsun rin chen dpal (14th c.) at the age of twenty-five.²⁷ Until this master is identified, however, one can only speculate on this matter because the biography does not mention any specific Great Perfection rubrics or texts that were received from Rinchen Pel.

There are other passages in the early biographies, however, that acknowledge that Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem had been exposed to the Seminal Heart. In one of the last episodes of rGod ldem's life in his own biography, it is reported that just before his death, one could see the signs of his attainments—including his possession of experiential knowledge of the “two Seminal Hearts” (*snying tig rnam pa gnyis*)—in his facial expression.²⁸ Then, in the biography of rNam rgyal mgon po (1399–1424), Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem's son, shortly after his first exposure to the Great Perfection at the age of six, the elders of the community are reported to have gone before rGod ldem and made an official request for rNam rgyal mgon po to be trained as the next patriarch of the burgeoning treasure community.²⁹ Their request included a detailed list of the transmissions that he would need to receive, including obvious cycles like *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra*, which would be expected since it is the quintessential teaching of the Northern Treasure Tradition, but also the treasures of Gu ru Chos dbang and the two Seminal Hearts (*snying tig rnam pa gnyis*).³⁰ In a similar passage in the biography of rDo rje mgon po (14th c.) and Rin chen grags pa (14th c.), a pair of brothers who were among rGod ldem's most trusted disciples, this reference to the two Seminal Hearts is clarified: “Thus, [Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem] gave them the set of empowerments, quintessential teachings, authorizations, and demonstrations for [his own] Great Perfection teachings [i.e., *The Unimpeded*]. Other than that, he gave them the entirety of *The Vimalamitra Seminal Heart (Bhi ma la'i snying tig)* and *The Seminal Heart of the Dakinis (mKha' 'gro snying tig)*.”³¹ While these passages do not help us understand when and from whom Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem could have received this training, together they do constitute a strong case for concluding that he was considered by the early biographers of the tradition to be a master of a significant set of Seminal Heart teachings that predated his own revelations.

The biographies of six patriarchs of the early Northern Treasure

²⁷ Nyi ma bzang po 1983, p. 69.

²⁸ Nyi ma bzang po 1983, p. 145.

²⁹ Sangs rgyas dpal bzang 1983, pp. 177-178.

³⁰ Sangs rgyas dpal bzang 1983, p. 177.

³¹ Sangs rgyas dpal bzang 1983, p. 189.

Tradition who followed immediately after Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem are gathered together in a single text entitled *The Garland of Light* ('*Od kyi 'phreng ba*).³² The biographies of this collection fall into two groups, starting with those that recount the episodes involving five individuals with close ties to rGod ldem and his direct disciples: rNam rgyal mgon po (i.e., rGod ldem's son), rDo rje dpal (i.e., rGod ldem's maternal nephew), Byams pa bshes gnyen (i.e., rDo rje dpal's nephew), rDo rje mgon po (i.e., rGod ldem's primary disciple who helped translated the treasure scrolls), and Ngag dbang grags pa (i.e., the nephew of rDo rje mgon po). The collection concludes with the biography of Sangs rgyas dpal bzang (15th c.), and it is rather obvious that *The Garland of Light* is intended to explain how this final patriarch, who is a clan outsider, legitimately inherited the authority of the tradition that had been invested in the previous five patriarchs. The six biographies are united in that they present *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra* as the heart and soul of the Northern Treasure Tradition. However, throughout the tenures of the first five patriarchs, the tradition appears to have remained focused largely on *The Unimpeded* with minimal emphasis on preexisting scriptures, such as *The Vimalamitra Seminal Heart*, *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinīs*, and the treasures of Gu ru Chos dbang, but these cycles evidently held some importance within the tradition from the very beginning. The biography of Sangs rgyas dpal bzang, on the other hand, is much more explicit regarding the details of the various Great Perfection transmissions its protagonist acquired.

Sangs rgyas dpal bzang had already received an extensive and eclectic training—featuring the quintessential teachings of the Jonangpa and Sakyapa traditions—before receiving his first Great Perfection transmission: *The Bindu Cycle* (*Thig le*), which he received from 'Phags mchog Rin chen bzang po (15th c.).³³ Shortly after this first introduction to the Great Perfection, Sangs rgyas dpal bzang developed a desire for *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra*, which led him on a quest to the two epicenters of the Northern Treasure Tradition, Ri bo dpal 'bar and bKra bzang, where he studied with Byams pa bshes gnyen and Ngag dbang grags pa respectively. The language of the biography suggests that Sangs rgyas dpal bzang

³² For a translation of the entirety of this text, see Valentine 2017, pp. 146-165.

³³ I have not definitively identified this person or this cycle; neither are mentioned anywhere else in *The Collected Biographies and Prophecies of the Northern Treasure Tradition*. There are many treasure texts with the word "Bindu" (*thig le*) in the title found in *The Great Treasury of Rediscovered Teachings* by 'Jam mgon kong sprul. For a searchable table of contents, see the online database at rtz.tsadra.org. Elsewhere it is stated that the "Bindu Cycle" of the Great Perfection is also the name for the collection of teachings that Mañjuśrīmitra transmitted to Śrī Siṃha, who then categorized those teaching into the Four Cycles: Outer, Inner, Secret, and Unsurpassed Secret. See Kunsang 2012, p. 136.

received transmissions for all of the Northern Treasures, beginning with *The Unimpeded*, from both of these masters, thus uniting these two lineages into one. Ngag dbang grags pa is also the first to transmit Seminal Heart teachings to Sangs rgyas dpal bzang. From him, he received what is unhelpfully entitled *The Seminal Heart of the Old Translations* (sNying tig snga 'gyur gyi bskor).³⁴

Shortly after this, he received *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinīs* and *The Seminal Heart of Vimalamitra* from mThu chen rgya mtsho (15th c.) in sPa gro in Western Bhutan.³⁵ From this same master, he also received *The Seventeen Tantras, The Supreme Vehicle of Indestructible Clear Light* ('Od gsal rdo rje snying po'i theg mchog), and *The Four Profound Tomes* (Zab mo'i po ti bzhi).³⁶ This passage is meant to convey the idea that Sangs rgyas dpal bzang received the entirety of the Seminal Heart teachings that predated Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem—up to and including the works of Klong chen pa—from this master in Bhutan. In fact, when Sangs rgyas dpal bzang passes this set of teachings to his heart-disciple, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, we find the first explicit mention of Dri med 'od zer (i.e., Klong chen pa) and his Seminal Heart compositions: *The Quintessence of the Dākinīs* (mKha' 'gro yang tig), *The Quintessence of the Guru* (Bla ma yang tig), *The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (Theg mchog mdzod), and *The Profound Flavor in Four Parts* (Zab pa pod bzhi).³⁷ Presumably at some later date, Sangs rgyas dpal bzang also received Padma las 'brel rtsal's *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinīs*, Sar paṅ phyogs med's³⁸ *Mañjuśrī's Great Perfection* ('Jam dpal rdzogs chen), and Nyang ral's *The Stages of the Path of Secret Mantra* (gSang sngags lam rim), for he also transmitted these cycles to Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan.³⁹

Lastly, Sangs rgyas dpal bzang also received the Father-Tantra (*Pha rgyud*) of *The Stainless Moon* (Dri med zla shel), the Mother-Tantra (*Ma rgyud*) of *The Blazing Brilliant Expanse* (Klong gsal 'bar ma), *The Non-*

³⁴ Sangs rgyas dpal bzang 1982, p. 200.

³⁵ Immediately following his reception of the *Seminal Heart of Vimalamitra*, the biography includes an opaque statement (Tib: rin po che rnam pa gsum la gnang ngo) that either means that he had now received transmission directly from the three precious masters—Byams pa bshes gnyen, Ngag dbang grags pa, and mThu chen rgya mtsho—or that he had now received the Great Perfections teachings of the three precious masters—Vairocana, Vimalamitra, and Padmasambhava—who acquired the teachings in India from Śrī Siṃha and transmitted them to Tibet. For details, see Sangs rgyas dpal bzang 1983, p. 200.

³⁶ This is a four-part compendium of Great Perfection teachings said to be compiled by Vimalamitra. See Germano 1992, pp. 31-32.

³⁷ See the translation after this introduction or see Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, p. 214.

³⁸ For a brief biography of this treasure revealer, see Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Taye 2011, p. 181.

³⁹ Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, p. 215.

Dual Tantras (gNyis med rgyud), and *The Twenty-one Miniscule Tantras* (rGyud bu chung nyi shu rtsa gcig) of *The Blazing Brilliant Expanse Cycle of the Great Perfection* (rDzogs pa chen po klong gsal) from Gu ru Chos kyi rdo rje who was residing at sTag tshang seng ge bsam 'grub.⁴⁰ This is a treasure cycle that was revealed by Shes rab me 'bar (1267–1326) but later translated from the treasure script by rDo rje gling pa (1346–1405), a contemporary of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem.⁴¹ From this list of teachings, it is evident that Sangs rgyas dpal bzang had a voracious desire to acquire a wide range of Great Perfection transmissions, which was likely the reason for his journey to Bhutan. His biography also suggests that while he received some of the early Seminal Heart materials from his two Byang gter teachers who gave him *The Unimpeded*, it was necessary to find other masters from whom he could receive a more thorough training in the teachings of Klong chen pa. It appears, therefore, that Sangs rgyas dpal bzang may have been the first of the patriarchs to be known as a master of not only *The Unimpeded* on the Northern Treasure Tradition, but also of the Seminal Heart in its full breadth and depth.

Among the early hagiographies of the patriarchs of the Northern Treasure Tradition, the autobiography of Chos rgyal bsod nam (1442–1509), which is written entirely in verse, is an outlier.⁴² Chos rgyal bsod nam was born in Southern Mustang in what is now Nepal and does not appear to have been a very important figure in Byang. He trained with various teachers from different sects (e.g., rNying ma pa and Shangs pa) while travelling extensively through Northern India, the Kathmandu Valley, and Tibet. In 1465, he trained with the head of the 'Bri khung Order, Rin chen dpal bzang po (1421/22–1467), and received the name by which he is most well known: Chos rgyal bsod nam.⁴³ He then proceeded to sTag tshang seng ge in Bhutan, which is where Sangs rgyas dpal bzang travelled to receive *The Blazing Brilliant Expanse Cycle of the Great Perfection* as discussed in the previous paragraph. It is here that Chos rgyal bsod nam received his first taste of the highest teachings of the rNying ma pa Order. Surprisingly, however, he received extensive training not in the treasures of Shes rab

⁴⁰ Sangs rgyas dpal bzang 1983, p. 202.

⁴¹ For a discussion of these texts and Shes rab me 'bar (1267–1326), see Ehrhard 2007, p. 88, note 20. When Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan receives transmissions from Sangs rgyas dpal bzang, events recorded in the recipients' biography, Shes rab me 'bar is mentioned by name. See Nam mkha' bsod nam 1983, p. 214.

⁴² Unless otherwise stated, the details of the life of Chos rgyal bsod nam have been drawn from his autobiography. See Chos rgyal bsod nam 1983, pp. 235–250.

⁴³ For a brief discussion of Chos rgyal bsod nam's life that includes this encounter with Rin chen dpal bzang po, which is based on the Fifth Dalai Lama's record of received teachings, see Ehrhard 2012, p. 87.

me 'bar, but in *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra* from one sPrul sku Dharma ra dza (15th c.), about whom virtually nothing is known.⁴⁴ The following year (1467), he finally traveled to bKra bzang, where he received a complete training while serving Sangs rgyas dpal bzang. Despite his relationship with this master who resided at the epicenter of the Northern Treasure Tradition, it is suggested in the autobiography that his relationship with sPrul sku Dharma ra dza was the more significant connection.⁴⁵ When Chos rgyal bsod noms departed Byang, he travelled to Bodhgaya, where he appears to have remained until his death in 1509. While the autobiography of Chos rgyal bsod noms does not increase our knowledge of the various cycles of Great Perfection teachings that were circulating among the patriarchs of the Northern Treasure Tradition in the fifteenth century, it is interesting to know that as early as 1467 it was possible to receive transmission of *The Unimpeded* in Bhutan. This suggests that the fame of this cycle began to spread well before the establishment of rDo rje brag and its Byang gter ritual program in the seventeenth century.

In the biography of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan called *Dispelling the Darkness that Shrouds Meaning*, the translation of which follows this introduction, we find that the protagonist was similar to his teacher, Sangs rgyas dpal bzang, in that both appear to have had an insatiable desire to encyclopedically collect scriptural transmissions. Unlike Sangs rgyas dpal bzang and Chos rgyal bsod noms who were clan outsiders, however, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan was of the Mes family, which had strong familial connections to the Northern Treasure Tradition.⁴⁶ His father was Byams pa bshes gnyen, who was the nephew-disciple of Mes ston rDo rje dpal (14th–15th c.), who was in turn the nephew-disciple of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem himself.⁴⁷ The

⁴⁴ Chos rgyal bsod noms 1989, p. 241. In *Gu bkra'i chos 'byung* (18th c.), there is a small section dedicated to the life of Chos rgyal bsod noms in the chapter that discusses the abbatial succession of rDo rje brag Monastery. Therein his connection with sPrul sku Dharma ra dza is not mentioned, which results in the impression that Sangs rgyas dpal bzang was his only Byang gter teacher. See Gur u bkra shis 1990, p. 672.

⁴⁵ At the end of his autobiography, when Chos rgyal bsod noms is summing himself up, he refers to himself as a follower of sPrul sku Dharma ra dza, and does not mention Sangs rgyas dpal bzang at all. See Chos rgyal bsod noms 1983, p. 247.

⁴⁶ The following passage from *Gu bkra'i chos 'byung* (18th c.) explains the name of this lineage of teachers: "The progenitor of the family jabbed his staff into a rock in southern Sa dmar, and it caught fire. There were many signs of his attainment, such as the handprints and footprints left in the rock. Thus, he was known as 'Mes ston' or 'he who teaches with fire.'" See Gur u bkra shis 1990, p. 672.

⁴⁷ In the section of *The Garland of Light* that is dedicated to the life of Byams pa bshes gnyen, which as I have mentioned above appears to be directly concerned with establishing the authority of Sangs rgyas dpal bzang, mention of the familial connection between Byams pa bshes gnyen and rDo rje dpal is suspiciously absent.

patriarchs of the Mes family, who were seated at the estate of bDe grol in Ngam ring, remained influential in the area through at least the seventeenth century.⁴⁸

The biography places special emphasis on Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's three meetings with Thang stong rgyal po (1361–1486), who was a wildly famous saint from Byang.⁴⁹ It is from this master that Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan received training in Mahāmudrā, a “post-tantric” tradition of the Kagyupa.⁵⁰ While Thang stong rgyal po is known to have held the Northern Treasures, these were not among the teachings passed to Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan.⁵¹ The bulk of his early training in rNying ma pa *Mahāyoga*, however, was received from Mes ston mGon po rdo rje (15th c.), to whom Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan was deeply dedicated.⁵² He also received extensive training in the tantric tradition of the “new” (*gSar ma*) schools, including the Sa skya pa, which was also prevalent in Ngam ring at the time.

Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan then met Sangs rgyas dpal bzang, and his affinity for the teachings of the Great Perfection were awakened. He served this master for a significant length of time, and Sangs rgyas dpal bzang apparently transmitted every teaching he held to Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan. In fact, the list of teachings that were transmitted to Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan from this master reflects the order in which these cycles were obtained throughout Sangs rgyas dpal bzang's life. But, in the places where Sangs rgyas dpal bzang's biography is vague, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's biography clarifies the details. For example, it is in the exchange between these two masters that one finds the only mention of *The Self-Emergent Self-Arisen Primordial Purity* (*Ka dag rang byung rang shar*), the actual title of the fifth volume of the Great Perfection anthology of the Northern

See Sangs rgyas dpal bzang 1983, pp. 185-188.

⁴⁸ Padma 'phrin las (1641–1717), the fourth incarnation of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem, records his interactions with members of both the Se and Mes clans during his pilgrimage to Ngam ring in 1690. See Padma 'phrin las, pp. 549-630.

⁴⁹ Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, pp. 209-210.

⁵⁰ The first meeting obviously occurred while Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan was very young, but the other meetings that include transmissions of Mahāmudrā and Severance (*gcod*) teachings likely transpired much later. However, the biography places all three meetings with Thang stong rgyal po together, just before discussing Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's other training activities, which presumably reflects the importance of the master when the biography was written.

⁵¹ There is an interesting parallel here because Thang stong rgyal po's mother consulted Don yod rgyal mtshan (14th–15th c.), who held the Northern Treasures and would later transmit them to him, while he was an infant. See Sterns 2007, pp. 105 and 494-495, note 324.

⁵² The biography does not explain why Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan does not train with his own father, Byams pa bshes gnyen, who was a lineage-holder of the Northern Treasures.

Treasure Tradition, in any of these early biographies.⁵³ We can thus conclude that by the time he had finished training with Sangs rgyas dpal bzang, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan was also well informed about a wide range of Seminal Heart teachings and was on his way to becoming a master himself.

Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan returned to his family estate of bDe grol after completing his training with Sangs rgyas dpal bzang, but he continued to collect a wide range of transmissions, including Great Perfection teachings, from other masters. He acquired the treasures of Gu ru Chos dbang from sPos rin chos rje gZhon nu dbang chen (15th–16th c.), including *The Great Perfection of the Buddha Samyoga* (*rDzogs chen sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor*).⁵⁴ From sPang ston gSang sngags rdo rje (15th c.), he acquired the treasures of Kun skyong gling pa (1396–1477),⁵⁵ such as *The Seminal-Heart Great Perfection of Vajrasattva* (*rDzogs chen rdor sems snying tig*), the treasures of rDo rje gling pa, such as *The Great Compassionate One's Ocean of Victors* (*Thugs rje chen po rgyal ba rgya mtsho*), and those revealed by U rgyan gling pa (b. 1323), such as *The Chronicles of Padmasambhava* (*Padma thang yig*), *The Testament of Padmasambhava* (*Padma bka' chams*) and *The Likeness of Vairocana* (*Bai ro'i 'dra 'bag*).⁵⁶ At this stage in his life, it is already clear that Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's training in and knowledge of the Great Perfection surpassed that of Sangs rgyas dpal bzang.

Perhaps the most interesting connections discussed in the biography are those between Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, Shākya bzang po (16th c.), and bsTan gnyis gling pa (1480–1535). The later hagiography of the Northern Treasure Tradition⁵⁷ stresses that Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan passed his authority to Shākya bzang po, who in

⁵³ Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, p. 213.

⁵⁴ Nam mkha' bsod nams 1993, p. 216.

⁵⁵ For a brief biography of this treasure revealer, see Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Taye 2011, p. 142.

⁵⁶ Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, p. 216. gSang sngags rdo rje appears in a list of sixteenth century luminaries, which includes bsTan gnyis gling pa and Shākya bzang po, who were held in high regard by the King of Mang yul gung thang, Nyi zla grags pa (1514–1560). For a translation of the relevant passage, see Ehrhard 1997, p. 340. For a short biography of gSang sngags rdo rje, see Everding 2004, p. 268, note 2.

⁵⁷ Here I am referring to the hagiographies that were written after the establishment of rDo rje brag Monastery and the enthroning of the incarnations of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem at that location. Boord's account of the history of the Northern Treasure tradition prioritizes the narratives of authority of the later historiographic tradition despite being based on both earlier and later sources. See Boord 2013, pp. 31–63. Boord's account is valuable in that it accurately reflects how the tradition sees itself today, which is relevant for modern scholars and practitioners alike. I understand the earlier biographies, emphasized herein, not as "corrective" historiographies, but as "complementary" narratives.

turn was the teacher of Legs ldan rdo rje, the first reincarnation of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem in the incarnational series that was eventually enthroned at rDo rje brag in Central Tibet. But, while Shākya bzang po and bsTan gnyis gling pa are listed as the foremost of his disciples, they were also both important teachers who transmitted large numbers of teachings to Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan. The treasure cycles of Padma gling pa, such as *The Great Perfection Compendium of the Realization of Samantabhadra* (*rDzogs chen kun bzang dgongs pa kun 'dus*), were foremost amongst the texts received from Shākya bzang po.⁵⁸ From him he also received the treasures of bDung bu Byang chub gling pa (14th c.), such as *The Great Perfection Mind Treasure of Samantabhadra* (*rDzogs chen kun bzang thugs gter*).⁵⁹

bsTan gnyis gling pa, on the other hand, was himself a master of the Northern Treasure Tradition, and he had already revealed treasures that would eventually constitute a “branch” of the treasure tradition.⁶⁰ While Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan received a wide range of transmissions from this master, the most interesting by far were Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem's *The Unimpeded* and bsTan gnyis gling pa's own treasures such as *The Uncontaminated Aggregates of the Great Perfection* (*rDzogs chen phung po zag med*)⁶¹ and *The Extensively Profound Vajravārahī* (*Phag mo zab rgya*).⁶² This later text is significant in that bsTan gnyis gling pa revealed it at Ri bo dpal 'bar, the most important southern outpost of the Northern Treasure Tradition that was established with the blessing of the King of Mang yul gung thang during Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem's lifetime.

Thus, while Sangs rgyas dpal bzang exceeded his predecessors by acquiring a wider range of preexisting Seminal Heart and other Great Perfection transmissions, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan was able to exceed him largely because of his meaningful connections with famous, itinerant treasure revealers. From them he was able to obtain a more complete collection of Great Perfection treasure cycles as well as new treasures belonging to the Northern Tradition. Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, however, was also a dedicated practitioner of the Great

⁵⁸ Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, pp. 216-217.

⁵⁹ For a brief biography of this treasure revealer, see Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Taye 2011, p. 216-217.

⁶⁰ For an introduction to the life of bsTan gnyis gling pa, see Solmsdorf 2014, pp. 26-34.

⁶¹ One of bsTan gnyis gling pa's other Great Perfection texts, *Quintessence of Wisdom Liberated through Seeing* (*Yang tig ye shes mthong grol*) has been analyzed in great detail; see Achard 2004, pp. 58-97. The structure of the cycle is very similar to that of *The Unimpeded*; compare with Turpeinen 2015.

⁶² Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, pp. 217-218. The revelation of this text was very important in the treasure career of bsTan gnyis gling pa. For details, see Achard 2004, pp. 61-62.

Perfection. Later in life, he completed a three-year meditation retreat that focused entirely on acquiring experiential realization of his Great Perfection training.

Before proceeding to the translation of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's biography, it will be helpful to discuss the underlying agenda that animates the text. As the title, *Dispelling the Darkness that Shrouds Meaning*, is meant to suggest, there was an earlier biography of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan as well as oral accounts of his life that were judged to be misleading, and this new text was authored because certain issues needed to be clarified. Without having access to this former work, it is impossible to know every way in which it differed from *Dispelling the Darkness*. There are, however, two large sections of the revised biography that could not have been in the earlier text, and these sections illuminate the underlying agenda of the biography. Toward the end of the biography, there are two different accounts of the final months of the life of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, the experience of his death, and the days following his passing. The first is likely the testimony of rDo rje 'dzin pa bSam bgrub rgyal mtshan (15th–16th c.), who, according to the colophon, requested for the biography to be written and supplied the biographer, Nam mkha' bsod nams (16th c.), with many of the details that were required to author the text.⁶³ The second is the account of Se ston 'Dzam gling chos grags (16th c.), who was the reigning patriarch at the original epicenter of the Northern Treasure Tradition, bKra bzang, when the biography was written.⁶⁴ Both bSam bgrub rgyal mtshan and 'Dzam gling chos grags were close disciples of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan.

The updated elements of the biography have at least two goals. The first is to discredit rumors regarding bad omens after the death of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan that might cause those of little faith to doubt the spiritual accomplishments of the biography's protagonist. The second is to establish as fact that the mantle of authority of the Northern Treasure Tradition passed to Se ston 'Dzam gling chos grags. This is a controversial assertion because the later hagiography of the tradition stresses, as discussed above, the link between Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan and Shākya bzang po for it was this lineage that was eventually reestablished at rDo rje brag in Central Tibet. Interestingly, *Dispelling the Darkness* resoundingly confirms that Shākya bzang po was first among Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's disciples. However, in 'Dzam gling chos grags's account of his master's final months, he reports that Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's only regret was that he knew

⁶³ For the entire section, see Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, pp. 225–227. For the colophon, see p. 234.

⁶⁴ For the entire section, see Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, pp. 227–232.

that he would never again see Shākya bzang po, who was traveling through mNga' ris at the time of his decline.⁶⁵ 'Dzam gling chos grags was present, however, and he assumed leadership responsibilities after the passing of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan.

Ultimately, 'Dzam gling chos grags's ascendancy is not very surprising. Among the nineteen disciples who are explicitly listed in Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's biography, the three most important were Shākya bzang po, bsTan gnyis gling pa, and gSang sngags rdo rje.⁶⁶ All three of these figures were not simply his disciples, but individuals with whom Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan maintained reciprocal relationships. They were also, like Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, heavily involved with either the revelation of treasures, the propagation of recently revealed treasures, or both. Moreover, Shākya bzang po, bsTan gnyis gling pa, and gSang sngags rdo rje were all well-travelled and well-known in many different regions of Tibet—all three maintained relations with the court of Mang yul gung thang, for example—and none of them were native to Ngam ring. While these three lamas were first among his disciples in terms of their close relationship with Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan and in terms of their fame, it is unlikely that any of them were expected to permanently settle in Ngam ring and act as the regional patriarch of the Northern Treasure Tradition.⁶⁷

Similarly, Legs ldan rdo rje (1512–1580), who is extremely important for the Central Tibetan Tradition, appears in *Dispelling the Darkness*, but in a surprisingly diminished role. According to seventeenth century biographical accounts, before meeting Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, Legs ldan rdo rje had already been identified by Kong chen rin po che (15th–16th c.) as a “speech emanation” (*gsung gi sprul pa*) of sNa nam rDo rje bdud 'joms (8th c.), one of Padmasambhava's Tibetan disciples during the era of treasure concealment.⁶⁸ Legs ldan rdo rje, Shākya bzang po, and Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan were together at bDe grol in Ngam ring in 1527, and it was at this time that Legs ldan rdo rje developed the intention to become a master and preserver of the Northern Treasure Tradition.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, p. 227.

⁶⁶ The complete list of disciples is very impressive. See Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, pp. 222-223.

⁶⁷ According to Boord, Shākya bzang po accumulated disciples in Mustang and Ngam ring; see Boord 2013, pp. 65-66. These passages of Boord should not be interpreted to mean that Shākya bzang po was seated at bDe grol as its patriarch. At least from the perspective of *Dispelling the Darkness*, Shākya bzang po was as much a disciple of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan as he was a master.

⁶⁸ For a discussion of this identification, see Valentine 2013, pp. 148-148.

⁶⁹ Boord 2013, p. 46.

Nevertheless, Legs ldan rdo rje departed for Central Tibet where he stayed, presumably until after the passing of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan. Later in life, Legs ldan rdo rje returned to bKra bzang, where he finally remembered his previous life as Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem.⁷⁰ He then settled at gSang sngags theg mchog gling in Ngam ring,⁷¹ which was constructed by bKra shis stobs rgyal (1550–1603) and destroyed prior to 1690.⁷² None of this information is reflected in *Dispelling the Darkness*, which was written in 1556. Perhaps this is because Legs ldan rdo rje had not yet returned and established his authority in the region. Regardless, the author of the biography, while very respectful of the famous itinerant treasure revealers of his day, is more concerned with buttressing the authority of 'Dzam gling chos grags, a master of a clan with deep roots in the Northern Treasure Tradition in particular and Ngam ring in general.

From this perspective, the thesis statement of *Dispelling the Darkness* is not that 'Dzam gling chos grags, who is listed fourth among Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's disciples, legitimately usurped the authority that rightfully belonged to Shākya bzang po. Rather, the proposition is that 'Dzam gling chos grags succeeded Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan as the leading regional patriarch of the Northern Treasure Tradition lineages of Ngam ring. The authority that had been wielded by Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan of the Mes clan from the family estate of bDe grol did not pass into the hands of Mes ston rDo rje bsod nam (15th c.), who is listed sixth among the disciples. That authority was consolidated at bKra bzang, the original epicenter of the Northern Treasure Tradition, by Se ston 'Dzam gling chos grags of the Se clan. Despite their irrelevance within the Central Tibetan tradition, the patriarchs of this ancient hereditary lineage of the rNying ma pa were intimately involved in the life of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem before and during his revelatory escapades and were among the revelator's closest disciples.⁷³ They also maintained transmission lineages of the Northern Treasures through at least the seventeenth century.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Valentine 2013, pp. 152-153.

⁷¹ Boord 2013, p. 47.

⁷² Padma 'phrin las, p. 551.

⁷³ In Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem's own biography, the only explicit transmission of *The Unimpeded* is given to a group of fifteen male and female disciples who remain unnamed except for two patriarchs of the Se lineage of the tradition: Se ston Thugs rje rgyal mtshan (14th–15th c.) and the author of the biography, Se ston Nyi ma bzang po. See the relevant passage in Nyi ma bzang po 1983, p. 143.

⁷⁴ Evidence of the power struggle between the Mes and the Se families can be found in the autobiography of Padma 'phrin las (1641–1717), the fourth incarnation of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem. When he traveled from rDo rje brag in Central Tibet to Ngam ring in 1690, he encountered a large number of the descendants of both the Mes and Se families featured in Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's biography. He noticed

Principle Personages

De gyin hor Lineage of the Northern Treasure Tradition – Seated at bKra bzang in Ngam ring

Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem	1337–1409	Primary Treasure Revealer
rNam rgyal mgon po	1399–1424	Son of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem

Mes Lineage of the Northern Treasure Tradition – Seated at bDe grol in Ngam ring by the 16th c.

Mes ston dpal ba	rDo rje 14th–15th c.	Maternal Nephew of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem
Byams gnyen	pa bshes 15thc.	Nephew of rDo rje dpal ba
Mes ston rdo rje	mGon po 15th c.	Teacher of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan
Nam mtshan	mkha' rgyal 1454–1541	Son of Byams pa bshes gnyen
Mes ston bsod nams	rDo rje 15th c.	Primary Mes Disciple of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan

Lineage of the Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem's Disciples – Resided at bKra bzang by the mid-15th c.

rDo rje mgon po	14th c.	Primary Disciple of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem, no familial relationship to Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem
Rin chen gags pa	14th c.	Brother of rDo rje mgon po
Ngag pa	dbang gags 15thc.	Son of Rin chen gags pa

Se Patriarchs of the Northern Treasure Tradition – Seated at bKra

that there is still a rivalry between the two families that are seated respectively at bDe grol and bKra bzang, and he attempted—without much success—to mediate a peaceful settlement between the two parties. For the record of Padma 'phrin las's pilgrimage to Ngam ring in 1690, see Padma 'phrin las, pp. 549-630.

bzang by 16th c.

dPal chen 'bum pa	14th c.	Teacher of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem
Legs pa ba	14th c.	Teacher of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem
Se ston Thugs rje rgyal mtshan	14th–15th c.	Disciple of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem
Se ston Nyi ma bzang po	14th–15th c.	Disciple and Biographer of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem
Se ston 'Dzam gling chos grags	16th c.	Disciple of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan

Northern Treasure Lineage - Seated at rDo rje brag in Central Tibet after 1632

Shākya bzang po	16th c.	Teacher-Disciple of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan
Padma dbang rgyal	1487–1542	Disciple of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan and Shākya bzang po
Legs ldan rdo rje	1512–1580	Disciple of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan and Shākya bzang po
bKra shis stobs rgyal	1550–1603	Reincarnation of Padma dbang rgyal, Disciple of Legs ldan rdo rje
Ngag gi dbang po	1580–1639	Son of bKra shis stobs rgyal, Reincarnation of Legs ldan rdo rje
Padma 'phrin las	1641–1717	Reincarnation of Ngag gi dbang po
sKal bzang padma dbang phyug	1720–1771	Reincarnation of Padma 'phrin las

Miscellaneous Patriarch of the Northern Treasure Tradition

bZang po grags pa	14th c.	Treasure revealer who indirectly passed his treasures materials to Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem
-------------------	---------	---

'Jam dbyangs bla ma	14th c.	Reincarnation of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem
Sangs rgyas dpal bzang	b. 15th c.	Disciple of Ngag dbang grags pa and Byams pa bshes gnyen, Reincarnation of rNam rgyal mgon po
sPrul sku Dharma ra dza	15th c.	Transmitted <i>The Unimpeded</i> to Chos rgyal bsod nams in Bhutan
Chos rgyal bsod nams	1442–1509	Disciple of Dharma ra dza and Sangs rgyas dpal bzang
bSam bgrub rgyal mtshan	15th–16th c.	Disciple of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, Involved with Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's Biography
bsTan gnyis gling pa	1480–1535	Teacher-Disciple of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, Later Revealer of Northern Treasures
Gar dbang rdo rje	1640–1685	Later Revealer of Northern Treasures

Works Cited

- Achard, Jean-Luc. 2015. "The View of *Spyi Ti Yoga*." In *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*. v. 31, pp. 1-20.
- Achard, Jean-Luc. 2004. "bsTan gnyis gling pa (1480–1535) et la Révélation du Yang tig ye shes mthong grol." In *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*. v. 5, pp. 57-96.
- Aris, Michael. 1989. *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives: A Study of Pemalingpa (1450–1521) and the Sixth Dalai Lama (1683–1706)*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International.
- Boord, Martin. 1993. *The Cult of the Deity Vajrakīla: According to the Texts of the Northern Treasure Tradition of Tibet (Byang-gter phur-pa)*. Tring: The Institute of Buddhist Studies.
- Boord, Martin. 2013. *Gathering The Elements: The Cult of the Wrathful Deity*

- Vajrakīla according to the Texts of the Northern Treasures Tradition of Tibet*. Berlin: Wandel Verlag.
- Chos rgyal bsod nams (1442–1509). 1983. *Rigs 'dzin chos rgyal bsod nams gyi rnam thar* [The Life of Rigs 'dzin Chos rgyal bsod nams]. In *Byang gter lugs kyi rnam thar dang mang 'ongs lung bstan*. TBRC W27866. Gangtok, Sikkim: Sherab Gyaltzen and Lama Dawa, pp. 235-250.
- Dudjom Rinpoche. 1991. *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*. Dorjé, G. & M. Kapstein. trans. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Ehrhard, Franz-Karl. 1997. "A 'Hidden Land' in the Tibetan-Nepalese Borderlands." In MacDonald, Alexander. ed. *Mandala and Landscape*. New Delhi: DK Printworld, pp. 335-364.
- Ehrhard, Franz-Karl. 2007. "Kaḥ thog pa Bsod nams rgyal mtshan (1466-1540) and the Foundation of O rgyan rtse mo in Spa gro." In Ardussi, John and Françoise Pommaret. eds. *PIATS 2003: Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Oxford, 2003: Bhutan: Traditions and Changes*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, pp. 73-95.
- Ehrhard, Franz-Karl. 2012. "'Flow of the River Gangā': The Gsan-yig of the Fifth Dalai Bla-ma and its Literary Sources." In Vitali, Roberto. ed. *Studies on the History and Literature of Tibet and the Himalaya*. Kathmandu: Vajra Publications, pp. 79-96.
- Everding, Karl-Heinz. 2004. "rNying ma pa Lamas at the Court of Mang yul gung thang: The Meeting of gTer ston bsTan gnyis gling pa with King Kun bzang nyi zla grags pa." In Cüppers, Christoph. ed. *The Relationship Between Religion and State (chos srid zang 'brel) In Traditional Tibet*. Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute.
- Germano, David. 1992. *Poetic Thought, the Intelligent Universe, and the Mystery of the Self: The Tantric Synthesis of rDzogs Chen in Fourteenth Century Tibet*. Ph.D. dissertation. University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- Germano, David. 2005a. "The Funerary Transformation of the Great Perfection (rDzogs chen)." In *The Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, vol. 1. www.jiats.org.
- Germano, David. 2005b. "Klong chen rab byams pa." In *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Jones, Lindsay. ed., vol. 7. Esther: MacMillan Reference USA, pp. 5191-5195.
- Gu ru bkra shis (b. 18th c.). 1990. *Gu bkra'i chos 'byung*. Beijing: Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang.
- Harding, Sarah. trans. 2003. *The Life and Revelations of Pema Lingpa*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications.
- Herweg, Jurgen Wilhelm. 1994. *The Hagiography of Rig 'dzin Rgod kyi ldem 'phru can and Three Historical Questions Emerging from It*. MA

- Thesis, University of Washington.
- Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Taye (1813–1899). 2011. *The Hundred Tertöns: A Garland of Beryl: Brief Accounts of the Profound Terma and the Siddhas Who Have Revealed It*. Yeshe Gyamtso. trans. Woodstock: KTD Publications.
- Kunsang, Erik Pema. trans. 2012. *Wellsprings of the Great Perfection: The Lives and Insights of the Early Masters*. Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe Publications.
- Nam mkha' bsod nams (16th c.). 1983. *Thugs sras nam mkha' rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar mthong ba don ldan ma rig mun sel [Dispelling the Darkness that Shrouds Meaning: The Life of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, The Heart-Disciple]*. In *Byang gter lugs kyi rnam thar dang mang 'ongs lung bstan*. TBRC W27866. Gangtok, Sikkim: Sherab Gyaltsen and Lama Dawa, pp. 207–234.
- Nyi ma bzang po (14th–15th c.). 1983. *Pprul sku chen po'i rnam thar gsal byed nyi ma'i 'od zer [The Ray of Sunlight]*. In *Byang gter lugs kyi rnam thar dang mang 'ongs lung bstan*. TBRC W27866. Gangtok, Sikkim: Sherab Gyaltsen and Lama Dawa, pp. 53–152.
- Padma las 'brel rtsal. ed. 1983. *Byang gter lugs kyi rnam thar dang mang 'ongs lung bstan*. [Collected Biographies and Prophecies of the Byang Gter Tradition]. TBRC W27866. Gangtok, Sikkim: Sherab Gyaltsen and Lama Dawa.
- Padma 'phrin las (1641–1717). *Padma 'phrin las kyi rang nyid kyi rtogs brjod rab dkar shel gyi me long [The Clear White Mirror]*. Unpublished. <http://tbrc.org/link?RID=W23811>
- Sangs rgyas dpal bzang (b. 15th c.). 1983. *Bla ma rnams kyi rnam thar 'od kyi 'phreng ba [The Garland of Light: Lives of the Masters]*. In *Byang gter lugs kyi rnam thar dang mang 'ongs lung bstan*. TBRC W27866. Gangtok, Sikkim: Sherab Gyaltsen and Lama Dawa, pp. 173–206.
- Schwieger, Peter. 2010. "Collecting and Arranging the gTer ma Tradition: Kong sprul's Great Treasury of the Hidden Teachings." In Anne Chayet, Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, Françoise Robin & Jean-Luc Achard, eds., *Edition, éditions: l'écrit au Tibet, évolution et devenir*. München: Indus Verlag.
- Solmsdorf, Nikolai. 2014. *Treasure-traditions of Western Tibet: Rig-'dzin Gar-dbang Rdo-rje Snying-po (1640–1685) and His Activities in Mang-yul Gung-thang*. München: Indus Verlag.
- Stearns, Cyrus. 2007. *King of the Empty Plain: The Tibetan Iron-bridge Builder Tangtong Gyalpo*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2007.
- Turpeinen, Katarina. 2015. *Vision of Samantabhadra: The Dzokchen Anthology of Rindzin Godem*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia.
- Valentine, Jay Holt. 2013. *Lords of the Northern Treasures: The Development*

- of the Tibetan Institution of Rule by Successive Incarnations*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia.
- Valentine, Jay Holt. 2015. "The Family and Legacy of the Early Northern Treasure Tradition." In *Journal of Global Buddhism*, v. 16, pp. 126-143.
<http://www.globalbuddhism.org/jgb/index.php/jgb/article/view/151/172>.
- Valentine, Jay Holt. 2016. "Zangpo Drakpa," *Treasury of Lives*, accessed September 28, 2016,
<http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Zangpo-Drakpa/9572>.
- Valentine, Jay Holt. 2017. "Introduction to and Translation of *The Garland of Light: Lives of the Masters of the Northern Treasure Tradition*." In *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*. no. 39, pp. 133-165.



Dispelling the Darkness that Shrouds Meaning The Life of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, the Heart-Disciple⁷⁵

[208] Praises to the Guru!

You abide in the expanse of the *Dharmakāya*, and
 Raise the victory banner of the *Sambhogakāya* like the sun and
 the moon.
 Your *Nirmāṇakāya* are like the ten million emanating rays of
 light.
 Homage to you, my lama who is endowed with the three *kaya*-
 bodies!

From your oceanic liberation story,
 The following is like a few drops of water for the fields [of this
 world].
 I have carefully gathered them by cupping my mind like hands
 [under a dripping spring].
 But, [it is enough to] satiate the longing of the faithful ones.

Indeed, this is the liberation story of my guru, who is known as the
 Venerable Holy One, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan (1454–1541).

There is a clan-lineage of successive realized masters that begins

⁷⁵ I am grateful to Kinley Drukpa for his assistance in translating a few of the more difficult passages in this text during our meetings in Queens and Manhattan, NY (2014–2016).

with Mes ston rDo rje dpal (14th–15th c.) of the Sa dmar ba clan. [Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's] father, Byams pa bshes gnyen (15th c.), was the nephew-heir of this master, and he was a practitioner of mantras and a yogin. He was an expert in cycles such as the *Ancestral Vajrakīla* (*pha chos rdo rje phur pa mdo lugs*), and he had many good personality traits. [209] His mother was of the Sa dmar 'da' pa [lineage]. She was known as dPon mo Nam mkha' rgyal mo, and she was modest and respectful in private and public. My lama was born to the couple in the year of the Male-Wood-Dog (1454). While he was residing in his mother's womb, her body was pleasantly healthy and meditative equanimity awakened within her mental continuum. She didn't experience any discomfort when he was born. When he was a young child, he proved to be mentally fit and he grew faster than [his siblings]. He was endowed with many wonderful qualities [that come easy in this] tradition. By the time he reached seven or eight years of age, he learned to read and write, and he understood effortlessly. It was clear that he was awakening habitual tendencies learned in his former lives.

My lama met the saint named Thang stong rgyal po (1361–1486) three times. [210] The first time was when he was very young. His mother carried him to the meeting. She put a measure of white butter on top of a choice cut of meat and gave it as an offering. The great saintly lord spoke many prophecies like the following: "This [offering demonstrates] an auspicious connection. [This child] will churn the profound dharma and yield true meaning that is similar to this purified butter!" He also named the child dGe bsnen Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan. The practice commentary (*khrid*) for *Five-fold Mahāmudrā* (*phyag rgya chen po lnga ldan*) was foremost among the transmissions given to my lama by the saint during their second meeting. During their final meeting, the saint gave him many teachings, such as the practice commentary for Severance (*gcod*) and the empowerments for *Opening the Door of the Sky* (*Nam mkha' sgo 'byed*). He received continuous blessings from the master.

Mes ston mGon po rdo rje (15th c.) was one of the precious lord's elders. From him, he received the empowerment for the *Ancestral Vajrakīla*, the procedures (*lam gyi rim pa*) for liberating activity (*grol byed*), *The Kīla Root Text Cycle* (*Phur pa rtsas skor*), *The Great Tantra of the Secret Cycle* (*gSang skor gyi rgyud chen mo*), *The Explanatory Tantras and the Indian Commentaries of Pema* (*Padma rgya 'grel*), *The Five-fold Secret Tantra* (*gSang rgyud sde lnga*), the liturgical procedures for those, the expulsion rites of accumulated action (*las tshogs phyir bzlog*), the protection from hail rites, the oral instructions for the four aspects of familiarization practice, and the subtle teachings regarding the generation and completion stages of deity yoga. [211] He listened to these teachings and practiced them earnestly. As a result, in his heart

he came to adore Mes ston mGon po rdo rje like an elder brother.
The lord expressed [his gratitude] in the following lines of verse:

He had the nature of the mind of all the victors of the three
times, and
His discipline, who could criticize even a fraction?
How could one measure the profundity of his intentions?
One cannot grasp the extent of his kindness.

To my kind lama, mGon po rdo rje,
Who spoke so kindly to this prostrated devotee,
With the ancestors in mind as I venerate you, I go to you for
refuge.

I grasp onto that protector, who with the empowerments,
reading transmissions, and quintessential instructions,
Took this servant with disciplined mind into your care,
Because I am in awe of you out of respect, I am nourished by
my memory of you.

Having transmitted the teachings verbally to me, the old gods
were engendered in the beginning, and
When I perform *The Ancestral Vajrakīla*,
Maturation occurs because of my deep connection with the
preparation and the primary practices.

Then, as I progress through the stages that bring about
liberation, and
I learn the truth of cyclic existence, impermanence, and the
pursuit of riches,
As well as suffering, karma, and fruition, and through seeking
refuge, the purification of the defilements and the
accumulation of merit,
By means of the one hundred syllable refuge practice, the
mandala practice, [212]
Guru Yoga practice, and my prayers,
Through these preliminary practices, I became a suitable
vessel.

After that, you gave me the three: *The Ancestral Vajrakīla*,
The secret cycles and the shown cycles, and
You explained each one of them in detail.
In your inconceivable manner, you enumerated the Tantras,
the root texts, and their commentaries,

The sādhana practices, the empowerments, the quintessential instructions, the accumulation practices, and
The oral directions for each.

To me in particular, you gave the cycle for the path to liberation
The commentary on the great secret Tantra of Padma,
The five classes of Tantras and the explanation of those, and
The liturgical procedures for all that, the accumulation practices, the expulsion rites,
The quintessential instructions for the hail protection rites,
The oral instructions for each of the familiarization practices,
The single points for the profound final birth, and
You put the oral transmissions in the center of my mind!

Then, before the one who resided at rDzong phu named bKra shis dpal bzang (15th c.), who was an expert in all types of Tantra, including the Yoga-tantras, he received many transmissions, such as those for *Trinity of Splendor, Peak, and Space* (dPal rtse dbyings gsum), *The Twelve Core Practices* (sByong dkyil bcu gnyis), *The Five Pronouncements* (gSungs gra lnga), *Vajravali* (Bla med kyi rdo rje 'phrengs ba), and *The Ultra-secret Hayagrīva* (sNying ma'i rta mgrin yang gsang). [213]

Then, he went to go see the protector chaplain, Dharma-Lord Sangs rgyas bzang po (15th c.), perform the eight-day offering ceremony. He witnessed the lord's entry into the chapel dressed as a lordly Brahmin with four faces. As a result of witnessing his performance, he became very faithful [in this master]. He then received empowerments for teachings such as *One Hundred Thousand Precepts of the Sakya* (Sa skya bka' 'bum), *Hevajra* (Kye rdo rje), *Cakrasaṃvara* (bDe mchog), *Bhairava of the Ra Lineage* ('Jigs byed ra lugs), *Face of Protector Gur* (mGon po gur zhal), *Kīla of the [Sakya] Lineage* (Phur pa lugs), and *Shunning the White Demoness* (dKar bdud lcam bral).

Then, [he met] the Precious Sangs rgyas dpal bzang (15th c.), who was the rebirth of rNam rgyal mgon po (1399–1424), the son of the treasure revealer Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem. He had great faith in this teacher, and his affinities to the teachings of the Great Perfection were awakened. As he attended to this master's needs at various holy locations, such as sKu 'bum rnam rgyal,⁷⁶ he received the following transmissions: the Northern Treasure Tradition's Great Perfection anthology that includes *The Unimpeded* and *The Self-Emergent and Self-Arisen* (Rang byung rang shar), *The Self-Emergent and Self-Arisen Eight*

⁷⁶ This is where Sangs rgyas dpal bzang completed a one-year retreat dedicated to practicing the cycle of the Eight Herukas. While impressive, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan completed a three-year retreat practicing the same cycle. This location is also important for the Sa skya pa. For details, see Padma 'phrin las, pp. 556.

Herukas (*bKa' brgyad rang byung rang shar*), the peaceful guru cycle entitled *The Master of Awareness that Embodies the Lineage* (*Rig 'dzin gdung sgrub*), *The Azure Heart Practice of the Wrathful One* (*Thugs bsgrubs drag po mthing kha*), *The Bodhicitta Authorization* (*Byang chub sems pa'i spyod dbang*), and all of the treasure cycles [that were revealed by bZang po grags pa (14th c.)] at Grom pa rgyang, such as the prophetic cycles like *The Great [Treasure] Certificate* (*bsKul byang chen mo*), [214] *The Inventory of the Northern Treasures*⁷⁷ (*Kha byang gter gyi bang mdzod*), *The Seminal Certificate on the Key Points*⁷⁸ (*sNying byang gnad kyi them bu*), and *The Seven Topics of the Seminal Heart* (*sNying tig don bdun*); [he also received] *The Great Compassionate One that Self-Liberates the Passions* (*Thugs rje chen po nyon mongs rang grol*), *The Iron Treasury Kīla* (*Phur pa lcags khang ma*) cycles [of the Northern Treasure Tradition], such as *The Great Supreme Kīla* (*Phur pa che mchog*) and *The Wrathful Mantra Kīla* (*Phur pa drag sngags*), cycles for the collected empowerments (*dbang bsdud*) of texts such as *The Seven Points of Connection* (*rTen 'brel chos bdun*), the cycles for protective utterances (*bKa' bsrung*), such as *The Tiger-Mounted Protector* (*mGon po stag zhon*), and the teaching cycles of 'Dzeng rdo dkar po that were extracted from sKra bzang rlung bseng.

In brief, he also received the Heart-Treasures of Zang zang lha brag, *The Seminal-Heart of Radiant Light of the Great Perfection* (*rDzogs chen 'od gsal snying tig*) that was revealed by lCe sgom pa, the teaching cycles of the treasure revealer Dri med 'od zer [(i.e., Klong chen pa)], such as *The Quintessence of the Dakinīs* (*mKha' 'gro yang tig*), *The Quintessence of the Guru* (*Bla ma yang tig*), *The Seventeen Tantras of Vimalamitra* (*Bi ma la'i rgyud bcu bdun*), *The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (*Theg mchog mdzod*), and *The Profound Flavor in Four Parts* (*Zab pa pod bzhi*). Regarding the treasure cycles of the treasure revealer known as Shes rab me 'bar (1267–1326), he received the Father-Tantra (*Pha rgyud*) of *The Stainless Moon* (*Dri med zla shel*), the Mother-Tantra (*Ma rgyud*) of *The Blazing Brilliant Expanse* (*Klong gsal 'bar ma*), *The Non-Dual Tantras* (*gNyi med rgyud*), and *The Twenty-one Miniscule Tantras* (*rGyud bu chung nyi shu rtsa gcig*). He also received the treasure teachings of the revealer Padma las 'brel rtsal (1291–1315) called *The Seminal Heart of the Dakinīs*, [215] the treasure teaching of the revealer Sar paṅ phyogs med called *Mañjuśrī's Great Perfection* (*'Jam dpal rdzogs chen*), *The Stages of the Path of Secret Mantra* (*gSang sngags lam rim*) that was discovered

⁷⁷ This text as well as the next two as treasures passed indirectly from bZang po grags pa to Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem. For details, see Valentine 2016. Turpeinen lists this as a prophetic text but notes that it is not currently in any known collection; see Turpeinen 2015, p. 15.

⁷⁸ Turpeinen points out that this text can be found in *Collected Biographies and Prophecies of the Northern Treasure Tradition*; see Turpeinen 2015, p. 15.

by the treasure revealer Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192), and all of *The Wrathful Black Vajravārahi* (*Phag mo khros nag*) and *The Wrathful Red* (*Drag po dmar po*). In brief, Sangs rgyas dpal bzang gave the entirety of the vast and profound teachings that he possessed to Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, who subsequently held onto them.

Later, when he had reached his thirties, he was invited to bDe grol. Up until [his master] attained nirvāṇa, he focused on being his attendant. After [Sangs rgyas dpal bzang] passed into nirvāṇa, however, [Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan] performed the fire ceremonies for the lineage. Without interruption [by any other possible patriarch], he performed the lineage offerings for the Fifteenth Day of the New Year ceremony. Indeed, during the performance of every tea ceremony, it was he who scattered the offering without fail. It was to this lama, [Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan] alone that we prayed without fail. Indeed, he had the blessings of the lineage. This lama was like a spreading, expansive cloud that accomplished great benefit for migratory beings.

At one point, the Precious One went together with his disciples to practice in solitary retreat. [216] He performed the yoga of vase breathing, while remaining in a state of undisturbed and clear awareness. For fourteen days he did absolutely nothing else, [it was clear that he had no] hunger or thirst. During this time in retreat, many thoughts were formulated [in his mind] regarding the tutelary deities.

Then, he went before the one named sPos rin chos rje gZhon nu dbang chen (15th–16th c.) and received the primary treasure teachings of Gu ru Chos dbang (1212–1270), such as *The Completely Perfected and Secret Heruka* (*bKa' brgyad gsang ba yongs rdzogs*), the cycles for large audiences (*bskor phal che ba*), such as *The Great Empowerment Practice* (*sGrub dbang chen mo*), *The Assembled Secret Guru* (*Bla ma gsang 'dus*), *The Great Perfection of the Buddha Samyoga* (*rDzogs chen sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor*), and *The Glorious and Genderless Protector* (*dPal mgon ma ning*).

Then, in the presence of sPang ston gSang sngags rdo rje (15th c.), he received an extensive version of *The Eight Herukas*, such as the empowerment and sādhana practice for *The Completely Perfected Secret Eight Herukas* (*bKa' brgyad gsang ba yongs rdzogs*). He also received the treasure cycle of Kun skyong gling pa (1396–1477) called *The Seminal-Heart Great Perfection of Vajrasattoa* (*rDzogs chen rdor sems snying tig*), rDo rje gling pa's (1346–1405) treasure cycle entitled *The Great Compassionate One's Ocean of Victors* (*Thugs rje chen po rgyal ba rgya mtsho*), and especially U rgyan gling pa's (b. 1323)⁷⁹ treasure called *The*

⁷⁹ For brief biographies of Kun skyong gling pa, rDo rje gling pa, and U rgyan gling pa, see Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Taye 2011, pp. 140-143, 149-152, and 122-

Chronicles of Padmasambhava (Padma thang yig), and such teachings as *The Testament of Padmasambhava (Padma bka' chams)* and *The Likeness of Vairocana (Bai ro'i 'dra 'bag)*.

Then, although Shākya bzang po became one of his disciples and manifested great faith [in my master], it had also been written in the prophecies of Padma [gling pa] that, [217] “he would receive these teachings that were spoken far away.” Thus, [Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan received from Shākya bzang po] with quick apprehension the treasure cycles of Padma gling pa⁸⁰ (1450–1521), such as *The Great Perfection Compendium of the Realization of Samantabhadra (rDzogs chen kun bzang dgongs pa kun 'dus)*, the cycle for *The Three-Faced Six-Armed Wrathful Red (Drag dmar zhal gsum phyag drug)*, *Vajrapāni Tamer of All Haughty Beings (Phyag rdor dregs pa)*, *The Vajra Garland Life-Guidance (Tshe khrid rdo rje 'phreng ba)*, *The Life and Songs of Padma gling pa (Padma gling pa'i rnam thar mgur 'bum)*, the treasure cycles of bDung bu Byang chub gling pa (14th c.), such as *The Red Lance of Vaiśravaṇa (rNam sras mdung dmar can)*, *The Great Perfection Mind Treasure of Samantabhadra (rDogs chen kun bzang thugs gter)*, *The Regent's Great Tantras of the Northern Treasure Tradition (Byang gter gyi rgyal tshab rgyud chen)*, such as *The Peaceful and Wrathful Guru (Gu ru zhi drag)*, *The Avalokiteśvara (sPyan ras gzigs)*, *The Mañjuṣa (Jam dbyangs)*, *The Vajrapāni (Phyag rdor)*, and *The Ultra Kūla (Yang phur)*, then there was the cycle for *The Thirty Haughty Beings (Dregs pa sun bcu)*, *The Leisurely Heart Practice (Thugs sgrub kyi dal gyi sgrubs)*, and *The Vase Consecration (bum sgrub)*. For a great many of these, he received the pith instructions (*gdams ngag*). ARRET

Then, the treasure revealer named bsTan gnyis gling pa (1480–1535) came from around mNga' ris to Ngam ring. This treasure revealer gave the empowerments for *The Unimpeded (Zangs thal)* to [Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan]. Having mingled their minds into a single stream, he received the treasure revealer's own biography and songs (*gter bton rang gi rnam mgur*), *The Uncontaminated Aggregates of the Great Perfection (rDzogs chen phung po zag med)*, *The Quintessence of Sight-Liberating Wisdom (Yang tig ye shes mthong grol)*, [218] *The Mahāmudrā of Dispelling the Darkness of Ignorance (Phyag chen ma rig mun sel)*, *The Cutters Sword of Knowledge (gCod yul shes rab ral gri)*, *The Spells of Yama (gShin rje 'joms byed)*, *The Compendium of Subjugating Mantras (Drag sngags kun 'dus)*, *The Compendium of Vaiśravaṇa, the Lord of Wealth (rNam sras nor bdag kun 'dus)*, *The Compendium of the Buddha's Realization (Sangs rgyas dgongs pa*

126, respectively.

⁸⁰ It is interesting that the dates for Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan and Padma gling pa are nearly identical. However, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's connection with Padma gling pa is only made indirectly through transmission connections. For a study of the life and significance of Padma gling pa, see Aris 1989 and Harding 2003.

'*dus pa*), and *The Extensively Profound Vajravārāhī* (*Phag mo zab rgya*) that was discovered at Ri bo dpal 'bar in Mang yul.

Then, before Chos rje rin po che U rgyan 'bras dpungs pa (d. u.), who was known as the rDo rje rgyal po, he received many transmissions, such *Yama, Angel of Dawn* (*gShin rje 'char kha sprin gyi shugs can*) and *The Vase of Amṛta* (*bDud rtsi bum pa*). Then, he received many teachings from the monastic preceptor of the 'Phags sde ba named 'Phags chen dge 'dun lhun grub, such as *The Life and Songs of Mi la ras pa* (*rJe btsun mi la'i rnam mgur*) and *The Life and Songs of rGyal ba yang dgon pa*, together with *Practicing in the Mountains in Three Parts* (*Ro chos bkor gsum cha lag*).

He also received many teachings from 'Phags chen grags pa rgya mtsho, such as *The Avalokiteśvara with One Thousand Arms and One Thousand Eyes* (*sPyan ras gzigs phyag stong spyan stong*), the liturgical methods for fasting (*smyung gnas kyi chog sgrigs*), *The Great Mind Training* (*Blo byung chen mo*), and *The Holy Compendium of Reverential Mantras* (*Dam chos ma ni bka' 'bum*). [219] He also received many teachings from his own paternal uncle named Byams chen rdo rje, such as *The Great Instructions of the Mother for Cutting* (*Ma gi gcod khrid*), which was composed by Chos rje legs mchog, and *The Compendium of Reverential Mantras* (*Ma ni bka' 'bum*).

Really, he received Sūtra and Tantra teachings of both the Old and the New Schools from just about every known person at that time. For the details, one should see his transmission records. By listening to those lamas like that, he established a connection with empowerments and teachings of those kind ones. The precious one himself praised those lamas in the following stanzas.

§⁸¹

I faithfully praise with my body, speech, and mind
 The unchanging reality of the *Dharmakāya* Samantabhadra,
 The peaceful and wrathful deities of the five families of the
Sambhogakāya,
 The supreme *Nirmāṇakāya* manifestation of Padmasambhava,
 and
 His spiritual son, my root lama, Sangs rgyas dpal bzang.

To he who has brought to its completion the practice of secret
 mantra and attained enlightenment
 mGon po rdo rje, who has opened the three doors of divinity,

⁸¹ Nam mkha' bsod nams 1983, p. 219. There is a section marker on this page. The others are inserted for clarity.

and

Has kindly given me the ancestral teachings of Rigs 'dzin rGod
Idem though himself and my father, Byams dpal bshes gnyen,
To the feet of the great kind ones—the lord and his son—that
grasped the teachings of mantra-vehicle,
To those powerful ones possessed of blessings, I bow and pray!

To the famously fearless one who changed his appearance,
Who made efforts to train his mind in the supreme golden
light, [220]

To the one that experienced the single taste of pleasure and
pain, the iron bridge maker, Thang stong rgyal po,
To his disciples, such as the incomparable Grags pa rgyal
mtshan (d. u.),
To those holy and great lamas, I pray with faith!

To the profound men and women who were renowned for
their virtue,

To Rin chen bzang po (15th c.), who was exalted with respect
to migratory beings,

To the spontaneously assembled community, the superior
ones, that fully developed compassion,

To those like bSod nam dpal bzang (15th c.), who increased
my roots of knowledge,

Who were emanations of the noble ones, I pray!

To those of purifying light, like Mañjuśrī, that adhere to the
teachings and the three trainings,

Who fulfill the wishes of migratory beings from the precious
vase of the teachings,

To the treasury of good sayings regarding the goodness, and
the example of enlightenment,

To those such as bKra shis dpal bzang, who are the lamp of the
teachings,

To those supreme scholars, I pray!

Then he did a three-year practice retreat in gDan thog focusing on *The Great Royal Sādhana of the Eight Herukas* (*rGyal du sgrub chen bka' brgyad*). As for his signs of attainment, during the winter celebration of the Great Miracle [of the Buddha], he heard a sound and went to investigate. [221] There was a small white *kri ma*, and in it he saw the clear varieties of light, the eight auspicious signs, and various other signs. He was able to make the expected offerings constantly without

being cold.⁸² A white sapling sprouted from a vase and sprang up to become a tree. These were among the outer signs. There were also inner signs like his freedom from sickness. And people said, for example, that his spiritual wind would neither come nor go [while he was meditating].

Then, in the abodes that are all around bKra bzang, such as dBu gsum, he practiced Cutting (*gcod*) together with a precious servant, he practiced at the hundred different springs (*chu mig brgya rtsa*) and the one hundred charnel grounds (*gnyan khrod brgya rtsa*). His mind and phenomena thus mingled as one and he achieved conquest of the three realms of gods, demons, and humans. In brief, he reached the end of experiential practice completely through the three types of practice.

Then, in the primary temple at bDe grol he performed the three-year, three-month, three-day retreat focusing on the practice of the Great Perfection. From that point forward, he could see the nature of reality. Because he now had experiential understanding of the four visions (*snang bzhi*), signs of his attainment manifested one after another. [222] In short, his body was fully matured, endowed with all seven qualities attributed to a high birth, such as longevity, which are positive indications from the perspective of the teachings. And, his senses, such as sight and hearing, were operating with clarity. Even as he was progressing in age, reaching his nineties, his manner, physical well-being, and so forth were still good. He appeared to be in better health than others who were younger. Regarding his inner qualities, although they were concealed within him, to be sure he had inconceivably good control over his [internal] qualities, such as vision and insight, recollection and confidence, renunciation and discriminating wisdom.

Like the fruits of his attainment, his disciples were arrayed around him. Among them were the Emanation and Treasure Revealer Shākya bzang po, Treasure Revealer bsTan gnyis gling pa, gSang sngags rdo rje, the great practitioner of bKra bzang named Se ston 'Dzam gling chos grags, the mantra-holder of lHong named bSod nam bkra shis, and Mes ston rDo rje bsod nam (15th c.). [223] Then there were the two brothers, dGe slong Padma dbang rgyal (1487–1542) and Chos rje Legs ldan pa (1512–1580). The elder indeed discovered treasure, and both brothers were lamas of the 'Bri khung. Then there was the one who maintained the cave-dwelling lineages of the region called rGyal mkhar tshe, named Chos rje Padma tshe bdag rgyal po. Then there were the brothers: the one seated at Blo bo, Chos rje 'chi Nu bSod nam rab rgyas pa from Ne rings, and the one seated at the primary establishment belonging to Saint Thang stong rgyal po. Then there was

⁸² I have not been able to determine what a "kri ma" might be.

dPal ldan blo gros who was seated at sPang khang and Rigs 'dzin mGon po don 'grub. These were actual disciples of Padma gling pa who had come to the sacred sites of sTag po gangs ra. Then there were the brothers: the one seated at Ra chung named Thog sdugs Sangs rgyas seng ge and the other was Chos rje rin po che Dam chos pa. The elder of these was appointed as the minister (*ti sri*) of the lHo pa region. The younger was among the students who [Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan] established at monasteries like bKra bzang. Then there was the heart-son (*thugs sras*) of bsTan gnyis gling pa, the great ascetic practitioner named Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan,⁸³ [224] who was accepted as a disciple at the center at Ri bo che. Then, there were students such as Lama Nam mkha' dpal ldan from Dang ra ba and Bya btang Nam mkha' dpal bzang from Nyang stod. Indeed, he nourished all of them with advice, guidance, and empowerments. There were students in every kingdom; the number cannot be calculated!

§

Because his life was long and his enlightened activities were expansive, he was unrivaled in his accomplishments spreading the essential teachings, such as the Great Perfection, in the ten directions. Having essentially completed his activities that were meant for this world, he decided to pass beyond misery. Because his superficial body did not reveal itself as sick, his retinue did not realize that there were signs of his impending transcendence. Indeed, in that year, before the arrival of the annual thread-ceremony (*dus mdos*), when he received the request asserting that his presence was required as before, he said, "I will not make it there this year." Indeed, no one grasped the truth of this statement.

[225] On the 27th of the month, I [i.e., bSam bgrub rgyal mtshan, 15th–16th c.] went before him in order to receive his blessings. When it was time for me to depart, he said, "I will not meet with you again in this world after now. Cultivate your practice of the tutelary deities and be more beneficial to sentient beings!" I tried to meet with him again and again, but I was not able. Nevertheless, I pray that we will meet in the highest pure land in the next life. Then I returned home. He indeed made it to the day before the annual thread-cross ceremony, which was the day of the new moon at the end of the month. In short, he remained alive until his 88th year, but on the 30th day of the 11th month of the Iron-Female-Ox Year (1541), he departed for the Pure Land accompanied by [auspicious] sounds, sights, and fragrances.

On the first day of the new month, I went to examine the corpse. In

⁸³ Obviously, this must be a different Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan.

two holes in the flesh, there were significant pools of white essence (*byang sems dkar po*) and there was a definite protrusion on the top of his head. It was as if there were dewdrops in the dry grass of his hair. This was witnessed by all who were there, and thus everyone began to speak of his power [226]. On the day when the garment was offered [into the fire], there were a few inauspicious signs, such as windy weather. Although there were [only] a few trainees with wrong views that spoke erroneously about the events [at the time], later [others] would perform some unfortunate actions as a result of [the confused understanding] of those omens. But, throughout that period of time, [there were others] that understood the signs clearly.

Some suggested that the corpse should be burned immediately, for this would reveal the wondrously relics. Others said that if they were to request their own relics immediately, this would indeed show signs that [the lama] had experiential understanding of the teachings. But, they noted that there was a great number of the lama's paternal relatives and that they would have [their own] considerations and turn away the hands of others. The number of people making requests would be very large.

The matriarch named lHa lcam dbon mo (16th c.) and a few faithful disciples who relied upon their connection with the mind stream [of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan] said that it would be very auspicious to distribute relics.⁸⁴ Despite the fact that it would take a long time and require a multitude of relics, it would be in accordance with the intentions of the lama himself. Because their wishes were expressed in private, there weren't many who witnessed what transpired. Even I heard about it much later and then went to collect a share of the relics. [227] However, lHa lcam dbon mo [evidently] never said she would distribute all of the relics. There did happen to be a portion of powerful corpse ash, and I saved some. Much later, there was a time when I could not stop a bad hailstorm by any other means. However, when I released some of the corpse ash, the hail immediately halted. The nature of this blessing augmented my earlier faith and resulted in great conviction.

§

Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan was particularly pleased with Lord bsGrub chen, the great practitioner (*rJe bsgrubs chen*) named [Se ston] Chos rje 'Dzam gling chos grags. [The following account of the apparent

⁸⁴ This woman must have been someone very significant at bDe grol; perhaps she was Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's wife or sister. The passage highlights the fact that women were important within this tradition despite the fact that they rarely appear in the biographies of the patriarchs. For a discussion of the role of women in the early tradition, see Valentine 2015, pp. 133-134.

decline and death of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan was received from Lord bsGrub chen.] In the summer of the Ox-Year (1541), before his transcendence that winter, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan said: "Until the end of this year, I will remain here. I will continue only to the border between the years. I have seen this clearly. The astrological chances for this confluence of events (*'phel tshan*) this year are great. My mind is focused on Lord Drang [i.e., Shākya bzang po], and my only remaining mental fixation is because the two of us will not meet again. All of my other goals, I have achieved." On another occasion, I said, "You should go to mNga' ris to see Lord Shākya bzang po." He responded, "Although that would make me happy, I must remain here for the duration. [228] Whoever has not come to see this body [of mine], should come do so quickly."

Some mistakenly reported on the twenty-fifth day of the eleventh month that he had come down with a cough that diminished his physical form.⁸⁵ Others mistakenly reported that on the fifteenth day of the twelfth month, there had been bad swelling of the body caused by a water-born illness and that he was sleeping both day and night. Really, he was only making it appear as if his physical form was fatigued.

Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan sent a sealed message to me, Lord bsGrub chen, stating, "I will not remain [much longer in this world]. Come [to me]!" On the 18th day, I arrived and prostrated before him. He said, "I have completed the activity of training disciples in this world, and I will no longer reside here when we reach the border between this year and the next. All of you should embrace renunciation and take up virtuous actions. Apply yourself to the practice of the Great Perfection!" He opened the way, by means of the entire catalog of oral lineage teachings for each one of his disciples. There were prophecies about the number of disciples that he would have that would benefit others. To his sons and nephews he spoke about the ways to practice the dharma.⁸⁶ To Lord bsGrub chen himself, he said, "You have attained single-pointedness in your prayers. I will bless you continuously!" [229]

In his final oral teaching, he advised, "As the Tiger-Year (1542) is

⁸⁵ The events recorded in this paragraph and the next are not presented in strict sequential order. In the first paragraph, he appears to be discussing two prevalent, but mistaken, views that arose on those particular days. The second paragraph begins his sequential presentation of the events as *'Dzam gling chos grags* experienced them.

⁸⁶ Neither Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's wife nor any sons, daughters, or nephews are explicitly named. However, "Mes ston" rDo rje bsod nams is listed as one of his closest disciples and may have been a blood relation considering his title. This line might also be referring to his close disciples in general who are like sons and nephews.

almost here, apply yourselves to spiritual activity." But, because of his great compassion, he remained in a state of great delight and his blessings billowed forth again and again. I stayed on my cushion and attended him day and night, abandoning sleep. Repeatedly I visualized the master giving the consecration that liberates conceptuality, his resounding voice, and the oral lineage. On the 27th day of the month, I broke off the practice for the observance of the holy day dedicated to Sangs rgyas dpal bzang.

Back on the eighteenth of the month, when I was thinking of going [to bDe grol], the minister (*sde pa*) arrived at bKra bzang.⁸⁷ We met, and he said, "You should not stay here at the estate. This body of mine has become decrepit, so there is no need for me to [attend the thread-cross ceremony]. I would be happy if you were to release yourself from atop your cushion until the thread-cross ceremony." Over and over again he demanded that I answer his question: "Which day will it be observed?" I responded that it would be on the twenty-ninth.

As soon as I got up [from my meditation], the suitable disciples, [including me], were called to see [Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan]. Students from near and far, as well as faithful and trustworthy patrons were called to attend [the ailing master]. [230] He performed activities that completely satisfied [their needs]. Then, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan said, "It is our custom to perform spiritual activities that clear away impediments through expulsion rites; we issue forth protective benedictions that are intended to extend life. But, you will not expel the approach of my death, and I will not be pleased to hear protective benedictions [issued on my behalf].

"Regarding Lord bsGrub chen and his powerful son, there are signs that they have attained experiential realization of the tantric deities. You should beseech the two of them for advice regarding practice. They will do this, giving the details to whoever requests them. Their inconceivability fills my eyes with tears. By the ever-pure enlightened one and my own ancestral fathers of the Mes lineage, I have met with the enlightened guru in my own life. If you practice every day of your life, your spiritual attainment will never be weak and there will be great benefit for others. If you are very [intent on achieving these goals], then conduct yourself accordingly."

Early in the evening, when he was feeling exhausted, he said, "Later tonight, I will depart through the door of the lama lineage." From within a state of delight, at dawn on the 30th of the month, having offered food to the meditational deities, he erected his body in the

⁸⁷ Again, the sequence of events is broken so that 'Dzam gling chos grags can tell of the auspicious activities that led him to be present at Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's side in his final days.

seven-pointed posture of Vairocana, [231] completed his prayers to the lineage of the victor's intention, offered pointing out instructions, and then departed for the primordial realm at daybreak.

Immediately, a tremendous amount of white mind-fluid began to emerge from both of his nostrils. At sunrise, there were rainbows mixed with white rays of light above the corpse. A dome of multi-colored, rainbow light formed in the sky above. I, Lord bsGrub chen, beckoned others to the room [to witness the signs]. During that first day, there were natural sounds of thunder in the east. My companions and I heard these ourselves [while observing] the emergence of red mind-fluid [from the corpse]. Then, the fortunate students departed to tend to the needs of the faithful male and female householders by meeting with whoever [was in need]. Then, his six disciples and I sent out the invitations that were required for the funerary services. [232] Recognizing that there was great warmth within the heart of the corpse, I exclaimed aloud, "Miraculous!" I was told that the services began on the first of the month with the offering of garments into the fire and continued until the actual prayers of commemoration on the third day. At that time, I went before the lord who had transcended and performed the eulogy, which was simply amazing.

I, [Nam mkha' bsod nams dpal—the author of this text], have inserted this [account of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's passing] without alteration of what [was provided by Lord bsGrub chen].

§

My lama, the venerable one from Sa dmar,
 The great man named Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan,
 From the time he was born in this realm during the Year of the
 Male-Wood-Dog (1454),
 Up until he transcended misery during the Year of the Female-
 Iron-Ox (1541),
 Is summarized in this brief liberation story.

There were good signs when he was residing inside his
 mother's womb, and
 He was born pleasantly, without pain.
 His faculties were clear, and his mind was lovely to behold.
 He easily understood customs and developed great wisdom
 and faith.
 Even while a youth, he knew how to read, write, and so forth.

Having depended well on many learned and practiced
 masters, [233]

Such as his own ancestors, like rDo rje mgon po,⁸⁸
 He attained the perfection, which is reflected in the ocean of
 teachings of the Sūtras and Secret Tantras.

In particular, he served well the lotus feet of Sangs rgyas dpal
 bzang,
 The rebirth of the supreme lama (i.e., rNam rgyal mgon po),
 From whom he received the oral teachings like a vessel that
 could hold all things.
 He practiced while being an attendant of the lama for a long
 time.
 They mingled their minds as one, and he became the heart-son
 [of Sangs rgyas dpal bzang].

For a long time you kindled the lamp of the teachings of
 The highest of the vehicles, the Great Perfection, A ti Yoga,
 Wielded the teachings and the Heart-Treasures of Zang zang,
 Clarified many instructions for the *bKa' ma* and *gTer ma*
 teachings, and
 Because of that, you are the lord of the teachings!

You opened the treasury of the profound teachings, and
 You were a guide for the fortunate ones.
 You appointed many regents to hold the teachings,
 To be the lamps that clear away ignorance in this time of
 degeneration.

You remained close for nearly ninety years, and
 Your good activity was beneficial for all nine forms of beings,
 and so
 You were kind without rival, and
 I faithfully worship at your lotus feet! [234]

Indeed your life story is vastly expansive like the sky, and so
 How could I—even with my pure intentions—fathom [its
 measure]?
 However, it is only through faith and great effort and
 By way of my own observations and of what I heard from
 others, that

⁸⁸ Although we do not have exact dates for rDo rje mgon po, who was one of Rigs 'dzin rGod ldem's primary disciples outside of his immediate family, it is unlikely that he taught Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan as this verse suggests. It is more likely that this was meant to read mGon po rdo rje, who was one of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's teachers within the Mes clan.

I was able to devote my mind to [capturing a glimpse] of the rare star that appears [in the light] of day.

To those disciples who have faith in this great being,
He has happily displayed [a life] that is an aide for their devotion, and
Since some people are confused [about the nature of his life], please guard [against them].

All of these wholesome accumulations starting with [the authorship of this text],
I dedicate them to the goal of completing the intentions of the glorious lama!

May I follow him closely through all my series of births!

§

Regarding this abridged version of *The Life of the Holy Lama, the Heart-Disciple, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan*, a few disciples with unwavering faith in the holy lama requested [for the text to be created]. Of note within this group that made the request was rDo rje 'dzin pa bSam bgrub rgyal mtshan, the heart-son of the lama. From his mouth, many of the details emerged. Depending upon the nephew-disciple of the lama, a scribe named rDo rje bdud 'dul ba (d. u.), Nam mkha' bsod nams dpal (16th c.), who was a Sa skya pa monk and a member of the Awareness-Holder's retinue, authored [this abridged biography] in the year of the Female-Fire-Snake (1556), known [astrologically] as *Piṅgalā* (*dmar ser can*),⁸⁹ on the twentieth day of the fourth month. This occurred at the estate at the holy site of bKra bzang.⁹⁰



⁸⁹ The word "piṅgalā" refers to an auburn color.

⁹⁰ The translation of the colophon would not have been possible without the generous assistance received from Christopher Bell and David DiValerio.