


## Resurrecting an Old Advice: Funerary Teachings in the Bka' brgyad Cycle of Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192)

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 As I was translating the fourth chapter of the *Rig 'dzin 'dus pa'i rgyud* (*Assembly of the Knowledge Holders' Tantra*), an early Rnying ma tantric scripture of Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer which belongs to his Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa (The Eight Instructions: Assembly of the Ones Gone to Bliss) cycle, I encountered a peculiar manual "hidden" just after the section on the history of transmission that Nyang ral provided. This sub-section contains different components of funerary teachings such as the *Bardo* teachings (*Bar do*), Transference of Consciousness into another Body ('*Pho ba grong 'jug*), "Deceiving" Death ('*Chi bslu*), and others. Kar ma gling pa's (1326–1386) *Bar do thos grol* (*Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State*) is the culmination of the funerary practices and the most complete manual for these teachings. However, it was a progression over several centuries until the formulation of such a work, and its ensuing standardization was completed by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Nyang ral seems to be one of the links between the early tantras containing such practices and the later traditions. In this article, I will introduce these teachings and Nyang ral's role in spreading them, thus demonstrating parts of the "syncretism," which occurred between the early Bka' brgyud and Rnying ma factions.

For this article, I have examined ten manuscripts of the *Rig 'dzin 'dus pa'i rgyud*. Seven of them are found in the *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum* (*The Hundred Thousand Tantras of the Rnying ma School*) in the editions of Sde dge, Dgra med rtse, Sgang steng (both the plain and the illustrated one), Mtshams brag, Gting skyes, and Rig 'dzin tshe dbang nor bu. In addition to that, I used three manuscripts from different individual collections, which I named Ms. A, Ms. B, and Ms. C, respectively. While Ms. A<sup>1</sup> does not contain annotations,<sup>2</sup> both Ms.

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<sup>1</sup> Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1977–1978: 359–396.

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B<sup>3</sup> and Ms. C<sup>4</sup> do, as well as the Sde dge edition. The annotations in Ms. C follow the text of the *Rig 'dzin 'dus pa'i rgyud* from the beginning to the end.

The more surprising part, however, is that the versions in the Sde dge edition and Ms. B are annotated only on the funerary part of Nyang ral's work. It is not entirely clear who the different annotators were. Perhaps, it was the Rnying ma master and a disciple of Sog bzlog pa blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552–1624), Gong ra lo chen gzhan phan rdo rje (1594–1654), who was behind the annotations of Ms. C. However, there is no decisive indication. It is clear that the annotator of Ms. C often tries to insert the Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen)-based concepts into the Mahāyoga descriptions. The two other annotators entirely follow the Mahāyoga framework.<sup>5</sup> Here I provide a part of my critical edition, which summarizes Nyang ral's funerary teachings:

If one desires to quickly attain [the level of] Vidyādhara<sup>6</sup> and has not yet realized the suchness upon reaching the moment of death, by diagnosing the special signs in the body, one will know for certain [if one is about to die]. Additionally, by analyzing dreams, body and speech, heaven and earth, the signs which appear in the mind, [one should first apply] the examination of the time duration of these signs, [then apply the practice of] *Ransoming* [death], [then try] *Averting* [it] and [then apply the practice of] *Merging*. [If neither worked,] one should *Transfer* [one's consciousness to another] body before the power [of life] is exhausted.

In the *Dharmatā*,<sup>7</sup> birth and death are worldly appearances and

<sup>2</sup> Two types of annotations in these manuscripts are scribal corrections and gloss insertions. The latter constitutes the majority of annotations and there one finds handwritten inserted explanations for the text, below or above the original text.

<sup>3</sup> Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978: 431–472.

<sup>4</sup> Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1979–1980: 447–498.

<sup>5</sup> This work by Nyang ral is designated as a Mahāyoga tantra, the seventh *yāna* (vehicle) according to the Rnying ma Nine Yānas scheme (Tib. *theg pa dgu*). In these passages the annotations of Ms. C include an ongoing emphasis on the concept of *lhun grub* (spontaneous presence) as being the pinnacle of three levels that can be attained by three types of practitioners. The two other annotated manuscripts do not contain these concepts. The term *lhun grub* (one of the two main aspects of Rdzogs chen teaching, the ninth *yāna*) itself is absent from the entire main text as well.

<sup>6</sup> Vidyādhara (Tib. *rig 'dzin*) is an elusive term and can carry several meanings. As a Pan-Asian term it often depicts a “spell-caster” or a supernatural being such as a sorcerer. Thus, Vidyādhara could mean the mastery of these crafts. The Rnying ma school, however, prescribes four levels of Vidyādhara as the ultimate spiritual attainments of the Mahāyoga practice. For a detailed discussion on the different meanings of Vidyādhara, see Wangchuk 2009 and Grafe 2001.

<sup>7</sup> *Dharmatā* (Tib. *chos nyid*) is the intrinsic nature of reality or the unconditioned truth, suchness.

conceptually constructed phenomena. The essence of the mind is free from elaborations. *Transference* and *Transmigration* are completely not established. The Vidyādhara is self-originated.<sup>8</sup>

In the following part of the *Rig 'dzin 'dus pa'i rgyud*, there are instructions for how one should transfer his consciousness into a dead body with the help of a qualified friend. Apparently, a successful attempt should lead to Vidyādhara-hood. The next stanzas deal with the case when the transference of one's consciousness was not successful, and one has to face the intermediate state between death and rebirth. It is there where we find a short explanation of the *bardo* stages and one's experiences.

The categories of funerary practices in Nyang ral's text can be summed up as:

1. "Signs of Death Diagnosis" (*'Chi ba'i mtshan rtags pa*).
2. "Ransoming from Death" / "Deceiving Death" (*'Chi bslu*).
3. "Averting Death" (*'Chi ba bzlog pa*).
4. "Merging" (*Sbyor ba*).
5. "Transference of Consciousness into Another Body" (*'Pho ba grong 'jug*).
6. "Bardo Instructions" (*Bar do'i gdam ngag*).

### 1. Works on Funerary Teachings

One of the early sources for these funerary teachings and perhaps the most probable source for Nyang ral's scheme is the *Tantra of the Great Secret Union of the Sun and the Moon* (Tib. *Nyi ma dang zla kha sbyor*), which belongs to the *Seventeen Tantras* (Tib. *Man ngag sde'i rgyud bcu bdun*) of the Great Perfection Man ngag cycle, most likely dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In this tantra, either the Buddha Vajradhāra or Vajrasattva explain the contents of the teachings to a bodhisattva called *Mi tog thub pa*. The second section of the *Tantra of the Great Secret Union of the Sun and the Moon* deals with the signs of death and the instructions on how to overcome death. As in Nyang ral's text,

<sup>8</sup> *de yi dus su rig pa 'dzin/ myur du thob par 'dod pa yis/ 'chi ba'i dus la sleb kyang bla'i/ gal te de nyid ma dtogs na/ rten 'brel gzugs la brtags pa yis/ nges pa can du shes par 'gyur/ gzhan yang rmi lam brtag pa dang/ lus ngag gnam sa brtag pa dang/ sems la snang ba'i ltas rnam ni/ ring thung bsam pa'i yul dag gis/ bslu dang bzlog dang sbyor ba yis/ nus pa ma rdzogs rten 'pho ste/ mtshan ma med pa'i skye 'chi sogs/ rnam rtog 'jig rten snang bas brtags/ sems kyi snying po spros bral la/ 'pho dang 'gro ba yongs ma grub/ rang byung rig pa 'dzin pa'o/.* For the complete critical edition, see Grizman, "Unearthing the Herukas: A Study of the *Rig 'dzin 'dus pa'i rgyud*," Ph.D. diss., Universität Hamburg (forthcoming).

this part also ends with the *bardo* instructions, if all other attempts to avoid dying fell short.

As David Germano showed, many Great Perfection tantras were dedicated to funerary rites and concepts, especially by the time of the *Seventeen Tantras*.<sup>9</sup> Two other important sources which predate Nyang ral's work, and address similar topics are *The Tantra on Eliminating All Evil Rebirths* (Skt. *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana-tantra*) and the *Precious Self-Presencing of the Intermediate State of Rebirth* (Tib. *Rin po che srid pa bar do rang snang ba'i rgyud*). The first belongs to the class of Yoga Tantra, which focuses on different sets of rituals to ensure a better rebirth for the deceased. This tantra is found in the Bka' 'gyur. The translators of this tantra from Sanskrit to Tibetan are known as Śāntigarbha (dates uncertain, most probably 8<sup>th</sup> century) and Jayarākṣita (8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>10</sup> Śāntigarbha had a leading role in Nyang ral's Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa as one of the eight Vidyādhara (Tib. *rig 'dzin*) who received the eight caskets.<sup>11</sup> He was the one to receive the casket of *Drag sngags*, that of *Fierce Mantras*. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, another Sanskrit version was translated into Tibetan by the Indian Devendradeva (dates uncertain) and the Tibetan translator Chag lo tsā ba chos rje dpal<sup>12</sup> (1197–1263), the nephew of Chag lo tsā ba dgra bcom (1153–1216), who according to Nyang ral's son, was in charge of his father's funeral.<sup>13</sup>

The *Precious Self-Presenting of the Intermediate State of Rebirth Tantra* can be found in both the *Bai ro'i rgyud 'bum* (*The Hundred Thousand Tantras of Vairocana*) and the *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum*. This particular tantra represents one of the earliest Tibetan sources describing the Buddhist "intermediate state" or *bardo* period, which comes after death. It includes brief discussions on a number of topics directly relevant to the subject of *bardo*, such as the methods for reading the

<sup>9</sup> Germano 2005: 9–28.

<sup>10</sup> Skorupski 1983: 1–9.

<sup>11</sup> The caskets consist of eight cycles or sets of praxis-oriented Mahāyoga teachings associated with a constellation of eight Tantric deities (e.g. Vajrakīlaya, Yāmataka, and so on) and the following eight Vidyādhara: (1) Mañjuśrīmitra, the Vidyādhara of Body (Tib. *sku'i rig 'dzin*), (2) Nāgārjuna, the Vidyādhara of Speech (Tib. *gsung gi rig 'dzin*), (3) Hūmkara, the Vidyādhara of Mind (Tib. *thugs kyi rig 'dzin*), (4) Vimalamitra, the Vidyādhara of Qualities (Tib. *yon tan gyi rig 'dzin*), (5) Prabhāhasti, the Vidyādhara of Activities (Tib. *'phrin las kyi rig 'dzin*), (6) Dhanasamskṛta, the Vidyādhara of Sphere (Tib. *dbyings kyi rig 'dzin*), (7) Rom bu Guhyacandra, the Vidyādhara of Intimidation (Tib. *mngon spyod kyi rig 'dzin*), and (8) Śāntigarbha, Vidyādhara of Fierce Mantras (Tib. *drag sngags kyi rig 'dzin*). Each cycle of teachings from the Bka' brgyad constellation seems to be seen as complete and self-sufficient in and by itself in achieving one's soterical goal, namely, the Buddhahood.

<sup>12</sup> Skorupski 1983: 8.

<sup>13</sup> Hirshberg 2016: 205–208.

omens of death correctly, the internal and external signs of the dying process, advice on how to take control of the *bardo* experience, and techniques for avoiding an unpleasant rebirth.<sup>14</sup>

Additional early manuals on death rituals can be found in the Bstan 'gyur. These are related to the "New School" (Gsar ma) of translation. One of the death manuals was authored by Tathāgatarakṣita (11<sup>th</sup> century) and was translated by Ba ri lo tsā ba rin chen grags (1040–1111) in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and is called '*Chi ba bslu ba* (*Deceiving Death*). Another is called '*Chi ba blu ba'i man ngag* (*Esoteric Instructions of Deceiving Death*) and is supposedly based on early translations of Atiśa (982–1054) and Rin chen bzang po (958–1055) in the 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. As Irmgard Mengele showed in her work dedicated to the rituals for Deceiving Death, these two death manuals seem to derive from the *Mṛtyuvañcana* (*Death Cheater*) written by Vāgīśvarikīrti (dates uncertain) from the same period.<sup>15</sup> From that period in Tibet, we see evidence that, to some degree, all Tibetan Buddhist schools had their own set of funerary teachings.

Now I would like to focus on each of the categories of funerary practices found in the *Rig 'dzin 'dus pa'i rgyud*.

## 2. The Funerary Practices according to the *Rig 'dzin 'dus pa'i rgyud*

### 2.1. Identifying the Signs of Death

In the *Tantra of the Great Secret Union of the Sun and the Moon*, we find explanations of how one can check his own signs of death or assist others in figuring out these signs. It involves checking almost every bodily organ and sense faculty, paying attention to changes in colors or angles, one's shadow, and other characteristics. Reading the signs of death correctly is the key to the successful practice of the rituals which are supposed to prevent death from approaching.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Germano 2005: 15.

<sup>15</sup> Mengele 2010: 105–106.

<sup>16</sup> Glen Mullin, in his translation of the *Self-Liberation by Knowing the Signs of Death* suggests that the study of the signs of death must be accompanied by a study of the longevity yogas and of the methods of consciousness transference for those cases when longevity cannot be achieved. It is further explained that "we humans face two kinds of death. Death by untimely conditions and death by the exhaustion of the natural lifespan. Untimely death can be turned away through the methods taught for achieving longevity. However, when the cause of death is the exhaustion of the natural lifespan, those methods will be of little value" (Karma gling pa 1998: 126–147).

## 2.2. Ransoming and Averting Death

The terms “ransoming” and “averting” in the funerary texts are sometimes used differently but at the same time often synonymously. Perhaps “averting” is just a more successful application of the ritual of “ransoming,” but this is not entirely clear.<sup>17</sup>

In general, many ritual texts on ransoming death contain the word “averting” or “reversing.” For example, a work by Zhu chen tshul khrim rin chen (1697–1774) is translated as *Bestowing the Bliss of Immortality: A Method to Avert Obstacles and Deceive Death Based Upon the White [Goddess] Flaming Mouth*.<sup>18</sup> Another example is Bdud 'joms 'jigs bral ye shes rdo rje's (1904–1987) text translated as *Turning Away the Face of the Lord of Death: A Death Deceiving Ritual Connected with the Life Drop [of] Longevity [and] Immorality*.<sup>19</sup>

According to the *Tantra of the Great Secret Union of the Sun and the Moon*, it seems that averting is the successful result of ransoming. In short, ransoming or averting death is a ritual performed for a person facing an untimely death.<sup>20</sup> However, a person cannot avert death if the death has come due to the exhaustion of the natural lifespan.

## 2.3. Merging

The practice of merging of the “Body” and “Wisdom” could be best illustrated by a passage from the *Tantra of the Great Secret Union of the Sun and the Moon*:

After the elements started dissolving, one expresses the teachings of the master in one's own mental continuum [... and] the four winds gradually stop. At the moment when the great winds move, one is taught how to enter objects and how to unify the Body and Wisdom.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> In Giacomella Orofino's work (1999: 34–36), we find the following passage: “Now I will explain the magical rituals which ransom one from death, if the signs of death should appear. When one undertakes the ritual of ransom from death one begins by accumulating merit, particularly to the master and to the religious community. Then one draws a mandala of the five elements, confess one's sins. Then one makes an effigy (*ngar zan* or *ngar glud*) and tormas [...]. Then one throws everything into the middle of a river and without doubt one averts death.”

<sup>18</sup> *Kha 'bar ma dkar mo la brten nas 'chi ba bslu zhing bar gcod bzlog pa'i thabs 'chi med bde ster* (Mengele 2010: 124).

<sup>19</sup> *Tshe sgrub 'chi med srog thig dang 'brel bar 'chi ba bslu ba'i cho ga 'chi bdag gdong zlog* (Mengele 2010: 127).

<sup>20</sup> As Mengele (2010: 104) put it: “the aim of the ritual is to reverse impending death and to eventually restore health.”

<sup>21</sup> Orofino 1999: 37.

The method for the unification of the Body with Wisdom is then explained:

Pure awareness is concentrated in a single point; the body takes the position of the sleeping lion. One directs the mind to the eyes, and in an instant, the space becomes the way. If the pure awareness and space are immobile, that person will not wander in the *bardo*, and will be illuminated instantaneously, in the original purity.<sup>22</sup>

#### 2.4. Transference of Consciousness into Another Body

Interestingly, Nyang ral is concentrating on the transference of consciousness into another body. This topic is more obscure and is not concerned much with what turned out to be the more widespread practice, the “Transference into a Pure Realm.” The *Tantra of the Great Secret Union of the Sun and the Moon* recommends putting into action the methods of the body: the transference and the reanimation of a dead body.<sup>23</sup> I am not aware of many Rnying ma accounts concerning this practice of *grong 'jug*, but it is certainly available in the accounts of the early Bka' brgyud.

In the *Blue Annals*, we find three references to this practice.<sup>24</sup> First, it mentions that Mar pa (1012–1097) performed the transference four times.<sup>25</sup> Further, 'Gos lo tsā ba recounts the story in which Grol sgom chos g.yung, a disciple of Sgam po pa (1103–1199), demonstrated the rite of entering into the corpse of a goose.<sup>26</sup> The last story is about a master called Ka ro pa, who taught this practice to his disciple Ni ru pa. Ni ru pa then went to Nepal and transferred his consciousness into the body of a dead Tibetan monk.<sup>27</sup>

Another account can be found in Lha btsun rin chen nam rgyal's (1473–1557) biography of Ras chung pa (1083–1161), where Ras chung pa's disciple, Sangs rgyas ston pa, known as Yang dag dpal, re-animated a dead lamb by temporarily transferring his consciousness into it.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the most well-known account of a failed attempt to apply the transference practice involves Ti pu pa, Mar pa's son, who, upon his death, transferred his consciousness into

<sup>22</sup> Orofino 1999: 37–38.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba 1979: 404, 469, 853.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid: 404.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid: 469.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid: 853.

<sup>28</sup> See *Bka' brgyud pa'i skyes chen dam pa rnams kyi rnam thar* in Khams sprul don brgyud nyi ma 1972: 749.

a dead Indian youngster. The accounts mentioned above and some additional ones are also recorded in Dpa' bo Gtsug lag phreng ba's (1504–1566) *Chos 'byung khas pa'i dga' ston* (*Feast for Scholars*) and Gu ru Bkra shis' (18<sup>th</sup> century) *Dharma History* (*Gu bkra'i chos 'byung*). Furthermore, Daniel Berounský provides interesting accounts from a later period of such a practice being applied in the following centuries.<sup>29</sup>

All of these accounts (except for the ones mentioned by Berounský) are connected to the transmissions associated with the Bka' brgyud, in the way they were established by, for example, Ti lo pa, Nā ro pa, and Maitrī pa. They all point out that the source of the transference teachings lies in the *Chaturpīṭha Tantra*<sup>30</sup> (*Tantra of the Four Seats*). In *Shes bya mdzod* (*Treasury Embracing All Knowledge*),<sup>31</sup> 'Jam mgon kong sprul also points that out and asserts that this tantra belongs to the Yogini Tantra classification. Besides, a tantra with the same name can be found in the lists of the *Eighteen Mahāyoga Tantras* by Sangs rgyas gling pa (1340–1396) and by Sog bzlog pa blo gros rgyal mtshan's (1552–1624) *Chos 'byung dgag pa* (*A Refutation*).<sup>32</sup> Nyang ral, in his *Chos 'byung me tog nying po sbrag rtsi'i bcud* (*Flower Nectar: The Essence of Honey*), underlines that Padmasambhava together with one of his 25 disciples, Cog ro klu'i rgyal mtshan, translated the *Chaturpīṭha Tantra*, alongside the other *Eighteen Mahāyoga Tantras* and supplementary texts.

## 2.5. Bardo Instructions

Nyang ral did not elaborate on the topic of *bardo* instructions in his work, and since it was previously well-studied, in this article, I will also refrain from going into detail.<sup>33</sup>

One of the intriguing lists of transmissions of “*Bardo Instructions*” is illustrated by Yang dgon pa. Bryan Cuevas focused on this transmission list:

1. *Bardo Instructions* of Mnga' bdag nyang ral pa can.
2. Three Distinct *Bardo* Systems of the Six Doctrines.
3. Father Lineage of Paṇḍita Mngon shes can.
4. *Bardo Instructions* of Btsun mo can.

<sup>29</sup> Berounský 2010: 7–23.

<sup>30</sup> *Gdan bzhi*.

<sup>31</sup> 'Jam mgon kong sprul 2008: 180.

<sup>32</sup> Almogi 2014: 81.

<sup>33</sup> See Orofino 1999 and Germano 2005 for discussion of the different *bardo* stages and texts.



5. The Tradition of Jo mo lha rje ma:
  - a. Oral *Bardo* Lineage.
  - b. *Ḍākinī Bardo*.
  - c. Direct Perception *Bardo*.
6. *Bardo* Instructions of Shangs pa ri bo che.
7. Essential *Bardo* Explanations of Zhang rin po che.
8. *Bardo* of Dbyar ston dbu ma pa, *Nectar Vehicle Dispelling Illness*.<sup>34</sup>

Yang dgon pa rgyal mtshan dpal, sometimes known as Lha gdong pa, the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud master of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, listed eight different *bardo* lineages in his text called *Bar do 'phrang sgrol gyi lo rgyus tshe ring ma'i shun len* (*Responses to the Questions of Tshe ring ma, History of Deliverance from the Perilous Straits of the Bardo*). Cuevas was concerned mainly with the concept of the different stages of the *bardo*. However, it is unclear whether it is entirely limited to this category and cannot be extended to funerary teachings in the more general sense, as they are often interconnected.

The first item on the list refers to Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer, and he is the only one on the list who does not belong to the "New Translation" lineage. It is quite remarkable to find Nyang ral on this list as the sole representative of the Rnying ma school; however, I will later explain the possible reasons for this.

The second item on the list refers to the Six Yogas of Nā ro pa,<sup>35</sup> who had probably codified existing cycles of teachings received by his teacher, Ti lo pa, who, in turn, received them from La ba pa, Lalitavajra, and Sukkhasidhi, who is believed to have been a contemporary of Ni gu ma.<sup>36</sup>

The third item refers to Rdo rje gdan pa, also known as Mngon shes can, while the fourth refers to the Bengali Paṇḍita Devākaraçandra, also known as Btsun mo can. These two masters taught the *Guhyasamāja-tantra* to Mgos khug pa lhas btsas, the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Bka' gdams master, who was a contemporary to Mar pa, Atiśa, and Rwa lo tsā ba. It seems that both of them represent the father tantras on this list, as *Guhyasamāja* is designated as one.<sup>37</sup>

The fifth item refers to Ma gcig zha ma of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. She is

<sup>34</sup> 1. *Mnga' bdag nyang ral pa can gyi bar do gnad kyi gdam ngag*. 2. *Chos drug gi bar du[lo] lugs mi 'dra ba gsum*. 3. *Pha brgyud kyi gdam ngag paṇḍita mngon shes can*. 4. *Btsun mo can gyi bar do'i gdam ngag*. 5. *Jo mo lha rje rma: (a) Bar do snyan rgyud, (b) Bar do mkha' spyod, (c) Bar do mngon sum ma*. 6. *Shangs po ri bo che pa'i bar do'i gdam ngag*. 7. *Zhang rin po che'i bar do'i dmar khrid*. 8. *Dbyar ston dbu ma pa'i bar do nad sel bdud rtsi thegs pa* (Cuevas 2003: 46).

<sup>35</sup> *Na ro'i chos drug*.

<sup>36</sup> Cuevas 2003: 49.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

mostly known as a disciple and consort of Rma lo tsā ba, and later on of Pha dam pa sangs rgyas. Rma lo tsā ba himself was a disciple of Khyung po rnal 'byor, the sixth category on the list.<sup>38</sup>

According to the *Blue Annals*, all of Ma gcig zha ma's brothers were disciples of great contemporary Buddhist masters of various traditions. The same source tells us that she preserved the Lam 'bras instructions of the Sa skya and that she was one of the teachers of Phag mo gru pa.<sup>39</sup>

Item number six refers to Khyung po rnal 'byor (11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries). In the list of teachers who taught Khyung po rnal 'byor, we find a nearly endless list of masters: Ni ru pa, Amoghavajra, disciples of Nā ro pa, Maitrī pa, and so on. However, the most significant encounters were first, the contact with Ni gu ma, who transmitted to him the Six Yogas, and the second, the encounter with Sukkhasiddhi, the disciple of Vi rū pa.<sup>40</sup>

The seventh item refers to Bla ma Zhang of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Being one of the most famous disciples of Rgwa lo tsā ba, he received many instructions and initiations from him, including the Six Yogas of Nā ro pa. Another teacher of Bla ma Zhang was Vairocanavajra, who himself was a disciple of Ba ri lo tsā ba rin chen grags, the translator of the death ritual text mentioned earlier in this article.<sup>41</sup>

Concerning the eighth item, I have not found a corresponding satisfactory explanation for it, and neither did Cuevas in his work. To get a better understanding of this list, a closer examination of Yang dgon pa's background is needed.

### 3. Reconstructing the Transmission Lineage

#### 3.1. Yang dgon pa's Lineage

Yang dgon pa's lineage was made of several prominent masters. First, Rgod tshang pa mgon po rdo rje (1189–1258), the founder of the Upper 'Brug sub-school of 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud, a disciple of Gtsang pa Rgya ras ye shes rdo rje, the first 'Brug chen, who was a disciple of Bla ma Zhang.<sup>42</sup>

Second, Ko brag pa Bsod nams rgyal mtshan (1182–1261), who is known to have received the Ma gcig zha ma lineage from Zhang ston se mig pa, and teachings from the Kaśmīri Paṇḍita Śākyaśrībhadra.

<sup>38</sup> Cuevas 2003: 49.

<sup>39</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba 1979: 220–226.

<sup>40</sup> Cuevas 2003: 50.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba 1979: 680–690.

Śākyaśrībhadrā was invited to oversee the funeral ceremony of Nyang ral, as described in his son's biography, which was in the end overseen instead by Śākyaśrībhadrā's disciple, Chag lo tsā ba dgra bcom.<sup>43</sup>

The third would be Sphyan snga grags pa 'byung gnas (1175–1255), a 'Bri gung Bka' brgyud master, a disciple of 'Jig rten mgon po and one of Phag mo gru pa's disciples, Yel pa Ye shes brtseg (1134–1194).

The fourth master, Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182–1251), was the grandson of Sa chen kun dga' snying po, the nephew of Grags pa rgyal mtshan and a close disciple of Śākyaśrībhadrā.

The last on the list of Yang dgon pa's direct teachers is Mi bskyod rdo rje sangs rgyas brag (12<sup>th</sup> century). According to the *Blue Annals*, he was a Rnying ma lama who spread the Yang dgon pa Rdzogs chen teachings and the treasures of Nyang ral.<sup>44</sup>

### 3.2. Nyang ral's Lineage

I have tried to reconstruct Nyang ral's attested primary lineage in order to track the possible points of connection between Nyang ral and Yang dgon pa. Thus Nyang ral's main teachers were Grub thob Dngos grub and Bla ma Ra shag (11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century). His main direct disciples were his two sons, Nam mkha' 'od zer and Nam mkha' dpal (12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century), and his prominent disciple Sman lung pa Mi bskyod rdo rje (12<sup>th</sup> century). His "spiritual heir" was Chos kyi dbang phyug (1212–1270).

Interestingly, we find another Mi bskyod rdo rje with a different title included in this list. Sman lung pa Mi bskyod rdo rje is the name attested in Nyang ral's chos 'byung.<sup>45</sup> This Mi bskyod rdo rje is known as the disciple of Nyang ral, and apparently of Gu ru chos dbang as well.<sup>46</sup> It may be the same person who transmitted and taught Yang dgon pa, but it is not certain.

Bla ma Ra shag and Grub thob dngos grub were the most important teachers in Nyang ral's career. They gave him transmissions of their revealed treasures (*gter ma*), which in turn resulted in his own treasure revealing activity. There are not many accounts about Nyang ral's treasures, and most of what we know is from his two early biographies: the *Dri ma med pa* (*Stainless One*) and the *Gsal ba'i me long* (*Clear Mirror*), which Dan Hirshberg worked on extensively. While still a disciple of Bla ma Ra shag, Nyang ral

<sup>43</sup> Stearns 1996: 142.

<sup>44</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba 1979: 689–690.

<sup>45</sup> Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1998: 11.

<sup>46</sup> 'Jam mgon kong sprul 2012: 105.

discovered the Bka' brgyad teachings, and from him, he further received more of these teachings.<sup>47</sup> From Grub thob dngos grub, Nyang ral received the *Maṇi Bka' 'bum*<sup>48</sup> teachings, Zhi je,<sup>49</sup> and several Bka' brgyad treasures.<sup>50</sup> According to 'Jam mgon kong sprul, in *Gter ston brya rtsa'i rnam thar (One Hundred Biographies of Treasures-Revealers)*, Bla ma ra shag was responsible for transmitting at least two ransoming ritual texts: *The Matrikas Great Ransom Effigy of the Four Continents* (Tib. *Ma mo gling gzhi'i mdos chen*) and the *Ten Secret Ransom Effigies* (Tib. *Gsang ba mdos bcu*). 'Jam mgon kong sprul asserts that these instructions came down from Rje btsun mi la ras pa (1040–1123) in the context of his account with Tse ring ma and her four sisters.<sup>51</sup>

Since Nam mkha' 'od zer was not a prominent figure, I will focus on Nam mkha' dpal instead. Having been designated as Nyang ral's primary heir, Nam mkha' dpal became the abbot of Ma wo chog Monastery after his father's death in 1192. According to Hirshberg, "he neither continued the practice of treasure recovery nor taught extensively, but invited various lamas to teach at Ma wo chog and thus fostered an ecumenism where tantric transmissions from Gsar ma lineages such as the Bka' brgyud, which had been developing nearby, were bestowed there."<sup>52</sup> He was one of the teachers of Gu ru chos dbang, who continued Nyang ral's line of treasure revelation.

Gu ru chos dbang received many teachings from the "Old" and the "New" traditions: his father also taught him Rdzogs chen, Mahāmudrā, Gcod, Zhi je, and the Six Yogas of Nā ro pa. It is said that he took the bodhisattva vows together with Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan. 'Jam mgon kong sprul mentions that Gu ru chos dbang "studied exhaustively even the *Great Treatise on Thread-Cross Ransom Rituals*,"<sup>53</sup> once again showing the importance of these kinds of rituals for the Nyan ral's lineage.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show several things. First, to present a very early "Death Manual" and explain its contents. Second, to show

<sup>47</sup> Hirshberg 2016: 100.

<sup>48</sup> A collection of teachings and practices focused on Avalokiteśvara and attributed to the 7<sup>th</sup>-century Tibetan King Srong btsan sgam po.

<sup>49</sup> Pacification or Pacification of Suffering, a tradition that traces itself especially to the south Indian master Pha dam pa sangs rgyas.

<sup>50</sup> Hirshberg 2016: 102.

<sup>51</sup> 'Jam mgon kong sprul 2012: 93.

<sup>52</sup> Hirshberg 2013.

<sup>53</sup> 'Jam mgon kong sprul 2012: 102.

the connection between the different funerary teachings and transmissions. I have tried to situate Nyang ral's role in receiving and transmitting funerary instructions. As with other sets of tantric practices, it seems that both the "Old" and the "New" schools received similar teachings from different lines of transmission, and in Tibet, these lines of transmission started mixing together and adding local innovations. David Germano stated that Nyang ral's Great Perfection texts were devoid of funerary concepts, and he preferred keeping it for his Mahāyoga section.<sup>54</sup> The findings in the present article support this claim, but there is still a lot of work at hand to unravel what else is hiding in the Mahāyoga-based *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* cycle, and probably in the places, we would least expect.

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